

The Kerner Commission Report: Lessons Learned & the Geography of Opportunity

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The Kerner Commission Report

- Next year will mark the 50th anniversary of the civil disorders of 1967 and 49 years since the *Fair Housing Act of 1968* made racial discrimination in housing illegal.
- It will also be 49 years ago since the Kerner Commission issued the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, with recommendations that answered three major questions:

The Kerner Commission Report

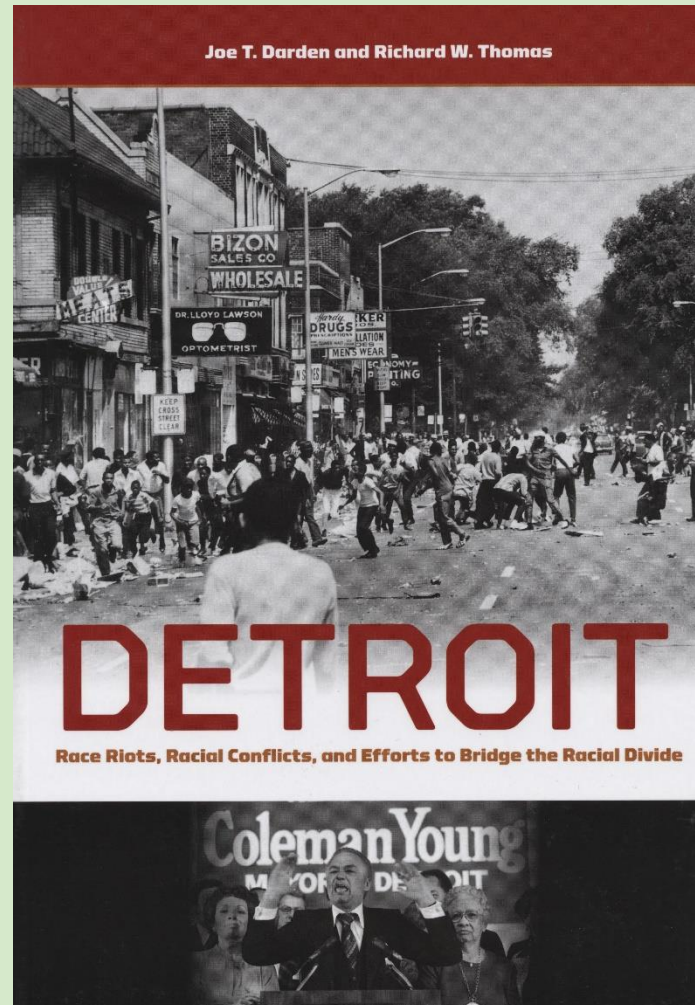
Three Questions:

- What happened?
- Why did it happen?
- What can be done to prevent the civil disorders from happening again?

Detroit as an Example of What Happened

- As an example of what happened in 100 American cities during the summer of 1967, I present to you the events in the city of Detroit, a city that experienced the worst civil disorders in American history.
- What happened in Detroit is documented in a 2013 book I co-authored with Richard Thomas called, *Detroit: Race Riots, Racial Conflicts, and Efforts to Bridge the Racial Divide*.

Detroit: Race Riots, Racial Conflicts, and Efforts to Bridge the Racial Divide



(Darden & Thomas, 2013)

Where & When the Riot Started

- The riot started precisely outside 9125 12th Street in the early morning of July 23rd when a “blind pig” (illegal bar) in Detroit’s slum ghetto was raided by the police.
- The photo on the cover of the book is the exact *place* where the riot started.
- The riot lasted a week.

Inaction to Peaceful Protest

- Martin Luther King said, “inaction to peaceful protest makes violent protest inevitable.”
- Prior to 1967, there had been continuing peaceful protest and struggle to address racial inequality and racial injustices in Detroit.
- However, the problem was never addressed before the riot of 1967.

The Major Grievances

- The major **grievances** were related to relative *black deprivation* and *inequality* between blacks and whites in the areas of *housing, employment, education, and police brutality*.
- Instead of responding to the grievances of blacks, most whites responded by saying that, “blacks in Detroit had only themselves to blame for the fact that they had ‘worse jobs, education, and housing than white people’.”

The Cost of the Riot: The City Burned



12th Street,
July 23, 1967

The Cost of the Riot

- As the city burned, more than 43 people died during the riot, most of them black.
- The fires lasted for days.
- There was \$50 million in property damage.

