Case study of the ERGO network

Roma children in Europe

Child poverty and prevention of family separation

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1 Introduction

1.1 Description of the organization

Vzájemné soužití (Life Together) was founded in 1997 after catastrophic floods that had a disproportionate impact on the Roma of Ostrava. From that time onwards, Life Together has been trying to build up the Roma Community, organize, and support it so that the Roma can come to enjoy the same rights and opportunities as any other person in Czech Society. We have created educational and social services that are accessible to the Roma and other needy people. We have established bases within communities and have created Roma-Czech teams there to make our work meaningful and helpful, appropriate and easily accessible. We have thus been fortunate to take up hundreds of individual cases, group cases and community issues, and make them mainstream. In 1999, we established Ostrava's first free Legal and Social Advice Office. We have a full time lawyer and several teams of social workers to serve the people and influence institutions. Dignity of all and respect for each other is a cornerstone of our work. Life Together has expertise in many fields: Housing, Education, Health, Human rights, Employment. We have been involved in many field researches and studies. For example:

- 2007 UPR submission on Housing of the Roma

  https://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session1/CZ/COHRE_CZE_UPR_S1_2008_CentreonHousingRightsandEvictions_uprsubmission.pdf

- 2009 SASTIPEN survey. Health and the Roma Community, analysis of the situation in Europe Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain. The analysis of the health situation was prepared by Life Together (Vzájemné soužití) on behalf of the Czech Government Office.

  http://www.gitanos.org/upload/78/83/Health_and_the_Roma_Community.pdf

https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/zalezitosti-romske-komunity/dokumenty/Sastipen.pdf

- 2012 We worked with prof. Kevin Browne, University of Nottingham on: The Problem of Child Abandonment and its Prevention.

  https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Child%20Abandonment%20and%20Its%20Prevention%20in%20Europe.pdf

- 2014 We prepared the Shadow Report on Segregation of the Roma in Czech Education

  http://www.dare-net.eu/cms/upload/file/shadow-report-on-roma-segregation-in-education-czechrepublic-english-2014.pdf

- 2015 We prepared the Methodology for monitoring Roma national strategies for education.

  http://www.dare-net.eu/cms/upload/file/national-methodology-for-monitoring-the-plans-on-education-within-the-national-strategies-for-roma-czechrepublic-english.pdf

- 2015 Strategies and Tactics to Combat Segregation of Roma Children in Schools - Case studies from Romania, Croatia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Greece

  https://ec.europa.eu/research-roma-children/?publications/366/

  https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/cffp/documents/childabandonment/czech/brochure.pdf

We have also successfully organized demonstrations against harmful laws that sought to put unconstitutional bars on accessing housing benefits.

https://www.idnes.cz/ostrava/zpravy/petice-za-schvaleni-doplatku-na-bydleni.A150615_161515_ostrava-zpravy_jog

1.2 Research methodology and geographical scope

In this research, we draw on a sample examined within our organization, Vzájemné soužití o.p.s. (Life Together) in Ostrava, where we worked with 1,292 families and 4,522 children. This cooperation has been ongoing since 2006. Furthermore, we based our findings on our statistics dating back to 2006, indicators, questionnaire surveys, and ERGO case studies developed in 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2025.

Another part of the research was conducted using qualitative methods, namely interviews, observation, and direct field work in the families' homes; above all, we drew on the case files of the 1,292 families. These case files record social, family, and economic histories, stories of the life situations of children and parents, and the subsequent planning and support provided to resolve them. The research itself focuses predominantly on Roma families with children who find themselves in highly distressing social situations and live mostly in socially excluded localities or hostels. However, it also includes the borderlands of the former Sudetenland—mainly the Osoblaha and Bruntál regions—which lack public amenities, where people struggle to find work, and where houses are poorly maintained. Private individuals buy these properties from the state and rent out the apartments or houses at exorbitant prices, leading to severe poverty in these areas.

The research primarily focused on the Moravian-Silesian Region, specifically the areas of Ostrava and its surroundings, Karviná, Bohumín, Havířov, Horní Suchá, Orlová, Petřvald, Frýdek-Místek, Nový Jičín, Bílovec, Studénka, Opava, Budišov nad Budišovkou, and Krnov. Although we draw from a sample within the Moravian-Silesian Region, findings and available information from organizations in other regions of the Czech Republic indicate that families face identical problems, live mostly in excluded localities or hostels, and experience nearly identical challenges nationwide.

These families often demonstrate low competencies in child-rearing, education, and healthcare, while facing long-term, recurring issues—particularly in housing, finance, children's education, and access to healthcare. We consider the lack of financial literacy to be one of the most serious problems. At the same time, field experience shows that the situation of these families has not significantly improved since 2006; on the contrary, it has continued to worsen in recent years.

1.3 Socioeconomic situation of the Roma in the Czech Republic

The situation of the Roma minority in the Czech Republic remains one of the most pressing issues in post-1989 social development. The Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation Strategy 2021–2030 builds upon the strategy up to 2020, aiming to reverse negative trends in the situation of Roma people, particularly in the areas of housing, education, employment, and health.

The estimated number of Roma in the Czech Republic is between 250,000 and 300,000, with approximately half living in socially excluded localities (hereinafter referred to as "SELs") and substandard, dormitory-style housing. According to the 2015 Gabal Analysis, there are 606 SELs in the Czech Republic, 12 of which are in Ostrava, and their number continues to rise. At the same time, newer approaches indicate that the problem is concentrated in approximately 238 municipalities with high rates of social exclusion. In the city of Ostrava, there are currently around 23 hostels/dormitories housing approximately 2,000 families, most of whom are in material deprivation.

The Roma are one of the groups most vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. As stated in the Social Inclusion Strategy 2021–2030 published by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (hereinafter referred to as "MoLSA"), different societal groups are exposed to varying degrees of poverty and social exclusion. In 2016, more than 58% of Roma in the Czech Republic were at risk of income poverty, which is six times higher than the rate for the majority population. The highest proportion of Roma at risk of poverty or social exclusion is in areas where all or most residents are of Roma origin, confirming the situation in socially excluded localities, where up to 80% of the population are Roma.

In cooperation with the Platform for Social Housing, the University of Ostrava (Faculty of Social Studies), and the City of Ostrava, the Housing Policy Index – Ostrava was developed. The results indicate that more than 4,200 households (approximately 7,100 people) live in housing exclusion in Ostrava, representing the second-highest figure among Czech cities. These data are cited in the Action Plan of the Social Housing Concept of the City of Ostrava.

1.4 Well-being and social inclusion of Roma children

Investing in children's futures is one of the most crucial aspects of development. Investing in the well-being and social inclusion of Roma children is vital for several fundamental reasons that affect both the children themselves and society as a whole.

One of the primary reasons is ensuring **equal opportunities in education**. When children from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to preschool and school education, their chances of successfully completing their education and subsequently succeeding in the labor market increase significantly. This approach is highlighted, for example, in the Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee for the 2022–2030 Period. The Child Guarantee is a European initiative implemented in the Czech Republic by the MoLSA which aims to prevent the social exclusion of children in need (under the age of 18).

Another key reason is the **prevention of social exclusion**. Early support for children helps reduce the risk of long-term poverty, unemployment, and dependence on the welfare system in adulthood. The importance of social inclusion is also emphasized by the Social Inclusion Strategy 2021–2030. Supporting the family environment and investing in children's health increases their chances of a stable and high-quality life. UNICEF Czech Republic underscores the importance of early support and an inclusive approach.

From a broader perspective, social inclusion benefits society as a whole. When children grow up in an environment where they enjoy equal opportunities, it leads to better social cohesion and lower levels of discrimination in adulthood. Higher levels of education and employment lead to greater economic stability, reduced social expenditures, and better functioning of society as a whole. This approach is also supported by the European Union Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation, available via EUR-Lex – Roma equality framework.

This approach aligns with the work of James Heckman, an American economist at the University of Chicago and Nobel laureate (2000). Heckman is widely known for demonstrating that investments in early childhood (including early education, family support, and skills development) yield exceptionally high returns for both individuals and society. According to his research, supporting children as early as possible is highly cost-effective, as mitigating problems later in life is significantly more difficult and expensive. His influential work is frequently cited in connection with social policy, education, labor market dynamics, social inequalities, and the targeted support of disadvantaged children.

2 Roma children in Europe - child poverty and family separation

2.1 Demographic aspects

Statistical information

Accurate statistical data on the number of Roma children are not available in the Czech Republic, as ethnicity is not systematically tracked in official statistics. Nevertheless, there are qualified estimates that make it possible to create a fairly accurate picture of the situation.

The total number of Roma in the Czech Republic is estimated at approximately 250,000 to 300,000, with Roma children accounting for roughly 3–5% of the child population. The situation can be monitored in greater detail within the education system. According to data from the Ministry of Education, Roma pupils make up approximately 3.9% of primary school pupils, which corresponds to around 39,000 children. In preschools (kindergartens), their representation is lower, at around 2%, while in secondary schools it further declines to roughly 1–1.2%. This trend demonstrates a gradual decrease in the representation of Roma students as the level of education rises.

Characteristics

Roma children grow up in diverse family and social conditions. Many of them face disadvantaged conditions in their daily lives and school attendance. These children often live in substandard or insecure housing. The families frequently have more children, and older siblings often assume a parental role, caring for their younger brothers and sisters. The children lack a stimulating and safe environment, miss suitable toys, and have limited opportunities for school preparation. They often spend their free time unsupervised on the streets. There are usually no playgrounds in the vicinity of SELs (socially excluded localities) and hostels. Due to a lack of funds or unavailability, these children do not attend extracurricular activities.

The distressing situation of the parents negatively impacts the children's psychological well-being and overall development. Consequently, children appear tired, irritable, frustrated, or insecure as a result of their living conditions and family poverty. Our experience shows that even young children exhibit highly aggressive behavior, bullying and hitting each other, or harming animals. They behave inappropriately in public spaces and show a lack of respect for adults. This aggressiveness may be caused by the environment they live in. Due to the lack of basic necessities, these children are frequently registered with the Child Protection Authority (hereinafter referred to as OSPOD) and face a higher risk of being placed into substitute care.

Composition

The demographic aspect of Roma families is characterized primarily by a higher number of children, meaning that the birth rate is higher than that of the majority society. As a result, the Roma population is generally younger—children and young people predominate, while there are fewer elderly persons. At the same time, statistics show that the Roma population often has a lower life expectancy, which is mainly linked to poorer socioeconomic conditions, limited access to healthcare, and lifestyle factors. Furthermore, it is typical for Roma youth to enter partnerships and parenthood at an earlier age.

