The Kerner Commission Report Fifty Years Later: Revisiting the American Dream

SUSAN T. GOODEN AND SAMUEL L. MYERS JR.

The 1968 account of the 1967 race riots, authored by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (the Kerner Commission, thus the Kerner report), directly called into question the fundamental premise of the American Dream. "The idea of the American dream has been attached to everything from religious freedom to a home in the suburbs, and it has inspired emotions ranging from deep satisfaction to disillusioned fury. Nevertheless, the phrase elicits for most Americans some variant of Locke's fantasy—a new world where anything can happen and good things might" (Hochschild 1995, 17). The premise of the American Dream rests on three fundamental tenets: the equal opportunity to participate and the ability to start over, a reasonable anticipation of success, and the notion that success is under one's control (Hochschild 1995). The basis of each of these tenets is strongly refuted in the report first released on February 29, 1968 (commonly referred to as the Kerner Commission report in reference to the commission chairman, Otto Kerner).

Understanding the shortcomings of American society in implementing its democratic ideals relative to African Americans was advanced long before the Kerner report. Writings by W. E. B. DuBois (1903), Franklin Frazier (1940), Gunnar Myrdal (1944), Kenneth Clark (1965), and Gary Marx (1967), for example, expose a deep-seated disconnect between philosophy and practice. In his 1890 commencement address at Harvard University, DuBois reflected on a "nation [that] was founded on the loftiest ideals, and who many times forgot those ideals with a strange forgetfulness" (1903, 19).

OVERVIEW OF THE KERNER REPORT: WHAT IS IT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The Kerner report was the final report of a commission appointed by the U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 28, 1967, as a response to preceding and ongoing racial riots across many urban cities, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, and Newark. These riots largely took place in African American neighborhoods, then commonly called ghettos. On February 29, 1968, seven months after the commission was formed, it issued its final report. The report

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was an instant success, selling more than two million copies.

The pathbreaking nature of the Kerner report is not based so much on what was said, but on who said it. A White House commission, responding to Executive Order 11365, issued by then President Lyndon B. Johnson, explicitly identified white racism as the principal cause of the civil disorder evidenced across hundreds of U.S. cities in which riots occurred: "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" (Kerner Report 1968, 2). The report directly acknowledged the gripping role of white racism in U.S. society. A report commissioned by a U.S. president powerfully introduced institutional racism into the political mainstream.

Fifty years have passed since the release of the Kerner report. President Johnson tasked the commission with three central questions following four summers of urban racial disorders and violence in several major cities: What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again? After conducting a comprehensive investigation, visiting cities affected by riots, and consulting with scores of experts and witnesses, the Kerner report attributed the cause of urban violence to white racism, and the neglect and isolation it produced for African Americans. The basic conclusion was this: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal."

The Kerner report outlined core recommendations for a National Plan of Action, the goal of which was moving toward "a single society and a single American identity." It called for the substantial investment of federal funds to assist African American communities and prevent further racial polarization and violence. The main recommendations were in the areas of education, employment, housing, police-community relations, and welfare. Although he commissioned the report, President Johnson never accepted or acted on its findings. Shortly after it was released, the nation was shaken by the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Riots and violence broke out in many cities across the country.

The Kerner report documents 164 civil disorders that occurred in 128 cities across the forty-eight continental states and the District of Columbia in 1967 (1968, 65). Other reports indicate a total of 957 riots in 133 cities from 1963 until 1968, a particular explosion of violence following the assassination of King in April 1968 (Olzak 2015). Estimates of the number of persons who died during these riots vary. The Kerner report, however, puts the number at eighty-three, citing 1,897 injuries in the study of seventy-five disturbances by the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Senate Committee on Government Operations (1968, 66).

The fiftieth anniversary of the Kerner Commission report provides a critical opportunity to revisit the report, its findings, and its recommendations in light of contemporary political realities, social structures, and policy debates. This is the purpose of this issue of *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, which includes nine essays from thought-leaders in a range of social science disciplines including economics, sociology, public policy, and public administration.

This introductory essay provides historical context on the Kerner Commission, as well as its importance and relevancy today. Additionally, it examines measures of inequality from 1963 to 2016 in income, education, poverty, and unemployment. We demonstrate that some areas—educational attainment and poverty—show relative improvement but other areas—family income and unemployment disparities—show little change. By multiple measures, the relevancy of the Kerner report is ever increasing.

Emblematic of this, just as contributing authors prepared drafts of their manuscripts for this volume during the summer of 2017, violence erupted in Emancipation Park in the City of Charlottesville, Virginia. The August 12 uprising occurred when white nationalists gathered for a march that ended in violence. The result was the tragic killing of Heather Heyer, who died when a car plowed into the crowd of protesters. Revisiting the Kerner report on its fiftieth anniversary is not a symbolic opportunity to reflect on its critical importance, but

Table 1. Timeline Highlights from the 1960s

February 1, 1960	Greensboro, NC, lunch counter sit-ins
November 8, 1960	John F. Kennedy elected president
May 3, 1963	Bull Conner uses fire hoses and police dogs on protestors
August 28, 1963	Civil rights march on Washington (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech)
September 15, 1963	Birmingham Church bombings
November 23, 1963	President Kennedy assassination
January 8, 1964	President Lyndon B. Johnson declares War on Poverty
May 22, 1964	President Johnson proclaims the "Great Society"
Summer 1964	Freedom Summer
July 2, 1964	Civil Rights Act of 1964 signed
December 10, 1964	Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. receives Nobel Prize
February 21, 1965	Malcolm X assassination
March 7, 1965	Selma-Montgomery March—"Bloody Sunday"
July 30, 1965	Creation of Medicare and Medicaid
August 6, 1965	Voting Rights Act of 1965 signed
August 11–16, 1965	Watts riots
September 24, 1965	Johnson Executive Order 11246 enforcing affirmative action
July 1967	Riots in several U.S. cities, including Newark and Detroit
July 28, 1967	President Johnson appoints Kerner Commission in response to riots
October 2, 1967	Thurgood Marshall sworn in as Supreme Court justice
February 29, 1968	Kerner Commission report released
March 31, 1968	President Johnson announces he will not seek reelection
April 4, 1968	Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. assassination
April 11, 1968	Civil Rights Act of 1968 signed prohibiting housing discrimination
November 5, 1968	Richard Nixon elected president

Source: Authors' tabulation.

an acute need to provide acumen for America's future.

