CASE STUDIES 2026:
Roma children - Preventing child poverty and family separation
Romania Case

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Introduction

Sastipen – Roma Center for Health Policies is a national Roma-led civil society organization established in Romania in 2007, dedicated to promoting Roma inclusion, health equity, and social justice. The organization coordinates a nationwide network of approximately 470 Roma Health Mediators and supports 30 Integrated Community Service Centers operating in Roma communities across the country. Through direct community engagement, Sastipen facilitates access to healthcare, education, and social protection services for vulnerable Roma families. In addition, the organization conducts research, policy analysis, and advocacy on issues related to child poverty, discrimination, family vulnerability, and access to services, applying a participatory, community-based, and rights-based approach.

This case study applies a mixed-methods, community-based research approach, combining desk research with qualitative fieldwork. The study draws on a review of EU and national policy documents, legislation, statistical data, and existing research on Roma children, child poverty, and family separation. Qualitative data were collected through 15 semi-structured interviews and 5 focus group discussions involving Roma Health Mediators, Roma School Mediators, social workers, education and health professionals, representatives of civil society organizations, Roma community leaders, and Roma parents. In total, approximately 50 stakeholders participated in the consultation process. The research covered ten Roma communities across Romania, including both traditional and more assimilated communities, selected to reflect diverse socio-economic conditions, settlement patterns, and levels of institutional engagement. These communities were selected from the counties of Gorj and Mehedinți in the South-West Oltenia Region, the county of Neamț in the North-East Region, and the counties of Tulcea and Constanța in the South-East Region. The methodology sought to ensure that the perspectives and lived experiences of Roma communities were adequately reflected throughout the analysis.

Roma represent the largest ethnic minority in Romania, with official census data significantly underestimating their actual number due to persistent underreporting. Despite progress in recent decades, Roma population continues to experience disproportionately high levels of poverty, social exclusion, and discrimination. According to European and national studies, Roma households are considerably more likely than the general population to live in severe material deprivation, inadequate housing, and segregated communities, often lacking access to basic utilities such as water, sanitation, and electricity.

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Employment rates among Roma population remain substantially lower than those of the majority population, with many adults engaged in informal, precarious, or seasonal work. Educational attainment is also significantly lower, with high rates of early school leaving, school segregation, and limited participation in early childhood education. Roma communities face important barriers in accessing healthcare and social protection services, including geographical isolation, administrative obstacles, and discriminatory attitudes. Structural and institutional antigypsyism continues to affect Roma across all areas of life, reinforcing intergenerational cycles of poverty and exclusion. These socio-economic disadvantages have particularly severe consequences for Roma children, who remain among the most vulnerable groups in Romanian society.

Investing in the wellbeing and social inclusion of Roma children is essential to breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty, exclusion, and discrimination. Roma children represent one of the youngest and most disadvantaged population groups in Romania, facing multiple and overlapping barriers in accessing education, healthcare, adequate housing, and social protection. Ensuring equal opportunities for Roma children is not only a matter of social justice and fundamental rights, but also a prerequisite for sustainable social and economic development. Early investment in inclusive, community-based, and culturally sensitive services can improve life outcomes, strengthen family resilience, and contribute to more cohesive and equitable societies.

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

Demographic considerations

Roma constitute the largest ethnic minority in Romania. According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, 569,477 people self-identified as Roma, representing approximately 3.4% of the total population. However, numerous national and international studies suggest that the actual Roma population is considerably higher, ranging between 1.2 and 2 million people, due to persistent underreporting linked to stigma and fear of discrimination. Consequently, the number of Roma children is also significantly underestimated in official statistics.

The Roma population in Romania is predominantly young compared to the general population. Demographic data indicate that approximately one-third of Roma are under the age of 15, while more than half are younger than 25 years old. In contrast, Romania's general population is characterized by demographic ageing. This youthful demographic profile highlights both the importance of investing in Roma children and the risks associated with persistent poverty and social exclusion.

Roma children live in diverse settings, including urban and rural areas, segregated neighborhoods, informal settlements, and mixed communities. Significant differences exist between traditional Roma communities and more assimilated groups in terms of family structures, living arrangements, educational participation, and interaction with public institutions. Many Roma children grow up in large households, often in conditions of overcrowding and material deprivation, particularly in marginalized rural settlements and urban informal communities.

