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Child Poverty in the Member States of the European Union through the Lens of Hungary and the Romani Population**

ABSTRACT: In this study, we examined the different measurement methods for poverty. Extreme poverty has decreased both in terms of actual number and overall proportion, but it is still present even in the developed European countries. Having assessed the situation of the Romani people and their children in the European member states, we found that their conditions were relatively better in three Central European countries. We provide a detailed picture about the Hungarian Roma and the state's endeavours to integrate them into society. Hungary has high-quality institutions, including social innovations such as the Sure Start Children's House and Study Hall, but their functioning is not without deficiencies.

KEYWORDS: child poverty, Roma, Hungary, social policy.

1. Introduction

The study explores the issue of child poverty from several angles. First, we examine international trends and patterns using the results of macro-level data and quantitative research, paying particular attention to how Hungary fits into the overall picture. In doing so, we review the tools developed to measure poverty and analyse their specific values. As the Roma are the largest ethnic minority in the European Union (EU), as in Hungary, and they are amongst the most deprived, facing social exclusion, unequal access to education, employment, housing and health[1], we lay special emphasis on their situation. During the discussion of this topic, we rely on the results of EU Agency for Fundamental Rights' (FRA) Roma research, and with the help of Hungarian qualitative research (including our own field experience[2])

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[1] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014.
[2] The author has been present in the life of various Roma communities in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County for a decade and a half, partly as a volunteer and partly as an employee in

we illustrate what is behind the numbers and how the numbers can be translated into the everyday world of the Hungarian Romani children. In this process, we will also discuss what measures the Hungarian state has tried to take to tackle the given issue and with what results.

1.1. Measuring poverty and related data

Measurements of poverty are either *absolute*, with references to a single standard, or relative, when poverty is dependent on context. A single standard is, for example, the percentage of the population eating less food than required to sustain the human body (2000–2500 calories a day) or the percentage of the population with an income of less than $1/1.95/2.15/3.65/6.85 a day. At present, the World Bank uses the $2.15-a-day threshold for extreme poverty (in 2017 PPP prices)[3].

Over the last few decades, extreme poverty has decreased both in terms of number and ratio. In 1990, 1.9 billion people still lived on less than $2.15 a day, a little bit more than one third of the world's population; currently, that number is approximately 700 million people (one tenth of the population). Naturally, the geographical distribution of extremely poor people is uneven; the majority lives in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa[4]. The poverty headcount ratio at $2.15-a-day in Hungary was 0.4% (in 2020), and it is 1.2% on average in upper middle-income countries.

Relative poverty is based on the concept that poor people are those who do not have access to the possessions, amenities, activities, and opportunities that are considered normal by most people in the society in which they live. The relative poverty line could be drawn at 40, 50 or 60% of a given community's median income[5].

The *deprivation indices* are both relative and absolute in their nature. They are based on the kinds of possessions, services, and opportunities that most people would consider normal in an affluent society. The data for these indices are drawn from questionnaires. Whether a person has or does not

development projects. During this time, she held numerous conversations with members of the Roma communities, social workers, and local teachers. Information not specifically referenced in the study are the fruits of this participant observation process.

[3] World Bank (2022) Fact Sheet: an Adjustment to Global Poverty Lines [Online]. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2022/05/02/fact-sheet-an-adjustment-to-global-poverty-lines (Accessed:10 January 2024).

[4] World Bank (2024) Poverty and Inequality Platform [Online]. Available at: https://pip.worldbank.org/home (Accessed:10 January 2024).

[5] UNICEF, 2012, p. 8.

have something is an objective/absolute question, but what is considered normal in a country changes with time and place, so it is relative.

The Eurostat uses the so called ‘material and social deprivation index’, which refers to those people who are facing at least five items out of this list:

- facing unexpected expenses;
- unable to pay for one-week annual holiday away from home;
- able to avoid arrears (in mortgage, rent, utility bills, and/or hire purchase instalments);
- unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish, or vegetarian equivalent every second day;
- unable to keep their home adequately warm;
- do not have a car/van for personal use;
- unable to replace worn-out furniture;
- unable to replace worn-out clothes with some new ones;
- having less than two pairs of properly fitting shoes;
- unable to spend a small amount of money each week on themselves (‘pocket money’);
- unable to engage in regular leisure activities;
- unable to get together with friends/family for a drink/meal at least once a month;
- lacking an internet connection[6].

The relative poverty rate tells us the proportion of each country’s population that falls below the selected threshold but does not reveal how far below. The depth of the poverty gap can be expressed with the difference between the median income of households below the poverty line and the poverty line itself. In deprivation indices, the number of missing items can be counted from the list. Eurostat, for example, considers the index of severe material and social deprivation (SMSD), referring to the proportion of those people who face seven out of the thirteen situations mentioned above.

In 2022, an average of 6.7% of people in the European Union was affected by SMSD. The lowest rates were registered in the Nordic countries (1.9–2.3%), Slovenia (1.4%), and the Czech Republic (2.1%), while the highest were registered in Romania (24.3%), Bulgaria (18.7%), and Greece

[6] Severe material and social deprivation rate by age and sex. [Online]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_mdsd11/default/table?lang=en. (Accessed:10 January 2024).

