

The educational situation of Roma students in Spain

Executive summary



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1 | Introduction

1.1 | Equity in education, a challenge that must be faced.

The academic literature shows the importance of education in improving the living conditions of the population. **Education is considered the main driver of upward social mobility, helping to stop the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next, and for this reason equity in education is a challenge that must be faced.**

This study contributes to the objectives of the European Council's Recommendation for the adoption of effective measures for the integration of Roma people in Member States¹, providing data and information about the educational situation of the Roma population. It also contributes to the commitment under the Spanish Strategy (2021-2030)² to provide up-to-date statistics on the degree to which these objectives have been met.

Knowledge of the Roma people's educational situation helps us to determine how far we are from reaching the objectives set, as well as from the educational situation of the general population of Spain. It thus allows us to propose a pathway towards the elimination of disadvantage and towards a guarantee of equity in education. This requires the development of educational policies to compensate for disadvantages and provide an education for the Roma population which meets their needs. Such an education will provide a launchpad to enable the Roma population to escape the situation of exclusion which affects most of its members.

1.2 | Study objectives and methodology.

1.2.1. Objectives

The main objective of the study is to **discover the educational situation of Roma students at different stages in the education system**, comparing this situation with that of students in Spain generally. At the same time, an analysis of the progress of Roma students in secondary education will be carried out, based on data from the study *Roma students in secondary education: a comparative study*³, carried out by the FSG in 2013.

The study also offers an **analysis of the family and social environment** in which Roma people live, this environment being a determining factor in educational success, and examines the critical issue of the concentration and segregation of Roma students in certain centres of education.

1.2.2. Methodology

The study was carried out by means of two surveys: one of 1 734 households (7 280 people) and another of 166 centres of education. The results obtained have been compared with sources of statistical information⁴ on the educational situation of the Spanish population, along with previously-collected data on the situation for Roma people (2012).

1 The Council of the European Union (2013). *Council Recommendation of 9 December 2013 on effective Roma integration measures in the Member States (2013/C 378/01)*.

2 Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030 (2021). *Estrategia para la Igualdad, Inclusión y Participación del Pueblo Gitano 2021-2030*.

3 Fundación Secretariado Gitano (2013). *Executive summary. Roma Students in secondary education in Spain. A comparative study*.

4 *The sources can be reviewed in the full report (in Spanish)*.

2] Main findings and conclusions

A decade after the abovementioned study on the educational situation of Roma students in secondary education, we can see that there has been little progress in this area and that inequality in education with respect to the general population persists. While early school dropout rates are gradually falling in Spain and across the European Union, the majority of Roma students still do not gain a Compulsory Secondary Education Certificate.

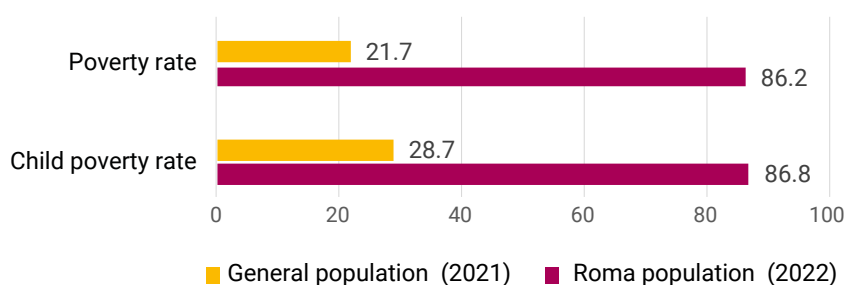
This situation of serious inequality in education, which does not exist for any other group in society, explains in large measure the difficulty of reversing chronic processes of exclusion and poverty among the Roma population.

Education is a key factor in personal and social development, as well as in a person's readiness for employment, for any social group. If certain minimum levels of education are not reached, young Roma people will continue to be excluded from the labour market or will find themselves in precarious employment. Thus the cycle of poverty will continue from one generation to the next.

2.1] The social and economic context of Roma households is not conducive to educational success.

