Roma children in Europe – child poverty and family separation in Hungary

Introduction

The case study was written by Tibor Béres (beres.tibor@autonomia.hu) and Miklós Kóródi (korodim@autonomia.hu).

The Autonómia Foundation is an independent, private foundation established in 1990 to strengthen civil society, support excluded groups and, above all, promote Roma integration. Its aim is to promote the development of civil society in Hungary, including Roma integration. It does this primarily by supporting civil initiatives in which people mobilize local resources to achieve their goals. Since its establishment, the Foundation has supported and implemented hundreds of Roma inclusion programs, participated in numerous research projects and has an extensive network of contacts. Detailed information on the Foundation's activities is available at www.autonomia.hu.

In writing this case study, we have collected and processed analyses and case studies on the educational situation of Roma from recent years. In some chapters we have also presented the experiences of relevant programmes of the Autonómia Foundation. In our analysis, we have mostly used national data, illustrated in some cases with specific local examples. In preparing this report, we relied heavily on a study by Tibor Béres and his co-author (Emőke Both) on operational anomalies in the child protection system, which was completed in 2025 and is currently in press.

Socio-economic situation of Roma in Hungary

The Roma population remains one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged and socially excluded groups in Hungary. Persistent inequalities in education, employment, housing and access to public services are reinforced by residential and educational segregation. A significant proportion of Roma families live in deprived and segregated settlements characterised by poor living conditions and limited access to services. According to the latest data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), 64,5% of Roma people were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2024, compared with 61.5% in 2023.

Why is it important to invest in the wellbeing and social inclusion of Roma children?

Investing in Roma children's wellbeing and social inclusion is essential for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and ensuring equal opportunities. Roma children are disproportionately exposed to poverty, material deprivation and educational disadvantage, while segregation further limits their future prospects. As the Roma population is considerably younger than the national average, today's children will form an important part of Hungary's future workforce. Ensuring access to quality, non-segregated education, healthcare and social support is therefore not only a matter of children's rights and social justice, but also a long-term investment in Hungary's demographic, economic and social sustainability.

Demographic considerations

Hungary has no single official figure for the number of Roma children because census data are based on voluntary self-identification, and many Roma do not declare their ethnicity due to fear of discrimination, distrust of public authorities, or uncertainty about the purpose of ethnic data collection. As a result, official statistics are widely acknowledged to underestimate the size of the Roma population, particularly among children.

According to the 2022 population census, no separate publicly available data are provided on the number of Roma children by age group. The most recent detailed demographic information therefore relies on the 2011 census and subsequent demographic research. The 2011 census recorded 315,583 Roma, representing 3.18% of Hungary's population, compared to 205,720 in the 2001 census. However, demographers and Roma organisations generally estimate that the actual Roma population is between 700,000 and 900,000 people, or approximately 7-9% of the total population, while some local estimates suggest an even higher figure of around 887,000 people (9.2%).

The available evidence consistently shows that the Roma population is substantially younger than the non-Roma population. The proportion of Roma among newborns is estimated to be 17-20%, meaning that approximately every fifth or sixth child born in Hungary is Roma. Child-rights organisations similarly estimate that Roma children account for around 13% of all children in the country. Based on Hungary's child population (approximately 1.7-1.8 million), this suggests that there are roughly 200,000-250,000 Roma children in Hungary. Although this is not an official statistical figure, it represents the most widely accepted estimate, combining census data, birth statistics, and independent demographic analyses.

Hungary, regional inequalities closely mirror the geographical distribution of the Roma population, with the most significant disparities concentrated in areas with a high Roma population.

The most developed regions are Budapest and its agglomeration, Győr-Moson-Sopron, and, to some extent, Vas and Komárom-Esztergom counties. In contrast, the most disadvantaged areas are concentrated in north-eastern Hungary (Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, and parts of Heves), as well as in parts of Southern Transdanubia, particularly Baranya, Somogy and Zala. Among the EU's NUTS 2 regions, per capita GDP in Észak-Alföld and Észak-Magyarország has consistently remained at around 60-65% of the EU average, while the Budapest region is above the EU average.

Income and employment disparities follow a similar pattern. According to KSH and TÁRKI data, median income in the poorest districts - predominantly in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and Baranya - is substantially lower than in Budapest and Western Transdanubia, while unemployment is often two to three times higher.

This regional pattern is particularly relevant for the Roma population. Research indicates that a significant proportion of Roma live in the most disadvantaged counties of Northern Hungary (Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, Heves and Nógrád), parts of the Northern Great Plain (particularly Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg), and Southern Transdanubia (Baranya and Somogy).

