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***EDMONTON'S URBAN NATIVES:
An Uphill Struggle for Survival***

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***Jonathan Murphy
Edmonton Social Planning Council
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Introduction

During 1990, the discontent of Canada's aboriginal people boiled over into violent confrontation at Oka and civil disobedience throughout the country. While the immediate threat of widespread insurrection seems to have subsided, it's clear that the concerns of Native people are not trivial, and they will not go away if ignored.

In order to understand and address the issues and demands which Native people have raised, it is necessary to have a clear picture of the economic and social circumstances which give rise to their sense that an injustice is being perpetrated against them. This paper brings together information from various sources to create a profile of Edmonton's aboriginal people¹. It is hoped that it can be used by Natives and non-Natives alike in planning for change.

Numbers

In the 1986 Census, 27,950 Edmontonians reported that they were wholly or partly of aboriginal origin (Indian, Metis, Inuit). Of Canada's large cities, Edmonton and Winnipeg have the biggest concentration of Native people: about five percent.

Most Natives live in north Edmonton, concentrated in the downtown core, the north-east, and the Jasper Place area. In those neighbourhoods the Native population ranges from six to eighteen percent of the total.

Only a small minority live south of the North Saskatchewan River. In only thirteen of the fifty-seven census tract areas south of the river does the aboriginal population account for more than three percent of the total, and in none does it exceed six percent.

¹ Much of the statistical information is from the 1986 Canadian Census. While this data is several years old, circumstances are unlikely to have greatly changed. This type of detailed information is only available from Census materials; it will not be available from the 1991 census for several years. I have used the terms aboriginal and Native synonymously: these are taken to include Metis, Indian and Inuit people, as well as those who declare themselves partly of Metis, Indian, or Inuit origin. While this broad definition may include a few people who have only minimal connection with the aboriginal community, it is probable that this overestimate is more than balanced by those people who are part of the aboriginal community but choose not to declare themselves as such in response to government census questions.

The relative youth of Edmonton's Natives, along with in-migration from rural communities, suggest that the population is likely to grow very rapidly over the next years. Statistics Canada reported only 12,000 Native people in Edmonton in 1981.²

Background of Edmonton's Native People

Most Natives in Edmonton trace their roots to rural Indian and Metis communities in Alberta and Saskatchewan. In 1986, three in ten had arrived from elsewhere in Canada over the last five years; twice as many as for the population as a whole.

Alberta Native Affairs reports³ that the primary motivator to move to the City is to seek employment. A brief comparison of social indicators on randomly selected reserves and Northern Alberta towns confirms that the economic circumstances of rural Natives are often desperate:

| Average Family Income: Native and Non-Native Communities 1985 | |
|--|----------|
| Valleyview (non-Native) | \$35,528 |
| Sturgeon Lake (Native - 8km east) | \$16,221 |
| Slave Lake (non-Native) | \$40,678 |
| Driftpile (Native - 65 km west) | \$17,202 |

(Source: Statistics Canada, 1986⁴)

Even when aboriginal people move from a reserve or settlement to the nearest regional trade centre, their economic and social circumstances do not improve. In Slave Lake, for example, Native people make up one-fifth of the total population, but account for almost one-half of people living in families below the poverty line. This pattern is the norm for the great majority of the communities from which Edmonton draws its Native migrants.

With limited job and employment prospects in their home communities and in regional centres, it is inevitable that a high percentage of Native young adults will continue to move to large centres such as Edmonton. The impact on home communities is, of course, severe, as the most productive members of the community are forced to leave. While one third of Edmonton aboriginals are between twenty and thirty-five, in Lac La Biche only a fifth are in the same age

² The 1981 and 1986 figures cannot be compared with any degree of accuracy, as questions were asked differently.

³ Alberta Native Affairs, Demographic Characteristics of Natives in Edmonton, July 1985, Page 5.

⁴ Most data on aboriginal people in Edmonton and elsewhere is from Statistics Canada's A Profile of the Aboriginal Population Residing in Selected Off Reserve Areas, February 1990.

bracket. As in Third World countries, rural areas become home mainly to the non-productive, children and the elderly.

