

## **Detroit 1st stop in talks on race divide**

Panel that examined '67 riot coming to WSU

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The Rev. Kevin Turman, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Detroit, sees the problem facing Detroit: the lack of regional equity and cooperation between Detroit and its suburbs.

Fred Harris, a former Oklahoma senator and an original member of the Kerner Riot Commission that studied the country's racial divide after riots in several cities in 1967, sees Detroit's problem, too: segregated schools and housing that fosters a sense of hopelessness.

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And so does Robin Boyle, chair of the Department of Geography and Urban Planning at Wayne State University: disenfranchisement that has created a permanent black underclass.

Racial progress has been made during the last half-century in virtually every aspect of African-American life: More blacks are college-educated, own homes and make more money. Yet is it possible that African Americans are doing better and worse at the same time?

Such issues will be explored Saturday at WSU as the reconstituted Kerner Commission makes Detroit its first stop on a six-city national tour of hearings on race, poverty and inequality.

"Detroit is no longer a city divided by race; Detroit is a city divided by class and by the opportunities that are available," Boyle said.

In Detroit, "we are faced with a large underclass that is effectively disenfranchised from a quality of life by a whole range of factors that include life skills, income level, educational attainment, housing conditions and physical location.

"It's no longer simply an issue of division that's within Detroit; it's indeed a much more complicated regional condition that is similarly segregated by class, by opportunity and by race," he said.

Such disparities -- factors that contributed to Detroit's riot and others and created a larger racial polarization -- leave little mystery as to why the commission will kick off its national tour reexamining the effects of race in America in Detroit.

### **Different worlds**

Forty years ago, following riots in Detroit and other cities, a panel commissioned by President Lyndon Johnson concluded that the nation was moving toward two societies: one black, one white -- separate and unequal.

The Kerner Commission, formally known as the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, was convened to study the cause of the riots. It identified problems that plagued blacks living in urban America.

The Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a private-sector organization that includes some of the commission's veterans, formed to continue its work. It has continued to examine race and poverty issues and make recommendations. Its latest report will be released to Congress in March.

Alan Curtis, president of the foundation, said there has been an ebb and flow of improvements, though many of the same problems exist. In general, there's been a lack of political will to truly address domestic poverty and race issues, an ideology he said he'd like to change.

"We think it's a lucky coincidence that the 40th anniversary comes in an election year, especially with this kind of election year, where it's wide-open," Curtis said.

"This report will be given to all the candidates, and we hope they will be fully engaged and dialogue about their plans to improve the lives of Americans -- be it the African-American population, or Latino population or any other population of the truly disadvantaged."

### **Poll findings**

A Pew Research Center study released Tuesday shows that 45% of black children born to solidly middle-income parents in the 1960s grew up to be among the lowest income earners, with a median family income of \$23,100. Only 16% of whites experienced a similar decline.

The Pew study also found that a growing number of black people said they're worse off than they were five years ago and have no expectation that their lives will improve.

Black pessimism about racial progress in America, according to the study by the research organization based in Washington, D.C., is the worst it has been in more than two decades.

## Seeking solutions

After Detroit, the 34-member commission is to head to Newark, N.J., and then to New Orleans, Miami, Washington and Los Angeles. New Orleans was added because of the race and poverty issues in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Susan Kaufmann, associate director for advocacy for the University of Michigan Center for the Education of Women, is to talk Saturday about the abolition of affirmative action in Michigan and gender issues in Detroit during the last 40 years.

"Without as much access to education as possible, and as much education attainment as possible -- for everyone -- we're going to continue to struggle to revitalize our cities and our economy," she said.

Detroit remains one of the poorest big cities in America, with 28.5% of residents living below the poverty line, nearly half functionally illiterate and more than 12% unemployed. It remains one of America's cities hardest hit by violence and continues to shrink in population.

Pastor Turman said that all that is bad about the country can sometimes seem amplified in Detroit. But he also said the region could become an agent and example for change.

"Think about how diverse metropolitan Detroit is; all of us live in this milieu and function -- at least from 9 to 5 -- pretty well together," he said. "We leave that workplace and go to a pretty segregated world. But at least we show there is a capacity for people from other religions and races and ethnicities to coexist.

"We have a special opportunity, and I know we have the capacity. We simply have to live that out."

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