These are also the areas where unemployment and child poverty are highest, incomes are lowest, and educational outcomes are weakest. The most disadvantaged districts are home to a high proportion of segregated or highly segregated schools, often with a high share of Roma pupils.

Overall, there is a strong link between regional underdevelopment and the spatial concentration of the Roma population. The socio-economic development of Hungary's peripheral regions therefore cannot be achieved without Roma inclusion, while the sustainable social advancement of Roma communities depends on the development of these disadvantaged regions.[1]

Administrative data also demonstrate the overrepresentation of Roma children in vulnerable situations. According to the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), although Roma children make up approximately 13% of Hungary's child population, they account for 58% of children living in residential state care, highlighting the cumulative effects of poverty, discrimination, and social exclusion.

The uncertainty surrounding demographic data has several causes. During fieldwork, Roma respondents frequently report that they avoid declaring their ethnicity because of fear of discrimination or a general lack of trust in state institutions. Many are also unaware that Hungarian censuses allow respondents to indicate multiple ethnic identities. Political factors may further discourage ethnic self-identification. Although the census and the electoral register are legally separate systems, many Roma citizens believe that declaring their ethnicity may influence their voting rights. This perception has been reinforced by political mobilisation around the minority electoral register during recent parliamentary elections, contributing to continued mistrust of state data collection.

Roma child poverty

Roma child poverty in Hungary is widespread, deep, and multidimensional, and remains one of the most persistent forms of social inequality. While official statistics rarely provide ethnicity-disaggregated data, combining national poverty indicators, Eurostat-based corrections, and Roma-focused research consistently shows that Roma children are disproportionately affected by income poverty and severe material deprivation compared to non-Roma children. Estimates based on household surveys suggest that around half or more of Roma children live in income poverty, while Roma households with children show some of the highest poverty risks in the country.

Broader poverty indicators confirm the severity of child poverty in Hungary. According to earlier Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO) data, child poverty reached 35-38% in the late 2000s. Although official figures in the 2010s indicated a decline, later Eurostat-based revisions revealed that child poverty had been significantly underestimated. For example, the previously reported 9.5% child poverty rate for 2020 was later corrected to 20.9%. Independent analyses further suggest that Roma children are overrepresented within this group, with poverty rates several times higher than those of non-Roma children.

1 References in the appendix, under the subheading 'Regional inequalities'

Roma child poverty is closely linked to severe material deprivation. International estimates (e.g. UNICEF and Eurostat-based analyses) indicate that a large proportion of Roma children experience multiple forms of deprivation, including overcrowded or substandard housing, food insecurity, and limited access to basic goods such as adequate clothing and heating. In addition, Roma children are heavily overrepresented in segregated settlements, where infrastructure is weak and access to services is limited. Census and survey data suggest that hundreds of thousands of people live in such segregated areas, which remain concentrated in disadvantaged regions of Hungary.

The causes of Roma child poverty are structural and mutually reinforcing. Low levels of parental education and weak labour-market attachment result in unstable or low-income employment, contributing to intergenerational poverty. Larger family sizes, combined with insufficiently targeted family support policies, further increase vulnerability. Residential and school segregation reinforce regional inequalities, limiting access to quality education and employment opportunities. Discrimination in both education and the labour market also plays a significant role. Roma children are more likely to attend segregated or lower-quality schools and are disproportionately overrepresented in child protection systems, often due to material deprivation rather than neglect.

The consequences of Roma child poverty extend across the life course. In education, poverty is associated with lower participation in early childhood education, learning delays, grade repetition, early school leaving, and tracking into low-status or special education pathways. In health, it contributes to poorer nutrition, higher rates of chronic illness, and increased mental health risks linked to stress and deprivation. In the labour market, childhood poverty strongly predicts lower educational attainment, higher unemployment, and long-term exclusion from stable employment. Socially, segregation limits contact with mainstream institutions, weakening social networks and reinforcing stigma and exclusion.

Research consistently highlights the intergenerational nature of poverty among Roma families. Poverty is transmitted across generations through a combination of structural disadvantages, including low educational attainment, limited employment opportunities, and persistent discrimination. In Hungary, family background has an exceptionally strong impact on life chances and educational outcomes, meaning that Roma children born into poverty are highly likely to remain in disadvantaged positions throughout their lives.

