Understanding the social exclusion of Roma

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Overview

- Roma are recognised as one of the most socially excluded communities across contemporary Europe.
- There are a range of structural and cultural barriers impacting on health outcomes, educational attainment, employment, housing and social welfare.
- Policy and practice has increasingly focused on addressing the exclusion of Roma at a European and national level; however, many initiatives do not offer long term solutions.
- Future approaches to Roma inclusion need to ensure the involvement of Roma in their development and implementation.

Introduction

Roma are recognised as one of the European Union's (EU's) largest minority ethnic groups, with estimates that there are more than 10 million Roma residing across the EU (Council of Europe, CoE, 2011; European Commission, EC, 2012). Despite a commitment at a European level to address the continuing disadvantage of Roma, and the development of a number of policy initiatives, entrenched disadvantage, discrimination, prejudice and exclusion remain defining features in the lives of many Roma (Amnesty International, 2011; CoE, 2011b; EC, 2011). Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that Roma are one of the most socially excluded communities across contemporary Europe (Amnesty International, 2011; Bartlett, Benini, and Gordon, 2011; CoE, 2011b; EC, 2011; ERIO, 2010).

The chapter begins by defining and clarifying our use of the term Roma and the concept of social exclusion. We then outline some of the key characteristics of the exclusion of Roma, with reference to the specific policy areas of housing, health, education and employment. We provide a discussion of the European and UK policy context, before exploring what is currently known about Roma communities who have migrated to the UK. The discussion includes a case study of a mediation project aimed at increasing interactions between Roma and non Roma communities. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting the issues that need considering in order to continue to address the exclusion of Roma.

Defining Roma

The term 'Roma', first chosen at the inaugural World Romani Congress held in London in 1971, is now widely accepted across the European Union (EU) as a generic and pragmatic term to describe a diverse range of communities. Members of these communities can differ in many significant linguistic and cultural ways and include people who identify themselves as Roma, Sinti and Kale, whose ancestors originate from northern India. Similarly, it can also include other indigenous groups in countries across the EU such as Gypsies and Travellers resident in Ireland and the UK, and Yenish communities living in Switzerland and France, who do not routinely see themselves as part of the Roma community (CoE, 2011a). As such, "'the Roma' are a particularly difficult social group to conceptualise accurately" (Kovats, 2001: 7-8) due to the complexities associated with identities which are bounded up in culture, time, practices, ethnicity, language, national identifications and so

on. Indeed, for some commentators, using a homogenising label of Roma is problematic, particularly when such definitions are used for policy purposes (Matras, 2013).

While we recognise that the term 'Roma' is disputed, and acknowledge that debates around the conceptualisation of Roma are on-going, for the purpose of this chapter our discussions utilise the Council of Europe (CoE) definition, which uses the term 'Roma' to refer to:

> Roma, Sinti, Kale and related groups in Europe, including Travellers and the Eastern groups (Dom and Lom), and covers the wide diversity of the groups concerned, including persons who identify themselves as Gypsies (CoE, 2006: 4).

However, with a UK policy and practice framework the use of the term Roma tends to refer to those populations who arrived in the UK from other countries, usually those within Central and Eastern Europe. Here, the term Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (GRT) is commonly used to encompass a diverse group which includes both Roma who have migrated to the UK and indigenous Gypsy and Traveller communities (often associated with caravan dwelling). There are broad similarities between UK Gypsy and Traveller populations and Roma communities a history of nomadism, and issues relating to generally poor health outcomes, educational attainment, and other indicators of social exclusion. However, there are also huge differences between these populations, not least relating to the fact that Roma in the UK are by and large migrants, and as such face similar issues to other newly arriving communities (e.g. language barriers, lack of understanding of UK systems, etc.). This chapter focuses specifically on those communities who are identified as 'Roma', and within the UK, this primarily relates to those who have migrated from Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. In terms of UK Gypsy and Traveller communities; discussions of social exclusion relating to these populations can be found elsewhere (see, for example, Kenrick and Clark, 1999; Clark and Greenfields, 2006; Brown and Scullion, 2010).

Reflection

What issues come to mind when you see or hear the term Roma?

The social exclusion of Roma: a 'European issue'

Social exclusion is a much debated and highly contested concept within social science (see e.g. Room, 1995), but one that has become firmly embedded in the policy discourses of many European countries (Béland, 2007). Originating in France, the term is linked to the concept of citizenship which views:

> [S]ociety as a status hierarchy comprising people bound together by rights and obligations that reflect, and are defined with respect to, a shared moral order. Exclusion is the state of detachment from this moral order and can be brought about by many factors, including limited income (Walker, 1995: 103).

