



# **Locked in the Poorhouse: Cities, Race, and Poverty in the United States**

Edited by Fred R. Harris & Lynn Curtis

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Contents

## Introduction 1

1. The Kerner Report Thirty Years Later  
*Fred R. Harris*
2. Urban Poverty, Welfare Reform, and Child Development  
*Greg J. Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn*
3. Poverty as a Public Health Issue: Since the Kerner Report of 1968  
*Gary Sandefur, Molly Martin, and Thomas Wells*
4. The New Urban Poverty: Consequences of the Economic and Social Decline of Inner-City Neighborhoods  
*William Julius Wilson, James M. Quane, and Bruce H. Rankin*
5. Urban Poverty, Race, and the Inner City: The Bitter Fruit of Thirty Years of Neglect  
*Paul A. Jargowsky*
6. Race, Violence, and Justice Since Kerner  
*Elliott Currie*
7. Racism and the Poor: Integration and Affirmative Action as Mobility Strategies  
*William L. Taylor*
8. Policy for the New Millennium  
*Lynn A Curtis*

Conclusion

Notes and Sources

Index

About the Contributors

## Conclusions

### **Introduction**

"Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." These were the stark and distressing words of the Kerner Commission—the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders—in its landmark report issued on March 1, 1968.

President Lyndon B. Johnson had appointed the blue-ribbon citizens' commission following the terrible riots that broke out in the black sections of many American cities during the summer of 1967. The Kerner Report recommended "compassionate, massive, and sustained" federal efforts to combat the nation's intertwined problems of racism and poverty that, the commission found, had most harshly impacted the nation's inner cities and that were the root causes of the urban disorders.

After the 1968 assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, President Johnson appointed another citizens' body, the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, headed by Milton S. Eisenhower. Its December 1969 report declared: "The greatness and durability of most civilizations has been finally determined by how they responded to challenges from within. Ours will be no exception."

Since the reports of these two national commissions, the divide between rich and poor in the United States has become greater and the challenges from within more formidable.

The Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation is the private sector continuation of the Kerner and Eisenhower commissions. It is a nonendowed and nonprofit foundation and a national intermediary organization. The foundation replicates and evaluates multiple-solution successes for children, youth, and families and for the inner city. And it communicates what works to citizens, the media, and decision makers.

To mark the thirtieth anniversary of the Kerner Report, the Eisenhower Foundation has sponsored two complementary volumes. The Millennium Breach was released on March 1, 1998—thirty years to the day after the original Kerner Report. Written by the editors of the present volume and other Eisenhower Foundation Trustees and published by the Foundation, The Millennium Breach presents the Foundation's position on practical policy and on how to replicate the grassroots non-profit inner-city programs that are responsible for much of what works. It is targeted to private and public policy makers and to community practitioners on the front lines in inner cities.

Locked in the Poorhouse is a compilation of essays by a distinguished panel of experts who give their assessments of where America is now in regard to the problems with which the original Kerner Report dealt. It concludes with a summary of The Millennium Breach, which, in turn, drew on some of the analyses in Locked in the Poorhouse.

**In chapter 1** of *Locked in the Poorhouse: Cities, Race, and Poverty in the United States*, "The Kerner Report Thirty Years Later," Fred Harris, who was a member of the Kerner Commission, briefly relates the details of the urban riots that gave rise to the creation of the Kerner Commission, outlines the contents of its 1968 report, and assesses the present situation in America. He shows how economic shocks and trends, as well as government action and inaction, caused the nation's progress on the problems of race, poverty, and the inner cities to stop toward the end of the 1970s and even, in some ways, to be undone. Today, thirty years after the Kerner Report, there is more poverty in America, it is deeper, blacker, and browner than before, and it is more concentrated in the cities, which have become America's poorhouses.

**In chapter 2**, "Urban Poverty, Welfare Reform, and Child Development," Greg Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn call attention to the fact that one in five of American inner-city residents are poor, half again more than thirty years ago, and that child poverty is twice the rate for adults. Childhood poverty, especially in the earliest years, can have an alarmingly depressing impact on children's school achievement and cognitive and verbal ability. The authors point to important national policy initiatives to which these findings should lead us.

**Chapter 3**, "Poverty as a Public Health Issue," by Gary Sandefur, Molly Martin, and Thomas Wells, emphasizes that poverty in America is at least as prevalent as it was thirty years ago and is not just a city, nor a black, issue. However, what is now distinctive about inner-city poverty is the geographical concentration of large numbers of black and Hispanic poor people. Poverty, wherever it occurs and whatever group it affects, should be viewed by the nation as a public health problem, as a failure of national will and political courage, rather than as a moral failure on the part of poor people.

