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Kerner Commission: Not enough progress made on poverty

Darren A. Nichols / The Detroit News

Little progress has been made for African-Americans in key areas such as poverty, racial injustice, education and crime in the 40 years since racially charged urban riots across the county, according to an update of the landmark Kerner Commission released this morning.

Despite an emerging black middle class and increases in entrepreneurs and public officials at all levels, the commission that famously warned the United States is moving toward "two societies, one black, one white -- separate and equal" found that few goals have been met since its 1968 findings.

Its grade on progress for African-Americans: D+. It's a mark that resonates in metropolitan Detroit, the nation's most segregated region.

"There is nothing I can point to in our present day experience that tell us that we are significantly better off today than we were (then)," said Arthur Johnson, former president of the Detroit branch NAACP. "The income gap is real and something we have the right to argue about. It has come to a point where we must tell this nation that we are not going to accept the mis-education and the misdirection of education resources."

Last year, the Washington D.C.-based Eisenhower Foundation reconvened the commission during the 40th anniversary of the 1967 riots. The initial 11-member panel, appointed by President Lyndon Johnson after rioting in 100 cities, warned the nation faced a "system of apartheid" in major cities and urged legislation to create jobs and improve housing. Johnson rejected the findings and they further languished the next year with the election of Richard Nixon.

The updated findings were compiled through hearings in Detroit, Newark and Washington, D.C, which all rioted in the 1960s. A final report will be released this year.

It found:

- Some employers still "steer" minority applicants into the worst jobs; real-estate agents send them to less desirable neighborhoods and mortgage lenders accept fewer applications than those from similar whites.
- Unemployment and underemployment were the most important causes of poverty, yet African-American unemployment remains twice as high as white unemployment during each of the four decades since 1968. About 37 million Americans live in poverty, while 46 million Americans are without health insurance.
- Educational disparities remain linked to funding. The wealthiest 10 percent of school districts in the U.S. spend nearly 10 times more than the poorest 10 percent.

The report called for the following remedies: boosting the \$5.85 an hour minimum wage beyond the \$7.25 an hour it's set to increase to in 2009; passing laws to require the Federal Reserve to take action whenever unemployment increases past 4 percent; approving the Employee Free Choice Act to make it easier to form unions; increased job training and college grants for low-income students and make funding for public school districts more equitable.

The results may come as a shock to some -- reflecting a divide in perception that still persists.

The Eisenhower report echoes findings by The News' two-day series published last July that found the white-black gap still persists. Black incomes in Detroit are down since 1970, while they're up for whites. More blacks are going to college than ever before, but nearly twice as many whites are too. The white-black employment gap is the same now as it was in 1960.

"It's kind of telling given all of the bickering and finger-pointing by some that (suggest) Detroit has gotten into the predicament by itself," said the Rev. Horace Sheffield III, Michigan chapter president of the National Action Network.

"It's not new to me, (but) it's something suburbanites want to ignore and say we alone are responsible for the deplorable plight of the city, which is not true."

Maureen Taylor, who served on Detroit's panel last November, said the Eisenhower findings weren't harsh enough. She would have recommended a D-.

"There is no war against poverty in America," said Taylor, the state chairwoman of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization.

"There is a war against the poor. We have to go and change the circumstances of poverty."

But many are still optimistic. A Detroit News poll conducted found six in 10 African-Americans said they feel blacks have made at least some economic progress since 1967. Ulysses Chauffe, a 54-year-old west-side Detroit resident, said he doesn't see it as a lack of progress, but rather people who are not taking advantage of the resources available to them.

"I don't know if I perceive it the same way," Chauffe said. "This generation is more informed and has more tools available to them than past generations. It's whether or not you grasp onto that. I don't think that more so than (in the past) it's we're under some type of glass ceiling that keeps us from progressing. It's ourselves."

You can reach Darren A. Nichols at (734) 462-2190 or ddnichols@detnews.com.