In general, policy-makers’ class and gender assumptions flowed from and favoured a capitalist and patriarchal society. But, as historian Linda Gordon argues in the American context, their goals were “fragmented and inconsistent.” Most welfare policies, Gordon insists, “represent the jerry-built compromises which are the artefacts of political and social conflict.” Depression-era welfare policies were not simply imposed from above by a ruling elite and accepted without question or complaint by those below; they were compromises fashioned through complex arrangements among different interests. The character of the city relief machines was likewise influenced and directed both by policy-makers, with their “fragmented and inconsistent” goals, and by external forces, including the senior levels of government, local business interests, community groups, and the unemployed themselves.
All of these elements of urban Prairie society affected, in various ways, the functioning of the relief systems by attempting to bend them to their own advantage. Yet in the end, the city relief machines maintained considerable control over both the direction and the character of unemployment relief in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Edmonton. External forces were able to stretch and strain and bend them, but the machines’ basic features as constructed by city policy-makers remained intact.

That relief and welfare administrations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were gendered is well known. Historians like Theresa Healey, Alice Kessler-Harris, Nancy Christie, and Linda Gordon have shown how welfare policies, in particular, as well as efforts to deal with unemployment and poverty more generally, distinguished between male and female recipients. But relief systems also categorized men. The city relief machines studied here employed qualitatively different relief policies for single and married men, revealing a deeper layer of the gendered welfare system. This distinction illustrates the different ways in which policy-makers imagined the jobless man. The unemployed married man represented stability, maturity, and responsibility, and he tended to move in more or less the same circles as he had when employed. The unemployed single man, in contrast, represented shiftlessness, youthfulness, and potential danger; he was restless—riding the rods, living in makeshift jungles, or begging on back doorsteps.

These distinctions—both in how city policy-makers imagined married and single men and in how city relief policy was applied to them—are characteristic of “two-track” welfare programs, in which different welfare policies and practices are applied to different categories of recipients. According to Linda Gordon’s explanation of the two-track system in the United States from 1890 to 1935, the first track included old age pensions and unemployment insurance programs that “disproportionately serve white men” and were less stigmatizing and more generous than second-track programs. Second-track programs, made available to women and minority men, followed more closely the old British Poor Laws tradition of stigmatization and low stipends that keep “recipients below the poverty line and are not designed to allow them to
attain a respectable working-class standard of living.” Suzanne Mettler explores this effect through her analysis of unemployment insurance and aid for dependent children during the Depression in the United States. Unemployment insurance grew ever more “fortified and elevated” and eventually “became regarded as an earned ‘right.’” Aid for dependent children, primarily aimed at helping single mothers and children, in contrast, “became stigmatized as it grew to resemble the sort of ‘relief’ programs its framers had tried to avoid.” In similar ways, and as we shall see below, the relief that city relief machines offered to married men tended to be more generous and less stigmatizing than that offered to single men. Married men’s relief was explicitly set up to help them maintain their self-respect and pride. When it came to single unemployed men, the city relief machines were more concerned with the potential danger and disorder, as well as the “wasted youth,” that they represented, and the relief policies reflected this concern.

ACCESSING RELIEF: THE RESIDENCE REQUIREMENT

One of the first and most important policy problems the city relief machines had to contend with was deciding who was entitled to relief. City governments soon discovered the difficulties in determining who among the unemployed were city residents, and therefore entitled to city relief, and who were not. Ambrose Bury, a Conservative MP representing Edmonton-East and the former mayor of Edmonton, put his finger on the nub of the problem. “In the case of unemployment the chief factor is the drift of the unemployed from municipality to municipality and from province to province,” he pointed out in December 1929. “And neither the municipalities nor the provinces have any power to prevent this movement.” Bury set the migration problem squarely at the feet of the federal Liberal administration’s immigration policy of the 1920s. “So long as the immigration laws and procedure are exclusively matters of federal control and neither the provinces nor the municipalities have any power over the volume or quality of the tide
of immigration coming into the country and no power over the movements of immigrants once they are in the country,” he charged, “it is in my judgement illogical unreasonable and dead against facts to say the matter is entirely one for the municipalities and provinces.”

In order to deal with the problem, Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg, collaborating with their respective provinces, insisted on a residence requirement. Alderman Hair in Saskatoon, speaking to the Lion’s Club in late 1929, asserted that the city would not consider as a resident anyone who had been in the city less than six months. Shortly thereafter, with the Depression growing worse and the relief applications increasing, Edmonton and Winnipeg lengthened their residence requirements to one year. In establishing residence requirements, city relief policy-makers were drawing on a history of relief practice going back at least as far as the first Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1601. At that time, England introduced a parish-based relief system supported by public taxes to deal with the extreme poverty in some quarters. The Poor Law commissioners believed that establishing residence in the parish before accessing relief was crucial to maintaining the integrity of the relief system. Without a proof-of-residence requirement, nothing could stop recipients from receiving relief from several parishes at once. Such a policy was similarly critical to Depression-era cities with tight budgets and spiralling relief costs. “We cannot take care of [migrants]; we are financially unable,” Edmonton’s Mayor Douglas flatly reported to Premier John Brownlee in the spring of 1931. The hard rule was that non-residents could not expect relief in Edmonton, Saskatoon, or Winnipeg.

But a residence requirement could hardly stop unemployed migrants from seeking relief from western cities. Regardless of the strategies that city administrations used to discourage destitute families and individuals from entering their cities, the people kept coming and, more importantly, seeking relief. Responding in December 1930 to repeated complaints from Mayor Douglas about migrants, Premier Brownlee suggested that “some very drastic affidavit be drafted as to where these people have been in the last year so that action can be taken against any who falsely register as residents of the City of Edmonton.” Whatever the outcome of the premier’s suggestion, the situation had changed little
by the following summer. “Whenever the notion gets into the minds of some of these people that they are going to get something to eat,” Mayor Douglas reported in 1931, “they stick with it and become our residents mighty quick.” Migrants, he wrote, were a “national problem. It is not the fault of the City of Edmonton . . . that these people are destitute at the present time, and I am quite convinced that we have been paying for people, all last winter, that were not our charges.”

Although residence requirements did not discriminate among single or married, male or female applicants, city authorities were much more likely to encounter single male migrants than single female or family migrants. A typical case was that of a man recently arrived in Edmonton from Calgary “with no fixed abode and penniless.” The city relief office refused to support the twenty-nine-year-old, pointing out that “we meet with innumerate cases just like this.” This story was repeated on a much broader scale. In 1930, Winnipeg refused relief to some 10 percent of all single male relief applicants under its residence ruling. Early in 1931, Edmonton relief investigator Harold Gutteridge reported to the city commissioner that of a hundred single men living in boxcars at the edge of town whom he had recently interviewed, only twenty-seven could “claim some semblance of city residence.” Of these, Gutteridge wrote, “there are five men who satisfy me that they are bona fide city residents.” Edmonton’s city commissioner, David Mitchell, was convinced that “a very large percentage of single men making application for relief were not the city’s responsibility.” The city’s comptroller agreed, estimating in January 1931 that as many as “twenty percent of single men applying for relief produced residence qualifications which would not be substantiated upon investigation.” In December, Daniel Knott, the mayor of Edmonton, wrote Premier Brownlee insisting that of the twenty-four hundred single unemployed men who had congregated in the city, fully half were non-residents and therefore not his city’s responsibility. In Saskatoon, city officials faced the same problem. Residence requirements could not keep single men from migrating into the city, especially at the close of harvest season. “It is very clear,” the mayor wrote to prospective aldermen just before municipal elections in November 1930, “that single men are starting to flock into Saskatoon and
it is also very evident that there are agitators of the worst type trying to create trouble amongst the single men.”21

