



**National Endowment  
for Democracy**  
*Supporting freedom around the world*

# **The Impact of Covid-19 on Hungary's Roma Communities**

## **Public Opinion Research**

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# May-August 2020

## Introduction

In May 2020, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) commissioned research on the effects of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma communities living in Hungary. Well before the pandemic, the Roma community faced substandard living conditions and suffered from [systemic discrimination](#). NDI's work with Roma communities in Hungary and throughout Central Europe has [demonstrated how](#) the political process adversely affects these communities. An emergency powers law raised immediate concerns about how COVID-19 legislation would affect vulnerable communities such as the Roma. Further anecdotal evidence in NDI's work with Roma communities suggested a clear exigence for a line of inquiry to articulate the challenges that arose during the pandemic. The lead researcher was Roma expert Judit Bari, working with a group of research assistants from Hungarian Roma communities.


NDI's research highlights how, by August 2020, Roma communities in Hungary faced extreme vulnerability due to the ongoing pandemic. These vulnerabilities cut across various aspects of quality-of-life, including:

- ❖ Limited access to testing facilities, personal protective equipment, and general healthcare services;
- ❖ Drastic reductions in income leading to higher levels of debt, mental health challenges, and food insecurity;
- ❖ Reduced access to primary and secondary education; and
- ❖ New forms of discrimination and hate crime

Underlying these factors are inadequate levels of information in Roma communities on how to receive assistance during the crisis. The research highlights spaces for opportunity to strengthen cooperation between civil society, communities, and decision makers that can mitigate many of the challenges and improve the quality of life for the Roma community as the multi-faceted effects of the pandemic remain. With this in mind, NDI shares its findings and conclusions with the aim that they may be considered by local, national, and international decision makers to catalyze remedying action that may improve the quality of decision making and combat lingering inequalities between Roma and non-Roma – including hate crimes and technological divides.


# Methodology and Demographics

## Methodology




**SAMPLE DESIGN**

The sample is statistically representative of the Hungarian Roma population in terms of gender, level of education and region.



**FIELDWORK PERIOD**


August 2020 (the survey covers the time frame of May to August 2020)



**SAMPLE SIZE**

2,359 respondents (607 households).

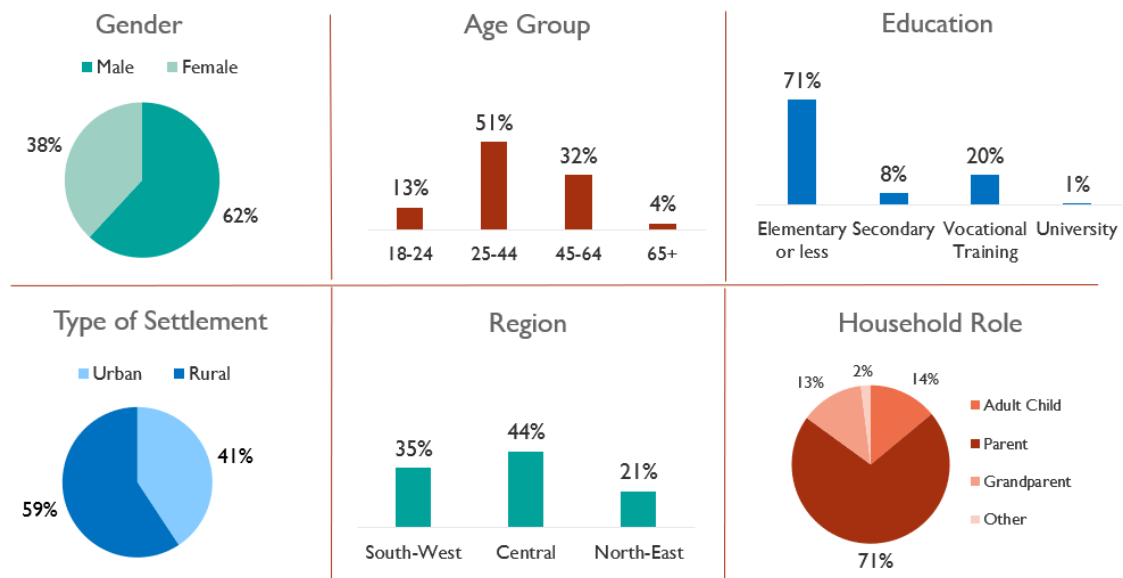
27 settlements in nine counties.



**TYPE OF SURVEY**

This survey is exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. It consists of a combination of field surveying and focus group discussions.

## Respondent Demographics



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## Research Findings

### 1. Roma communities face severe financial deprivation due to the pandemic.

- Increase in poverty as a result of the pandemic exacerbates divisions within families and communities. For example, traditional bread-winners face a significant reduction in income leading to an increase in disputes within communities.
- Families are resorting to selling their assets (such as mobile phones) to be able to withstand the financial impact. This is further limiting their access to accurate information, government services, education and healthcare.
- The restrictions to stop the spread of the virus, including travel restrictions, group gathering limits, and business closures, while negatively affecting the region's entire population, are having a considerable impact on Roma communities in particular. While a majority of respondents do not know anyone infected with COVID-19, they are heavily affected by the economic consequences of the restrictions, including shutdowns and layoffs.
- Approximately 40% of Roma households are requiring financial assistance during the pandemic as they continue to pay household expenses such as food, medical bills and rent.
- A fifth of the families surveyed noted struggles to pay for monthly utility bills as their main financial concern between March and July.
- Mental health precarity has risen owing to economic pressure. Focus group respondents frequently associated the added strain and uncertainty of the pandemic situation and limited cultural practice of seeking mental health support to an increase in conflicts and tensions within the Roma community, particularly between generations in households.

### 2. Roma access to public services has seen dramatic declines.

- Roma communities across the country have limited access to government support services and healthcare. 74% of households report not having access to hospital care in their localities and merely 4% of respondents say members of their family have been tested for COVID-19. With only 3% of households reporting using their municipalities for information on the pandemic, the research suggests a weak communication line between central government, local authorities, and Roma communities about restrictions designed to mitigate the pandemic and the availability of support measures and strategies on how to respond to their constituents.

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- The government's strategy of redirecting routine healthcare expenditure towards combating COVID-19, as opposed to dedicating new funding, has a notable adverse impact on the Roma community. To contain the impact of the virus, the government focuses on directing existing healthcare resources to tackle COVID-19. This is resulting in both primary care and hospital resources to treat other health conditions being reduced, with the implication that the quality of healthcare for Roma citizens is suffering as their access to medical resources (check-ups, medication, emergency care) becomes more limited.
  - Many respondents and/or their families suffer from pre-existing health conditions, and many are concerned about their health because of reduced access to healthcare. Moreover, this fear also leads many to fear being more vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19.
  - Municipal authorities lack the knowledge and authority to mobilize and reorganize resources and to make these resources accessible to citizens in need.
  - Access to education for Roma communities is significantly limited during the pandemic due to the shift to online education. This in part results from the Roma community not having adequate access to technology infrastructure sufficient for following online education during the pandemic. Only 41% of households report having access to both cable and mobile internet and 13% report no access to the internet at all. While the majority households note awareness of the KRETA (online education) system, nearly half of respondents believe their children's education has been deteriorating during the pandemic.
  - According to focus group respondents, challenges for child education are being exacerbated by broader economic hardship, food and housing insecurity and health challenges. For example, Roma children who had accessed free meals through schools suffer direct deprivation as a result of education moving online.

### **3. The Roma community is obtaining limited government information.**

- Roma community members encounter difficulty finding accurate information about the pandemic or about the support they qualify for. Respondents claim that part of this difficulty is due to frequent contradictory pieces of information and a lack of trustworthy, valid sources of information.
- The lack of information from decision makers is leading to divisions between Roma and non-Roma citizens, as Roma citizens maintain a perception that non-Roma citizens receive more support than they. This perception stems from decades of structural discrimination against Roma in Hungary and results in an increased likelihood of conflicts within multi-ethnic communities.
- People fear that misinformation and/or unclear regulations will remain throughout the second wave of the pandemic and that they will not get help from the local

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government. Communities expect more conflicts and difficulties as the pandemic continues.

#### **4. The Roma community experiences hate crimes and discrimination associated with the pandemic.**

- 21% of respondents report that they personally experienced racism or discrimination during the pandemic and 62% of respondents claim to have witnessed discrimination against a Roma citizen during the pandemic.
- Respondents report online bullying, hate speech and verbal harassment as the most frequently experienced type of racism during the pandemic. Facebook Community Groups are launching into new, virulent attacks on the Roma community. Focus group respondents encounter a prevalent narrative that Roma communities are responsible for exacerbating the spread of the pandemic.
- NDI focus groups demonstrate that Hungarian Roma citizens do not, by and large, understand democratic institutions and legal procedures designed to allow them to seek justice in cases of discrimination.

#### **5. A disproportionate burden of care is falling on women during the pandemic.**

- Roma women are, *de facto*, tasked with facilitating homeschooling for children during the pandemic, in addition to their regular day-to-day responsibilities.
- Quantitative data shows that more than 30% of mothers help with children's school work, as opposed to 4% of fathers.
- As women become overburdened with competing sets of responsibilities, nearly a quarter of children are responsible for coordinating their own education with schools as teaching shifts online, without parental involvement.
- According to focus group respondents, domestic violence cases are increasing during the restriction period, predominantly against women and children. Those that experience such violence do not approach authorities with these incidents, as they are not aware of the official mechanisms to report what they experience.
- The majority of those reporting incidents of domestic violence request help from civil society organizations or community activists – in lieu of or in advance of approaching government authorities for help.
- Increasing conflicts and tensions between generations in households and in localities, as well as insufficient health, childcare and child protection support to families, mean that mental health issues, normally taboo or ignored by Roma communities, manifest themselves. While these are not explicitly addressed in this study, research assistants find that in their conversations with respondents, deteriorating mental health in the lives of people in crisis is becoming an unexpected major warning sign.

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## 6. Support from local government institutions to the Roma community is insufficient and unequal.

- NDI research finds discriminatory and exclusionary practices, double standards and inconsistencies in the efforts of local institutions to provide support to different communities. Focus group respondents claim to be excluded from mitigation measures and experience discrimination in accessing services.
- Respondents have limited understanding of active citizenship, community empowerment and the value of democratic institutions.
- The Roma minority self-government is a parallel institution to mainstream governing institutions that have the right to make decisions in the areas of education, language use, local media, and protection of culture. While the institution is not intended to be a key actor in crisis mitigation, as municipal government support is limited, respondents turn to Roma-self government representatives for assistance. In many circumstances, these representatives lack the resources and mandate to advance Roma citizens' requests.
- Roma communities rely to a large extent on municipalities for resources and employment opportunities. The level of reliance on the municipal government depends on the size and type of Roma settlement. Roma communities in smaller settlements are more dependent on government resources and employment than communities in larger settlements, [as evidenced by](#) the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (source in Hungarian). Because of the discrepancy, smaller communities are more likely to be overlooked during the pandemic and therefore require priority attention.
- The capacities of important institutions such as schools, child protection services, job centers or local health facilities, typically depend on individual decisions made by central and/or local decision makers. This process leads to resources being made available in an unequal and non-transparent manner.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, collaboration between municipalities and citizens are impeded, resulting in a further reduction in available services. Municipal officials are not open to in-person discussions, which is how Roma communities traditionally meet with their officials. Many respondents are unable to make use of digital communication methods and are left without avenues of contacting decision makers.
- However, given that municipalities have limited connections with the community, civil society organizations or volunteers, their measures do not respond to the needs of the community. Research participants are convinced that the only driving force for municipalities are orders coming from the central government.

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## 7. The Roma community is unaware of available civil society support.

- During the pandemic, local governments *de facto* defer most of their tasks and responsibilities to civil society, without providing them with any financial or technical support. Focus group participants explain the rising importance of Roma-focused CSOs as a main artery of aid. Roma civil society organizations, pro-Roma activists, and Roma minority self-governments play a vital role in directly securing the provision of resources to help families in need (even when this is not their chosen role) and advocating for governments to take action to ease the burden of the pandemic on Roma communities.
- Few respondents show understanding of how to advocate for their needs. Many do not know how CSOs can support them during the pandemic.
- The number of respondents asking for support is lower than the number of people who say they receive support. This suggests a knowledge deficiency among Roma respondents of available support mechanisms.
- Due to the prominent assistance Roma-focused CSOs and minority self-governments provide, focus group participants have high levels of trust in these CSOs and self-government institutions.



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## Priority Areas

### *Near Term*

#### **Access to information**

*Issue:* With access to credible and timely information, the Roma community would be able to improve their ability to follow state guidance, understand the support mechanisms already in place to address daily needs in light of the pandemic, and to access health infrastructure (such as testing facilities) that may help mitigate healthcare shortcomings.

*Response:* According to NDI research respondents, government bodies should improve the delivery of credible and timely information to Roma communities on the epidemic, and diversify its modes of outreach. These methods may differ from conventional methods. Roma respondents in urban areas cite preferences for signage clearly posted in public areas and include details for how to contact decision makers and where to find available support. Rural respondents would benefit from a continued system of physical access to decision makers, tailored to take into account pandemic restrictions such as small-scale public forums held outdoors or with strictly-enforced social distancing.

#### **Access to services**

*Issue:* Respondents with stable access to employment and public goods before the pandemic are also more likely to access furlough schemes and other support mechanisms. However, those in the Roma community that faced precarity before the pandemic see available support diminish further. In particular, the public works program on which many Roma communities rely for their only source of income discontinued during the pandemic, leaving many communities destitute. Instances of government support being available to respondents often vary significantly according to the municipality, indicating that support mechanisms are not systematically applied across the country. This suggests that access to support, rather than a lack of it, is a distinct challenge that may be solved.

*Response:* Drawing on respondents' disparate experiences in this research, the priority should be to standardize the delivery of available economic support and public services equally across the country. While municipal governments are granted agency to determine how they maintain services to the Roma community, many take their direction from the national level, instead of being informed by data from CSOs and minority self-government representatives. If municipalities built strong relationships with these local institutions, they would be able to provide more

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accurate and timely support to Roma communities at the local level. Municipal governments should function as liaisons, taking policy direction and resources from the national level and applying them according to local institutions that are aware of the needs of vulnerable communities improves the equity of resource distribution. This principle can be extended to various services including financial assistance, educational resources, and healthcare provisions. This would also avoid CSOs being responsible for, on an ad-hoc basis, the provision of such services. Since this is not the primary purpose of such CSOs, the impact any resources have when delivered by CSOs is diminished.

### **Access to digital resources and educational support**

*Issue:* Educational deficiencies rise sharply during the pandemic as a by-product of inadequate access to digital infrastructure and insufficient support for distance learning. Similarly, insufficient access to digital devices and internet connection, as well as respondents reporting that they resort to selling assets such as mobile phones to provide income for their families, result in a sharp increase in inequalities regarding education, health care and access to other services that will presumably have an impact on these inequalities down the line.

*Response:* An effective government response should be demand driven, based on assessments of real-time needs. Therefore, a first step would be conducting a community-specific needs assessment on barriers to the continuity of education. This would illustratively include a digital access assessment for students, education delivery assessment for schools, and an equipment assessment. With the results from such an assessment, government bodies can produce a comprehensive and effective remedying strategy suited to local needs.

### *Medium Term*

### **Data gathering on online hate speech and discrimination**

*Issue:* While hate speech and discrimination against the Roma community in Hungary is widespread and long term, respondents cite a rise in encountered discrimination specifically targeting the Roma community for catalyzing the spread of the virus. Respondents also point to social media as a way of exacerbating the incidence of hate speech for the Roma community. Structural barriers render attempts at identifying and holding users accountable to the hate speech futile. Furthermore, the extent to which hate speech and discrimination affect the mental health for many in the Roma community is not well documented. Despite swathes of anecdotal evidence that indicate these damaging trends, there is no systematic gathering or analysis of

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information to ascertain the scope and volume of the hate speech and structural discrimination; or systematic plans to combat it through well-designed advocacy and social media campaigns.

*Response:* State institutions should conduct a comprehensive qualitative and quantitative assessment of online hate speech against the Roma community. In addition to using the results from such an assessment to inform policies that can reduce the frequency and impact of hate speech and discrimination, the information would form a key part for soliciting cooperation from technology companies beyond Hungary to devise effective responses to hate speech.

### **Inclusive decision making**

*Issue:* The pandemic experience underscores the role of Roma CSOs and the minority self-government as actors that Roma respondents feel most comfortable approaching for assistance on a wide range of issues. NDI research suggests that, as happens with many marginalized communities around the world, Roma turn to civil society because local and national governmental structures are not seen as responsive to community needs. Orienting local and national democratic institutions towards the needs of Roma is both necessary and complex. In addition, since this research demonstrates unequal distribution of resources at local level, and because the pandemic affects the most basic needs of Roma communities, there is an urgent need for municipalities to learn how to be inclusive and equitable in the services they provide.

*Response:* Decision makers should connect with the Roma community and their chosen political representatives to understand how local government can support the community on a regular basis. This would entail creating spaces for substantive input for the Roma community in local decision making, empowering members of the Roma community to pursue efforts to become political leaders at local and national levels, and providing actors that are considered as trustworthy allies by the Roma community with resources and jurisdiction that will allow them to provide a measure of support that the community requires. Decision makers must also learn more about the advantages of inclusive cooperation with citizens and civil society; practical ways of long-term planning for and response to citizens' needs, especially in crisis situations; applying participatory approaches in planning, development and implementation of policies and services.

There remains a lack of practice in Roma communities on issue advocacy. Training efforts that share basic advocacy principles, the imperative of active citizenship, social accountability and the obligations of municipalities to intervene and act in a crisis will help the Roma community advocate for their needs, including in times of crisis. Local activists should be trained and empowered to: hold local institutions accountable; organize and mobilize local resources, such as volunteers who can engage decision makers to facilitate the provision of services to Roma

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communities; and to establish and strengthen sustainable networks to advance democracy building at the local level.