



Milwaukee reflects grim statistics

Poverty, inequality still pervade after 40 years, U.S. report says

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Forty years ago this week, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders - the Kerner Commission - issued its landmark report on poverty, inequality, racial injustice and crime in America.

Today, Milwaukee mirrors the grim statistics on deepening poverty and racial inequality outlined in a new report that updates the Kerner Commission's findings, said a researcher who worked on the anniversary report.

"Unfortunately, it strikes me that Milwaukee continues to be a leader in so many unfortunate measures, such as unemployment, mortgage rates, incarceration and segregation," said Gregory D. Squires, chairman of the sociology department at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

Middle-income Milwaukee neighborhoods declined in number, he said, while wealthy and poor neighborhoods increased. In 1970, the city had 11 census tracts in which 40% or more of the residents were poor, but by 2000, that had jumped to 43 census tracts.

According to U.S. Census figures, Milwaukee's poverty rate now ranks in the top 10 cities, and 1 out of 3 children in Milwaukee Public Schools is living in poverty.

"In many ways, Milwaukee not only mirrors but is ahead of the curve in terms of key measures of inequality, and racial inequality in particular," said Squires, who taught at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee before moving to Washington in 2000. "Clearly, Milwaukee is the type of community the 40th-anniversary Kerner report is writing about."

President Johnson convened the Kerner Commission after riots rocked many cities - including Milwaukee - in the late 1960s. The preliminary update, from a bipartisan task force of more than 40 experts that was set up by the Eisenhower Foundation, concludes that little progress has been made in reducing poverty and racial injustice, with the poor getting poorer and a growing divide between rich and poor.

The new report highlights advances made, such as the substantial expansion of an African-American and Latino middle class. Minority entrepreneurship has greatly expanded, and voters have elected large numbers of minority local and state officials. It notes that an African-American is running for president and a Latino was a candidate in the early primaries.

But for the most part, the report says, "America has failed to meet the commission's goals of reducing poverty, inequality, racial injustice and crime."

"Poverty is now more concentrated, and people in the central cities have been left behind," said Fred Harris, who was a Democratic U.S. senator from Oklahoma and is one of the two living members of the original 1968 Kerner Commission, and who served on the anniversary task force.

The growth of poverty in Milwaukee doesn't surprise Dexter Liggins, 35, who has been going to the Milwaukee Urban League offices for about a year to search for a job on the Internet.

Without a car, he can't get to the good jobs in the suburbs and outlying counties, he said.

"It just makes sense to me that the poor are poorer," he said. "Just look around. The city is plagued with crime and drugs that keep the inner city down, while the jobs go out to areas without bus service. . . . Milwaukee used to have jobs, but they left."

Mayor Tom Barrett said Milwaukee and the nation need policies to bring about equity in jobs, housing, contracting procedures, lending practices and education.

"That's why I'm focusing a lot on jobs and work force development," he said. "It's not a panacea, but it's a start."

Ralph Hollmon, president and chief executive officer of the Milwaukee Urban League, said massive public works programs with public service jobs should be created to help people earn money and restore and instill the values of work to a generation that's lost hope.