

Profile and Perspectives on Poverty in Edmonton

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INTRODUCTION

Periodically our society rediscovers poverty. When we do our attitudes towards the poor generally reassure us that poverty is really the result of individual shortcomings and that our collective responsibility is quite limited. When we see poverty in our midst, we reassure ourselves that there is a comprehensive safety net of income security benefits and community agencies that will always be there to relieve the worst of the financial hardships that the poor must face. When poverty makes its reappearance, we feel reassured by our provincial governments officially prescribed optimism that 'we are poised for years of steady growth and job security'. We learn that just a gentle massage to the province's economy and another round of tax concessions to major companies will once again see unemployment and poverty drop to insignificant levels.

In the past few years, many of us in this community have again rediscovered poverty. But this time I am optimistic that our responses will be different. We have begun to question our well worn assumptions about the causes of poverty and the plight of the poor. We have begun to openly challenge the economic and social prescriptions offered by our governments. We have begun to educate ourselves about the extent of poverty in our city and its many damaging manifestations. We have begun the long process of seeking change in our public policies and our community attitudes so that the lives of those who live day by day with the cruel uncertainties of poverty might be improved.

As we begin this important workshop on Poverty and the Schools, I see it as my responsibility to contribute to our collective questioning, challenging, educating and changing. How accurate are our perceptions of poverty and the poor? What do we understand about the impact of unemployment and poverty on families and communities in Edmonton? How appropriate are our current responses to poverty in Edmonton? What is the profile of poverty in this city; especially for our families and our children? Finally, what actions must we as a community of the concerned be prepared to take if we are to deal effectively with the problem of poverty in our midst?

OUR PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY

It has been suggested that the most important things that we can ever learn about any society are the things that it tends to take for granted. We tend to take poverty and unemployment for granted because the assumptions we make about those who are poor or unemployed help us to explain away the condition. Why is it

when the evidence of the damaging consequences of poverty and unemployment to our families and our communities continues to mount that our attitudes as a society seem to become even harsher? In the words of Martin Rein, the iron law of welfare comes into play; so that those who need help the most do in fact receive the least.

So what are these assumptions about poverty that we have to be prepared to question? Poverty is a manifestation of individual failure. We must all be responsible for our own welfare for to do otherwise would be to weaken individual initiative and make us a burden on the rest of society. If we replace our individual responsibility with a network of publicly funded and operated human services we will simply reward improvidence and encourage laziness. Governments do have a role, but only a very residual one. First call must be on our own resources and those of our family. Then we may call upon the community for help if our own resources are not sufficient. While we all recognise that we do have individual choices to make it is nevertheless abundantly clear that the increases in unemployment that we have seen in the last few years have not been the result of personal inadequacy. The greatest majority of those who have lost their jobs did so because of corporate and business decisions that were quite beyond their control. Yet we persistently reinforce the notion that our unemployed are in their predicament because of some individual failing. Consequently we in turn propose solutions to the problem of unemployment and poverty, such as introducing cuts in already inadequate welfare benefits because of our unchallenged belief that this will somehow restore individual responsibility. Not only are these solutions likely to prove ineffective in responding to the needs of the poor, they are in fact likely to be detrimental and actually increase human suffering. As part of a community response to welfare cutbacks in 1983 a single mother with three children commented:

"The actions of the provincial government make me wonder if I might be cut off completely one day. It is scary to know they don't care about those of us who are living in poverty. I now feel more put down than ever before and it will just make it so much harder to work towards becoming independent sometime in the future."

The second critical assumption, that is obviously linked to the first, is that the poor and the unemployed do not really want to work. We would like to believe that they prefer to remain dependent upon unemployment insurance and welfare. Of course should we ever raise the level of welfare benefits any will they had to work like the rest of us would be completely destroyed.

Again we assume that the fault lies not with society but with the individuals themselves. Studies that have been carried out on the question of the willingness to work of the poor and the unemployed have demonstrated time and time again that they do indeed want to work, that their incentive to work is not destroyed by the receipt of benefits and that whatever changes occur in their attitudes towards work are the consequence of being poor and unemployed and certainly not the cause.

