



## FACT SHEET 25

### **Roma, Sinti and Travellers in the EU General Overview of the Human Rights Situation**

**April 2006**

#### Introduction

The purpose of this fact sheet is to raise awareness among ENAR members of the wide range of discriminatory practices facing Roma, Sinti and Travellers<sup>1</sup> in the European Union.

The number of Roma in the EU is estimated at some 10 million. The vast majority of them are sedentary or move primarily within the borders of their countries. The last ten years has seen an increase in movement from Eastern European countries towards Western Europe, as a result of wars or persecution or the general situation of poverty and discrimination.

Throughout history Roma have faced serious obstacles to the enjoyment of their fundamental rights, and this situation continues to date in all EU member states. Despite positive initiatives and developments at the national and European levels, the climate of intolerance against Roma populations has worsened in recent years. Negative stereotypes against Roma are often deep-rooted in society, reinforced by the media and in public/political discourse. A lack of interaction between Roma and non-Roma communities is a major cause of perpetuating stereotypes and segregation policies. The unequal treatment of Roma is further exacerbated by an almost total absence of representatives of this minority population in decision-making processes, both at national and European levels.

Due to a lack of data collection on Roma or other ethnic minorities, both at national and European levels, there is an absence of official and reliable Roma-specific data. Available data however point to a very dramatic gap between the socio-economic situation of Roma and non-Roma throughout Europe. A lack of personal documents, such as birth certificates, identity documents, local residence permits, passports, etc, presents most Roma with insurmountable obstacles to the enjoyment of their most fundamental rights. This fact sheet gives a brief overview of the discrimination Roma face in the fields of housing, education, employment and health care, and also looks at the issue of racial violence.

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons of brevity, hereafter the term Roma will be used to indicate Roma, Sinti and Travellers.

## Housing

Although the situation varies from country to country and from region to region, many Roma throughout Europe live in housing conditions which can be called substandard (or worse). They often live in segregated neighbourhoods or ghettos which lack basic infrastructure such as running water, electricity, roads and transportation facilities. This inadequate housing situation also affects other basic rights, such as access to adequate health care, employment, education and other services. These services are generally lacking in the settlements and distances are often too great to bridge easily.

Those who try to leave the segregated settlements encounter serious problems when trying to access public or private rental markets. Landlords are reluctant to rent to Roma, and social housing criteria are often such that Roma are in practice excluded from applying -- e.g. requiring employment, a certain level of education, or identification documents such as ID card or birth certificate. Where they do access mainstream housing Roma can experience racism and discrimination from neighbours and the majority community.

With regard to nomadic Roma and Travellers, a shortage of camp sites and/or a very strict legislation regulating them mean that they are often forced to live in illegal settlements or sites and to move constantly from one place to another. As a result, it is becoming impossible for them to maintain their traditional life style and they are at risk of losing their culture and identity. Forced evictions are frequently reported, often without any consideration for the specific situation of the people concerned. Due to their lifestyle and the bureaucratic problems linked to this (a mobile home is most often not officially recognised as a residence), nomadic Roma and Travellers' access to basic socio-economic rights is also seriously hampered, as they tend to have no or limited access to social benefits or health care.

The EU Race Directive explicitly bans racial discrimination in the field of housing, however state authorities generally fail to ensure that national policies are effectively implemented at the local level. Even when the political will exists, funding for housing projects is frequently insufficient. This reality persists despite the fact that experience has shown that where projects have been successful, housing has played a key role in the inclusion of Roma and other excluded minorities. Best results have been obtained in projects where Roma were involved in the design, construction, maintenance and management of housing.

## Education

Many Roma children suffer from unequal access to mainstream primary education compared to other children, and school non-attendance and drop-out rates are high in many countries. Among the main reasons are discriminatory practices and prejudices in the educational system, poverty, as well as traditions in some Roma communities. Lack of adequate schooling not only diminishes opportunities for further education, but also affects ability to find employment.

Quite apart from the physical isolation of Roma communities, which makes it difficult or even impossible for children to reach school, bureaucratic requirements (such as a birth certificate, ID, etc.) also often impede school attendance. Segregation in

education is a serious concern, where Roma children either have to attend segregated schools located in the settlements or are referred to special needs classes or schools, without proper assessment of their needs, but rather on the basis of their ethnic origin. Quite apart from the effect this has on their level of education, it increases the stigma against Roma, as it labels Roma children as unintelligent or incapable.

