

Star Tribune
Minneapolis Edition
March 15, 1993

Kerner at 30

Some Done, Much More to Do

In March 1967, 30 years ago this week, the Kerner Commission responded to several summers of urban violence with its now-famous warning that America was "moving toward two societies - one black, one white - separate and unequal." Today, just two years shy of the turn of the century, a major update says that prophecy has become reality.

Authors of the report, for the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, say the message of their update is simple: Things have gotten worse, much worse.

They are partially right. Without question, racism still plagues America. And for those trapped in poor segregated, crumbling neighborhoods, with deteriorating housing, failing schools and high crime, there are indeed "two societies" that are worlds apart. The report offers some useful policy recommendations to combat chronic poverty, such as fully funding Head Start, and investing more in K-12 education and vocational training.

However, the past 30 years have also seen substantial growth in the black middle class and the expansion of entrepreneurship among people of color. There are more nonwhites in professional and leadership positions, both in the public and private sectors. And though incidents of both individual and institutional discrimination still occur, society is vastly more racially open than it has ever been.

The nation may not be moving so much toward separate and unequal in absolute black and white terms as toward societies of haves and have-nots - with disproportionate number of minorities among the have-nots. It is a society dividing into two distinct camps - one with the resources and mobility to acquire good housing, neighborhoods and schools, the other confined to urban combat zones with alternative street economies based substantially on illegal activities.

In 1968, Kerner commissioners emphasized that children raised in disadvantaged urban ghettos would be the primary cause of declining urban conditions. Certainly that prediction has come to pass. Just take a look at the across-the-board statistics for urban children raised in poverty.

School success and test scores are low. Arrest and incarceration rates are high. Unemployment is five times higher than the national average. Large numbers of urban young people fail to see any hope for their future other than the street economy based on drugs, gangs and crime.

As the Eisenhower update report wisely asserts, now is the time to invest in turning those trends around. With a robust economy, a projected federal surplus, low overall unemployment and companies clamoring for workers, certainly the conditions exist to lift more people out of poverty. Now America must develop the will to make it happen.