This attitude about the unwillingness of the unemployed and the poor to work also feeds a further obsession. That is the argument that the poor will do all they can to cheat on welfare. The stories about the limited abuse that does exist become exaggerated with every telling and quickly enter the realm of urban myths. Benefit systems and their ministers rush to reassure we taxpayers that they intend to increase their vigilance so that our dollars will not be squandered. Almost invariably when abuse is investigated it is found that the problem lies much more with inappropriate discretionary judgements, poor policies or administrative error. Because of our societal obsession with abuse we take a much more serious view of it than we do tax evasion.

In examining the impact of these assumptions it is important to acknowledge that poverty is not a thing a part. It is, in fact, a condition created by an affluent society which believes that a certain level of poverty is acceptable, and even necessary, if the rest of us are to continue to enjoy our present standard of living.

THE IMPACT OF UNEMPLOYMENT AND POVERTY

Although we often reassure ourselves that there is a comprehensive safety net of unemployment insurance and welfare to relieve the worst of the financial hardships, there is little doubt that it is the rising levels of employment which have been the direct cause of the alarming increase in family poverty in this province over the past five years. The financial hardship which accompanies unemployment is clearly the major source of distress for the unemployed and their families. However, it must be remembered that work is among the most pervasive of human activities. Consequently, besides the loss of a paycheque, unemployment can bring with it the abandonment of ambition and purpose, the destruction of self worth and accomplishment, the loss of social participation and contribution and the constriction of one's self and family image. Work is therefore the critical link between the family and the larger system. While we may be spending a lot of effort in strengthening family life, we have often failed to appreciate the connection between occupational status, job satisfaction and family stability. The evidence is now quite convincing that decent employment opportunities and adequate incomes are necessary preconditions for achieving family stability.

Not surprisingly the ability to cope with the psychological stress of joblessness will vary from one individual, or one family, to another. However, generally speaking the more prolonged the period of unemployment the more damaging are the effects on the well being of all concerned. It has also been demonstrated that the degree of stress experienced by a family where the male breadwinner is looking for work will depend very much upon the particular stage of the family cycle that they happen to be in. For

example, a young family is much more likely to be less stable economically and perhaps more fragile in terms of relationships and as a result the stress brought on by a prolonged period of unemployment can lead to the total collapse of a once stable marriage. However, the most critical mediating factor in coping with unemployment is the extent to which an unemployed person's need for affection, esteem and approval are met through a social support network of family and friends.

It is also evident that for some families, at least in the short term being without work can lead to an enrichment of their lives, with increasing time together, additional opportunities to follow up particular interests and improved cohesion as they rally together to respond to the stresses and strains of unemployment. However, for the majority of families, the loss of a job brings with it severe economic and psychological tensions which will inevitably threaten the stability and well being of the family and its members.

So what then are these tensions that can destroy a family? A basic assumption is that families are responsible for supporting themselves through work, in order to enable them to purchase necessary goods and services. Unemployment disrupts this important economic function, particularly for families headed by a single parent or those for whom unemployment is a frequent visitor. The loss of a stable and sufficient income leaves families to suspend or give up such family goals as home ownership, higher education for children or retirement plans. As well, families by necessity must reduce their expenditures on food, gasoline, entertainment, recreation and such necessities as dental care.

As well, the symbol of the male breadwinner and family provider remains strongly entrenched despite the major changes in sex roles that have occurred in recent years. Unemployment for a male breadwinner requires a change in role and often a critical adjustment in power relationships, authority and self image. Where the traditional views on role expectations remain strong, the loss of work can inevitably lead to strains in the marital relationship. However, research suggests that unemployment tends to reinforce the closeness or the distance that exists in a relationship before the loss of work. For those relationships that are already fragile, anxiety over finances, the loss of self esteem, the altering of family roles can begin the slide down the slippery slope to marital dissolution. Although the research evidence is rather contradictory, there is growing concern that extended periods of unemployment tend to increase the probability of divorce. In a recent study of marital complaints cited by women as reasons for their divorce, employment problems, including loss of employment, ranked in the top third of all reasons offered for marital breakdown. It is also suggested that the stresses brought on by unemployment rather than leading to the breakdown of a marriage may instead be internalized, with the result that violent behavior between family members becomes a more likely occurrence. The frustration and anger brought on by unemployment, the reorganization of family roles and status and the tension generated by increasing parent-child contact has also been shown to be linked to an increasing risk of child abuse. As a recent report from the United States commented:

“Children become the special victims of their parent’s unemployment. Serious decline in school performance, increase in child abuse and domestic violence and a worsening of parent–child relationship are all real testimony to the costs paid by unemployed families.”

As rejection letter follows rejection letter the hope becomes weaker, a sense of futility sets in and a disequilibrium appears in the family relationship. The management of the family’s financial resources becomes more problematic and every expenditure becomes a major decision and a potential source of conflict. The wife begins to look for work which fosters feelings of inadequacy in the husband because he senses that he has failed to fulfill his central duty in life – to be the family provider. A husband’s sense of demoralization may be increased if his wife manages to find a job, and new prestige, and soon he begins to project his problems onto his children and his wife. If none of the family members are working again within the next few months, domestic conflict can be intensified, with pressure from creditors, the loss of friends and a growing sense of personal failure. With the right intervention and consistent support from family members there can be a readjustment within a family and the gradual acceptance of new standards. Without this adjustment physical and mental health problems begin to appear: tension, sleeplessness, increased alcohol use, depression and irritability.

It’s here that frequently the human service worker – a doctor, a school counsellor, a psychologist, a social worker, a volunteer is brought face to face with the stark reality of unemployment. It is the middle aged man who visits your office complaining of being irritable and depressed. After initial discussion he mentions that he hopes the service you are providing is free because he is having difficulty stretching his money to pay all of his bills. It then emerges that he was laid off from his job almost nine months ago, he’s had to sell his car and now his house is on the market. He begins to talk about what a failure he’s been in life, how he’s never worked up to his expectations or those of his family. He expresses shame and anger because he feels that at this point in his life he should be able to provide an adequate living for them. In describing his life he tells how he doesn’t seem able to perform the home chores that he previously took responsibility for, he mentions that he spends most of his time watching television, eating and reading the newspaper. Oh yes, he’s been applying for jobs but with so many rejection letters he’s not sure it’s worth it to apply for any more. No, he hasn’t been back to see the personnel department of his previous employer. In fact he hasn’t seen any of his former co-workers for three or four months because he doesn’t go out much. As he talks it becomes apparent that his unemployment crisis has now become a family crisis.

What does unemployment mean to the other family members? At the beginning it meant that the woman’s routine was completely thrown off. She didn’t mind this to begin with because it was a bit like a holiday – they were spending more time together. She fully expected he would be back to work in a few weeks and in the mean time some of those jobs around the house were getting done. As the weeks rolled into months her pleasure at having him around the house has diminished; money

is now scarce, they are irritable with each other. She hasn’t followed her own routine for some months, she misses having time to herself during the day and resents him for questioning her about her day time activities. He seems to think he knows how to run the house better than she does – but he isn’t willing to share the work load. Now, instead of enjoying being together more they are fighting with each other during the day.

She will have to go back to work, even though she hasn’t had a job in over 15 years and the part-time job she will be able to get will hardly be enough to survive on once his UIC runs out. Not that she really minds having to go out to work. It is just that she will have to work hard both outside and inside the home, while he sinks further and further into a depression.

Of course, all of this tension and conflict has begun to affect the children. The teenage daughter was used to keeping up with the latest styles, buying make-up and having money to go out with her friends. She was looking forward to getting her drivers license so that she could go into town to visit her friends, without her parents. Now she isn’t allowed to buy new clothes or cosmetics, and the family car has been sold. And if that wasn’t bad enough they are always nagging her and yelling at her. It has reached the point where she doesn’t want to go home after school. She has started to stay in town after school. One of the older boys who has a car drives her home just in time for dinner. Instead of avoiding conflict, this seems to be aggravating it.