(13.9%). In Hungary between 2015 and 2022, SMSD decreased from a high level of 24% to 9%[7].

A special deprivation index for children shows the percentage of those aged 1 to 16 who lack two or more of the following 14 items because the households in which they live cannot afford to provide them:

- three meals a day;
- at least one meal a day with meat, chicken, or fish (or a vegetarian equivalent);
- fresh fruit and vegetables every day;
- books suitable for the child's age and knowledge level (not including schoolbooks);
- outdoor leisure equipment (bicycle, roller skates, etc.);
- regular leisure activities (swimming, playing an instrument, participating in youth organisations, etc.);
- indoor games (at least one per child, including educational baby toys, building blocks, board games, computer games, etc.);
- money to participate in school trips and events;
- a quiet place with enough space and light to do homework;
- an Internet connection;
- some new clothes (i.e. not all second-hand);
- two pairs of properly fitting shoes (including at least one pair of all-weather shoes);
- the opportunity, from time to time, to invite friends home to play and eat;
- the opportunity to celebrate special occasions such as birthdays, name days, religious events, etc.

Investigating this multidimensional index based on the data of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) in 2009, the fewest deprived children could be found in the Nordic countries (less than 2.5%) and the most in Romania and Bulgaria (72.6% and 56.6%, respectively), as in the case of adults. These two countries were followed by Hungary, although with a considerably lower rate of deprived children (31.9%)[8].

[7] Eurostat. Severe material and social deprivation rate. [Online]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/product/page/TESPM030. (Accessed:10 January 2024).

[8] UNICEF, 2012, p. 6.

In 2021, children were considered deprived if they lacked at least three items from a set of 17 items (12 child-specific and 5 household-specific). The patterns of countries remained the same, with the best results in the Nordic countries (less than 5%), and the worst in Romania (42%), Bulgaria, Greece, and Hungary (25%)[9].

Since 2000, UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre in Florence has been collecting, analysing, and publishing data on the well-being of children in high income countries (OECD and EU members). In its Report Card series, the organisation draws data from national and European Union Statistics, and it conducts its own research as well. Every ReportCard (RC) has a somewhat different focus, and thus uses different measures. RC 8, for example, analyses the transition in childcare[10], while RC 14 examines the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals[11], and RC 17 focuses on a healthy environment[12].

In the Innocenti Report Card 11, in 29 out of the world's most advanced countries, the subjective well-being and five dimensions of objective child well-being are analysed: material well-being, health and safety, education, behaviours and risks, and housing and environment. Amongst them, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries have the leading position in all five dimensions. The last positions are occupied by the poorest countries (Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania) and, surprisingly, by the USA, which is one of the richest countries globally. This points to the fact that quality of life (QOL) is a broader concept than material well-being and can be low in wealthy countries as well. Hungary's average rank is 20, but it has worse results in the dimensions of behaviour and housing.

The indicators of the different dimensions show that, usually, the Hungarian results are the worst, except for those indicators that are a direct consequence of state regulation. For example, the level of compulsory immunisation in the country is high, but there are negative results in birthweight and infant and child mortality.

Participation rate is high in early childhood education – as it is compulsory – but the Hungarian results of other education-related indices

[9] Child specific material deprivation rate by age (children aged less than 16 years). [Online]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_chmd01/default/table?lang=en (Accessed:10 January 2024).
[10] UNICEF, 2008.
[11] UNICEF, 2017.
[12] UNICEF, 2022.

are bad (participation in further education, NEET rate[13] and achievement – measured by PISA[14] scores).

The 'behaviours and risks' dimension contains data regarding health and risks behaviours (teenage fertility rate, smoking cigarette, using cannabis, alcohol abuse) and exposure to violence (being involved in a physical fight and being bullied). Hungarian children are in a relatively favourable position in terms of bullying and cannabis use, which improves the overall rank of the country, but the questionnaire did not measure the use of designer drugs, which causes a serious problem in Hungary, even amongst the poorest populations.

We dedicate the following section to the situation of Romani children. This topic requires special attention not only because the Roma make up the largest minority of the EU, but also because more Romani children live at risk of poverty and in severe material deprivation than non-Roma and they are more vulnerable to violation of children's (and human) rights.

2. The special situation of Romani children and Hungarian governmental endeavours to alleviate the hardships of people living in deep poverty

There are approximately 10 million Roma in Europe according to the European Council (2007). Romani people are typically not covered in general population surveys, so in order to know more about their situation (and other groups like the immigrants) the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) has carried out several research projects. In this article, we present the results of the 2021 Roma survey, which was launched by the FRA in 2020 in eight member states of the EU and supported national data collection in two further countries. This survey was set up to be representative of the Romani population in each country, but the representativeness of it is limited to the population covered in the sources of information available. For the analysis of education related topics, we will also use the results of the joint survey of the FRA, the UNDP, and the

[13] Young people (aged 15 to 19) who are not participating in either education, employment, or training.

