

THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND
Anti-Roma
hate speech

An analysis through case studies of its origins,
dissemination and impact upon people

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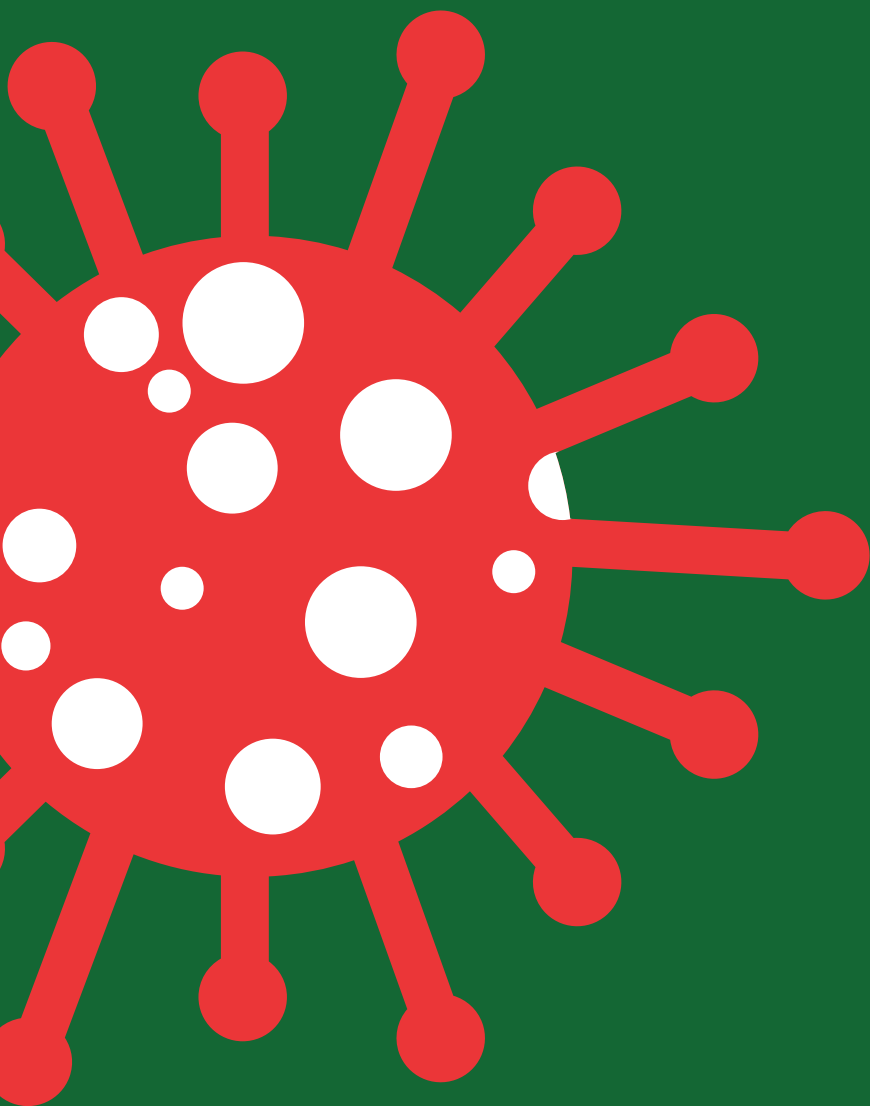


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Introduction

Aims and methodology

In the context of the social and healthcare crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the declaration of a State of Alarm in Spain, the Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG) notes and deplores a large number of cases of stigmatisation perpetrated by the communications media and on occasion by political figures. These cases involve rumours and fake news stories which blame minority groups for the pandemic and its spread, or for violating the rules of quarantine, in alarmist language which links such minorities with “infection” and “danger”. These messages have generated various kinds of hate speech against such groups. The Roma community has been one of the groups most badly affected, to the point where the FSG decided to bring some of these cases to public prosecution.

This kind of hate speech, although rare, tends to focus on identifying scapegoats for the pandemic, and it affords a valuable opportunity for qualitative analysis to reveal the processes involved in hate speech. These include the processes by which it is generated and spread, and the real-life impact of hate speech in terms of human rights at any given moment.

This study consists in an analysis of six cases of hate speech (five of them reported to the authorities by the FSG). Based on this qualitative analysis, the distinct phases of the process of generation and dissemination of anti-Roma hate speech are as follows:

- How the hate speech was first generated (journalistic malpractice, stigmatising statements by authorities, etc.).
- How the hate speech was then disseminated and the type of language used.
- The real-life impact in terms of human rights on the Roma people who are the subjects of such hate speech in the various locations where it occurs (feelings of rejection, the creation of other kinds of attitudes, discrimination, hate, etc).

Following this approach, we present the main conclusions of the qualitative analysis, along with a series of recommendations focused on the prevention of and proper response to hate speech, aimed at mass media, internet and social media companies and key institutions (judicial authorities, police and the public authorities responsible for equality of treatment and human rights). These recommendations are rooted in existing good practice and in current relevant international and European standards in the area of human rights.

Methodology of this study

To carry out this study, we analysed six episodes of hate speech identified in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Five of them were reported to the Special Prosecutor's Office responsible for dealing with hate crimes, both for the content of the speech itself and for the context and manner in which it was disseminated. A review was carried out of the written forms of these reports and of other procedural documents relating to these five episodes.

In addition, in order to analyse the impact on the people who are subjects of such hate

speech, we carried out six telephone interviews with Roma people who have been affected by or who experienced at first hand each of the six episodes. These interviews were carried out with the express consent of all the people involved, and their privacy, anonymity and the protection of their personal data were all guaranteed. **The quotations amply illustrate the personal and collective impact of these events, and demonstrate that hate speech has a far-reaching effect which goes beyond the simple facts of what has happened.**



II.

Contextualisation of the study: antigypsyism in Spain and Europe and during the COVID-19 crisis

II.1. Antigypsyism: a historical and specific form of racism

Antigypsyism is a concept defined by European institutions (first by the Council of Europe, and then by the European Parliament) as **a specific form of racism, an ideology founded on racial superiority, a form of dehumanisation and institutional racism nurtured by historical discrimination, which is expressed, among others, by violence, hate speech, exploitation, stigmatisation and the most blatant kind of discrimination**¹. Antigypsyism is not just about speech, but also about the acts (and omissions) of various social and institutional authorities.

Antigypsyism is a structural type of discrimination, which therefore appears in and cuts across all the contexts in which people carry on their lives, **and on many occasions appears in an intersectional form**², interacting with gender or

with other factors such as poverty or a situation of social exclusion.

In its first **Resolution**³ relating to **COVID-19**, the General Assembly of the United Nations insisted on the need to fully respect human rights, and stressed that there was no place for any form of discrimination, racism or xenophobia in the response to the pandemic.

The UN, in referring to racial discrimination in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, emphasises the following point: ***“The COVID-19 crisis and its repercussions disproportionately affect certain groups and collectives which are marginalised for reasons of race, nationality or ethnic status. The pandemic has highlighted underlying fundamental structural problems and inequalities in diverse areas of social, economic, civil and political life, and has aggravated the racism and racial discrimination which already existed in many parts of the world”***.