Despite the existence of national programmes aimed at reducing child poverty - such as the “Better for Children” strategy and later catching-up programmes - civil society and academic analyses suggest that these initiatives have had limited structural impact. While some local improvements have been achieved, poverty among Roma children remains deeply entrenched due to the persistence of segregation, inequality in public services, and insufficiently targeted social policy interventions.

Roma children and housing

Roma children in Hungary are disproportionately affected by poor housing conditions and residential segregation. Many Roma families live in geographically isolated settlements with inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded housing, and limited access to basic public services.

According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2022), 37% of Roma households in Hungary experience housing poverty, compared to 24% of the general population. Overcrowding is particularly severe: 91% of Roma households live in overcrowded homes, while 17% still lack access to piped drinking water, compared to only 2% of the overall population.

Residential segregation remains a long-standing problem. Although several settlement clearance programmes were implemented during the socialist period and four rounds of EU-funded desegregation programmes have been launched in recent decades, these initiatives have had only limited impact. Around 1,300-1,600 segregated settlements still exist across the country, most of them located in small villages in the north-eastern and south-western regions of Hungary. Independent evaluations conclude that these programmes have improved housing conditions in some locations but have not significantly reduced segregation or improved social integration.

Legally speaking, children should not be removed from their families on the grounds of the family's financial situation (poverty). Nevertheless, in many cases of removal, the real underlying factor is the family's housing situation. At the same time, due to a lack of capacity within the care system, no decisions are currently being made in such cases either.

Poor housing conditions have a direct impact on children's health and well-being. Many homes are poorly insulated and rely on outdated wood- or coal-burning stoves, contributing to indoor and outdoor air pollution. Families often struggle to afford heating, especially following recent increases in energy and food prices. Roma households also face greater risks of utility arrears and electricity disconnections, while limited access to affordable housing and discrimination in the housing market make it difficult to move to better living conditions. As a result, many Roma children continue to grow up in overcrowded, environmentally disadvantaged neighbourhoods that negatively affect their health, educational opportunities, and overall quality of life.

Roma children and healthcare

Roma children in Hungary continue to experience significantly poorer health outcomes than the general population, largely due to poverty, inadequate housing conditions, limited access to healthcare services, and discrimination. According to the 2025 Roma Civil Monitor, these inequalities are primarily driven by the social determinants of health rather than biological factors.

Families living in segregated settlements often have limited access to primary healthcare because disadvantaged regions face persistent shortages of general practitioners, health visitors, and other healthcare professionals. Although improving access to primary healthcare is included among the objectives of the National Roma Strategic Framework, the report concludes that existing measures are insufficient and fail to address the structural barriers affecting Roma communities.

The health of Roma children is also affected by poor living conditions. Overcrowded housing, lack of basic infrastructure, inadequate heating, and environmental pollution increase the risk of respiratory diseases and other chronic health problems. Food insecurity and poverty contribute to unhealthy nutrition, while limited access to preventive services further widens health inequalities. Although childhood vaccination coverage in Hungary remains generally high, access to preventive healthcare in disadvantaged rural areas is hindered by the shortage of healthcare professionals and the unequal geographical distribution of services.

In recent months, the increasingly widespread disease of syphilis has been receiving a great deal of public attention in Hungary. Unfortunately, there are an increasing number of cases where newborns contract the disease from their mothers whilst still in the womb, which not only poses a direct health risk but also makes it impossible for the newborn to be put up for adoption.

Drug use is not a new phenomenon, but experience shows that it is affecting increasingly younger people. Moreover, these new types of drugs (cathinones) lead to addiction and physical decline much more rapidly. Neither the regulatory (legal) nor the institutional environment is adequate for prevention, nor – more importantly – for treatment and rehabilitation, resulting in an increasing number of young people in society who are completely broken down.

Discrimination remains an important barrier to healthcare. The Roma Civil Monitor highlights that experiences of prejudice and unequal treatment within healthcare institutions contribute to mistrust of the healthcare system and discourage some Roma families from seeking timely medical care. Mental health issues, including stress and anxiety associated with persistent poverty, discrimination, and social exclusion, are also recognised as growing concerns, while access to appropriate psychological support remains limited. The report further notes that the National Roma Strategic Framework pays insufficient attention to these issues and does not include specific measures addressing discrimination in healthcare, child mental health, sexual and reproductive health, or the particular needs of children with disabilities and neurodevelopmental conditions.

Roma children and education

Roma children in Hungary continue to face significant educational disadvantages from early childhood through secondary education. One of the main challenges is school segregation, which remains widespread despite policy efforts and international criticism. According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2021), 44% of Roma children aged 6-15 attended schools where most or all students were Roma.