THE KERNER COMMISSION IN CONTEXT

It is important to highlight three characteristics of the Kerner report: the commission operated within a turbulent political environment, a primary data source for the report included images and voices of those directly affected by the urban riots, and the report recommendations were never implemented. We consider each of these in turn.

The Commission's Turbulent Political Environment

President Johnson formed the commission well after establishing his legacy Great Society programs designed to combat poverty and racial injustice. Such programs included the Job Corps, Head Start, and Upward Bound, as well as an expansion of Social Security and Food Stamps. They also included signature and controversial civil rights legislation, namely, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Johnson's Fair Housing Act, the third pillar of his civil rights agenda, was passed after the urban riots, the Kerner report, and the assassination of Dr. King in 1968. As table 1 highlights, the Kerner Commission was formed toward the end of the 1960s, a decade in U.S. history squarely focused on civil rights. As Julian Zelizer explains,

> Civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., had been making housing discrimination in northern cities a central issue of their campaign. . . . Among the many issues raised by civil rights and black power advocates, housing triggered an especially sharp backlash. Urban landlords, white eth-

Table 2. Members of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission)

Otto Kerner (chairman), governor of Illinois
John V. Lindsay (vice chairman), mayor of New York City
Fred R. Harris, United States senator, Oklahoma
I.W. Abel, president, United Steelworkers of America (AFL-CIO)
Edward W. Brooke, United States senator, Massachusetts
Charles B. Thornton, chairman of the board and chief executive officer, Litton Industries, Inc.
James C. Corman, United States representative, 22nd District of California
Roy Wilkins, executive director, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
William M. McCulloch, United States representative, 4th District of Ohio
Katherine Graham Peden, commissioner of commerce, state of Kentucky (1963–1967)
Herbert Jenkins, chief of police, Atlanta, Georgia

Source: Authors' tabulation.

> nic votes, and other Americans remained fretful over declining property values in the nation's suburbs. The tensions over the housing bill had played out in the midterm campaigns, with Republicans in many states riding white discontent into gubernatorial and congressional seats. . . . As the political situation around Johnson continued to deteriorate in July 1967, he then confronted some of the most difficult weeks of his presidency. In July, two major riots devastated the cities of Newark, New Jersey and Detroit, Michigan. These were the worst of 163 riots that broke out that summer. . . . On July 12, rioting started in Newark after rumors that the police mistreated an African American cab driver whom they were arresting. . . . [The riots occurred during at a time when] Johnson, northern Democrats, and the Great Society were already on the defensive. (2016, xiv, xv)

The Kerner Commission was formed rather hastily out of Johnson's desperation to do something in response to the riots. Members of Johnson's cabinet cautioned that the Commission's report could turn into a political nightmare. "The President tried to avert this problem by stacking the commission with established political figures who were moderate and committed to the existing economic and political system . . . He wanted commissioners who would demonstrate that the administration took the problem seriously, but he also remained intent on appointments that would ensure a final report that praised his Great Society programs. Furthermore, he resisted giving the commission sufficient funding, thus guaranteeing that they would be handcuffed from the start" (Zelizer 2016, xvii). Table 2 provides a listing of the members of the commission. The eleven members of the Kerner Commission included two African Americans, Republican Edward Brooke, a new senator from Massachusetts, and Roy Wilkins, the iconic civil rights leader and former president of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).

Wilkins was a strong Johnson supporter who respected the president's pro-government approach to promoting civil rights. As Wilkins explained in an oral history interview at the time,

> I don't think anyone even now pretends to know precisely what to do. But he [Johnson] knew that opportunity had to be provided for some of the people who had never had opportunity in their lives. And he knew also that the traditional political machinery had not worked. . . . So he conceived the federal government's role to be that to provide an opportunity for the inner-cities. . . . I think it was a daring assault by a man of Mr. Johnson's background to come to that conclusion and to actually authorize the machinery. (Baker 1969, 9)

In 1969, Senator Brooke described the rioters as everyday citizens frustrated with deeply

entrenched racial inequality in the United States.

> The people who rioted during the summer of 1967 were, for the most part, neither social misfits nor habitual criminals. They were not alcoholics or drug addicts. They were not Communists, and they were not inspired by Communists. And they were not part of an organized conspiracy designed to bring down the United States by attacking its great urban centers. Rather, they were men and women who were driven by the fear and frustration which accompanies continuing second-class citizenship in a country dedicated to the principle of equality. (Brooke 1969, 25)

The Kerner Report, Social Scientists, and Field Research

The Kerner report was grounded in empirical social science research, which included a team of social scientists with a deep understanding of structural racism. As Zelizer explains,

> During the investigative phase, the staff, as well as some commissioners, traveled in teams of six to twenty-three cities where there had been urban unrest so they could interview local citizens and activists. . . . In Milwaukee, Senator Fred Harris [(D-Oklahoma) the sole living member of the Kerner Commission] spent most of his day in a black barbershop, where he learned from customers about how segregation was far worse in Wisconsin than in the South. (2016, xxiv)

The data collection process that formed the basis of the Kerner report included direct engagement by members of the Kerner Commission with members of the affected communities. Members of the commission traveled to rioted cities and had conversations with inner-city residents within their community space. These involved firsthand, up-front, and personal conversations that allowed commissioners to hear, see, and understand the realities of deeply entrenched structural racial inequalities. One of their fundamental conclusions was that though variation across cities was considerable, there was "a complex relationship between the series of incidents and the underlying grievances. . . . When grievance-related incidents recurred and rising tensions were not satisfactorily resolved, a cumulative process took place in which prior incidents were readily recalled and grievances reinforced. At some point in the mounting tension, a further incident—in itself often routine or even trivial—became the breaking point, and the tension spilled over into violence" (Kerner Report 1968, 108).