1 ECRI General Policy Recommendation n° 13 on combating antigypsyism

<https://rm.coe.int/ecri-general-policy-recommendation-no-13-on-combating-anti-gypsyism-an/16808b5aef>

2 Guide on intersectional discrimination. FSG. https://www.gitanos.org/upload/22/65/GUIDE_ON_INTERSECTIONAL_DISCRIMINATION_-_ROMA_WOMEN_-_FSG_33444_.pdf

3 General Assembly, Global solidarity to fight the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) A/RES/74/270, 2 April 2020: <https://undocs.org/A/RES/74/270>

Antigypsyism and COVID

If we examine the report by Margareta Matache and Jacqueline Bhabha, entitled *Anti-Roma Racism is Spiraling during COVID-19 Pandemic*⁴, we can see that there has been an increase in anti-Roma racism across Europe, particularly in the Balkan region. Matache explains that **the public health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic** has only compounded the problem and increased racism and violence against Roma people, with statements from some European politicians and media outlets which portray Roma people as carriers of the virus.

In view of these situations occurring in various countries in Europe, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights published a document warning of the vulnerability of Roma communities in Europe in the face of the **COVID-19 pandemic, and asking Member States to provide greater protection to these communities, including by reporting hate speech and the dissemination of false rumours**⁵. Likewise, the European Fundamental Rights Agency recently published a specific Report⁶ **on the impact of COVID on Roma communities in Europe, in which they also note an increase in anti-Roma attitudes and incidents linked to the COVID crisis. These findings are corroborated by another report published by ERGO in December 2020 on the impact of COVID on the Roma population in Europe**⁷.

4 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7348427/>

5 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/governments-must-ensure-equal-protection-and-care-for-roma-and-travellers-during-the-covid-19-crisis>

6 FRA: Coronavirus pandemic in the EU. Impact on Roma and Travellers:

<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/covid19-rights-impact-september-1>

7 <https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Ergo-covidstudy-final-web-double-v2.pdf>

The United Nations recently published a Guidance Note⁸ warning of the dangers of disseminating hate speech linked to COVID-19; this document urges States to combat such activities and to implement measures and recommendations to challenge the type of discourse which links certain minorities with the spread of COVID-19.

We might think that such cases do not occur in Spain, but nothing could be further from the truth. In this study, we will see that there have been very similar cases, with characteristics which allow us to draw clear parallels in terms of racist, anti-Roma incidents, mechanisms and discourses. These cases have occurred on such a scale that the Council for the Elimination of Racial or Ethnic Discrimination, at the Ministry of Equality, has expressed its “concern” regarding the “cases of discrimination, rejection and hate” directed against certain ethnic or racial groups in the context of the coronavirus emergency. The events reported gave rise to a recommendation⁹ by this Council which referred to “the racist, anti-Roma and xenophobic reporting of some media outlets”, with news items on “the cause of the spread of the disease or on alleged violations of quarantine which refer to the ethnic, racial or national origin of the people involved”.

The Service of Advice and Assistance to Victims of Racial or Ethnic Discrimination also published a Report¹⁰ in which, two months after the pandemic

8 <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20related%20Hate%20Speech.pdf>

9 RECOMMENDATION: Avoid discriminatory attitudes and discourses in the current context of economic, social and healthcare crisis. Approved by the Council for the Elimination of Racial or Ethnic Discrimination on 13 April 2020. <https://www.inclusion.gob.es/oberaxe/ficheros/documentos/Recomendacion-Consejo-COVID19.pdf>

10 <https://asistenciavictimasdiscriminacion.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Informe-Servicio-de-Asistencia-COVID-19..pdf>

began, it was already possible to see the impact of the public health crisis and the State of Alarm on the expression of discrimination and on its victims. According to the data collected by the Service at the request of the Directorate General for Equal Treatment and Ethnic and Racial Diversity, by 8 May 2020 **53 cases had been detected relating to the social and healthcare crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the declaration of a State of Alarm in Spain. Of these cases, 46 directly affected Roma people.**

II.2. Hate speech

In the European context, the definition of hate speech that is commonly used is the one found in General Policy Recommendation N° 15 of the Council of Europe’s European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)¹¹:

“Hate speech (...) entails the use of one or more particular forms of expression – namely, the advocacy, promotion or incitement of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons, as well any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat of such person or persons and any justification of all these forms of expression – that is based on a non-exhaustive list of personal characteristics or status that includes “race”, colour, language, religion or belief, nationality or national or ethnic origin, as well as descent, age, disability, sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation”.

¹¹ <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-general-policy-recommendation-no-15-on-combating-hate-speech/16808b5b01>

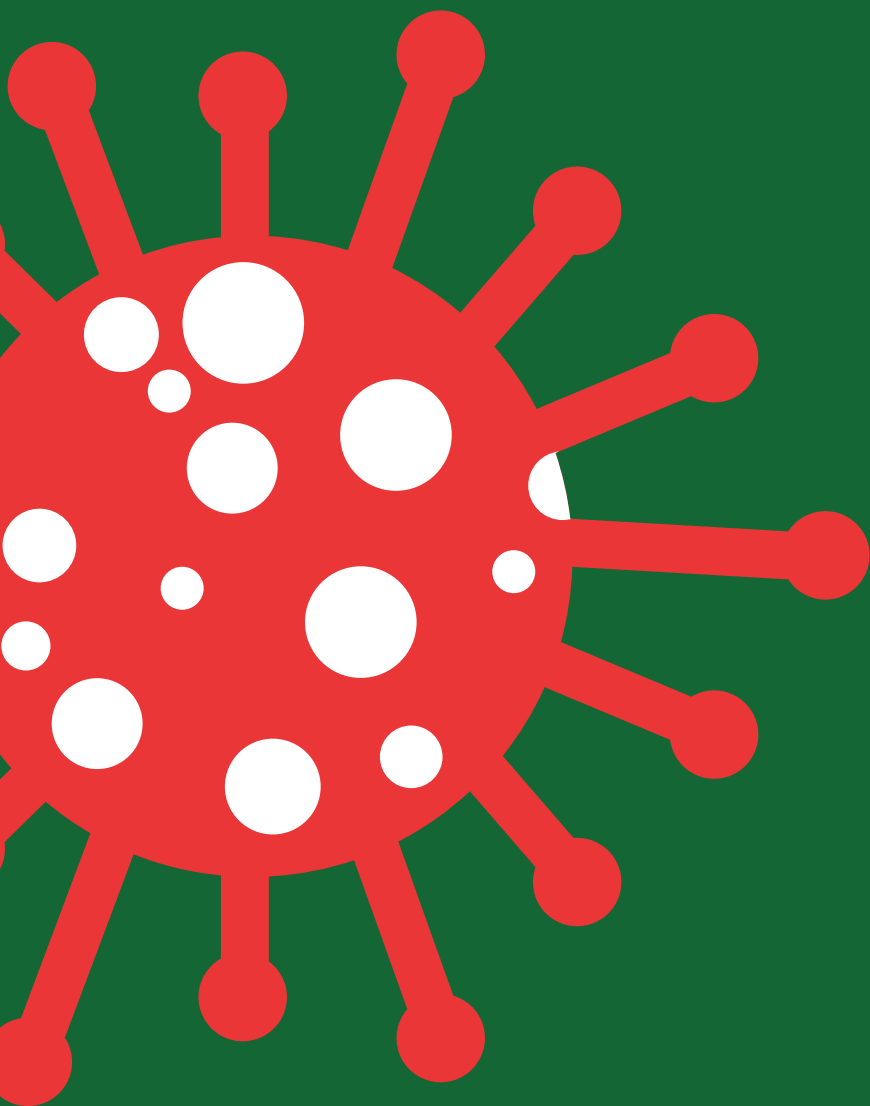


Hate speech¹² contributes to an increase in the rejection of Roma people, creates social division and generates an atmosphere conducive to the emergence of violent movements and acts of discrimination.

