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COMMISSION

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE STREETS AREN'T PAVED WITH GOLD?

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The global recession continues to dominate the media and with it come increasingly negative attitudes towards our migrant population, who are accused of taking everything from houses and jobs to hospital beds and benefits. People arrive in Northern Ireland every day to work, study, join family or start a new life, but what happens when the dream turns sour? Contrary to the myth that immigrants come to the UK specifically to claim benefits, the reality is that the majority are simply not entitled to even the most basic support.

Today (1 September 2009), the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission launches its report "No Home from Home: Investigating homelessness for those with no or limited recourse to public funds". The report looks at how current UK immigration law and policy can lead to poverty and homelessness among certain types of migrants. These laws limit, to varying degrees, access to employment, welfare benefits and homelessness assistance to a range of migrants including asylum seekers fleeing violence or persecution.

European law allows people from within the European Union (EU) the freedom to live and work in other EU countries. Under certain conditions such people will, after a time, be allowed to claim benefits here, just as British and Irish people have entitlements in other EU countries. However, people from the new EU accession states, for example, Poland or Lithuania, have to complete 12 months of registered uninterrupted work before being allowed the same entitlements as other European citizens. Even stricter conditions are imposed on migrants from Bulgaria and Romania.

Media coverage on the recent attacks on Roma families in Belfast focused on the apparent racism. These reports often failed to mention that these families had no entitlement to benefits or homelessness support in Northern Ireland, so with limited choices available to them, many returned to Romania.

People from non-European countries are subject to a further set of rules depending on their reason for coming to the UK. The non-European population in Northern Ireland includes the spouses of UK nationals, students, workers, asylum seekers and refugees. The law generally bars these people from claiming benefits and many are prohibited from working here and so have to fend for themselves. This goes against the international standards which the UK has agreed to abide by, including the right of every person to basic food, health and housing.

The Commission's investigation report includes case studies and interviews with people who have suffered a range of experiences including illness, injury, intimidation, exploitation, abuse or domestic violence. In each case, the individual has not been entitled to benefits or homelessness support and has had to rely entirely on friends or charity. The Commission says that human rights are for everyone regardless of nationality. The report therefore makes a number of recommendations aimed at tackling the barriers to access support within the current law. These recommendations have been made to prevent any family or individual, regardless of their nationality, from falling into destitution in Northern Ireland.

Sorcha McKenna is co-author (with Roisin Devlin) of "No Home from Home: Homelessness for those with no or limited recourse to public funds" and Investigations Worker at the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. The report is available on the Commission's website www.nihrc.org.