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The diversity of Roma communities also influences children's experiences and opportunities. While some families have successfully integrated into mainstream social and economic life, many continue to face multiple and intersecting disadvantages related to poverty, inadequate housing, limited access to quality services, and discrimination.

A Roma Health Mediator from a rural community in southern Romania described the situation as follows: *"Most families in the community have many children, and despite parents' efforts, poverty often limits their access to education, healthcare and extracurricular activities. Children grow up with fewer opportunities than their non-Roma peers from the very beginning."*

Roma child poverty

Roma children in Romania continue to experience disproportionately high levels of poverty and social exclusion and remain among the most vulnerable population groups in the country. Although disaggregated national data on child poverty by ethnicity remain limited, available evidence from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) indicates that approximately 77% of Roma children in the European Union are at risk of poverty. In Romania, Roma households are significantly more likely than the general population to experience severe material deprivation, food insecurity, and inadequate living conditions.

Roma child poverty is multidimensional and extends far beyond low household income. In many marginalized Roma communities, children grow up in overcrowded dwellings lacking access to basic utilities such as running water, sanitation, electricity, or adequate heating. Many children live in segregated settlements characterized by poor infrastructure and limited access to public services. Poverty also manifests itself through inadequate nutrition, insufficient clothing, limited access to educational materials, restricted participation in extracurricular activities, and reduced access to quality healthcare and social services.

The causes of Roma child poverty are complex, cumulative, and deeply rooted in structural inequalities. High unemployment rates among Roma adults, precarious and informal employment, low educational attainment, territorial segregation, and persistent discrimination in the labor market significantly reduce families' economic opportunities. Administrative barriers, insufficient institutional outreach, and limited access to social protection further exacerbate vulnerability.

Evidence collected by Sastipen in Neamț County highlights the cumulative nature of these vulnerabilities. Research conducted among families with children at risk of separation revealed that many households simultaneously experience severe material deprivation, inadequate housing, unstable incomes, and limited access to support services. The findings indicate that persistent poverty, combined with insufficient preventive and family support services, significantly increases children's vulnerability to social exclusion and family crisis (Sastipen, 2025).

Family poverty is frequently transmitted across generations. Children raised in poor households are more likely to experience educational disadvantage, early school leaving, and limited employment opportunities later in life. As a result, poverty often becomes an intergenerational phenomenon, reinforced by structural antigypsyism and unequal access to quality services.

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Importantly, poverty should not in itself constitute a reason for separating a child from their family. However, when severe material deprivation is combined with inadequate housing, unstable income, and limited access to preventive services, families may enter situations of crisis that increase the likelihood of child protection intervention. Early material and social support is therefore essential to prevent poverty-related vulnerabilities from escalating into family separation.

A local Roma community leader from a traditional Roma settlement in southern Romania explained: *"Poverty affects almost every family in our community. Parents want their children to succeed, but many struggle to provide basic needs such as adequate food, school supplies, or transportation to school. When poverty persists across generations, children grow up seeing exclusion as normal. Without targeted support and real opportunities, many of them risk repeating the same cycle of poverty experienced by their parents and grandparents."*

These testimonials illustrate how poverty continues to shape life trajectories across generations in many Roma communities.

Roma children and housing

Housing conditions remain a significant factor shaping the wellbeing and social inclusion of Roma children in Romania. Many Roma families continue to live in inadequate and segregated housing, which negatively affects children's health, education, and development.

Residential segregation remains widespread, particularly in rural areas and marginalized urban neighborhoods. Many Roma children live in settlements located on the outskirts of localities, often characterized by poor infrastructure and limited access to public services. A considerable number of Roma families reside in informal settlements or in dwellings without legal tenure, exposing them to housing insecurity and, in some cases, the risk of forced evictions.

Overcrowding is a common feature of housing deprivation among Roma communities. Several family members, including children, frequently share a single room, limiting children's privacy, study opportunities, and overall wellbeing. Many households lack access to basic utilities such as running water, sanitation, sewage systems, or adequate heating. Such conditions increase children's exposure to respiratory and infectious diseases and negatively affect school attendance and educational outcomes.

Environmental hazards further aggravate vulnerability. Some Roma communities are located near landfills, industrial sites, or flood-prone areas, exposing children to significant environmental and health risks.