Hate speech has been the subject of various rulings by the European Court of Human Rights. Although Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights protects freedom of expression, the European Court of Human Rights¹³ has been very clear on the limits of this right and on its relationship with hate speech. That is, **freedom of expression is limited by respect for the dignity of people, and by the requirement not to incite discrimination or violence against people or groups.**

¹² Guide to combating hate speech. FSG. https://www.gitanos.org/upload/96/00/GUIA_COMBATIR_DISCURSO_ODIO_FSG.pdf

¹³ https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/FS_Hate_speech_ENG.pdf



III.

Description of the cases analysed in the study

Having provided the context for the study, we will now present the cases to be analysed, all of them real-life examples of episodes of anti-Roma speech linked to the situation of crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

III.1. Summary of the analysed cases

Five of the six cases to be analysed relate to the dissemination of information which led to instances of hate speech which constituted criminal offences and were reported to the relevant Prosecutor's Office specialised in dealing with hate crime:

1- **Anti-Roma comments prompted by the dissemination of images from a neighbourhood with a large presence of Roma people in Talavera de la Reina.**

In March 2020 in Talavera de la Reina, with measures against COVID recently introduced, a group of police officers carried out inspections and interventions relating to vehicles in the neighbourhood of El Paredón de los Frailes, where the majority of inhabitants are Roma. The aim was to prevent the movement of some of the Roma families living in the neighbourhood. The application of such coercive measures, the removal of vehicles by the municipal towing service and the ensuing sanctions

were clearly disproportionate at that moment, when the majority of non-urgent local authority administrative activities were at a standstill.

These actions were carried out despite the fact that Roma families living in the neighbourhood were complying scrupulously with the traffic restriction measures which had been imposed to avoid the transmission and spread of Covid-19. The actions created considerable distress for the people living there, given that they needed to use their vehicles to access basic goods and services such as pharmacies and supermarkets. They also hoped to be able to use their vehicles to carry out their professional and economic activities (many of them depending on street trading for their livelihoods) once restrictions were lifted. Furthermore, the measures applied in this neighbourhood, where the majority of the population was composed of people of Roma ethnicity, contributed to the stigmatisation and criminalisation of the entire Roma community in the eyes of society at large.

For all these reasons, many people in the neighbourhood came out of their homes to protest at the actions of the police, and this was filmed and disseminated on social media. The publication of a video, in which police officers can be seen fining parked vehicles while residents berate them, triggered an immediate reaction on social media networks. Numerous comments of a criminal nature appeared, expressing hatred of Roma people.

The comments displayed cruelty and racism of an extreme kind. Roma people were described as insects, there were calls for their extermination, for them to be beaten or even lynched. Roma people were accused of criminal behaviour of a “genetic” or racial origin, following a Nazi discourse which included the glorification of the “racial cleansing” carried out by Hitler. These comments were all gathered in a report presented by the Fundación Secretariado Gitano to the Prosecutor’s Office specialised in dealing with hate crime in the province of Toledo.

Some examples included in the report:

- **Sr. Trepador (@futbolomuerte):** *“They’re so disgusting, let’s see if they finally fucking evolve”*
- **Javigomez322 (@javigomez322):** *“They’re fucking street rats, they should all rot”*
- **Patricia G. De Miguel (@PatryGdeMiguel):** *“It should be like in Pakistan. These are the rules there: anyone who breaks the quarantine gets the lash. This type of ethnic group needs everyone to get strict with them. They just do whatever they want.”*
- **Blito (@Blito373):** *“This rabble are disgusting, they put everyone in danger. Apart from that there’s no problem, if they kick the bucket that’s a win for us, the bad thing is if they infect innocent people because they just ignore the laws which they think are for everyone except them, and on top of it all they get given houses ...”*
- **JB (@jblsfcdz):** *“The animals are taking over the cities, ducks in Córdoba, boar in Barcelona and cockroaches in Talavera, nature is breaking through.”*
- **Joaquin_ESP (@JoaquinRFe):** *“The only thing they understand is a beating, it’s a solvent, as they say.”*
- **MikelMerinoPutoAmo (@77bmm):** *“Up against the wall with all of them, I’m sorry*

but they bug me, and it bugs me even more what they did in Vitoria at the start of the pandemic”

2- Hate speech sparked by the murder of a Roma man in Rociana del Condado (Huelva)

The next case we present is particularly sad because it involves the murder of a Roma person in Rociana del Condado (Huelva) in front of two of his children, aged 9 and 13 years old respectively.

We will not go into the judicial process relating to this murder, currently in progress through the courts, but we deplore the avalanche of anti-Roma comments purporting to justify the murder because the victim was Roma; according to the comments, he deserved his tragic end for this fact alone.

Some of the comments defending the murder, under a video on YouTube which recounted the events, were of this type:

- *“the only good gypsy is a dead one”*
- *“thanks for pulling up the weeds”*
- *“it’s about time some gypsy blood ran down the streets”*
- *“he shouldn’t ever be punished, whichever one of those vermin he killed”*
- *“a good gypsy is a dead gypsy”*
- *“he hasn’t killed a person. He’s killed a gypsy”*

It is worth mentioning the shameful role played by some media outlets, specifically Ana Rosa’s programme on Tele 5, a programme with a large audience, which tried to justify the murder alleging that “perhaps it could be considered self-defence”, following up by presenting an

extremely negative image of the deceased person, exploiting every anti-Roma cliché and prejudice to convey the idea that this was a death that was in some way “deserved”.

From this starting point, we observed what happened on the main online platforms and on some internet forums. In these spaces, displays of hatred were much more graphic and aggressive. The attacks weren't only directed at the victim, justifying his murder, but also developed into anti-Roma declarations which incited violence. These comments were also reported by the FSG to the Prosecutor's Office specialised in dealing with hate crime in Huelva.

3- Messages of anti-Roma hatred disseminated in Santoña (Cantabria)

The third case we will examine took place in Santoña (Cantabria). On this occasion, the antigypsyism lay in a number of irresponsible statements made by the Mayor of that town, linking Covid 19 with the Roma population of the municipality. These statements, which pointed to the Roma community as responsible for the spread of the disease, triggered numerous anti-Roma messages which appeared on social media platforms, and hoax messages started to spread in the form of audios sent by mobile messaging. Some of these audios attempted to provoke anti-Roma sentiment by sowing panic about contagion in the general population. Others went even further, calling for the detention of the Roma population in concentration camps. On online networks, statements were made extolling Nazism and techniques of extermination. All these audios were reported by the FSG to the Prosecutor's Office for Hate Crime in Santander,

after which pretrial proceedings commenced in the Santoña Court of Instruction, proceedings in which the Fundación appeared as part of a class action.

