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Kerner Commission tackles race, poverty

Edward L. Cardenas / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- The issues of poverty, race and inequality were discussed Saturday at Wayne State University during the reconvened Kerner Commission, which will examine poverty, race issues and how much progress has been made since American cities were engulfed in riots 40 years ago.



Jamesi Morgan of ACORN of Detroit talks about her experience with the riot and now working with ACORN. The reconvened Kerner Commission discussed issues of poverty, race and inequality Saturday at Wayne State University. (Elizabeth Conley / The Detroit News)

About 100 community leaders, elected officials and residents filled the Wayne State University Law School auditorium to revisit the destructive riots of 1967, the affects of the programs instituted after the uprisings and the current state of the community.

"We thought back then in 1968 that the social statistics, which were getting better, would keep getting better. They didn't," said former Oklahoma Sen. Fred Harris, one of only two living members of the original 11-member commission. "We know what works and what we tried worked. But we just quit trying and we didn't try hard enough and we need to try again."

The Washington D.C. based Eisenhower Foundation has reconvened the commission,

which President Lyndon Johnson created in 1967 during Detroit's riots.

Following its release in 1968, new programs for jobs, education and training were created and there was enforcement of civil rights laws, Harris said. Now these efforts have fallen by the side and have contributed to the rise of Hispanics and African Americans living in poverty.

"That progress stopped and we began to go backward," he said.

Back in 1968, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders was also known as the Kerner Riot Commission after its chair Illinois Governor Otto Kerner.

The report concluded that "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white - separate and unequal."



Former Sen. Fred Harris, right, warmly greets Rep. John Conyers. "We thought back then in 1968 that the social statistics, which were getting better, would keep getting better. They didn't," Harris said. (Elizabeth Conley / The Detroit News)

Among the panelists which attended the hearing at Wayne State included Rep. John Conyers, D-Detroit, who supported the efforts of the commission and wanted to see it brought to Washington D.C.



"We have ignored getting rid of ghettos in America since the last half of the 20th Century," Rep. John Conyers, D-Detroit, said. "We have to have some extensive talks with ourselves ... We got to have this at a national level. I invite you to bring this set of hearings to Washington D.C." (Elizabeth Conley / The Detroit News)

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have this at a national level. I invite you to bring this set of hearing to Washington D.C."

The issues that inequalities create are first being tackled in Detroit. The commission starts its six-city tour here and will hold additional meetings in Newark, New Orleans, Miami, Washington D.C., and Los Angeles. The commission added New Orleans to its list after race and poverty issues arose following Hurricane Katrina.



Harvey Hollins III, vice president for the government and community affairs at Wayne State University, greets guests at the event. (Elizabeth Conley / The Detroit News)

Findings from hearings will be compiled into a report that will be presented to Congress and the presidential candidates. It will be released on the 40th anniversary of the original commission on March 1, 2008.

This summer, The Detroit News conducted a poll on race relations and examined economic indicators, which found blacks had made little progress in some key areas since the riots.



Dr. George Galster of Wayne State University talks about his findings on Detroit. (Elizabeth Conley / The Detroit News)

By 2000, Detroit blacks had less buying power than they did in 1967, according to The Detroit News' two-day series. In 2000, black median family income was down 6 percent from 1970, while white median income rose 18 percent, after being adjusted for inflation, according to the report.

The News also found that in 2005, blacks were 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed than whites -- the same gap that existed in 1960.

For more than a decade after the commission's 1968 report was issued, affirmative action created housing and employment gains, but that growth has slowed, Harris has said.

"You can throw all the money in the world at our social problems and our individual problems in our society. We can even blame who is in office, Bush, Clinton who ever it may be but we really need to start looking taking responsibilities for our own actions," said Jose Ramirez, 33, of Detroit. "This is going to get taken care of at the grass roots level."

Roy Levy Williams, a Detroit resident and former head of the Detroit chapter of the National Urban League, who said while there have been some successes; the gulf is still wide between whites and blacks.

"You have a few people who passed the glass ceiling," said Williams. "Do we have an equal society in this country we don't.

"It is a struggle to keep the middle class in Detroit and not have a city of senior citizens and the poor."

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