

Racial, Economic Disparities Require Higher U.S. Outlays, Study Group Says

By Laurie McGinley

WASHINGTON -- The Kerner Commission's famous 25-year-old warning that American society was moving toward two societies, one black, one white -- separate and unequal has become a reality, a private foundation says.

The organization, the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, calls for a 10-year program to increase spending for children and families and associated needs such as housing by \$30 billion annually.

A nonprofit group founded in 1981 by several members and aides to the Kerner Commission and two other 1960s-era presidential panels, the foundation said the earlier prophecy is more relevant today than in 1968, and more complex, with the emergence of multiracial disparities and growing income segregation.

The foundation's president, Lynn Curtis, acknowledged there have been improvements in recent decades for minorities and disadvantaged Americans including the emergence of a large, black middle class and the increased proportion of minority teenagers graduating from high school. But the downside clearly outweighs the upside, he said, pointing to the substantial rise in children in poverty and sharp cutbacks in government housing aid.

The Kerner Commission, officially known as the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, issued its warning in a report presented to President Lyndon Johnson on March 1, 1968. Its head, former Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner, was appointed by President Johnson in July 1967 in the wake of the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles and severe rioting in the summer of 1967, especially in Detroit and Newark.

The increased spending advocated by the Eisenhower Foundation would dwarf the Clinton administration's planned effort. The administration has proposed increasing all domestic discretionary spending by \$68 billion over the next four years. Mr. Curtis said he nevertheless welcomes the administration proposals.

In its report, the Eisenhower Foundation touted a raft of government and private programs including the Head Start preschool education program for disadvantaged children, and Job Corps, a federal job training and placement system focused on the highest-risk youth. The Clinton administration plans spending increases for both.

The foundation also proposes creation of a nonprofit Corporation for Youth Investment, to be backed with federal and private funds, to replicate across the country successful programs by community nonprofit organizations.

Robert Rector, senior policy analyst for the conservative Heritage Foundation, sharply disagreed with the call for more spending. He argued that government social-welfare spending has only exacerbated urban problems, not eased them. He questioned the usefulness of Head Start and the Job Corps, adding, We shouldn't be pouring more money into programs long ago shown to be ineffective, he said.

Instead, he said, the government should focus on increasing work effort and marriage rates in the inner city; taking tougher steps to keep repeat criminals off the streets; changing the public school system by offering vouchers for children to go to private and parochial schools and enlisting help from black churches to rebuild moral character.

While he doubtless would disagree with most of Mr. Rector's points, the Rev. Jesse Jackson also is stressing the importance of improved behavior by people especially young people who are living in poverty. There must be more focus on the behavior of people, he told reporters recently.