The 11 year old boy is really mad at his parents. He lives, breathes and dreams hockey. His social life in the winter is all centered around being on the hockey team. He can’t believe he won’t be allowed to play on the team this year. He doesn’t know what he has done wrong that his parents are punishing him this way. His weekends are boring and he has started to hang out with a rougher crowd. Last weekend the police brought him home. He had been caught vandalizing the community centre.

The family which used to be close, which used to enjoy life, which used to participate in the community, is now characterized by conflict, stress, isolation and poverty.

THE MEASUREMENT OF POVERTY

Fundamental to our understanding of poverty in any community, is the method we choose to measure it. As is certainly true of other aspects of our welfare policy, how we decide to measure poverty will be heavily influenced by what we as a society think of the poor and what we believe are our obligations to assist them. The two basic approaches for determining poverty are an absolute measure – that attempts to establish an objective absolute minimum that any household requires for food, clothing and shelter – and a relative measure, where poverty is defined by looking at the standard of living enjoyed by others in the community. The most widely used poverty lines in Canada are those produced by Statistics Canada. In attempting to establish a relative measure of poverty, Statistics Canada discovered that Canadian families spent an average 38.5% of their income on food, clothing and shelter. Since it was apparent that poorer families spend proportionately more of their income on these three basic necessities, a low income cut off was established at 20

percentage points above the average. This effectively has meant that the bottom 20% of those on the income ladder are generally below the low income cutoffs. In order to make their poverty lines even more relative, Statistics Canada takes into account the size of the family and the place of residence. This series of poverty lines is updated each year according to the change in the cost of living. The 1989 low income figures for Edmonton families are shown below.

Edmonton's Low Income Lines for 1989

| Family Size: | Gross income: |
|--------------|---------------|
| 1 | 12,037 |
| 2 | 15,881 |
| 3 | 21,245 |
| 4 | 24,481 |
| 5 | 28,526 |
| 6 | 31,157 |
| 7 or more | 34,294 |

It should also be noted that the income referred to is gross, rather than after tax, income and it includes all wages and salaries, investment income, as well as transfer payments such as family allowance, old age security and pensions.

Taxpayers who hear the current poverty lines are frequently given to complaining about the generosity of the Statistics Canada low income figures. Surely a family of four can live quite comfortably on \$24,481 a year, is the cry! However, in 1988, a Gallup poll asked Canadians what they considered to be "the least amount of money a family of four – husband, wife and two children needs each week to get along". The average amount was \$452 a week. By way of comparison, the average weekly poverty level for a family of four in 1988 was \$399. On an annual basis, the average poverty line income was almost \$3000 below the Gallup average minimum income identified by Canadians.

Besides questions of generosity and adequacy, there are other important concerns about establishing a low income measure for poverty. We must also appreciate when we set our demarcation line that poverty also has a depth dimension – that many households have incomes that are far below the poverty line. For example, it has been estimated that a quarter of all poor families earn less than half of the poverty line income, while another 27% fall between half and three quarters of a poverty line income. A further dimension of poverty that we must consider is the length of the poverty experience. We know from recent research on unemployment that it is the long grinding periods of low income living that bring with it the most damaging aspects of poverty.

The Statistics Canada low income lines are therefore at best a rough guide that allows us to measure the number of poor and any changes in the numbers that may have occurred over time. As well these poverty lines are used by welfare administrators as a relative guide for establishing benefits levels and by welfare advocates to demonstrate how inappropriate the established benefits levels are! What is particularly important in establishing a measure of poverty is that it must be based on the bed rock of

community standards – what a family requires to allow it to be full participating members of a community. It must never be linked to mere physical survival. In the words of Peter Townsend, one of Britain's poverty experts:

"Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong."

