



Healing our divided society: Investing in America fifty years after the Kerner report

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BOOK REVIEW

Healing our divided society: Investing in America fifty years after the Kerner report, edited by Fred Harris and Alan Curtis, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2018

“Everybody does better when everybody does better” (p. vi) is the appropriate opening epigram, penned by Jim Hightower, for this retrospective on the 50th anniversary of the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, better known as the Kerner Commission report. Fred Harris, the last remaining member of the Kerner Commission, and Alan Curtis, president and CEO of the Eisenhower Foundation, have assembled several assessments over the years of how the United States has changed since this report was released in 1968. This is the most comprehensive. And though the focus is on the evolution of racial disparities, particularly between Blacks and Whites, it explicitly acknowledges the larger context of increasing inequality and the changing life chances of other marginalized groups (e.g., Latinos, Native Americans, women, and the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and gender). Most readers can probably identify issues they wish had been explored in greater depth (my wish list follows), but this book contains voluminous information on evolving disparities and inequities, what has worked and what has not worked in efforts to ameliorate them, and steps we need to take going forward.

The book begins with an introductory chapter that briefly summarizes the major findings of the Kerner Commission report (referencing one of the most frequently cited statements from the report that “White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II”), Lyndon Johnson’s lukewarm if not hostile response, and the progress (or lack thereof) that followed. The editors assert that the nation made significant progress in the first decade following the report but has fallen back since then, with some exceptions during the Clinton and Obama administrations. Then the editors offer that the primary reason for this book is to put issues such as racism, poverty, income inequality, women’s and children’s rights, health, education, police–community relations, and related challenges back on the public agenda. The book certainly provides a lot of ammunition for those who share these objectives.

This book is organized around two parts and several chapters in a somewhat eclectic fashion typical of most edited volumes. The introduction is followed by Part I, which includes eight chapters that provide overviews of specific issues, many of which are explored in greater detail later in the book. Topics include economic and employment policy, education, housing and neighborhood investment, criminal justice and mass incarceration, the global impact on domestic policy reform, financing reform, and a chapter entitled “New Will” in reference to the new resolve called for by the Kerner Commission to make the required investments that will address these diverse issues. Part II includes 23 chapters on economic and employment policy, education, housing and neighborhood investment, crime, equality (with individual chapters on African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and women), and the media. Each of these chapters is written by leading scholars, activists, and public intellectuals including, among many others, Henry Cisneros, Gary Orfield, Marian Wright Edelman, Joseph Stiglitz, Elijah Anderson, and Linda Darling-Hammond.

If much of this story is familiar to many readers, some of the findings will still be striking, positively or negatively:

- In 1988, 44% of African American students attended majority-White schools; 20% do so today (p. 40).
- The federal government spends \$36 billion annually on housing assistance for households earning up to \$40,000 a year while spending \$43.9 billion (primarily via various mortgage related and capital gains tax breaks) on households earning \$200,000 or more. Annual federal

housing spending per household is \$1,529 for households making less than \$20,000 compared to \$6,076 per household for those earning \$200,000 or more (p. 70).

- African American teenage boys and men are 21 times more likely to be shot and killed by police than their White peers (p. 83).
- The percentage of Whites who believe that Whites work harder than Blacks declined from 65% in 1990 to 42% in 2008, but it remains the case that almost half of all Whites hold to this belief (p. 158).
- 187,000 people were in state or federal prisons in 1968, and this number increased to 1,500,000 in 2015; the ratio grew from 94 to 458 per 100,000 people (pp. 308–309).
- 86% of the net new businesses launched between 2007 and 2012 were started by Latinos, who accounted for approximately 20% of the total population (p. 325).

Throughout the book, overviews of programs and organizations that have made progress in closing some of the disparities cited in the Kerner Commission report are noted, frequently with references to randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental design evaluations to support these conclusions. Such programmatic results, models for the future, constitute perhaps one of the greatest reasons for optimism going forward.

One shortcoming of the book, however, is the treatment of housing. In Part II there are anywhere from three to five chapters on each of the topics. But in the housing section there are just two. And one of those two is an examination of the “iconic ghetto” that offers an insightful analysis of how stereotypes and stigmas are attached to African Americans regardless of socioeconomic status and where they actually live but does not directly address housing policy. The remaining housing chapter in Part II and the housing overview in Part I do offer helpful guidance on housing. But there is little discussion in the book on the foreclosure crisis (with just three pages listed in the index under “foreclosure”) and its continuing effects. This is particularly problematic at a time when the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and other federal agencies are taking significant steps backward. The re-emergence of traditional redlining practices by mortgage lenders, discriminatory appraisal practices, and insurance redlining are among other housing and housing finance issues that receive little or no attention.

But this is a minor vent in an otherwise rich collection of empirical evidence, policy analysis, and recommendations for future actions. This is the strength but also possibly a challenge for many readers. Almost every chapter begins by briefly noting progress since 1968 followed by many statistical indicators of persisting disparities and then policy recommendations (usually calls for increasing government and particularly federal government expenditures) for programs to achieve the goals of the Kerner Commission. The book is not exactly a page-turner. It probably will be used more as a reference for specialists (academics as well as policymakers) who draw from chapters most relevant to them than as a book to be read from cover to cover. But that does not lessen its importance for those who continue to pursue the unfinished agenda that the Kerner Commission set out for the nation more than 50 years ago.

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