A Roma Health Mediator working in a rural community explained: *"Many children live in overcrowded houses without adequate heating or sanitation. During winter, some children miss school because they are sick or because families cannot afford to heat their homes. Housing deprivation affects every aspect of children's lives."*

Forced evictions represent an additional source of vulnerability for Roma children, particularly for families living in informal or segregated settlements without secure tenure.

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Eviction, or the persistent threat of eviction, can disrupt children's education, access to healthcare and social services, weaken family stability, and expose families to homelessness or relocation to even more marginalized areas. When adequate alternative housing and family support are not provided, housing insecurity can deepen poverty and place additional pressure on families already facing multiple forms of social exclusion.

A representative of a Roma civil society organization stated: *"For Roma children, forced eviction means much more than losing a home. It can mean changing school, losing access to services and moving to an even more marginalized area. For families already living in poverty, the threat of eviction creates additional instability and makes an already difficult situation even worse"* .

Housing deprivation and forced eviction may also increase the risk of family separation when homelessness or inadequate living conditions are assessed primarily as failures of parental care rather than as structural vulnerabilities requiring housing and social support.

Roma children and healthcare

Roma children in Romania continue to face significant health inequalities compared to the general population, largely as a result of poverty, inadequate living conditions, limited access to healthcare services, and persistent discrimination. Although the network of Roma Health Mediators has contributed to improving access to healthcare, important disparities remain.

Access to antenatal and postnatal care is uneven, particularly in marginalized rural communities, where some women experience difficulties in accessing regular medical consultations during pregnancy. Vaccination coverage among Roma children has improved in recent years; however, barriers such as lack of information, geographical isolation, administrative obstacles, and distrust of public institutions continue to affect immunization uptake in some communities.

Poor nutrition remains a major concern. Many Roma children grow up in households experiencing food insecurity, resulting in inadequate and unbalanced diets. Overcrowded housing and poor sanitation conditions also increase the risk of communicable diseases, including respiratory and gastrointestinal infections.

Roma children with disabilities often face multiple forms of exclusion, encountering barriers in accessing healthcare, rehabilitation, and specialized support services. Mental health needs are frequently overlooked, while limited availability of culturally sensitive counselling services further restricts access to appropriate support. Sexual and reproductive health education remains insufficient, particularly among adolescents living in traditional communities. In addition, neurodevelopmental conditions, including autism spectrum disorders and attention deficit disorders, are often underdiagnosed due to limited access to specialized assessment services.

A Roma Health Mediator explained: *"Many families seek medical assistance only when children's health problems become severe because they face transportation difficulties, lack financial resources, or have had negative experiences with public institutions."*

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Roma children and education

Despite important policy developments in recent years, Roma children in Romania continue to face significant barriers in accessing quality and inclusive education. Educational inequalities emerge from early childhood, as participation in early childhood education and care remains considerably lower among Roma children than among the general population. Financial constraints, limited availability of childcare services, lack of transportation, discrimination and insufficient information among parents often reduce enrolment in preschool education.

According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), Roma children continue to experience lower participation in early childhood education, higher rates of early school leaving, and lower educational attainment than their non-Roma peers. These disparities contribute to a persistent education gap and limit future employment opportunities and social mobility.

School segregation remains a significant barrier to equal educational opportunities for Roma children in Romania. Many continue to attend schools or classes with a high concentration of Roma pupils, often affected by poorer infrastructure, fewer educational resources, and limited learning opportunities. Such environments can reinforce existing inequalities, restrict interaction with children from different social backgrounds, and contribute to lower academic expectations.

Discrimination further compounds these disadvantages. Roma children may experience stereotypes, unequal treatment, bullying, and low expectations from teachers, affecting their confidence, sense of belonging, school participation, and academic progress. These experiences can also weaken parents' trust in schools and reduce their engagement with educational institutions. When discrimination intersects with poverty, segregation, and insufficient educational support, the cumulative impact can lead to irregular attendance, lower academic performance, disengagement from education, and an increased risk of early school leaving, further perpetuating educational and social inequalities.