Age and Family Composition

Consistent with all Canadian aboriginal populations, Edmonton Natives are much younger than their non-Native counterparts:

| Age Breakdown, Edmonton <i>(Source: Statistics Canada, 1986)</i> | | |
|--|--------------|---------------|
| | <i>Total</i> | <i>Native</i> |
| Under 5 | 8.5% | 14.3% |
| Under 15 | 23.8% | 37.6% |
| 15-44 years | 52.2% | 56.2% |
| 45-64 years | 16.7% | 4.1% |
| 65 and older | 7.3% | 2.1% |

It's clear from the preceding chart that the number of aboriginal students will climb over the next few years, and that the natural growth in the city's aboriginal population overall is likely to continue. In contrast, many fewer Natives are at or near to retirement age, suggesting that demand for specialized Native seniors programs will not grow markedly in the near future.

Single parent families make up over one-third (34.5%) of all families headed by a Native person, compared with less than one-eighth of Edmonton families as a whole. There will be increasing need for day care and other family support services in comparison with the non-Native population.

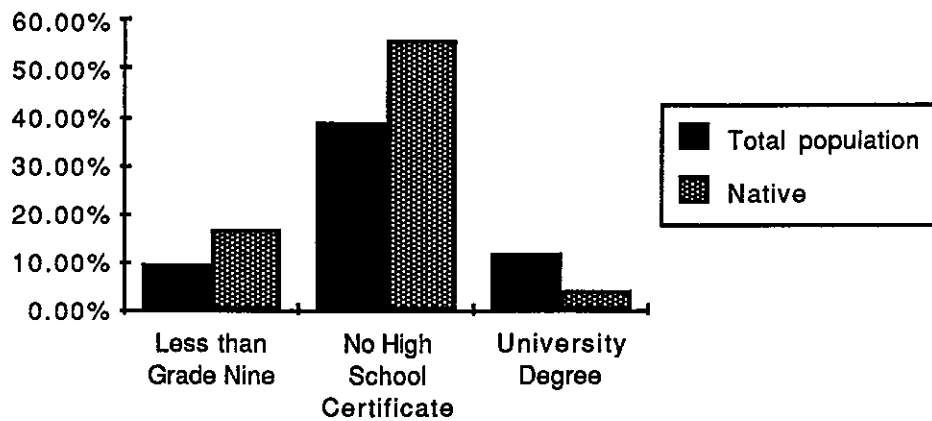
Education

A 1985 survey of Edmonton Natives revealed that, after employment, upgrading or completing of education was the most common reason for relocation to the City from elsewhere⁵. Both the Edmonton Public and Separate Schools have established specialized programs for Native children⁶, and post-secondary institutions have followed suit. Nevertheless, educational attainment remains considerably below that of the general population:

⁵ Alberta Native Affairs, *ibid.*, page five.

⁶ The Awasis Program, and Ben Calf Robe School, respectively. In addition, both school districts have Native Liaison workers.

Educational level attained, Edmonton, 1986
 (Statistics Canada, 1988, 1990)



The Edmonton Public School Board does not maintain separate statistics for Native students. While the separate school system does keep a count, officials there emphasize⁷ that they believe these figures are serious underestimates because many Metis and non-Status Indians do not declare their ancestry. The Catholic School District's statistics show an average of 100 self-identified Native students per grade. This figure drops markedly in Grades 11 and 12, to 64 and 67 respectively⁸, suggesting a high drop-out rate. No reliable figures are available on the numbers of graduating students.

There is a close relationship between level of education and both the quality and quantity of employment obtained. Relative educational underachievement places Native students at a considerable disadvantage in the employment field.