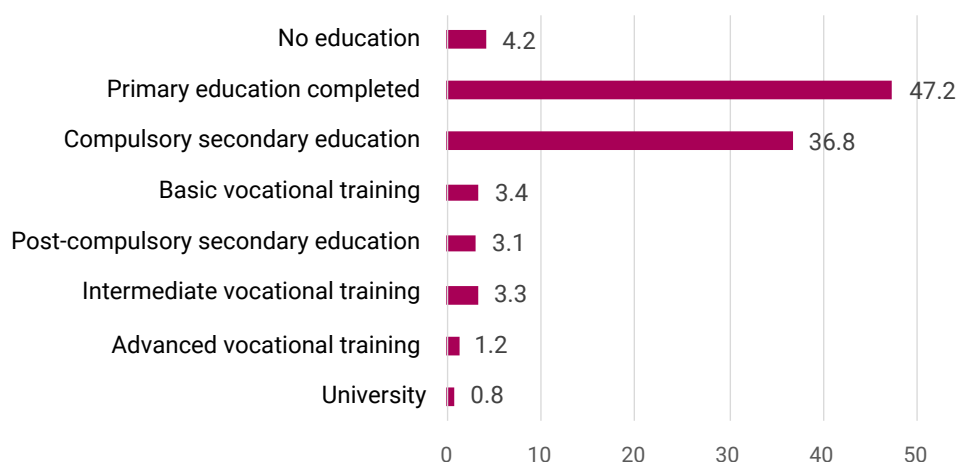
In general, levels of **poverty and exclusion** are extremely high. The AROPE rate in the Roma population is 87.4% while the child poverty rate is 86.8%, three times higher than the rate found in the general population of Spain (28.7%).

Figure 1] Rates of poverty and social exclusion.



The majority of Roma households do not receive sufficient income: less than half have income from work, unemployment is very high and welfare benefits are not sufficient to cover daily living costs. In addition, the educational level of these households is very low, with more than half having completion of primary education as a maximum level among household members.

Figure 2 | Distribution of households with members aged up to 24 according to the maximum level of education reached by a household member.



As might be expected, these households have **fewer educational resources**: a third of Roma households surveyed do not possess any books, 20% have no internet connection ('digital divide') and the availability of electronic devices is less than half of that found in the general population. This all places enormous limits on the resources families are able to devote to education or to educational support for their children.

The consequence is a vicious circle in which the intergenerational transmission of poverty brings with it the **intergenerational transmission of educational disadvantage**.

2.2 | The majority of Roma parents have high expectations for the education of their children and believe it is important in order to find better jobs and to make progress in life.

Families have **high expectations** for their children's educational success, and the majority think that young Roma people should continue studying after the age of 16. However, expectations fall in later years of education. Expectations are similar for males and females, or even a little higher for female students (36.8% believe their girls will go to university, while this percentage is only 31.9% for boys).

Despite the high value placed on education, the participation of Roma households in the educational arena (Parents' or Families Associations, educational guidance, etc.) is relatively low and limited to compulsory elements such as attending guidance sessions and general meetings. In fact, while more than half took part in meetings related to school performance, less than a quarter attended school or classroom activities and only 13.8% were members of a Parents' Association.

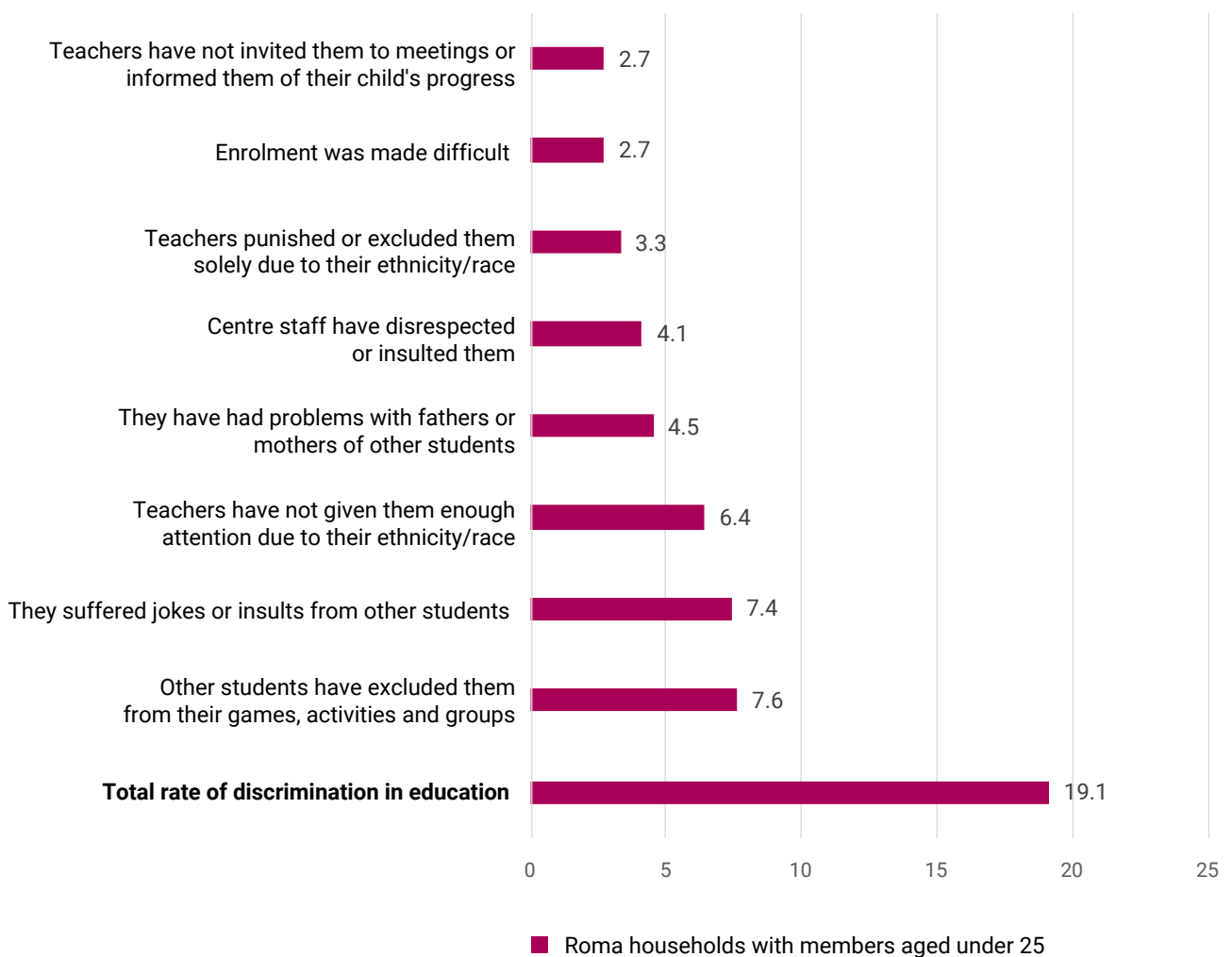
Family support for studies is still lacking in many ways. For example, slightly more than a third of households never take part in daily activities to support their children's education, such as talking about what they have learned in class or making sure that they set time aside for homework.