The approach to the much rarer migrant family was different. In Saskatoon, for instance, the provincial government agreed to pay all relief costs for migrant families that met certain provincial specifications, provided that the city administer the relief “on exactly the same conditions as your board would administer relief to a resident family similarly situated.” Saskatoon’s Civic Relief Board had “authority not only to determine the amount and kind of relief to be given to the family, but also whether any steps might be taken to get the family off relief by returning them to their place of domicile in any other way usually adopted by your board in the treatment of relief cases.”22 One family from Fish Creek, well to the northeast of Saskatoon, applied for city relief after only two months’ residence. The Civic Relief Board granted the family temporary relief while it tried to get them back to Fish Creek.23 A Cree family from the much closer municipality of Cory, located just outside the city’s western limits was, however, refused outright on the grounds that they were not city residents. A city relief investigator located the family’s tent “after considerable difficulty” and “explained through an interpreter to [them] that the City could do nothing for residents of Cory,” advising them to contact officials of that district instead.24 Edmonton likewise treated migrant families differently from migrant single men. The city relief officer reported to Mayor Knott early in 1932, “Owing to the disorganized state of the country districts where little, if any, sympathy is extended to necessitous families, they are obliged to come to the City.” Edmonton, together with the province and the federal government, paid for their relief.25 Apparently, migrants occasionally had help in making the move from one city to another. Regina, city officials in Saskatoon complained to Premier Anderson, had paid some of its own residents enough money to allow them to live in Saskatoon for six months. At the end of the six months, and much to the chagrin of Saskatoon relief officials, the newly minted Saskatoon residents applied for relief in “their” city.26

City officials in all three cities were convinced that a good number of the migrants fell into the particularly vexing category of the “foreigner.”27 How cities determined what constituted a “foreigner” was
never exactly clear, but relief policies typically attached a longer residence requirement to them than to “non-foreigners.” 28 Most cities, for example, insisted that this class of relief applicant show residence in the city for at least two years. 29 Edmonton’s mayor in 1931 had his own ideas on how to deal with the problem. “The great bulk of these fellows who are demanding food to-day are foreigners,” he pointed out to Premier John Brownlee, “and I can see no remedy for it whatever, except to deport them.” 30 The province’s Department of Municipal Affairs agreed with the mayor’s assessment. “Aliens in the Province are receiving relief on the same basis as Canadians;” one department member wrote in a memo to the province’s relief committee in June 1931. Their numbers, he warned, “provide our agitators with a following making unreasonable demands on the municipal and the provincial governments. They do not hesitate to express their desire to institute Soviet rule.” The department counselled deportation. 31 Officials in Saskatoon insisted that all recent immigrants applying for city relief “sign forms agreeing to deportation before giving them relief.” 32 Manitoba’s Public Works minister informed the federal Labour minister in 1930 that Winnipeg was “carrying a very large share of the burden of the immigrants who are not established and there is probably some justification for the feeling that local authorities are already carrying too large a share of the expenditure.” 33 Winnipeg’s mayor, Ralph Webb, was already “conducting some negotiations with the Hon. Minister of Immigration looking towards some solution.” 34 Deportation was at the top of his list. All of this municipal discussion, of course, relied entirely on co-operation from the federal government, since immigration matters fell exclusively under federal jurisdiction.

Although many counselled deportation in response to the “migrant” situation, that solution carried its own problems, at least according to Saskatoon’s medical officer in charge of relief cases: “Probably all of those deported carry back to the Old Country a bad report, condemn Saskatoon, and discourage immigration. The cost of their deportation and maintenance is a small part of the damage they do, because harm from their unfavourable advertising is a great deal worse. Letters from deported persons have been received complaining of their treatment and not speaking very favourably of this country.” 35 Leaving these migrants in
the cities, however, raised other problems. In January 1930, for instance, the same medical officer noted that “immigrants form a considerable percentage of the unemployed here in winter.” Of 443 unemployed single men registered at the end of January, he pointed out, nearly half were immigrants. “This is exactly as one would expect,” he suggested. “Persons coming from foreign countries, not accustomed to our ways of living and working, and in some instances not understanding the language, are handicapped to a considerable extent, but it would appear that even after the first year a number of these men do not profit by the lessons to be learned after a year’s residence in this country.” Saskatoon’s city relief officer, Frank Rowland, agreed that foreigners behaved differently than non-foreigners. Foreigners, whom he described as “people from Central Europe and Russia,” were “not interested in farming, preferring the city life and the present form of relief.” He also pointed out that 95 percent of applicants seeking to take up land as part of a land-settlement scheme were Anglo-Saxons: only 5 percent were foreigners. Immigrants were “crowding into the city,” he warned, making Saskatoon “more or less their headquarters, especially in the winter when employment is scarce.”

While western city administrations typically refused to accept single men who migrated across city borders as legitimate relief recipients, municipal officials nevertheless often made some small emergency relief available to them. These emergency relief programs were designed to limit the amount of time that migrants spent in the cities and ultimately to hasten their departure. Migrants were given a few meal tickets and perhaps a bed for the night, and then were actively encouraged to leave town. In part, this was because municipal authorities were anxious about the potential threat to social order of masses of tired, hungry, and frustrated single men. “The best possible is being done to limit demands,” Edmonton’s relief officer told the city commissioner in May 1931, “while at the same time, having due regard to the peace and order of our City, which might readily become disturbed due to the large number of unemployed in the ranks of the single men, who are moving aimlessly about.”

The practice of offering limited emergency relief was not entirely limited to single men. Cities offered some small relief to single migrant
women with children, though relief departments considered them neither a family proper nor a danger to social order. One woman came to Saskatoon in October 1932, after her husband died in an accident on their farm, which was located near the rural district of Cory, just west of Saskatoon. In this case, city officials said nothing about residents of Cory being ineligible for help and instead placed her and her nine children on weekly relief. In an unusual case in November 1932, another woman, who had been living on an Alberta farm for the past year and a half, returned with her six children to Saskatoon at her own expense after her husband died. When she applied for city relief, Saskatoon’s Civic Relief Board refused her application, offering only to pay her way back to Alberta.

City relief authorities, though, were typically careful not to go too far down the road of offering some small emergency relief to unemployed migrants because it could very well have the opposite of the intended effect, actually drawing single men into the city. “If Calgary and Edmonton keep giving relief to single men, we are going to have a problem here,” Edmonton relief officer McKee confided to the city’s commissioner. “In order to protect ourselves we are no longer registering single men, but we do still provide transportation if men have a job somewhere.” Offering overly generous relief to emergency cases, moreover, sometimes raised the ire of provincial authorities. In 1935, Alberta’s superintendent of charity relief, A. A. Mackenzie, told Edmonton’s city council, “I would point out that the City granting relief to cases that are definitely a responsibility of another district makes it difficult not only for this Department but for your city relief. Allowing people to defy constituted authority creates a precedent which is used by the unemployed organizations to encourage other people to insist upon relief being given irregularly.” Alberta’s premier, John Brownlee, reminded the Edmonton city council that unemployed workers’ wages “should be kept in line with the policy of the Government and other municipalities, otherwise, it would lead to difficulties.” Just what those difficulties might be, the premier did not say, but it seems likely that Brownlee wanted to avoid situations where one municipality’s work relief wages were more generous than another’s because this would draw unemployed men seeking
work relief to the city with the highest wages. After all, two years earlier, the premier had remarked in a letter to Calgary’s mayor that “there is already a great transient movement to and fro from Province to Province which will be attracted to any centre seeming to offer special consideration.” Manitoba’s minister of Public Works offered the same warning to city officials in Winnipeg. Writing to the chairman of the Civic Unemployment Relief Committee in June 1931, the minister pointed out that “it would be very dangerous for us, in Manitoba, to adopt regulations which would be more favourable than in other parts of Canada.”