On average, Roma live 18 years less than the majority population. Men from the minority have an average life expectancy of 57 years, and women 65 years. In comparison, men from the majority population live to an average of 76.1 years, and women to 81.9 years.

Life story

"Mrs. Sabina lives with her husband and three preschool-aged children in a two-room social apartment. Due to housing loss and a deteriorated financial situation, Mrs. Sabina's parents, along with their two minor children, have also temporarily moved into the household. As a result, multiple family members across three generations currently live in the apartment, despite the fact that the living space is insufficient for such a large household.

Overcrowded housing presents an increased burden, particularly for Mrs. Sabina's children. The daily functioning of the household is complicated by excessive noise, a lack of personal space, and greater difficulty in establishing a regular routine. These circumstances have a negative impact on the children's psychological well-being and overall development. Due to the long-term tense atmosphere in the household, the children more frequently appear tired, irritable, and insecure."

2.2 Poverty of Roma children

Statistical information

Exact data on Roma children are not available, as statistics generally refer to the entire Roma population; however, available research allows for a relatively accurate estimation. According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), approximately 77% of Roma in the Czech Republic were at risk of poverty in 2021. Because the Roma population is significantly young and children make up a large proportion, this implies that the majority of Roma children grow up in conditions of poverty or at high risk thereof. Research also shows that roughly 20% of Roma in the Czech Republic live in so-called "severe poverty," which directly impacts the situation of children. Based on available data, it is evident that tens of thousands of Roma children in the Czech Republic live in poverty or are at risk of poverty.

Characteristics

From a research perspective, poverty among Roma children can be described as a situation arising primarily from the long-term social exclusion of families living in segregated or economically disadvantaged localities. Roma families often have very low and unstable incomes, which are insufficient to regularly cover basic needs such as quality nutrition, school supplies, clothing, school activities, toys, or leisure pursuits. These children do not experience trips or family vacations; they know only their streets. Given the families' poverty, the children lack a stimulating environment.

Causes and lifelong effects

The causes of poverty among Roma children stem primarily from social exclusion and the deteriorating living conditions of their families. This is often a combination of parents' low qualifications, limited job opportunities, precarious employment, and sometimes discrimination in the labor market, all of which lead to long-term low household incomes.

Poverty then has significant lifelong impacts. In childhood, it manifests through poorer conditions for education and lower support for school preparation, leading to weaker academic results and lower educational attainment. In adulthood, these individuals face reduced opportunities in the labor market and a higher risk of long-term social and economic insecurity.

In a broader sense, poverty can also affect health, psychological well-being, and social inclusion. Long-term stress associated with financial insecurity, limited access to healthcare, and reduced opportunities for personal development lead to a lower quality of life in adulthood.

Family poverty and intergenerational transmission

Family poverty in Roma households is described in research as a persistent long-term condition linked to social exclusion, low and unstable incomes, and limited access to quality housing and education.

The intergenerational transmission of poverty is manifested by children growing up in adverse environments, adopting the behavioral patterns and living conditions of their parents. In adulthood, it often happens that their economic and life situation mirrors that of their original family, thus repeating poverty in the next generation. It must be added, however, that this is not merely a problem of current children and their parents, but a long-standing model that has persisted for several generations. This process is sustained by long-term social exclusion, limited job opportunities in these localities, and weaker connections to institutions that could improve the situation.

Despite societal efforts, field social work, the OSPOD, educational support (teaching assistants, tutoring, preschool preparation), and the activities of non-profit organizations (debt counseling, family support, leisure programs for children), a significant portion of these families find it difficult to break out of this cycle.

Life story

1) *"Anička (8 years old) lives with her parents and three siblings in a single room in a hostel. She has no suitable conditions for studying. She frequently babysits and cares for her younger siblings. Consequently, she goes to school tired and unprepared. Teachers perceive Anička as showing no interest in the curriculum, but in reality, she simply lacks an environment where she can concentrate."*

2) *"Mirek is a nine-year-old boy in the third grade. At school, he often struggles with the learning material and cannot keep up with the pace of his classmates. Mirek is unable to complete certain school assignments in the same manner as other children because his family does not own a computer or have internet access. At home, his parents cannot help him much with his studies, as they lack the necessary knowledge themselves.*

Although non-profit organizations operate in the city providing tutoring through volunteer students, some of them are afraid to enter socially excluded localities. As a result, support does not reach all the children who need it. When Mirek does not understand something, he often loses motivation and prefers to give up on the task. Teachers sometimes think he is inattentive or lazy, but in reality, he lacks the support and conditions that are a standard part of the home environment for other children. Mirek thus has to overcome obstacles that his classmates often do not even realize exist."

2.3 Roma children and housing

The housing situation of Roma children and their parents in the Czech Republic represents a long-standing and serious issue that has yet to be satisfactorily resolved. A significant portion of Roma families live in socially excluded localities or other forms of substandard housing that fail to meet common living standards. This includes apartments and houses with structural defects.

This type of accommodation is frequently offered by private property owners or hostel operators, with rents being disproportionately high given the quality of the housing. At the same time, low-income families have no access to standard bank loans or mortgages that would enable them to finance more dignified housing.

Experience shows that the monthly costs for such substandard housing, including utilities, range approximately between CZK 20,000 and CZK 25,000. For comparison, in the case of cooperative or standard rental apartments, these costs could amount to roughly CZK 7,000 to CZK 10,000 per month per person. Purchasing a family house currently costs around CZK 7,000,000. It must be added, however, that mortgages and other forms of housing loans are now often out of reach even for a segment of the majority society's middle class (ERGO 2023).

It is a generally known fact that due to prejudice, the majority population is reluctant to rent apartments to Roma families. The reasons they cite include that these families have many children who are noisy, do not adhere to house rules, lack hygiene, that more people frequently occupy the apartment than stated in the lease agreement, make a mess in hallways and in front of the building, fail to maintain the cleanliness of common areas, and damage property.

A significant phenomenon is residential segregation, where Roma families with children are concentrated in specific parts of cities or municipalities with limited access to quality housing and services. These localities are often associated with lower levels of infrastructure and poorer accessibility to schools, healthcare, and public transport. In some cases, informal or substandard forms of housing occur. These premises often suffer from issues such as dampness, inadequate insulation, outdated facilities, and an overall low standard of hygiene. However, these are not Roma settlements of the type known in the Slovak Republic.

Another frequent problem is the overcrowding of housing units, where more people live in a single space than is suitable in terms of capacity or hygiene. This has impacts on the privacy, hygiene, and health status of the residents.

Forced evictions represent another factor, which may arise, for example, due to rent arrears or the termination of lease agreements. This situation leads to frequent housing instability and repeated relocation. Families who move break ties with people in the community, children lose their friends and frequently change schools, and families lose their general practitioners.

Environmental risks also emerge, such as inadequate infrastructure, neglected surroundings, and proximity to industrial areas. Overall, this is a set of structural problems that interact with one another, leading to long-term disadvantaged living conditions for Roma children and their parents (ERGO 2023).

Housing is the foundation. If a family has no housing, a parent cannot go to work. If a family lacks stable housing, children frequently change schools, consequently lacking knowledge and missing out on an adequate education. Thus, the cycle of poverty remains unbroken.

The Chamber of Deputies has approved the Housing Support Act amendment, which regulates the framework of the support system for people in housing exclusion. However, the adopted amending proposal carries significant risks that could jeopardize the availability and functionality of assistance for the most vulnerable households. Even after the approved modifications, the problem remains that a segment of people in housing exclusion will still not qualify for support. In principle, the Government took a step in the right direction by shifting powers from municipalities to the Labour Office regarding assistance for people in housing exclusion. However, the Platform for Social Housing considers this shift rather problematic. Labour Offices are centralized and heavily overburdened. While municipalities know their people and their needs, they are dependent on elections and will always tend to segregate and discriminate against a segment of the population that is unpopular with other residents. Poor people have a low voter turnout.

Life story

1) *"During the last school year, Viki and her brother Daniel lived with their parents in an apartment within a socially excluded locality. Even though their circumstances were challenging, the family managed to maintain a baseline of stability—the children had their own space, a degree of privacy, and a relatively regular daily routine at home.*

In the current school year, however, the family moved to a hostel, which significantly disrupted their household functioning. The hostel provides limited privacy and is characterized by long-term high noise levels, frequent turnover of residents, and an overall highly unstable environment. Consequently, the family lost their sense of 'home' in the traditional sense and had to quickly adapt to conditions that are largely provisional and insecure.

This transition gradually began to impact the children's daily lives. At home, they lack the quiet environment and space needed to concentrate, which complicates both their school preparation and proper rest. The constant commotion and lack of privacy have resulted in fatigue, poorer concentration, and lower overall psychological well-being. Their academic performance and motivation are steadily deteriorating. Ultimately, living in a hostel has severely affected their daily routines and family stability."

2) *"Patrik is a ten-year-old boy who lives with his parents and three younger siblings in a small rental apartment on the outskirts of the city. The housing is in very poor condition, suffering from damp walls, leaking windows, and outdated wiring. Due to these electrical issues, power outages occur frequently, even during the normal use of household appliances. The family moved into this apartment after being forced to quickly leave their previous residence; they had received an eviction notice due to long-term financial difficulties and rent arrears.*

Patrik's childhood is shaped not only by unstable and insecure housing but also by a lack of recreational opportunities. He enjoys sports at school and would like to join extracurricular clubs, which the family cannot afford for financial reasons. A low-threshold facility for children and youth, which he could visit free of charge to spend time safely with his peers, is located far from their residence, and Patrik can rarely access it due to poor public transport connections. Instead, he often spends his time at home in a crowded apartment with no space to rest, study, or play. Although his parents desire better conditions for their children, a stable home, and opportunities to develop their interests, their options to change their situation remain extremely limited due to low incomes, debts, and rejection by landlords."

2.4 Roma children and health care

The health status of Roma children and their families in the Czech Republic is primarily influenced by the social and economic conditions in which a segment of this population lives. This involves an increased prevalence of health problems linked to poverty, poor housing, and limited access to preventive care. Chronic illnesses and poorer overall health status occur more frequently among some families, which is related to inadequate nutrition and stress. Children living in socially disadvantaged conditions are more likely to suffer from respiratory problems, allergies, or recurrent infections, often associated with damp and poorly insulated housing. Overall, the health situation is closely linked to social backgrounds, housing quality, and the stability of the family environment (ERGO 2022).

Prenatal care in a segment of Roma families is characterized by a lower utilization of regular prenatal check-ups. Expectant mothers often lack a registered gynecologist and frequently register just before childbirth—usually with the assistance of Non-governmental organizations (hereinafter referred to as "NGOs")—or go directly to the maternity hospital to give birth. This is linked to their social situation, the accessibility of services, or a lack of trust in the healthcare system.