Employment

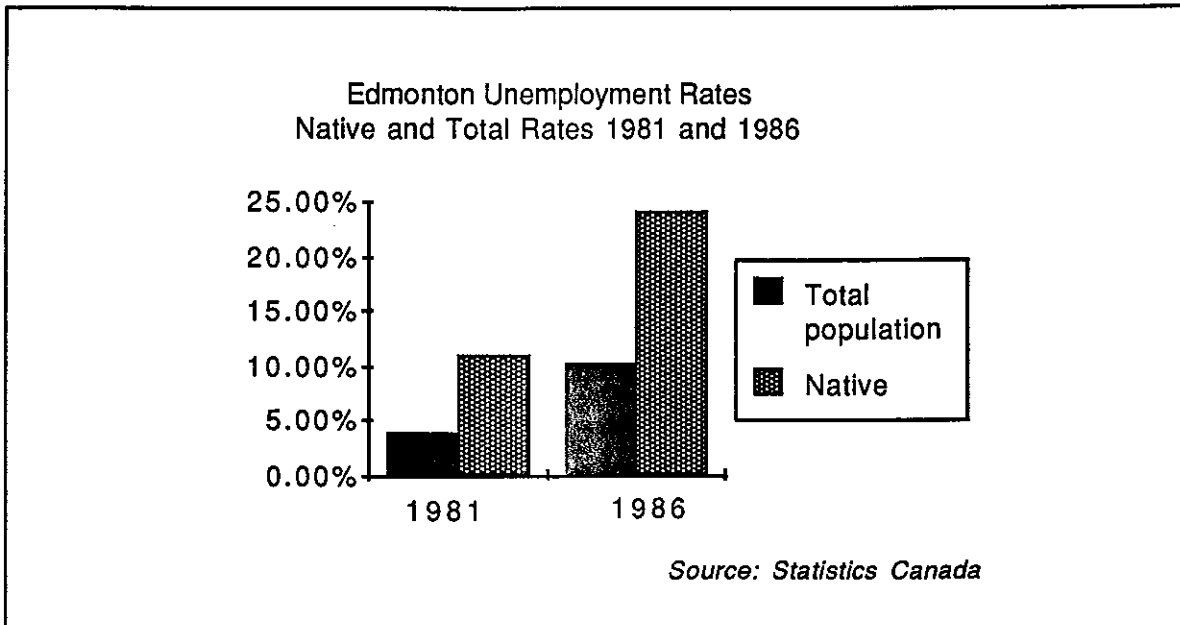
Waged work in an urban environment provides an income, self-esteem, and social connections. This contrasts with most rural Native communities, where extended family ties, band and settlement political structures, and religious organizations provide corresponding social and economic opportunities. Failure to successfully transfer to the urban workforce effectively

⁷ Telephone interview with Leith Campbell, Edmonton Catholic School District, March 11 1991. A comparison of Catholic School District statistics with other available statistics confirms this hypothesis. There are numerous government and non-government surveys and censuses of Native peoples living in Edmonton. All of them indicate that there are between two and four times more Metis and non-Treaty Indians in Edmonton than Treaty. However, the Catholic School District figures show them to be approximately equal in number. Mr Campbell gives anecdotal information to the same effect, suggesting that many Native people do not wish their children to be coded as Native.

⁸ Edmonton Catholic Schools, Native student count, 18 December 1990.

excludes many Native migrants to Edmonton not just from work, but from all aspects of mainstream society.

Edmonton Native unemployment rates are more than double those of the general population:



High unemployment rates do not demonstrate fully the exclusion of Native people from equal participation in Edmonton's workforce. Only half of the aboriginal workforce worked full-time for the whole year, compared with two-thirds of non-Native workers. Further, only two-thirds of aboriginal Edmontonians 15 years of age and older considered themselves part of the workforce, compared with about three-quarters of the non-native population⁹. Within the workplace, Native people are overrepresented in the construction and service trades, and underrepresented in professional and managerial occupations.

