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Opinion | OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

The Unmet Promise of Equality

By FRED HARRIS and ALAN CURTIS FEB. 28, 2018



The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in session in Washington in 1967. Known as The Kerner Commission, after the chair, Otto Kerner, seated at the head of the table, the group was convened by President Lyndon Johnson in the wake of the 1967 race riots. Fred Harris is the second person to the right of Kerner. Underwood Archives/Getty Images

“Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.”

Fifty years ago, on March 1, 1968, these were the grim words of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, called the Kerner Commission after its chairman, Gov. Otto Kerner of Illinois.

President Lyndon Johnson had established the commission to examine the disorders and violent protests in Detroit, Newark and well over 100 other American cities during the summer of 1967, and earlier. What it found was searing. “What white Americans have never fully understood – but what the

Negro can never forget – is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto,” the commission concluded. “White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”

Mostly moderate and mostly white men, the members of the bipartisan panel carried the imprimatur of the political establishment. Their recommendations attracted widespread public debate. The paperback edition of the report sold over two million copies.

Occupied by the Vietnam War and concerned about the legacy of his Great Society domestic agenda, Johnson distanced himself from the “two societies” warning. But the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy strongly endorsed the commission’s findings and recommendations before they were assassinated and before more protests erupted during that traumatic year of 1968.

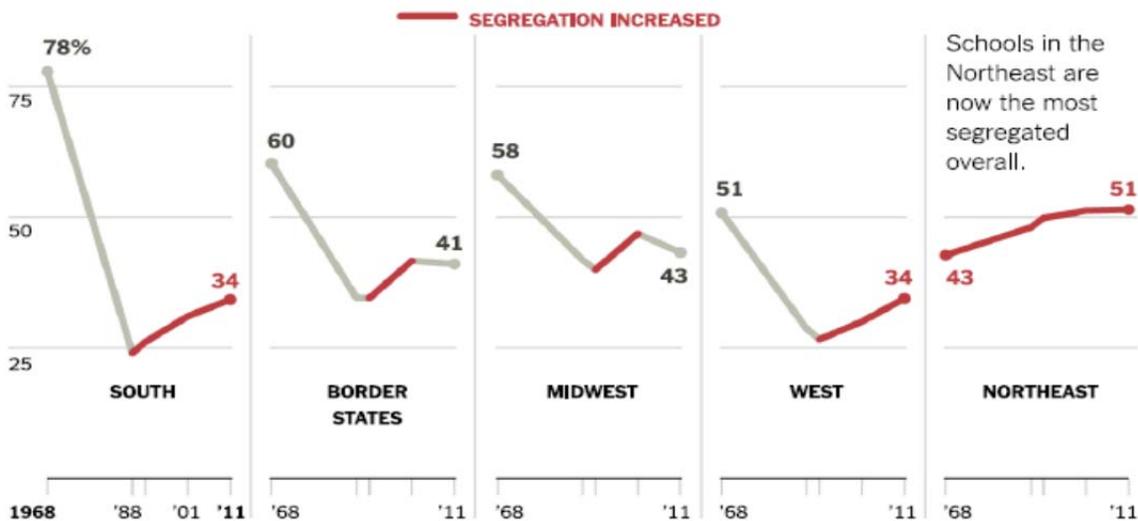
The Kerner Commission recommended “massive and sustained” investments in jobs and education to reduce poverty, inequality and racial injustice. Have we made progress in the last 50 years?

A Return to Segregation

In many ways, things have gotten no better — or have gotten worse — since 1968. Public schools have been re-segregating for decades.