Vaccination coverage among Roma children is generally lower than in the majority population. In some Roma families, particularly those with multiple children, it can be difficult to strictly adhere to the vaccination schedule for all children. Reasons include poorer accessibility to healthcare, more frequent organizational challenges within the family, or limited capacity for regular medical check-ups.

Some parents harbor a fear of vaccination, driven by ignorance and disinformation spreading on social networks, especially Facebook, leading them to miss vaccination deadlines. In the worst-case scenarios, they lack a general practitioner entirely. This issue is not exclusive to the Roma; some parents from the majority population also choose not to vaccinate their children, preferring alternative lifestyles. However, insufficient vaccination coverage creates a risk of transmitting communicable diseases that were previously under control.

Hard drugs are commonly spreading within these families. People from these communities are easy prey for drug dealers. Adults use substances to escape from reality. It is not uncommon during hostel visits to witness a mother injecting drugs while her child watches, with the child subsequently mimicking the entire process. Consequently, drugs are spreading among children and youth, with substance abuse now occurring even among 14-year-olds. Dealers predominantly sell drugs within hostels and SELs (socially excluded localities). As a result, families lack money for basic necessities and borrow from loan sharks at usurious interest rates (locally known as "intereš"). They trap themselves in a vicious cycle from which they cannot escape. OSPOD is aware of these situations and orders parents to undergo drug testing; however, parents actively evade these tests. The problem is not intercepted in time, ultimately resulting in the child being removed from the family.

A client enters Vzájemné soužitíˇs program only after being referred by OSPOD; by that time, the client is already addicted to substances. We strive to motivate and support the client; we organize various educational programs and provide individual counseling, but we lack the resources to treat their addiction. By referring them to our services, OSPOD offers them a helping hand and, through our services, seeks to prevent the children from being placed in alternative care.

In low-income Roma families, access to quality and varied nutrition is limited. There is a higher consumption of cheaper, nutritionally inferior foods, which can negatively affect the health of both children and adults. A significant issue is the lower financial literacy of parents, which manifests as difficulties in family budgeting and money management. In practice, this leads to financial resources being exhausted rapidly—a "carpe diem" approach—which subsequently causes periods of deprivation and a limited supply of basic necessities for the children.

In environments with poor hygienic conditions, such as hostels or overcrowded apartments, there is an increased risk of infectious diseases spreading, particularly respiratory and skin infections. In the localities where our research was conducted, cases of diseases such as hepatitis, tuberculosis, whooping cough, impetigo, and scabies were recorded. The overpopulation of bedbugs, cockroaches, and lice is not uncommon, and recently, one case of diphtheria was detected.

For children with special needs, timely diagnosis and access to specialized care remain problematic, especially if the family encounters barriers within the health and social services system (ERGO 2022). Families more frequently experience psychological distress associated with housing stress, financial insecurity, and social exclusion. These factors negatively affect both adults and children, manifesting as anxiety, concentration disorders, behavioral changes, and aggressiveness in children.

Basic information regarding prevention, family planning, and reproductive health is generally accessible to Roma families, but many households do not place significant emphasis on these topics in the long term. This is also linked to the intergenerational transmission of attitudes and behavioral patterns, where certain areas of healthcare prevention are not systematically addressed within the family environment and remain taboo.

Neurodivergent children in some Roma families face poorer or delayed diagnosis. This is linked to social factors such as difficulties navigating the system, administrative barriers, or a potential distrust of institutions.

As a result, these children frequently do not receive timely, appropriate support or the necessary supportive measures that would help them better manage educational and everyday situations (ERGO 2022).

Life story

1) *"Mrs. Bára is a single mother living in a hostel with her two minor children. Her greatest concern is her children's teeth. She has been trying to find a dentist who would accept them for a long time, but without success.*

Mrs. Bára called her health insurance company, pleading for assistance in securing a dentist. She was provided with a list of clinics, but every single one informed her they were not accepting new patients. Some clinics did not even answer the phone. Mrs. Bára felt desperate, knowing that the children needed regular check-ups but not knowing where else to turn. Even if she managed to find a dentist for the children, she would not be able to afford the registration fees or procedures not covered by health insurance.

When a child gets a toothache, Mrs. Bára has no choice but to go to the dental emergency clinic, where she pays a fee of 'only' CZK 90 per person. At the emergency clinic, the dentist performs a basic procedure but does not resolve the long-term issue. The children are terrified of these visits because they associate the emergency clinic with pain and an unpleasant experience. Mrs. Bára often feels helpless. She wants her children to have the same healthcare opportunities as others, but due to her financial situation, the shortage of dentists, and the poor accessibility of care, it is extremely difficult for her."

2) *"Mrs. Kája is a mother of five children aged 9, 8, 6, 4, and 2. The family lives in a socially excluded locality. The pediatrician for the four older children is located on the opposite side of town, and the doctor for the youngest child is also not within a reasonable commuting distance. The children have different pediatricians due to the insufficient capacity of available spaces at local clinics.*

As a result of this situation, long-term difficulties have arisen in adhering to deadlines for preventive check-ups and vaccinations. At the same time, the children require care from multiple specialists (such as a neurologist, dentist, or endocrinologist), which significantly increases the organizational demands of caring for the family.

Mrs. Kája often attends medical appointments with all her children at once because she has no childcare options. The situation is further complicated by the fact that if one child falls ill, it is difficult to carry out scheduled appointments for another. The financial costs associated with transport and medication also play a major role, heavily straining the family budget.

From the perspective of the healthcare system, this situation is sometimes perceived as a failure to comply with preventive care, particularly due to repeated absences from check-ups or vaccinations. In reality, however, it is a combination of geographical, social, and organizational barriers that fundamentally impact the family's ability to ensure regular and continuous healthcare."

3) "A family with 5 minor children aged 6, 9, 11, 14, and 17 lived in a settlement in Slovakia before moving to the Czech Republic, believing they would find better living conditions for their children here. Initially, they stayed with a sister in a socially excluded locality. They lived together in a single room, where the adults slept on the floor and the children shared one bed. In that particular locality, infectious and skin diseases—especially Hepatitis A, viral infections, and scabies—occurred repeatedly.

At one point, the family was ordered into temporary quarantine by the Regional Public Health Authority due to an outbreak of an infectious disease. Subsequently, support was provided to help the family find more suitable accommodation, and they were placed in a hostel with the aim of ensuring more dignified living conditions. However, during home visits, it was discovered that the hostel was infested with bedbugs, forcing the family to search for suitable housing once again."

***4)** "During the COVID-19 pandemic, the NGO Vzájemné soužití (Life Together) actively engaged in supporting residents of socially excluded localities and hostels. The objective was to provide residents with information about COVID-19, preventive measures, and vaccination options.*

Many families harbored fears regarding the vaccine and expressed distrust toward the healthcare system. A segment of the population was concerned about potential health consequences of the vaccination, and there was a general mistrust of institutions among some individuals. The organization's staff regularly visited socially excluded localities and hostels to conduct one-on-one conversations, attempting to explain the significance of vaccination and the importance of protecting the health of their families and the wider community in an accessible manner.

Fieldwork was highly challenging, as it was necessary to overcome the fear, distrust, and misinformation spreading among the residents. The Vzájemné soužití organization subsequently established cooperation with the Regional Public Health Authority and other institutions, which made it possible to provide accessible, free vaccinations directly to the residents of socially excluded localities. Thanks to long-term fieldwork, support, and building trust between the organization's staff and the residents, they ultimately succeeded in motivating a significant portion of the families to get vaccinated against COVID-19."

2.5 Roma children and education

In the Czech Republic, compulsory school attendance is established from the 1st to the 9th grade of primary school. Since 2017, the final year of preschool education has also been compulsory for children from the age of five. This obligation stems from Act No. 561/2004 Coll., on Pre-school, Basic, Secondary, Tertiary Professional and Other Education (the Education Act), specifically Section 34a. In cases of long-term non-compliance with compulsory preschool attendance, the situation may be treated as a misdemeanor or as parental neglect.

However, many parents lack sufficient information regarding the functioning of preschool, primary, and subsequent education. They are often unaware of when enrollment for kindergartens and primary schools takes place, where to find the deadlines, and understand little about the admission process. In these situations, non-profit organizations frequently step in to assist, accompanying families to enrollments and open days, providing necessary information, and facilitating communication with kindergartens and schools.

Roma children typically do not attend standard kindergartens but instead enter compulsory preschool education. Non-profit organizations conduct non-formal education for children aged three and up as part of various projects.

Segregation in education persists in two main forms. The first consists of schools where Roma children are concentrated, locally referred to as "Roma schools." These schools are typically located closest to SELs (socially excluded localities). They are frequently associated with poorer conditions and a lower quality of education.

The second form is the disproportionate placement of Roma children into special education, particularly under the category of "mild mental disability," where the reasons often relate to social factors rather than the actual abilities of the children.

Statistics show that approximately 22% of Roma pupils are placed in special classes and 15% in special schools, which is significantly higher than the rate for the majority population.

Special classes are part of mainstream primary schools, but education there is conducted using adjusted teaching methods and with fewer pupils. In contrast, special schools are independent institutions primarily intended for children with disabilities or more severe educational needs. In both cases, a child's placement can impact their further educational opportunities and future employment, as many of these pupils subsequently continue predominantly in vocational programs without a school-leaving examination (maturita).

Roma children face a high risk of early school leaving. Among the primary reasons is the insufficient preparation of children prior to entering primary school. Once in primary school, children often lack suitable conditions for studying and miss necessary school supplies. Furthermore, parents with low educational attainment are unable to prepare their children for classes, leaving the children demotivated, and they frequently give up. It is also common within these families for older children to bear a greater responsibility for caring for younger siblings, which deprives them of time for home school preparation.

Parental support during the transition of children to secondary schools or vocational training is also weak. Intergenerational patterns play a role here ("they won't accept me anywhere anyway...", "what good will it do me..."), and parents also fear the financial demands of subsequent education. A very critical factor for parents is the fear of their child being separated from the family. They often believe that the majority society will not accept a Roma student from a disadvantaged background, which is a major reason why parents do not encourage their children to pursue further studies.

On the other hand, support mechanisms do exist, such as scholarship programs for Roma students in secondary and higher education, designed to reduce financial barriers. However, these opportunities are not always fully utilized, often because information fails to reach all families. In a segment of Roma households, limited access to the internet, computers, or a suitable space for home study still persists. This problem became highly apparent, for instance, during distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it continues to this day.