Moreover, these households **seldom make requests for educational support, despite their children's limited educational success** (only 5% of Roma families considering that their children need some type of educational support). When such needs are identified, they are not always met by centres of education (in 17.2% of cases where families identified a need for support, the centre failed to adapt the child's education to the need identified).

2.3 | The education system does not cater for the specific difficulties of Roma students.

Approximately one in every five households say their young people have suffered discrimination in the educational environment, at the hands of teachers, centre staff, other students or their relatives.

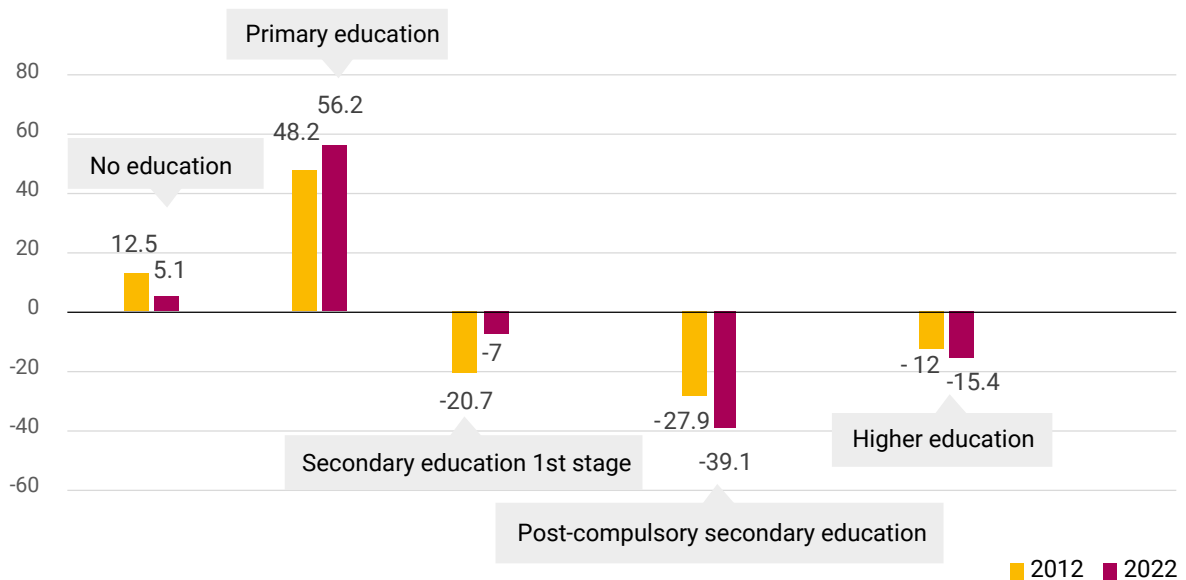
Figure 3 | Percentage of households which have suffered various types of discrimination in the educational environment due to being Roma.



2.5] Educational disadvantage has increased for the Roma population with respect to the general population.