With thousands of the unemployed on city relief, some non-resident applicants inevitably succeeded in accessing relief by lying to investigators about the length of time they had been in the city. But wherever city officials found evidence of recipients who had “unlawfully obtained supplies by misrepresentation,” they took serious action, pressing criminal charges with penalties of jail time, fines, or a combination of both. In April 1931, for example, Edmonton’s relief officer informed the city council that his department had successfully prosecuted two men accused of relief fraud. One man was sentenced to three months in prison and ordered to return the $32 he had received in relief, while the other pled guilty and was sentenced to two months in jail. City officials in Winnipeg and Saskatoon were similarly concerned about fraudulent relief claims, and a good measure of their time was spent attempting to deal with the problem.

In the end, the whole migrant problem illustrated the heavy pressures put on cities by the wider concept of local responsibility, a yoke that municipalities found increasingly difficult to bear. And while organized national responses to employment management, especially the Employment Service of Canada, emphasized the movement of workers across the country, by the early 1930s, this was exactly what cities were trying to minimize. Without a national, or even provincial, system of relief (other than the movement of workers) to coordinate efforts on a much broader scale, city authorities could do little more than complain to the more senior governments, prod them into supplying more resources and cash, and continue to refuse relief to those applicants unable to satisfy their residence requirements. But how city governments
responded to migrants also revealed their primary concern that most were single men and that single men represented danger and disorder.

CATEGORIES OF RELIEF: GENDER AND MARITAL STATUS

All three cities under study here divided those potential recipients who satisfied the residence requirements into categories that they typically called married men, single men, and single women. Married men and their families were offered qualitatively different relief than single men and women. These divisions, based on sex and marital status, corresponded with and reinforced the kind of social relations policymakers wanted to promote. One class of unemployed persons entirely absent from relief policy was married women. City relief policy-makers simply assumed that married women fell under the authority and care of their husbands’ relief provision. This stands in contrast to welfare policy earlier in the century, when, according to historian Nancy Christie, women made successful claims against the state as mothers, and the general welfare state was based on a “maternalist system of public provision.”

By the Depression, however, women’s status as mothers in the eyes of the state was on the wane and was increasingly replaced by welfare policy’s concern with men as breadwinners. “Motherhood,” Christie argues, “no longer constituted an independent claim on the state.” Thereafter, women “were defined in public discourse and in concrete policies as mere dependents of men with no separate identity of their own.” This analysis accords well with how the city relief machines treated married women. Married men, however, had a duty and an obligation to look after their wives and children. “Undoubtedly, a man has a legal responsibility to take care of his family,” declared the director of Edmonton’s special relief office in 1934.

Married men’s relief typically consisted of groceries to stock their kitchen cupboards, fuel to heat their homes, rent payments to avoid evictions, and clothing for themselves and their families. Part of the reason for this effort at making their relief experience similar to their “normal”
routine was because married men represented social stability in ways that single men and women did not. Delegates to a conference on unemployment relief in Edmonton agreed with Calgary’s mayor, Andrew Davison, when he reported to Premier Brownlee in June 1931, “We are not having very much trouble so far as the married people are concerned. Most of the agitation in Calgary comes from the single men, fostered of course by some of our communistic friends.”

City relief officials soon discovered, however, that not all cases fit so easily into their categories. Married men’s obligations were taken seriously by urban administrators, but in at least one case, they did not extend so far as a deserted man’s obligation to his own child. The man had left Calgary for Saskatoon shortly after his wife left him and their son. Upon arrival, he approached the Civic Relief Board, seeking relief “so he can look after his child and not work.” The board rejected the man’s application, deciding instead that the child’s female caretaker, a certain Mrs. McCurdy, “be allowed forty-five cents per day for the care of the child and that no relief be granted to the man.” The board evidently believed that a man staying at home with his child was not appropriate. In another case that defied the city’s categories, Saskatoon’s Civic Relief Board was willing to support a man and his common-law wife as a married couple, but when the man moved in with a different woman and her child, and asked for relief for the three of them, the relief board balked. The investigator in charge of the case informed the second woman that she would get relief for herself and her child only if she left the man and went “into a home approved by the Department.” The Civic Relief Board, of course, would henceforth treat the man as single.

As we have seen, city officials viewed single unemployed men as the most troublesome. Single men from families in Saskatoon were encouraged to stay with their parents; more troublesome were single unemployed men with no family in the city. Rather than offering aid that would enable these men to support themselves in their own lodgings, city relief offices provided them with café and rooming house tickets on an emergency basis until arrangements could be made for the men to go to relief camps or to work on nearby farms. Single unemployed men were typically offered two or three meal vouchers per day, which could be
redeemed at local cafés, but this relief was limited to the winter months. Thereafter, it was assumed that single men could find work on farms. This view of single men as transients held even when single men actually had homes. In October 1932, one single man applied to Saskatoon’s Civic Relief Board seeking “fuel for cooking purposes.” The man did not own a stove but wanted the fuel to use in his landlady’s stove. The board nevertheless refused his application on the grounds that he was single. The differential treatment for single men was carried to an extreme in the case of two Edmonton men who owned their own homes and qualified only for single men’s relief. According to the United Workers’ Council, an organization working on behalf of the unemployed, their inability to pay their property taxes or to buy food forced them “to leave their homes in order to go on single relief and obtain meal tickets and bed tickets.”

While the relief offered to married men reflected the assumption that those men had homes, city relief policy related to single men was based on the supposition that they were transients who properly belonged outside the city or, at the very least, should be under provincial or federal control. By 1932, all three cities were still registering single men, but they typically forwarded the lists of registrants to the federal and provincial governments. In Edmonton, the police department assumed the job of registering unemployed single men, reflecting the anxiety that city officials felt about them. Saskatoon registered single men through the relief department and then forwarded the data “to the Provincial and Federal Governments urging immediate action for their care and maintenance.” City officials in Saskatoon took the added step of inserting a news item in newspapers “advising that no relief will be given . . . to unemployed single men as it is considered this is a Federal responsibility and requesting single men to keep away from this city.”

The city relief machines likewise treated single women differently than men, regardless of men’s marital status. Single women were, ideally, expected to find relief in the homes of their kin or in private homes as domestics. Winnipeg relief investigator Margaret Kee, for example, tried to “induce many of the unemployed girls and women to consider the work of domestic service on the farm,” but it seems that she had little luck. “There is a strange attitude towards this proposed work,” she wrote
in a letter to the assistant deputy minister of Public Works. “A spirit that appears almost defiant is shown by some. Very careful observation has led me to believe there is an undercurrent at work that is hindering the success of this work, but just what it is,” she added mysteriously, “I am not yet prepared to say.” Relief officials in Edmonton reported similar attitudes among single unemployed women. In a letter to the city’s commissioner in early September 1931, one relief officer claimed, “All women and girls applying for assistance are being sympathetically met, patiently listened to, and the best service permitted and possible extended to them.” He admitted, however, that the applicants “seem indifferent about getting jobs, fail to keep their appointments, do not turn up at places referred to, refuse to go on farms at $10 per month or even $15 per month.”