[14] The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a worldwide study conducted by OECD every three years starting in 2000. Its aim is the evaluation of educational systems by measuring 15-year-old pupils' scholastic performance in mathematics, science, and reading.

World Bank. Table 1 shows the number of Roma living in those European countries in which these surveys were conducted.

Table 1 *Number of Romani people in European countries with significant numbers or ratios of Romani people*

	Census (date)	Average estimate
Bulgaria	370,908 (2001)	750,000
Croatia	9,463 (1991)	35,000
The Czech Republic	32,903 (1991)	225,000
France	-	310,000
Greece	-	215,000
Hungary	190,046 (2001)	700,000
Italy		120,000
Portugal		45,000
Romania	535,000 (2000)	1,850,000
Slovakia	89,920 (2001)	435,000
Spain	-	700,000

Source: www.coe.int

According to the research by the FRA in 2021, on average, 83% of Romani children lived in households at risk of poverty[15], while in the general population, this ratio varied between 10 and 30% in the analysed countries[16]. One out of every two Romani children (54%) lived in severe material deprivation[17], although there were better situations in Croatia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, where one out of every three children lived in such poverty.

Earlier we mentioned a deprivation index developed for children that has 13 items. Researchers consider a child deprived if two or more of the items are lacking, but in the poorest families living in Hungarian Roma ghettos ("cigánytelep"), it is not rare for up to 11–13 items to be missing from the list. In Hungary, we usually talk about 'deep poverty' instead of 'extreme poverty'. What is the difference between the two concepts and

[15] In households with an equivalised income after social transfers that is lower than 60% of the median income in their country.
[16] FRA, 2022, p. 14.
[17] In a household that cannot afford to pay for four of the nine items in the material deprivation index

groups of people? People living in deep poverty may have more than $2.15 a day, but they still live amongst terrible conditions, and there is a considerable number of such people in Hungary. Being a Romani person in Hungary is not equivalent to living in deep poverty; however, a significant proportion of this group (less than half but more than a third) does. Nor is it true that all people living in deep poverty are Roma; approximately one third of them are[18]. As a matter of fact, when the Roma and non-Roma poor live together amongst similar conditions, with similar challenges and opportunities, over time, they begin intermarrying, and it is hard to distinguish between them. The question may arise as to what this study is about: children living in poverty, the poor in general, or the Roma. As the three topics are inextricably linked, we must analyse them all. The situation of the children stems from the situation of their parents and – at least in Hungarian terms – a significant proportion of those in poverty is of Roma origin. Now we would like to turn our attention to basic needs and how they are satisfied amongst Hungarians living in poverty.

2.1. Food

According to UNICEF data, 1% of the children in Hungary do not have access to three meals a day; however, health statistics experts estimate this value to be higher – 2–3%. In the most disadvantaged micro-regions of the country, 2% of children during the week and 3% on weekends are not provided with three meals a day. Expressed in absolute numbers, there are 36–54 thousand chronically hungry children in Hungary (who do not get enough food on a regular basis) and more than 200 thousand children are starving occasionally[19].

Hunger has qualitative in addition to quantitative dimensions. In Hungary, amongst the poor, it is not rare to find people who are obese as a consequence of eating food high in saturated fats and carbohydrates. Even in rural areas, few small gardens can be found amongst the poor that can supplement a potato- and pasta-based diet with vitamin- and fibre-rich food. On the one hand, people gave up gardening during the communist regime, and on the other hand, with increasing theft, many places must be guarded if their owners would like to harvest the crops. Local shops are expensive, if they exist at all, and travelling further to do the shopping is also costly. There is a form of market according to which a loan shark does the

[18] Havas, 2008, p. 121.
[19] Husz and Marozsán, 2014, p. 58.

shopping for a family but charges multiple times the price. This has been particularly common since shark loans became a criminal offence.

Another problem derives from the lack of money management/budgeting. On the day of payment or upon receiving state benefits, poor families go on a shopping spree and buy food and drink that are luxuries for them. In some ways, this practice is understandable, that is to say, that they spend and consume lavishly at least once a month. A further problem in connection with children is that they refuse to eat or even taste food that is unfamiliar to them. According to my experience, fruit and sweets constitute an exception to this problem; children always eat them greedily having the chance even if they are not familiar with them.

Husz-Marozsán reported that in some parts of the country, mothers over-breastfeed their children, often at times when one-sided breast-feeding should be supplemented. In other places, however, breast-feeding is no longer the norm, increasing the vulnerability of the youngest children. The malnutrition of babies among people living in deep poverty can partly be explained by lack of knowledge. An example of this is when mothers feed their babies bread with gravy from the age of two months in the belief that that will provide them the right nutrients. Can breastmilk-substitute formulas ameliorate this situation? In Hungary, such formulas are provided for a limited time for families in need. Moreover, in many cases, older siblings also consume the formulas if it is necessary. Besides the babies, the other most vulnerable group is that of adolescent children who have learned that they must leave food for the younger ones, so they frequently prefer not to eat. I have seen in study halls[20] that children do not eat the afternoon snack but take it home to their younger siblings.