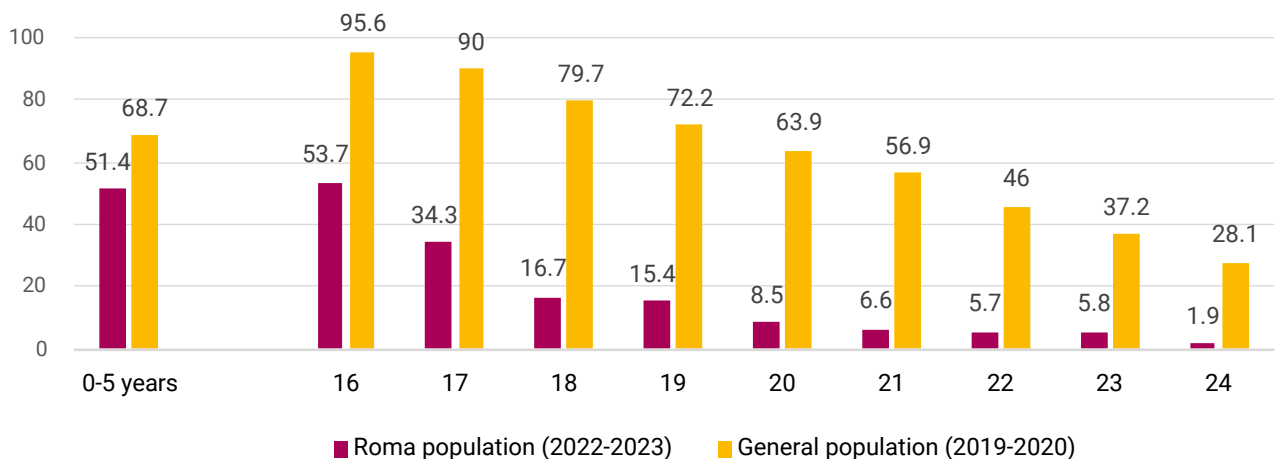
There still exists a significant gap between the educational results of the Roma population and those of the general population: although the difference between the proportion of Roma students finishing compulsory secondary education and proportion in the general population has decreased over the last decade, it is still a seven-percentage-point difference. However, differences in levels of post-compulsory education have increased, given that the educational situation of the Roma population has worsened after the age of 15, while for the general population it has improved.

Figure 4] Differences in the proportions of the Roma population and the total Spanish population (aged 16 to 24) according to maximum level of education.



For this reason, the difference in school attendance rates in the Roma population and in the general population of Spain increases substantially after the age of 16; while in 2012 the school attendance rate for Roma students aged 16 was 38 percentage points lower than that for the general population, this difference is now 41.9%, and at later ages it is even larger.

Figure 5] Net school attendance rates at non-compulsory ages.

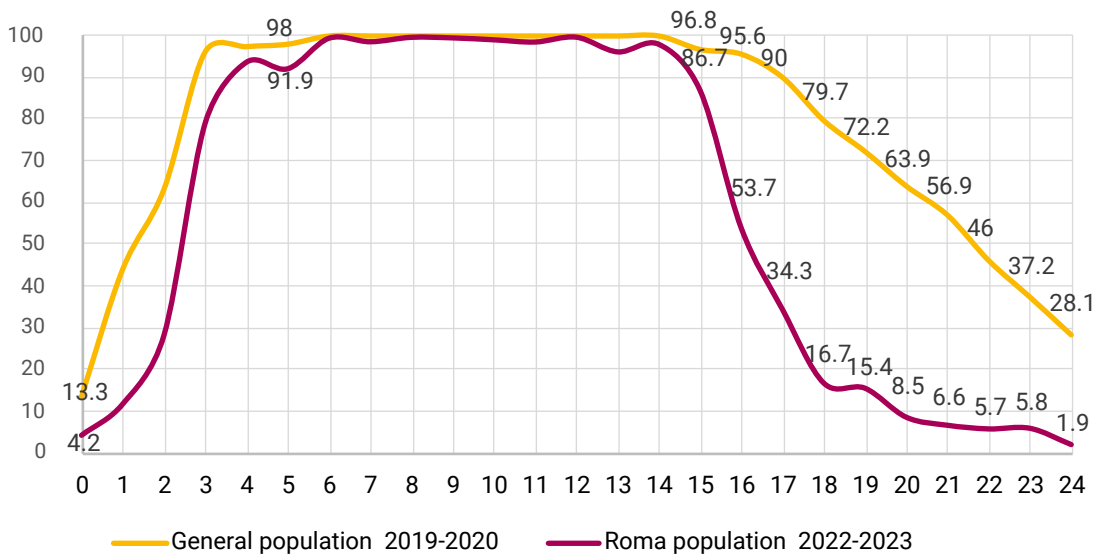


This inequality is evident at all levels of education:

Inclusion of the Roma population in infant education is lower and begins later than in the general population, which creates a disadvantage in the early years.