Life stories

***1**) "A family lived in a housing estate. The parents tried to provide their children with the best possible conditions for school, although it was not always easy. The oldest was Patrik (13 years old)—a calm, thoughtful boy who enjoyed mathematics but frequently encountered technical issues during distance learning. Next to him was Lenka (10 years old), who was curious and loved to read but required more support and explanation while studying. The youngest was David (6 years old), who was lively and playful, spending most of his time moving around, making it difficult for him to sit still for quiet activities.*

When the period of distance learning arrived, it became apparent that their home environment was not ideal. They owned only an older mobile phone and a weak internet connection that frequently dropped out. Patrik was repeatedly unable to connect to online classes, Lenka struggled to follow the teacher's explanations, and David engaged in online learning only minimally, as he required direct guidance and a quieter environment. Furthermore, there was a lack of space at home. All the siblings took turns at the kitchen table while the ordinary running of the household took place around them, making concentration extremely difficult for the children.

One day, the mother noticed information about a field social worker who assisted families in the area. After some initial hesitation, she decided to contact her. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, the field worker came directly to the household, listened to their situation, and offered tutoring opportunities for Patrik and Lenka. She also helped them communicate with the school. The field worker became an important link between them and the school. Without the support of NGOs, foundations, and a mobile operator - who provided families with laptops and internet connections - the children would have had no opportunity to receive an education like their peers during the Covid pandemic.

***2)** "The mother is currently a single parent caring for three children: Patrik (5 years old), Anna (9 years old), and Natálie (15 years old). The family resides in a hostel. The mother's partner is currently serving a prison sentence in a correctional facility in connection with the neglect of compulsory school attendance for the children, Anna and Natálie. Natálie would like to study to become a pastry chef. However, due to an adverse financial situation, the mother is unable to support her studies financially. At the same time, she expects Natálie to help with the household chores and care for her younger siblings, and to register with the Labour Office after completing her primary education. As a result of this family pressure, Natálie is gradually losing motivation and hope of achieving her professional goal and pursuing further education in the confectionery field."*

2.6 Roma children and other services

The situation of Roma children regarding access to services such as transport, school catering, advisory support, and extracurricular activities is frequently hindered and directly linked to their social disadvantage. Families from socially excluded localities (SELs) have limited access to transport, both due to financial constraints—where parents with children often travel without a valid ticket, resulting in exclusion from transport vehicles and generating further debt—and due to poorer public transport accessibility. These factors negatively impact children's school attendance as well as their opportunities to engage in leisure activities.

Access to school catering represents another significant challenge. Although support programmes exist, not all schools are integrated into these initiatives, which provide children with free breakfast and lunch; furthermore, not all families are aware of them or capable of utilizing them. Parents often do not send their child to school because they lack the financial means to provide a school snack. Inadequate nutrition can subsequently impact both the health and academic performance of the children. At school, the child becomes fatigued, hungry, unwell, and unable to concentrate, which may also turn them into a target of ridicule.

NGOs usually concentrate their efforts within SELs and hostels, offering various types of services; however, not all of them provide specialized advisory support. Families from hostels and SELs must then commute outside their locality to access advisory services at NGOs or other institutions. Some counseling services are subject to a fee. Families utilize NGO services more frequently due to a profound lack of trust in official institutions. Many families are completely unaware of whom and where to turn to when in need of assistance. Participation in extracurricular activities is significantly lower, primarily due to financial costs, transport inaccessibility, and, at times, fears of non-acceptance. The majority of clubs and activities require fees, with parents obligated to pay at least six months in advance, involving substantial amounts of money. NGOs attempt to base their operations close to excluded localities, where they run low-threshold facilities for children and youth, allowing children to spend their organized free time free of charge; however, this is not accessible to all Roma children. Yet, leisure activities play a crucial role in children's development and their integration into society.

Roma children thus face a combination of barriers that restrict their opportunities and disadvantage them compared to their peers.

Life stories

1) *"A family lived in a rented older house on the outskirts of the city. The locality suffered from limited transport accessibility, with the bus connection being irregular and frequently unreliable. Three children grew up in the family—Patrik (8 years old), Nikola (10 years old), and the youngest, Ema. Nikola and Patrik regularly attended primary school.*

At that time, the children were predominantly cared for by their mother. In some instances, the parents failed to ensure the children departed for school on time, which led to absences and irregular school attendance. The children lacked sufficient support from their parents for their further development within the home environment. The family's situation was repeatedly addressed by the school in cooperation with the Police of the Czech Republic and the OSPOD. After some time, the husband left the family. Subsequently, the mother began serving a prison sentence. The father then decided to take over the care of the children.

Currently, the father lives alone with the three children and actively strives to ensure the regular running of the household, timely preparation of the children for school, and punctual attendance at bus connections so that the children can attend school regularly. The children feel much happier, and their schooling is no longer neglected."

***2)** "Vanesa is in the fourth grade and lives with her mother and her 4-year-old twin brothers, Adam and Jiřík. Her mother works only occasionally, and the family frequently struggles to make ends meet until the end of the month. At school, it sometimes happened that Vanesa had no snack or money for lunch. She also lacked certain school supplies that other children normally possessed. Thanks to a free school catering programme, Vanesa can now regularly attend lunches and concentrate better at school. Furthermore, she received school supplies and a backpack from a non-governmental organization, so she no longer has to fear having nothing to write in or with which to arrive at school. Nevertheless, similar assistance is not equally accessible everywhere. Some schools receive support from the municipality or NGOs, while others lack such options. Therefore, children can still be found who, despite their family's best efforts, attend school without the necessary support system and foundation."*

***3)** "Mrs. Martina's family lived in a hostel where staff from a non-governmental organization regularly operated. Martina, residing in the hostel, has seven children—15-year-old Daniela, 14-year-old Patrik, 12-year-old Alenka, 10-year-old Enrico, 9-year-old Marie, 2-year-old Fabi, and one-year-old Lilinka. The family faced long-term financial shortages, overcrowded housing, and escalating conflicts among the children. The older children experienced difficulties at school; Patrik was frequently absent from classes, and Daniela was exhausted at school because she assumed a large portion of the care for her younger siblings. Frequent conflicts began to emerge within the family, and Martina felt unable to cope with the situation, yet she did not know where to turn for help.*

Field workers regularly visit the hostel to offer support to families. However, Martina did not approach them for a long time—she harbored fear and distrust, worrying that she would be judged as a mother who could not manage the care of her children, which could lead to them being removed from her. The situation changed only when a neighbor advised her that she did not need to fear the workers and that they could truly help her, thereby giving her courage. Martina eventually approached the NGO workers.

Following a consultation with the workers, it became evident that the family required multiple forms of support. An NGO intervened to help them address housing, finances, and the children's school attendance. The organization supported the family with parenting and resolving the children's school issues, while providing counseling to improve family communication and relationships. Through a crisis intervention specialist, the NGO offered assistance for moments when family situations escalated, as well as the option to contact other organizations for specialized or psychological help. At school, a school psychologist was arranged for Patrik and Daniela to address their psychological distress. The children were registered in the records of the OSPOD, which collaborated with the NGO and the family to provide aid and support. Gradually, thanks to the interconnection of these services, the situation within the family began to improve. The children attained greater stability, Martina gained a support system, and the family began to better manage daily challenges. Crucially, the first step toward assistance occurred only after encouragement from a neighbor, who helped her overcome fear and distrust."

4) *"A single mother cares for four children aged 5, 8, 10, and 15, and resides with them in a rented apartment. The oldest son was recommended by his school to start thinking about his future occupation and choice of secondary school. Upon returning home, the mother asked her son which field he would like to study. The son stated that he would like to become a police officer. However, this study would require staying at a boarding school during the workweek, with him returning home only for weekends. The mother did not agree with this proposal, as she harbored fears regarding her son's separation from the family. She informed him that, as the oldest child, he should assist with the care of the family. Simultaneously, she stated that she lacked sufficient financial resources to cover the boarding school fees and other costs associated with the studies. For this reason, the son enrolled in a bricklaying vocational program, in which, however, he had no interest. During the first semester, he ceased attending school regularly. Currently, the mother is addressing a problem regarding her son's unexcused absences, which is now the subject of an investigation by the Police of the Czech Republic (PČR) and OSPOD."*

2.7 Support for Roma parents

Income support

In the labour market, Roma parents frequently face higher unemployment rates and restricted access to stable employment. When employed, they often occupy low-income, temporary, or less stable work positions, or work under agreements performing work outside of employment relationships (agreements on work performed outside employment), or engage in undeclared work (informal employment). Another factor is indebtedness and wage garnishments (executions), where legal employment would result in significant deductions from wages and a substantial reduction in the family budget.

Social benefits—and newly also the so-called "super-benefit" (a single integrated social support benefit)—play a significant role in the income of many households. This benefit consists of four components: a livelihood component, a housing component, a child bonus, and a work bonus. (The work bonus means that a family receives higher financial advantages if at least one of the parents is employed or registered with the Labour Office as a job seeker and is actively searching for work or undertaking retraining courses. If the parents do not work and do not actively seek employment, the work bonus is zero. According to the statements of the families we cooperate with, families have experienced a significant financial worsening during the transition from the original system of material need benefits to the new "super-benefit" when the work bonus is zero. The families were accustomed to a regular financial amount which they managed; under the current new "super-benefit," they can lose as much as CZK 6,000 to 10,000 per month, and these finances will be severely missed in the family budget.) When assessing eligibility, the income of the entire household is evaluated, alongside its property assets, the number of members, housing costs, and the work activity of the household members. In certain cases, these benefits can constitute a major part of the total household income, particularly if the family lacks a stable income from employment.

The combination of low work incomes and dependence on social benefits leads to limited financial possibilities for households. This situation subsequently translates into the quality of housing, children's educational opportunities, and the accessibility of leisure activities and healthcare. Overall, the income situation of these families is frequently unstable and sensitive to changes in employment or the social support system, which can increase the risk of long-term poverty and social exclusion. Originally, it was reported that about one-third of benefit recipients would see a decrease in support. However, an analysis by the MoLSA reveals that when recalculated under the "super-benefit" system, support decreased for 57% of recipients. After paying housing and living costs, one-fifth of households were left with less than the subsistence level. On average, households experienced a financial worsening of approximately CZK 3,500.

Life story

"We were visited by Sandra, who had previously been to the Labour Office to collect the decision on the amount of her 'super-benefit.' Originally, she received CZK 35,000 per month (the family consists of two adults and two minor children), and according to the new assessment, she will receive CZK 24,000. The amount was thus reduced by CZK 11,000, specifically because her work bonus is 0 and her partner is also unemployed."

