

## **Racist Harassment of Roma People in Belfast 2009**

In summer 2009 the whole world was made aware of the fact that 113 Roma people from Romania had been intimidated in the Lisburn Road area of South Belfast. They included vulnerable families with small children and elderly grandparents. Following threats and the breaking of windows the families were moved to the sanctuary of City Church and then to a secret location, until the Housing Executive was able to make emergency payments for flights so that families could return to Romania. Money donated to EMBRACE allowed single people to travel. Many have come back, but they had needed to reassure family back in Romania.

What disturbed many people was the fact that the victims had to flee rather than the perpetrators being stopped. The police admitted later that they had not known enough about the Roma community to understand their fears. Assistant Chief Constable Finlay said:

‘We didn't have the ability to, perhaps, reach in and understand what was going on in their lives and what their fears and apprehensions were, and perhaps we came to that slightly late.’

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/8116102.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/8116102.stm)

Denise Wright of EMBRACE later said.

‘Many of those people have made contact with me since their return, to express their thanks for all the help they received. There has also been recognition by the statutory agencies of the key contribution of the churches who were able to meet needs when public bodies were unable to, and they are looking to build working relationships to feed into existing emergency planning for the city.’

For a news account see: [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/defiance-meet-the-romanian-families-refusing-to-be-forced-out-1722458.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/defiance-meet-the-romanian-families-refusing-to-be-forced-out-1722458.html)

Perspectives on the crisis from Jolena Flett of NICEM, Linda Hutchinson of NIHE and a number of other writers, and articles on the legislative and rights implications can be found in NICEM's *Minority Rights Now!* Issue 1, December 2009.

<http://nicem.org.uk/files?category=Publications>

Conditions back in Romania

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/8143368.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/8143368.stm)

*The Situation of Roma EU Citizens Moving to and Settling in Other EU Member States 2009*

[http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/attachments/ROMA-Movement-Comparative-report\\_en.pdf](http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/attachments/ROMA-Movement-Comparative-report_en.pdf)

There was sympathy but also a great deal of misunderstanding. The airwaves were full of people stereotyping the whole Roma community in a derogatory way, or talking about people 'taking our jobs' and 'only here for the benefits'. Here are some corrective facts.

- Roma people have lived in poverty on the margins of society wherever throughout history, subject to suspicion, discrimination and largely excluded from mainstream employment.
- Many suffered slavery prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were among the groups who died in the gas chambers in the Nazi period in Europe.
- When Bulgaria and Romania (A2 countries) joined the EU, their nationals were not given the same rights to come and work here as people from other new EU countries such as Poland.
- Many of the Roma people in Belfast have come from Romania. As EU citizens they were entitled to move freely throughout the European Union but in 2009, as A2 nationals, they could usually work here legally only if they got Work Permits as highly skilled workers or if they worked as self-employed people. Since 2014 they have been free to apply for jobs like other EU citizens.
- People from other countries without full employment rights are more vulnerable to poverty and exploitation. They are also usually not entitled to most welfare benefits, access to full medical care or social housing.

### **The Good News**

The reputation of Belfast as the 'race-hate capital of Europe' was counterbalanced in the eyes of the world when the Roma families were welcomed into City Church to shelter and other people helped with food and bedding. They probably saw this as a spontaneous gesture but churches in the area already had relationships with Roma people.

- City Church already had relationships with Roma people who had been given space to worship there and families had attended community events organised there.
- Other local congregations have Roma children in their youth groups and Roma groups have had permission to use local churches for worship in the past.
- Churches elsewhere in the city have Roma members.
- Throughout the crisis all the food came from Storehouse (a project of the Vineyard Church) and donations from churches, individuals and supermarkets.