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COVID-19



IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS ON THE ROMA POPULATION

**RESULTS OF A SURVEY OF
11,000 PARTICIPANTS
IN PROGRAMMES ORGANISED
BY THE FUNDACIÓN
SECRETARIADO GITANO**

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PROPOSALS MADE BY THE FUNDACIÓN SECRETARIADO GITANO

The situation of vulnerability and inequality affecting the Roma population was already alarming before the crisis caused by Covid-19. Based on data from 2018, the “Comparative study of the situation of the Roma population in Spain in 2018 in terms of employment and poverty” found that poverty and social exclusion affected more than 80% of Roma people, with 46% living in extreme poverty. The child poverty rate stood at 89%, with 51% in a situation of extreme poverty.

In terms of employment, the study revealed the low representation of Roma people in the labour market, with those in work often being in insecure jobs with little social or legal protection. The unemployment rate was as high as 52% (more than three times the rate of 14.5% found in the general population) and Roma women were at a clear disadvantage, with an employment rate of only 16%.

Only 53% of the economically active were salaried workers (compared with 80% in the general population), while self-employed workers represented 47% (compared with less than 20% in the general population). This high proportion of self-employed workers is due to the high prevalence of street vending, which continues to be the main form of work for Roma people.

In relation to education, only 17% of Roma people over the age of 16 have completed compulsory secondary education or higher education. Six out of ten Roma boys and girls do not finish compulsory secondary education.

Finally, more than 9,000 Roma families in Spain live in substandard housing which does not meet basic standards of habitability (around 40,000 people). Of these 9,000 households, 2,273 live in slum settlements (around 11,000 people) [1].



THE EXISTING SITUATION FOR ROMA PEOPLE

This crisis is leaving large swathes of the Roma community at risk of being unable to exercise their basic rights. The first onslaught of Covid-19 has affected numerous Roma families across different Autonomous Communities (regions). At first, the priority was **to provide information and promote public health measures aimed at prevention and containment**. However, since the declaration of the state of alarm across the country, we have been facing a new, more complex scenario, in which new social risks combine with the public health crisis and with the situation of especial vulnerability which already affected the Roma population.

A large number of Roma families' primary source of income is **street vending**, an activity which was already an unreliable income source even before this crisis. The closure of street markets, and the impossibility of alternative activities such as collecting scrap metal, selling fruit or other activities which used to provide a day-to-day income, has left many families facing a situation of social emergency, without any income, and with serious difficulties in accessing Government aid for the self-employed.

In addition, contrary to the common belief that Roma families live on **social welfare payments**, only 32% of very poor Roma households receive such payments.

Of particular concern is the situation in **slum settlements**, where public health protection and public and social services are scarce. The health of residents is also poor due to existing medical conditions and the sanitary risks posed by their immediate environment, which means they represent a high-risk population. However, the most pressing concern in these moments is the lack of food and of basic necessities such as medicines and sanitary products.

Despite the resources provided by the Government to relieve the situation of social emergency facing many people, and despite the recommendations to direct these resources to the most vulnerable families, for various reasons **the aid is not arriving with sufficient speed**. We are observing a lack of food and of basic necessities in many Roma households, which were already living in a state of extreme poverty and vulnerability.

This crisis may also lead to an even higher rate of school failure among Roma pupils, already victims of **the digital divide and of educational inequality**. The closure of primary and high schools has led to the creation of an education system based around digital resources, but a large number of Roma families do not possess the necessary equipment or skills to access and use these resources. Furthermore, subject-related learning support, which previously pupils received in normal school-based classes and in support classes, is now more difficult to access. Pupils thus face serious difficulties in following their courses, combined with limited family support.

THE IMPACT OF THE CRISIS CAUSED BY COVID-19

At the Fundación Secretariado Gitano we have worked since the beginning of the crisis in two areas. First, we have redirected the work of our teams towards offering assistance and support by telephone or online to the people we work with regularly on our programmes, providing information on health and on the resources available to support them in this situation; continuing our work in learning support; assisting people with applying for aid and welfare payments, etc. Second, we are working to apply pressure politically, communicating with all levels of the public administration (European, national, regional and local) regarding the urgent needs of many Roma families and making concrete proposals to relieve the effects of the crisis.

