

RIVERDALE PRESS, February 11, 2010

Editorial comment: Bronx district no. 1 in hunger

Pride as motivation toward charity works as well as anything else.

Being number one isn't necessarily a source of pride, especially when you're number one in hunger. Rep. Jose Serrano's district, which abuts our own Eliot Engel's, is the most in need in the nation, according to a new survey.

The poll found that 18.5 percent of all Americans had trouble paying for enough to eat in 2009. The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), a national non-profit, published the results of a yearlong survey, undertaken with the pollsters at Gallup, at the end of January. According to the report, 650,000 people were reached for the survey. Results were tallied nationally, by state and by congressional district.

One finding? Nearly 40 percent of the people who live right next door to the Riverdale/Kingsbridge area have trouble getting enough to eat. To say this is despicable is to make light of the situation.

Common images of hunger in the United States often show African Americans in clapboard shacks in rural Mississippi — which is in fact, the state with the most hunger overall, according to the survey. The footage always looks improbable, unlikely, wrong. Surely the pictures aren't coming from a place that a New Yorker could drive to in just a couple of days. You expect to see shacks like these, people sweltering in a heat that never abates, in images from other continents. Africa, Latin America or on an island in the Caribbean.

Yet, as surprising as these images are, they don't really shake a New Yorker's jaded view of the South, or Mississippi in particular. Mississippi we know only from the movies or from books and TV programs about the struggle for civil rights in the 50s, 60s and early 70s. Jim Crow laws, American apartheid, slavery. The New Yorker's perception is of a place left behind by time.

But Mississippi's hungriest congressional district, the second, only has 33.6 percent of its people reporting trouble with feeding themselves or their families. Only is surely relative. The number is horrific and unacceptable. But the district ranks as the third hungriest in the nation, not the first.

A strip of the Bronx, in perhaps the richest city in the richest nation on Earth, has more hungry people than one of the the least developed parts of the country.

If that doesn't incite empathy, it should at least inspire indignation. New York poorer than Mississippi! Well, we'll just see about that!

Pride as motivation toward charity works as well as anything else.

People in Riverdale and Kingsbridge are being asked to do a lot, not least by The Riverdale Press, which has lobbied for readers to give generously to help the hungry in our own area and in Haiti, for the autistic and for the homeless. As has often been the case, Riverdalians have responded with generosity.

Solving the problems of Haiti, will or would take years, if the political will and pity stirred by the earthquake continues.

Housing the homeless isn't simple, either, with homes needing to be built and associated programs — helping to find people jobs, or in some cases, weaning them from substance abuse or ameliorating the effects of mental illness — needing to be funded and coordinated.

Feeding people is a little more straightforward, and the government does much to help, with food stamps, free school breakfasts and other programs. Many, many charities offer free meals, or nonperishable food.

The Press has mentioned the Kingsbridge- Riverdale-Marble Hill Food and Hunger Project, which helps people in our own backyard.

The New York City Coalition Against Hunger works more broadly, with 1,200 organizations around the city, some in Mr. Serrano's district. The easiest way to add it to the list of places you give your time or financial help is to go to www.nyccah.org.

Why should our neighbors go hungry in a nation that still pays farmers not to grow crops?

This is part of the [February 11, 2010](#) online edition of The Riverdale Press.