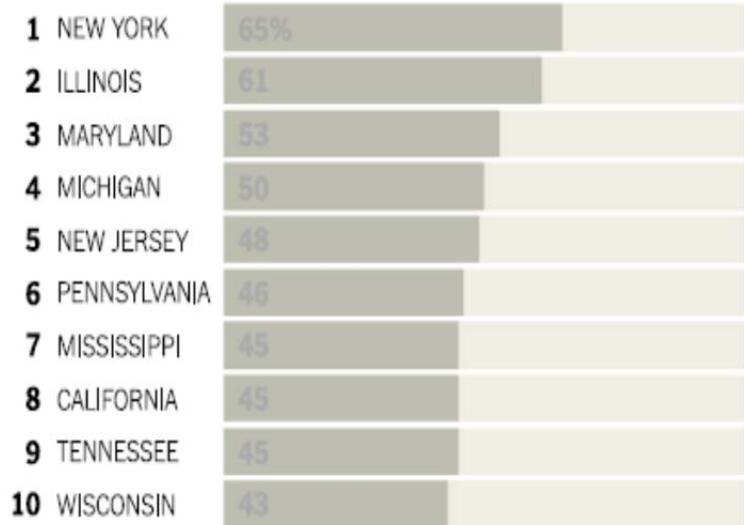
Progress, Then Backsliding

Percentage of each region’s black students in schools with a student body that is more than 90 percent minority, 1968-2011.



Not Just a Problem In the South

The 10 most segregated states are mostly in the North, Percentage of each region's black students in schools with a student body that is more than 90 percent minority, 2011-12.

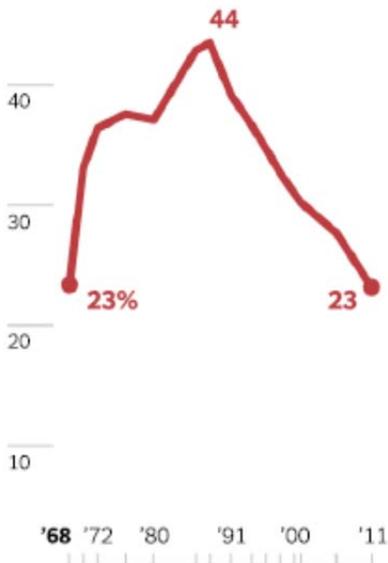


Border states: Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Oklahoma, West Virginia. Source: "Brown at 60," University of California Civil Rights Project

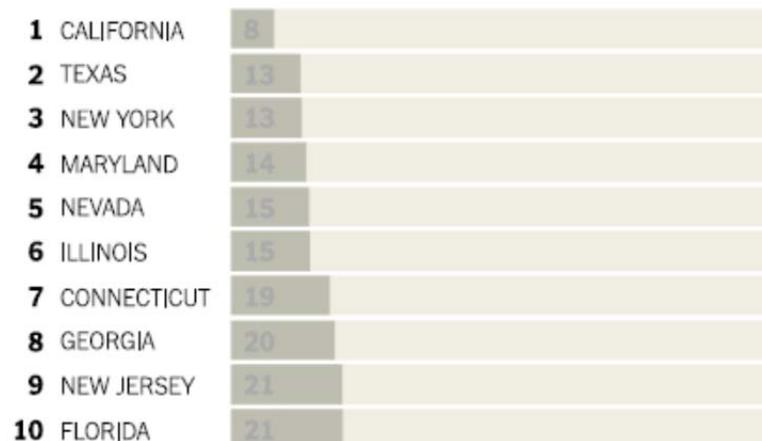
Today the gap between poorer and richer American students in access to qualified teachers is among the highest in the world. Fewer African-Americans have access to majority-white (read: generally better financed) schools.

Progress Erased

By another measure, segregation has returned to Kerner-era levels across the South, Percentage of all black students in the South who attended majority-white schools, 1968-2011.



The 10 most segregated states in 2011-12, by the same measure, are scattered throughout the country.

