



## **Still separate and unequal 40 years after Kerner**

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Forty years ago, the seminal National Advisory on Civil Disorders, called the Kerner Commission after its chairman, Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner, concluded that we are moving to two societies: one black, one white; separate and unequal. During this political season, the media has reported that one or another candidate for president is "playing the race card."

Whatever the validity of these reports, it is in fact true that race issues are still played out daily in our nation. Structural racism, social factors that persist in dividing our nation on the basis of race, is a ubiquitous part of the American landscape. For no group is this more evident than minority youth, who have made only limited progress since the March 1968 Kerner Commission report.

On this 40th anniversary, it is a good time to consider the current challenges for minority youth. The disparities paint a stunning portrait of inequality.

In Wisconsin, a 2006 report from the Office of Juvenile Justice indicated that custody rates (per 100,000 youth) for Hispanics were more than six times greater, and for black youth were more than nine times greater, than was the case for white youth.

Nationally, black youth are referred to juvenile justice courts at a rate twice their proportion in the population. Even when charged with the same offense, black youth are more likely to be placed into detention facilities than are whites. In turn, black and Latino youth are less likely to be placed on probation than are white youth.

Black and Latino newborns in the United States today are 300% more likely to grow up in poverty than are white newborns. Poverty is a major basis of other facets of structural racism - affecting health, education, employment and ultimately feelings of hope for the future.

The mortality rate for infants born to black mothers is more than twice as high as corresponding mortality rates for infants born to white mothers. If they live, black youth receive fewer primary care or mental health services than their white peers. These racial differences exist even when socioeconomic status and insurance status are taken into account.

The amount of state and local tax revenue spent per student varies substantially in relation to the level of minority enrollment in a school district. For instance, across the nation, between 1996 and 2000, an average of \$6,684 was spent per pupil in districts with the lowest minority enrollment. In districts with the highest minority enrollment, the corresponding expenditure averaged \$5,782.

In 1972, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 50.5% of the total population of youth, aged 16 to 19, was jobless. The corresponding percentage for blacks was 70.5%. In 1995, the percentages of joblessness for all youth in this age range and for blacks was 49.2% and 72.6%, respectively. In 2003, the corresponding percentages were 59.1% and 78.3%, respectively.

The Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, the private-sector continuation of the landmark commission, is chaired by Sen. Fred Harris (D-Okla.), one of only two living members of the original body. In its 40-year update of Kerner, it finds that America earns a D+ in progress on race, poverty, crime and inequality. Nowhere is that failing grade more evident than in the status of minority youth.

We cannot deny the data or try to explain the facts away by claiming they reflect the outcomes of personal or cultural shortcomings. Combating racism begins with Americans evaluating their own values and behavior about race. Race needs to be dealt with by elected officials in a transparent, objective and proactive manner. All Americans must reject the idea that different life chances for racial groups are somehow natural or expected.

Today's political challenge is to speak forthrightly about racial inequality and to no longer accept racial injustice. We must demand that our presidential candidates address racial disparities in the lives of our children and explain how they will create a socially just nation for all of America's youth.

"Liberty and justice for all" must not remain empty words for our nation's children of color.

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