Although this represents a decrease compared to 2016, segregation remains among the highest in Europe. Segregated schools generally provide lower-quality education due to lower funding, fewer experienced teachers, lower academic expectations, and limited educational opportunities, resulting in poorer academic performance and reduced chances of continuing to higher levels of education.

On a positive note, however, it is worth mentioning the early childhood development programmes funded by the EU: 'Focus on the Child' and 'Sure Start' children's centres. Funding totalling some ten billion forints[2] (appr. 27 million EUR) was allocated to these programmes under several (10+) funding schemes over the course of 19 years at more than 150 locations, reaching tens of thousands children.

Educational inequality is reflected in high dropout rates. In 2021, approximately 62% of Roma young people aged 18-24 were early school leavers, compared to only 12% of the overall Hungarian population. Consequently, Roma youth are also much more likely to be NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), with estimates ranging from 40% to over 50%, while the rate among non-Roma youth is below 15%. Regional disparities are also significant, with the highest rates of early school leaving found in North Hungary, where the Roma population is relatively large.

The main causes of these educational disadvantages include poverty, residential and school segregation, discrimination, and low expectations within the education system. Roma girls face additional barriers, as early family formation and childcare responsibilities often interrupt their education, particularly in rural areas. Experts emphasize that reducing segregation, improving access to inclusive and high-quality education, expanding mentoring programmes and scholarships, and providing flexible learning opportunities are essential steps to improve educational outcomes and reduce inequalities affecting Roma children and young people.

Examples and life stories[3]

A case reported by a civil society organisation illustrates how the assessment and placement of children with special educational needs (SEN) can contribute to educational disadvantage. Two siblings, in grades 8 and 6, were assessed and classified as having SEN and subsequently placed in an SEN class, where the older child, despite having better abilities, received very limited academic instruction and had poor prospects of further education. When a third child from the same family developed behavioural difficulties, the family was also encouraged to consider an SEN placement; however, after the civil organisation recommended waiting, the child was found to have good abilities and was not placed in the class. The case illustrates how delayed or inappropriate assessment and the use of SEN classes may reinforce educational segregation and limit children's future opportunities.

The research also identified barriers to early developmental support for children living in segregated settlements. Some children start kindergarten later than the usual age, while others are not referred for specialist assessment even when developmental difficulties are suspected. Specialist examinations may only be available in a distant town, making access difficult for families without sufficient resources or transport. As a result, children may miss the developmental support they need before starting school, and the resulting learning gap can later contribute to placement in segregated classes and poorer educational outcomes.

2 There is no official table available containing detailed data on all grant schemes. This calculation is a compilation of the figures for each grant scheme.
3 Béres, Tibor - Both, Emőke: Anomalies and Critical Points: Encounters between the Child Protection System and Children Living in Segregated, Settlement-like Environments. Manuscript.

Roma children and other services

Roma children in Hungary have formal access to a range of public services beyond education and health, including school transport, subsidised or free meals, counselling services, and after-school programmes. However, access remains highly uneven and is strongly influenced by territorial inequalities, poverty, and residential segregation.

Although school segregation and so-called structural discrimination are well-known and well-documented phenomena, there is not much information available on discrimination not linked to educational institutions. It is important to emphasise that if both the place of residence and the educational institution are segregated, then - in the absence of interaction - the likelihood of discrimination is, in practice and logically, lower.

Free or subsidised school meals are among the most widely used support measures. Although eligibility is not Roma-specific, Roma children are overrepresented among beneficiaries due to higher poverty rates. However, availability and quality vary significantly across municipalities, and in disadvantaged rural areas limited local capacity can restrict access. School transport is formally available in rural regions where distance to schools requires it, but in practice services are often irregular or insufficient. This particularly affects children living in segregated settlements, where limited mobility can contribute to absenteeism and early school leaving.

Among after-school and educational support services, “tanoda” programmes play a key role. These community-based initiatives provide after-school tutoring, mentoring, meals, and psychosocial support for disadvantaged children, many of whom are Roma. “Tanoda” services are widely recognised as effective in reducing educational disadvantage and supporting school engagement. While the programmes remain dependent on state and EU funding, their financing has become somewhat more predictable in recent years through multi-year budget cycles and renewed national-level support schemes, although sustainability and geographical coverage remain uneven. Counselling and psychosocial services are formally available through school psychology networks and child welfare services, but access is limited in practice, particularly in underserved rural areas. Staff shortages and overburdened systems mean that Roma children in disadvantaged schools often receive insufficient individual support.