While poverty is a key constituent of social exclusion, the concept of social exclusion has moved debates beyond an economic focus, to consider the ways in which "discrimination, chronic ill health, geographical location or cultural identification" (Hills et al., 2002: 6) may constrain individuals from effective participation in society. Indeed, a comprehensive review of disadvantage undertaken by UK academics defines social exclusion as:

A complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas (Levitas et al. 2007: 9).

People who experience such exclusion "across more than one domain or dimension of disadvantage" (Levitas et al. 2007: 9) are regarded as suffering deep or severe social exclusion; a situation that many commentators agree is common for Roma communities across contemporary Europe (see e.g. Bartlett, Benini, and Gordon, 2011: ERIO, 2010). It is impossible to adequately understand the social exclusion experienced by 'migrant' Roma populations without first appreciating the context within which Roma have lived in their countries of origin. The following provides an overview of some of the issues and barriers Roma face across Europe in relation to four key policy areas: housing; health; education; and employment.

Housing

The accommodation of Roma, and issues related to the segregation occurring between Roma and non-Roma populations, are central to the concerns around social exclusion. Indeed, housing issues are often at the root of a variety of associated negative impacts in the lives of Roma. A review of housing provision in 15 European countries, for example, found clear evidence that Roma were particularly disadvantaged:

> [Roma] suffer from a combination of neglect in terms of housing provision and control in terms of settlement. This is reflected in their housing circumstances, which are typically highly segregated, deprived and excluded from mainstream society (Phillips, 2010: 218).

Across Central and Eastern Europe a lack of adequate housing remains a pervasive issue for Roma. In Bulgaria, and Hungary, for example, many Roma live in segregated 'ghettos' or 'colonies', whilst in Slovakia 50% of Roma are reported as living in settlements - which lack basic service provision - on the outskirts of towns and villages (Molnár et al. 2011). There are also examples of walls being built between Roma settlements and the majority population to keep the two communities apart (European Roma Rights Centre, ERRC, 2010). In the UK some resentment and hostility towards Roma has been observed following EU expansion. This resentment led to specific consequences in Northern Ireland, for example, where Roma who had recently migrated there were forced out of their homes in 2009 following pressure from the local majority population (McGarry, 2011).

Health

Endemic poverty, poor housing conditions and a lack of basic amenities and sanitation in the locations in which many Roma live contribute to ill health among Roma populations across Europe. Indeed, "[for Roma] life expectancy is in general 8-15 years lower and the mortality, infectious and chronic disease rates are much higher" (CoE, 2011b: 9). Such outcomes have many causes including: poverty, lack of access to health services, poor quality of health services in areas populated by Roma, and prejudice of health workers. Similarly, it is important to appreciate the intersection between culture and health. Romani culture encompasses different beliefs about health and medical care and often differences in treatments and procedures lead to confusion when the Roma seek health care and health care workers are unfamiliar with their culture (Vivian and Dundes, 2004: 88). In the UK specifically, practitioners in a study in Sheffield highlighted that the following health issues were being found amongst Roma communities: diabetes, heart disease, obesity, teenage pregnancy, nutritional deficiencies, neonatal issues relating to consanguinity, and Hepatitis A, B and C and TB, with Hepatitis and TB posing difficulties in relation to tracing and screening, particularly if the communities were mobile (Ratcliffe, 2011).

Education (and children)

Evidence suggests that Roma children are a particularly disadvantaged group within an already
marginalised population (Farkas, 2007). Some of the key – and widely acknowledged – issues facing
Roma children include low levels of attendance at schools (particularly in relation to secondary
education), and poor educational attainment compared to majority populations (Bartlett, Benini and
Gordon, 2011; CoE, 2011a). As a result of "sporadic and unsystematic school attendance" (Symeou
et al., 2009: 514), it is reported that illiteracy rates among Roma are often in excess of 50% (CoE,
2011b). The intersection between education and poverty has been highlighted as a key issue, with
day-to-day survival underpinning the lives of many Roma (Scullion and Brown, 2013). As such,
children are sometimes expected to contribute to the family income by themselves undertaking paid
employment, or by looking after younger siblings so parents can work (ibid). Furthermore, in
addition to residential segregation (highlighted above), it has emerged that educational segregation
is 'systemic' in some European countries (see ERRC, 2004, 2011; Friedman et al., 2009; O'Nions,
2010; Ryder, Rostas and Taba, 2014). The ERRC (2004), for example, talks about three different types
of segregation in relation to Roma: segregation in 'special' schools for children with developmental
disabilities (often through direct placement i.e. without prior enrolment in mainstream schools);
segregation within mainstream schools; and segregation in 'Ghetto schools'. Additionally, Roma
children are significantly overrepresented in public care systems in many European countries.