Single women had several reasons for their reluctance to take domestic farm work, one being the low pay. A young woman speculated in a letter to the editor of the Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, for example, that some single women refused the work because farmers were taking advantage of their vulnerable situation. “It is a shame,” the woman wrote, “the way some farmers are capitalizing [on] this unemployment situation. Just because there are girls without number looking for work, they think girls should jump at the chance to work for $5 a month and expect a girl to milk and help with work outside the house as well as do the housework.” The writer went on to describe her personal experiences on a farm. Upon arrival, she was told to look after an eighteen-month-old child, cook meals for four people, milk five cows each morning and each evening, and do all the churning and separating, as well as the laundry. When she left after serving one month in the home, the “lady of house” told her that “it served me right if I starved for the rest of the winter.” Another woman, “a good strong girl who came from the farm,” reported that all that farmers do is “work you to death for 5 dollars per month.” Perhaps a little too candidly, the same woman revealed that she was “going to try and play off sick so she will be able to stay in the city” and draw direct relief. Some single women who were considering domestic work feared that farmers “would not be good to them.” Others had family responsibilities in the city and could not simply pack up and go to the country. One single mother, for instance, would take work as a
domestic on a farm only if she were allowed to take her sixteen-year-old boy along, while another refused to leave her children alone in the city. Another possible reason for the women’s rejection of farm work, according to a former chambermaid, was the hard work involved. She declared that she would not “split wood, carry water and scrub floors.”

ON THE DOLE: DETAILS OF URBAN RELIEF DELIVERY

Although the development of urban relief machinery was an ongoing process, certain general features emerged early and remained fairly consistent into the early 1930s. These features reveal the different ways in which officials in each city negotiated the sometimes rocky and complicated terrain of relief delivery and administration.

Clothing Distribution

Clothing was clearly an important relief item, not only because of the cold winter months on the Canadian prairies but also because people on relief typically could not afford to replace worn-out garments. Each of the three cities had its own means of distributing clothing among the unemployed. In Edmonton, the job was performed by the Special Relief Department, which, in the early 1930s, expended more than $60,000 on relief clothing. Recipients in need of clothing visited the department’s clothing bureau carrying with them a voucher obtained from the department offices for specific items. The bureau was staffed by four people—a woman in charge of recording distribution, two men unpacking goods and filling applications for clothing, and one man attending to invoices, pricing, and inventory. Bureau staff checked each voucher for specific items of clothing against the applicant’s previous record “so that the depot knows just what has been received by the relief case in the past,” and then attempted to redeem the voucher. Although it seemed a simple process, it was sometimes chaotic. “We have hundreds of calls from mothers and children who
are continually requesting shoes, stockings, underwear, dresses, and boys’ shirts,” Carl Berg, the bureau’s director, informed the mayor of Edmonton, Daniel Knott, in June 1932. “Last Saturday . . . our place was completely filled with women and children who were clamouring for clothing.” Children, the director explained, were “going to school with practically nothing on their feet and dresses and overalls which are all rags.” The children’s mothers had mended the family’s clothes as best they could, but at some point, mending could no longer save old clothes. Married men on relief were also in dire straits, the director noted, with some having “no other clothing to work in than their only suit . . . when they accept a job to go out into a ditch or similar labor. Such men should at least be given a pair of overalls and a working shirt.”

The situation had become so desperate by the following winter that Edmonton’s United Workers’ Council demanded that “the place be closed down and applicants be given orders on stores for their requirements” because applicants were not able to get the clothes they required at the bureau. Meanwhile, Saskatoon’s clothing depot, which was run by volunteers, relied entirely on donations of clothing and otherwise provided only shoe repair and tailoring services. This saved the city a good deal on relief costs; Saskatoon spent on average only $3,000 per year in the period from 1930 to 1932.

The Greater Winnipeg Welfare Association, also a volunteer-run organization, handled Winnipeg’s clothing issues until 1932. Thereafter, as a result of complaints from both unemployed recipients and the city council over how the association purchased and distributed clothing, Winnipeg’s Civic Unemployment Relief Committee (CURC) managed its operation. The change offered several advantages to the city administration. For one thing, the CURC was better equipped to make cheaper bulk purchases, buying all clothing through the “Provincial Government Purchasing Bureau directly from factories and wholesalers.” For another, it was no longer necessary for city officials to supervise the voluntary Welfare Association; instead, they directed clothing distribution through the city’s central offices. This meant that city authorities determined the requirements of recipients by sending their own investigators to their homes. As for quality, the CURC insisted that it could “give good
serviceable garments of a class which would ordinarily be bought by working people.”

The change from the Welfare Association to the CURC, however, made some city business owners wary. The Northern Shirt Company wrote to provincial officials one day after Winnipeg’s city council voted to set clothing relief in the hands of the CURC. “The Greater Winnipeg Welfare Association has been a heavy purchaser at competitive prices of goods produced by Winnipeg workmen in Winnipeg factories,” the company’s president wrote W. R. Clubb, the minister of Public Works. That arrangement, he reminded the minister, furnished “employment for many men who otherwise would be obliged to call upon the City and the Province for relief.” The company’s president hoped that the transfer of responsibility “will not result in any change in policy but that Winnipeg workmen, will still be given an opportunity to supply the demand for goods required by the Unemployment Relief Committee.”

Winnipeg retailers had similar business-related concerns, but theirs were about distribution, not production. Clothing distribution through a central office, they argued, hurt relief recipients, the city, and, of course, the retailers. If clothing and shoes were supplied through regular channels of trade, recipients “will not have to walk five miles or more to a Relief Depot,” where they would be handed a suit of clothes or a pair of shoes “by some office man who has no experience.” Instead, they would be able to “walk to the nearest clothing store or shoe store and be fitted by an expert shoe man or clothier who will hold himself responsible for the fitting to the recipient of Relief and for the wear to the Relief Department.” Furthermore, the city “will have a better check if anything goes wrong with the shoes or with the clothing simply because they will deal with each section separately.” The city would also benefit in receiving taxes from the retailers, who had been “finding it very difficult to carry on and pay their share of business tax to the city.” Finally, relief business would not only benefit the retailers themselves but would also prevent a “further lay off of help particularly during the months of January and February.”

Footwear was an important element of relief clothing distribution, and much like shirts and pants, sweaters and coats, the methods
of distributing shoes and boots concerned local business interests. On 16 December 1932, Edmonton businessman F. S. Wright alerted the city commissioner to the private sector’s future prospects should municipal officials continue to operate a shoe repair shop out of the unemployment relief office. “I visualize a time in the near future,” he warned, “when these officials, will also, in the ‘cause’ of economy go into other lines of business with the result that there will be no business at all excepting municipal and government business—everyone will be on relief.”

However exaggerated his prediction, Wright nevertheless exposed some of the more paradoxical features of the city’s increasingly active role in the delivery of relief services to Depression-era unemployed workers. First, as municipal involvement increased, so too did the tendency of some local entrepreneurs and industries to experience the city not as regulator or administrator, or even as booster of private enterprise, but rather as competitor for the limited local business. The introduction to the shoe repair business of so formidable a competitor as the city, with its use of relief workers who were paid in kind and its steady stream of relief “customers” receiving free services, certainly undermined private shoe repair businesses. Indeed, between January and November 1932, the City of Edmonton’s shoe repair shop handled more than eleven thousand pairs of shoes, making no small dent in the local industry.

But, despite Wright’s complaint, it made little economic sense for the city to leave shoe repair services to private operators, at least according to the city’s chief engineer. After all, he argued in reply to Wright’s letter, doing so would merely force the unemployed shoemakers working in the city’s shop to find other relief work or else go on the dole, while at the same time necessitating cash payments to private sector shoe repair shops for their services to the unemployed. In the end, such a move would do little more than shift the unemployment problem from here to there without fundamentally ameliorating it. Furthermore, he continued, it was doubtful that private shoe repair shops lost much business to the city’s operation. Paying from their own pockets for private sector shoe repair was probably not a high priority for unemployed men, given their already tight (or non-existent) budgets and lack of visible working prospects. But although such arguments may have made good economic
sense to the city, they offered little to the many shoe repair businesses struggling with the same depressed conditions affecting unemployed workers and their families.