2.2. Housing

Housing deprivation is another aspect of poverty. According to the FRA Roma survey of 2021, one out of every two Romani people (52%) lived in damp, dark dwellings or housing without proper sanitation facilities. Additionally, 22% of Romani households did not have access to tap water inside their dwelling, and 82% of Roma lived in overcrowded households[21].

[20] Study halls are places where socially disadvantaged children go in the afternoons and participate in skill-development sessions. At the same time, study halls also function as community spaces, providing opportunities for high-quality leisure activities. Study halls are run by NGOs and churches. For more details, see Havasi, 2019.

[21] FRA, 2022, p. 18.

In Hungary (and presumably in other countries as well), overcrowding amongst those living in deep poverty partly stems from having many children, and at the same time, several households live in one house. It is common that, in addition to those from the parents' and grandparents' generation, a sibling or even more distant relatives share one house. Romani individuals are often not found amongst homeless people, because relatives tend to take each other in.

The housing situation of the Roma seems better in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where 7 and 26% of the respondents, respectively, reported some kind of housing deprivation. In Hungary, this figure was 37%, and the worst results could be found in Bulgaria and Romania, with 70%[22].

Below, we will briefly outline the progression leading to the prevailing housing conditions of the Romani population in Hungary. The slow, organic settlement of the wandering Hungarian Roma on the outskirts of towns and villages, and sometimes within settlements, began as early as the 16th and 17th centuries. The absolutist rulers of the 18th century aimed to settle and assimilate the Romani population. As a result of these efforts, the framework of the later settlement structure was established. Stewards of the manors and officials of the settlements designated areas where Roma could settle, often in otherwise useless places such as marshy, flood-prone areas or near locations serving communal functions of the settlement (dung heaps, garbage dumps, clay pits, execution sites, cemeteries). Therefore, the Roma ended up in small areas, living in miserable shanties that later became the cores of overcrowded settlements[23].

The state expressed renewed intentions to address the housing (and other) situations of the Roma during the Communist era. Following the 1961 party resolution, Romani residents with stable incomes gained access to state-supported housing loans, which were used to build low-comfort, so-called "C" ("csökkent értékű": devalued) apartments. Approximately 10,000–11,000 housing units were constructed in a slum-like manner (telepszerűen), yet, due to related crimes, they were of poor quality. Later, from the mid-1990s onwards, the utilisation of social housing subsidies under the "szocpol" programme unfolded in a hauntingly similar fashion.

It is no wonder that in 1971, 73% of Hungary's Romani population lived in "Gypsy colonies" (cigánytelep). Although this figure had decreased to 6% by 2003, more than half of the Roma still lived exclusively or

[22] FRA, 2022, p. 70.
[23] Lengyel, 2006, p. 56.

predominantly in Roma environments, often on the outskirts of settlements[24]. In the meantime, a new phenomenon emerged in the 1980s: urban poor, including many Roma, started purchasing low-comfort, small-sized houses in former worker colonies within cities. Since the change of regime and the emergence of unemployment, there has been a migration of people (mainly Roma) from cities to villages, driven by the need to escape unemployment. Subsequently, wealthier non-Romani individuals moved out of these villages. As a result of these processes – which still continue today – certain villages, and eventually entire regions, began to experience ghettoisation[25]. In some settlements in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, the Romani population comprises 90–95% of the residents, although this may not be reflected in census results but became apparent during field research[26].

In Hungary, programmes for the eradications of colonies and urban slums have been running since 2005, funded partly by the EU and partly by Hungary. These programmes typically involve renovation or construction of social housing that is completed by human services. The country has a small stock of social rental housing (4–5%), a product of the rapid and massive privatisation of housing stock in the early 1990s. Altogether, 54 local projects were carried out between 2005 and 2010 and 97 between 2014 and 2020. The process is rather slow because 6–7 apartments are renovated or built[27] in each project. Moreover, in many cases, they do not work towards reducing segregation as relocation in a ghettoised village does not change that process, but they certainly lead to better housing conditions.

2.3. Work

The source of income poverty is the lack of a job or low-paid jobs. According to the results of the 2021 Roma survey by the FRA, only 43% of the Roma (aged 20–64) were engaged in paid work in the analysed countries. That does not only refer to full-time but also to part-time work, doing ad hoc jobs, being self-employed or having occasional work. The situation was somewhat better in Hungary and Italy, which had reached the EU target of at least 60% of Roma in paid work[28].

[24] Kemény and Janky, 2004.
[25] Kőszeghy, no date, p. 20
[26] See, for example Havasi, 2021, p. 453.
[27] Városkutatás et al., 2022, pp. 17–18.
[28] FRA, 2022, p. 43.

