

Charleston-based center tries to tackle problems of the ‘Southern Crescent’

By Robert Behre
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OCT. 13, 2013 -- It could be the legacy of slavery or the more recent struggles facing family farms or rural areas' loss of political clout.

In all likelihood, it's some combination of all three — and possibly other factors as well.

Map after map shows that a crescent-shaped swath of the South — from Virginia's Tidewater region to the Mississippi Delta in Arkansas — lags behind when it comes to improving poverty, unemployment, education and health.

Andy Brack, a self-employed journalist and head of the nonprofit Center for a Better South, is trying to call attention to the unique challenges facing this area, which he refers to as the “Southern Crescent.”

Brack said he never thought much about what lies beyond South Carolina's so-called “Corridor of Shame.” The corridor — a wide swath around Interstate 95 — took its name from a 2006 documentary about the state's most impoverished and struggling public schools.

As he studied maps, however, Brack realized the Palmetto State is not unique and that the corridor extends hundreds of miles beyond its state lines.

And he began an effort to raise awareness about its existence, awareness that he hopes will lead to solutions.

“We have a moral imperative to do something to reduce high rates of poverty, unemployment, disease and other conditions in the crescent,” he said. “If we deal with these, that will bolster the South's reputation, lead to more business and improve our entire region.”

Two Souths

The idea of two Souths is nothing new.

Many talk about the “Deep South,” including states such as Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina, and the peripheral South, with states such as Florida and Kentucky, but the real division is more nuanced than state lines.



Even though many nearby properties sport “Jesus Saves” signs, this Williamsburg County church is for sale, as is the land surrounding it. Population loss is one symptom of a larger economic problem the Southern Crescent faces.
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"I've heard it described as the 'Black Belt,' the former slave-holding areas where cotton was grown," said Gibbs Knotts, a College of Charleston political science professor who specializes in the region. "It's very, very different."

However, Knotts said several cities such as Charleston, Greenville, Atlanta and Charlotte are prospering more than other parts of their states.

"I think it's largely a rural issue," he said, adding that the South has become far more urban: Currently, 77 percent of its residents live in cities or suburbs, up from 48 percent in 1950. Meanwhile, rural areas have lagged behind.

Brack said he thinks the key map is one dating from 1860 that shows the same crescent-shaped swath where the most slaves were held. "I think a lot of this is 150 years of neglect after the Civil War," he said.

Knotts said a new political paper from three political scientists at the University of Rochester bears that out.

"Slavery continues to affect how Southern whites identify politically, how they feel about affirmative action, and how they perceive African-Americans," the paper concludes. "To our knowledge, ours is the first study in American politics to quantitatively document the persistent effects of an institution that has long been abolished."

The authors cited attitudes passed down through generations. "Our paper makes clear that America's institutional and historical legacy is crucial for understanding modern politics," it said.

Tammy Ingram, a College of Charleston history professor working on a book about the Dixie Highway, said slavery is a big factor, but changing farm economics have contributed, too, as has the reality that money made in rural counties does not remain there like it previously did.

"I think it's all related, but there's not a simple and direct correlation of the legacy of slavery and the economic problems we have today," she said. "Obviously, there are more recent political and economic problems that have their origins traced to the legacy of slavery."

Finding solutions

The federal government created the Appalachian Regional Commission in 1965 to deal with persistent poverty and social ills in its eastern mountain range, from southern New York to northern Mississippi.

Congress also created a Southeast Crescent Regional Commission five years ago but has not appropriated a dime for it to start work.

Given today's political climate, Brack said, he is not optimistic.

He said he hopes President Barack Obama would appoint a special study commission to recommend policies and fresh ideas that can raise standards of living in the Southern Crescent.

But he said he also sees a big role for the private sector and charitable foundations, if they can coordinate their attention here.

Brack said he doesn't expect the states to do much because their legislatures increasingly are made up of members from urban and suburban areas. Knotts noted that one problem is the rural South has lost a lot of its political power.

Not only has its population dwindled — Ingram said her hometown in southern Georgia lost 10 percent of its population in the past decade — but court cases forced states to draw legislative districts to correspond more with one-person, one-vote.

While McCormick and Saluda counties once had the same representation in the South Carolina Senate as Greenville and Spartanburg, most lawmakers now come from metro areas.

Ingram said tackling the issues in the right order will be important. For instance, if there's a lot of emphasis placed on education — but ultimately no jobs available for those with degrees — then frustration could build.

Brack noted The Post and Courier recently focused on "Forgotten South Carolina," a set of about 26 rural counties that generally fall into the larger pattern of the Southern Crescent.

Brack said "forgotten" is an appropriate word for the Southern Crescent and the problems it faces, but he hopes to change that.

"What the center is trying to do is draw attention to this forgotten area. There's a romance to the rural South, but the reality is that there's an enormous challenge and lack of opportunity to keep these communities vibrant," he said.

"To sit back and do nothing is irresponsible," he added. "For poverty in Allendale County to be more than 40 percent highlights that something is broken and needs to be fixed. It's almost immoral not to try."

Sagging Southern Numbers

The South has:

- Roughly 25 percent of the U.S. population.
- Eight of the nation's 10 poorest states (Miss., La., Ky., Ga., Ala., Ark., S.C. and N.C.)
- Seven of the nation's 10 states with lowest graduation rates from public high school (Miss., S.C., La., Ga., Fla., Ala. and Ark.)
- Seven of the nation's 10 states with lowest median household income (Miss., Ark., Ala., Ky., Tenn., La. and S.C.)
- Four of the nation's 10 states with the highest crime rates (Tenn., S.C., La., and Fla.)
- Four of the nation's 10 states with the highest unemployment in August 2013 (Ga., N.C., Miss. and Tenn.)
- Two of the nation's 10 states with lowest 2012 voter participation (Ark. and Tenn.)

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- Between five and eight of the nation's 10 states with the highest rates of diabetes (8), high blood pressure (7), obesity (6) and infant mortality (5).

Source: [2013 Briefing Book on the South](#), October 2013. (which defines the South as these 11 states: Ala., Ark., Fla., Ga. Ky., La., Miss., N.C., S.C., Tenn. and Va.)

To learn more

For more details on the Southern Crescent — including a short video outlining the project — visit <http://www.southerncrest.org>

For further information on the Center for a Better South, visit <http://www.bettersouth.org>, call 670-3996 or email info@bettersouth.org.