The setting of these community standards should ideally never be left in the hand of the so called experts but instead should be determined by the community members themselves. By way of illustration a recent study in Britain attempted to find what degree of community consensus existed with respect to various indicators that would constitute a minimum standard of living and participation. The study showed that two thirds of those surveyed agreed on eighteen indicators that were considered to be necessities. These community-based indicators included such things as:

- a damp free house
- bed for everyone in the house
- a warm waterproof coat
- three meals a day for children
- special celebrations, such as Christmas
- a hobby or leisure activity
- presents for family members once a year

Should not we, as a community, be working to establish a list of basic necessities and determining whether our social allowance payments are sufficient to cover them?

Of course we should also appreciate that our obsessive concern with the subtleties of definition and measurement are of little interest to those who are, in fact, poor. For them, living with a low income is just one aspect of the poverty package. It is not just the level of income that is important but the security and the source of that income and the expectation for improvement in one's economic circumstances that are so critical to economic well-being. Interwoven then with the poverty of income is the poverty of spirit: the social and psychological damage that results when the struggles of daily existence seem almost too much to bear, and the poverty of power, where full citizenship and freedom of choice are automatically denied.

People with persistently low incomes do not simply live scaled down versions of middle class life. They are in fact required to live markedly different lives. The paradox is that the poorer a family the more they are likely to be misunderstood, rejected and excluded by the many, yet at the same time they are dependent on the many – neighbours, employers, teachers and welfare staff. Their lives become frighteningly dependent on the kindness, the good humour, the understanding, the sense of justice and the morality of others. They become dependent on a society that is prepared to intervene in their daily lives, often without their invitation or their consent. Is it any wonder that with this state of fragile precariousness, this feeling of exclusion from ever being a contributing member of a community that the very poor often appear to adopt for themselves the very image that society

has of them?

OUR POVERTY PROFILE

In 1987 three and a half million Canadians – one in seven – were living on a low income. This number included 777,000 families, one million single people and close to a million kids. Despite these high numbers the country's poverty profile has shown gradual improvement since the peak of 1984 when over four million Canadians were living below the poverty line.

Here in Alberta the same gradual improvement is also evident: from a 1984 level of just over 100,000 poor families to a present level of 66,000. Living in these poor Albertan families are 94,000 children. Of this number 34,000 live in a single parent family headed by a woman, giving the startling poverty rate of 51% for families of this kind. By contrast Alberta's children living in two parent families are five times less likely to be living in poverty than their single parent counterparts.

It is also worth noting that a family led by someone who did not get to high school is four times more likely to be poor as one headed by a university graduate. As well, contrary to popular belief, most poor families are headed by men and women who work. In 1986 56% of low income families were headed by a person in the labour force. However, families whose head works part-time runs a five times greater risk of poverty as families led by full time workers, while families whose head was out of work in the previous year were twice as likely to be poor as those in which no member was unemployed. Occupationally it has been shown that families that are headed by workers in service industries, a heavy employer of women, have the highest risk of being poor at 20%.

When we focus our attention on our own city we quickly discover that many of these features of poverty among families and children are much in evidence. While 14% of Edmonton's families are living below the poverty line, half of our single mother headed families are in this situation. It is estimated that almost a quarter of Edmonton's children under the age of 18 (22.8%), or 41,000 are presently living within low income families. (See attached map)

When we examine Edmonton by community we find that low income families tend to be concentrated predominantly in the city's north east, with other disturbing pockets in the west end and in Millwoods. In order to take a closer look at the characteristics of our communities that have an above average number of low income families the following table examines the large concentration in Edmonton's northeast and contrasts it with Edmonton as a whole.