Although not explicitly stated in the report, this intensive, firsthand engagement with inner-city African Americans provided an eye-opening, transformational experience that narrowed the social distance between the *us* and *them* worlds of members of the commission and inner city residents. As Kerner Commissioner former senator Fred Harris (D-Oklahoma) explained during a 2017 National Public Radio interview, "We held about 20 days of hearings, and then we divided up into teams and visited the cities where riots had occurred. And what we found was that there'd been a huge influx since World War II of African Americans from Southern states coming from criminally inferior schools, looking for jobs about the time that jobs were disappearing. They didn't have any transportation. Housing was awful. The schools were inferior. And there'd been all sorts of conflicts with the police so that there was enormous hostility between the people and the police in those cities" (NPR 2017).

Personal interactions are powerful. For example, when natural disasters strike communities, one of the most important actions elected officials can take is to travel to the affected communities, interact with residents, listen to their concerns, and witness firsthand the experiences of the affected. This creates an important emotional connection: empathy. The data collection process of the Kerner Commission offers an important roadmap for elected officials, academics, and practitioners alike in understanding the perspectives of individuals in urban and poor communities. Further, it offers a direct observation of these individuals' experiences vis-à-vis the core principles of the American Dream.

Lack of Implementation of Kerner Commission Report Recommendations

The core recommendation of the Kerner report included the following objectives for national action:

- Opening up all opportunities for those who are restricted by racial segregation and discrimination, and eliminating all barriers to their choice of jobs, education, and housing.
- Removing the frustration of powerlessness among the disadvantaged by providing the means to deal with the problems that affect their own lives and by increasing the capacity of our public and private institutions to respond to those problems.
- Increasing communication across racial lines to destroy stereotypes, halt polarization, end distrust, and hostility, and create common ground for efforts toward common goals of public order and social justice. (Kerner Report 1968, 413)

President Johnson was enormously displeased with the report, which in his view grossly ignored his Great Society efforts. The report also received considerable backlash from many whites and conservatives for its identification of attitudes and racism of whites as a cause of the riots. "So Johnson ignored the report. He refused to formally receive the publication in front of reporters. He didn't talk about the Kerner Commission report when asked by the media," and he refused to sign thank-you letters for the commissioners (Zelizer 2016, xxxii–xxxiii).

Kerner Commission member Roy Wilkins was profoundly disappointed in President Johnson's response.

> I was disappointed . . . now the report did not say that white racism . . . is behind every single act that's committed—or every single Machiavellian scheme that's hatched. . . . It didn't say that. It simply said that the creation of the climate, which has brought about our present tension, has been because, to use the words of the report, "of the attitude of white Americans towards black Americans." . . . It is perfectly in line with his actions as President and with the accomplishments of his Administration. I think probably, maybe the word racism, white racism, frightened him. He didn't want to go down in history as the President who had pointed his finger at his own people. (Baker 1969, 12)

Unfortunately, the fundamental recommendation of the Kerner report, a call for unity was virtually ignored. As the commissioners wrote, "This deepening racial division is not inevitable. The movement apart can still be reversed. . . . The alternative is not blind repression or capitulation to lawlessness. It is the realization of common opportunities for all within a single society. . . . From every American it will require new attitudes, new understanding, and above all, new will" (Kerner Report 1968, 1).

CRITICISMS OF THE KERNER COMMISSION REPORT

The Kerner Commission report was a best seller, millions of copies sold across the country and devoured by a generation of intellectuals, activists, community organizers, and politicians. Not surprisingly, early critics of the report were numerous. Given the central role *white racism* played as the defining cause of the riots, much of the attacks on the Right and the Left concerned the significance of white racism in contributing to the civil disorders across the country.

Two years after the production of the Kerner Commission's final report, the University of Illinois hosted a retrospective analysis of the report, bringing together top Illinois politicians, business leaders, media executives, and academics. The commentary captured what had emerged as an enduring refrain about the shortcomings of the report. The most prominent concern, echoed by other writers over the years was the focus on white racism:

> [The Report's] basic finding that "white racism" was the fundamental cause of racial disorders and the emphasis placed upon that finding by the mass media have given the erroneous impression that the guilt of white

> society is simply a matter of prejudicial attitudes. The Kerner Commission Report failed to specify exactly what was meant by white racism and largely ignored the problem of institutional racism—the less overt, more subtle acts that sustain and perpetuate racist policies in virtually every American institution. . . . Thus, the Report placed too much emphasis on changing white attitudes and underplayed the importance of changing white behavior and the basic structure of such institutions as schools, labor unions, and political parties. (Meranto 1970, 3)

The notion that the report fails to examine deeply institutional racism nor propose solutions that will remedy the problems rooted in institutional racism was recognized early among reviewers. For example, as Michael Parenti writes,

> The Kerner Report demands no changes in the way power and wealth are distributed among the classes; it never gets beyond its indictment of "white racism" to specify the forces in the political economy which brought the black man to riot; it treats the obviously abominable ghetto living conditions as "cause" of disturbance but never really inquires into the causes of the "causes," viz., the ruthless enclosure of Southern sharecroppers by big corporate farming interests, the subsequent mistreatment of the black migrant by Northern rent-gorging landlords, price-gorging merchants, urban "redevelopers," discriminating employers, insufficient schools, hospitals and welfare, brutal police, hostile political machines and state legislators, and finally the whole system of values, material interests and public power distributions from the state to the federal Capitols which gives greater priority to "haves" than to "have-nots," servicing and subsidizing the bloated interests of private corporations while neglecting the often desperate needs of the municipalities. The Kerner Report reflects the ideological cast of its sponsors, the Johnson Administration, and in that sense is no better than the interests it served. . . . To treat the symptoms of social dislocation (e.g., slum conditions) as the causes of social ills is an inversion not peculiar to the Kerner Report. Unable or unwilling to pursue the implications of our own data, we tend to see the effects of a problem as the problem itself. The victims, rather than the victimizers, are defined as "the poverty problem." It is a little like blaming the corpse for the murder. (1970, 145–46)