**Chapter 4**, "The New Urban Poverty: Consequences of the Economic and Social Decline of Inner-City Neighborhoods," William Julius Wilson, James M. Quane, and Bruce H. Rankin demonstrate how continued high levels of poverty, together with the disappearance of well-paying blue-collar jobs and an outmigration of working- and middle-class African Americans (paralleling a similar, and greater, white outmigration), have concentrated poverty and chronic joblessness in the inner cities and have increased the number of urban ghettos. The concentration effects are increased social disorganization, crime, and isolation from the outside world. The authors conclude that "the ominous predictions of the Kerner Report have become our urban reality."

**Chapter 5**, "Urban Poverty, Race, and the Inner City: The Bitter Fruit of Thirty Years of Neglect," by Paul A. Jargowsky, demonstrates that, as a result of inaction and neglect, the conditions that spawned the 1967 riots have grown worse. Today's urban crisis can be summed up as "increasing economic segregation interacting with rising inequality in the context of the aftermath of three hundred years of poverty and racism," which "poses the greatest threat to the United States' long-term economic and political stability."

**In chapter 6, "Race, Violence, and Justice since Kerner,"** Elliott Currie shows that, despite a falling national crime rate, crime and violence in minority communities remain "a public health disaster of staggering proportions." An explosion in minority incarceration and a massive expansion in the prison system—which is what America has instead of effective antipoverty, public housing, drug treatment, and mental health programs—are crippling the chances for a stable and successful future for millions of minority people.

**Chapter 7, "Racism and the Poor: Integration and Affirmative Action as Mobility Strategies,"** by William L. Taylor, describes how affirmative action and desegregation laws have helped lift many minority people out of poverty, but the nation's "drive for equality has been running on empty for a quarter of a century." Taylor argues that it is in America's national interest to renew and build on these past efforts.

**In chapter 8, "Policy for a New Millennium,"** Lynn A. Curtis, President of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, argues that, if we reduce by only a fraction the \$100 billion-plus that taxpayers pay for affirmative action for the rich and for corporate welfare, we could finance both a full employment program for the truly disadvantaged in our inner cities and the reform of our urban public education system. Such reform should be based on replicating scientifically proven models of success and programs that work. Curtis shows how the 1980s policy of tax breaks for the rich and prison building for the poor has failed. He says that leadership and the political will to act must be forged through a new alliance among the working class, the truly disadvantaged, and the anxious middle class, all of whom have lost ground because of present policies. Curtis concludes with public opinion information that suggests the political feasibility of such an alliance of a "what works" policy.

The Conclusion summarizes the findings and recommendations of the earlier chapters and makes a final analysis:

America made progress for nearly a decade on the problems with which the Kerner Report dealt. Then, because of certain economic shocks and trends and government action and inaction, that progress stopped and, in some ways, went into reverse.

A growing number of working-class families fell into poverty and a lot of already-poor Americans became deeply poor.

There are more poor people in America, now, than there were thirty years ago—36.5 million, 13.7 percent of our population, compared to 25.4 million, 12.8 percent. Child poverty is greater. The income gap between rich and poor is wider. Those who're poor are poorer: 14.4 million Americans have incomes that are 50 percent or less of the poverty line.

Poverty is more concentrated now. Three-fourths of the poor live in metropolitan areas, compared to about half in 1968, and forty-two percent of today's poor live in the very central cities.

Many working- and middle-class whites and African Americans have moved out, and inner-city poverty has become more densely packed. Housing and schools are resegregating. Poverty concentration has produced social disorganization and crime and social isolation for inner-city residents—largely African American and Hispanic, with some American Indian and Asian-American, as well. Children are often damaged by growing up in poverty, especially in high-poverty neighborhoods, severely curtailing their life-success chances.

America's inner cities have become the nation's poorhouses from which many, now, have little hope of escape.

It's not true that government can do nothing right. What we tried after the Kerner Report largely worked. We just stopped trying it or we didn't try it hard enough.

We know what works—Headstart and early childhood development, sensible and working follow-on programs for older children and youth at risk, jobs, public school reform, job training and job retention, affirmative action and proven desegregation efforts, investments in housing and community development organizations that are more directly targeted at generating jobs for the poor, and a livable minimum wage.

We know what doesn't work. Tax breaks and other incentives for the rich don't work, not for most Americans. Neither do disinvestment from the inner city or massive prison building and the explosion in incarceration.