How did the employment of the Romani people develop in Hungary in the past? In the socialist era, the majority of Romani men were employed at the same employment rate as the non-Roma. For Romani women, however, merely 30% of them worked in 1971, compared to 64% of non-Romani women[29]. Due to their low educational level, Romani people found only underpaid and physically demanding jobs. This phenomenon was called 'segregation within integration'[30]. Another characteristic of the employment of the Roma was the frequent changes of jobs, which was considered a "Gypsy" character trait; however, this situation it was true for unskilled non-Romani people as well. During the socialist era, the standard of living of the Romani people started to rise, but the aforementioned factors, along with the fact that Romani families had more children than the non-Roma, led to an increase in income inequalities between the two ethnic groups[31]. After the change of regime, certain industries were hit by crises, specifically those employing Romani people. Although nationally, on average, 30% of workplaces disappeared before 1993, this number was 55% in the case of positions occupied by Romani people[32]. A study focusing specifically on the Roma labour market situation in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county found that 88% percent of them were unemployed in 2000, at a time when the percentage of overall unemployment was only 11.7%[33]. Experts agree that the biggest victims of the political transformation were the Roma[34].

At the end of the 1990s, childcare-related benefits were the main income source for more than half of Romani families[35]. At that time, a prevalent stereotype emerged among members of the mainstream society that Romani families live off their children – a perception that persists to this day. Indeed, some Romani families were motivated to access as many childcare benefits as possible. However, this was not the sole factor driving their decision to have children. Following the austerity measures of 1995, the state strongly reduced its social spending, so the Roma strategy to have many children did not generate the necessary income. In the 2000s, the livelihood sources of poor Romani families in Hungary comprised a combination of the following options:

[29] Kemény, Janky and Lengyel, 2004, pp. 96–97.
[30] Csoba, 2006, p. 109.
[31] Kemény and Janky and Lengyel, 2004, p. 96.
[32] Kertesi, 2006, p. 3.
[33] Babusik, 2002.
[34] Kertesi, 2000, p. 425.
[35] Bánlaky, 1999.

- temporary work (in agriculture or the construction sector)
- "hetelés"[36]: working for manufacturing companies away from home and visiting their families only on the weekends or less frequently
- harvesting and selling forest products, logging
- rummaging through the trash and disposed junk
- "doing business": doing semi-legal businesses like trading or banking (without establishing a former enterprise) or conducting completely illegal activities (shark loans, trafficking in stolen merchandise)
- participation in public work schemes
- social subsidies
- providing services to the local people (garden maintenance and chopping wood)
- continuation of the still-existing traditional Roma occupations (knife sharpening, basket weaving, and providing musical services).

It is necessary to point out that poor non-Romani communities followed the same lifestyle strategies, although the majority of the society typically labelled them as Roma lifestyles. Additionally, it is important to stress that there are more and more Roma among the skilled labourers, professionals, and legally functioning entrepreneurs, in this way overcoming the negative prejudices and triumphing over the challenges that stand in their way. On the whole, a regrettable characteristic of the first two decades following the regime change was that an entire generation of Romani children grew up with parents who were not employed. The government attempted to change this situation by expanding public works schemes starting in 2010. (The target groups of public works programmes are not the extremely poor or the Roma but those who are otherwise not employable in the labour market; however, these programmes have become a tool for improving the situation of the Roma, as well, as large numbers of them were impacted.)

Public works schemes can be classified into active and passive labour market policy tools, as their aim is to make participants employable and enable them to enter the primary labour market. During this process, they can obtain a guaranteed income while engaging in activities that are beneficial to society. The Hungarian programmes have produced mixed results in achieving these objectives. Public work was criticised because it provided a lower income than the minimum wage, yet this did not prevent it

[36] Hungarian slang, literally transalted as weeking.

from becoming a permanent solution for many people. For many children living in deep poverty, their life goal became to be a public worker.
Public works programmes had low targeting efficiency, as they involved not only the most disadvantaged people but became a cost-saving device for many companies and institutions. In some public works schemes, the workers were engaged in sweeping and sitting along the ditch banks. Elsewhere, efforts were made to utilise the opportunities provided by the programme, including food production, renovating or constructing public buildings, establishing drainage systems, and so on.

A set of measures were introduced to amend public work, that is, efforts were made to support value-creating schemes. Another example is that those under 25 years of age are allowed to take part in the public works scheme only if employment programmes designed for youth cannot offer them any other options. Public works schemes became the most important employment programme for some time. In 2016, an average of 223,469 people were employed in public works, which represented 3.2% of the total employment. Later, due to the massive labour shortage in the primary labour market, the number of public workers began to decrease, reaching an average number of 77,680 in 2022[37].

The labour market situation of the Roma is also influenced by their place of residence. In Hungary, the majority of Romani people live in the poorest regions that are most affected by unemployment (Northern, Hungary Southern Transdanubia, Northern Great Plane). The GDP per capita in these regions is half that of the EU average. Apart from these territories, the capital city and its surrounding areas exhibit a higher Roma population than average, attracting the Roma from the impoverished regions (and non-Roma youth alike) with better employment opportunities. A relatively new development is the emergence of Romani workers among Hungarians who commute abroad for work.