In order to gather information quickly and systematically about the home situations of our programme participants, we have carried out a telephone survey which, while not intended to be scientifically rigorous, aimed to gather objective evidence of the situations we had already observed; to collect information on people's real-life needs; and to ensure that our actions, and the actions we are calling for the public administration to take, are the appropriate ones. To this end, our teams interviewed almost **11,000 of our programme participants** in 68 cities across 14 Autonomous Communities (regions) during the week of 30th March to 3rd April. 58% of the interviews were with female respondents and 42% with males. 15% of those interviewed were aged under 16 (participants in our educational and childhood assistance programmes), 46% were participants aged between 16 and 30, 21% were aged between 30 and 40 and 18% were aged over 40 (adult respondents being mainly participants in our programmes related to employment or to combating poverty and exclusion).

11,000 TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS WITH PARTICIPANTS IN OUR PROGRAMMES, COVERING THEIR NEEDS, HEALTH, EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION

The Survey provides data in five areas: the respondents' health, their social needs, their employment situation, the educational situation of minors and perceptions of discrimination.

The survey is valuable because it provides up-to-the-minute information, giving a snapshot of the general situation of the Roma population at this moment in time (based on 10,935 telephone interviews), and because of its utility as a tool for setting priorities and taking decisions.



A SURVEY OF 11,000 ROMA PEOPLE

RESULTS

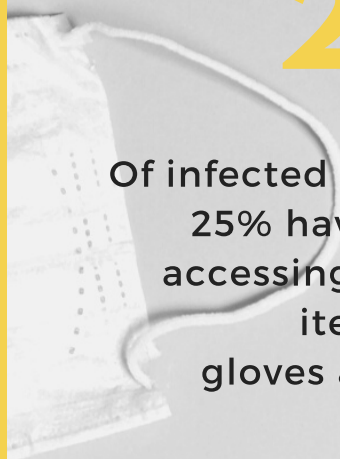
There is a low incidence of Covid-19 in Roma households (in terms of infections or deaths). The most pressing need, and the one which most preoccupies the families, is the need to **cover basic necessities and obtain food**. This crisis is not a situation which Roma people have ever faced before, and the lockdown has had an immediate effect on the ability to earn a living of many of these Roma families, who normally live day-to-day relying on insecure forms of work, often in the informal economy and without social and legal protections. In addition, contrary to popular belief, only a third of these families, living in extreme poverty, receive social welfare benefits such as minimum income payments.

- **The great majority of those participating in programmes run by the Fundación Secretariado Gitano** have not been affected directly by Covid-19. Only 1.53% have had symptoms of the disease (more often women than men), while fewer than 1% have been confirmed to be infected with Covid-19 (again, more women than men, while of confirmed cases, 5 have been minors).
- **3 out of 4 people interviewed say they do not have difficulty in following disease prevention measures.** However, those who say they have difficulty generally point to the lack of availability of protective items (gloves and masks), followed by the stress and anxiety caused by the situation, the overcrowded living conditions facing many families, and financial problems. Of those infected with the disease, 25% find it difficult to obtain protective items such as gloves and masks. The reasons for this difficulty are not being able to go and buy them or not having anywhere nearby where they could do so (73%), and not having enough money (27%).
- Of all the people interviewed, the majority say they do **not have difficulty in obtaining medicines** (76.4% of the total). Only 5.7% say they have difficulty in doing so, mainly due to not having enough money to buy them (80% of those having difficulty), not being able to go and buy them due to personal circumstances (22%) or not having anywhere nearby where they could do so (almost 16%).

HEALTH

25%

Of infected individuals, 25% have difficulty accessing protective items such as gloves and maskss



SOCIAL NEEDS

- **More than 40% of the participants are experiencing difficulty in accessing food**, and 34.8% of those interviewed who were aged under 18. The most commonly cited reason was not having money to buy food.
- In the face of this difficulty in accessing food, families are receiving help mainly from the extended family or from neighbours (more than 48%), followed by social organisations and parishes (more than 38%) and after that from the local authorities (23.34%). In 1.38% of cases they have also received help from the UME (Military Emergency Unit) or from Civil Protection services.
- **28% of minors are recipients of free school meals, and of this group, almost 80% are receiving the food they are entitled to** through arrangements made by the local authorities or their centre of education, while around **20% are not receiving it.**
- **34% of participants are finding it difficult to pay their electricity bills**, 31% their water bills, 25.6% their rent and 25% their gas bills.
- Of all those interviewed, **34% live in an isolated or segregated area**, with the difficulties that implies in terms of accessing goods and public services of all kinds.
- More than half of participants (53%) **need support** from their local social services.
- Of those who need this support from social services, 37% are receiving it, while **62% are not receiving the support they require** (of these individuals, 61% are women and 19% are minors).