Support for Roma parents

The income situation of many Roma parents in Hungary remains significantly less favourable than that of the general population. Although Roma employment has improved over the past decade, largely due to economic growth and public employment schemes, employment rates remain substantially lower than among non-Roma, while many Roma adults work in low-paid, insecure or informal jobs. Roma women are particularly disadvantaged, as they are less likely to be employed and more likely to leave the labour market for extended periods due to childcare responsibilities. Consequently, many Roma households experience persistent poverty despite having employed family members.

Hungary provides a range of family benefits that are formally available to all citizens, including Roma families. These include family allowance, childcare benefits (CSED, GYED and GYES), free school textbooks for all pupils in public education, free or subsidised school meals for eligible children, and the regular child protection allowance. However, the effectiveness of these measures in reducing poverty among Roma families is limited. The monthly family allowance ranges from approximately HUF 12,200 to HUF 16,000 per child**,** depending on the number of children in the household and certain family circumstances, and has remained unchanged since 2008. As a result, its real value has been substantially eroded by inflation. In addition, several major family support schemes-such as housing subsidies and tax-based family benefits-primarily benefit middle-income households with stable employment and formal income, making them less accessible to many Roma families living in poverty or informal employment.

Work-life balance measures also benefit Roma parents less than the general population. While childcare benefits are legally available to all eligible parents, earnings-related benefits require a stable employment history, excluding many Roma women with interrupted or informal employment. Access to childcare services remains uneven, particularly in disadvantaged rural areas where many Roma families live, limiting mothers' opportunities to return to work.

There are no nationwide programmes specifically designed to support Roma parents in their children's education. All pupils in public education receive school textbooks free of charge, while children from disadvantaged families are also eligible for free or subsidised school meals and other needs-based forms of support. Scholarship programmes are available for low-income students, including many Roma children. However, because educational inequalities accumulate from an early age, many Roma children leave school before they can benefit from these opportunities. Civil society organisations therefore play an important role by providing mentoring, parental support, after-school programmes and community-based educational services, although these initiatives remain local and cannot compensate for the structural shortcomings of the public system.

Roma children and antigypsyism

Roma children in Hungary are exposed to antigypsyism across multiple areas of life, including education, child protection, access to services, and everyday social interactions. Although discrimination is formally prohibited, research and civil society reports consistently show that ethnic bias continues to shape institutional practices and outcomes, often in indirect and structural ways rather than through explicit exclusion.

In education, antigypsyism is closely linked to segregation and unequal treatment. Roma children are disproportionately placed in segregated schools or classes, where they are more likely to face lower expectations, reduced access to quality teaching, and fewer opportunities for participation in school life. In some cases, discriminatory practices also appear in the form of misdiagnosis of special educational needs, which can contribute to overrepresentation of Roma children in segregated or special education settings. These patterns limit educational attainment and reinforce long-term inequality.

Child protection and welfare systems also reflect discriminatory dynamics. Research indicates that Roma families are more likely to come into contact with child protection services, often in contexts of poverty. Civil society reports have documented cases where children are removed from families due to material deprivation or inadequate housing conditions, despite legal prohibitions against removal solely on economic grounds. At the same time, there are also concerns about under-intervention in cases of domestic violence in marginalised settlements, where authorities may underestimate risks due to biased assumptions about social norms in Roma communities.

Access to public services, including healthcare, counselling, and social support, is also affected by indirect discrimination. Roma families in segregated or disadvantaged areas often experience reduced service quality and limited availability of professionals. Trust in institutions is frequently low, partly due to previous negative experiences, which further reduces the likelihood of seeking assistance or legal remedy.

In access to justice, Roma children are formally protected under national and EU law, but practical barriers remain significant. Limited legal awareness, dependence on adults, and complex administrative procedures restrict effective access. Civil society organisations often play a key role in supporting Roma families in navigating legal and administrative systems, particularly in cases involving discrimination or child protection.

In addition to institutional discrimination, Roma children also face everyday antigypsyism in school and community environments, including stereotyping, social exclusion, and lower expectations from teachers and peers. These experiences are often embedded in broader patterns of residential segregation, which separate Roma and non-Roma children from early childhood and reinforce social distance.