Related, and relevant to the current rise of working-class whites who view programs in support of immigrants and racial minority group members as depriving them of economic benefits, is the criticism that the report fails to adequately identify the beneficiaries of alleged white racism. As famed black political scientist Mack Jones, former chair of Atlanta University's Department of Political Science, writes,

> [An] important failing of the Report was that it failed to put white racism in a systems context so that we can see who benefits directly and materially from American racism. I am talking about the economics of racism. Such analysis, it seems to me, must by definition precede any attempt to devise even the most tentative prescription for change. However, from the Kerner Report one could infer that either all whites benefit equally or that they all suffer equally from racism in this country. The truth is that white racism has a highly differentiated impact in the white community. Only a small number of the white majority realize immediate material gains while the remainder must content themselves with psychic payoffs for their racism. (1970, 156)

A second line of criticism comes from the failure to acknowledge the significance of emerging black nationalism and the roles of the Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam and black self-help organizations in producing successful remedies to problems of economic distress in urban neighborhoods. Mack Jones, once again, provides powerful insights:

> The Commission discussed what it entitled "Black Power" in little more than two pages. The major thrust of this part of the Report was the argument that the new mood in the black community was really old wine in new

> bottles, and that therefore it represented a retreat from integration and confrontation with racism. This may have been the greatest disservice of the entire Report, because while black power may be old wine in new bottles, the Commission had both the wrong wine and the wrong bottles. The new mood in the black community is a function of the intensification of the old argument between nationalists and integrationists which has been going on in the black community since the days of Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany. These two currents have always been present in the black community. Historically, those blacks espousing integrationism as an ideology have allied themselves with forces in the white community, and as a result the black liberation struggle has always been controlled in varying degrees by whites. Meanwhile, those who accept nationalism as the optimum sustaining ideology for the black struggle have always constituted an isolated and relatively impotent minority with little or no standing in their communities. The new mood which the Commission tried to deal with its "wine-bottle" analogy is really an indication that the followers of integrationism as an ideology are losing out to the nationalists. Although this development is more pronounced among the young, it is taking hold in every sector of the black community. (1970, 159)

Other notable criticisms of the report include the concern that there was little connection between the policy recommendations and the problem definition (Briggs 1968) and that the premise that the riots themselves were irrationally and randomly determined was unsupported by the evidence presented in the report. Michael Lipsky and David Olson questioned the extent to which riot commissions generally can be effective given the larger political landscape in which they operate (1969). A recurring theme among conservative critics of the report, moreover, was that the report misstated the degree of deterioration of the economic conditions of blacks and ignored improvements in relative earnings and incomes in the years before the riots (Thernstrom, Siegel, and Woodson 1998).

Modern social science researchers studying racial and ethnic economic inequality will note three types of omissions from the Kerner report. The first is that little attention is paid to the causal impacts of the riots in differentiating between outcomes among riot cities and nonriot cities. The interviews and data collection focus almost exclusively on riot cities, making it a bit more difficult to draw the conclusion that riots were "caused" by the frustrations and blocked opportunities faced by blacks living in cities that experienced riots. If riots were caused by these factors, then one would need to show that the pathways to economic outcomes differed between riot cities and nonriot cities. The descriptive evidence we provide in the next section of this essay is motivated by an attempt to address this issue of causality.

A second social science concern is that the report largely ignores the issue of wealth inequality, focusing instead on measures of income and poverty. Modern social science researchers note that black-white wealth inequality is far greater than black-white income inequality, even within common income quartiles. Recognition of the huge gap in home ownership and in ownership of other assets and the role of the federal government in contributing to and perpetuating wealth disparities would have prompted policy recommendations from the commission that spoke to such issues as antidiscrimination legislation in mortgage lending and compensation for government culpability in creating and sustaining racial disparities in ownership of property.

A third omission, surprising in retrospect, is an analysis of the role of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and law enforcement agencies in collecting information on dissident groups and their leadership. This role, coupled with the heavy investment by the federal government thwarting challenges to contemporary militarism and industrial capitalism, may have created an atmosphere ripe for revolutionary change. Although the report takes great pains to discount and discredit such a state role in contributing to the riots, it is surprising that little or no mention is made of the now infamous COINTELPRO operations. These covert efforts designed to discredit black organizations may have contributed to the heightened

violence in urban areas in America by infiltrating black political organizations and contributing to distrust and hostility towards the police. It is not known whether the COINTELPRO activities blocked efforts of the commission or whether the commission's efforts purposefully avoided confronting evidence of the infiltration of black organizations. What is known is that shortly after the release of the commission's report, King was assassinated. Nowhere in the report does the commission investigate Dr. King's contention that "racism, economic exploitation, and militarism" are the triple evils of American society and that these evils are caused by capitalism. So, the commission ignored King's contention that ending racism requires a "revolution of American values" along with "fundamental structural transformation" of American society.

THE STATE OF INEQUALITY: FIFTY YEARS AFTER KERNER

We are motivated to explore the trajectory of social-economic outcomes in riot cities and nonriot cities, before, during and after the riots by questions raised in the criticisms to the Kerner report. The report has implications for several areas of inequality within public policy, including education, employment, housing, police-community relations, and welfare. In the 1960s, the U.S. educational system was largely segregated, and blacks had far fewer educational opportunities than whites. Today, although high school completion rates are higher, classrooms within schools are perplexingly segregated, blacks struggling in basic classrooms with high rates of suspension and whites often enjoying the benefits of gifted and talented programs, sometimes within the same physical school. Although college attendance rates have soared, college completion rates remain widely disparate. By many accounts, housing segregation is as deeply rooted today as it was fifty years ago, particularly for low-income blacks.