We have not mentioned discrimination in relation to the labour market situation of the Roma. There are enormous differences among the European countries in this respect. According to the results of the 2021 Roma survey by the FRA, 17% of the Italian Romani respondents felt discriminated against because of being Roma when looking for a job, while in Portugal, this figure was 81%. The Hungarian result is relatively low (26%) and

[37] Közfoglalkoztatásban részt vevõk havi átlagos létszáma. [Online]. Available at: http://kozfoglalkoztatas.bm.hu/statisztika/terkep/!F_KERET.HTM (Accessed:10 January 2024).

ameliorating[38]. The reason for this is that a labour shortage is emerging in an increasing number of sectors, as the country has been characterised by structural unemployment in recent times. Hence, employers tend to be reliant on Roma workers, who therefore have the opportunity to prove themselves. Low status in the labour market is strongly connected with a low education level. We will turn our attention to this topic now.

2.4. Education

An analysis of education must be started with the question of early childhood development, the importance of which is well-established[39]. Extensive research links investments in early childhood education with better outcomes both for individuals and the society[40]. Critical stages in the child's mental and physical development occur during pregnancy and the first few months of life, and each stage serves as a foundation for the next. By the age of two, cognitive delay can be measured, and by the age of four, much of the potential damage may have been done. The message here is clear: the earlier the intervention, the greater the leverage[41]. Brain research has shown that a state of deprivation in early life, neglect, physical abuse, and the severe depression of the mother constitute continuous toxic stress for young children, damaging the development of brain structure. This can later result in enduring problems in learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health[42].

A good and effective example of the institutions of early childhood development is the Sure Start Children's House (SSCH), which was developed in the UK and adapted in Hungary. In SSCHs children under the age of 3 can spend time together with their parents and engage in high-quality play and learning while their parent imperceptibly learns how to develop the cognitive and social capacities of their children at home. At present, approximately 2,000 children attend SSCHs in Hungary; this is many fewer children than the number of small children living in disadvantaged families, but the initiative exists and is spreading.

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[38] FRA, 2022, p. 46.
[39] Piaget, 1952; Fraiberg, 1959, cited in Richardson et al., 2023, p. 13.
[40] Kamerman, 1994; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Waldfogel, 2006, cited in Richardson et al., 2023, p. 13.
[41] UNICEF, 2010.
[42] Center on Developing Child, 2007, p. 9.

A more widespread institution of early childhood development is kindergarten or preschool, which can be found in every European country in some form. Participation in preschool is the first contact with the education system, and survey results confirm that Roma children with preschool experience have a greater chance of successfully completing compulsory education. According to the FRA Roma survey in 2011, preschool attendance was the lowest in Greece (9%), and here, the gap between Roma and non-Roma attending preschool was the largest (70%). In contrast, about 80% of Hungarian Roma children aged 4 to 6 (compulsory primary education age) attended kindergarten. Not all ex-socialist, Central-European countries had such a high proportion of Roma children attending kindergarten; for example, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, this figure was only 30%[43].

The high preschool attendance rate of Hungarian Roma children is due to the fact that the last year of kindergarten was compulsory for all children (and since 2011, it has been compulsory starting from age 3). In addition, kindergarten is free, and for children receiving regular child protection benefits, meals are also provided for free. In addition, socially disadvantaged children are given priority in enrolment, and the government has endeavoured to open kindergartens in smaller settlements inhabited by Roma. This seemingly bright picture is somewhat clouded if we look at everyday experiences. For instance, Roma children exhibit a higher rate of absenteeism, kindergartens are facing a deficit in professional staffing, particularly in smaller settlements, alongside a broader disparity in the quality of educational services provided therein.

High quality early childhood education and care can help to reduce bottom-end inequality, but there is a danger that the child care transition will contribute to a widening rather than a narrowing of it. The Hungarian case confirms that more educated parents and higher income homes tend to be most aware of the importance of, and more capable of affording, high-quality childcare[44].

The beneficial effect of kindergarten is shown by the results of the 2011 Roma survey, according to which, 94% of compulsory-school-age Roma children attending school had prior preschool experience, while 15% of the same-age Roma children who did not attend school had preschool

[43] FRA, 2014.
[44] UNICEF, 2010, p. 32.

experience[45]. Of course, the explanation of this phenomenon may also be that those families who consider preschool education important are those who consider schooling important.

According to the 2011 FRA Roma survey, the percentage of the Roma respondents aged 16 and above who said that they had never been to school was the highest in Greece (44%), Portugal (32%), and Romania and France (24%). The expansion of the education of Roma is demonstrated by the fact that, among the 16–24-year-old Roma, these figures were smaller, yet still considerable: namely, 28% in Greece, 15% in Romania, 12% in France, and 9% in Portugal. The other extreme is represented by Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, where only 1–3% of the Roma respondents have never attended formal education[46].

Early drop-out refers to those who have attended school but left education before the age of 16, which marks the end of compulsory schooling in most places. The southern countries recorded the highest shares of Romani people who had dropped out: in Greece, Portugal, Italy, and Spain, 79–92% of those surveyed had dropped out. The situation in the Central-European countries was the best in this respect as well; however, in these places, the drop-out rate of the Roma was slightly higher than 50% (52–59%)[47].

The analysis of data by age groups and reasons for not attending school reveals important country-specific differences. In Hungary, Italy, and Spain, only the first and last two years of compulsory education were affected by late starts and early drop-outs. In Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania, peaks of not attending school could be detected in the same periods, but it occurred at all compulsory school ages. In Portugal, the critical phase was the point of transition between school types[48].