40%

40% of those interviewed
have difficulty accessing
food

33%

More than a third of the people interviewed who were in paid work have lost their job

64% of Roma people interviewed were unemployed before the Covid-19 crisis: only 14% were employed, 3% were self-employed as street vendors and 19% were street vendors in the informal economy (assisting family members) or collected scrap metal. This situation of inequality and vulnerability has intensified as the crisis has developed.

With the state of alarm, **the situation of two thirds of Roma people in paid employment has worsened: more than one third have lost their jobs**, another third have been temporarily laid off and 12% have seen their working hours reduced. Only 24% have not seen any change in their situation.

71% of self-employed people are street vendors in the informal economy, often assisting family members, and are not registered as self-employed; 12% are street vendors who are registered as self-employed (of these, 52% are registered through a cooperative) and 17% collect scrap metal. Only 3% of street vendors have been able to continue their activity during the crisis.

Of those who receive social welfare, 60% receive minimum income payments; 21% receive benefits, 10% receive an unemployment allowance and 6% receive some kind of pension. **58% of unemployed people do not receive any kind of social welfare payment** and find themselves lacking financial protection at this time.



EMPLOYMENT SITUATION

EDUCATIONAL SITUATION

- **The majority of centres where Roma girls and boys are educated have adapted their teaching methods using digital resources**, either by offering virtual classes (36.2%) or by sending materials to students (85.3%). Another means of support is the telephone (17.8%). In 56 cases, the family did not know how the centre was adapting the classes.
- **Only a third of girls and boys participating in our educational programmes have access to a computer**, an essential tool to be able to access school tasks comfortably and while having access to other resources on the same screen. Even so, the majority of participants in the FSG's educational programmes have access to some digital device, most commonly a telephone (90.7%). 2.5% do not have any kind of digital device.
- More than 40% of students do not have internet access, or have limited data allowances. The students who most often face this problem are those in primary education (48.62%), followed by those in compulsory secondary education (38.2%), those in basic vocational training (37.74%) and those in post-compulsory secondary education (29.73%). 57% of students have an unlimited internet data allowance.
- **Almost a third of Roma girls and boys (29%) cannot carry out the learning tasks being set by their centres of education**, in most cases because they lack the necessary equipment (58.8%) and/or access to educational materials (48.7%). In addition, almost half (49%), while they have the necessary equipment and materials, cannot make progress because they do not understand the subject matter and are not receiving the support they need to resolve this problem.
- In terms of help to carry out learning tasks, the FSG's tutors are the main source of support, reaching 89% of the students interviewed. 42% of Roma students are carrying out these tasks without support from teachers and only half receive support from their families to complete the tasks. 5.1% are not receiving any kind of help.

37%

37% believe that they are being stigmatized during the Covid-19 crisis

6.3% of those surveyed say that they have suffered at least one incident of discrimination, of being insulted or of being attacked because they are Roma. This is a large number in absolute terms, bearing in mind that discrimination tends to be seen as normal by the Roma community, meaning that many people who are victims of discrimination do not identify the incident as a case of discrimination.

37% believe that they are being stigmatised, which leads to a negative, unfair image of the Roma community in the context of the Covid-19 crisis.



PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION

PROPOSALS

1

Act urgently, putting statutory social services to work in rapidly and flexibly implementing the Government Recommendations for the most vulnerable settlements and neighbourhoods, and in coordinating emergency aid and food delivery in the most deprived areas.

2

Direct and increase the amount of aid from FEAD (Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived) in the coming weeks, ensuring that it is distributed efficiently and that the responsible organisations work effectively in the most vulnerable areas.

3

Apply the promised Minimum Living Income with urgency and flexibility, although details of the new benefit may be modified and finalised in the months to come. If this is not possible, make urgent financial aid available, at least to the families with the lowest income and with dependent children in their care.

4

Make legal provision for funds stemming from income tax subsidies and from 0.7% of corporate tax to be distributed by specialised Third Sector organisations to help cover basic necessities (and the digital divide).

5

Strengthen the collaboration of local authorities with NGOs, and make the most of the abilities of the FSG and of many other NGOs to manage aid correctly and to get it directly to those who need it.



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The Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG) is an intercultural social organisation which has been working for more than 35 years to promote and ensure equal opportunities for the Roma population in Spain and in the European context. It carries out programmes and provides services to ensure the rights of Roma people are upheld, mainly in the fields of employment, education, health and housing. It also works to promote more proactive policies for the social inclusion of the Roma population, to fight discrimination and to ensure equality for all people.