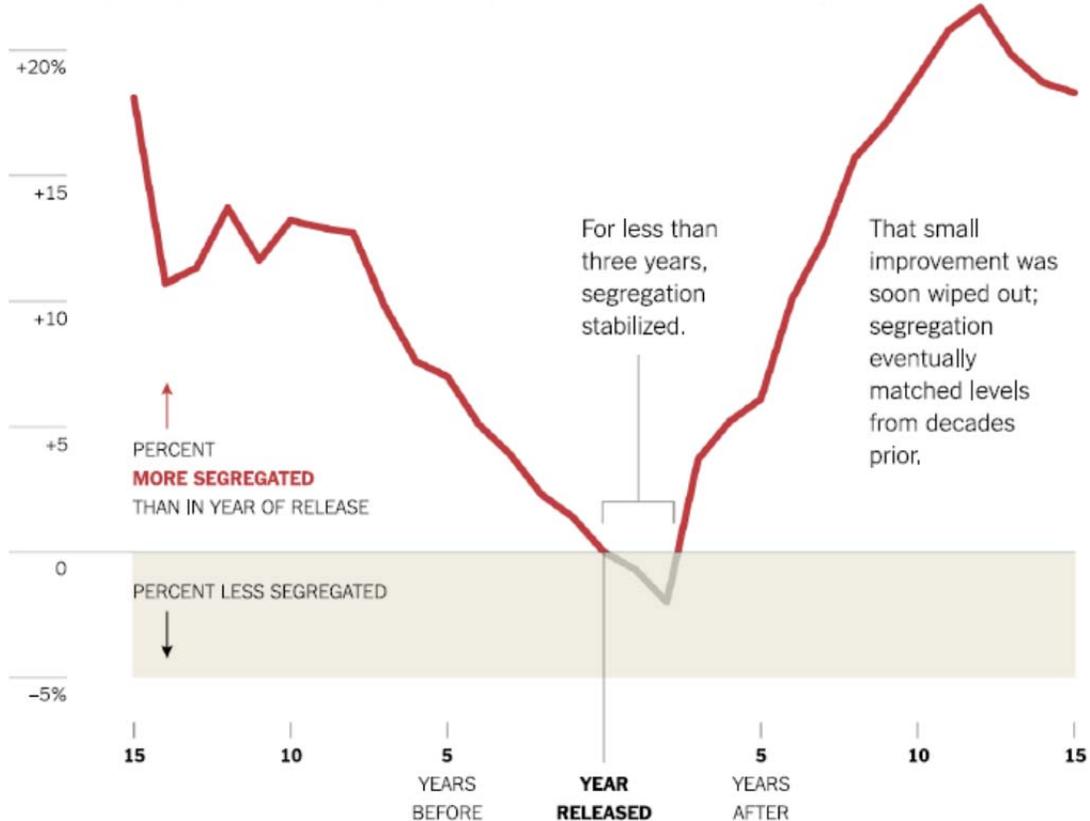


Source: "Brown at 60," University of California Civil Rights Project

We know why. One reason: When schools are released from court-mandated desegregation, that progress gradually is reversed.

When the Courts Step Away

After being released from court oversight, this group of 159 school districts across the South wound up as segregated, on average, as they were before the mandates began.



Source: Sean F. Reardon, Elena Tej Grewal, Demetra Kalogrides and Erica Greenberg in The Journal of Policy Analysis and Management