Why Did the Civil Disorders Happen?

- The Kerner Commission concluded that the cause was **institutionalized racism** that had negatively impacted the lives of many blacks during the years leading up to the civil disorders.

Why Did the Civil Disorders Happen?

- To put the cause of the civil disorders more bluntly, the Commission stated explicitly that, “What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it and white society condones it” (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968, p. 2) .

The Future if No Action is Taken

- Regarding the future, the Commission continued, “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”
- As to what can be done to prevent the civil disorders from happening again in the future, the Commission gave Americans **three** alternative recommendations.

Alternative Recommendations of the Kerner Commission Report

3 Alternatives:

- We can maintain present policies, continuing both the proportion of the nation's resources now allocated to programs for the unemployed and the disadvantaged, and the inadequate and **failing effort to achieve an integrated society.**
- We can adopt a policy of “enrichment” aimed at improving dramatically the **quality of ghetto life while abandoning integration as a goal.**
- We can pursue **integration** by combining ghetto “enrichment” with **policies which will encourage Negro movement out of central city areas.**

Alternative Recommendations of the Kerner Commission Report

- After almost 50 years, what evidence exists to determine which of the three recommendations Americans implemented and what are the lessons learned?

What the Research Based Evidence Shows

- According to some indicators, the status quo has been maintained, rather than there being an *enrichment of ghetto life in cities. Most blacks still live in ghettos.*
- In 1970, in the nation as a whole, the white unemployment rate was 4.1% and the black unemployment rate was 7.0 % for a ratio of **1.7**. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1973).

What the Research Based Evidence Shows

- The poverty rate for whites was 8.6% compared to a black poverty rate of 29.8% for a rate ratio of **3.5** (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1973).
- At the time of the civil disorder, many blacks were complaining about discrimination in employment, which led to higher unemployment and poverty for blacks, compared to whites.

What the Research Based Evidence Shows

- By 2010-2014, based on the most recent census data available (U. S. Bureau of the Census 2010-2014), the white unemployment rate was 7.9% compared to a black unemployment rate of 16.1% for ratio of **2.0**.

What the Research Based Evidence Shows

- Thus, the unemployment gap has increased over the almost 50 year period.
- A ratio of 1.0 = racial equality.
- The white poverty rate was 12.8% based on the most recent census data and the black poverty rate was 27.3% for a ratio of **1.9**.

What the Research Based Evidence Shows

- The results reflect an *increase* in the white poverty rate and a slight *decrease* in the black poverty rate but the racial gap remained **1.9**, revealing a degree of *inequality* where blacks still have a rate of poverty that is almost **twice** the rate for whites.

What the Research Based Evidence Shows

- Recent studies also show that **concentrated poverty**, i.e., neighborhoods or census tracts where **40%** or more of the residents are poor, has *increased* since 1970 (Jargowsky, 2015).

What the Research Based Evidence Shows

- It appears that there is little evidence of ghetto enrichment.
- What are the consequences ?
- The Commission reminded Americans that where the economy, and particularly the resources of employment are predominantly white, a policy of *separation* can only relegate “Negroes” to a **permanently inferior economic status.**

Black Residential Segregation and Spatial Mismatch

- Blacks had consistently complained at the time of the civil disorders about racial discrimination, resulting in black residential segregation and *spatial mismatch*.
- Spatial mismatch is the distance between the place of residence where blacks are forced to reside (in the city) due largely to racial discrimination and where most of the jobs are located in the metropolitan area (in the suburbs).

The Kerner Commission's Recommendation: Choice 3

- Recognizing the disadvantages blacks would face via racial separation, the Commission recommended the third choice:
- A policy which combines ghetto enrichment with programs designed to encourage **integration** of substantial numbers of “Negroes” into the society outside the ghetto.

The Kerner Commission's Choice & The Geography of Opportunity

- Is there evidence for the implementation of this third choice, which I call “the geography of opportunity”?
- The Geography of Opportunity is a concept used by urban geographers and other social scientists to argue that the best way to obtain social mobility for a disadvantaged group is for that group to engage in **spatial mobility** and move to the places where the opportunities are (Darden & Thomas, 2013, Chapter 13).
- This is essentially Recommendation 3 of the Kerner Commission Report.

What the Research Based Evidence Shows

- Although black-white segregation and residential barriers remain high in some of the US's largest metropolitan areas, the latest census data show a trend of continuing integration in nearly all the nation's major Metro Areas.
- Based on Census data and the Index of Dissimilarity,* black-white residential segregation reached its peak in 1970, three years after the civil disorders in 1967, and two years after the *Fair Housing Act of 1968*.

*The *Index* measures residential segregation that is defined as the overall unevenness in the spatial distribution of two groups over a set of subunits (e.g. census tracts).

Decline in Black-White Residential Segregation

- Using the Index of Dissimilarity, one sees that the mean index was **81.4** in 1970 and has been gradually declining each decade since.
- The index fell to **73** in 1980, to **67.2** in 1990, to **63.1** in 2000, and to **59.0** in 2010 (Powell & Menendian, 2016).
- The decline is largely due to the increase in black suburbanization which occurred after the Fair Housing Act .

Decline in Black-White Residential Segregation

- This trend has changed the face of most American cities and suburbs despite racial tensions over the last year that have cast an image of a nation starkly *separated* between blacks and whites (Frey, 2015).

Decline in Black-White Residential Segregation

- Between 2000 and 2014, segregation between blacks and whites *declined* in almost all of the nation's 53 metropolitan areas with a population of over a million.
- Some of the biggest declines occurred in Metropolitan Areas long divided by race, including Detroit and Chicago (Frey, 2015).

Decline in Racial Discrimination in Housing

- Like residential segregation, according to the most recent Paired Test Studies of discrimination in housing, outright *overt* racial discrimination, which was common before the *Fair Housing Act*, has been declining as well (Oh & Yinger, 2015).

The Persistence of Racial Steering

- Nevertheless, Oh and Yinger (2015) concluded that paired testing has shown that some discrimination remains, especially in the number of units shown to customers and the offers to help a customer find financing.
- Finally, there is **racial steering**, especially of blacks and Latinos, away from all-white or predominantly-white neighborhoods.

The Persistence of Racial Steering

- This practice has not declined.
- This covert action is the most difficult problem to be addressed in the future by fair housing centers and the Department of Justice.
- Finally, although the decision by the U.S. Supreme Court case, *Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs v. Inclusive Communities Project, Inc.*, is a positive sign, it is too soon to tell how much the decision will have an impact on residential segregation.

U.S. Supreme Court Decision: Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs v. Inclusive Communities Project, Inc.

- In this case, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed with the Inclusive Communities Project which cited statistics that showed that “93% of low-income housing tax credit units in the city of Dallas were located in census tracts with less than 50% white residents.”
- This spatial distribution, according to the Court, resulted in a *disparate impact* on populations that were not white.

Affirmatively Furthering Neighborhood Choice

- According to James Kelly (2016), local government accountability for ending segregation and resolving the spatial mismatch between affordable housing and economic opportunity has been assisted by both the Supreme Court's *Inclusive Communities Project* decision in June 2015 and by President Obama's Administration's adoption, in July 2015, of the Final Rule for Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH).

Affirmatively Furthering Neighborhood Choice

- Kelly (2016) goes on to say that:

“Instead of being responsible only for **overt, conscious attempts** to harm protected groups, jurisdictions that receive money from HUD will now need to take a hard look at their **policies** that perpetuate the barriers to housing opportunity for economically marginalized protected groups [emphasis mine](Kelly, 2016).

Affirmatively Furthering Neighborhood Choice

- Further, “The duty to Affirmatively Further Fair Housing, although somewhat aspirational in its formulation, requires HUD grant recipients to engage with fair housing issues in a way that the threat of litigation, **even disparate impact litigation**, never has” (Kelly, 2016).

Conclusion

- In conclusion, the third recommendation of the Kerner Commission has not been implemented as quickly or as effectively as the Commission had intended.

Conclusion

- This recommendation was to pursue **integration** by combining ghetto “enrichment” with policies which would encourage “Negro” movement out of central city areas.
- This would be the implementation of the Geography of Opportunity practice.

Conclusion

- Almost 50 years later, the research evidence reflects an ongoing reluctance on the part of White Americans to adequately address what W. E. B. Du Bois warned us about (c. 1903), i.e., *“the problem of the color line.”*
- This problem remains our greatest challenge, today and for the foreseeable future.

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