Edmonton's Concentration of Low Income Families

| | <u>Low Income Communities</u> ¹ | <u>Edmonton</u> |
|--------------------------------|--|-----------------|
| <i>Incidence of Low Income</i> | | |
| Families | 30% | 14% |
| Singles | 50% | 37% |
| <i>Employment</i> | | |
| Full-time males | 44% | 57% |
| Part-time males | 56% | 43% |
| Unemployed males | 14% | 9% |
| Full-time females | 42% | 42% |
| Part-time females | 58% | 58% |
| Unemployed females | 8% | 6% |
| <i>Education</i> | | |
| < Grade 9 | 22% | 10% |
| < Grade 13 | 31% | 29% |
| Incomplete University | 8% | 10% |
| Complete University | 5% | 12% |
| <i>Marital Status</i> | | |
| Singles | 30% | 22% |
| Married | 41% | 48% |
| Widows | 6% | 4% |
| Divorcees | 6% | 4% |
| <i>Families</i> | | |
| Two parents | 81% | 87% |
| Lone male parents | 4% | 2% |
| Lone female parents | 17% | 13% |
| Children < 6 years old | 30% | 29% |
| Children 6–14 years old | 30% | 37% |
| <i>Housing</i> | | |
| Owned | 35% | 57% |
| Rented | 65% | 43% |

¹ Includes the communities of McCauley/Boyle Street, Central McDougall, Queen Mary Park, Spruce Avenue, Norwood, Parkdale, Northlands, Delton, Eastwood, Alberta Avenue, Westwood, Sherbrook, Balwin, Delwood and Kennedale.

The table shows that almost a third of the families and half of all single people are living below the poverty line, that unemployment is much more prevalent and that the number of single-parent families is higher than the city average.

When we focus even further on the poorest of our communities we find that Boyle Street and McCauley present the most disturbing picture: the lowest median income in the city, the highest male unemployment, the lowest level of education, and the highest number of female headed single-parent families.

Highest Poverty Community: Boyle Street/McCauley

| | <u>Boyle Street McCauley</u> | <u>Edmonton</u> |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| <i>Employment</i> | | |
| Lowest median income | \$10,367 | \$32,440 |
| Lowest full-time male income | \$15,560 | \$33,026 |
| Lowest part-time male income | \$6,651 | \$13,733 |
| Lowest part-time female income | \$5,754 | \$8,563 |
| Highest male unemployment | 19% | 9% |
| <i>Education</i> | | |
| Lowest education < Grade 9 | 40% | 10% |
| <i>Marital Status</i> | | |
| Highest % of singles | 43% | 22% |
| Lowest % of married | 27% | 48% |
| Greatest % divorcees | 10% | 4% |
| Greatest % female lone parents | 20% | 13% |
| <i>Housing</i> | | |
| Greatest % of apartment dwellings | 44% | 7% |

TAKING ACTION

How have we responded to this human tragedy that now confronts us? What should we be able to expect from our human service workers?

It is surely a sad and bitter irony that we have for all too long remained silent about the impact of poverty when its cruel outcomes can be so vividly seen in the children and families who seek help at our doors. We must be prepared to use the evidence we have before us to demand that greater public attention be focussed on the appalling human costs of poverty. We must speak out about the mounting evidence of financial, family and health problems that will inevitably follow a prolonged period of poverty. We must be prepared to educate ourselves about the causes of poverty and the political and economic attitudes and actions that allow such a human tragedy to occur. We must become knowledgeable about the policy alternatives that are available to us as a caring humane society, and be willing to demand of our decision makers that greater recognition be given to the social consequences of our economic policies.

Above all then, we must be prepared to forego the conventional, the respectable and the expedient, and in its place be prepared to accept a role that is still at the very heart of human services. We must accept the challenge of advocacy – to work hard for

improvements in the lives of individual families while at the same time be willing to use our positions in the community to press for broader social changes. If we are all to do our part in mounting the necessary community response to this most tragic of human conditions we must all be prepared to become "partisans for the poor."

Thank you for your attention and for the opportunity to be with you on this occasion.