The main reasons behind the *irregular school attendance* of Roma children (or that they do not attend school at all) are usually the parents' negative perception of the educational institutions, the low value placed on skills beyond reading and writing, and sometimes the enormous distance that children have to travel to get to school. The mobile lifestyle of the French or the Irish Roma is another hindering factor of not attending

[45] FRA, 2014.
[46] FRA, 2014.
[47] FRA, 2014.
[48] FRA, 2014.

school[49]. The general belief is that Roma parents are demotivated and, consequently, so are their children. This is contradicted by a Hungarian research result that suggests that parents in Roma families are not less ambitious regarding their children's academic career. The issue lies more in the fact that parents often lack the parenting knowledge and cultural practices necessary for their child's academic success and for achieving the ambitions related to education[50]. International research findings confirm that factors such as the presence of books in the household, reading bedtime stories to the child, and enabling participation in extracurricular activities all contribute to improving the child's academic performance and thus reduce the likelihood of early drop-out[51]. However, some parents are less aware or less able to provide adequate cognitive stimuli for their children within the home.

The apparent lack of interest and behavioural issues of children living in deep poverty are often symptoms of deprivation. A hungry child is less sociable, pays less attention in class, gets tired more quicky, and cooperates less with others[52]. Early drop-out is often rooted in negative educational experiences and a sense of inadequacy, but more often it is caused by factors not related to the educational system like early marriages, criminalisation, and fluctuations in the demand for unskilled labour.

Completing upper secondary education makes an essential difference in the job market, and it is a minimum requirement for accessing higher education. A Hungarian researcher, Kertesi, found that, in the country, a Roma person with a vocational qualification a chance that is 27 times (and one with a general upper secondary qualification has a chance that is 7 times) bigger of getting a regular job than do those with lower than primary school education[53]. There are likely variations by country of these ratios, but the connection exists. In this regard, it is quite problematic that the ratio of early school leavers (people aged 18–24 without a higher secondary education and no education or training) amongst the Roma was high in every member state, even in the better performing Central-European ones. The best result could be found in the Czech Republic, where 72% of the respondents were

[49] FRA, 2014.
[50] Husz, 2015, p. 8.
[51] Evans et al., 2010, Mahoney and Cairns, 1997 cited in Husz, 2015, p. 8.
[52] Howard, 2011, cited in Husz, 2015, p. 5.
[53] Kertesi, 2006.

early school leavers; the worst was in Portugal and Greece, where almost everyone was[54].

Unfortunately, the existence of certain educational certificates does not necessarily mean that an individual possesses the appropriate skills – at least, not in Hungary. Reading, writing, and fundamental mathematical skills must be acquired during the early stages of education. Despite this, numerous secondary institutions teaching Roma students often face challenges posed by the insufficient skills of these children. However, literacy is an essential prerequisite to social integration and participation in modern societies. The 2011 FRA Roma survey measured self-perceived *literacy* and found that, on average, 20% of Romani respondents reported that they were illiterate, in contrast to 1% of non-Roma respondents. We could find the most illiterate Roma in Greece, where more than half of the Romani respondents aged 16 and above could not read or write. The situation was not much better in Portugal (35%), Romania (31%), or France (25%). In the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, however, 6% of the Roma respondents perceived themselves as illiterate[55].

Education could be a key instrument in preventing and overcoming social exclusion, but it can also reinforce inequalities. The PISA has an index measuring the *capacity of an education system to limit compensation:* it is the share of resilient students who perform well despite coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. The analysis of educational systems characterised by significant capacity for compensating disadvantages (which is typically found in Asian countries and within Europe in Estonia) extends beyond the scope of this study. It encompasses elements such as appropriately compensated teachers, sufficient educators, and the absence of segregation, none of which are characteristic features of the Hungarian education system. As a consequence, according to the PISA results in Hungary, the share of resilient students was quite low: 19.3% in 2015, and the number has been declining since 2006[56].

Now, we will depict the *evolution of the educational situation of the Hungarian Roma.* Prior to the Second World War, approximately 50% of Romani children were not enrolled in formal education, a figure that diminished to 10% in 1957. One-third of Roma born between 1947 and

[54] FRA, 2014.
[55] Ibid.
[56] OECD, 2019, p. 8.

1951 completed eight grades, but those with less than seven grades were virtually illiterate.

The majority of Roma born after 1971 had already completed elementary school; however, in the 1990s, unemployment awaited those who did not pursue further education[57]. Over the past century and the subsequent period, the educational attainment of the Roma has continuously increased, but the gap between them and the social majority remained. The situation worsened with the reduction of compulsory schooling to the age of 16 and also due to the fact that many schools where Roma students are enrolled barely teach anything, making attendance pointless.

