

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Letters to The Editor

March 23, 1998

Inequality and Violence in Our Cities

Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom profess themselves mystified over the causes of urban violence analyzed - badly in their view - by the Kerner report of 1968 ("American Apartheid? Don't Believe It." editorial page, March 2). But their confusion requires an extraordinary level of denial, which can be maintained only by ignoring or misreading a body of evidence that was already substantial in the 1960s and is even larger today.

To begin with, the Thernstroms, curiously, ignore altogether the role of the police in fueling the tensions that led to the worst of riots, though the Kerner report found anger at police practices at the top of the list of black residents' grievances in the riot-torn cities. As importantly, the Thernstroms seem not to understand - or perhaps not to have read - the report's analysis of the links between social disadvantage and the outbreak of violence.

They claim, for example, that black unemployment in Detroit, the city hardest hit by urban violence, was only 3.4 percent and hence the city could hardly be considered "a tinderbox ready to explode." The authors of the Kerner report, however, knew better. They noted that the unemployment rate among black men in the 12th Street area, where the riot began, was estimated at 12 percent to 15 percent, and 30 percent or more for those under 25 - the population from which the typical riot participant came. More importantly, the Thernstroms are apparently unaware that the report saw underemployment as the key problem behind the disorders. The report cited Labor Department estimates that the proportion of inner-city blacks who were either out of work altogether (including those who had dropped out of the labor force), working part time when they needed full-time work, or working at poverty-level wages, was many times higher than those officially jobless. They also noted that the most typical riot participant was drawn from the large population of young men trapped in menial or low-paying jobs - and surrounded by an affluence they were largely blocked from attaining.

An abundance of statistics shows that those conditions are still very much with us. The riots of the 60s constituted a staggering human tragedy. That

tragedy will be compounded if we lose sight of the lessons they so painfully taught us about the connections between inequality and violence.

Elliott Curie
Center of Study of Law and Society
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA