

POLICY BRIEFING

March 2014

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KEY MESSAGES

- In order to remove the barriers to social inclusion of Roma migrants, stigmatisation and exclusionary practices must be challenged.
- Interventions must focus on capacity building within the Roma community rather than expand the mediation role of third sector agencies.

Roma migrants from central and eastern Europe

Summary

Roma migrants from central and eastern Europe have been in the centre of recent public debates on EU immigration. Local authorities are under pressure to respond to the arrival of Roma, who are often portrayed as a difficult target group.

Reports commissioned by third sector agencies who provide mediation services have tended to exaggerate the number of Roma migrants in an effort to secure additional financial resources. There is a risk that delegating support to external agencies might strengthen the view that Roma are unable to manage their own affairs, and that it might perpetuate dependency.

Where Roma are guaranteed access to school places and conventional facilities for advice and support, we see reasonable levels of participation. The principal barriers to social inclusion are exclusionary practices such as attempts to deny Roma school places and to segregate Roma pupils within schools, and claims that Roma have a propensity to crime and anti-social behaviour. Such attitudes must be tackled through information and equality training. Roma, in turn, are often unaware of opportunities to participate in education, employment and public life, and they lack the confidence, motivation and tools to seize such opportunities. This can only be overcome through capacity building within the Roma community and empowerment of community spokespersons.

Background

Roma are one of Europe's largest minority populations and their number is estimated at anywhere between 4-7 million. They live in dispersed communities but share many aspects of language, social organisation and culture. Roma are often confused with 'Travellers' and with the fictional image of 'Gypsies' -- as a rootless population with a propensity to lawlessness and a tendency to 'live for today'. European institutions have noted high rates of poverty, unemployment, and difficulties accessing health care and education among Europe's Roma population, as well as widespread discrimination against Roma. In 2011, EU member states were asked to submit National Strategies on Roma Inclusion that address these issues.

Like other citizens, Roma benefit from freedom of movement within the EU. There is no evidence that the proportion of Roma among migrants from central and eastern Europe in the West is higher than their proportion in the overall population of the respective countries of origin. Yet measures to exclude Roma from access to employment (including self-employment), housing, health care, and education and even to curtail their right to take up residence have been taken in several western EU states; large-scale expulsions of Roma from France and Italy have been condemned by the European Commission.

Where local authorities have been persuaded to examine the situation of Roma more closely and to engage in discussions with members of the Roma community, it was established that there were no noticeable issues of school attendance, waste management, unemployment or criminality, and that allegations to the contrary were based largely on misguided perception and prejudice. Manchester City Council's Roma Strategy Document for 2011-2014 flags precisely that conclusion.

Key issues

Roma society is organised in extended families. When Roma emigrate, groups of several nuclear families often re-locate together. For this reason, Roma groups tend to be more conspicuous than other immigrants. When Roma congregate in dense neighbourhoods, they are perceived as 'spilling over' into the streets and accused of being a public nuisance. When family clusters take up residence close to one another, many Roma children seek admission to the same local school. Schools are often reluctant to offer Roma places for fear that they will be a burden on staff and resources and that they will pull down attainment figures. Many schools feel unable to engage with large numbers of Roma pupils. Illiteracy rates are high among Roma from central and eastern Europe, and many Roma parents are unable to provide literacy support to their children at home.

Support offered by local authorities and third sector agencies has sometimes helped raise awareness of Roma among local practitioners, but it has also had the effect of marking them out as a 'problem' population. In some schools, Roma pupils are routinely segregated and external agencies are commissioned to offer them activities outside the normal curriculum. Misconceptions about Roma family structures have been used to justify so-called

'safeguarding' interventions such as investigations into the relationships between children and their adult carers or surveys of teenage girls residing with their in-laws. Such actions run the risk of stigmatising Roma culture as exploitative of children and restrictive toward women, and so they risk portraying Roma as victims of their own culture. The pressure put on Roma parents to self-ascribe as 'Travellers' so that schools can qualify for special support further blurs the distinction between the needs and cultural traditions of the Roma, and those of other populations collectively mislabelled as 'Gypsies'. Such practices in effect counteract efforts to raise awareness among practitioners and officials and to provide them with accurate information.

Where schools have placed an emphasis on cohesion and offered Roma pupils opportunities to integrate as individuals while respecting their cultural traditions, attainment results have improved. Concerns about 'safeguarding' are usually alleviated once officials understand that relationships among young people in the Roma community require the consent of their families and are thus internally sanctioned as partnerships. This, however, does not make young Roma more vulnerable than their non-Roma peers, nor is there evidence of higher teenage pregnancy or school dropout rates among Roma compared to other population sectors of similar income and education levels.

Institutionalised segregation and continuing stigmatisation of Roma culture constitute a serious barrier to social inclusion, as they block opportunities and diminish aspirations among young people. Interventions by third sector agencies entrusted with managing interaction between Roma and local institutions may appear as active engagement in the short term, but in the long term they risk perpetuating the Roma's dependency on outside mediators and support provisions.

Intervention should instead support capacity building within the Roma community. Young Roma must be able to recognise and make use of participation opportunities. For this they require confidence and self-esteem as well as a basic set of generic skills. Schools must therefore avoid segregation measures that deprive Roma of equal opportunities. Young adults in the Roma community should be offered training in advanced literacy and basic management and leadership skills, and incentives in the form of opportunities to advise local authorities and service providers directly on their affairs rather than having to rely on third sector mediators to represent their interests.

Concluding remarks

In order to make use of available opportunities for equal participation in education, employment, and public life, Roma must be able to manage their own interactions with local institutions and to reduce their dependency on external advice and support. Local authority funds and European grants for Roma inclusion should be diverted away from third sector agencies and specialised networks, to be directed instead toward capacity building within the Roma community itself. Critical monitoring of local authority and third sector intervention by independent experts is required in order to assure that segregation and stigmatisation are avoided.

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