Prevention of Roma family separation

Although the Hungarian Child Protection Act explicitly prohibits removing children from their families solely because of poverty, evidence from civil society organisations and recent research indicates that material deprivation continues to play a significant role in child removals affecting Roma families. According to Béres-Both (2025) and the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), Roma families are disproportionately affected by child protection interventions due to the combined effects of poverty, discrimination, and institutional bias. These structural disadvantages contribute to the overrepresentation of Roma children in the child protection system.

Anti-Roma discrimination (antigypsyism) is reflected in several stages of the child protection process. Research points to ethnic bias in access to preventive family support services, the disproportionate identification of Roma children as having special educational needs, and unequal treatment by public authorities. Civil society organisations have also documented a "double standard" in child protection practice: in some segregated Roma communities, authorities may tolerate poor living conditions or domestic violence for extended periods, assuming that families have a higher "tolerance threshold." At the same time, severe material deprivation or inadequate housing may later be interpreted as parental neglect, despite legal safeguards prohibiting removals based solely on poverty.

While Hungarian child protection policy formally prioritises keeping children within their biological families, the implementation of family preservation measures remains weak. Professionals generally agree that preventing family separation is in the child's best interest, yet preventive social services are often understaffed and lack the capacity to provide intensive support. When children are removed, reintegration into the family is frequently hindered by unrealistic administrative requirements. Parents may be required to renovate their homes, secure formal employment, or significantly improve their housing conditions within a short period, despite receiving little or no practical assistance from child welfare services. As a result, many families lose confidence in the system, and children remain in state care for prolonged periods. In practice, civil society organisations often provide the mediation, counselling, and social support that public institutions are unable to deliver.

The child protection system also faces significant capacity problems. Approximately 21,000 children enter the child protection system each year, while around 19,000 children currently live in long-term care. Experts estimate a shortage of approximately 2,000 foster parents, resulting in increasing pressure on the existing foster care system. Between 2012 and 2022**,** the number of foster parents caring for six or more children increased by 71%**,** illustrating the growing strain on the system. Although official statistics do not record the ethnicity of children in care, available evidence suggests that these structural shortcomings disproportionately affect Roma children because of their overrepresentation among socially disadvantaged families.

Examples and life stories[4]

A case documented by a Hungarian civil society organisation illustrates the interaction between poverty, domestic violence, and systemic failures. A Roma mother (*from a small-town in North Hungary, 40 km East of Budapest, segregated settlement*) sought help after repeated domestic abuse, hoping to rebuild her life through temporary accommodation. Although child protection authorities had already decided six months earlier that the children should be placed in care, the decision could not be implemented because of the shortage of foster parents. When an emergency removal finally took place following a violent incident, the siblings were separated and placed in three different locations, causing additional trauma that could likely have been avoided through earlier and better-planned intervention.

Civil society organisations also report that, despite the legal prohibition, poverty-related factors continue to influence child removals in practice. Conversely, in cases involving domestic violence or neglect, interventions are sometimes delayed because professionals underestimate the seriousness of the situation in segregated Roma communities. These examples highlight the need for stronger preventive family support, greater investment in community-based services, improved reintegration assistance, and measures to eliminate discriminatory practices within the child protection system.

4 Béres, Tibor - Both, Emőke: *Anomalies and Critical Points: Encounters between the Child Protection System and Children Living in Segregated, Settlement-like Environments*. Manuscript.

Participation and justice for Roma children

There is no official data in Hungary on the representation of Roma children in student councils or other school-based participatory structures, as ethnicity is not recorded in these settings. This lack of data reflects the broader invisibility of Roma children in formal participation mechanisms within the education system.

Available evidence from research and civil society organisations suggests that Roma children face multiple structural barriers to participation in school life. Educational segregation remains a key factor: Roma students are disproportionately enrolled in disadvantaged or segregated schools where student councils and similar bodies often have limited influence and participation is largely formal rather than meaningful. In such contexts, opportunities for developing civic skills and engaging in democratic school governance are restricted.

Lower levels of institutional trust, experiences of discrimination, and weaker school-family relationships further reduce Roma children's participation in formal and informal decision-making processes in schools. In many cases, participation occurs primarily through informal peer networks rather than structured institutional channels.

Access to justice is formally guaranteed for all children, including Roma children, but practical access is limited by low legal awareness, dependence on adults to initiate procedures, and the complexity of institutional systems. Roma families often rely on civil society organisations for legal support and advocacy in cases related to education, discrimination, or child protection.

Civil society reports also indicate that Roma children are underrepresented in leadership roles within schools and overrepresented among pupils with disciplinary measures or early school leaving risks, particularly in segregated educational settings.