In the Whatsapp audio it was possible to hear these kinds of comments:

- ***They should be arrested and taken to prison, for God's sake, and they should be kept there, behind bars. They can sing and dance there, shut up like in a concentration camp until they all die, for fuck's sake. They're infecting everyone, those gypsies, and they say we're racist, but fuck that. I hope all those motherfuckers die, the little ones, kids, grandparents and every fucking one of them.***
- ***they're pigs, they don't care about anything... and whatever happens to them it isn't enough. It's true what they say about gypsies, they went to a gypsy wedding in Bilbao when you weren't allowed to, and more than half of them got infected. Already three of them have died, two were gypsies, and the other we don't know if he was a gypsy or not. And they've had a burial and everything, they all got together again. And they're still going to church. They're all infected, they've been banned from the supermarkets, as soon as they're spotted they're arrested. We were clean, in Santoña nobody had it, we were totally clean, and now they've brought all this shit in. Now, we're.... well, we've got the Military Emergencies Unit here, we've got everything... in Santoña things are really bad. If you needed to come for some reason, don't. Things are really really bad in Santoña right now, all because of the gypsies. Really bad.***
- ***I really don't know where, but anyway, they've spread it around everywhere, and it's becoming a really really really big thing. The whole gypsy rabble's down here and that's how the trouble started.***

In relation to this, on Twitter one user posted the following:

“The infection in Santoña of a family of Roma ethnicity has left 5 people dead: the mayor is calling for help. That’s the help you were looking for, Mayor”.

And with this text they posted an image of what appear to be canisters of gas, similar to those used by the Nazis in the extermination of Jews, Roma and other minorities.

4- Messages disseminated in La Línea de la Concepción (Cádiz)

To examine this fourth case, we travel to La Línea de la Concepción (Cádiz) to find once again the spreading of hoax audio messages by mobile messaging, focusing on the Roma population as spreaders of Covid-19.

At the beginning of April 2020, when there was still little information available and the country was under lockdown, everyone was suffering great uncertainty and anxiety. At that time in La Línea, some very alarming audio messages began to spread, apparently sent by someone working at a hospital and warning that a Roma person had died of COVID and that the whole family was trying to break the lockdown rules and get in to mourn them. The audio, which in the circumstances obviously generated fear, among other reactions, was accompanied by a photo of the deceased person which appeared to be taken from their social media.

Starting with this first audio, the story began to spread more widely, with two more audios appearing which had the same aim, to portray

and mark out the Roma population of La Línea as uncivil, asocial and spreaders of the virus, and as being incapable of following the emergency rules. The messages demanded apartheid for the Roma population. We can see that in this case new technologies, far from helping us to take coordinated action to fight the pandemic, served to exclude and spread hate against vulnerable groups which were already suffering rejection before the arrival of the Coronavirus. As in the other cases, these events were reported to the Prosecutor’s Office specialised in dealing with hate crime in Cádiz.

In one of the audios the following comments, among others, can be heard:

- **A gypsy has died of COVID19.** He had diabetes, but he died of COVID, OK? He was supposed to be isolating but the guy, in spite of that, he carried on going shopping at the Mercadona at “Los Junquillos”. **He and his family got it. He died and the family is still going out in the street, they don’t care about isolating.** Now they’re in hospital. They’re making trouble. Warn your whole family and all your friends, **tell them not to go to the Mercadona at “Los Junquillos”, because they carried on shopping there,** right? And be really careful, wear mask and gloves. **Because of the gypsies, because they don’t do isolation, this thing is spreading like wildfire.**
- **These people are all infected, because all of them, the whole family is infected.** There has to be a solution to this, right? This has to be solved, doesn’t it? **I mean these people should be kept isolated somewhere - in one place, right?**

5- Hate speech generated after the publication of images of Roma people in Beas de Segura (Jaén)

Fifth, we will look at a case which occurred in Beas de Segura (Jaén), also in the month of April. Once again, new technologies and their misuse were a defining feature.

A national newspaper with a large circulation published a photo of a Roma family with a van, some children and some loudspeakers. The mere fact of using this image, especially considering the stigma already suffered by the Roma population, shows the newspaper's clear intention of reinforcing existing beliefs, stereotypes and prejudices. We should not forget that at this time, many media outlets insisted on broadcasting scenes of uncivil behaviour in an attempt to mark out the Roma population as the main offenders.

The publication of this image generated a wide variety of anti-Roma comments on various social media platforms.

For example, users posted these comments on Twitter:

- **Pedro (@Peter_FB):** “What a disgusting bunch of lowlifes. They say it’s a problem of integration... most of the ones you see are gypsies, the kind that don’t want to be like any other group of citizens, but are just lazy delinquents relying on handouts. It’s incredible that we have to put up with having this scum on the streets”.
- **EsoEsAsi (@vincencalvo):** “Pseudo-people”
- **Ojoaldato (@Ojoaldato76842498):** “I reckon that none, or almost none of them, are paying social security, if they get infected they’ll have to use some gypsy ritual to heal themselves and if it doesn’t work, well ... natural selection ...”
- **El Peseta (@Cien_Ptas):** “their faces and their registration are there, what else can you expect from the worst pack of animals in Spain...? THE GYPSIES...”
- **Diego (@mark88stark):** “Fucking gypsies... They’re a cancer”
- **Serconmi (@serconmi):** “Brutes! That’s gypsy Spain...”

There is a similar modus operandi at work here as in the other cases we have seen. Perhaps what makes this case a little different to the rest is that it was the media outlet itself, the newspaper, which in its different online forms incited this anti-Roma reaction. It did so by means of sensationalist reporting which generated greater online traffic and thereby increased the circulation and popularity of the newspaper on the internet. The anti-Roma comments match the profile of those seen previously, creating dehumanisation, calling for extermination and apartheid, extolling Nazism as the solution to the “gypsy problem”. All these comments were also reported to the Prosecutor’s Office for Hate Crimes of Jaén, many of them constituting criminal offences under Article 510 of the Criminal Code.

6- Anti-Roma speech directed against the residents of the Las Tres Mil Viviendas neighbourhood (Seville)

Another case worth mentioning as relevant, although it has not been reported to the prosecutor as it does not meet the criteria for a criminal offence, is the case of Las Tres Mil Viviendas in Seville (officially part of the Polígono Sur area). According to the report on urban indicators from the National Statistics Institute, produced as part of the European Urban Audit project to investigate living conditions in cities of the

European Union, it is the poorest neighbourhood in Spain, with a large Roma population.

A number of images disseminated by the newspaper *ABC de Sevilla* were used to highlight the breaking of lockdown rules by some Roma residents of this slum neighbourhood in order to attend an evangelical religious service. This unleashed a wave of antigypsyism which was further fuelled by the Commissioner for Polígono Sur (Jaime Bretón). The Commissioner for Polígono Sur is a public figure, considered a senior member of the Andalusian Government. What makes it necessary to highlight this case is its gravity, given that it demonstrates institutional antigypsyism and was accompanied by a whole string of discriminatory statements culminating in a public call, through various media outlets, for military intervention.