**Housing and Food Relief: Married Men and Their Families**

In addition to clothing, provisions for food and shelter became a municipal responsibility. Whereas single women, either with or without children, were expected to rely on their kin to fulfill these needs or to find work as domestics, unemployed men received relief from the city in which they lived. Here again, policies guiding relief distribution differed according to marital status.

Unemployed married men could apply for relief to pay the rent, but the amounts offered varied considerably: some city relief authorities calculated twenty dollars per month, for example, while others believed that ten was sufficient. Until the spring of 1932, the City of Saskatoon paid only a single month’s rent, and only if the tenant had been evicted. Not surprisingly, this was entirely unsatisfactory to some landlords. In May of that year, a delegation of landlords visited city council seeking a more expansive policy. “In many instances,” they complained, “unemployed had occupied residences for months without contributing one cent.” As a solution to this problem, the delegation suggested that the city ask the provincial and federal governments to contribute two-thirds of the cost of rent for qualified cases, with the city paying the balance. In Edmonton, those in need of rent money applied to the Special Relief Department, which consisted of three staff members dedicated to processing rent requests. The staff processed each application and then decided whether to accept it based on an examination of the applicant’s history card. If the application was approved, rent was paid to the applicant’s landlord directly. If it was rejected, unemployed families had little choice but to find some other way to avoid eviction. When one man learned that his household effects were to be seized for arrears of rent, he “moved them from the place of seizure” in order to protect them and subsequently faced a charge of theft.

As for food relief, married men and their families obtained groceries either from retail stores, using vouchers, or from central city-run
stores. Of the three cities, only Saskatoon experimented with the idea of a central relief store. Opening in June 1932, it was an attempt to centralize and make more efficient the distribution of food among family relief recipients. Before the introduction of the new central store, relief recipients had received vouchers that they could exchange for thirty-three specified goods at any city grocery store. At a council meeting in late March 1932, city councillors discussed abandoning the open voucher system and adopting the central store. Those in favour (only one alderman disagreed) pointed out that under the current system, considerable substitution in food items was taking place, in addition to which most of the business was going to “two or three large stores” rather than to smaller grocers. One alderman further noted that the city might save money by inconveniencing relief recipients. “If the store were centrally located,” Alderman Crimp suggested, “and the adult members of the family were obliged to go to the stores [of goods] and get the groceries, a lot of them might soon be buying their own.”

Switching to a central city-run store system did allow the municipal government significant savings. Buying bulk from wholesalers, rather than issuing vouchers redeemable at city grocery stores, enabled the city to acquire large quantities of food at bargain prices. Moreover, the relief store allowed the city to confine relief groceries “to certain items of high food value” and to ensure that store attendants could easily explain to recipients any changes to the relief diet prescribed by the city. Ostensibly, trained dieticians could scientifically determine the precise proportions of specific foods required to keep a family healthy, while at the same time keeping a close eye on costs. Municipal officials were thus able to exert substantial control over the foods available to unemployed families. At the same time, while the central relief store supposedly ensured that unemployed families ate a healthy diet and did not splurge on foods that were neither essential nor nutritious, such municipal involvement implied that recipients could not be trusted to make responsible decisions on their own.

Many of Saskatoon’s storekeepers were unhappy about the city’s relief store. Some merchants lost much of the relief business they had enjoyed prior to the store’s opening, when the relief orders on which
they had counted simply stopped. “The Civic Relief Store is not in the best interest of the taxpayers and citizens in general, nor is it fair or equitable to those engaged in the lines of businesses covered by the operation of the Store,” Saskatoon’s West Side Business Men’s Association complained in 1934. “Any saving made is more than offset by the damage occasioned business interests of the city and the consequent loss of revenue in licenses and taxes, which will be more than ever apparent this year.” Some storekeepers estimated that over the course of just one week, they lost nearly $5,000 worth of grocery-related business to the city’s relief store. Merchants also complained that “the relief store was instrumental in . . . losing contact with some of their former customers,” severing the long-standing customer relations on which they relied.

But the original voucher system had had its own set of problems with respect to customer relations. Unlike cash, grocery vouchers limited customers to specific food items. Voucher holders could not substitute one item for another even when both items were of equal value. Some relief shoppers may have had sufficient (and maybe free) access to butter, milk, and eggs from family or friends living on nearby farms but needed goods such as coffee or sugar. Relief vouchers would not allow relief shoppers to exchange their butter, milk, or egg allotment for items not on the city’s list. Clearly frustrating to recipients, the inflexibility of relief vouchers thus set up potentially damaging customer-relations situations for storekeepers. Merchants “cannot afford to refuse requests for substitutions,” the Civic Relief Board reported in 1932, “as the applicant may have been a good customer of theirs for years and probably will be again when he gets back to work.” For some storekeepers, then, the risk of alienating their long-time customers prompted them to allow substitutions despite the voucher system rules.

In addition to dissatisfied relief recipients and the ambivalent merchant response to the relief store, municipal officials in Saskatoon had to contend with provincial government strictures. In 1933, Thomas Molloy, the Saskatchewan deputy minister of Railways, Labour, and Industries, advised the city of new federal and provincial policies dictating that all relief purchases “should be through the regular channels of trade and that wherever possible Canadian goods should be purchased
in preference to those from foreign countries.” These policies resulted from “pressure . . . brought upon the Governments by the Western Cattle Dealers’ Association and the Milk Producers’ Association.” 88 The source of beef and dairy products for Saskatoon’s central relief store is not known, but the province’s directive suggests that the city was not limiting its bulk purchases to local or even national products. Like most industries, the Depression hit cattle and dairy producers hard. In the cattle industry, the economic slump hindered sales that had already been in steady decline since at least the early 1920s. The situation went from bad to worse as cattle producers had to contend with new American protectionist tariffs, especially after July 1930, when President Herbert Hoover imposed a 30 percent levy on live cattle imported into the United States. Throughout the 1920s, cattle producers had been exporting 90 percent of their live cattle stock to the United States. The tariff’s effects were disastrous. In 1929, 160,000 cattle shipments left Canada for the United States; by 1931, that number had dropped to a paltry 10,000. 89 The combined effects of the Depression’s onset and the Smoot-Hawley tariff similarly threatened the Canadian dairy industry. Between 1920 and 1932, the price of Canadian butter fell from just under fifty-seven cents a pound to less than twenty cents a pound. After the 1930 American tariff took effect, duties on fresh milk increased from zero to three cents a gallon, and on cream, from zero to nearly fifty-seven cents a gallon. 90

Given the all-but-closed American market on which cattle and dairy producers had relied through the 1920s, it is not surprising that they turned their attention homeward after 1930. The emerging relief machines in western Canadian cities seemed an obvious market and a potential saviour from economic ruin. After Saskatoon opened its relief store in 1932, the city spent an average of more than $800 on meat and $1,000 on dairy products in a typical week. 91 With orders as large as these, it is not difficult to see why the cattle and dairy producers were so interested in the local market. Provincial meddling in Saskatoon’s relief purchasing practices, however, was not in the city’s financial interest. Forcing the city to purchase Canadian goods whenever possible effectively barred Saskatoon officials from hunting out bargains south of the border.
Like local businesses, relief recipients also had problems with the relief store. Many were forced to travel greater distances and thus to spend more time getting groceries than they had previously using the voucher system, which had allowed them to shop at their local store. Travel to and from the central store with little transportation but their own two feet was no easy task for many of the unemployed, particularly for those who lived across town from the store. Saskatoon’s icy prairie winters made the trek even more onerous for nearly half the year. When the Saskatoon Trades and Labor Council brought up the issue with city officials, seeking “free street railway transportation from the relief store to enable recipients of relief to get their goods home,” the Civic Relief Board answered that the relief store would parcel recipients’ goods into several packages, apparently making them easier to carry home, and would allow recipients to leave some goods at the store for pickup the following day. Relief recipients also complained about the poor quality of the store’s products, as well as the diet list’s inflexibility when it came to making substitutions. One woman complained that her family’s relief diet did not include enough butter, a commodity that her husband needed in greater quantities to sustain his strength while he worked on one of the city’s work relief programs. After comparison shopping, moreover, some recipients claimed that prices at the relief store were higher than those charged by retail stores.

