

**ONLINE FOCUS****ONLINE NEWSHOUR****A NATION DIVIDED?**

March 2, 1998

[The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer Transcript](#)

Thirty years ago, a presidential panel found that the races were becoming more separate and unequal. A newly released report says the situation has worsened. The findings have sparked a debate over the state of racial equality and what should be done to improve the situation. Elizabeth Farnsworth explores the debate with four experts.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Now, an update on the Kerner Commission report. Thirty years ago in the wake of the urban riots of 1967 a presidential commission headed by then Illinois Governor Otto Kerner concluded that the nation was "moving towards two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal."



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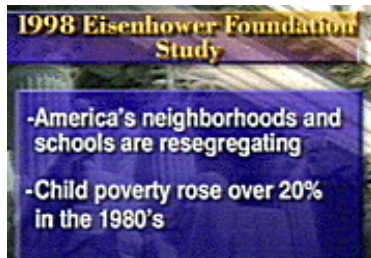
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That prediction has come true according to a new report from the foundation set up to carry on the Kerner Commission's work. The study concludes the economic and racial breach is wide and growing wider, with America's neighborhoods and schools resegregating and child poverty up over 20 percent in the 1980's, a situation that disproportionately affects minorities.

We get four views now on the new report. Lynn Curtis is the president of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation and one of the authors of the new report; Hugh Price is president of the Urban League; Robert Woodson is the president of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise; and Stephan Thernstrom is a professor of history at Harvard University and the co-author of **America in Black and White, One Nation Indivisible: Race in Modern America**. Thank you all for being with us.

The Kerner Commission updated.

Mr. Curtis, the Kerner Commission was set up to look at the riots of the summer of 1967 and the summer before riots in which a hundred people died--nearly a hundred people in 1967, and many hundreds were injured. What was your report looking at specifically?

LYNN CURTIS, Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation: We looked at what has happened in the 30 years since the original Kerner Commission report came out, and what we found is there's been good progress in many areas, for



example, the African-American middle class has increased, and high school graduation rates for African-Americans have improved. We also found at the same time, though, that there have been a lot of negatives. For example, employment in inner cities is a Depression levels at the same time that we celebrate a supposedly robust economy. The rich have been getting richer at the same time the poor have been getting poorer. The working class has been getting poor. The middle class has also lost ground to the rich. You mentioned the increase in child poverty.



Today, our child poverty rate is four times higher than in western Europe and today, for example, the rate of incarceration of African-American men is four times higher than in pre-Mandela apartheid South Africa. And so when you look at income, when you look at wealth, when you look at wages, when you look at employment, when you look at education, when you look at the bias of the criminal justice system, you see a growing breach, and that's why we have said, on balance, things are getting worse.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Mr. Woodson, what do you think about those conclusions?



ROBERT WOODSON, National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise: I don't agree with the conclusions. He mixes race and economics. We have made--the biggest income gap has been low-income blacks and upper income blacks. Also, what he fails to address in the report, if racism is the primary contributor to the problems of poverty, then why is that poor blacks have suffered over the last 20 years in cities

where the programs are run by blacks, school systems, foster care systems, housing programs, in some of those cities that we have the highest per capita expenditure on programs to aid the poor, highest per capita expenditure in those cities. Yet, a black child born in Washington and Harlem has a lower life expectancy than a child born in Bangladesh, and only higher in Haiti. So the report doesn't really address why, if racism is the primary contributor, why are blacks failing in the hands of other blacks?

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Did you conclude that racism was the primary problem?



LYNN CURTIS: No. We concluded that poverty and race are intertwined. And I might just respond to Bob in this way. In the late 70's, when I was working with the Carter administration, I gave Bob a grant, and it was to start up his own organization. It was a federal grant to empower him to sort of invest in human capital. And he has done very well. We are saying in this report, by the same token, that what we need to do is invest in the education and employment not only of the poor but of the working class and of the middle class.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Okay. Let me come back to both of you on what should be done in just a second, but first, Mr. Price, what do you think about the conclusions in this report?

HUGH PRICE, National Urban League: Well, I think the United States is not the racial cauldron that it was 30 years ago because we have made a lot of progress. Corporate work forces are vastly more integrated. College campuses are vastly more integrated. The middle class has grown, but neither is the United States in 1998 the melting pot that it ought to be, because we do have this tremendous stratification along skill lines that affects minorities

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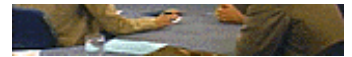
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disproportionately. We have a huge achievement gap in our society. We have serious pockets of deep unemployment and poverty, and we, therefore, have a long way to go but we have certainly come a long way from 1968.



ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Do you welcome this report? Do you think it's necessary?

HUGH PRICE: Oh, I think the report is necessary because it enables us to take stock some 30 years later, and it points the spotlight on areas that still need attention. In the prison system, in continuing conflicts between police and civilians, in the pockets of high unemployment, and hopelessness we certainly need concerted action there. I think the report does sort of under-sell the progress that we've made, which has been quite significant.

Mr. Curtis: "I've learned not to listen to Harvard intellectuals as much as my mom or David Letterman's mom."

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And, Mr. Thernstrom, what is your reaction to the conclusions of the report?



STEPHAN THERNSTROM, Harvard University: Well, I think it's deja vu all over again that the Kerner Commission report, itself, was a quite unbalanced and simplistic analysis of the social trends of the 50's and 60's, quite mistaken in many ways. But it, unfortunately, created a tradition of doom and gloom and simplistic analysis which, after the fifth anniversary, the tenth anniversary, the twentieth anniversary all provoked much comment unfailingly to stress that nothing has gotten better. Indeed, things have gotten worse. Now, the Eisenhower Commission report isn't quite as simplistic as that, but it does seem to me rather lurid and misleading in fundamental ways. For example, it stresses wealth disparities with some figures I find impossible to verify. It claims one percent hold 90 percent of the wealth. The latest Census Bureau study of this shows that the top 20 percent own only 43 percent.

More important, in terms of the stress on continued black child poverty, that is, indeed, true and very alarming. The question is: What is causing it? We know, in fact, that it is very closely linked to the fact that 70 percent of all black children today are born out of wedlock. And there is an enormously close correlation between being born out of wedlock, growing up without a father in the household, and being poor. Indeed, 85 percent of all poor black children today are living with their mother and no father. And this is a problem--I would strongly stress--that obviously would not be ameliorated one wit if every white racist dropped dead tomorrow.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Mr. Curtis, you want to respond to these and specifically that criticism.

LYNN CURTIS: I'm a graduate of Harvard, and I've learned not to listen to Harvard intellectuals as much as my mom or David Letterman's mom. And I find some of those comments just not in keeping with what the statistics actually show. And I would ask the professor to talk to his colleague at Harvard, William Julius Wilson, who has many of the statistics we use.



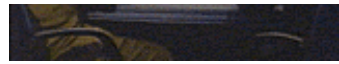
STEPHAN THERNSTROM: I'm well aware--

LYNN CURTIS: The most important--

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: What about the family structure?



LYNN CURTIS: The most important point in our report is that unemployment is at Depression levels in inner city areas, and when you have unemployment, families fall apart. You have a social structure that is not in existence. You need a full employment policy and a lot of other things will follow.



ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Okay. So let me just get this clear quickly. So, in looking at these problems which you enumerated, the main cause is unemployment. What other causes do you look at in the report specifically?

LYNN CURTIS: The main policy is full employment in the inner city, along with report of the public inner city school system. The causes of this go way back, for example, to the 1980's, when the administration practiced tax cuts for the rich and that resulted in the poor getting poorer, the working class getting poorer, the middle class losing ground.

Mr. Woodson: "He almost exempts the poor of being responsible in part for their own condition."

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Okay. Let's look at the causes now, Mr. Woodson. What do you think the causes are of some of the problems, or do you not think there are some of the problems that we enumerated?



ROBERT WOODSON: Let me just say that, first of all I think, Lynn, this is fantasy. For instance, saying that he gave us the money to start the organization is just patently untrue, as are elements of the report. For instance, if economics and full employment and race conditions were the sole predictor of a people, explain to me why the 10 years of the Depression that 82 percent of black families have a man and a woman raising children when there was a 25 percent unemployment and 50 percent in the black community, so historically—

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: So you're saying that's not economics.