Work-life balance and other policy measures to support families

Among the most crucial tools for supporting work-life balance are flexible forms of employment, options for part-time work, working from home, or flexible working hours. However, these opportunities are not equally accessible to everyone—particularly individuals working in low-skilled or time-fixed occupations who often cannot utilize them. This typically applies to construction work, manual occupations, cleaning services, or auxiliary labor, where physical presence at the workplace and fixed working hours are strictly required.

The availability and financial accessibility of preschool care, especially kindergartens and children's groups, represent another critical area. However, there is frequently a shortage of these places, which can complicate parents' return to employment and increase their dependence on social benefits. Significant support for working families eligible for the work bonus is provided by the state's social and family policy, such as the parental allowance and the "super-benefit" (which includes a livelihood component, housing components, a child bonus, and a work bonus) or social counseling programmes.

These mechanisms are designed to help families manage adverse financial situations and reduce the risk of social exclusion. The effectiveness of support measures depends not only on their availability but also on whether families can actually utilize them. Applying for the "super-benefit," for example, can be administratively demanding, and not all households have the necessary documents or sufficient information at their disposal. Therefore, better interconnectedness between social support, education, employment, and accessible childcare services is essential to make the system operate more simply and to render it more understandable and accessible to families /ERGO 2021/.

Barriers to access

Barriers may include a lower awareness of available support and services, the administrative complexity of the system, or a profound distrust toward institutions. It commonly occurs that if a family visits an office without the support of a social worker from an NGO, officials do not devote sufficient attention to the family; the official often makes no effort to adapt to the client's abilities and mindset and projects a sense of superiority over the client. The client frequently feels humiliated, does not understand what the official is demanding of them, and subsequently may behave inappropriately or leave without resolving the matter.

For this reason, programmes and, above all, non-governmental organizations exist that focus on supporting socially disadvantaged families. These organizations provide social counseling, employment support, debt counseling, or assistance with children's education; they commonly accompany families to the Labour Office and serve as a bridge between state officials and the client.

The success of these measures, however, depends on their accessibility, long-term sustainability, and individualized cooperation with families, but crucially also on the approach of state officials. Success further depends on reducing bureaucratic procedures, lowering the administrative burden, and ensuring the clarity and simplification of documents. Families are frequently involved in supportive activities within projects that help them resolve their situation; however, once the project and its funding conclude, these activities cease, and families can find themselves without any follow-up support.

Life story

"Mrs. Silvia went to the Labour Office to apply for the 'super-benefit' and retrospectively submitted the requested documents for the past three months (payments for rent and related utilities). However, the apartment lease agreement did not include an occupancy list (evidenční list), and as a result, Mrs. Silvia received a written notice of rejection regarding her benefit application. She had to repeat the entire application process for the 'super-benefit.' To ensure success in obtaining the 'super-benefit,' Mrs. Silvia approached a non-governmental organization, which assisted her through the process."

2.8 Roma children and antigypsyism

Roma children often perceive antigypsyism as a recurring experience of unequal treatment that manifests in multiple areas of their lives, particularly in school, housing, and during contact with institutions. This can involve both direct manifestations of discrimination and less visible forms of disadvantage, such as lower expectations from teachers, limited opportunities for further education, or a feeling that they are not fully accepted by their peers from the majority population and wider society.

Long-term experiences of this type influence the way children perceive the world outside their own community. A segment of them develops a notion that the "external environment" is rather dismissive or distrustful toward them. This perspective rarely arises in isolation; rather, it is shaped through the experiences of the family and immediate social surroundings, which have themselves encountered discrimination, most frequently when searching for housing or employment. The family environment thus plays an important role in how children interpret their prospects in society.

Another significant factor is the environment of SELs (socially excluded localities) and hostels, where children often grow up in a relatively closed social space. Furthermore, hostels exhibit the characteristics of a social institution. Through shared stories within the community, certain attitudes toward the majority society are reinforced.

At the same time, however, these experiences are not identical for all children, and their perception varies significantly depending on the specific situation. The quality of the school environment, the approach of teachers, family support, and the opportunity for contact with people outside their own community exert a major influence. Where an inclusive environment and sufficient social support function effectively, the perception of society can be much less negative.

Research in the Czech Republic as well as in the international context has long shown that antigypsyism manifests primarily as structural inequality in education, housing, and access to services and institutions. Studies by the European Roma Rights Centre (2009) highlight the persistent segregation of Roma pupils in the education system. Similarly, reports by the Public Defender of Rights (Ombudsman) and UNICEF confirm that Roma children more frequently face unequal treatment and restricted access to quality education. Overall, academic literature agrees that this is not merely a matter of individual prejudices, but a combination of social, institutional, and structural factors that impact the standing of Roma children in society.

At Škrobálkova Primary School in Ostrava, mothers alerted the school management that both the children and the mothers were being discriminated against, stating that the teachers did not treat them with respect. They drew up a petition and elected two representatives from among themselves to handle the resulting incident on behalf of the families; to date, the situation remains unresolved.

Life stories

1) *"Daniela lives with her parents in a segregated locality and rarely had the opportunity to travel outside this environment. Prior to her starting school, her parents decided to enroll Daniela in a school outside the locality so that she would have the opportunity to be educated in a different environment alongside the majority population.*

In terms of knowledge, Daniela was well-prepared to start school, but no one had prepared her for the difference in the environment. During the first meeting with her classmates in the classroom, Daniela was unable to enter the room and suffered a panic attack. Until that moment, Daniela had never seen so many 'white' children together.

Gradually, however, she began to grow accustomed to the new environment, realized that it was friendly and safe, built relationships with her classmates and teachers, and even became popular among her peers in the class."

2) *"The parents have two children, 7-year-old twins. The parents wished for their children not to attend a school located in a socially excluded area, but rather a mainstream (majority) school, in order to provide them with an opportunity for higher quality education so they could continue their studies after primary school. The twins started attending the majority school, and everything appeared to be fine.*

During the course of their school attendance, the parents began to notice that their children did not feel well at school; they occasionally came home with torn clothing, and their academic performance began to deteriorate. The children eventually confided in their parents that classmates in their room were taking their school snacks and ridiculing them due to their differences. The parents attempted to resolve the situation during parent-teacher meetings, but the school did not identify any issue and believed that the parents and their children were fabricating these facts. Despite this negative experience, the parents are keeping the children at the same school in the hope that the situation will improve in the future."

3) *"The family, with two minor children (9 and 6 years old), used to live in Slovakia. Despite residing in a Roma settlement (osada), both parents strived to lead a standard lifestyle, particularly by actively seeking employment, ensuring regular school attendance for the children, routinely utilizing public services, and communicating with authorities in a standard manner.*

As a result of repeated negative experiences and a sense of rejection, the family decided to relocate to Ostrava in the Czech Republic, where they expected better conditions for social integration and a more dignified approach from the majority population. The parents assumed they would not be as exposed to discrimination and negative stereotypes related to their Roma origin here.

However, after moving to Ostrava, the family discovered that finding employment without corresponding qualifications is difficult. When dealing with certain institutions and authorities, both parents also experienced a sense of the all-too-familiar prejudicial approach, particularly in situations where they applied for financial support for the family.

The family turned to a non-governmental organization for advice, which provided them with support in their job search and assistance in communicating with authorities and institutions. Thanks to this cooperation, both parents ultimately managed to secure employment.

The minor children regularly attend a mainstream primary school. In the initial period, they faced challenges related to stigmatization and judgement. During the school year, the situation stabilized, and the children currently perceive relationships at school as good. The parents continue to feel the need to prove to their surroundings that, despite their different ethnic origin, they want to be part of society, work actively, participate in everyday life, and ensure a safe and stable environment for their children."

4) *"A young Roma man, David, trained as a carpenter at a vocational school and, after completing his education, sought a job at a timber and lumber store. He possessed good grades, practical experience, and recommendations from his teachers. When he submitted his CV, the employer invited him for an interview. Over the phone, the employer was very pleasant and stated that they were looking for a reliable employee. However, when David arrived in person for the interview, the employer changed his approach and ultimately informed him that the position had already been filled. After a longer period, he found work at a different company, where the employer was primarily interested in his skills, willingness to work, and responsibility. David was satisfied there, worked well, and gained the trust of his colleagues."*

5) *"The family has been living in a hostel for several years. Both parents are employed and together care for three minor children—Amanda (4 years old), Viktorie (6 years old), and Valerie (8 years old). The parents are keen to secure more suitable and stable housing conditions for the children that would correspond to the family's needs. Their goal is to provide the children with their own background, sufficient space for rest, school preparation, and a safe environment for healthy development. They consider the current conditions in the hostel to be unsatisfactory, among other reasons due to the frequent occurrence of pests (bedbugs and cockroaches) and an increased risk of viral illnesses.*

The family has a long-term cooperation with a non-governmental organization. Within this cooperation, the family is provided with support in searching for suitable housing and in resolving their social situation. The social worker actively assists the parents with searching for subleases and communicating with landlords. When searching for housing, the family repeatedly encounters a dismissive approach from certain landlords. The reasons given are often the number of children in the family or prejudices against the Roma minority. The parents have been repeatedly confronted with stereotypical opinions regarding Roma families, particularly in connection with concerns over property damage, non-compliance with hygiene habits, noisy behavior, or non-payment of rent. The parents stated that they do not understand society's negative approach toward their family, given that they strive to lead an orderly life, work, and endeavor to improve their life situation. They perceive that, despite their efforts, obtaining standard housing is extremely difficult for them. The family continues to reside in the hostel."

2.9 Prevention of separation of Roma families

In the Czech Republic, under Act No. 359/1999 Coll., on the Social and Legal Protection of Children, the case law of the Constitutional Court, and international conventions on the rights of the child, poverty alone should not constitute a reason for removing a child from a family.

In practice, however, a family's socio-economic situation can be one of the factors entering into the assessment of conditions for a child's upbringing.

Expert organizations and various research studies have long pointed out that Roma children are disproportionately overrepresented in institutional or residential care. Studies by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) and other analyses state that significant roles are played by social factors such as poverty, substandard housing, indebtedness, or restricted access to support services. Concurrently, some experts point out that the decision-making of institutions may, in certain cases, be influenced by stereotypes, prejudices, and antigypsyism.

Consequently, recent years have seen a greater promotion of an approach focused on preserving the child within the biological family. Field-based social services, parenting competency support programmes, social housing, debt counseling, and early intervention services are being developed. The objective of these measures is to prevent the removal of children solely for reasons of socio-economic poverty and to strengthen family stability.

This concept of supporting the family in its natural environment is promoted in the Czech Republic by multiple institutions, expert organizations, and the non-profit sector. A crucial role is held primarily by the MoLSA, which has long supported the process of deinstitutionalization and the transformation of social services. The Ministry emphasizes that the goal is a shift away from institutional care toward supporting families within their everyday environment and community.