Neither Edmonton nor Winnipeg operated a central relief store, and city storekeepers and married relief recipients alike seemed content with those cities’ grocery distribution policies. Winnipeg, for instance, used an open voucher system, allowing relief recipients to shop at any retail store in the city. As noted in a Winnipeg unemployment relief report for 1932, the result proved “satisfactory to recipients of relief as well as the merchants of the city.” But early on, Winnipeg officials identified some of the immediate problems. First, they believed that “people sought assistance who were not entitled to it.” Second, they suggested that the use of this system offered relief recipients the “opportunity for a certain amount of trafficking in coupons.” City officials, however, believed that most such problems could easily be avoided by hiring more investigators. The Edmonton relief office also issued to recipients grocery
vouchers that were redeemable at any local grocery store. To some business interests in the city, this seemed only proper. As Edmonton businessman F. S. Wright pointed out, “City relief administrators showed good business acumen in seeing that the distribution of coal, milk, and groceries go through proper channels of business operation—that is through the retailer to the relief applicant. The benefit of this procedure as regards aiding business in slack time is obvious. It has kept many of the small merchants off relief.”

Initially, Edmonton families on relief could expect four dollars’ worth of grocery vouchers and one dollar in cash each week. The city’s relief officer, H. F. McKee, implemented this policy in April 1932 so relief recipients “could exercise their own initiative in making purchases.” Although the policy proved popular among recipients, it did not survive the year. By December, federal and provincial opposition had compelled city officials to eliminate the dollar in cash; instead, recipients were to receive five dollars in grocery vouchers. Not surprisingly, the change elicited complaints from the unemployed. In mid-December, representatives of an unemployment group called the United Front Council appeared before city council demanding “immediate return of the dollar that was cut on the relief tickets.” Relief officer McKee replied that his department “was being subjected to criticism” from provincial and federal officials “in respect to the relief that was being given.” To compensate the unemployed for the loss, however, the city began providing them with a “free lot and means of growing their own vegetables.”

With regard to food distribution, Winnipeg’s relief officials believed that “in comparison with systems in force in other large cities,” theirs was “fair to the unemployed, yet sound from an economical point of view.” They admitted, though, that “the Unemployed Organizations, as is probably natural, are insistent that allowances are not sufficient.” As a direct result of those complaints, the city, together with the province, initiated an investigation into its food distribution practices. In the main, this meant sending copies of Winnipeg’s food and diet schedules to dieticians and other welfare “experts” with a view to “receiving an unbiased report from authority of the highest standing.” Almost without fail, the experts, who were from across Canada and the northern United States,
assured Winnipeg relief officials that their efforts were well justified and that their food schedules were entirely sufficient. Many also offered advice on dealing with relief recipients’ complaints. Lucy H. Gillett of New York City’s Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor was among those who suggested educating families about food preparation and nutrition:

We find—as you say is true in Winnipeg—many who feel our allowances are insufficient, but trained nutritionists who go into the homes always find the complaints arise because the quantities of various foods provided differ from those to which families have been accustomed and they do not know how to plan meals for them. In the majority of the cases, our educational workers are successful in showing them how to make satisfactory adjustments in food habits. Usually the health of the family improves and when this happens its members are convinced that they can live on a diet that differs from that to which they have been accustomed.  

Montréal’s Child Welfare Association concurred with this advice, asking Winnipeg relief officials whether they were providing education about food choices and preparation: “From our past two years’ experience, we have found that an adequate supply is only half the problem. This allowance must be accompanied by individual instruction in the homes by public health nurses, social workers, or nutritionists.”  

Most correspondents likewise approved of Winnipeg’s voucher system as opposed to central relief stores. Marjorie Bell, director of Toronto’s Visiting Housekeepers Association, commended Winnipeg relief officers on their voucher system, considering it “much more satisfactory than the central depot or warehouse. The latter diverts trade from natural channels, gives undue publicity to recipients of relief and entails long distance travel with supplies by clients, who are quite often unfit physically for the task.”  

Determining the quantity of food that families on relief should receive entailed keeping abreast of food prices. To that end, relief officials periodically dispatched a committee of women to “actually buy
the supplies.” In addition, the Civic Unemployment Relief Committee enlisted the services of five “experienced and reliable women … to obtain frank opinion from the housewives of recipients of relief as to the adequacy or otherwise of the schedule.” Upon completion of their task, the five women reported that some housewives were “just able to manage” but that more than half of the total 2,447 families visited had stated that the food allotments were “sufficient for their family requirements.”

How did the relief diet affect the recipients’ health? Edmonton officials dispatched a Dr. Whitelaw to investigate this matter. In January 1933, he reported:

I have been on the whole very agreeably surprised to find that there have been so few cases where it would be fair to say malnutrition exists. On the other hand I have found the great majority happy, healthy, and vigorous to a greater degree than might have been expected. Despite the Depression now existing it would appear from health reports that the general health reports of the community throughout our province and dominion is even more favourable than it has been during the periods of prosperity in past years. This may be due to a plainer, more sensible even if somewhat restricted diet made necessary or unavoidable because of the prevailing economic depression.

A provincial relief investigation committee came to similar conclusions five years later. In December 1938, the committee reported to the province, “Some of the officials consulted went so far as to say that there was less malnutrition among children of relief recipients than among children whose parents were in a position to buy them large quantities of processed articles of doubtful food value.”

**Housing and Food Relief: Single Men**

Food and shelter relief for single men was distinctly different from that for married men and their families. Rather than issuing vouchers redeemable at grocery stores or providing rent payments, municipal
officials distributed to single men meal and bed tickets redeemable at local cafés and hotels. By January 1931, approximately one thousand single men were assembling each morning at Edmonton’s relief offices to receive meal and bed tickets. Afternoons were given to reviewing and accepting new applications for single men’s relief. In order to reduce situations that relief officials believed might promote disorder, the city devised “a scheme . . . whereby an entire change of rooming houses takes place once a week and so far has been productive of the results anticipated—no complaints.”

This strategy went some direction in aiding café and hotel owners as well. “So far a fairly equal distribution of services has been extended throughout the city,” Superintendent T. S. Magee of the Civic Relief Department reported to the city commissioner in January 1931. “The reason for using so many [businesses] is we feel people in business . . . are passing through a period of depression while having to take care of rent, licenses, etc. [and] are entitled to participate.”

In addition to compelling single men to move to a different rooming house every week, Edmonton’s relief authorities distributed the men throughout the city to reduce the possibility of subversive activities. “It prevents large numbers of men congregating at a given place,” the relief officer explained, “as we realize segregation as far as possible is beneficial to the department in handling our problems.” Presumably, Superintendent Magee wanted to avoid the potential problems that might flow from several hundred men taking their meals together and talking about his department’s shortcomings, or worse, organizing some sort of collective activity against the state. With more than three thousand single men on city relief in mid-January 1931, it is perhaps not surprising that Magee harboured serious concerns about possible situations where the men could congregate.

