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'69 PREDICTIONS RING TRUE

In the wake of the 1968 assassinations of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King, President Lyndon Johnson appointed a National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. Its report, issued in 1969, predicted that without creative new action to address social problems that breed crime, Americans would soon see:

"Central business districts in the heart of the city... largely deserted except for police patrols during night-time hours."

"High-rise apartment buildings and residential compounds protected by private guards and security devices will be fortified cells for upper-middle and high-income populations living at prime locations in the city."

Fighting Crime

Prisons fill up, numbers drop, but problems linger

The economy's up and crime is down. That's the good news of the '90s, and you hear it so often it must be true.

So phooey! on those nagging progressives from the Milton Eisenhower Foundation who insist everything is not coming up roses and assert, in a new report, that "triumphalism" about the war on crime is at best misleading and at worst dangerous.

Except that ...the report makes a few good points. Much of what it says rings true for Detroit and Michigan. For instance, statistics show serious crime is generally down since about 1993, with today's levels about the same as 1969. But fear of crime has gone up, as reflected in the boom in security systems, cell phones and tank-like SUVs.

In an annual Justice Department survey, Americans are asked if they fear walking alone at night in any area within a mile of their homes. In 1967, 31 percent said yes. Last year, 41 percent did.

Also, given the record population of prison inmates in the state and country, the report makes a sensible point that crime should be dropping

even more. More bad folks are locked away longer, right? But the cells keep overflowing. Criminality isn't falling in relation to the level of punishment.

"In a reasonable culture, we would not say we had won the war against a disease just because we had moved a lot of the sick people from their homes to hospital wards," especially if people kept getting sick, the report observes.

In other words, this country still is not treating conditions that foster criminal behavior.

The report is an update on the 1969 findings of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. Milton Eisenhower, brother of President Dwight Eisenhower and head of three universities in his long career of public service, chaired the bipartisan group; its members included U.S. Sen. Phil Hart of Suburban neighborhoods, increasingly far-removed from the central city, with homes fortified by an array of security devices; high-speed police-patrolled expressways becoming sterilized corridors connecting safe areas, urban streets that will be unsafe in differing degrees.

That was in 1969. Sound like any metropolitan area you know? Michigan. And a number of its unpleasant predictions have come true at some level for metro Detroit.

So what's the answer? For one thing, don't think prosperity has solved the crime problem. For another, filling prisons won't do it, either. And it's a shame that this country, with 2 million people behind bars, spends more on prisons than on higher education.

The report identifies local programs that make a difference because they start with young people and, most importantly, stay with them. Putting resources into larger-scale efforts along those lines could produce a much more "triumphal" report 30 years from now.