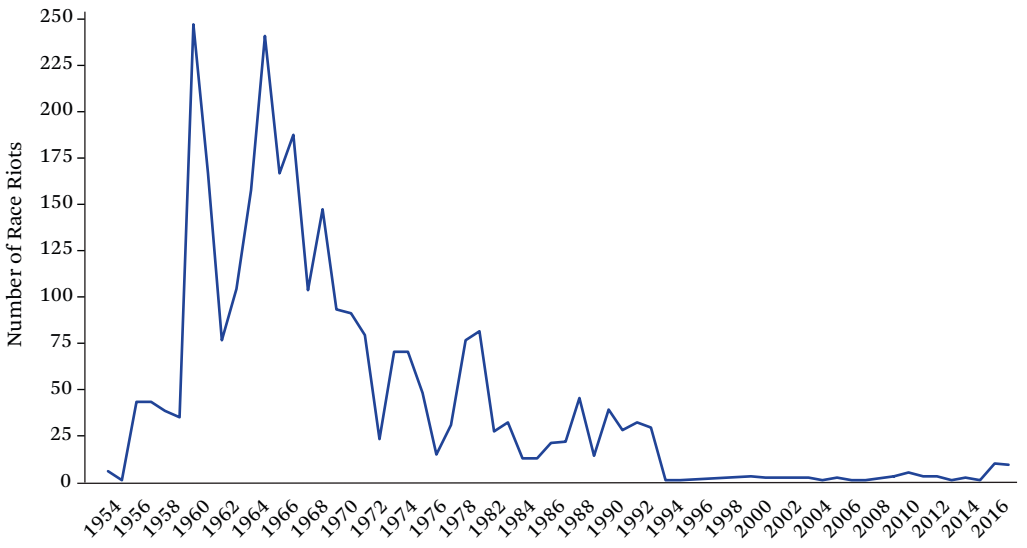
Many racial disparities persist, particularly among minority youth in urban areas. Housing segregation, often viewed as one of the causes of black-white disparities in quality of education and access to jobs, appears to be as acute today as it was in the 1960s. Job markets, wages, and earnings all indicate significant racial differentials. In addition, those with criminal records often have very few labor market options. Housing policies have a significant impact on asset accumulation and economic well-being. The Kerner report highlighted specific public policy areas where changes were needed to reduce segregation and discrimination. Notable public policies on home ownership, rental housing and public housing, and lending all emerged after the Kerner report. A core component of the report focused on racial violence and its relationship to police behavior. Recent reports from the Department of Justice confirm that significant areas of concern remain regarding the relationship between law enforcement and the African American community. Finally, welfare policies have played a core role in the post–Kerner Commission era. Antipoverty measures were a primary focus of the War on Poverty. However, welfare policy has been largely shaped by conceptualizations of the deserving versus the undeserving poor. Since the Kerner report, the politics and public policy in approaches to welfare policy have gravitated toward efforts to dismantle the social safety net.

Violent Protests Before and After the Kerner Commission

If anything, the Kerner Commission sought to quell the rise of violent protest. Figure 1, drawn from the work of Susan Olzak and various online sources, shows estimates of the number of racial riots from 1954 to 1992 and from 1993 to 2016 (Olzak 2015).[1] Although the methodologies differ between the two sources, the patterns displayed confirm a well-established historical record: that throughout the civil rights era of the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, race riots were frequent across virtually hundreds of cities, peaking before the Kerner Commission and declining thereafter. Upticks in 1980, 1987, and 1992 and more recently in 2016

1. For a list of incidents of civil unrest in the United States since the Revolution, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_incidents_of_civil_unrest_in_the_United_States#2000.E2.80.932009 (accessed May 14, 2018).

Figure 1. Urban Race Riots, 1954–2016



Source: Authors' compilation based on Olzak 2015 and "List of Ethnic Riots," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_riots (accessed September 5, 2017).

seem minor relative to the massive civil disorders of the 1960s.

Arguably, the incidence of race riots in urban areas declined after the turbulent 1960s. The reasons for the quelling of urban unrest are the subject of a copious literature. But, for the purposes of this essay, we focus on several key economic indicators that putatively describe the underlying causes of the conditions that led to the riots.

Of the major criticisms of the Kerner report, the easiest to confront is the one concerning causality. The report failed to include in its analysis interviews from nonriot cities. Because only riot cities are examined, it is impossible to know whether the determining factors highlighted in the report are different from conditions in nonrioting cities. Four major economic indicators painted a dire portrait of the black-white divide in America in the Kerner report. Blacks had lower incomes, higher poverty rates, higher unemployment rates, and lower educational attainment than whites. One might ask: Were conditions worse in the riot cities than in the nonrioting cities? Further, did the riot cities experience trajectories of these economic indicators that differed from those of the nonrioting cities?

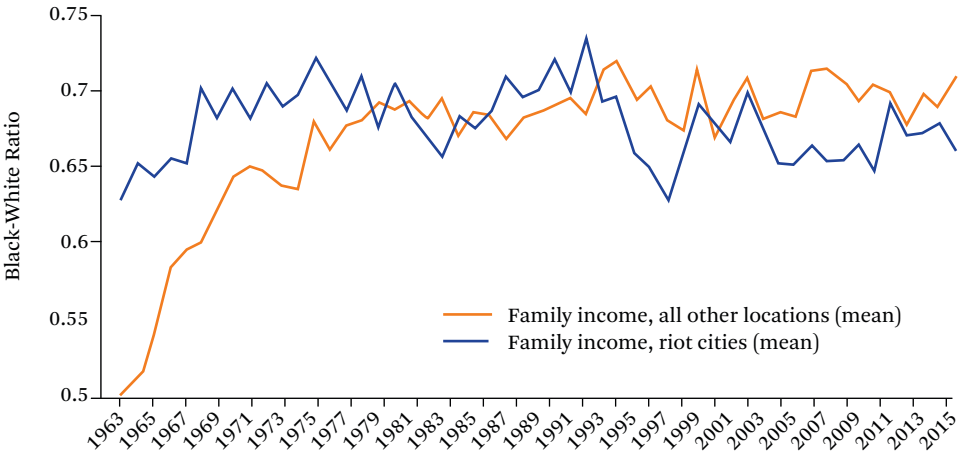
Trajectories of Riot Cities and Nonriot Cities

To answer these questions, we have compiled information from the March Supplements of the Current Population Surveys from 1963 until 2016 and plotted the ratios of black to white family incomes, unemployment rates, high school graduate rates, and poverty rates.[2]