Income levels

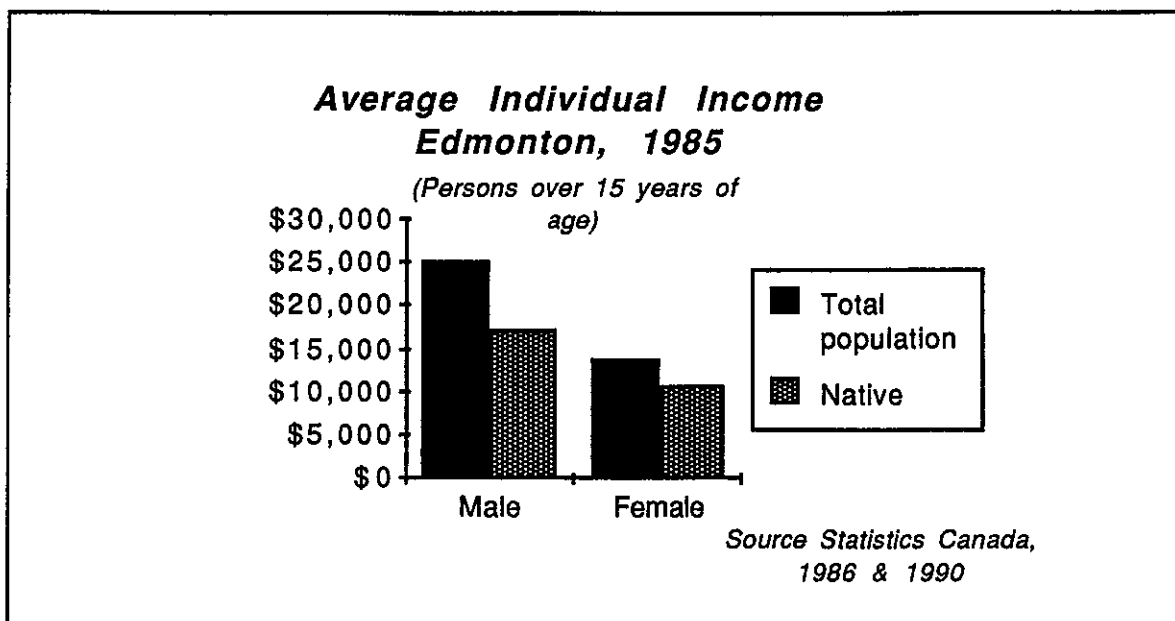
Several factors combine in maintaining aboriginal income levels well below those of the general population. As noted above, Natives have much higher rates of unemployment. Single parents head a third of families, compared with only an eighth of non-Native Edmonton families. Fewer aboriginal people are in management and professional positions, the more highly paid sectors of the workforce. Government transfer payments¹⁰ account

⁹ Even though many more non-Native people are over 65 and therefore less likely to be in the workforce.

¹⁰ Source: Statistics Canada. Including social assistance, unemployment insurance, government pensions, etc. As transfer payments are generally well below employment incomes, this depresses average Native income in comparison with non-Natives.

for nearly twenty percent of Native family income, compared with less than ten percent for Edmonton families as a whole.

The income gap between Native and non-Native people is smaller among women. However, it is important to remember that there is a disproportionate number of aboriginal single parents in Edmonton, over 90% of whom are women. Usually, their families must rely upon the mother's income alone. This factor is reflected in an analysis of families considered low-income (below the "poverty line"¹¹). Just under half (48.4%) of all members of a Native-led family were in poverty, while only one-sixth (17.3%) of the total population lived in a low-income family.



The majority of Native people, both males and females, were reliant in 1985 upon an income of less than fifteen thousand dollars:

Individual income below \$15,000
Persons over 15 years of age

| | <i>Native</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| <i>Male</i> | 53.9% | 35.9% |
| <i>Female</i> | 74.2% | 61.3% |

Source: Statistics Canada, 1986-90

¹¹ For Edmonton in 1985, the Statistics Canada poverty line was as follows:

| | | | | | |
|-----------|----|----------|-----------|----|----------|
| 1 person | .. | \$10,223 | 2 persons | .. | \$13,501 |
| 3 persons | .. | \$18,061 | 4 persons | .. | \$20,812 |
| 5 persons | .. | \$24,252 | 6 persons | .. | \$26,488 |
| 7 or more | .. | \$29,155 | | | |

More recent figures are available. However the 1986 census from which we have calculated income levels relies upon 1985 data.