Early school leaving disproportionately affects Roma children, particularly those living in marginalized rural communities and traditional Roma settlements. The long-term consequences of educational disengagement are also reflected in the very high proportion of young Roma who are neither in employment, education nor training (NEET). FRA data show that 56% of Roma aged 16–24 was NEET in the 2021 survey, compared with around 11% of their peers in the general population. More recent FRA data indicate some improvement, but the gap remains substantial, with 47% of young Roma and Travellers being NEET compared with 9% of the general population surveyed. Romania also recorded the highest overall NEET rate in the EU in 2025, at 19.2% among young people aged 15–29. Poverty, inadequate housing conditions, child labor, early marriage, and low parental educational attainment are among the main factors contributing to school dropout. Low academic performance is also common, reflecting the cumulative effects of poverty, irregular attendance, overcrowded housing, and limited access to educational support outside school.

A Roma School Mediator working in a marginalized rural community noted: "Many Roma children are highly motivated to learn, but poverty, lack of study space at home, and irregular attendance make it difficult for them to keep up with their peers. Some children miss school because they lack

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transportation, adequate clothing, or family support. Without additional educational and social support, many eventually disengage from school."

Roma children and other services

Access to services beyond education and healthcare remains uneven for many Roma children in Romania, particularly those living in marginalized rural communities, segregated neighborhoods, and informal settlements. Limited transportation, administrative barriers, insufficient information, geographical isolation, and discriminatory attitudes can restrict access to social assistance, child protection services, counselling, and afterschool programs. Experiences of discrimination and antigypsyism may also weaken Roma families' trust in public institutions and discourage them from seeking support, particularly when previous interactions with service providers have been perceived as stigmatizing or unequal. These barriers can further reinforce existing inequalities and increase children's vulnerability.

Transportation remains a major barrier, especially in rural areas where schools, healthcare facilities, and social services are often located far from Roma communities. The lack of affordable and reliable transport contributes to school absenteeism, reduced access to specialized services, and social isolation.

Although social assistance and child protection services are available nationwide, their accessibility and quality vary considerably across localities. In many marginalized communities, social services remain understaffed and insufficiently resourced, limiting their capacity to provide early intervention, family support, and preventive services. Outreach activities are often sporadic, and some Roma families encounter administrative barriers, lack of information, or discriminatory attitudes when accessing social benefits and child protection services. As a result, vulnerable families frequently receive support only after problems have escalated.

This gap in early intervention is particularly relevant to the prevention of family separation. When families do not receive timely assistance with housing, income, school attendance, healthcare, or parenting support, multiple vulnerabilities may accumulate until the situation is treated as a child protection crisis rather than a family support need.

Access to psychosocial support and counselling services is also limited. Many schools and communities lack school counsellors, psychologists, and culturally sensitive support services able to address the complex needs of children exposed to poverty, discrimination, or family hardship.

Afterschool programmes, community centers, and integrated community services have proven effective in improving educational outcomes, supporting families, and preventing school dropout. However, these services remain unevenly distributed and are often dependent on short-term project funding rather than sustainable public investment.

A representative of a local NGO working with vulnerable Roma families stated: *"Community-based support services can make a real difference in children's lives. When families have access to counselling, afterschool activities, parenting support, and social assistance, the risk of school dropout and family crisis decreases significantly. Unfortunately, many Roma communities still lack such services or rely exclusively on short-term NGO projects."*

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Support for Roma parents

The socio-economic situation of many Roma parents in Romania continues to be characterized by high levels of poverty, unstable employment, and dependence on social benefits. Despite some improvements in labor market participation, Roma adults remain disproportionately excluded from formal employment and are more likely to engage in informal, seasonal, or low-paid work. Limited educational attainment, territorial segregation, lack of local employment opportunities, and persistent discrimination significantly reduce families' income security.

Findings from the Roma Civil Monitor indicate that Roma continues to face major barriers in accessing decent and sustainable employment. Civil society reports highlight that many Roma parents experience precarious working conditions, insecure incomes, and limited access to active labor market measures, while discrimination remains a significant obstacle to labor market inclusion.

