

The impact of the coronavirus crisis on Roma and Travellers

The EU's Roma and Traveller communities are among those most at risk of contracting Covid-19. This only adds to the multiple difficulties they face as regards employment, education, housing and health, compounded by discrimination and anti-Gypsyism. To tackle this situation, the European Commission has introduced targeted measures and provided financial support. The European Parliament has repeatedly expressed its deep concern about the conditions of the Roma and people of other backgrounds during the ongoing pandemic.

Background

The [Roma](#) and Travellers are [estimated](#) to be Europe's largest ethnic minority and the most [vulnerable](#) to poverty, exclusion and discrimination. According to a study published by the [European Commission](#) and another by the [Fundamental Rights Agency](#) (FRA), Roma and Traveller communities are [disproportionately affected](#) both by the coronavirus crisis and the measures to contain the spread of Covid-19.

Employment and education

Roma and Travellers, and especially the [women](#) within these communities, have for long been strongly affected by [unemployment](#) and [low work intensity](#). The coronavirus outbreak only made things worse: many of those employed in the [informal economy or doing seasonal work](#) lost their jobs due to lockdowns, restrictions on movement and business closures. Their precarious work position and lack of a formal residential address often excluded them from [social security benefits](#), while most [employment support measures](#) adopted to mitigate the impact of the crisis did not explicitly target or include them.

At the same time, many Roma and Traveller children, especially those living in substandard housing, do not have access to home internet or computers. As a result, they have not been able to benefit from online [distance learning](#), which widens the already high [education gap](#) between them and other pupils.

Housing, health and access to healthcare services

Roma and Travellers living in informal settlements and encampments face [overcrowded housing](#) or unsanitary conditions making it difficult for them to comply with hygiene, social distancing and isolation requirements. Almost half of them have [limited or no access](#) to drinking water, sanitation or electricity. Furthermore, numerous [forced evictions](#) have also been reported since the beginning of the pandemic.

Roma and Travellers face higher risks of contracting the virus, but also of developing health complications and suffering premature death, due to a high proportion of [longstanding chronic illnesses](#). They encounter [barriers to accessing healthcare services](#), as few have health insurance and most live in segregated areas. Both are now more at risk of [malnutrition](#), which was already [high](#) before the pandemic: their [life expectancy](#) is, on average, 10 years lower than that of the general population in the countries they live in.

Discrimination and anti-Gypsyism

During the pandemic, some Member States have applied [discriminatory restrictions](#) to their Roma communities in the form of [stricter lockdowns](#) exceeding the principle of precaution (e.g. walls built, roadblocks put in place, drones used for surveillance purposes or policed checkpoints established to prevent residents from entering and leaving Roma villages). Moreover, the fear engendered by the pandemic has often fuelled anti-Gypsyism discourses, discrimination and [anti-Roma rhetoric](#) across the [media](#) and social networks, sometimes also echoed by the [public authorities](#) themselves.

EU action to address the impact of the pandemic on Roma and Travellers

Targeted measures for vulnerable groups, including Roma

In April 2020, Commissioners Helena Dalli, for Equality, Stella Kyriakides, for Health and Food Safety, and Nicolas Schmit, for Jobs and Social Rights, sent a [letter](#) to the Member States on behalf of the European

Commission, emphasising the need for targeted measures for vulnerable groups, including Roma. Considering the high risk faced by these groups, the three Commissioners drew attention to the need for food and [drinking water](#) for all, and the delivery of key [sanitation](#) products and medicines. They pointed out that the pandemic had exacerbated pre-existing [racial discrimination](#) and recommended that governments ensure the wide dissemination of information on the pandemic to both racial minorities and the majority population, to avoid the [scapegoating](#) of minority individuals.

Implementing the new EU Roma strategic framework

As the [EU framework for national strategies for Roma inclusion](#) had come to an end, in early October 2020 the Commission presented [A Union of Equality: EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation](#) (2021-2030). Through this new strategic framework, Member States have been invited to tackle the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on Roma people. Since March 2021, the strategy has been accompanied by a [Council recommendation](#) on Roma equality, inclusion and participation, replacing an earlier one from [2013](#). This recommendation encourages Member States to adopt strategic frameworks for the inclusion of Roma and Traveller communities and to communicate them to the Commission by September 2021.

Funding initiatives to support Roma and Traveller communities

To respond to the health and socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, the Commission adapted the rules of the relevant funding programmes as follows:

- In April 2020, the Commission launched the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative ([CRII](#)), complemented by the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus ([CRII+](#)). The flexibility built into the package allowed Member States to rapidly mobilise unused resources from the [EU cohesion policy](#) funds (in principle, the European Social Fund ([ESF](#)), the European Regional Development Fund ([ERDF](#)) and the [Cohesion Fund](#)) in order to implement their immediate and long-term crisis responses. That way, some €37 billion that had remained unspent over the 2014-2020 programming period was channelled to mitigating the effects of the pandemic, including for disadvantaged groups such as the Roma.
- On 27 May 2020, the Commission complemented these initiatives with the new package, Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe ([REACT-EU](#)), launched as part of the emergency temporary recovery instrument [Next Generation EU](#). REACT-EU made available €55 billion of additional resources to the cohesion policy funds and to the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived ([FEAD](#)) in 2020-2022.
- The scope of the EU Solidarity Fund ([EUSF](#)) – a tool in support of countries hit by natural disasters – was extended to cover major public health emergencies and provided additional assistance of up to €800 million to the countries worst affected by the pandemic.

The forthcoming [ESF+](#) (2021-2027) will include a [specific objective](#) focusing on Roma inclusion, allowing Member States to adopt targeted measures on access to health, housing, education, employment and social services for the Roma population, as well as specific measures on countering discrimination.

Parliament's position

Since the mid-1990s, the Parliament has given priority to combating all forms of discrimination against Roma people. On 17 September 2020, the Parliament adopted a resolution on the implementation of [Roma integration strategies](#), underscoring that the overall situation of the Roma people in the EU has not improved. Members deplored that a significant number of Roma in the EU live in extremely precarious conditions. The Parliament called on the Commission to develop a 'Romani mainstreaming policy' and Member States to formally recognise anti-Gypsyism as a particular form of racism against Roma people. The Parliament expressed particular concern about the high level of segregation faced by Romani children in schools. In its 21 January 2021 resolution on access to [Decent and affordable housing for all](#), the Parliament also encouraged Member States to increase public investment in order to eradicate homelessness and housing deprivation by 2030. Members expressed their deep concern about the conditions of Roma people, many of whom are often living in substandard housing within segregated settlements. They called on the Member States to promote spatial desegregation and emphasised the need for public investment in housing, which has become even more urgent in the context of the pandemic.

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