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A new look at racial divide Panel to update 40-year-old report

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Forty years ago, a commission charged by President Lyndon Johnson with understanding the civil disorders ripping apart America's cities reported the nation was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white -- separate and unequal."

Now the private foundation that continues the work of the Kerner Commission wants to know if that's still true. Tomorrow, it will be coming to Newark as part of a national tour to gather testimony for a report it will release next spring on the 40th anniversary of the Kerner Commission.

"I don't know what our conclusions will be. We want people to tell us," said Alan Curtis, president of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. "We didn't simply want our report to be a lot of experts talking -- although we'll have experts, too. We wanted it to have credibility from speaking to real people who can tell us what's really happening."

The hearing, which begins at 10 a.m. tomorrow at the New Jersey Historical Society, is being billed as a public dialogue on race, poverty, inequality and crime. Several local groups have already been invited to testify, including a group of Newark high school students.

But the Eisenhower Foundation is also opening the microphone for community members to discuss the legacy of Newark's riot -- a five-day spasm of violence that killed 26 people and caused \$10 million in damage during July 1967 -- and share observations about the present state of the city.

The Eisenhower Foundation has already visited Detroit, which rioted six days after Newark's disturbance came to an end, and also plans to hold hearings in Los Angeles, New Orleans, Miami and Washington.

"We're going to be going national and we want Newark to be part of the national discussion," Curtis said.

Much like the Lilley Commission -- which was established by New Jersey Gov. Richard

Hughes in 1967 to study the civil disorders in this state -- the Kerner Commission made a set of sweeping recommendations aimed at stamping out inequality, many of which were never implemented.

Most data suggests there has been an upturn in poverty this decade after a decline during the 1990s and that poverty is more concentrated in the inner cities than ever before.

"We need to bring America back to a place where poverty reduction is a priority. But how do you get America to do that?" Curtis said. "We often hear it's difficult to improve conditions because there is no political will. We're going to spend a lot of time asking, okay, how do you change political will?"

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