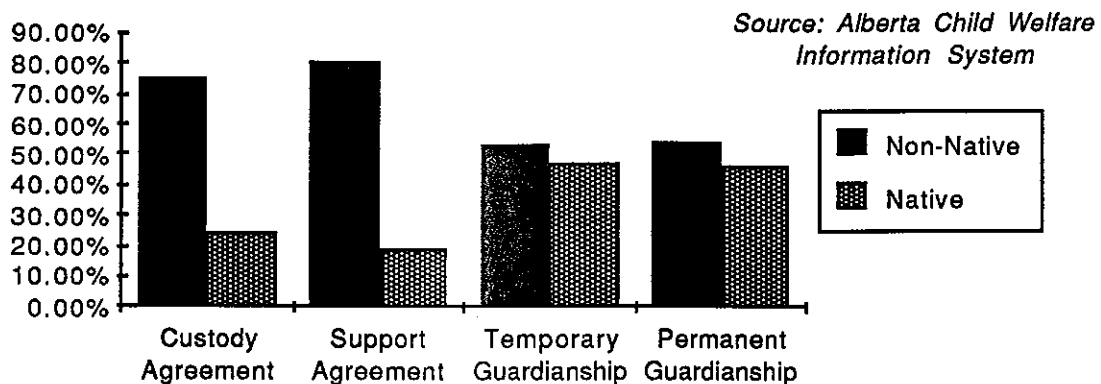
Social problems

In all societies, a combination of relative poverty and exclusion from mainstream society results in low self-esteem, which in turn manifests itself in self-destructive actions.

Native peoples are grossly overrepresented in the federal and provincial correctional systems within Alberta. Despite programs designed to ensure adequate counselling for Native people involved in the court system, Natives accounted for 31% of those admitted to Provincial correctional institutions, a proportion seven times greater than their share of the Alberta population¹². The "Edmonton Inner City Violent Crime Taskforce" report states that "over a fifteen year period from 1974 to 1989 in Edmonton, Native people were victims in 26.8% of the total homicides and suspects in 31.9% of the cases."¹³

Child welfare statistics show a similar trend. Of eight thousand files open in Alberta on January 31, 1989, 31.5% involved Native families. This statistic is repeated for the Edmonton area, where Native families account for about one-third of ethnic origin coded open child welfare files. Further, there are some clear racial correlations in the *type* of open files. Native cases make up only 2.5% of Handicapped Children's Services files, but as the type of intervention becomes more intrusive, so does the percentage of Native files increase. Over 45% of all Permanent Guardianship files involve Native families:

**Edmonton Region Child Welfare Cases
By Selected Type of Case, January 1989**



Given extensive documentation of the negative impacts of apprehension and resultant loss of identity and self-esteem, it's more than unfortunate that greater strides have not been made in recent years to reduce such traumatic

¹² Statistics Canada/Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Adult Correctional Services in Canada 1989-90.

¹³ Edmonton Inner City Violent Crime Task Force, Discussion Paper and Recommendations, December 1990. Page 7.

incidents. This is further exacerbated by reports that fewer than half of Native children apprehended are placed with Native foster parents¹⁴

There are many other social issues facing the Native community in Edmonton. Studies in America and Canada¹⁵ conclude that alcohol abuse is a problem among both urban and rural Native communities, and there is no reason to believe this is not also the case in Edmonton¹⁶. Housing conditions for Native people are often appalling: high needs housing areas correspond closely with those containing large Native populations¹⁷. Nationally, rates of death by suicide, violence, and accidents are much higher than for the population as a whole. While accurate local figures are not available, a cursory glance at reports in the newspapers seems to confirm that these trends are repeated in Edmonton.¹⁸

Conclusion

Edmonton's Native people face enormous challenges. Half live on incomes below the poverty line. They endure exceptionally high rates of unemployment. Their children are apprehended and their parents incarcerated seven times more frequently than the rest of the population. Most live in the poorest parts of town, where overcrowding and violence are commonplace.

There's nothing special about Edmonton. The same pattern of poverty and its attendant social ills follows Native people wherever they live: on reserves and in settlements, in regional towns and villages, in other cities across the country. It's been this way for generations.

Confederation has always been a bad deal for aboriginal people. From the Indian people, the Europeans took away a whole continent and confined them to marginal land from which they could not travel without the permission of the Indian Agent. From the Metis people, who opened the West for settlement, these immigrants took the Metis province of Manitoba, and then hanged Riel, their Father of Confederation.

Today, our federal government has the gall to speak of our "two founding peoples", the English and the French, as if the Native is not truly a person. The Supreme Court of British Columbia can declare that the Native people of that

¹⁴ Interview with a provincial Child Welfare worker who wished to remain anonymous, March 1991.