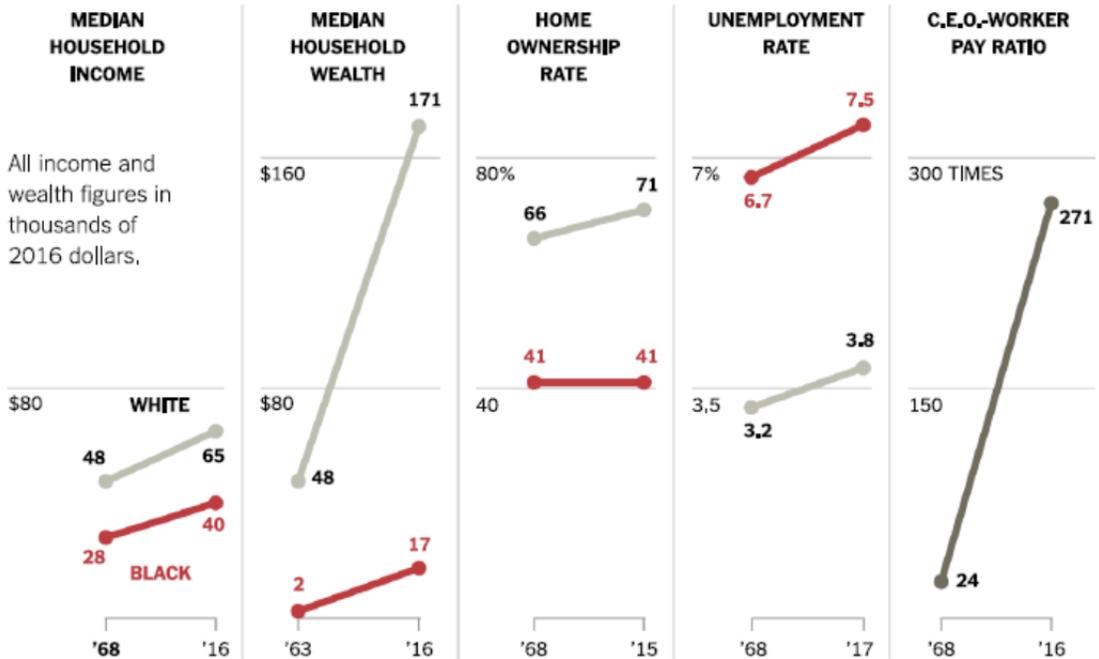
Inequality That Would Shock the Commission's Members

The disheartening percentage of Americans living in extreme poverty — that is, living on less than half the poverty threshold — has increased since the 1970s. The overall poverty rate remains about the same today as it was 50 years ago; the total number of poor people has increased from over 25 million to well over 40 million, more than the population of California.

Meanwhile, the rich have profited at the expense of most working Americans. Today, the top 1 percent receive 52 percent of all new income. Rich people are healthier and live longer. They get a better education, which produces greater gains in income. And their greater economic power translates into greater political power.

Five Indicators

America of the 1960s contrasted with the most recent available data.