Employment

Paid employment levels for Roma vary across Europe but are routinely significantly lower than those
of majority populations. A high level of discrimination against Roma jobseekers is also apparent in
many settings (Bartlett, Benini, and Gordon, 2011; EC, 2011a). Recent research has characterised
Roma employment in terms of horizontal and vertical segregation in the labour market, with
segregation into low skilled, low paid and precarious/unstable employment, coupled with limited
opportunities to progress (Scullion, Brown and Dwyer, 2014). Gender is also a feature of discussions
around economic activity, with reports of higher levels of unemployment amongst Roma women,
particularly young women (Pantea, 2014) and the view that gender barriers were more pronounced
within the Roma community (Lajčáková, 2014). Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that
increasing secondary education amongst Roma does not increase employment rates in the same
way that it would for non Roma (ibid). Across Europe access to many unemployment benefits has
become increasingly dependent on recipients accepting compulsory work or training opportunities
(see Lødemel and Trickey, 2001). In some countries – for example Hungary and Slovakia - such work
programmes are primarily undertaken by Roma. Some Roma have made use of their rights to free
movement to escape endemic prejudice in their countries of origin and seek work in other European
nations – including the UK (Scullion and Pemberton, 2010).

In recognition of the pervasive and ongoing disadvantage and marginalisation of Roma highlighted above, the institutions of the European Union are openly involved – and have been for many years - in a number of initiatives to improve the lives of Roma (Bartlett, Benini and Gordon, 2011; McGarry, 2011), with what some call a "Europeanization of Roma policy" (Vermeersch, 2011: 96). In 2008, a Commission Staff Working Document (CSWD) set in motion a series of steps that would lead to the development of, what was perceived as, a framework for a more effective implementation of policies to support Roma inclusion within each Member State of the EU (Commission of the European Communities, 2008). Consequently, in 2011, the European Commission published the *EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020,* which called on all European Union Member States to prepare, or adapt, strategic documents to meet four key EU Roma integration goals: access to education, employment, healthcare and housing (referred to as National Roma Integration Strategies or NRIS), including 'targeted actions and sufficient funding (national, EU and other) to deliver' on the goals (European Commission, 2011: 4).

By March 2012, all European Union Member States had presented their NRIS, or a set of policy measures, in light of this EU Framework. These strategies varied depending on the size of the Roma population and the challenges that countries felt that they needed to address (European Commission, 2012). The NRIS were expected to be linked to overall social inclusion policies within individual countries to ensure *mainstreaming* of Roma inclusion rather than *separation*. Furthermore, it was stated that regional and local authorities had a key role to play, as they would be responsible for the implementation of integration strategies on the ground. Effective monitoring of performance against these strategies was encouraged as was the integral role of Roma civic society, and regional and local authorities in their design, implementation and evaluation.

However, it is recognised that progress has been slow (European Commission, 2014) with initiatives not always delivering intended outcomes or providing only short term solutions (Brown et al., 2014; 2015). Approaches across European countries vary, but broadly speaking they fall into two camps: *targeted schemes* (i.e. focusing specifically on Roma) or more *mainstream approaches*, with a broader focus (i.e. unemployed people, minority ethnic communities, etc.). What is clear is that, regardless of the approach, there is often a disconnect between the strategies that are put in place and their actual impact on the ground. The main reasons cited for the limited effectiveness of existing mechanisms are lack of political will, lack of strong partnerships and coordination mechanisms, but also an unwillingness to acknowledge the needs of Roma as an issue (European Commission, 2010). Furthermore, there are particular concerns around a lack of involvement of Roma in the consultation, development and implementation of initiatives (Brown et al., 2015).

Arguably, part of the challenge also relates to competing discourses around Roma exclusion. More specifically, Roma typically primarily emphasise *structural factors* such as poverty, discrimination and racism and describe the negative impact that these issues have on their daily lives (Brown, Dwyer and Scullion, 2013: 54). On the other hand non Roma (including some of those responsible for the development and implementation of policy and various services) often view the social exclusion of Roma as "being rooted in the dysfunctional behaviour or culture of Roma themselves" (ibid: 54).