This approach is implemented, for example, through the Strategy for Family Policy 2024–2030, support for field-based social services, funding for programmes targeting vulnerable families, support for foster care, and projects aimed at the deinstitutionalization of social services.

A significant role is also played by the OSPOD, which, according to the current approach, should prioritize working with the family and seeking options to keep the child in a safe family environment. Part of this work includes, for instance, individualized child protection plans, cooperation with field workers, or assisted contacts between parents and children. The current child protection system is structurally well-designed; infant homes for children under 3 years of age have already been abolished in the Czech Republic, and the further closure of residential institutions will occur progressively. Children who cannot remain in their own families should, in the first instance, be placed with their relatives.

To ensure that relatives are financially secured, our country utilizes kinship foster care. The child is cared for by a grandmother, aunt, uncle, sister, etc., and the foster parent is thus entitled to a foster care allowance from the state. If there are no relatives in the family, or if relatives cannot care for the child, temporary foster care exists here. A child can remain in this type of foster care for up to 1 year. Meanwhile, the family adapts conditions at home so that the child can return. If the family fails to establish suitable conditions, the child may be placed in long-term foster care, and children older than 3 years may be placed in an institution.

The problem is that currently, all children's homes for children aged 3 to 18 are overcrowded, and facilities for children requiring immediate assistance are also full. The greatest challenge lies in the fact that there is already a shortage of foster parents; if children's homes are to be abolished, where will these children be placed? At present, it happens that children remain in unsuitable family conditions simply because there is no alternative placement available. Since there is an increasing number of impoverished families in the Czech Republic—today this no longer concerns only Roma families, as poor families from the majority population are also increasing—these families resolve a multitude of problems, and to prevent the removal of children, a sufficient number of field workers is necessary.

Today, one field worker typically works with 15 families. Consequently, they cannot provide the family with high-quality, intensive, and adequate support. Furthermore, Roma families tend to have multiple children, and it is necessary to devote attention to each child individually. In the Czech Republic, emphasis is placed on field work, but in practice, the reality is different. It is only thanks to European projects that organizations can hire more staff and provide families with the support they require.

This concept is also supported by expert and non-governmental organizations, such as the Foundation, People in Need, ROMEA, IQ Roma servis, Vzájemné soužití, and others, which focus on supporting vulnerable families, social work, education, debt counseling, and the prevention of social exclusion.

Currently, an excessive number of children in the Czech Republic are placed in children's homes, diagnostic institutions, and other residential facilities. There is nowhere to place these children. At present, they are placed according to vacant capacity rather than with regard to their specific needs. During the first half of the school year, OSPOD was required to place 183 children but had vacant capacity for only 58 children. There is nowhere to place vulnerable children.

However, the majority of children are not endangered by intentional harm from their parents; rather, these are socio-economic reasons where the parent is unable or cannot manage to provide sufficient care for the children. There is also a high correlation between the regional occurrence of social problems and the proportion of children removed from families. Building further capacities does not resolve the issue. This is a systemic problem. It is necessary to focus more comprehensively on prevention within families. The solution, according to the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, is to place emphasis on building counseling centers for families and on inter-ministerial cooperation.

In the Czech context, studies most frequently highlight the situation of Roma families. However, similar tendencies can, to a certain extent, also be observed in other socially or ethnically disadvantaged groups—for instance, in families from Ukraine (*"Ukrainians are taking our jobs...", "Ukrainians get more money...", "Ukrainians have advantages and priority in everything...", "Ukrainians are getting apartments that I could have received..."*), individuals living in socially excluded localities, or families from the majority population who face long-term risks of poverty.

Social disparities within the majority population itself manifest most significantly among children in schools. Poor children from the majority population face the same exclusion as Roma children. Children from wealthier families mock them, humiliate them, refuse to accept them into their social circles, or turn them into their subordinates (*"you are just a welfare case, look at the clothes you are wearing, you don't even have a mobile phone..."*). The risk of institutional intervention is often higher where economic problems, unstable housing, restricted access to services, and societal prejudices intersect.

Life story

„Mr. Josef shared with us that he participated in a recruitment process as a job applicant. After the selection process concluded, however, he was informed that the employer had hired other workers of Ukrainian nationality. Mr. Josef perceived the situation very negatively. At that moment, he believed that Ukrainians had taken away his opportunity to be employed."

2.10 Participation and justice for Roma children

Formally, Roma children enjoy the same opportunities for involvement in education and public life; in practice, however, they frequently face barriers. The primary obstacles include poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, and distrust toward institutions. These factors limit their participation in school activities, sports clubs, community projects, or student parliaments.

Children's parliaments represent an important tool for the participation of children and young people in decision-making on matters that directly affect them. Supporting children's parliaments is one of the areas focused on by non-governmental organizations. Their goal is to create space for the meaningful participation of children and youth and to strengthen their civic competencies. Through children's and youth parliaments, children become acquainted with democratic principles, learn to formulate their needs and opinions, advocate for them, and engage in resolving problems in their surroundings. They thus gain experience with active citizenship and realize that they can influence events within the community and society through their actions.

NGOs support the establishment and functioning of children's parliaments, for example, by providing methodological support, educational activities, facilitating joint meetings, or creating opportunities for dialogue among children, experts, and local government representatives. The objective of these activities is to amplify the voices of children and young people and to support their active involvement in civic life. Developing participation contributes not only to the personal growth of individuals but also to building active, responsible, and engaged citizens who can participate in shaping the environment in which they live.

Roma children also participate in children's parliaments, but they are underrepresented because they attend secondary schools and universities at lower rates than children from the majority population.

Within the framework of our organization Life Together o.p.s. we operate a low-threshold facility for children and youth (NZDM), where a children's parliament has been established. Through this parliament, children and adolescents actively participate in the operation of the facility. They have the opportunity to express their views, propose their own ideas, co-decide on the programme, rules, and planned activities, and participate in creating an environment that meets their needs and interests. In doing so, they learn to take responsibility, cooperate, respect the opinions of others, and actively participate in collective decision-making.

Access to justice

Formally, under the law, Roma children have the same rights as other children. These rights are based, for example, on the Constitution of the Czech Republic and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees the right to education, equal access, and protection from discrimination. The right to equal treatment and the protection of human dignity is also derived from the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, which forms part of the constitutional order of the Czech Republic.

In practice, however, significant barriers exist, such as discrimination in education, low awareness of rights, distrust toward institutions, or poorer access to legal aid. Furthermore, some parents lack sufficient awareness of their rights and support options, which is why they often do not guide their children toward actively asserting their rights or developing a better understanding of the educational system and institutions.

A well-known case is the 2007 judgement in D. H. and Others v. the Czech Republic, in which the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Czech Republic had discriminated against Roma children in their access to education. The case concerned 18 Roma children from Ostrava who, during the 1990s, were placed in "special schools" (zvláštní školy) designed for pupils with mild mental disabilities. These schools provided a simplified curriculum, which significantly restricted the children's further educational and employment opportunities.

The Court concluded that Roma children were placed in these schools disproportionately more often than children from the majority population, despite the fact that many of them did not have an actual mental disability. A major issue also lay in the psychological tests, which failed to take into account the linguistic, cultural, and social differences of Roma children. The European Court of Human Rights found a violation of Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights (prohibition of discrimination) in conjunction with the right to education.

The judgement became a significant milestone in the protection of the rights of Roma children and drew attention to systemic segregation in education in the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, according to the Public Defender of Rights and other organizations, the problem of the segregation of Roma pupils persists to this day, manifesting, for example, in the form of separate classrooms or the excessive placement of Roma children into special education.

A highly significant step in the area of child rights protection is the fact that since April 2026, the Czech Republic has had its first-ever Children's Ombudsman. Until this time, an independent institution of a Children's Ombudsman was lacking in the Czech child protection system, even though its establishment had long been recommended by international organizations, including the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Previously, the issue of child rights protection was addressed within the remit of the Public Defender of Rights, but without a separately designated office focused exclusively on children and adolescents.

Martin Beneš, a former family law judge, became the first Czech Children's Ombudsman, elected by the Chamber of Deputies on March 6, 2026. He assumed office after taking the oath on April 1, 2026, and his mandate is set for six years.

The establishment of the Children's Ombudsman represents a major strengthening of the child rights protection system in the Czech Republic. The primary mission of this institution is to monitor the implementation of children's rights arising from the Convention on the Rights of the Child, draw attention to systemic deficiencies, receive complaints and suggestions from both children and adults, and advocate for changes that lead to improving the standing of children in society. The Children's Ombudsman addresses not only individual cases but also broader themes, such as children's mental health, the quality of education, the protection of vulnerable children, conditions in institutional care, and supporting the participation of children in decision-making on matters that affect them.

Representation

A small percentage of Roma pupils continue on to secondary schools and universities, which is subsequently reflected in their low representation in student councils, school parliaments, and other decision-making structures. This situation is also linked to the fact that some parents do not support their children in continuing their education, or do not send them to school regularly, which constitutes another significant barrier.

While school parliaments, peer programmes, or inclusive projects aimed at supporting cooperation, pupil engagement, and equal access to education operate at some schools, Roma children are generally not commonly represented in school decision-making structures and engage less in activities that promote student participation.

Although there are projects funded, for example, by the European Social Fund (ESF) that support inclusion, tutoring, cooperation with families, or leisure activities, a portion of parents lacks sufficient information about these opportunities or does not actively utilize them. In some cases, there is also a lack of greater family support for children to regularly engage in school and extracurricular activities. Programmes exist that secure and provide scholarships and other forms of support for Roma university students; however, not all young people are aware of this opportunity. If a family does not cooperate with a non-governmental organization, it is highly unlikely that they will learn about these projects.

A major problem is segregation in education, where Roma children often attend schools with a high proportion of Roma pupils. Poverty and social exclusion also exert a negative impact, restricting access to quality education and further development opportunities. Simultaneously, a portion of the Roma community distrusts institutions due to past experiences with discrimination.

Recommended solutions include supporting inclusive education, increasing the involvement of teaching assistants, deploying more field workers to support the entire family, preventing prejudices, and strengthening trust between institutions and the Roma community.

According to estimates, more than 35,000 Roma pupils attend Czech primary schools, with approximately one-third of them attending schools with a high degree of segregation. This information is provided by the Mezi soudy (Between Courts) portal. The Ombudsman also points out that Roma children receive a diagnosis of mild mental disability significantly more often than non-Roma children.

Life story

"Petra attended a segregated primary school, where she achieved excellent results. After finishing primary school, she enrolled in a four-year hairdressing programme. Upon entering the new school, Petra discovered that her knowledge did not match that of her classmates from the majority population, and she began to feel ashamed of her educational gaps. Her classmates did not hold back comments regarding her knowledge, and Petra felt humiliated. The teachers offered her tutoring, but Petra left the school after about three months."