Some of Mr Bretón's statements¹⁴ literally included "We can't let a minority just do whatever they

¹⁴ https://sevilla.abc.es/sevilla/sevi-comisionado-para-poligono-pide-entre-ejercito-tres-viviendas-202003191920_noticia.html?ref=https:%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F

want", referring to the breaking of the lockdown by some families. These families were referred to as "dysfunctional" family clans who "are not used to public order, discipline and respectful co-existence", and for this reason he believed the authorities needed to "impose" such order. In statements to the EFE news agency, he asked the Government Sub-delegation to bring the Military Emergencies Unit into the neighbourhood.

If it is normally dangerous to have such hate speech spreading on the internet, it has even worse repercussions when the person responsible for the hate speech is in a position of political authority and, furthermore, has ultimate responsibility for something as delicate as the overall strategy in the neighbourhood and for the special attention it requires.



IV.

Dissemination. How the reported cases were disseminated

IV. 1. Forms of dissemination

In the cases we are examining, we can observe **four forms of dissemination**, each with its own characteristics:

1. Whatsapp audio messages (spreading a hoax story about Roma people deliberately infecting people at a hospital).
1. The publication of various news stories by media outlets (TV and press).
1. The dissemination of information or videos on social media platforms and comments on these same platforms.
1. Public comments made by a person in a position of political authority, and the subsequent dissemination in the press of these irresponsible statements.

As we can see, although the four modes of dissemination share some common elements (for example, linking Roma people with contagion, with irresponsibility, with crime, etc.) the ways in which these ideas are disseminated are very different.

On one hand, we have the issue of mobile messaging or Whatsapp, which allows users to rapidly cascade hoax audio messages through chains of other users. These messages remain unverified, but nonetheless cause alarm and other negative reactions.

The mode employed by communications media is different: here, it is the media outlet itself which is responsible (whether it is through a television programme carrying unacceptable comments in favour of a murder, or a written press article linking Roma people with crimes or criminality). After publishing such news stories, these media outlets receive comments from readers which in many cases constitute anti-Roma hate speech.

The third mode is that employed by social media platforms: these days, it is easy to record a video of any everyday incident and disseminate it on a platform such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. This rapid, easy online dissemination means that many users can post instances of hate speech – in this case anti-Roma comments – which are sometimes very extreme.

Finally, the fourth mode of dissemination is in public speech; in other words, when someone in a position of political authority makes a statement, and this statement produces an effect on society, given that public authority figures can reach a greater audience and bear a greater degree of



responsibility. Such was the case of Las Tres Mil Viviendas described above.

IV. 2. Dissemination of fake news as a means of propagating anti-Roma hate speech

Many of the disseminated messages of hate stemmed from what is known as “Fake News”, alluding to the supposed role of the Roma community in the spread of the COVID-19 virus, so it is worth pausing to examine this issue. According to the Office of Security for Internet Users (OSI), fake news is news containing false, manipulated, erroneous or unverified data which is published in an attempt to generate disinformation and confusion and to feed conspiracy theories among readers, with the aim of making money through the visitor traffic to websites which publish the news, or of manipulating the opinions of the users who read it.

Fake news is propagated through the use of various methods which lure readers into reading and sharing it. In this way, its creators hope to increase its dissemination and its effects.

We can enumerate these methods as follows:

- Shocking headlines are used, which often have little or nothing to do with the information contained in the article.
- The stories implicate topical figures who have been involved in controversies, scandals or other newsworthy events.
- On occasion, old news stories are re-used which are shorn of context, or which simply did not happen but nevertheless generate curiosity

- A sensationalist slant is put on the news story.
- The images used are touched up or faked.
- The focus of the news story is skewed to garner immediate reactions from the reader, depending on his/her political orientation or beliefs.

As we have observed, there are various factors which contribute to the spread of hoax messages, fake news and disinformation. It must be stressed that **the media outlets themselves, both physical and virtual, carry their share of responsibility when they fail to adopt the measures necessary to control hate speech, measures which their own protocols recognise they ought to take.**

We normally tend to talk about the effects of these kinds of hate speech upon society in general, and about the repercussions they have for the perception of minority groups. It is very rare, however, that we pause to reflect on **how these incidents of discrimination, oppression and/or exclusion affect the group at which the violence of hate speech is directed.**

Although there were many images focusing on isolated instances of uncivil behaviour on the part of some Roma individuals, the media treatment of the same behaviours when displayed by non-Roma individuals was very different, as was the response it generated.

Impact of the cases on the Roma community. Testimonies

We have already analysed these six cases and have been able to understand the context and consequences of the hate speech, but there remains a very important part to investigate: **the impact that these cases have had on the Roma community, which we will illustrate with the first person accounts of those who have suffered this antigypsyism** and who have had to endure its direct effects.

The negative effects suffered by a community when it is subjected to exclusion, racism and xenophobia are not inconsiderable. Anti-Roma racism is racism of a structural character. Since it affects the whole of a population group, we can understand those who form part of this excluded group as suffering what is known as collective trauma.

This trauma is the result of exposure to unavoidable stress, from which escape is not possible and for which habitual coping methods have not been sufficient. The trauma is collective when it is a shared experience and when there is a group which has felt itself to be harmed by and defenceless against another.

1- Impact: fear

In the cases that we have examined, a logical reaction by the Roma people exposed to the messages is fear. The hate speech shows hostility towards the Roma community which could turn into violence. Awareness of this causes a feeling of vulnerability and fear.

A clear example of this is found in the testimony of one of the people affected by the hate speech incident in Talavera de la Reina: the community were living in a state of apprehension since they felt that at any moment a spark could light the flame of violence: *“A lot of times we said: ok..., because of this stuff some idiot, I don’t know, could maybe throw something at you from a car”... “We said, be careful and if they start on you, don’t say anything, and you know, we were always warning people...”*

2- Impact: public marking-out

Sometimes anti-Roma hostility can lead to unfounded public accusations against Roma people. This finger-pointing causes shame and scapegoating, and damages the mental health of those who experience it.

A clear example of this can also be found in testimony given by someone from Talavera de la Reina. To give an idea of the recent context, he relates an incident he experienced with one of his grandchildren. Due to Covid-19, the students were having online classes, and some students had been lent tablets, which later had to be returned. The Roma boy was accused of stealing the tablet. **The boy, 9 years old, had been singled out in front of his classmates, despite his innocence.** Furthermore, the tutor had not even waited for the school bus to arrive. Nor did he show any faith in the adult since he suspected, perhaps, that none of the children would say anything and that they would keep the

incident to themselves; this was the impression that our subject was left with.

Feeling very uncomfortable with the situation, he called the tutor and communicated how he felt, after which the tutor apologised and regretted her attitude. *“If a nine-year old child who is starting out now, so that as you say, soon he can be someone and be a child who can form part of society and who has to integrate and know what it is to study, to work... and his own teachers are going to set him apart and accuse him, at nine years old, of stealing a tablet for being Roma...”*

3- Impact: stress.

The cases we have seen show that there is an awareness within the Roma community of racism, of rejection towards Roma people because of their ethnicity, and even of possible violence towards them. This fact, which becomes an everyday constant in the lives of many Roma people, generates stress.

Again the case of Talavera de la Reina reflects clearly how this stress works. Our interviewee made a very ingenious comparison to talk to us about antigypsyism as a form of racism that is overlooked but dangerous: *“It’s like COVID, they don’t know they have it until they show the first symptoms, they’re asymptomatic until they’re with a Roma person” ... “The ‘We’re all the same’ mask slips”.*

He also described to us the tension surrounding the possibility that there could be an outbreak of violence of some sort. He gave as a recent example a video posted on social media in which two girls were begging for a sandwich. No mention was made in the video of any

ethnic identity, and yet it gave rise to numerous anti-Roma and aporophobic comments. This demonstrates the hostile atmosphere which is experienced and faced by Roma people on a daily basis.