Indeed, racisms (see Husband, 1987), that use individual, physical and/or collective cultural differences between communities to legitimise discriminatory practices are important issues that need to be considered in relation to the ongoing exclusion of Roma.

Reflection

How might competing discourses on the social exclusion of Roma impact on the policies and initiatives that are developed?

Roma in the UK

Roma migration to the UK has a long standing history in but has been a continuing feature making up the tapestry of migration flows since 1945 (Horton and Grayson, 2008). However, since 1989, the number of Roma migrating from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has steadily increased (Poole, 2010). During the 1990s and early 2000, a number of Roma came to the UK seeking asylum. However, the accession of a number of CEE migrants into the EU led to freedom of movement within EU borders to Roma communities (Poole, 2010). Consequently, those who were once 'forced' migrants were deemed 'voluntary' migrants. Some commentators suggest, however, that Roma still fall into a 'grey area' between 'forced' and voluntary' migration:

> [G]iven the ongoing infringements of Roma rights in CEE, it is not unreasonable to view the Roma as a group that continue to be 'pushed' abroad as much as being 'pulled' (Poole, 2010: 251).

Although there are widely acknowledged difficulties in enumerating Roma populations (Clark, 1998), research suggested that as of 2013 there were around 200,000 Roma are living across the UK (Brown, Martin and Scullion, 2013; 2014). The most numerous nationalities of Roma in the UK are suggested to be Czech, Slovak and Romanian Roma, with the largest populations in cities across the North of England, East Midlands, Kent, north and east London (European Dialogue, 2009: 38), with groupings in Glasgow (Scotland), Cardiff (Wales) and Belfast (Northern Ireland) (Craig, 2011). Settlement patterns often reflect areas where Roma have been asylum seekers in the past, or where they have existing contacts (European Dialogue, 2009).

A survey carried out by European Dialogue (2009) with Roma living in different areas of England highlighted that Roma have been moving to England because they experience relatively low levels of discrimination here. Indeed, some respondents said they felt proud of their identity for the first time in their lives (European Dialogue, 2009: 7). This survey (involving 104 Roma across ten different locations) found that work was a key motivation for migration, with 58.7 % indicating they had moved to England due to greater employment opportunities. Following employment, the main reasons cited were 'a better life for children' (22.1%) and 'discrimination in country of origin' (15.4%). The majority of those surveyed (97.1%) said that their life had improved since coming to England; however, the report raises the question as to whether or not Roma have low expectations due to their experiences in their home countries (see European Dialogue, 2009: 7-8).

Issues for policy and practice

Within the UK, policy makers and practitioners have often conflated the issue of Roma in the UK with discussions around UK Gypsy and Traveller population. At a central Government level, there has been limited commitment to producing a specific National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS) in line

with the majority other European countries. Instead outlining a series of steps the government was taking around greater inclusion towards Gypsy and Traveller populations which only focussed on Roma arriving from overseas when these issues overlapped with education (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012;).

Given this 'policy vacuum', it is argued that local agencies have had to adopt their own approaches to Roma inclusion, often largely driven by their current approach to other minority ethnic communities (including UK Gypsies and Travellers) (Craig, 2011: 23). As highlighted previously, while it is recognised that there are similarities between indigenous Gypsy and Traveller populations and migrant Roma communities, there are also considerable differences relating to language barriers, lack of understanding of UK systems, and the degree to which Roma have experienced extreme financial hardship, discrimination and exclusion in their home countries. Indeed, recognising the wider home country experiences of Roma is vital to understanding their engagement with service areas in the UK. Such issues are sometimes compounded by the concentration of Roma in particular geographical areas, with very little contact with members of the wider community. Research carried out in Manchester, for example, highlighted that Roma often choose to live in close proximity to extended family, with little desire or need to form friendships outside their own communities; however, this was sometimes – although not always – attributed to a desire to avoid conflict (Davies and Murphy, 2010). As such, from a practice perspective, there are particular considerations around engaging with Roma communities, with suggestions by some frontline services that Roma communities require an increased level of support in comparison to other minority ethnic and migrant groups (Scullion and Brown, 2013).

Approaches based on mediation techniques as a means of reducing inequalities and 'bridging' the gap between communities has been a significant focus not just within the UK, but also across Europe (Brown et al., 2014). This approach ranges from the training of Roma community members to provide a link between communities and services, through to 'trusted' frontline staff undertaken an intensive role within Roma communities. Such approaches have often – but not exclusively – focused on addressing inequalities in relation to health and children's education. However, beyond these specific policy areas, mediation has also gained momentum as a means of fostering cross community relations at a local level to promote greater inter-cultural understanding (ibid). The case study below provides an example of how football has been used as a mediation technique to improve relations between Roma and non Roma young people in Bradford.