Figure 2 shows the pattern of black-white family incomes from 1964 until 2016 for riot cities and nonrioting cities. Rioting cities, located disproportionately in the Northeast, Midwest, and West, maintained higher ratios of black to white family incomes than all other

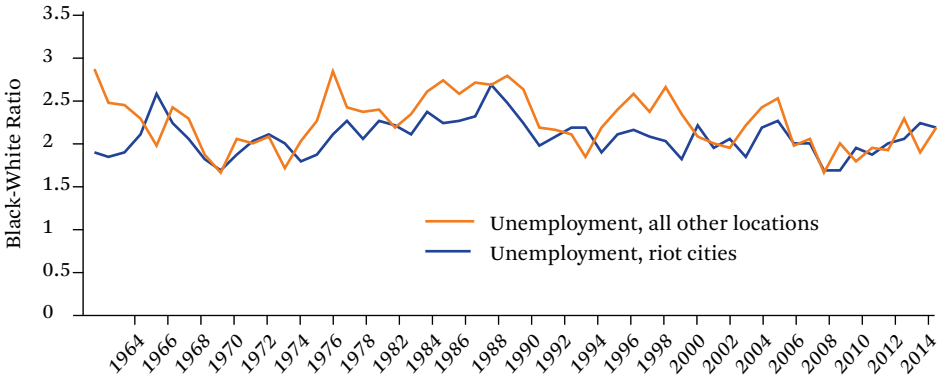
2. All the analysis on CPS used the March Supplement. The data source is IPUMS-CPS. Person weights were used for unemployment and education disparities; household weights were used for family income and poverty rates. Unemployment rate excludes persons not in Universe for labor market status, not in labor force, or missing in employment status. High school graduates excludes people with missing education variable and includes high school equivalents (GED degree).

Figure 2. Mean Family Incomes, Black-White Ratio



Source: Authors' compilation based on the CPS March Supplement files (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018).

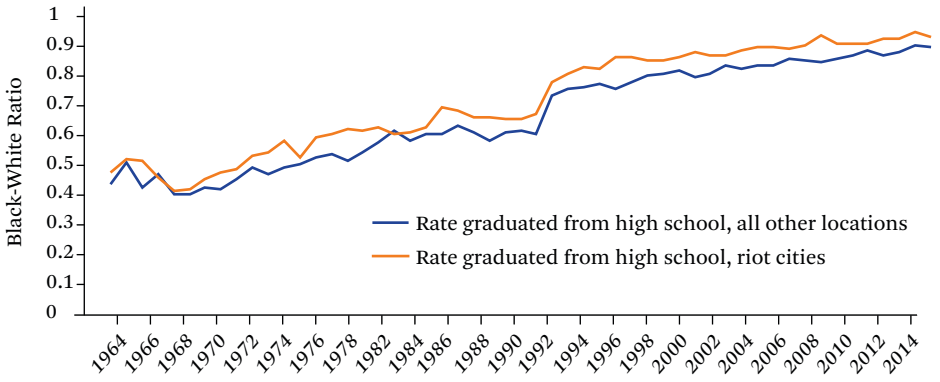
Figure 3. Unemployment Rates, Black-White Ratio



Source: Authors' compilation based on the CPS March Supplement files (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018).

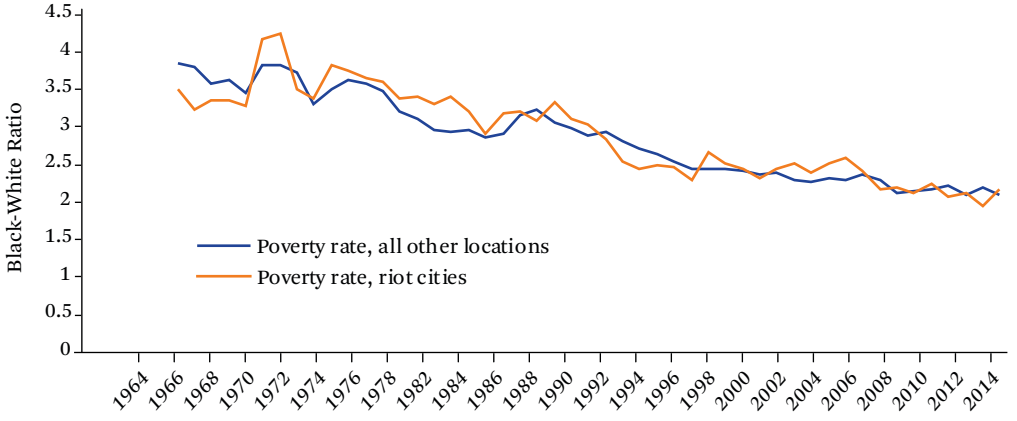
parts of the country before the major riots. In the year of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, black family income was about half of white family income in nonrioting cities and 63 percent in rioting cities. By the time Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, the racial gap in family incomes had narrowed in both series, and the black-white family income ratio converged to 0.68 and 0.69 in nonriot and riot cities respectively. By 1998, the ratio had fallen to 0.63 in the riot cities but hovered at 0.68 in the nonriot areas. Throughout most of the 2000s, the black-white family income ratio was higher in the nonriot areas than the riot cities, perhaps signaling the impacts of gentrification and out-flight of the black middle class. Gentrification in riot cities meant higher white incomes and lower ratios of black to white incomes. Out-flight of the black middle class in the riot cities meant lower ratios of black to white incomes relative to nonriot cities. Figure 3 shows the pattern of black-white unemployment rates from 1964 to 2016 in riot and nonriot cities. Rioting cities showed higher ratios of

Figure 4. High School Graduate Rates, Black-White Ratio



Source: Authors' compilation based on the CPS March Supplement files (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018).

Figure 5. Poverty Rates, Black-White Ratios



Source: Authors' compilation based on the CPS March Supplement files (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018).

black to white unemployment rates than other locations before the riots. Black unemployment in the riot cities was three times that of white unemployment rates in 1964. Both series converged to about 2:1 to 2.5:1 throughout the rest of the century, the riot cities having slightly higher ratios than the nonriot cities until about 2007, when the two series became virtually identical.