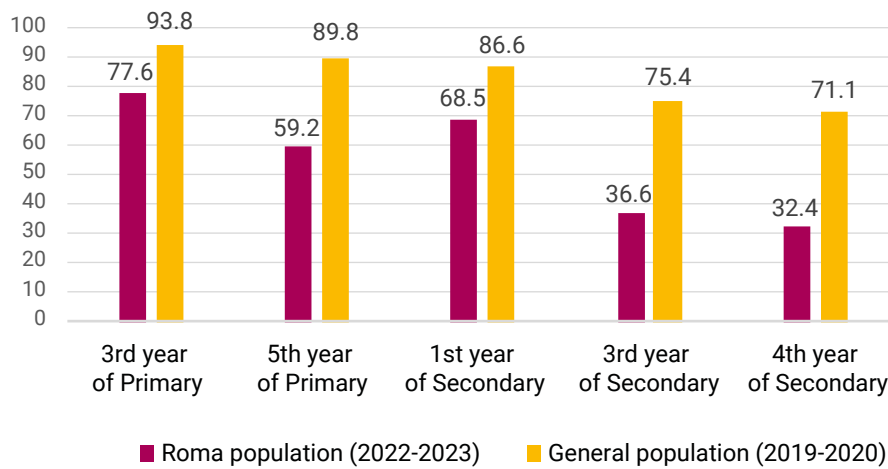
Only 51.4% of the Roma population aged 0 to 5 years was enrolled at this non-compulsory level in the school year 2022-2023, while enrolment in the general population stood at 68.7%. The difference between the groups is significant up to the age of 3. Moreover, Roma girls are enrolled at a somewhat lower rate than the boys at all ages, while in the general population there is hardly any difference by gender. The lower and later inclusion in infant education of the Roma population implies a **disadvantage in the early years**, given that this stage is essential for psychological and social development, for stimulation, for the acquisition of norms and habits, etc, and for taking the first steps in learning to read and write.

Figure 6] Net rate of attendance in education up to age 24.



As students progress through primary education, the gap widens, leading to repetition of school years (largely due to a lack of adaptive support measures).

In the third year of primary education only 77.6% of Roma pupils are of the normal age for this school year (8 years old), while the great majority of general population pupils are at the normal age (93.8%). By the penultimate year of primary education, only 59.2% of Roma pupils are at the age which matches their school year, with the percentage being slightly lower for girls (57.4%) than for boys (60.8%). On the other hand, nine in ten pupils in the general population are at the age which matches the fifth year (10 years old), with the figure being somewhat higher for girls than for boys.

Figure 7] Rates of match between age and school year.

This difference is essentially caused by the **repetition of school years** despite the fact that absenteeism has decreased substantially over the last decade, and by the **lack of specific support measures** to ensure educational success.

During compulsory secondary education, and particularly at 15-16 years old, much of the Roma population finish their schooling, having given up on their expectations of education.

Early school dropout is explained, among other factors, by more frequent repetition of school years and by a resulting cumulative lag in education. This discourages students from continuing with their studies; 59.2% of young Roma people aged 16 to 24 have repeated at least one school year in their lives (22% having done so twice or more) and **45% of Roma students stop studying at 16 because they are tired of it, they are not interested, and they want to look for a job.** For Roma women, family obligations are also an important factor in dropping out of education.

The education system does not offer training which is tailored to, or interesting to, young Roma people at risk of dropping out. Despite this, the rate of school failure (young people aged 16 to 24 who have not completed compulsory secondary education) has fallen slightly since 2012. However, it is still much higher than the rate found in the general population (62.8% compared with 4%).

Table 2] Rate of school failure.

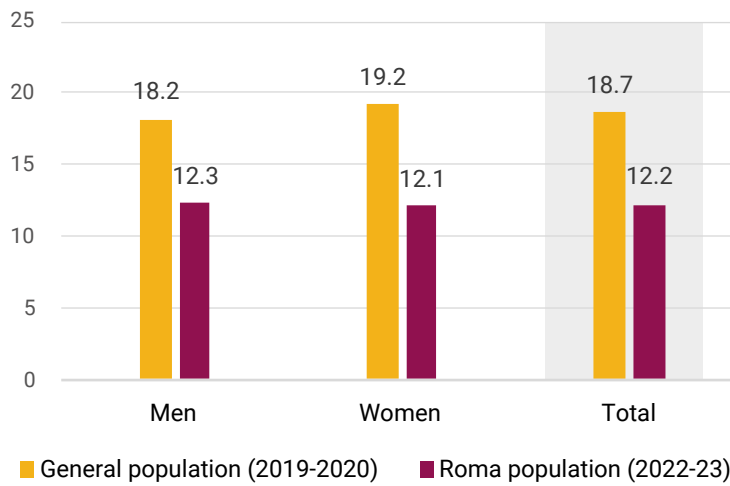
	General population (2022)	Roma population (2022)	Difference
Men	4.5	63.6	59.1
Women	3.4	62.1	58.7
Total	4	62.8	58.8

Source: Survey of Roma households. For general population "Active Population Survey annual data 2022" (National Institute of Statistics).