¹⁵ See, for example, Alcohol in Canada, Health and Welfare Canada, 1989, Chapter Five.

¹⁶ "By mid-afternoon each day...transient and homeless males and females, the majority of whom are Native, start walking the streets. Many are already intoxicated. Most are in search of an alcohol-based substance." Inner City Violent Crime Task Force, ibid., p.7

¹⁷ Compare Larrie Taylor Architects, Edmonton Inner City Housing Need and Demand Study, Edmonton, 1990, "Composite Incidence of Housing Need Indicators by Study Area Neighbourhood", p23A, with Statistics Canada, 1986 Census Aboriginal Population Fact Sheets, "Edmonton Aboriginal Ethnic Origin" map, page unnumbered.

¹⁸ See Andrew J. Siggner, "The Socio-Demographic Conditions of Registered Indians", in Canadian Social Trends, Winter 1986, pp.2 - 9.

province, who have lived there since before time was recorded, have no rights over their land, but may use unoccupied land 'at the pleasure of the Crown'.

It is hardly surprising that many Native people feel alienated. Forced to leave their rural communities because of hopeless economic circumstances, they live in the poorest parts of the big cities, cut off from home and yet never truly part of the urban economy and society. For a long time they have stayed quiet while their needs and rights are ignored. The 'hot summer of 1990' was a sign that things are going to change.

In many ways, Native people's status in Canada is comparable with that of blacks in the United States prior to the civil rights movement. Our society has a choice. We can either ignore the situation and suffer increasingly divisive conflict, or we can work together to ensure the full citizenship of Native people.

Edmonton's Urban Natives

Discussion points

The following proposals for action to address the challenges facing aboriginal Edmontonians have been suggested by various contacts within the Native and non-Native communities. They are listed in no particular order, and are for discussion purposes only. These proposals are not endorsed by the Edmonton Social Planning Council.

- that both municipal and provincial social service providers systematically review their services to ensure that they are useful and accessible to Native people. The City of Edmonton, for example, has recently carried out a "multiculturalizing" process. A similar initiative should be carried out to improve service to the aboriginal community, given that all available statistics indicate they are the most needy of all groups. While existing and proposed Native-run services should be supported and properly funded, this does not relieve other organizations (whether provincial, municipal, or non-profit) of the responsibility to serve Native people.

- that the Provincial and Federal governments institute effective preferred hiring programs for correctional facilities, given that a disproportionately small number of Native staff work with a disproportionately large number of Native inmates.

- that the school boards take seriously their mandate to serve the Native population. Their inability to even say how many Native students are enrolled in their schools is not acceptable. School boards should liaise closely both with Native political organizations *and* with parents to combat excessive drop-out rates.

- that all organizations receiving public funding be required to hire appropriate numbers of Native staff. Those which serve primarily Native clientele (eg child welfare agencies, inner city agencies) should implement training and hiring procedures to bring their Native staffing to a majority within a specified time.

- that companies receiving Provincial government contracts be required to hire an appropriate number of Native staff, as is the case with companies having Federal contracts.

- that all organizations serving Native people, both Native and non-Native, ensure that their clientele understand the importance of accurate statistical information on urban aboriginal people being collected in the 1991 census. It is generally believed that existing figures are a major underestimation, due to the reluctance of many Native people to identify their ethnic origins.

- that the City of Edmonton follow through on plans to create an Aboriginal Affairs Committee, as has existed in Calgary for a number of years.

- that significant resources be devoted to an urban integration program which can assist Native people making the transition to urban life. This program should include an outreach component whereby urban Native people could teach young Natives in rural areas the realities of urban life.

- that social service agencies (both Native and non-Native) work together to canvass the needs of Native people living in low-income neighbourhoods, and campaign for resources to meet those needs through organizations *controlled by the population being served.*

- that the University of Alberta and/or the University of Calgary (Edmonton Division) and/or Athabasca University explore seriously the possibility of delivering specialized degree programs for Native and inner city people, especially in the fields of education and social work. One of the major excuses used by employers in not hiring aboriginal people is that their level of training is below that of other applicants. A special downtown campus devoted to serving this need has been operating for a number of years in Winnipeg.