

The Miami Herald

Posted on Wed, Nov. 24, 2010

Take action to end hunger now

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Good news.

An average of 17.7 percent of all Americans were at times unable to feed themselves in the 12 months prior to September of this year. That's according to an analysis of data from the Gallup-Healthways Index, conducted and newly released by the Food Resource and Action Center (FRAC), an advocacy group.

You may be wondering: In what universe does a 17.7 percent hunger rate qualify as good news? In this one, actually. That figure, after all, represents a slight drop from the average 18.5 percent rate recorded at the end of 2009. But even the smaller figure is hardly reassuring, given that it means just under 55 million Americans had to do without food at least occasionally.

Hunger endures. It seems a timely point to make as we enter upon that season wherein we express profound thankfulness by gorging on turkeys and hams and yams and greens, potatoes by the mound, dressing by the mountain and groaning tables full of puddings, pies, cookies and cakes.

Hunger endures. The point also seems salient given an often niggardly political environment in which it is common to hear people speak of poverty as a defect of birth or character, and an André Bauer -- lieutenant governor of South Carolina -- can get away with likening children who receive free and reduced-price lunches to stray animals you feed at the back door.

Relieving the guilt

Hunger endures. And maybe, as your humble correspondent did once, you respond to that by spending some part of Thanksgiving at a shelter, ladling food onto paper plates held forth by less fortunate people. It makes you feel good -- or at least, not so guilty about your relative plenitude. Just don't think too hard about them, about where they will go when they leave this place, and how they will eat tomorrow.

Hunger endures.

"It's great that people at this time of year make donations to food emergency charities," says FRAC president Jim Weill. "But that's ultimately not going to solve the problem. What will solve the problem is a better food-stamp program, better school-lunch programs and a more-robust economy that shares the prosperity more with struggling families."

Hunger, says Weill, "existed unnecessarily before the recession and has gotten worse unnecessarily since the recession. As Congressman Jim McGovern says, hunger in America is a political condition. It's not something that exists because of lack of food or lack of resources."

Why poverty exists

And yes, some of us still view poverty as a sign of laziness. But as recent victims of the Great Recession will no doubt testify, reality does not conform to that stereotype.

People are poor because of untreated mental conditions or lack of education. They are poor because there are no jobs. They are poor because the jobs they do find don't pay enough to live on.

You and I are often asked to care about the plight of people who are not like us. But this is different. After all, if you are not a member of some mistreated racial, religious or sexual subset, you can be reasonably certain you

never will be.

But any of us can be poor. Some of us already are or have been. And any of us can be hungry. Some of us are just a crisis away. So while it's all well and good to spend Thanksgiving ladling food at a soup kitchen and breathing that well-worn prayer about the grace of God, it might not be a bad idea to also drop a line to your elected representative and let her or him know you consider it unacceptable that children -- and even their working parents -- hunger in the richest nation on Earth.

To draw that line in the sand is to take the critical first step in becoming a nation where everybody eats.

And that would be very good news, indeed.

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