2.11 Roma children in the National Strategic Framework for Roma

The Czech Republic has several strategic documents that directly or indirectly concern Roma children. Among the most important are the Strategy for Roma Integration, the Strategy for Social Inclusion 2021–2030, the National Strategy for the Protection of Children's Rights 2021–2029, and also the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation published on EUR-Lex.

These strategies contain measures focused on the education of Roma children, combating segregation, supporting preschool education, social inclusion, protection against discrimination, and supporting the participation of Roma youth. The Government of the Czech Republic states that the measures also include support for teaching assistants, inclusive education, tutoring, and cooperation between schools and families.

Provisions regarding Roma children in national and European strategies:

- ⇨ Ensuring equal access to education: Emphasis is placed on ensuring that Roma children have equal chances for quality education without discrimination and segregation.
- ⇨ Desegregation of education: Measures aimed at limiting the separate education of Roma children and supporting inclusive schools.
- ⇨ Support for inclusive education: Implementation of inclusive teaching methods and better inclusion of socially disadvantaged children in regular classes.
- ⇨ Teaching assistants and support professions: Strengthening the role of teaching assistants and other support workers in schools.
- ⇨ Support for early childhood education: Increasing the participation of Roma children in kindergartens as a preventive measure against later school failure.
- ⇨ Fight against discrimination and prejudice: Measures aimed at preventing discrimination in education and society.
- ⇨ Social inclusion of families: Connecting schools, social services and families with the aim of improving conditions for children's education.

⇨ Supporting the participation of Roma youth: Involvement of Roma children and young people in school parliaments, community projects and decision-making processes.

Objectives regarding child poverty and educational disparities are addressed quite prominently in strategic documents. The documents mentioned above highlight that Roma children face a higher risk of poverty, social exclusion, poorer access to quality education, and segregation in schools. "Children growing up in households at risk of poverty face a higher risk of social exclusion and restricted life opportunities." This information is stated, for example, by the MoLSA in Chapter 1.1.4 of the Strategy for Social Inclusion 2021–2030.

In the field of education, the strategies support increasing the enrollment of Roma children in preschools, reducing segregation, lowering the number of Roma children in special schools, supporting the completion of secondary education, and ensuring equal access to quality education. These measures are also described on the website of the Ministry of Justice of the Czech Republic.

Regarding child poverty, the strategies focus on supporting families at risk of poverty, social work, housing support, access to healthcare, and the prevention of social exclusion. According to EUR-Lex, the European Union recommends that Member States focus specifically on the education of Roma children, poverty reduction, equal opportunities, and the participation of Roma youth.

What is missing?

Most experts agree that the strategies are written relatively well; however, the primary problem lies in their implementation. The greater support for inclusive education, the work of teaching assistants, an increased emphasis on preschool education, the funding of social and educational projects, and the increased attention paid to the discrimination of Roma children are evaluated positively. These measures are noted, for example, by the Ministry of Justice of the Czech Republic.

Nevertheless, numerous problems remain. One of the greatest challenges is persistent segregation. Roma children are still frequently concentrated in segregated schools, separate classrooms, or special schools. European institutions and the Ombudsman point out that this problem has not been fully resolved.

Another issue is insufficient funding. Many projects operate only on a short-term basis, depend on European grants, and lack long-term, stable funding from the state.

Furthermore, despite the existence of these strategies, stereotypes and lower expectations toward Roma children persist. This often worsens relationships between schools and Roma families and restricts the chances of Roma children receiving a quality education and actively engaging in society.

2.12 Roma children under the Child Guarantee - National Action Plan

The Czech National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Child Guarantee 2022–2030 focuses primarily on "children in need," referring to children at risk of poverty, social exclusion, and unequal access to services. This information is outlined by the MoLSA.

Roma children are not always listed as a standalone category in the document; instead, they are primarily included among children living in socially excluded localities, children at risk of poverty, and children with disadvantaged access to education. This issue is also pointed out by the Czech Council of Children and Youth.

The National Action Plan focuses particularly on supporting preschool education, equal access to schooling, healthy nutrition, healthcare, housing, and the prevention of social exclusion. Significant emphasis is also placed on inclusion, support for schools, teaching assistants, social work with families, and the support of Roma and socially disadvantaged children. These measures are described by the Ministry of Justice of the Czech Republic.

What is missing?

According to experts, the measures are partially beneficial but are not yet sufficient. On a positive note, the state recognizes the problem of child poverty, strives to reduce educational disparities, supports inclusive education, and funds certain social and educational programmes targeted at children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. These priorities stem from the activities and strategies of the MoLSA focused on social inclusion and the support of vulnerable population groups.

An important step is also the increased support for preschool education, efforts to reduce the segregation of Roma pupils, strengthening the role of teaching assistants, and closer cooperation between schools, social services, and families. The significance of these measures is highlighted by the Ministry of Justice of the Czech Republic in the Action Plan to Support the Participation of Roma and Socially Disadvantaged Children in Preschool Education and in documents focused on the desegregation of the education of Roma pupils.

Nevertheless, experts warn that significant problems persist. In particular, there is a lack of sufficient capacity in preschools within certain socially excluded localities, a lack of stable funding for supportive professions (teaching assistants, school psychologists, and school social pedagogues), a lack of more effective support for families at risk of poverty, and a lack of a systematic resolution to housing distress. The slow pace of school desegregation, the lingering educational gaps between Roma and non-Roma children, and the limited evaluation of the effectiveness of individual measures are also considered insufficient. To achieve truly equal opportunities, a long-term integration of educational, social, healthcare, and housing policies is therefore essential.

3 Conclusion and recommendations

3.1 Summary

The case study demonstrates that a significant proportion of Roma children in the Czech Republic continue to grow up in conditions of social exclusion, poverty, and housing instability. These factors profoundly impact their education, health status, psychological well-being, and future life opportunities. Research findings and long-term experience from field social work confirm that the problems faced by Roma families are interconnected and frequently transmitted across generations. They manifest most visibly in the areas of housing, education, employment, indebtedness, and access to healthcare.

Roma children are more likely to grow up in overcrowded and substandard housing, have restricted access to quality education, and face a higher risk of academic failure and early school leaving. The long-term financial insecurity of families, low financial literacy, and the limited capacity of parents to support their children with school preparation also exert a negative impact. Furthermore, social exclusion and persistent prejudices against the Roma play a significant role, as they can influence the approach of institutions and the overall integration of children into society.

At the same time, the study shows that early and long-term support for families can significantly contribute to improving the children's situation. Field social work, the enhancement of parental competencies, affordable and stable housing, quality preschool education, and individualized support for children in schools are of paramount importance. Cooperation among schools, social services, healthcare, and non-governmental organizations is also crucial. The study clearly proves that investing in the well-being and support of Roma children and their families is not merely a matter of social justice, but also a vital investment in the future social cohesion and stability of society.

As described in the previous chapters, the Czech Republic has drafted comprehensive documents intended to assist socially disadvantaged families and has formulated numerous measures and recommended solutions; nevertheless, the situation of Roma families and their children has remained virtually identical, if not worse, for nearly 30 years. Currently, there are approximately 600 socially excluded localities in the Czech Republic, characterized by common traits such as truancy among children, a substandard environment, parental unemployment, and low levels of education among parents. As a consequence of child truancy, parents responsible for the child's upbringing are often legally convicted and sentenced to imprisonment. During this period, the children are subsequently placed into alternative care. The study reveals that these children suffer from deprivation and subsequent frustration, which they then direct against the majority society, viewing it as the culprit behind their highly adverse situation.

However, the success of the measures depends primarily on suitable housing for families with children, and on the accessibility, long-term nature, and individual approach of cooperation with families, but crucially also on the attitude of public officials. Success further hinges on reducing bureaucratic procedures, lowering the administrative burden, and ensuring the clarity and simplification of documents. Families are frequently involved in supportive activities within projects that help them resolve their situation; however, once the project concludes and its funding ends, these activities terminate, leaving the families without any follow-up support.

Every government currently in power, as well as local municipal representatives, has its own priorities. Unless all legislators and municipal officials—regardless of who holds power—agree on shared priorities and begin to seriously address substandard housing in socially excluded localities and residential hotels in practice; unless they resolve the accessibility of preschools for Roma families; unless they support inclusive education, preventing Roma children from being placed predominantly in segregated schools, special classes, or special schools; unless NGOs are financially secured to strengthen field work in support of the entire family and the reinforcement of their competencies; unless the Roma are more involved in current affairs at the municipal level, in local councils, the Chamber of Deputies, the Senate, and within the European Union; and unless the Roma are better represented in the media and in schools, the prejudices of the majority population will not change, trust between institutions and the Roma community will not be strengthened, and, above all, the lives of the Roma themselves will remain unaltered.

3.2 Recommendations

We have been addressing the issues of social exclusion and poverty with our families with children for more than 25 years. Based on long-term cooperation and feedback from our families, we observe that the social situation has improved in some cases. However, the extent of this improvement falls short of our expectations. Furthermore, we have recently perceived stagnation, and overall progress has slowed down or deteriorated. We work primarily with Roma mothers and their children. The heaviest burden and responsibility lie on the shoulders of Roma mothers, yet their voice is the least heard within the family. Mothers assume all child care and are usually solely responsible for fulfilling parental duties. The fathers of the children mostly bear no responsibility for their upbringing and, as a rule, intentionally choose not to be registered on the birth certificates. They do not contribute to child support obligations.

According to Roma family customs, mothers are not the ones who decide how family finances are managed or how the children's education will look. The decisive voice in the family belongs to the partners of our mothers and the partner's family—especially the grandparents. Consequently, the mothers are deeply frustrated, preoccupied with their worries, and have no time left for the children. As a result, the children grow up entirely neglected, and the tense atmosphere affects them negatively. Upon reaching adulthood, children from such families adopt the same model and apply this family dynamic within their own households. Unless the internal family dynamics are altered through both internal and external interventions, our work will not achieve the scale of success we desire.

As an NGO, we have always strived to help families escape their situations. However, our experience also shows that many families have completely resigned themselves to accepting help because they feel that the state does not care about them. Before every election, numerous political candidates visit the localities, listen to the families, promise assistance, and then fail to remember them once the elections are over. The families are trapped in a cyclical lifestyle; they perceive their current life as the norm—their parents lived the same way—and they no longer possess the strength or willingness to change anything.

The state must clearly define the roles and responsibilities of entities involved in the housing sector, define social housing including its target groups, and precisely establish the role of municipalities in this area.