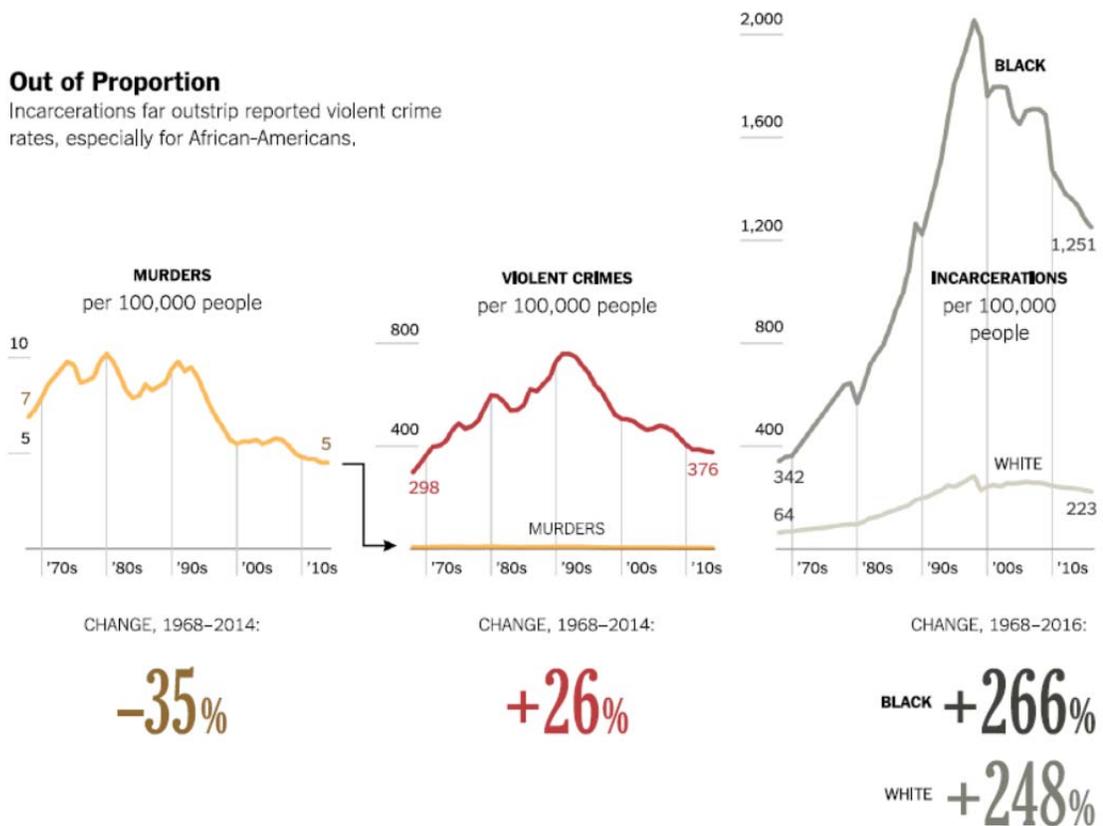
Source: Economic Policy Institute

The Tragedy of Mass Incarceration

At the time of the Kerner Commission, there were about 200,000 people behind bars. Today, there are about 1.4 million. “Zero tolerance” policing aimed at African-Americans and Latinos has failed, while our sentencing policies (for example, on crack versus powder cocaine) continue to racially discriminate. Mass incarceration has become a kind of housing policy for the poor.

Out of Proportion

Incarcerations far outstrip reported violent crime rates, especially for African-Americans.



Figures are rounded. Murder includes cases of nonnegligent manslaughter. Sources: Department of Justice (reported crime); The Sentencing Project (incarceration rates)

Fifty Years Later, We've Figured Out What Works

Policies based on ideology instead of evidence. Privatization and funding cuts instead of expanding effective programs.

We're living with the human costs of these failed approaches. The Kerner ethos — "Everyone does better when everyone does better" — has been, for many decades, supplanted by its opposite: "You're on your own."

Today more people oppose the immorality of poverty and rising inequality, including middle-class Americans who realize their interests are much closer to Kerner priorities than to those of the very rich.

We have the experience and knowledge to scale up what works. Now we need the "new will" that the Kerner Commission concluded was equally important.

What Doesn't Work

What Does

THE ECONOMIC PLAYING FIELD

Reduced health care for workers and low-income Americans	Insured health care through a single-payer system
Small, grudging increases to minimum wage	Substantial increases to minimum wage
No new tax credits or child allowances	Expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit to reduce gaps in wealth and income
Supply-side, trickle-down economics for the rich and corporations; enterprise zones with corporate tax breaks	Demand-side, full-employment Keynesian economics for all Americans

JOBS

Unrestrained corporate globalization	Globalization that prioritizes worker rights
Fewer and weakened labor unions	More labor union power
No or minimal job training; "welfare reform"	Job training tied to job creation and placement

EDUCATION

Racial segregation in schools, neighborhoods	Racial integration
Vouchers, choice and charter schools	Investments in public school equity, quality teachers, early childhood education, community schools and other proven models

HOUSING

Subsidized housing that reaches only one-quarter of eligible low-income citizens	Subsidized housing for all eligible citizens
Continued neglect of fair-housing laws	Rigorous enforcement of those laws

THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Zero-tolerance policing; excessive use of force	Community-based policing; partnerships with local nonprofit youth development groups
Continued mass incarceration	Alternatives to incarceration, especially for nonviolent offenders
Lack of investment in proven ex-offender reintegration programs	Funding and wide use of these programs

Fred Harris, a former senator from Oklahoma, is a professor emeritus of political science at the University of New Mexico and the lone surviving member of the Kerner Commission. Alan Curtis is the president and chief executive of the Eisenhower Foundation, the private-sector continuation of the 1968 Kerner Commission and the 1969 National Violence Commission. The two are the co-editors of "Healing Our Divided Society: Investing in America Fifty Years After the Kerner Report."