In Edmonton, unemployed single men could expect two meals per day and a bed at one the city’s many hotels. A typical ticket promised two fried eggs or hot cakes, one cup of coffee, bread and butter, and fried potatoes for the first meal, and a choice of four meats (liver, hamburger, whitefish, or sausage) with bread and butter, one cup of coffee or tea, and potatoes for the second. The ticket also carried the name
of the establishment where the meals could be had and the name of the hotel where the man could lay his head that night. But cafés and hotels were not the only beneficiaries of the city’s relief distribution policies. Individuals outside the regular city retail trade also supplied the relief market with food services and accommodation for single unemployed workers. During the first three weeks of May 1931, for example, one woman served Edmonton’s single unemployed more than seventy-one thousand bowls of porridge at a cost of one cent each. She billed the city accordingly. Similarly, a Mrs. Golden, proprietress of the Golden Community Mission, kept ten men and served meals for one hundred, all billed to the city. Edmonton citizens who ran boarding houses for single unemployed men received from the city ten cents per man per day, but while this income went some way toward paying city taxes and utilities, it was never enough. Boarding house operators compensated by trying to increase their share of the boarding house market. The city’s medical officer of health alerted the city commissioner to the full implications of the problem in March 1933: “Operators cannot operate at this price and so they squeeze many more lodgers than are allowed by law.”

Unfortunately for the single unemployed, cities could not sustain the practice of supplying them with a bed and two square meals each day for long. During the first few years of the Depression, for example, city officials ceased registering single men after April 30, fully expecting the men to “shift for themselves” through the summer months. The cities would then reinstate the meal and bed scheme through the winter. The general spring cut-off, however, had to be flexible enough to accommodate what the cities considered emergency cases. In late May 1931, for example, Edmonton relief officials felt “obliged . . . to provide sleeping accommodation . . . for thirty-five men” and to issue four meal tickets each to some one hundred men. The city relief officer, however, was aware of the emergency relief’s implications. “This service we fear will have an ever widening scope,” he pointed out to Edmonton’s city commissioner on 21 May 1931, “and may in the near future bring back many of those cut off on April 30.” Within one week, his fears were realized: by 27 May, the city was providing emergency accommodation for 254 men, and delegations from both the United Empire Loyalists Association and
the National Unemployed Workers Association were demanding equal
treatment for their members. 119

Similar problems cropped up the following spring, and by August
1932, the city, together with federal officials, was quietly investigating
the possibilities of mass feeding and mass accommodation schemes for
unemployed single men. In one scenario, the city would use the old fed-
eral penitentiary at the centre of town as a site for mass feeding only. In
another, it would incur some small expenditure on a new set of build-
ings at the penitentiary to house and feed the men. Yet a third possibility
was to set up a simple tent city at the exhibition grounds in Edmonton’s
north end. 120 When word of the city’s mass feeding plan finally trickled
into the local business community, it prompted fifteen Edmonton café
owners to issue a formal protest against the move and to call for the
maintenance of the old ticket system. The mass feeding plan, the café
owners complained, “will affect our ability to pay taxes and otherwise
carry on business.” Edmonton Mayor Daniel Knott replied to the peti-
tion by pointing out that the provincial and federal governments had
lately assumed all responsibility for the care and maintenance of unem-
ployed single men, including their mass feeding. 121 The city could do
nothing but go along with this new scheme. Still, the implicit threat
behind the café owners’ petition was probably not lost on Knott. After
all, business and property taxes were among the few forms of revenue
generation open to the city.

Some of Edmonton’s unemployed workers likewise protested the
mass feeding and housing plan. On 14 November 1932, a huge crowd met
in the city’s downtown market square to oppose the idea, noting that
“Calgary experience shows such kitchens only economize the already
meagre relief allowances of single unemployed workers” and calling
for cash payments to the single unemployed instead. 122 The Edmonton
Retail Clerks’ Association shared the sentiments of those attending the
mass meeting about the meagre relief allowances, although probably
for reasons quite different from those of the single unemployed men.
In May 1931, association representatives S. H. Williamson and James
McMillan wrote the city commissioner requesting that the city provide
more substantial food, shelter, and sleeping accommodations to single
unemployed men. More specifically, they proposed that the city offer each man at least two meals per day at no less than 12.5 cents per meal.123 Tellingly, the Edmonton Retail Trades Association cast its proposal in economic terms rather than focusing on food quantity or quality. While the association was doubtless interested in the welfare of the city’s single unemployed men, a more substantial city-funded diet would most certainly benefit the local retail trade as well.

Food and housing issues continued to bedevil city officials. In 1936, when the federal government began to wind down the Dominion relief camps, the provinces were faced with the problem of providing food and shelter for the men who had recently been released from the camps, many of whom were migrating back into the cities. In Edmonton, a delegation of seven, representing fifteen hundred unemployed single men who ate at a downtown community soup kitchen, complained to the provincial government about their situation. In addition to two meal tickets per day, the men received bed tickets worth ten cents each—but, as one man pointed out, there was “no accommodation for such things as soap or towels, no provision made for shaving and toilet necessities. . . . If a man wants a hair cut, he has to get it the best way he can.”124 As for meals, conditions verged on the intolerable. “The heat and stench in the soup kitchen is more than we can bear,” one member of the delegation declared. “One of the boys fainted on Sunday night, and the men could hardly eat their supper.” Living under such circumstances was stigmatizing, and it robbed the men of their dignity and sense of independence. “These conditions in many cases have been undermining our lives,” one of the men observed. “Our food and clothing leaves us isolated from the rest of society. There are demoralizing influences for the younger men in the kitchen.” What the men really wanted was cash “to pay for meals in a restaurant, or if we like, rent a little housekeeping room and buy our groceries.”125

A provincially appointed relief committee that was struck in early 1938 to investigate relief conditions across the province found most of the problems associated with the kitchen “unavoidable.” Among these problems were the “association of some individuals of undesirable habits” and the “accumulation during the meal of unsightly quantities of unused food, creating an ‘atmosphere’ repugnant to aesthetic sensibilities.” More
distressing to the visiting committee, however, was the kitchen’s demoralizing effects, especially on its longer-term clientele: “A tendency is gradually developed to lower the morale of those eating in the Kitchen. At first the individual finds eating at the Kitchen a necessity but objectionable. Later this objection is gradually overcome by repetition, and eating at the kitchen becomes a habit, destructive to initiative and ambition.”

Some of Edmonton’s single men found accommodation at rooming houses paid for by the city, but despite the medical officer’s warning in 1933 about overcrowded conditions, the problem remained some three years later. One unemployed man complained to provincial officials in 1936: “In one place in particular, there were eight men in a room where, according to city health regulations, it would only be allowed to

Figure 3. Unemployed single men queue for food at Edmonton’s soup kitchen, 1933. In this photograph, the kitchen appears precisely the way city officials wanted it to: clean, clear, orderly, operating with machine precision. Single unemployed men described a different kitchen in their brief appearance before the cabinet of the Alberta government in 1936. Glenbow Archives, ND-3-6523a.
hold three men.” The city, he said, was doing its best to make conditions better, but the rooming house keepers simply could not afford to maintain clean, reasonable accommodations at ten cents per man per night. The man also warned of potential health problems due to overcrowding: “Because of men on relief being compelled to sleep with other men, probably they get diseases. We have had cases like that of men having to sleep with other men who were diseased.”