State interventions need to be configured so that they are effective and mutually interconnected. The affordability of housing in the Czech Republic is one of the most significant and critical social and political issues. An overpriced market and a shortage of rental housing create barriers to housing affordability for young families, seniors, low-income groups, and residents of larger cities.

Affordable housing should be financially sustainable, correspond to the needs of households, and be located in an accessible area with regard to job opportunities and services. To measure housing affordability, the financial capabilities of households, the sustainability of housing expenditures, and an adequate quality of housing are essential metrics. In recent years, the situation has significantly worsened, both in terms of the financial affordability of owner-occupied housing and the financial sustainability of housing. The situation manifests very differently from a regional perspective, and access to housing is restricted primarily for vulnerable population groups.

Financially sustainable housing is that which households can afford without placing an undue burden on their budget. It takes into account operating costs, maintenance costs, and utility expenses so that households retain sufficient resources for other necessities. Low-income households are significantly burdened, expending over 40% of their income on housing, which leaves them with insufficient means for a livelihood and covering basic needs.

Housing

- ⇨ Solve the issue of affordable social housing for vulnerable people: affordable housing will solve a lot of other subsequent problems / a person will find a job better, provide children with a safe, stimulating and hygienic environment, space for children to learn, provision of basic life needs will improve the psychological health of the family, stabilize the family more, children will not have to change schools, this will ensure a better education for children/
- ⇨ Obligation of municipalities to manage a certain number of social or low-cost housing.
- ⇨ Reduce the criteria for the availability of housing: currently there are high deposits for apartments, one or two rents are paid in advance, if a person is burdened with debts from the past for rent or services, or is burdened with foreclosure, he usually cannot afford an apartment.
- ⇨ Engage private owners to rent apartments to people in need, when the state will provide them with a guarantee: In the 1990s, as a state, we disposed of the housing stock. Currently, a person in the Czech Republic does not have to be extremely poor to not be able to afford housing.
- ⇨ Tighten the control mechanism for owners of houses, apartments and hostels to comply with the amount of rent: the real value should be based on the normative costs of the usual place and the rent should be assessed according to m2 and not according to the number of people.

- ⇨ Inspection of private owners for compliance with conditions and type of accommodation: if it is a room or apartment unit. From practice: "*e.g. 2 families are accommodated in one housing unit, mainly in hostels, each has a contract for the same apartment. The Labour Office pays two housing allowances for one apartment ".*
- ⇨ In the Czech Republic, we are trying to solve the housing situation. As we mentioned above, the Chamber of Deputies approved an amendment to the Housing Support Act. Although it still has its shortcomings, it also brings its risks, but it is a good step forward.
- ⇨ Another positive aspect is that a family in need is eligible for an extraordinary immediate assistance benefit to cover a security deposit or to address emergency situations. Foundations and funds also provide financial contributions to families, subject to specific conditions and criteria. However, it is disadvantageous for families to move from better to worse accommodation—for example, from an apartment to a hostel—as they then lose their eligibility for extraordinary immediate assistance.

According to the Ostrava Social Inclusion Plan 2022–2027, Ostrava had a total of 589 social apartments in 2021. At the same time, the city owned 12,635 municipal apartments, which represented approximately 9.5% of the total housing stock. At the same time, approximately 3,100 households (about 7,100 people) were in need of housing.

The structure of the municipal housing fund is divided between individual city districts, with the largest number of apartments managed by:

- Ostrava-Jih – approximately 5,200 apartments,
- Mariánské Hory a Hulváky – around 2,000 apartments,
- Moravská Ostrava and Přívoz – approximately 1,600 apartments,
- Slezská Ostrava – around 1,300 apartments,
- Poruba– approximately 800 apartments,
- Vítkovice – around 700 apartments,
- other city districts have a smaller number of apartments.

Since 1991, when Ostrava owned nearly 46,000 municipal apartments, the number has gradually declined due to privatization. In recent years, however, the trend of large-scale sales has halted, and the city is focusing more on the development of affordable and social housing.

Austria, and Vienna in particular, takes a different approach. Vienna has approximately 7 times more inhabitants than Ostrava.

Social and municipal housing here is not only intended for the poorest residents in housing need, but is also available for the middle class. The city of Vienna directly owns approximately 220,000 municipal apartments and hundreds of thousands more apartments are created through non-profit housing companies. In total, the public sector has a direct or indirect influence on approximately 60% of the city's housing stock. Financing of apartments in the Czech Republic is dependent on subsidies, in Austria it is stable long-term financing.

This is a comprehensive housing policy regulating the entire market. It can be stated that Ostrava is one of the cities in the Czech Republic with the most developed system of social housing, however, compared to the Austrian model, it is still a relatively limited system focused mainly on solving the acute housing shortage. The Austrian model, on the other hand, represents a long-term housing policy that affects the entire housing market and ensures affordable housing for broad segments of the population.

This means that in Ostrava there is approximately 1 municipal apartment for every 22 inhabitants. In Vienna, there is approximately 1 municipal apartment per 9 inhabitants. If we also include apartments of non-profit housing companies, there is approximately 1 available publicly supported apartment per 5 inhabitants in Vienna. That is why the Viennese model of social and affordable housing is considered one of the most developed in Europe.

Prevention of separation of Roma families

- ⇨ Strengthen prevention of removal of children from families through timely field support and intervention: guarantee long-term funding of NGOs, increase their funding to ensure a sufficient number of personnel. The number of workers in NGOs is currently dependent on the financial resources provided by the Municipality and subsequently by the regional office.
- ⇨ Develop long-term outreach work with families in their natural environment: Today, 1 outreach worker usually works with 15 families. Then he cannot provide the family with high-quality, intensive and adequate support. In addition, Roma families have several children and it is necessary to pay attention to each child separately. In the Czech Republic, emphasis is placed on field work, but in practice it is different. Only thanks to European projects can the organization take on more staff and provide families with the support they require.
- ⇨ Strengthen multidisciplinary and interdepartmental cooperation between subjects
- ⇨ Catch the problem in time and intensive support in families in the initial phase: interdepartmental cooperation and linking of the school area and the social health area, so that the care of children is individual and to strengthen cooperation with the family. Stabilize the situation and increase the chance of children returning to a suitable and safe environment.
- ⇨ Create multidisciplinary teams: counseling centers, educational care centers, which should be focused on counseling, consultation, diagnosis, therapy for children and youth aged 3 to 26 years /already the first draft of the legislative amendment/.
- ⇨ Establish a central office that will focus on the issue of social and legal protection of children and families.

Education

- ⇨ Ensuring equal access to education: Emphasis should be placed on ensuring that Roma children have equal chances for quality education without discrimination and segregation.
- ⇨ Desegregation of education: Measures aimed at limiting the separate education of Roma children and supporting inclusive schools.

- ⇨ Support for inclusive education: Implementation of inclusive teaching methods and better integration of socially disadvantaged children into regular classes and kindergartens.
- ⇨ Teacher assistants and support professions: Strengthening the role of teacher assistants and other support workers in schools and kindergartens.
- ⇨ Support for preschool education: Increasing the participation of Roma children in kindergartens as a prevention of later school failure.
- ⇨ Ensure the availability and capacities of pre-school education in socially excluded localities through municipalities.
- ⇨ Social inclusion of families: Linking schools, social services and families with the aim of improving the conditions for children's education, a bridge between school, family / the social worker knows what circumstances the child comes from, intimately knows the whole family, their problems/.
- ⇨ Educate teaching staff in the field of inclusion and knowledge of Roma.
- ⇨ Strengthen individual support for pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds
- ⇨ Support children's involvement in school and extracurricular activities.
- ⇨ Financially support long-term programs for free meals and drinks for poor children /breakfast, lunch/: simplify administration for schools, create conditions for a coordinator who will lead the agenda and reduce sanctions / schools do not participate in the programs, it is a big burden for them and they are afraid of sanctions/.
- ⇨ Arrange tutoring for children at the school: allow children in the after-school club to do their homework, as children from low-income families lack the proper conditions for studying at home.

Healthcare

- ⇨ Improve the availability of health care and preventive services for disadvantaged families.
- ⇨ Establishment of a permanent position of Roma health assistant in hospitals, especially in maternity wards and directly in families: currently the position depends on the project and its duration. The establishment of a Roma health assistant, a so-called mediator, who would come directly from the community, would be financed by the Ministry of Health or municipalities, and would be an employee of the state administration or local government, not a worker of a non-profit organization. If the above function should be performed by a non-profit organization worker, the project should be 3 to 5 years.
- ⇨ Focus on education and prevention in the field of health care: healthy lifestyle, healthy nutrition, sex education, contraception, carry out education directly in Roma families and in schools where there are Roma children - use terminology they understand.
- ⇨ Make psychological help available: private psychologists are at least partially financed by the health insurance company, this would reduce long waiting periods.

- ⇨ Re-introduce mandatory preventive check-ups at the dentist and pediatrician with the participation of schools: In the past, it has been proven that school pupils regularly visited the dentist together at least once a year during classes, received certain vaccinations together, children and adults were invited to preventive check-ups with their general practitioners.
- ⇨ Free dental treatment for children under 15 years of age: children currently have neglected teeth, treatment is very expensive for families.

Recommendations for equal treatment

- ⇨ Fight against discrimination and prejudice: Measures aimed at preventing discrimination in education and society.
- ⇨ Establishment of the position of Roma assistant at the branches of the Labour Office.
- ⇨ Establishment of the position of social worker and Roma assistant in schools
- ⇨ Specify training and internships for the Labour Office staff, other civil servants, medical personnel, doctors, on Roma issues, mainly with a focus on communication and the differences of the target group.
- ⇨ Introduce instruction on Roma culture in primary and secondary schools, as well as at the tertiary level—particularly in fields such as healthcare, nursing, social work, etc.
- ⇨ Supporting the participation of Roma youth: Involvement of Roma children and young people in school parliaments, community projects and decision-making processes.

Other recommendations

- ⇨ Develop financial literacy and employment support programs for parents
- ⇨ Unification of internal methodologies aimed at the client of the Labour Office throughout the Czech Republic and their availability to the public: methodologies should be transparent to the public and not just internal regulations, in possible problem situations it is often difficult to assess whether it is an individual failure of an employee of the Labour Office or a systemic problem.
- ⇨ Support the prevention of intergenerational poverty and social exclusion.
- ⇨ Increase families' awareness of available services and rights.

Overall, the study emphasizes that investments in the support and well-being of Roma children and their families have not only social, but also long-term economic and social benefits, as they contribute to reducing inequalities and strengthening social cohesion.

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5. List of abbreviations

MoLSA: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs

NGO: Non-profit organizations

OSPOD: Child Protection Authority (Orgán sociálně-právní ochrany dětí)

SEL: Socially excluded locality