Roma children in the National Roma Strategic Framework

The Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy (2020-2030), which serves as the country's National Roma Strategic Framework (NRSF), includes several measures that are relevant to Roma children, particularly in the areas of education, child poverty, health, and housing. However, according to the 2025 Roma Civil Monitor report, the strategy mainly addresses Roma as part of the broader population living in poverty rather than through targeted measures specifically designed for Roma children. This mainstreaming approach makes it difficult to assess whether the strategy effectively reduces inequalities affecting Roma children.

The strategy recognises the importance of reducing educational disadvantages and improving access to early childhood education, preventing early school leaving, and supporting disadvantaged pupils. Nevertheless, the report concludes that implementation has been limited and has not resulted in significant progress.

School segregation remains widespread, educational inequalities persist, and children living in segregated settlements continue to face serious barriers to accessing quality education. Similarly, although reducing child poverty is one of the declared objectives of the strategy, the measures are not sufficiently targeted to address the structural causes of poverty affecting Roma families.

The Roma Civil Monitor also highlights weaknesses in governance and implementation. Many objectives are formulated in general terms, without measurable indicators, clear responsibilities, or adequate monitoring mechanisms. Local authorities often lack both the capacity and the political commitment to implement inclusive policies, while cooperation with Roma civil society remains limited. The report therefore concludes that, although the National Roma Strategic Framework formally addresses the needs of Roma children, its implementation has so far been insufficient to substantially reduce child poverty, educational inequalities, or residential segregation. Stronger anti-segregation measures, targeted support for disadvantaged children, and more effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms are still needed.

Roma children in the Child Guarantee – National Action Plan

Hungary's National Action Plan for the European Child Guarantee recognises children living in poverty and social exclusion as a priority group, including many Roma children. However, Roma children are not consistently identified as a separate target group, despite being disproportionately affected by poverty, educational disadvantage, inadequate housing, and limited access to quality public services. Instead, the Action Plan primarily applies a general approach to disadvantaged children, assuming that Roma children will benefit indirectly from broader social inclusion measures.

Despite the logic outlined above - and as stated in the Action Plan - the Hungarian government launched a targeted programme in 2019, implemented by the Maltese Charity Service, in the 300 most disadvantaged localities, which was largely focused on social policy development and child care. The programme, which was presented as a clear success under the Fidesz government, has now been revealed to have failed to deliver the whole and necessary scale of child care services to settlements inhabited mainly by Roma children. This programme, along with expert opinions, reinforces the view that the general and financial development of the child protection system - which has deteriorated in every respect - must now, following the change of government, be the priority, because in the absence of certain elements of basic and specialist care, Roma children cannot receive adequate care either.

The Action Plan includes measures to expand access to early childhood education and care, improve educational opportunities, strengthen child welfare services, and provide free or subsidised school meals. While these interventions are relevant, civil society organisations have questioned their adequacy. According to the 2025 Roma Civil Monitor and assessments by Eurochild, the document largely describes existing policies rather than introducing new, targeted measures to address the structural disadvantages faced by Roma children. It also lacks measurable targets, clear implementation responsibilities, timelines, and a robust monitoring framework.

Furthermore, the Action Plan does not sufficiently address key barriers affecting Roma children, including school and residential segregation, discrimination, unequal access to quality education and healthcare, and the persistence of child poverty in marginalised communities. Civil society organisations also point to the limited involvement of Roma organisations in the design and monitoring of the Action Plan.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Roma children in Hungary remain significantly disadvantaged across all major life domains, including demography, poverty, housing, health, education, and access to services. Due to voluntary self-identification in census data, there are no precise official figures on the number of Roma children; however, the most widely accepted estimates suggest around 200,000-250,000 Roma children, with Roma making up approximately 13% of the child population. Demographic evidence consistently shows a much younger age structure among Roma compared to the non-Roma population, with 17-20% of newborns estimated to be Roma.

Roma children are disproportionately affected by poverty and severe material deprivation. Estimates indicate that around half or more of Roma children live in income poverty, far above the national average. Child poverty in Hungary has been significantly underestimated in official statistics, with Eurostat-based revisions doubling previously reported rates (e.g. 9.5% revised to 20.9% for 2020). Poverty is closely linked to overcrowded and segregated housing conditions, limited access to services, and regional disadvantage. Approximately 1,300-1,600 segregated settlements remain in Hungary, particularly in rural and economically deprived regions.