Figure 4 reports the ratio of black to white individuals who are high school graduates (among those over sixteen) for riot and nonriot cities. The two series are nearly identical, though the riot cities have a slight edge. The ratio rose from around 0.40 the year of the major riots prompting the creation of the Kerner Commission to 0.93 and 0.89 in the riot and nonriot locations.

Figure 5 reports the ratio of black to white poverty rates for family householders in the riot and nonriot cities. At the time of the Kerner report, the ratio hovered around 3.5:1 to 3.8:1 in both riot and nonriot locations. It jumped up to 4.2:1 for riot cities in 1973 but declined for both series thereafter reaching the current level of a little over 2:1 in 2016.

This evidence points to a possible flaw in the Kerner Commission's report. Although the

evidence clearly points to a divided America—a divide that continues today—the trajectories of the riot cities and the nonriot cities are remarkably similar. Thus, it is a bit more difficult to embrace the conclusion that this racial divide was the cause of the riots given that the racial divide was evident in both riot cities and nonriot cities and perhaps was even more pronounced in the nonriot cities than in the riot cities before the riots.

Fifty years later, it is worth revisiting these issues and also exploring whether successful policies designed to reduce the racial divide have emerged. The articles in this volume collectively address the questions of how far we have come, what worked and what did not work, and what the implications are for the twenty-first century.

OVERVIEW

The articles in this volume are interdisciplinary. Contributing authors bring to their essays diverse backgrounds in economics, sociology, law, medicine, history, public policy, and real world practice. The authors discuss the blackness and whiteness of the racial identity, the police-community relationship, and various aspects of racial inequalities in education, housing, and wealth at both the national level and the local level.

In "How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? The Missing Kerner Commission Report," Keisha Bentley-Edwards and her co-authors offer a critique of the Kerner report's positioning of black rage as deviant. By protracting the history of white race riots back to 1877, the authors find that white race riots, which resulted in the loss of black lives, black-owned property, and constitutional rights, have been perceived as maintaining social order. However, black riots, marked by the loss of white-owned property but few white lives, were what prompted the formation of a national commission to investigate the events. The authors also show the influence of the Moynihan report in 1965, which identified "Negro family social disorganization" as the source of a culture of poverty that impedes black social and economic progress, on the Kerner report in 1968 (Geary 2015). Besides positioning black rage as the problem, the Kerner report is also criticized for ignoring the intersectionality of race and gender. This article points out that the face of civil unrest described in the Kerner Commission's report was predominately male, and that the lived experiences of inequality of black females were absent. Juxtaposing the President's Task Force on the 21st Century Policing in 2015 with the Kerner report, Bentley-Edwards and her co-authors show that little has changed in terms of problematizing black rage and the invisibility of the black female over the past fifty years.

In "From Bakke to Fisher: African American Students in U.S. Higher Education over Forty Years," Walter Allen and his co-authors focus on racial inequality in higher education, which was, as they point out, "strangely minimal within the Kerner Commission report." The article connects higher education to the wider society with arguments that unrest did occur on college campuses in the 1960s, that campus unrest reflects persistent racial inequality across the society, and that higher education systematically reproduces society's racial hierarchies. Referring to critical race theory, the authors study black student patterns and trends in public higher education since the Kerner report. They use the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data from 1976 to 2015 to analyze national patterns and trends in black college enrollment, degree completion, and gender differences in the twenty states with the largest proportion black populations, by types of institutions including the state flagship university, the most prominent historically black colleges and universities, and the most prominent black-serving institutions. They conclude with broad strokes regarding the three questions raised in this volume.

In "Whither Whiteness? The Racial Logics of the Kerner Report and Modern White Space," Matthew Hughey studies another overlooked aspect of whiteness in the Kerner report: how whites functioned in the racial regime. Hughey conducts content analysis of the full text of the Kerner report in 1986 and ethnographic study among six all-white organizations to answer two questions: How did the Kerner report describe the intersection of whites with employment, education, housing, and police-community relations? How do whites today

make meaning of their intersection with these same four areas? Hughey's analyses also reveal little progress since the Kerner report. Taken together, the content analyses and ethnographic analyses demonstrate that the shared racial logics of white identity are stable and robust over both space (varied all-white locales) and time (1968 to 2018). Hughey further argues that these logics are often marshaled to promote a specific, or ideal form of white racial identity known as hegemonic whiteness.

In "Measuring the Distance: The Legacy of the Kerner Report," Rick Loessberg and John Koskinen, as a practitioner and a former Kerner Commission staff member respectively, provide insights into the legacy of the Kerner report, tapping their direct knowledge of the report and a review of the report's recommendations. Referring to various data sources and literature, Loessberg and Koskinen show that since the Kerner report, some areas, such as the incidence of poverty, have noticeably improved, whereas in others, such as black unemployment, virtually nothing has changed. Unlike many other studies that criticize the underimplementation of the Kerner report's recommendations, Loessberg and Koskinen demonstrate that some form of action was taken on many of the report's National Action recommendations, much of it occurring within the first five years, and that many recommendations of lesser scale have been implemented at the local levels. Along the same line, the authors argue that the Kerner report was and continues to be influential because it can educate, inform, and persuade America, and serves as the reference point of the discourse about racial inequality in the United States.

In "Changes in the Policing of Civil Disorders Since the Kerner Report: The Police Response to Ferguson, August 2014, and Some Implications for the Twenty-First Century," Patrick Gillham and Gary Marx focus on the changes in the police-protester relationship since the Kerner report. The authors argue that the relatively more sane, humane, and effective responses to the policing of disorders and protest is one of the most significant factors contributing to the absence of the large-scale, destructive, and spiraling riots since the 1960s. Gillham and Marx take a closer look at the changes in police disorder management during the 2014 Ferguson uprising, using the recommendations in the Kerner report as their analytical framework. The Kerner report identifies causes of policy mismanagement that include weakness in the command and control structure for policing disorders, lack of information or intelligence available to police, and inadequate self-protection equipment for the police. Drawing on media reports, police and activist accounts, after-action reports, and field observations of the 2014 uprising in Ferguson, Gillham and Marx find dramatic changes in the operational planning and equipment for policing disorders. The authors conclude with broader discussions about racial discrimination and inequality, police power, and justice in democratic societies.