Case study: Football as a tool for cross-community mediation

Migration Yorkshire commissioned the Joshua Project, a Bradford-based voluntary organisation working with socially excluded children and young people from a range of backgrounds, to run a cross-community mediation project, with a particular focus on young members of the Roma community. The Joshua Project were experiencing a lack of cohesion between Roma and non Roma young people and often had to intervene to halt potential confrontations and racist verbal abuse from non Roma. The Joshua Project had observed through their community work that one activity that brought different cultures together was football. They had an existing football team and wanted to open up this up to Roma young people. The aim was to use football as a tool to promote cohesion, as well giving Roma young people the opportunity to engage in a free, healthy, positive activity.

The Joshua Project held an open training session as part of a community festival in our local park. Over 30 Roma young people attended, in addition to existing team members. Rather than continuing to train on existing football pitches they ran the club

from the local park each week. The activity was supported by a football coach and three of youth workers. The football coach provided the technical training whilst the youth workers informally used existing Show Racism the Red Card (SRTRC) resources to encourage the young people to recognise similarities but to also see the value of celebrating difference.

The project was successful in its aim to encourage cohesion and a greater understanding on the football field, but this also spread to 'street football' as well as other areas of community life, with the team mentality bringing the young people together. For example, the Joshua Project has observed Roma and non-Roma young people meeting outside of football training to play football together as well more mixing of the young people at the open youth club. The Joshua Project is now transferring some of the techniques applied to the football club to other youth activities and clubs to encourage more demographically representative participation.

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While there are many examples of positive initiatives, we need to recognise the changing social, economic and political context in which 'Roma inclusion' is situated. Firstly, the expansion of the EU to include Bulgaria and Romania; countries that are home to large Roma populations. There has also been a gradual change in the framing of the discourse about the place of the UK within the EU and the often largely negative discussions around EU migration, with concerns raised around the perceived impacts on housing, welfare and employment. For the most part, the deeply rooted discrimination experienced by so many Roma has not yet transferred into everyday discourse within the UK. However, there are signs that this is unfortunately beginning to change with an increase in negative media around Roma communities in particular geographical areas, for example the intervention in the media by the former Home Secretary David Blunkett in November 2013 (see BBC News, 2013).

At the same time, efforts to address the exclusion of Roma are taking place within a constrained economic context and the very services that often work with Roma communities in the UK (e.g. the local authority Traveller Education Support Service or Ethnic Minority and Traveller Attainment Services) are the ones that have often seen their services eroded by cutbacks given the lack of ring-fenced funding (Bartlett et al., 2011: 103). This combination of a reduction in funding for areas that would support greater integration and mitigate some of the inequalities at the same time of a seemingly growing hostility to migrants in the UK raises significant concerns for Roma inclusion within the UK in the future.

Reflection

What are some of the issues faced by professionals working with Roma communities?

How could services be better designed to accommodate the range of issues faced by Roma communities?

Conclusion

This chapter has focussed on outlining the social exclusion of Roma populations who have migrated to the UK in recent years. This is set against a European policy context which, in recent years, has increasingly focused on trying to systematically tackle some of the core elements of social exclusion in education, employment, health and housing. The experience of such populations in their 'home' countries is particularly important, and this shows that Roma have invariably experienced low outcomes across a range of service areas, discrimination, under-representation in the democratic process and high levels of poverty in the majority of countries in which they feature. For those who can afford to leave their country, their migration to the UK is then a combination of these 'push' factors as well as the opportunity the UK often presents for improving their life chances. However, exclusion experienced by Roma often persists into the UK. This may be exacerbated by the reductions to funding for agencies experienced and equipped to work with multiply complex populations, as well as a broader anti-migrant discourse.

While we need to acknowledge and understand the exclusion faced by Roma communities, it is also essential to note that there are a number of areas where Roma and non Roma populations live relatively harmoniously as one part of an often very diverse community. A large number of Roma households are working in a variety of industries, skilled and unskilled, and Roma children are typically enrolled in local schools. Furthermore, as highlighted in research with Roma (see European Dialogue, 2009: Brown et al.,2013), discussions with Roma have suggested that their migration and settlement within the UK – and other Member States - has been a way to escape the constructed limitations and exclusions of being solely defined by their ethnicity as Roma.

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Relevant web links

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http://www.erionet.eu/
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