“The only thing I kept asking myself was ‘Why this hatred against the Roma community?’” “On a personal level, of course they affect me, they aren’t attacking me directly, but even though there isn’t a relationship between me and that person, they’re indirectly including me... that we steal things, that we kill... me, for example I don’t do those things, nor do my family or anyone in my circle, no-one I know is like that... honestly, we’re constantly being attacked”.

4- Impact: damage to personal dignity.

Many Roma, aware of messages of hate on social media through constant reports, feel that their image and personal dignity have been harmed. This causes shame, fear and a need for self-justification. A good example of this harm can be found in testimony from Santoña.

In this case, one of the first things we noticed was that our interviewee began the interview almost asking for permission to justify himself: *“The Roma of Santoña are civilized Roma, we aren’t Roma like 100 years ago, we have been in Santoña for more than half a century, 50 or 60 years in a town of 12 thousand people, and there’s never been any problem, we’ve lived here in harmony.”* He went on to declare himself proudly Santoñan, having been born and raised there.

In all this preamble there is an element of “excusatio non petita” and also an impression of confusion about attacks which come from

neighbours they have been living with all their lives.

The audios which accused the Roma population of being the spreaders of the virus caused uproar and indignation, not only because of the unfounded accusation, but above all because of the negative effect which it had on the majority population, which in turn unleashed anti-Roma hatred.

5- Traumatic impact in childhood

In some instances, Roma children bear witness to these comments, threats and smears. This can have traumatic effects, since children are more vulnerable and have less ability to understand what is happening.

In Santoña, where there was a deluge of comments calling for violence and genocide against the Roma, there is a clear example of this impact.

The interviewee was shocked by the level of violence in the comments, which even called for the deaths of children. This hatred against every member of the Roma community grew exponentially in the form of racist attacks on social media. References to Hitler were continuous, extolling Nazism, the concentration camps and the gas chambers, calling for the extermination of the Roma people, and displaying a level of violence very seldom recorded.

Our interviewee related an incident in the supermarket. *“I’m in the queue and there are loads of people, when a couple of Civil Guards enter the supermarket and say to one of the floor managers... ‘There they are, that’s him’ and they came over to identify me and I said ‘But why*

me?’ ‘No, no, come outside sir’. They took me outside, I had to identify myself, they saw that I wasn’t under any order of confinement and then immediately they confirmed to the floor manager that I didn’t have a confinement order and I said to them, ‘But wait, with all the people that are here, why me? What’s going on, is it because I’m Roma?’”

He also mentions that in these types of hostile situations they always try to prevent the Roma children from realising exactly what is happening and to downplay the situation, so that the children do not worry, even though in many cases this is impossible and the children end up understanding what is going on.

It seems that the children themselves did not want to go out on the street, and that it became difficult to take them to school because they were so frightened.

6- Impact: the “scapegoat” effect.

As we have seen in some of the cases, Roma people are often accused of being responsible for propagating the virus; this is what is usually called “scapegoating”, which means collectively blaming a social group for a complex situation or a crisis, in this case that of COVID-19¹⁵. This is a phenomenon which Roma communities have experienced repeatedly throughout history.

A testimony from Línea de la Concepción reflects the “scapegoat” effect very well: *“When the lockdown started, in March, the beginning of April, we received some audios*

15 Margareta Matache and Jacqueline Bhabha, “The shameful resurgence of violent scapegoating in a time of crisis”, 5th May 2020.

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/shameful-resurgence-violent-scapegoating-time-crisis/>

via WhatsApp because the first person to die of Covid in the area of La Línea had passed away, and it turned out that that person was Roma". This was the trigger for an explosion of hate against the Roma population.

"Some audios began circulating, saying, not only breaking data protection laws, sharing the photo of the deceased that had been taken from their social media... but also saying that everything was in chaos, that the person who had died was Roma, that they were infected, that they were spreading it all over La Línea because they weren't respecting the social distancing and lockdown rules and so the whole infected family was going out to do the shopping, that now the Roma were going to bring Covid to La Línea..."

It seems clear that in representing this behaviour as unusual, Roma people are being singled out as habitually disruptive elements whose behaviour uniquely fails to comply with social norms of correctness and manners.

7- Impact: dehumanisation.

Dehumanisation is a common technique used by those who are intolerant towards minorities. It is a way to deprive these people of their human characteristics and thus be able to enact violence towards them without remorse.

In the hate speech we have examined there are numerous anti-Roma racist reactions which, as so often, demand the eradication and extermination of the Roma people (the "final solution"), as well as references to Nazism and discourses of ethnic cleansing. The glorification of Nazi death machinery is, unfortunately, habitual in these discourses, and is sometimes justified precisely by an appeal to this dehumanisation (they are

not people, therefore they do not possess rights and can be murdered with impunity, their life has no value), by comparing Roma to animals (rats, dogs, cockroaches, "pseudo-people", chimpanzees etc).

The case of Beas de Segura (Jaén) is a good example of how this dehumanisation works. Our interviewee there explains in detail:

"When the news broke, the social networks immediately lit up with a huge amount of incredibly hateful comments" ... "We compiled all the comments that we saw anywhere, comments which I have right here so that I can tell you exactly what they said without making anything up, they were 'what disgusting scum, pseudo-people'... (their faces and registrations are here)... 'Fucking gypsies, they're a cancer'..."

But this was not the only case; as well as the case of Beas de Segura there was a further incident in Linares. *"This appeared not in the communications media, but on a Twitter profile, a video on the account 'Policías de España'. On this profile there is a video supposedly recorded in a neighbourhood here in Linares and it's the same thing, it's supposed to be a group of Roma people singing and dancing in the street. This video is accompanied by the heading, 'Chimpanzees are smarter, more intelligent and have more solidarity than them'; It's shameful!"*

8- Impact: discrimination in leisure spaces and the denial of services.

Another important effect of hate speech is that it leads to actual acts in everyday life (it does not remain restricted to the "virtual" online world, but also generates attitudes and reactions in society). For example, we can see in these cases that

because of these messages and false rumours, some Roma people have suffered discrimination while accessing leisure facilities or trying to make purchases in pharmacies or supermarkets.

This type of discrimination occurred in Beas de Segura (Jaén), as this testimony from one of the affected people shows: *“The hate spread out to include the whole Roma population. Harassment, for example, was intensified through social media, harassment also for example in supermarkets, which might not seem like much, but we’re talking about this happening right in the middle of lockdown, I mean, we could only go out for basic necessities like going to the doctor, getting the shopping, in supermarkets we noticed this a lot, well, we noticed it and we’re still noticing it. I mean, harassment of Roma people when we went to do the shopping, we noticed it a lot”.*

Many such incidents of discrimination have occurred in many different places, but they usually go unreported. The victims of the abuse get used to letting them pass because of the sense of helplessness and mistrust they feel.

Our interviewee recounted something similar that happened after the lockdown had ended, in a supermarket in Linares, involving some food vouchers that the FSG had given him through their programme of assistance during Covid.