Social benefits, including the Minimum Inclusion Income, child allowances, heating subsidies, and other family support measures, constitute an important source of income for many vulnerable Roma households. However, two major challenges remain: access to these benefits and their adequacy in relation to the actual cost of living. Administrative barriers, insufficient information, lack of identity or property documents, and limited institutional outreach may prevent some families from receiving available support. At the same time, for households experiencing severe poverty, the level of social benefits is often insufficient to cover essential expenses such as food, housing, utilities, clothing, school-related costs, and transportation. This gap is particularly significant for larger families and households with unstable or informal incomes, meaning that social benefits may alleviate hardship without providing sufficient protection against persistent poverty and material deprivation.

The European Commission notes that Romania's social protection system continues to face shortcomings in both adequacy and coverage. In 2025, social transfers (excluding pensions) reduced the risk of poverty by only 18.8%, compared with an EU average of 34.4%, while expenditure on social protection remained among the lowest in the EU. These limitations are particularly relevant for vulnerable families with children, including Roma households, which often face multiple and cumulative costs related to food, housing, utilities, education, healthcare, and transportation. Consequently, even when families access available benefits, income support may alleviate immediate hardship without being sufficient to lift them out of poverty or prevent material deprivation.

Romanian legislation provides a range of family support measures, including parental leave, childcare allowances, and flexible work arrangements. Nevertheless, many Roma parents employed in the informal economy cannot effectively benefit from these measures due to their precarious employment status. Limited availability of childcare services, particularly in rural areas, also constrains parents' ability to reconcile work and family responsibilities.

A representative of a local Roma NGO explained: *"Most parents want to work and provide for their children, but many can only find temporary or informal jobs. Without stable employment and accessible family support services, families remain trapped in poverty despite their efforts."*

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Roma children and antigypsyism

Antigypsyism remains a pervasive and structural phenomenon in Romania, affecting Roma children across all areas of life and significantly undermining their rights, wellbeing, and future opportunities. Roma children are frequently exposed to both direct and indirect forms of discrimination from an early age, with experiences of exclusion occurring in education, healthcare, housing, social protection, and interactions with public institutions.

In education, antigypsyism manifests through school segregation, low expectations from teachers, bullying, and discriminatory attitudes from both peers and school staff. Many Roma children experience stigmatization because of their ethnic background, which negatively affects their self-esteem, school participation, and educational attainment. In some cases, Roma children continue to be disproportionately represented in segregated classes or schools, despite legislative measures prohibiting segregation.

In healthcare settings, Roma families often report discriminatory treatment, prejudicial attitudes, and a lack of culturally sensitive services. Such experiences may discourage families from seeking healthcare and contribute to distrust towards public institutions. Similar discriminatory practices have also been identified within social assistance and child protection systems, where poverty, overcrowded housing, and precarious living conditions are sometimes interpreted as parental neglect without sufficient consideration of structural inequalities and the impact of poverty.

In the context of child protection, such biases may have particularly serious consequences when structural poverty or culturally specific family arrangements influence assessments of parental capacity. Preventing unnecessary family separation therefore also requires child protection decisions to be free from antigypsyism and based on individualized, culturally informed assessments of the child's best interests.

Housing segregation further reinforces antigypsyism by physically isolating Roma communities from mainstream society and limiting access to quality public services. Children growing up in segregated settlements are frequently exposed to negative stereotypes and social stigma, which may affect their aspirations and sense of belonging.

Evidence from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and reports produced by Roma civil society organizations indicate that discrimination against Roma remains widespread in Romania. Structural and institutional antigypsyism continues to undermine the effective implementation of policies aimed at promoting Roma equality and inclusion.

An Inspector for Roma Education from a County School Inspectorate stated: *"Although important progress has been made, many Roma children still encounter stereotypes and lower expectations within the education system. Antigypsyism often operates in subtle ways, influencing teachers' attitudes, children's educational trajectories, and families' trust in public institutions. Combating discrimination requires continuous training, monitoring, and active involvement of Roma communities."*

Addressing antigypsyism requires comprehensive anti-discrimination measures, inclusive public policies, and sustained efforts to promote positive representations of Roma children and communities.

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Prevention of Roma family separation

Community stakeholders consulted during this research emphasized that early and coordinated interventions can play a crucial role in preventing the unnecessary separation of Roma children from their families. Several respondents provided examples of situations in which timely support enabled vulnerable families to overcome periods of crisis and maintain family unity.

