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An action plan for everybody

By Stebbins Jefferson

American cities explode with predictable regularity. A 1919 riot in Chicago, 1935 and 1943 riots in Harlem, 1965 rioting in Watts, 1967 racial explosions in Newark, N.J., Detroit and other cities. America's traditional response has been to confront the problem of race riots and ethnic unrest with a study, generate a report-- and file it.

With each incidence of convulsive mass violence, more and more of the permanently employed, the affluent and the powerful seek sanctuary in the suburbs. Yet the problems of the inner cities, where 10 percent of the population lives in concentrated long-range poverty, stretch like tentacles to touch all Americans wherever they live, undermining social order, depleting resources and creating a counterculture alienated from core American values.

After nationwide rioting in 1967, President Lyndon Johnson appointed a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders chaired by Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner. The Kerner Report was published March 1, 1968. Its foremost conclusion: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white -- separate and unequal." The commission's recommendation was to "mount programs on a scale equal to the dimensions of the problems." That advice has been ignored.

Not just another study on inner cities, the Eisenhower report gives specific solutions.

Last week, on the 25th anniversary of the Kerner Report, the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation released a plan: "Investing in Children and Youth, Reconstructing Our Cities." This report not only confirms the prophecy of the Kerner Commission but also indicates that the underlying causes and circumstances are even more complex with the emergence of multiracial disparities.

The value of the Eisenhower Foundation report is that it identifies programs and policies that should be adopted for the rest of the 20th century. The commission invites the involvement of all who care and

understand that America can self-destruct if the problems of our cities are not solved.

The foremost advice is that to save disadvantaged youths we adopt a "multiple-solutions" approach. That formula includes varied combinations of mentoring, discipline, educational innovation, job training, social, community and economic development.

The commission's report addresses all facets of inner-city problems. During the past 12 years, housing for the poor was cut by 80 percent while the number of jail cells doubled, making jails and prisons the public housing programs of the day. The war on drugs has been a \$12 billion-plus annual program in which 70 percent was spent on law enforcement and 30 percent on prevention and treatment. Such formulas must be altered to bring solution, not merely containment, of problems.

Education, job training, welfare, health care and even government itself must be reinvented to eliminate bureaucracies that consume money but which prevent timely, innovative response to the needs of people. This report tells why and how, proposing specific, practical solutions and citing models that can be adapted to local needs. Dr. Lynn Curtis, president of the foundation, correctly calls the report "old-fashioned American common sense."

Perhaps the greatest value of the report is its insistence that leadership come from the bottom and the top of the social order, for there is work for all to do. Quick-fix solutions of the past have brought us to the brink of total chaos. Only long-term commitment to reconstruct our cities can restore order.

The cities that were once our greatest strength are becoming our greatest weakness. We can reverse that trend by investing in people who live there. If that advice sounds familiar, it is because we have always known what to do. We have not chosen to do it.

* Stebbins Jefferson is an editorial writer for The Palm Beach Post.