In "The Effects of the Neighborhood Legal Services Program on Riots and the Wealth of African Americans," Jamein Cunningham and Rob Gillezeau evaluate the impact of Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP), one of the many policy responses to the uprisings in the 1960s, on civil disorders and resulting changes in property values in African American communities. After brief reviews of the history of the legal service program and its relation to the War on Poverty, and to civil disorders, the authors hypothesize that the NLSP directly (through legal consultation) or indirectly (through reduction of riot propensities and severities) has a positive impact on wealth through property appreciation. Drawing on data from National Archives Community Action Program, Census City and County Data Books, and various other secondary datasets, the authors adopt continuous difference-in-difference analysis to determine the effectiveness of the NLSP as an antiriot policy, controlling for observable demographic characteristics as well as fixed effects to capture unobserved heterogeneity. The authors also use the age of the oldest nearby law school as an instrumental variable to deal with endogeneity related to the timing, location, and intensity of the NLSP as the treatment. Empirical analyses confirm the NLSP's effectiveness in combating civil disorders and in increasing property values. The authors conclude with broader discussions about the lessons and progress since the Kerner re-

port as well as implications for the twenty-first century.

In "Fifty Years After the Kerner Commission Report: Place, Housing, and Racial Wealth Inequality in Los Angeles," Melany De La Cruz-Viesca and her co-authors focus on wealth disparity, an ignored dimension of inequalities in both the Kerner Commission's report and California's McCone Commission report on the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles. The authors examine how place intersects with housing policy, racial discrimination, immigration, and globalization in Los Angeles, which contextualizes data analysis of wealth disparities through the lens of home ownership. Using data from sources including the U.S. Census Bureau public-use micro samples, the American Community Survey sample, and the American Housing Survey, this article studies the case of Los Angeles from 1960 to 1990 and then to 2015. Data analyses reveal that the black and Hispanic residents are disadvantaged in both homeownership rate and property value. The authors criticize the two reports' housing policy recommendations for focusing only on the rental sector, preventing asset building through homeownership and perpetuating wealth disparities. The two reports, according to the authors, also failed to foresee the significant demographic changes in Los Angeles. In terms of implications for the twenty-first century, the authors point out the necessity and importance of studying racial wealth inequality.

In "The Evolution of Black Neighborhoods Since Kerner," Marcus Casey and Bradley Hardy study the evolution of African American neighborhoods since the Kerner report. The authors match riot locations with tract-level census data to compare neighborhoods directly affected by the riots in the 1960s with those not affected in Detroit, Newark, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. The authors also expand the scope of the analysis nationally to study how black neighborhoods fared relative to nonblack neighborhoods from 1970 to 2010. The analytical results show that disparities identified as policy priorities by the Kerner report—primarily income, poverty, and unemployment—persist over the observation period despite declines in extreme segregation and increased suburbanization of blacks. Neighborhoods directly affected by riots in the four cities remain among the most economically disadvantaged today. And socioeconomic gaps continue to persist between black and nonblack neighborhoods regardless of the history of rioting. The authors conclude that fifty years after the Kerner Commission's report, pathways for black individuals to achieve economic mobility—through better education attainment and better access to elite employment, income, and wealth—have improved greatly, but that black neighborhoods remain economically stagnant.

In "Detroit Fifty Years After the Kerner Report: What Has Changed, What Has Not, and Why?," Reynolds Farley analyzes the racial changes in metropolitan Detroit in focus areas identified by the Kerner report. Drawing on the history of Detroit and data about the city from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey and Current Population Survey, the article shows progress since the 1960s in residential integration, indicated by the suburban ring being open to African Americans, and in social integration, indicated by increased interracial marriage and increased proportion of African Americans in the prestigious occupations. However, Farley also finds that African Americans in the metropolitan Detroit area are today further behind whites than they were in 1967 when it comes to key economic measures. Farley attributes the lack of progress to the dramatic changes in Detroit's labor market and the failure of the educational system to provide the trainings needed for jobs in the new economy to African Americans.

CONCLUSION

Fifty years ago, in the midst of violent protests and unprecedented urban riots, the Kerner Commission concluded that the United States had drifted into a wide racial divide: one white and one black. This volume and the articles in it underscore the theme that in many respects the racial divide persists into the twenty-first century. Although patterns of improvement—lower poverty rates, fewer instances of violent protest, and improved education for some segments of the population—are clear, the racial divide persists.

Given the renewed national attention to the

problems of race relations in the United States, the fiftieth anniversary of the Kerner report provides an opportunity to revisit the report, its findings, and recommendations in light of contemporary political realities, social structures, and policy debates. Each chapter included in this volume considers the following:

- How far have we come?
- What worked and what did not work?
- What are the implications for the twenty-first century?

The Kerner report exposed cracks in the premises of the American Dream. The challenge of living up to the ideals of the American Dream remains a very real one today—characterized by a continuous gulf between the democratic principle of equality and its actual practice. Confronting structural racial inequities is a "nervous area of government." "It has a pervading emotional and historical context that can make avoidance and minimization appear attractive options . . . addressing a nervous area of government requires active and sustained attention" (Gooden 2014, 196).

In his *Richmond Times-Dispatch* commentary published two weeks after the Charlottesville violence in August 2017, former Virginia governor L. Douglas Wilder poignantly discussed the American Dream and a contemporary challenge in a Richmond city elementary school struggling for basic funding. As Governor Wilder, the first elected African American governor since Reconstruction, stated, "It might be difficult in some quarters to imagine how that made parents and students feel about their status in the community—about their grasp of the American Dream. This is going on more than 150 years after Emancipation, and more than 50 years after the country got serious about protecting the civil rights to vote and hold office" (2017). This thought-provoking volume of essays offers a critical examination and analysis of the Kerner Commission fifty years later through the lens of American society today and highlights the continuing legacy of racial inequality documented fifty years ago.

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