ROBERT WOODSON: Absolutely.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: That's--

ROBERT WOODSON: And racial discrimination was rampant at the time, yet, black families maintained this. I would say absent in the report is any discussion of morality, of centers of moral influence, character; he almost exempts the poor of being responsible in part for their own condition. And so what works is when you invest in those moral centers of excellence that are indigenous to those communities, enable the poor to participate in the private market that Lynn Curtis says doesn't--he refers even to a white economy. I don't know what a "white economy" is that he has identified in the report. There is just an economy for which low-income blacks and others can participate if they have the resources and the will, but certainly their condition has never determined what white America does or liberal academics like Lynn Curtis decides is in their best interest.



ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Okay. Mr. Price, where do you come in here?

HUGH PRICE: I think it's very clear that urban economies have undergone a profound change over the last 30 years, and that the kinds of jobs that existed in factories that paid middle class wages for marginally-skilled people really no longer exist. And folks in inner cities have gotten caught in the switches, and their children are stranded in schools that don't function very well and don't equip them for a new economy. And that is where the pockets of severe poverty and despair exist. And we need concerted action on the part of the public sector and private sector to address that. I also think that there are some areas where people really may not be able to function in the private economy, in the private labor market, as we know it, and if we want them to work, we're going to have to take public action. And there's a long tradition of public action to close those kinds of gaps even as the economy revives and the unemployment rates are dropped. So I think that the report is correct in pointing out those pockets that require concerted action, and then obviously--and I think everyone would agree--urban children and rural children need to catch up with everybody else academically and get on

the up economic escalator.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Mr. Thernstrom, what about that, public action?

STEPHAN THERNSTROM: Well, first, let me say Mr. Curtis is, I think, just flatly wrong to maintain that the disintegration of the black family, the high illegitimacy rate is a function of black male unemployment. We have examined that theory very closely the better part of a chapter in our book, **America in Black and White**, and I think we've demolished it. Mr. Woodson points out quite correctly that the black male unemployment rate in the Great Depression was several times higher than it is anywhere in the United States today, and yet, the black family was not disintegrating. That theory simply doesn't hold up.



Where do we go from here?



ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Okay. Now, the few minutes we have left, what needs to be done?

LYNN CURTIS: What needs to be done is not talk about liberal versus conservative but what doesn't work versus what works. What doesn't work is prison building, supply-side economies, policies like that. They're failed. What we need to do is stop doing what doesn't work and invest in what does work: safe havens after school where kids come for help with their homework as evaluated by Columbia University, the James Comer E. L. University school development plan where teachers and parents take over inner city schools, the Ford Foundation's Quantum Opportunity program that mentors high schoolers; the Community Development Corporations like the New Community Corporation in Newark, which creates jobs; the South Shore Bank, which creates banking for the inner city and community-based policing by minority officers. Those are all proven scientifically-evaluated programs, and if we replicate what works at a scale that's equal to the dimensions of the problem, we can make an impact.

ROBERT WOODSON: Programs of the Eisenhower Center--let me just say in terms of remedies I really think that there are moral centers of economic and social influence, some of the major churches--Pastor Harold Ray in West Palm Beach--Buster Sorries in Somerset, New Jersey, these pastors are--Floyd Flake--Floyd Flake's church in Queens, New York, is the fourth largest employer, 840 people, where because he's able to call people to responsibility. So I think there needs to be support, private. We need to get tax incentives for individual taxpayers to contribute directly to these institutions. We do not need another massive poverty program, and for this report to be silent on the killing fields of the public schools, foster care, all of the major systems funded out of the \$5.3 trillion over the last 30 years, there's no criticism of those institutions in this report, and there's not a word about those moral centers of influence that are rebuilding inner city neighborhoods where government and everyone else has failed.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Mr. Price.

HUGH PRICE: I think we need a mobilization to eliminate the achievement gap in our community and a lot of that responsibility rests in our community, and that's why we of the National Urban League are parting with the Congress of National Black Churches, Bob, with the black church and fraternities, and sororities. We've got to spread the gospel that achievement matters and close that gap. But we also have to sit on the public schools which have 93 percent of our children. The second thing we have to do is there may be areas where the private labor market can't quite reach yet because the skills aren't there, the market opportunities aren't there, and there may have to be interim public action, just as community development corporations are supported by government and by foundations, until the private sector caught up just as the economic development administration in the South in the 1950's spent a lot of money on infrastructure and job creation in order to provide the groundwork for economic recovery in the South.



ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: I have to interrupt you--

HUGH PRICE: And I think we need to look at that.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Okay. Thank you. Sorry, Mr. Thernstrom, we can't get to you. We'll come back to this. We're out of time. Thank you all very much.

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