In Winnipeg, unemployed single men apparently enjoyed better living conditions. On three separate occasions in early December 1932, representatives of the Winnipeg Trades and Labor Council visited the sleeping and dining quarters on Water Street, which housed eight or nine hundred men. Water Street officials permitted the council’s delegation to “inspect every phase of the serving of relief to single unemployed men,” and the council representatives were “on hand to see the first meal being served.” The breakfast meal consisted of porridge “with a fair grade of milk,” sausage or bacon, bread, butter and honey or syrup, and tea or coffee to wash it all down. Only the meat was rationed; the men could eat all they could of the rest. For the second meal, the men received soup; beef, pork, or some other type of meat; pudding; bread and butter, with jam, honey, or syrup; two kinds of vegetables; coffee or tea; and milk. According to the delegates’ report, both meals and sleeping accommodations were good.

**FINANCING RELIEF**

City relief machines relied heavily on financial contributions from higher levels of government, which typically covered one-third to one-half of the total costs associated with relief. Without that financial aid, as well as indirect financing help, the relief machinery simply could not function. The first Dominion-wide arrangement between the cities, the provinces, and Prime Minister Bennett’s new federal administration in Ottawa for funding the city relief machines emerged in September 1930. Thereafter, the federal government agreed to renew the arrangement, with various important modifications, until the end.
of Bennett’s administration in 1935. Whenever the government (federal or provincial) threatened to withdraw its financial contributions or delayed renewing the agreements, the cities responded quickly. During the spring of 1932, for example, both the provinces and the municipalities grew increasingly alarmed at word that the federal government intended to discontinue its support of urban relief schemes. “It is absolutely impossible for the province or municipalities to carry on the very heavy burden of direct relief,” Manitoba’s Premier John Bracken informed Bennett in April 1932. As the premier pointed out, Winnipeg was in an especially difficult position: direct relief was costing some $265,000 per month, an amount the city could not cover on its own.129 A year later, it was the same story. The federal government had yet to renew its 1933 legislation after it expired on 31 March. By May, provincial and municipal officials across the prairies were growing worried. “From my personal knowledge of the situation in the West,” Alberta’s Premier Brownlee informed Bennett on 9 May 1933, “I am quite convinced that the urban and rural municipalities cannot be expected to assume any larger financial obligation than was required of them under the previous agreement. As we have been obliged to ask your Government for assistance, it is equally clear that the province cannot assume any larger obligation. I feel it is therefore absolutely necessary that the Dominion Government continue for this year to make a contribution on the same basis as under the previous agreement.”130

Although the federal government promised city councils that funding for urban relief systems would be forthcoming, actually getting the money was often an arduous process. City officials relied on a variety of methods to subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) impress on senior government administrators the difficult position they were in as a result of the slow transfer of funds. These ranged from appealing to the federal government directly, to recruiting premiers and other provincial officials to intervene on their behalf, to using their “man in Ottawa,” typically a local senator or Member of Parliament. In 1931, for example, the federal government signed agreements with the Province of Alberta and the City of Edmonton to fund 50 percent of the cost of public works relief undertaken in that city, with the balance shared by the city and the province.
equally. The federal government’s portion of the cost, according to the agreement, was $200,000. Within three months, Edmonton had received less than $24,000 from Ottawa and nothing at all from the province. “Tax collection is not supplying sufficient money for current needs,” the city’s treasurer informed the city council in April 1932, “and Governments must pay money owing by them.” In this case, foot-dragging on the part of the federal and provincial governments forced the city to withhold more than $300,000 earmarked for Edmonton Public School Board salaries and wages and to direct the money instead toward the city’s general operating expenses, at least until the federal funds came through. Edmonton’s Mayor Knott immediately fired off a telegram to Senator William A. Griesbach, one of Edmonton’s “men in Ottawa,” asking him to “please influence dominion to pay what it owes. Situation serious.” The mayor then anxiously wired Alberta’s Premier Brownlee, advising him that “the city has no more credit at the bank.” In the end, after a good deal of heated communication between Edmonton and Ottawa, the federal government agreed to make good on its share. But, as MP Ambrose Bury told city council, Ottawa insisted that its share was only $127,000, not the $200,000 that Edmonton expected. The shortfall, while not devastating, certainly put a difficult strain on the city’s finances.

The proper functioning of city relief machines also relied on financing arrangements with the federal government. With their credit ratings at banks and other lending institutions growing ever more precarious through the early Depression years, cities like Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg depended on the government to underwrite or otherwise secure substantial loans on their behalf. At a 1932 conference attended by the four western premiers and the mayors of the major cities, it was agreed that “because cities and provinces cannot make necessary relief expenditures without borrowing, and because the federal government has access to low interest loans, the federal government should get loans on security of provincial treasury bills” and make more funds available to the provinces and the cities. Prime Minister Bennett, however, was not sympathetic: “The Dominion has nothing to do with debts piled up by the cities and the provinces,” he began, and went on to reiterate the federal position that the ultimate responsibility for unemployment
relief rested with the provinces and the municipalities. Saskatoon, in as dire a financial situation as any other city, secured a series of loans from the provincial government in order to carry out its relief programs. The loans rested on promissory notes signed by the city at 7 percent interest, a rate that city council considered unfair on the grounds that the “province [could] borrow money at a cheaper rate of interest than 7%.” “It is assumed,” Saskatoon’s city clerk pointedly reported to Premier Anderson, “that there is no intention on the government’s part to make a profit from the transaction.”

City administrators were also acutely aware of perceived inequalities in the distribution of municipal relief funds, and they constantly sought to correct them. Edmonton city officials, complaining in March 1930 that Calgary had taken “the lion’s share” of Alberta’s $243,000 of relief disbursement announced that spring, immediately sought authority to spend any remaining and unallocated relief funds. The cities’ dependence on senior levels of government meant that the municipalities had little bargaining power. In November 1931, the federal and provincial governments compelled city officials in Edmonton to accept their terms when it came to dealing with single men. Noting that single men were “flocking into town,” the city agreed to provide relief for the men if they had registered prior to August of that year. In return, the province and the federal government together promised to cover two-thirds of the costs of their relief. For single men arriving after August, the city would pay only 25 percent of their care, with the province paying another 25 percent and the federal government covering the balance. “It appears we must accept these terms if we are to function under the Government Scheme,” Edmonton’s relief officer, T. S. Magee, reported to the city commissioner.

The provinces, while contributing financially, were not interested in taking control over the administration of relief in the cities. In Manitoba, for instance, provincial officials noted that “the Bracken administration’s policy has been to financially and otherwise, assist municipalities in dealing with unemployment, recognizing that elected councils and officials have the necessary intimate local knowledge upon which to base the measure of relief required.” Similarly, Alberta’s
director of employment services pointed out to Edmonton’s Mayor Knott that “some of the expenditures shown on direct relief statements are beyond what might be considered reasonable assistance. We have no desire to suggest to cities what should be given, though.”

Depression-related unemployment relief policy was clearly about more than municipal efforts to reduce costs or to control what they perceived as a potentially dangerous unemployment population, although these were critical elements of policy decisions. Ultimately, relief policy was designed to protect and promote city officials’ visions of their cities and their societies. How municipal officials administered relief had tremendous implications not only for how their cities experienced the Depression but also for what the social structure of their cities would look like once the economic and social crisis ended. The preference was clearly for couples who conformed to the model of male breadwinner and female homemaker, and the way that relief recipients were categorized, as well as the associated relief distribution methods, attempted to stabilize a social structure that privileged such couples over men and women who were single. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, the realities of the Depression compelled city authorities to adapt constantly to new situations. In the end, however, while these challenges stretched and strained and bent the relief systems, the basic concepts and social norms upon which city relief machines rested remained intact.