We have the money. We must reorder the federal budget and its priorities—moving back from programs and policies that don't work and cutting down on unneeded military expenditures and corporate welfare. We must return to human investment—in programs that do work.

To accomplish this, we must, first, help Americans see that things are getting worse again for millions. Many don't know this. We must communicate what works. We must reduce the alarmingly growing power of money in American politics. We must form political coalitions across racial, ethnic, and class lines.

We must begin to think of our inner cities, and wherever else great American poverty exists, as internal wasteful, underdeveloped areas and commit to the required human infrastructure investments. This makes economic, fiscal, and moral sense. And it will ensure a more stable and secure America for us all.

## **Conclusions**

America made progress for nearly a decade on the principal fronts that the March 1, 1968 Kerner Report dealt with: race, poverty, and the inner cities. Then that progress stopped, and in some ways we have even regressed.

Among the reasons for the halt and reversal were certain economic shocks and trends: a series of economic recessions; a leveling off of economic growth rates; technological

development and economic globalization, which caused the disappearance of many blue-collar manufacturing jobs and the creation of new jobs requiring high levels of skills and education; the weakening of unions and a decline in unionization. The net result of all of this was that a growing number of working-class families fell into poverty and a lot of already poor Americans became deeply poor.

Government action and inaction also played a part. Particularly during the Reagan and Bush administrations, social programs and social investment suffered badly. The value of income support programs dropped. So did that of the federal minimum wage. Job and training programs and investments in education and infrastructure fell.

As a consequence of these economic shocks and trends and of government action and inaction, there is more poverty in America now than there was thirty years ago. Today, 36.5 million Americans live in poverty, 13.7 percent of our population, compared to 25.4 million poor, 12.8 percent of our people, at the time of the Kerner Report. Child poverty is greater, having grown by a fifth in the 1980s. The income gap between the rich and the rest of Americans—the middle class, the working class, and poor people—has grown wider. The average American family today has less real income than in the 1980s.

Poverty is deeper than it was thirty years ago. Today, 14.4 million Americans live on incomes that amount to less than half of the poverty threshold.

Poverty is more concentrated now. In 1968, only about half of America's poor lived in metropolitan areas; three-fourths of them do today; 42 percent of poor people now live in core inner cities.

As working- and middle-class whites and African Americans have moved out to the suburbs, inner-city poverty has become more concentrated. American housing and schools are resegregating; two-thirds of African Americans and three-fourths of Hispanic children now attend predominantly minority schools.

Concentrated poverty in the inner cities has produced social disorganization and crime and social isolation for the poor people who live there—largely African American and Hispanic, with some American Indian and Asian American poor, as well. America's inner cities have become the nation's poorhouses, from which many have little hope of escape.

Growing up in poverty, and especially in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, has a dramatically depressing impact on early childhood development, limiting achievement and cognitive and verbal ability for many children and severely curtailing their chances for a successful life. It is not true that government can do nothing right. What we tried after the Kerner Report largely worked. We just stopped trying it. Or we did not try it hard enough.

We know what works. Head Start and other early childhood development programs work. So do sensible, and working, follow-on programs for older children and youth at risk.

Jobs, public school reform, job training and job retention work. Affirmative action and proven desegregation efforts work. We know how to make investments in housing, community development organizations, and public infrastructure work better to generate jobs for the poor. A livable minimum wage works.

We know what does not work. Trickle-down supply-side economics—incentives for the rich—do not work, not for most Americans. The Job Training Partnership Act has not worked for out-of-school youth. Neither have enterprise zones to subsidize corporate investment in the inner city. Massive prison building and the explosion in incarceration have not worked.

We have the money to do what needs to be done. We must reorder the federal budget and its priorities—moving away from programs and policies that do not work and cutting down on unneeded military expenditures and corporate welfare. We must return to human investment—on programs that do work. We must raise the minimum wage and renew or affirmative action and desegregation efforts.

To accomplish this, we must, first, help Americans see that things are getting worse again for millions of Americans. Many do not know this. Second, we must communicate what works. Third, we must reduce the growing power of money in American politics, drastically reforming our system of campaign finance—so that our policy and budget priorities can be changed. Fourth, we must all realize our common self-interest in forming political coalitions across racial ethnic, and class lines that can produce political action.

We must begin to think of our inner cities, and wherever and among whomever else great poverty exists, as internal wastefully underdeveloped areas. It makes economic sense to provide our underskilled, undereducated, underemployed, and underutilized fellow Americans a real chance for success and productivity. It will cost less to do this than what we are doing now. That is fiscal sense. It will save a lot of tragically lost American lives and unrealized human potential. And it will ensure a more stable and secure America for all.