

Report: Nation's Race Gap Widens

30 years after Kerner, society is seen divided as one black, one white separate and unequal

By Deb Riechmann, Associated Press

WASHINGTON Thirty years ago, at the height of America's civil rights movement, a report concluded that the nation was being divided into two societies: one black, one white separate and unequal. On the anniversary of that Kerner Commission report, a private urban-policy group says that's exactly what has happened.

Released this weekend, the report called *The Millennium Breach* says the economic and racial divide in the United States not only has materialized, it's getting wider.

While leaders and pundits talk of full employment, inner-city unemployment is at crisis levels, said the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, and minorities are suffering disproportionately.

The foundation's report was issued to coincide with tomorrow's anniversary of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders release of the Kerner Commission report, named after its chairman, then-Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner.

People need to become aware that things are getting worse again, said the new report's coauthor Fred Harris, a former Democratic senator from Oklahoma and member of the Kerner Commission. They need to see their own self-interest in this that it doesn't make sense to have these underutilized regions in the country and these underutilized people whose lives are being wasted.

Not all black leaders were impressed with the findings. Robert S. Woodson, Sr., a black conservative who heads the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, said Friday that the report rehashes earlier Kerner Commission updates and offers recommendations too general to be useful.

He accused the authors of being stuck in the 60s and seeing the world only through a prism of race.

The report says an estimated \$56 billion would be needed to carry out its recommendations: Expand funding for successful programs such as Head Start, reduce investment for ineffective programs, and cut corporate welfare and military spending.

Polls show that typical Americans want to do more for the truly disadvantaged and the inner city but think that the major obstacle to doing more is lack of knowledge, the report said, But we already know what doesn't work, what does work and how to replicate what does work.

What does work?

The report includes Head Start, after-school youth centers, urban school reform, and school-to-work programs as things that work. Other successes, the report says, are programs that focus on job training, placement and retention, inner-city economic development, and crime and drug prevention.

What doesn't work?

The report scoffs at supply-side economics - the idea that tax breaks for the rich and corporations will stimulate investments and benefits that will trickle down to the middle class and the poor.

The report denounces enterprise zones, the federal job-training program for out-of-school youth and prison construction. It also cites the ineffectiveness of boot camps, which the Clinton administration has supported.

And it says volunteer work - something the administration promoted at a 1997 summit in Philadelphia - can't be expected to single-handedly rebuild poor neighborhoods and individuals.

The report cites mountains of statistics as evidence: While the national jobless rate is below 5 percent, unemployment rates for young men in places like south-central Los Angeles have topped 30 percent; the child poverty rate in America is 4 times the average of Western European countries; the incarceration rate of black men in the United States is 4 times higher than the same rate in South Africa under apartheid; and 43 percent of minority children attend urban schools, usually where more than half the students are poor and more than two-thirds fail to reach even basic levels on national tests.

Woodson disagrees with the report's premise that the United States has had the most rapid growth in wage inequity in the Western world, with racial minorities suffering disproportionately.

The number of black families earning \$35,000 to \$75,000 doubled from 1970 to 1990, Woodson said. During the same 20-year period, the number of black families earning less than \$15,000 also more than doubled, he acknowledged.

Racism and discrimination still exist. But they aren't the biggest problems facing blacks in America today, Woodson said. The real issue is the growing economic rift within the black community.

If we keep banging the drum of racism, we will never find a way to close this economic rift. After all, if racism were the culprit, why haven't all blacks been affected in the same way?