Educational inequality is severe and persistent. Roma children are heavily overrepresented in segregated schools, where 44% attend majority-Roma institutions. Early school leaving rates among Roma youth are extremely high (around 62%), contributing to very low tertiary attainment and weak labour-market prospects. Similar inequalities appear in health, where poverty, poor housing, and limited access to services contribute to worse outcomes and higher exposure to chronic and mental health risks.

Structural factors driving inequality include intergenerational poverty, residential and school segregation, discrimination, and weak access to quality services. These factors reinforce each other and create persistent disadvantage across generations. Roma children are also significantly overrepresented in child protection systems, including residential care.

Across policy areas, national strategies such as the National Roma Strategic Framework and the Child Guarantee Action Plan include relevant objectives but are generally weak in implementation, lack measurable targets, and rarely provide Roma-specific interventions. Civil society monitoring consistently concludes that structural inequalities remain largely unchanged, particularly in relation to segregation, poverty, and unequal access to services.

Recommendations

- Strengthen the legal enforcement and systematic monitoring of school admission practices that contribute to the maintenance of segregation, including stricter oversight of catchment area arrangements and enrolment procedures.
- Ensure the consistent and effective implementation of desegregation measures, with clear responsibilities, timelines, and accountability mechanisms at national and local levels.
- Increase the number of teachers and support professionals (school psychologists, developmental teachers, special education teachers, and social workers) in schools located in disadvantaged and segregated areas, alongside targeted incentive schemes to address staff shortages.
- Strengthen cooperation between schools, child protection services, and social welfare systems to ensure integrated responses to the complex needs of disadvantaged children.
- Expand early childhood development and family support services (e.g. Sure Start-type programmes) nationwide, ensuring stable, long-term financing rather than project-based funding cycles.
- Improve the targeting, transparency, and monitoring of additional per-student funding allocated to disadvantaged learners, ensuring that resources effectively reach schools with the highest needs.
- Investigate and sanction forms of "hidden" segregation, including the artificial inflation of special educational needs (SEN) classifications that contribute to the indirect segregation of Roma children.
- The fight against anti-Roma sentiment and discrimination features regularly and repeatedly in public discourse, and there are encouraging signs, for example, regarding the portrayal of Roma in the media and their political participation. However, it remains a challenge to this day to involve the Roma intelligentsia in decision-making concerning Roma issues, as well as in the preparation and implementation of programmes. This would primarily require institutional (organisational) structures that enable the Roma to form their own independent opinions and represent their interests, going beyond political interests and party affiliations.

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KSH – Területi statisztikák, jövedelmi és munkaerőpiaci adatok

1. KSH, STADAT táblák (regionális GDP, foglalkoztatás, jövedelmek): https://www.ksh.hu/stadat
2. Megyei, járási profilok (népesség, foglalkoztatás, jövedelmek): https://www.ksh.hu/helyi_statisztikak

EU / Eurostat – Regionális GDP, NUTS2 adatok (Észak-Magyarország, Észak-Alföld)

1. Eurostat, regional GDP per capita: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database → „Regional economic accounts”
2. Magyar régiók összevetése EU-átlaggal (pl. Észak-Alföld, Észak-Magyarország vs. Közép-Magyarország).

MTA KRTK (HCSO–MTA) – Roma népesség területi eloszlása, szegregáció

1. Kertesi Gábor – Kézdi Gábor: A roma népesség Magyarországon (több tanulmány, térképekkel az északkeleti, dél-dunántúli koncentrációról).
2. Válogatás: https://kti.krtk.hu/kiadvanyok/muhelytanulmanyok/
3. Ladányi János – Szelényi Iván munkái a szegregációról és etnikai térbeli koncentrációról.

TÁRKI – Szegénység, egyenlőtlenségek, roma koncentráció

1. TÁRKI: Háztartás Monitor, illetve szegénység- és egyenlőtlenség-kutatások, regionális bontásban: https://www.tarki.hu/hu/research
2. Célzottan: tanulmányok a gyermekszegénységről, területi lejtőről, roma jelenlétű kistérségekről.

Oktatási szegregáció, kompetenciamérés

1. Oktatási Hivatal: Országos kompetenciamérés eredményei, iskolák/járások szerinti bontásban: https://www.oktatas.hu/kozneveles/meresek/kompetenciameres
2. Ercse Kriszta – Radó Péter és mások tanulmányai az iskolai szegregáció területi mintázatairól (pl. Civil Közoktatási Platform, NESET, CEU kiadványok).