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[Presented to the *Workshop on Poverty and the Schools*, May 12, 1989 at the Centre for Education, Edmonton, AB]

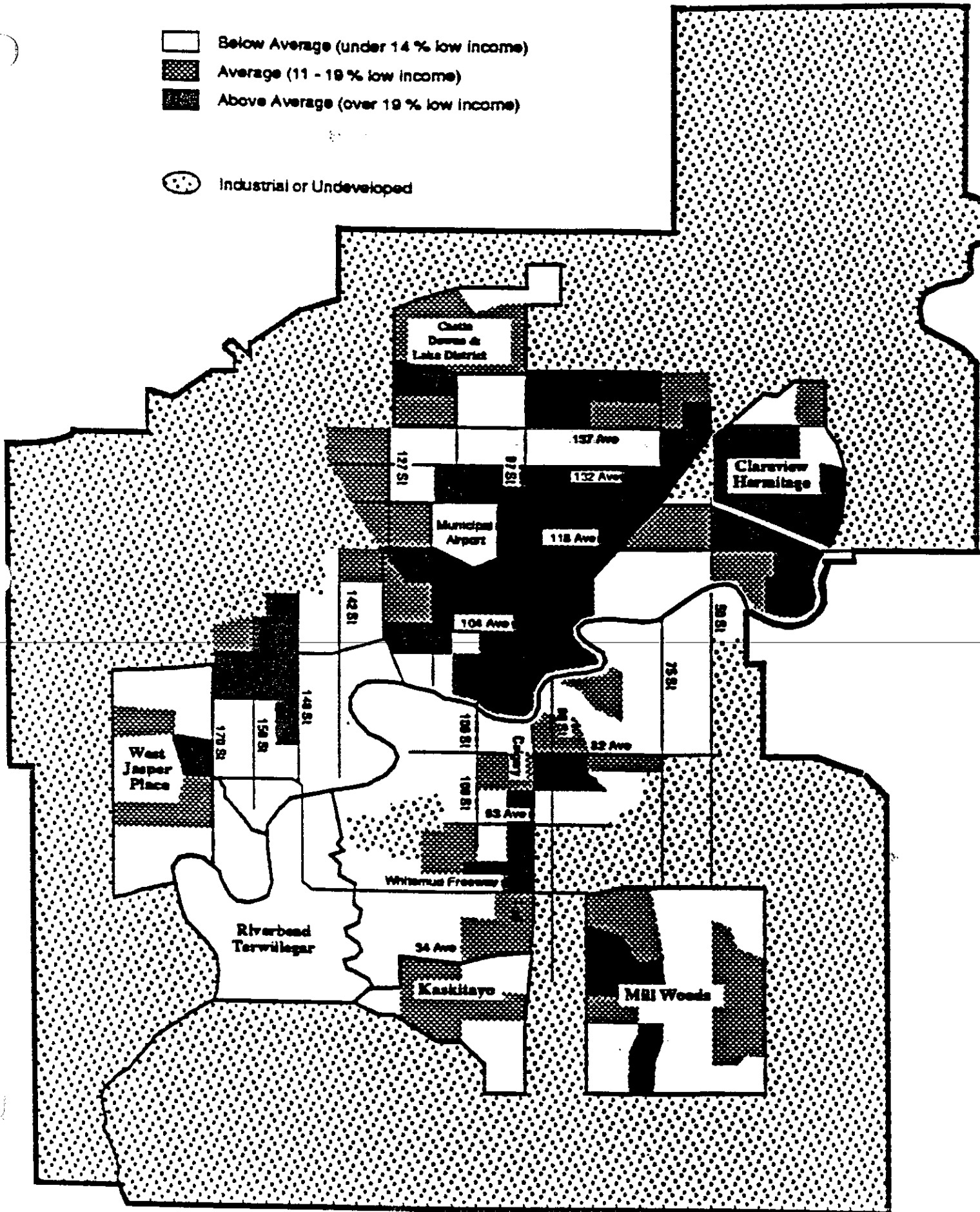
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Incidence of Low Family Income in Edmonton (1986)

-  Below Average (under 14 % low income)
-  Average (11 - 19 % low income)
-  Above Average (over 19 % low income)
-  Industrial or Undeveloped



Source: Family and Community Services and Statistics Canada, Edmonton Profile (Part 2).