Roma students spend a relatively short time in formal education, due to their late entry and early exit, and many Roma people are neither in education nor in employment.

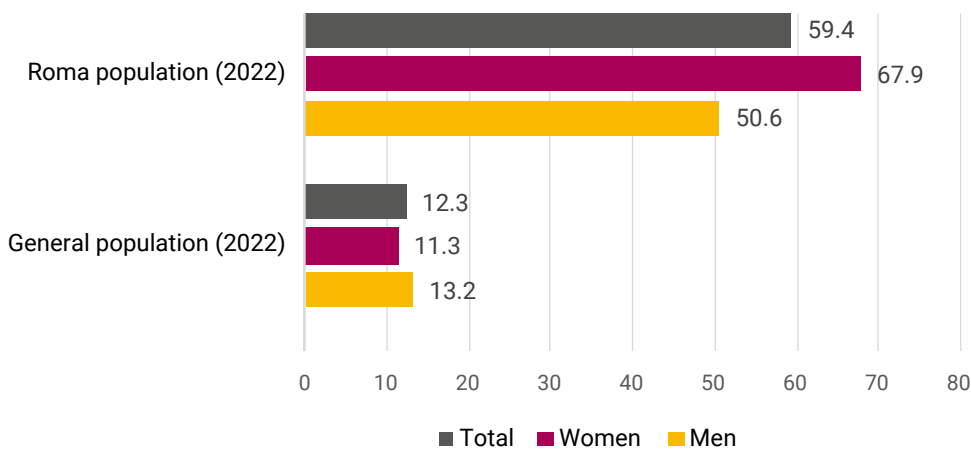
The rate of school attendance for the Roma population aged 12 to 24 has fallen since 2012, the gap widening with respect to the general population. As a result of these trends, **the number of years a child of five can expect to spend in education is much lower in the Roma population** (12.2 years) than in the general population (18.7 years).

Figure 8] Years a child of five can expect to spend in education.



Furthermore, **almost three in five young Roma people aged 16 to 24 neither work nor study**. Of these young people, 59.5% are unemployed and 23.5% are engaged in domestic work or in caring for children or older people, the latter group being women.

Figure 9] Proportion of young people who neither work nor study.



Source: Survey of Roma households. For general population "Active Population Survey annual data 2022" (National Institute of Statistics).

2.6] The lack of suitable alternatives for students who drop out limit their prospects of returning to education.

In comparison with a decade ago, **the number of Roma students who return to their studies has decreased**, which is a clear indicator that there is a lack of tailored, practical training on offer. The majority of those returning to education do so through Basic Vocational Training, mainly with the aim of finding a better job.

Table 3] Rate of return to education in the Roma population by age and sex.

	Academic year 2011-2012		Academic year 2021-2022	
	12-17 years	18-24 years	12-17 years	18-24 years
Men	20.5	23.9	13.4	6.9
Women	22	27.8	8.2	7.5
Total	21.3	25.8	10.9	7.2

Source: Survey of Roma households. Study "Roma students in secondary education in Spain: a comparative study" FSG 2013.

One of the most frequently-mentioned reasons for dropping out of education is that "I wasn't interested in what I was studying". Therefore, any educational alternative needs to "be interesting", that is, highly oriented towards employment and offered in a stimulating environment, to enable young Roma people to reconnect with the education system. Such alternatives are not often found at present.

2.7] The education system does not take the measures necessary to prevent educational segregation, a situation which is to the detriment of the right to education.

Based on this study and other reference studies⁵, we have estimated a possible range (between 25% and 40%) for the proportion of Roma students who may be in centres of education affected by high concentration or segregation. Although this range is wide, it allows us to state that at least one quarter of Roma students in compulsory education are studying in centres of this type. This is a major problem which must be taken account of in educational policies.

Centres of education in which Roma students study, the great majority being in the public school system, tend to have a high concentration of Roma students.

5 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). (2016). *Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey: Roma – Selected findings (EU-MIDIS II)*.
FSG-Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional. (2022). *Exploratory pilot study on school segregation of Roma students*.

Of the centres surveyed, 28.6% have a high concentration, 31.2% are segregated and 40.2% present a situation of extreme segregation. The effects of this reality are largely seen as negative by the centres themselves, on the assumption that this generates an increase in the stigmatisation of Roma students, makes their social inclusion more difficult, increases conflict and limits the quality of the education delivered. This is despite the fact that the inclusion of Roma students is seen as positive by centres with the highest levels of segregation.

Table 4 | Distribution of centres by size and degree of segregation.

Degree of segregation	Average size of centre	No. of centres
High concentration	550	32
Segregation	432	35
Extreme segregation	341	45
Total	429	112

Source: Survey of centres of education.