9- Impact: hypervigilance in shopping centres, with a sexist bias (intersectional).

Another effect of these messages is to provoke harassment in the form of excessive and continual vigilance directed at some Roma women in shopping centres by security guards. This is also an example of intersectionality, **where**

both ethnic and gender discrimination operate together.

Again, there is an example of this discriminatory impact in the case of Beas de Segura (Jaén):

“Because we had given this young woman a voucher, she had to go directly to a supermarket to use it, to get the food. She went with her child, and well, when she was in the queue one of the managers grabbed her by the arm and started shaking her. He asked her what she was doing, said that he had seen a companion of hers who had stolen something... what she was doing was getting the food she wanted to exchange for the coupon.” ... “So of course, when the little girl saw her mother being manhandled, she started to cry. The young woman’s mother was also with them, an elderly lady, and of course all they wanted was for them to let the young woman go.” ... “(the manager) started reprimanding them, the girl crying, the older woman telling him to let her go and from there ...she hadn’t stolen anything, she showed her voucher and everything, to show she hadn’t stolen anything, the guy... the manager, well he called the police”.

It is easy to understand why victims of this type of abuse mistrust the police force when it comes to filing reports: *“I imagine that happening to me... the police come and they side with the person who has been shaking me like that, well obviously, the level of mistrust is enormous.”*

10- Impact: isolation.

Another effect of these messages is isolation due to the assignment of blame. When they are falsely accused, some people feel discriminated against and shut themselves up within their community, breaking social ties with non-Roma

people and ceasing to exercise certain rights of citizenship, such as participation in politics.

We find a clear example of this in the case of Las Tres Mil Viviendas (Seville), where the interviewee gave the following account in relation to the second wave: *“In the second wave, almost at the beginning, from memory I think in August, a group of people got together, the exact same thing as before, they happened to be Evangelicals, it was one of their birthdays. So what happened, well a group of couples got together, the number that was legally allowed at the time, all fine, and they went to an outdoor restaurant to have dinner.*

Well, one of them was positive... at that dinner the others caught it. From there it spread through the neighbourhood. I said that in the first wave there were hardly any cases, but in the second wave there were cases.” “...it came from that and from another couple of outbreaks in the neighbourhood, and then not long after that, 15 or 20 days, from what we recall, we had the first Roma death.”

“This man went back to his old ways and said in the press that Las Tres Mil had to be put in isolation again, that we should go back to Phase 1. Then there really was more controversy because he was acting beyond his remit, so the Council, the Health Department, which is run by his political party, they had to call him to order because he couldn’t make those sorts of pronouncements.”

The interviewee also expressed his outrage regarding the article “Aislar a las Tres Mil (“Confine Las Tres Mil”) by the journalist Alberto García Reyes, which appeared in March 2020 in the daily newspaper ABC. This article can be summarised

in the words of its author: “In the ghettos, where the residents demand our solidarity with them, they show no solidarity in stopping the virus” and launches various accusations full of aporophobia and antigypsyism.

Conclusions on the human impact of anti-Roma hate speech

Through these testimonies we have been able to see how antigypsyism has become more virulent during the pandemic, and how it has had psychosocial effects at various levels on those who have been subjected to anti-Roma acts, either as individuals or as a collective.

The disorders affecting the victims of antigypsyism are **principally depression, low self-esteem and high levels of stress. At a social or collective level, they lead people to mistrust institutions and mainstream society, which is viewed as threatening or dangerous. This in turn means that many of these cases go unreported.**

Being constantly subjected to stereotypes, social and institutional discrimination, violence, inequality etc., as well as to everyday language which normalises the use of racist expressions in, for example, idioms or sayings, can make daily life very challenging for those who suffer antigypsyism.

Suffering an episode of hate or racism at school can psychologically scar a child for life, and can even cause problems of neurological development if the child is younger than 5 years old. This is stated in the *Manual for the detection and prevention of racism, xenophobia and other*

*forms of intolerance in classrooms*¹⁶, published by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport and aimed at teachers.

This manual warns that such discrimination affects not only its immediate victims, but also their families, other members of the minorities they belong to and the whole community, and suggests that experiencing a trauma leads to a series of effects on the development of children's brains.

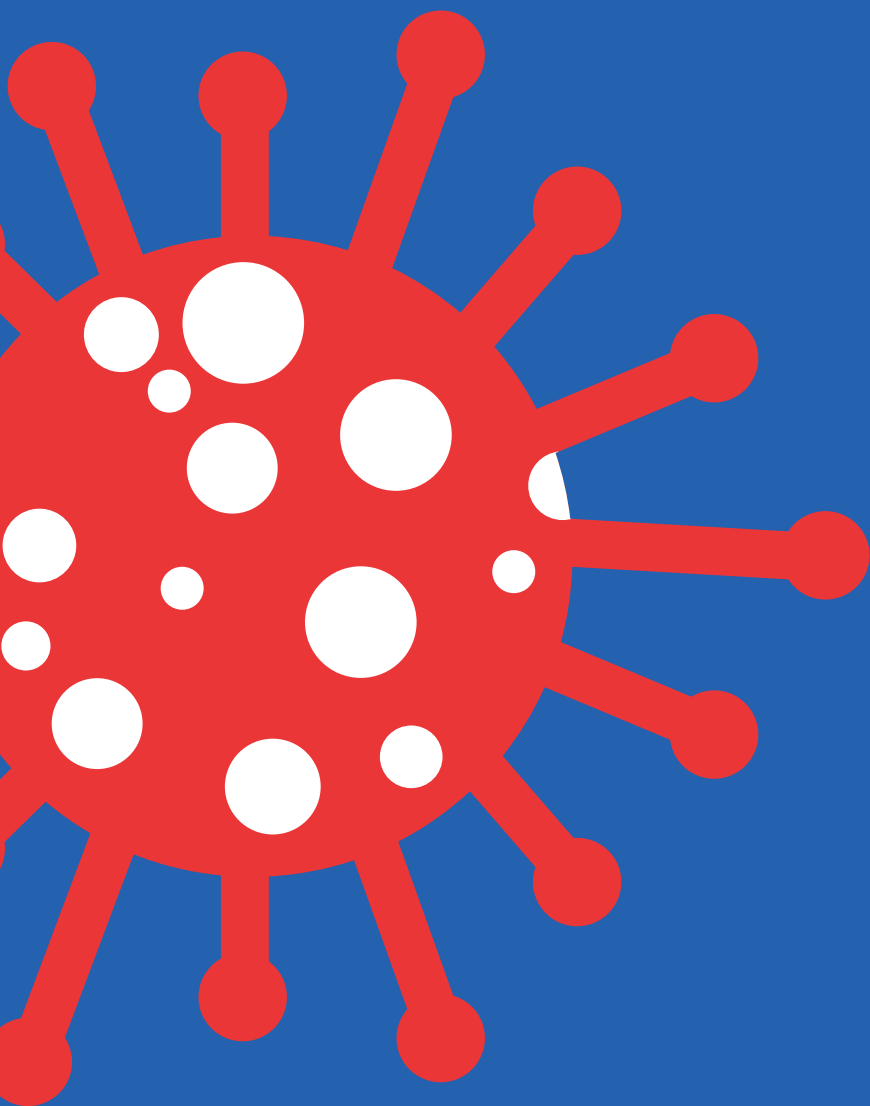
According to the manual, the consequences of hate incidents for children and young people are particularly serious, and one key reason for this is that such incidents are related to the victims' identity and therefore affect their self-

¹⁶ https://www.observatoriodelainfancia.es/oia/esp/documentos_ficha.aspx?id=4910

esteem. Furthermore, the manual points out that traumatic experiences can cause **children to learn mechanisms of hyper-vigilance or aggression to protect themselves, and that such experiences are not isolated events, but form part of a whole series of incidents experienced directly or indirectly by the victim.**

Based on these reported cases, alongside many others that the FSG has assisted with in the last 15 years¹⁷, we can understand the reach and impact of anti-Roma discrimination and hate speech on the human rights (to housing, employment, health and education) and on the self-esteem of those affected. As we have observed, the COVID-19 pandemic has served as an excuse for a revival of these anti-Roma practices.