We can say that *adult education* can be a second chance for those who realise the importance of education only as an adult. During the socialist era in Hungary, the Workers' School provided an opportunity for people who desired to continue their interrupted educational careers and obtain higher educational levels. There were also cases when individuals studied for decades to finally obtain a university degree. In recent decades, numerous adult education programmes have targeted the Roma and other people with low educational levels. These training programmes are sometimes combined with public works schemes, or are part of complex integration programmes. Unfortunately, due to the insufficient amount of course material and practical sessions in these adult education programmes, the qualifications obtained by those involved are worthless in the labour market. For many, participation in these training programmes is part of their income-generating strategy, as participants receive livelihood support during them. Several attempts were made to reform the system of adult education in Hungary such as by increasing the number of practical sessions, but its deficiencies remained.

Segregation – as we mentioned earlier – is one important obstacle of the school career of many Roma children. It is present in education in every country with a significant Roma population, but according to the 2011 FRA Roma survey, it was particularly problematic in Slovakia, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania. In Hungary, 44% of Roma children attended a school where all or most of the other children were Roma[58].

The roots of school segregation in the country date back to 1961, when the ministry ordered the establishment of Roma classes. In these segregated classes, the requirements were lower, the conditions worse, and the

[57] Kemény, Janky and Lengyel, 2004, p. 83.
[58] FRA, 2014.

knowledge of the pedagogues was insufficient. The rationale behind this policy was that Roma students disturbed other students in integrated classes, hindering their development. Another form of educational segregation was the sending of Roma students to special education institutions and "auxiliary" ("kisegítő") classes. In 1985, a significant shift occurred as the official goal became the elimination of Roma classes, and the criteria for placing children in special education became more stringent[59]. Following the change of the regime, the persistent spatial segregation processes mentioned above exacerbated school segregation. Other legal provisions also aggravate segregation. For example, the mandatory enrolment districts for state schools do not apply to schools sustained by churches, whose number is constantly increasing. These schools are able to refuse admission to Roma applicants, referring to their poor performance, even though that may not necessarily be the case, which was proven by lawsuits won by Roma advocacy organisations. Nuanced methods of segregation within schools are also present, like the launching of classes with specialisation in maths or languages, which Roma children typically do not apply for.

3. Summary

A low level of education, unfavourable employment opportunities, poverty, and poor health conditions are interconnected in a vicious cycle. The psychological consequences of persistent poverty include chronic stress, which leads to risk-averse behaviour and short-term thinking. Apart from this, stress-related anxiety increases the occurrence of certain addictions (e.g. excessive alcohol consumption, smoking) and mental illnesses[60].

Furthermore, parents who are economically disadvantaged and uneducated cannot create a conducive environment for their children wherein they can acquire the necessary social and cognitive skills for a successful academic trajectory. Consequently, they inadvertently perpetuate their own disadvantages by passing them on to their children.

A high number of children is typical among people living in deep poverty, thereby potentially accelerating the increase in both the absolute number and proportion of poor people in a given territory. This process is usually accelerated by the emigration of the better educated and more motivated inhabitants. Regions experiencing economic stagnation, particularly those

[59] Kemény, Janky and Lengyel, 2004, p. 85.
[60] Haushofer and Fehr, 2014, WHO, 2011, cited in Husz, 2015, p. 6.

afflicted by ghettoisation, do not attract external capital and do not have internal resources, either financial or cultural. Consequently, local schools in these areas become segregated, leading to a decline in the quality of education, thereby reinforcing the aforementioned negative trends[61].

Europe belongs to the more fortunate part of the world, but in many countries, absolute poverty has not been eradicated. One particular group, the Roma, is especially vulnerable. In this study, we reviewed the situation of Roma and Roma children in EU member states with a detailed focus on Hungary. We found that their conditions were relatively better in three Central European countries. The worst educational outcomes were observed among Portuguese and Greek Roma; the housing situation of the Romanian and Bulgarian Roma are critical; and in the labour market, the Spanish and Portuguese Roma are the most disadvantaged. An extremely high proportion of Greek Roma lived in households facing severe material deprivation. The Hungarian results were particularly perplexing in this regard, as in the 2016 Roma survey, 68% of respondents reported such conditions, whereas in 2021, only 28% did. Such a significant improvement could not have occurred, especially during the COVID period; there may have been issues with the sampling in one of the studies.

What can governments do to reduce child poverty and alleviate its consequences? They can intervene through benefits and taxes to redress inequalities. They can improve the income situation of families through employment policy and regional development tools like active labour market policies, especially adult education, public works schemes, and the development of the social economy. Education can be a key instrument to prevent and overcome social exclusion, but it can also reinforce inequalities. The state can offer other types of social and human services, including:

- family support services delivered directly to families either at home or in family centres,
- child protection services including services for social work, temporary child accommodation and institutional care,
- health services (subsidies or waivers for health insurance or direct costs, all forms of primary and secondary care, physical and mental health services).

Some of the aforementioned devices have been presented in detail in research including social innovations such as the SSCH or Study Hall. Their

[61] Havasi, 2019, p. 12.

practical operation, results, and drawbacks were provided from the point of view of the Hungarian Roma and other people living in deep poverty. The lesson learned is that institutions alone do not provide solutions automatically; they must be applied appropriately. There is a particular risk in Hungary that the country's previous achievements will dissipate if it cannot reverse the ongoing harmful processes in public education.

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