Concentration and segregation in educational centres may be influenced by the demographic context of the environment in which the centres are located and by family preferences. However, the prevalence of these phenomena cannot be explained by these factors alone; it is also due to the **lack of policies to avoid them or to mitigate their effects** (a lack of coordination between centres, a lack of measures to avoid concentration, certain admissions criteria). We must also remember that these phenomena bring with them an element of structural discrimination based on students' ethnic origin.

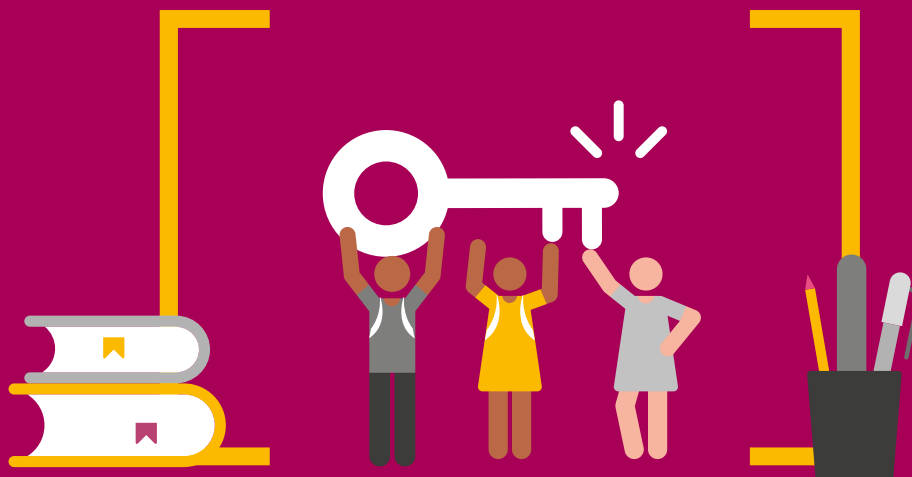
The right to a free choice of educational centre must be balanced with the need to avoid violating the right to equality, for example by creating the discriminatory situations that come with school segregation. Such situations impede the delivery of a high-quality, equitable education. Some Roma students find themselves in centres which have insufficient resources, many of them being classified as High-Complexity Educational Centres. It is the duty of the public authorities to offer a response which protects both of the above rights.



3 | Recommendations

The inequality in education affecting Roma students in Spain demonstrates the inability of the education system to offer an adaptive response, providing the support required by each student, based on their needs and circumstances. Guaranteeing the right to education is the responsibility of the public authorities, who must not turn a blind eye to the needs of Roma students.

The response to this educational divide, which is holding back the social progress of the Roma community, must be based on public responsibility. It is not simply a question of giving families the resources they need to live a decent life, in which education can drive social change and equal opportunities. It is also about increasing the provision of support, both within and beyond the system, to those students in the situations of greatest socio-educational vulnerability, as is the case of Roma students. This involves taking adapted measures, starting in the earliest stages of the educational journey (infant education), reinforcing these measures in the later stages (especially secondary education) with actions to guarantee the right to education in non-segregated centres, and providing routes of return to education for those who drop out of the system early.



1. Implement a specific plan at national level for educational guidance, support and reinforcement, continuing over the long term to reverse the situation of school failure and school dropout among Roma students.

Roma students are in a situation of particular socio-educational vulnerability, which affects them in a way which does not apply to any other group in society. This study demonstrates that this inequality is not diminishing, but rather that the educational divide between Roma young people and other young people in Spain tends to increase over time.

This serious anomaly in our educational system requires responses which are also exceptional, and which are tailored to the people affected. We therefore recommend the urgent implementation of **comprehensive**, high-quality, long-term measures which guarantee equality in the ability to exercise a fundamental right. In this way Roma students will be able not only to successfully complete compulsory secondary education, but also to continue their studies in post-compulsory education.

2. Ensure that Roma families have sufficient income to face the education of their children.

Having a minimum level of income which allows everyone to live in dignity is a fundamental right. It is essential that Roma families should have the resources necessary to cover the educational needs of their children, and that a lack of financial resources should not limit their educational possibilities. The **minimum income** and basic living income schemes operating in Spain's regions need to be sufficiently generous and rapid in response to guarantee this right, with amounts being increased where there are school-age children in a household. **Grants** should be distributed across the Roma population as a whole, bearing in mind levels of income. In addition, other systems should be piloted to provide financial resources for education, such as **personal payments** granted on condition that they are used to buy educational materials and support.

3. Guarantee the cost-free enrolment of all Roma children in infant education.

With the aim of avoiding educational disadvantage at an early age, and to compensate for the negative effects of the context in which a large part of the Roma population lives, it should be guaranteed within this decade that all Roma people can access infant education, with efforts made to ensure that Roma children enter infant education at the earliest possible age. Access to this stage of education at 0 to 3 years should be universal and free, particularly for students suffering inequality. To this end it is necessary to ensure that there are high-quality **infant schools and centres of education** in the areas where this population lives.