In a number of Roma communities, multidisciplinary teams composed of social workers, Roma Health Mediators, Roma School Mediators, teachers, healthcare professionals, and representatives of local non-governmental organizations collaborated to provide integrated support to families experiencing severe poverty and social exclusion. These interventions were generally initiated following the identification of risk factors such as extreme material deprivation, school absenteeism, inadequate housing conditions, or difficulties in accessing healthcare and social protection services.

Support measures included assistance in obtaining identity documents and social benefits, access to emergency material assistance, housing support, parenting counselling, mediation with schools and healthcare providers, school reintegration measures, and regular home visits aimed at monitoring children's wellbeing. In several cases, local NGOs complemented public services by providing food packages, educational materials, psychosocial support, and referral to specialized services.

Respondents highlighted that such integrated and community-based approaches contributed significantly to stabilizing family situations, strengthening parental capacities, and reducing the need for child protection interventions. Stakeholders also stressed that the involvement of Roma mediators was particularly important in building trust between vulnerable families and public institutions, facilitating communication, and ensuring that families remained engaged throughout the support process.

However, research participants noted that these examples of good practice are not yet systematically available across the country. In many marginalized communities, preventive and family support services remain limited, fragmented, or dependent on short-term project funding, reducing their sustainability and long-term impact.

Romania has made important progress in the deinstitutionalization process and in promoting family- and community-based care. Current legislation emphasizes prevention, family preservation, and the development of integrated community services. However, the availability and quality of preventive services remain highly uneven across the country. In many marginalized Roma communities, access to parenting support, counselling, outreach services, and multidisciplinary interventions is limited or non-existent. Consequently, support is often provided only after situations have significantly deteriorated.

The research also suggests that institutional antigypsyism may influence decision-making processes. Stereotypes regarding Roma parenting practices, family size, and living arrangements may affect risk assessments and contribute to disproportionate interventions. Similar tendencies have been observed among other marginalized and racialized groups experiencing severe poverty and social exclusion, although Roma families remain particularly vulnerable due to the cumulative effects of discrimination and structural disadvantage.

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A representative of a local Roma NGO stated: *"In many cases, families do not need separation; they need support. When parents receive counselling, social assistance, housing support, and regular outreach services, most children can safely remain with their families. Prevention should always come before removal."*

Preventing unnecessary family separation requires sustained investment in early intervention, culturally sensitive family support services, and integrated community-based approaches that address both poverty and discrimination while prioritizing the best interests of the child.

Participation and justice for Roma children

Roma children in Romania continue to face significant barriers to meaningful participation in civic life and decision-making processes. Although national legislation guarantees children's right to participate in matters affecting them, opportunities for Roma children's active participation remain limited, particularly in marginalized and segregated communities.

Roma children are generally underrepresented in formal participatory structures such as Student Councils, school boards, and local youth initiatives. Poverty, discrimination, low self-confidence, and limited encouragement from schools and communities often reduce their participation. Experiences of school segregation, bullying, and stigmatization may further discourage Roma children from engaging in school governance and other civic activities.

Access to justice also remains challenging. Many Roma children and their families are insufficiently informed about their rights and available complaint mechanisms. Limited legal literacy, lack of access to legal aid, administrative barriers, and distrust in public institutions may prevent families from reporting cases of discrimination or rights violations. Children living in remote rural communities face additional obstacles due to geographical isolation and limited access to specialized support services.

Despite these challenges, an increasing number of Roma youth initiatives and civil society programmes have created opportunities for Roma children and young people to participate in civic life, develop leadership skills, and advocate for their rights. Youth clubs, peer education programmes, mentoring initiatives, and community-based projects implemented by Roma and pro-Roma organizations have contributed to strengthening children's self-esteem, civic competencies, and awareness of their rights. However, these initiatives remain largely project-based and require stronger institutional support to ensure sustainability and broader outreach.

A representative of a local Roma youth organization stated: *"When Roma children are encouraged to express their views and participate in decision-making, they become more confident and engaged in school and community life. However, many still need supportive environments where their voices are genuinely heard and valued."*

Strengthening inclusive participatory mechanisms, promoting legal literacy, combating discrimination, and expanding institutional support for Roma youth initiatives are essential to ensuring meaningful participation and effective access to justice for Roma children.