¹⁷ All the Annual Reports on Discrimination and the Roma Community can be consulted at: <https://informesdiscriminacion.gitanos.org/informes-completos-ingles>



Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions regarding the impact on the Roma Community:

We can summarise the impact of the cases we have analysed at various levels:

- **Personal:** psychological impact, low self-esteem, internalised discrimination, trauma, stress, demotivation, anxiety, damage to personal dignity.
- **Collective:** the Roma community feels attacked as a collective, as stereotypes become normalised, hatred is incited and a negative image is created. This leads to mistrust on the part of some Roma people towards institutions and the police, and to fear of non-Roma people (which in turn is a factor in the under-reporting of cases of discrimination and hate crimes).
- **Discrimination. Impact on co-existence and the exercising of rights:** phenomena such as rumours, hoax messages, hate speech etc. affect social harmony and the safety of Roma people. They also eventually affect the ability of Roma people who suffer discrimination in other areas to exercise their fundamental rights (eg. access to employment, housing, health and education, and personal dignity).
- **Impact on childhood and an intersectional focus:** we have seen that many of these cases are witnessed by young children, who have less ability to deal with and understand what is happening, leading to especially deep and significant trauma. Similarly, many Roma women are subject to several specific forms of discrimination, a situation which is known as intersectional discrimination.
- With regard to hate speech, which is the focus of this study, we have seen how this can impede adequate interventions and exacerbate the problems of those subjected to this stigmatisation.

Recommendations

This study shows that hate speech is not simply politically incorrect or anti-democratic discourse, but discourse which causes specific and tangible harms to the people who make up the Roma community. As such we believe it represents a valuable opportunity for the key actors in the fight against this scourge to take effective measures to eradicate it.

Recommendations for communications media

COVID-19 has found useful allies in the form of disinformation, fake news, discrimination and the stereotyping of people and collectives who have historically suffered discrimination, such as the Roma community. To challenge this, we must **rely on official sources of information and try only to share the information which we have been able to verify**, to avoid sowing panic about infection and thus creating sensations of danger. We must also avoid participating in any way in actions or messages that discriminate against people or collectives.

Recommendations for internet companies

Along with the following practical examples of how to double-check the information which reaches us and which we pass on to others, we should remember that in 2016 the European Commission, along with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Microsoft, signed a Code of conduct¹⁸ with regard to illegal incitement to hatred on the internet. With this code, they committed themselves to fighting the propagation of incitement to online hate speech in Europe.

It is vital that this code of conduct is rigorously followed. Although there have been improvements in recent years, it does not appear that all these companies are applying it with the seriousness and thoroughness that is desirable, given that they are the simplest and fastest routes for the dissemination of hate (above all Twitter). The last round of monitoring, in 2020, indicated that anti-Roma hate speech was one of the most widespread types of hate

¹⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-code-conduct-counteracting-illegal-hate-speech-online_en

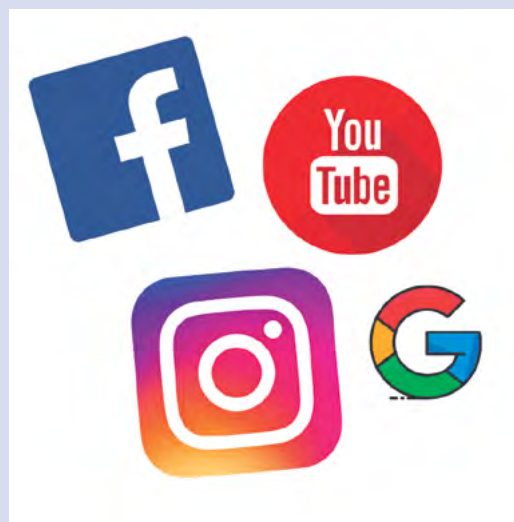
speech in Europe¹⁹ comprising 10% of all hate speech registered.

For this reason, we recommend to these companies that they apply the Protocol for combating illegal online hate speech, published by OBERAXE and mentioned previously.

Recommendations for social media users

We should never forget that the final responsibility for the spread of fake news and disinformation lies with us; for this reason, we must verify information before sharing it. We can follow some **simple guidelines to help avoid the growth of hate on social media:**

1. Take a moment and think. Don't immediately believe news or share texts.
2. Did you have a strong emotional reaction to the information? Be suspicious. Fake news is designed to provoke shock or outrage.
3. Did the information confirm a conviction you already held? This is also a common technique used in fake news. Develop the habit of being sceptical and investigating.
4. Is the information "asking" you to believe it, or does it "show" you why you should mistrust it? When a news item is true, it is more likely to cite



sources, to include links and to cite official documents (in other words, it is transparent).

5. Producing a report as soon as events happen takes time and requires qualified professionals. Don't trust "bombshell" stories in the heat of the moment.
6. Does it single out an ethnic group, or a minority, as being "to blame"? If so, this message or piece of information could be aiming to stigmatise or foment hatred against that group.

Do not share messages, audios or videos which are alarmist or which single out or criminalise a social group (ethnic, sexual minority, migrants etc).

¹⁹ News report on the FSG website:
<https://www.gitanos.org/actualidad/archivo/131364.html.en>

Recommendations for the authorities responsible for dealing this type of activity when it constitutes a criminal offence (police, public prosecutors and judges).

We call on these institutions to continue improving their approach to hate speech, specifically urging them to:

- Fully investigate each case (find out if there is repeat offending by that author or account, or an intention to criminalise, or to incite violence or discrimination). Examine the impact, spread, reach, indicators, etc.
- Monitor this type of discourse on a daily basis, including by using algorithms²⁰ for the detection of online hate speech.
- Publish recommendations and advice to the public not to produce or spread messages of hate which link COVID-19 to ethnic minorities, Roma people, migrants, etc. (publish campaigns or messages from official Police accounts, for example).
- Apply legislation properly, recognising the harm done and the impact of this type of crime in the context of the pandemic.

²⁰ ALRECO Project (OBERAXE):
<https://alrecoresponse.eu/en/home/>



- Train personnel in the prevention of this type of crime, with a focus on human rights and intersectionality.
- Share and use the Protocol for combating illegal online hate speech, published by OBERAXE in 2021²¹.

²¹ https://www.inclusion.gob.es/oberaxe/ficheros/ejes/discursoodio/PROTOCOLO_DISCURSO_ODIO.pdf

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