Intercultural education, multicultural teacher training or inclusion of objective information relating to Roma (history, culture, customs, etc.) in school curricula is generally non-existent. This situation adds to the lack of understanding on the part of majority society and deepens the gap between Roma and non-Roma communities.

EU member states generally fail to identify Roma as a policy target group in the field of lifelong learning. And although several countries have recognised the problems linked to segregated schooling and have introduced measures to remedy the problem and facilitate desegregation, these measures often meet with resistance from non-Roma parents or teachers. On the other hand, Roma parents do not always have the supports they need to recognise the importance of schooling for their children, girls in particular.

### Employment

Despite the fact that employment is one of the most essential elements for securing social inclusion, Roma communities are affected by massive and disproportionately high unemployment rates and face significant and systemic barriers in accessing the labour market. This is due to a number of reasons – residential segregation as well as unequal access to adequate education have been mentioned, but there are clear indications that unemployment also is a result of direct or indirect racial discrimination against Roma by employers. There have been frequent reports, for example, of vacancies mentioning that “Roma need not apply”. In employment Roma also frequently suffer from racial discrimination and harassment at the work place.

Although national legislation in most countries provides effective protection against discrimination in employment, in practice the implementation of these laws is weak and government action against discrimination in employment has remained extremely limited. Most EU countries’ National Action Plans on employment do not include any reference to Roma. When trying to sue employers for discrimination on racial grounds, the burden of proof in discrimination cases in most countries still rests with the complainant. Despite the difficulty of proof some of these cases have been won, although this seems not to have led to a decrease of racial discrimination on the job market.

### Health care

Available data on the health situation of Roma communities, although limited, suggest that their situation tends to be a lot worse than of the majority populations. This can be deducted from health care indicators such as life expectancy, child mortality, and the rate of contagious and chronic diseases (e.g. tuberculosis, hepatitis A and B, asthma, etc.). Roma also lack easy access to adequate health care, due to physical distance from health care centres or professionals, bureaucratic obstacles or discriminatory attitudes among health care professionals. A particular issue of concern is reports of forced or coerced sterilisations in some EU member states.

The socio-economic situation of Roma, their isolation and their limited access to information, education and public health services also mean that they can be at higher risk and more vulnerable to HIV/Aids infection or drug abuse.

The EU Race Directive includes an explicit ban on racial discrimination in the field of health care. Although some governments have taken measures and started initiatives to address the health situation of Roma and problems of access to health care, the results remain limited.

### Racial violence

Roma experience racial violence at the hands of gangs or other individuals (non-state actors), but are also regularly faced with excessive use of force, harassment or ill-treatment by members of the police forces. Reports indicate that the police also often remain indifferent or inactive when racially motivated violence takes place. This of course does not help to inspire confidence in the police. As a result, few are willing to submit a complaint to the police when victim of a racist or discriminatory (criminal) act. Although there have been some complaints before the European Court of Human Rights, with a few positive results, investigations of racially-motivated violence remain limited.

### Sources

➤ **Final report on the Human Rights situation of the Roma, Sinti and Travellers in Europe**

Alvaro Gil Robles, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe - CommDH(2006)1 - February 2006.

Download the report: in [English](#) // in [French](#)

➤ **The situation of Roma in an enlarged European Union**

European Commission, DG Employment and Social Affairs, Fundamental Rights and Anti-Discrimination - 2004.

Download the report: in [English](#) // in [French](#)

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*ENAR is a network of some 600 European NGOs working to combat racism in all EU Member States. Its establishment was a major outcome of the 1997 European Year against Racism. ENAR is determined to fight racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, to promote equality of treatment between EU citizens and third country nationals, and to link local/regional/national initiatives with European initiatives.*

*ENAR is funded by the European Commission, DG Employment and Social Affairs, Anti-Discrimination Unit.*



*ERIO is an international advocacy organisation promoting political and public discussion on Roma issues by providing factual and in-depth information on a range of policy issues to the European Union institutions, Roma civil society organisations, government authorities and intergovernmental organisations. ERIO cooperates with a network of more than 250 organisations. ERIO promotes the inclusion of Roma into European societies and supports efforts by Roma NGOs to gain access to European Union structures. The ultimate aim of ERIO is to eradicate discrimination against Roma and social exclusion of Roma communities.*