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Roma children in the National Roma Strategic Framework

Romania's National Roma Strategic Framework, adopted through Government Decision No. 560/2022 for the period 2022–2027, includes several provisions directly and indirectly targeting Roma children. The Strategy recognizes children and young people as priority groups and promotes an integrated approach addressing education, employment, health, housing, and social services. It acknowledges that Roma children are disproportionately affected by poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, and unequal access to essential services.

The Strategy explicitly addresses educational inequalities by setting objectives related to increasing participation in early childhood education, reducing school dropout, combating school segregation, and improving educational attainment among Roma children and youth. Measures such as expanding school mediation, strengthening inclusive education, supporting second-chance programs, and improving access to scholarships and educational support are envisaged.

Although child poverty is recognized as a major challenge affecting Roma communities, the Strategy does not establish specific quantitative targets on reducing Roma child poverty or systematically monitor child-specific poverty indicators. The link between poverty, inadequate housing, and risks of family separation is insufficiently addressed. Similarly, while the Strategy promotes integrated community services, it provides limited guidance on strengthening family support and child protection prevention services in marginalized Roma communities.

Overall, the measures included in the Strategy are relevant and broadly aligned with European policy objectives. However, implementation remains uneven, largely due to insufficient funding, weak coordination among institutions, limited local administrative capacity, and the persistence of structural and institutional antigypsyism. Greater emphasis is needed on early intervention, prevention of family separation, expansion of community-based services, and the systematic collection of disaggregated data on Roma children. At the same time, stronger measures are needed to identify, prevent, and address antigypsyism within public services, including through professional training, monitoring of discriminatory practices, and effective accountability mechanisms. Stronger monitoring and meaningful participation of Roma civil society organizations are also necessary to ensure that the Strategy translates into tangible improvements in the lives of Roma children.

An Inspector for Roma Education from a County School Inspectorate stated: *"The National Roma Strategy provides an important policy framework for improving the educational inclusion of Roma children. However, the effectiveness of these measures largely depends on their implementation at local level. Many schools serving marginalized Roma communities still lack adequate resources, support staff, and integrated services. Greater investment in early childhood education, school mediation, and family support is essential to reduce educational inequalities and prevent school dropout among Roma children."*

Roma children in the Child Guarantee – National Action Plan

Roma children are explicitly recognized as one of the vulnerable groups targeted by Romania's National Action Plan for the European Child Guarantee.

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The Action Plan acknowledges that Roma children experience disproportionate levels of poverty, social exclusion, and unequal access to essential services, and identifies them among the priority groups requiring targeted interventions.

The National Action Plan includes measures aimed at improving access to early childhood education and care, inclusive education, healthcare, healthy nutrition, adequate housing, and social services for vulnerable children, including Roma. It also promotes the expansion of integrated community services, school support programs, and interventions designed to prevent school dropout and social exclusion. The strengthening of community-based services and multidisciplinary approaches is particularly relevant for marginalized Roma communities.

While these measures are broadly aligned with the objectives of the European Child Guarantee, important implementation challenges remain. Existing interventions are often insufficiently funded, unevenly distributed across the country, and highly dependent on project-based financing. Children living in segregated rural communities and informal settlements continue to face significant barriers in accessing quality services.

Furthermore, the Action Plan lacks specific quantitative targets and robust monitoring mechanisms concerning Roma children. Limited availability of disaggregated data makes it difficult to assess the actual impact of interventions on Roma children's wellbeing. Greater emphasis is also needed on addressing structural Antigypsyism, strengthening family support and prevention services, and ensuring meaningful participation of Roma civil society organizations in the implementation and monitoring process.

Overall, although Roma children are formally prioritized within the National Action Plan, additional efforts are needed to translate policy commitments into sustainable and measurable improvements in children's lives.

A representative of a Roma civil society organization involved in monitoring the implementation of the Child Guarantee stated: *"The Child Guarantee offers an important opportunity to improve the lives of Roma children, particularly those living in marginalized communities. However, policies alone are not enough. Without adequate funding, strong local implementation mechanisms, and meaningful involvement of Roma communities in decision-making processes, many vulnerable children will continue to be left behind."*

Conclusions

The findings of this case study demonstrate that the persistent poverty and social exclusion experienced by Roma children in Romania are the result of multiple and interconnected structural factors, including inadequate housing, limited access to quality education and healthcare, precarious employment, and persistent antigypsyism. These vulnerabilities are further compounded by insufficient access to preventive and family support services, increasing the risk of social exclusion and, in some cases, family separation.