4. Provide support to families to ensure they can play an active part in the educational process of their children.

Roma families place a positive value on education and have high expectations for their children's educational success. However, it is not common for them to participate in the educational arena (Parents' and Families' Associations, educational guidance, etc), they do not often ask for the support they need, and their involvement in the educational support of their children is insufficient, often because their circumstances do not allow it. For this reason, a **plan is required to equip and help families to better support their children** and to become more actively involved in their centres of education.

5. Increase the provision of equipment and support for centres of education and the training of their teaching staff.

Educational support from outside the system must be accompanied by educational reinforcement within the system. A large proportion of Roma students require educational support from primary level to avoid repetition of school years and the resulting delay to their progress through education which can lead to them dropping out early.

This means that **extra staff, pedagogical measures and support** are required to carry out educational projects and adaptations which are inclusive of the Roma population and which respond to their needs.

Training and awareness-raising for teaching staff is another area to strengthen with a view to improving the quality of the attention given to students, especially those in circumstances of greater vulnerability.

6. Prevent school dropout and envision educational alternatives which will avert it.

A critical moment in the educational process for Roma students comes at age 15-16. School dropout results from accumulated educational delay and, above all, from the fact that school fails to offer anything interesting or significant to Roma students at this age, when what many of them need is a practical apprenticeship, in an environment distinct from centres of education and connected instead to the world of work. In the absence of other options, basic vocational training represents a kind of refuge for Roma students, although it is not always the option which best serves their interests, as it sometimes brings with it stigmatisation and another form of segregation. It is necessary to develop **forms of education which are tailored to students' requirements and life stage**, which help to prepare them for employment, and which offer financial support, grants, etc., which encourage them to continue with their education, as set out in Article 75 of the 2020 Spanish Organic Law on Education (LOMLOE).

7. Develop options for returning to post-compulsory education.

It is necessary to develop tailored educational options for students who have dropped out to enable them return to the education system, thereby avoiding a situation where young people are neither in education nor in employment.

In most cases, these options will consist of a **combination of flexible learning processes** which allow students to gain qualifications, **with support to access employment** which satisfies the income needs which many Roma people aged 16 to 24 already have.

The educational pathways must be effective and guarantee progress from one stage to the next, as is the case for example with the pathway from Basic Vocational Training to Intermediate Vocational Training. It is important to offer continuity on these pathways, working with students and their families to ensure the completion of longer pathways.

8. Prevent and reverse educational concentration and segregation.

It is necessary to implement **public policies and corrective mechanisms** which ensure a balanced distribution of students in situations of socio-educational vulnerability and with specific needs for educational support, to **avoid and reverse educational concentration and segregation** among Roma students. Guaranteeing a high-quality education in a pluralistic and diverse environment which avoids educational segregation in all its forms is a public responsibility which cannot come second to the freedom to choose an educational centre. The public authorities have a duty to avoid the emergence of educational concentration, using regulations, enrolment committees, dispersal criteria, transport subsidies, incentives for certain educational centres, etc. They also have an obligation to guarantee that Roma students can attend public schools and publicly-subsidised schools under the same conditions as other students.

The implementation of preventive measures to ensure these objectives are met must also avoid the creation of intra-centre segregation (the grouping of students on particular pathways, due to the selection of certain optional subjects, or as a consequence of educational compensation measures which tend to result in segregation). It is also necessary to have objective data regarding the extent of segregation of Roma students.

9. Reduce the digital divide in Roma households and ensure they have an internet connection.

For these households to have connectivity and the electronic devices necessary for students to do their school homework, this must be an unwavering commitment and must be considered a fundamental right. It should be noted that 20% of Roma households with members aged under 24 do not have an internet connection, while the availability of electronic devices is less than half of that in the general population, at a time when education is undergoing a digital transformation. **Specific funding must be made available to ensure that no Roma household is deprived of internet access** or of digital educational tools. For example, funds attached to Component 19 of the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism, the

National Plan for digital skills, could be used to implement a specific programme to provide digital support and internet connections to the Roma households which need them.

The acquisition of technological skills by students is essential to guarantee their inclusion in the digital society as citizens able to fully exercise their rights.

10.

Incentivise public-private collaboration in the development of initiatives.

Programmes of educational support and reinforcement which currently reach a small percentage of Roma students, both public (PROA+, Kumpania) and private (CaixaProinfancia, Promociona) should serve as points of reference for the implementation of a **large-scale, long-term, nationwide educational support and reinforcement programme** aimed at the Roma population. If we know that correcting the situation of educational disadvantage affecting the Roma population is a decades-long project, and that these programmes have positive effects, why not equip them better, run them on a larger scale and continue them over the long term?



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