The findings also show that family separation should be understood as the possible outcome of cumulative and unresolved vulnerabilities rather than as an isolated child protection issue.

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When poverty, housing insecurity, limited access to services, discrimination, and weak preventive support interact over time, families may reach crisis situations in which separation becomes more likely. This reinforces the need for early, coordinated, and family-strengthening interventions before vulnerabilities escalate into child protection measures.

The research also highlights that Roma communities are far from homogeneous. Significant differences exist between traditional and more assimilated Roma communities in terms of family structures, cultural norms, community dynamics, and relationships with public institutions. However, institutional responses frequently fail to acknowledge this diversity, relying instead on standardized approaches that may not adequately address families' needs or reflect their social and cultural realities. Such approaches risk undermining trust in public institutions and reducing the effectiveness of social inclusion and child protection interventions.

Preventing child poverty and unnecessary family separation among Roma requires a shift from reactive, crisis-driven interventions towards comprehensive, prevention-oriented, and culturally sensitive policies. Public authorities should prioritize early intervention, strengthen community-based support services, and ensure that poverty is never interpreted as parental neglect in the absence of appropriate family support measures.

Furthermore, effective responses require sustained investment in integrated community services, including outreach, counselling, parenting support, mediation, and social assistance services tailored to the specific needs of Roma families. Strengthening institutional capacity through training on antigypsyism, cultural competence, and Roma inclusion is equally essential.

Finally, policies affecting Roma children should be designed, implemented, and monitored in close partnership with Roma communities and Roma civil society organizations. Improved data collection, stronger monitoring mechanisms, and adequate funding are necessary to ensure the effective implementation of the EU Roma Strategic Framework and the European Child Guarantee, ultimately contributing to breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and promoting equal opportunities for all Roma children.

Recommendations

- Strengthen and expand integrated, community-based, and culturally sensitive services in marginalized Roma communities, including outreach, counselling, parenting support, mediation, and family assistance services.
- Strengthen family separation prevention as a cross-cutting objective of social protection and child protection policies, by developing early intervention mechanisms and ensuring that families at risk receive coordinated support before vulnerabilities escalate into crisis. Poverty should never be used, directly or indirectly, as a reason for family separation, and family preservation should be prioritized through adequate income and housing support, access to healthcare and education, parenting assistance, community-based services, and individualized case management. Family separation should remain a measure of last resort, based exclusively on the best interests of the child.

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- Increase investment in early childhood education and care, afterschool, school mediation, and other inclusive educational support measures aimed at reducing educational inequalities and preventing school dropout.
- Improve access to adequate housing, basic infrastructure, and essential public services in segregated Roma settlements to address the structural determinants of child poverty and social exclusion.
- Strengthen and ensure sustainable funding for the networks of Roma Health Mediators and School Mediators, recognizing their key role in facilitating access to services and building trust between communities and institutions.
- Improve access to social protection measures and family benefits by simplifying administrative procedures, strengthening institutional outreach, and ensuring that the most marginalized Roma families are effectively reached.
- Enhance coordination and cooperation among education, health, social assistance, and child protection services to provide integrated and holistic support to Roma children and their families.
- Combat structural, systemic, and institutional antigypsyism across all policies and public services affecting Roma children's rights and wellbeing, recognizing it as a key driver that reinforces child poverty, unequal access to essential services, and the risk of unnecessary family separation. This should include stronger mechanisms to identify and monitor discriminatory practices, ensure institutional accountability, provide effective remedies, and systematically assess the impact of policies and services on Roma children and families.
- Introduce mandatory and continuous training on antigypsyism, cultural competence, and Roma inclusion for professionals working in education, healthcare, social assistance, and child protection systems, accompanied by clear institutional standards and accountability mechanisms to prevent discriminatory practices.
- Strengthen data collection, monitoring, and research on Roma children by systematically collecting disaggregated data and integrating both structural and cultural dimensions of vulnerability into policy analysis.
- Ensure the meaningful participation of Roma communities and Roma civil society organizations in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies concerning Roma children, while strengthening the implementation of the EU Roma Strategic Framework and the European Child Guarantee through adequate funding and robust monitoring mechanisms.

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