

**Development, piloting and dissemination of new methods in data collection  
on discrimination against Roma in public services (ADinPS)**

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# Policy brief on discrimination against the Roma in public services

*Budapest Institute for Policy Analysis*  
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Project “**New methods in data collection on discrimination against Roma in public services (ADinPS)**” was implemented between May 2020 and February 2022 by a consortium led by the [Centre for Policy Studies](#) of the Central European University (CEU, Hungary) and including [Budapest Institute for Policy Analysis](#) (BI, Hungary), [Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance – Amalipe](#) (Bulgaria), [ROMEIA](#) (Czechia) and [Autonomia Foundation](#) (Hungary).

The project aimed at contributing to fighting discrimination that Roma face in accessing public services through developing, piloting and disseminating methods of data collection that can be easily implemented by NGOs and used to monitor discrimination in a regular and systematic way.

During the project three grassroots NGOs, Amalipe (Bulgaria), ROMEIA (Czechia) and Autonomia Foundation (Hungary) piloted the mystery shopping methodology in six experiments (two in each country):

- Bulgaria: enrolment in school, access to municipal social housing,
- Czechia: enrolment in school, renting municipal premises,
- Hungary: enrolment in school, registration of car,

and obtained data on discrimination that Roma face in accessing public services both accessed via online gateways and personal contact with providers.

Based on data from these experiments, the present policy brief was developed.

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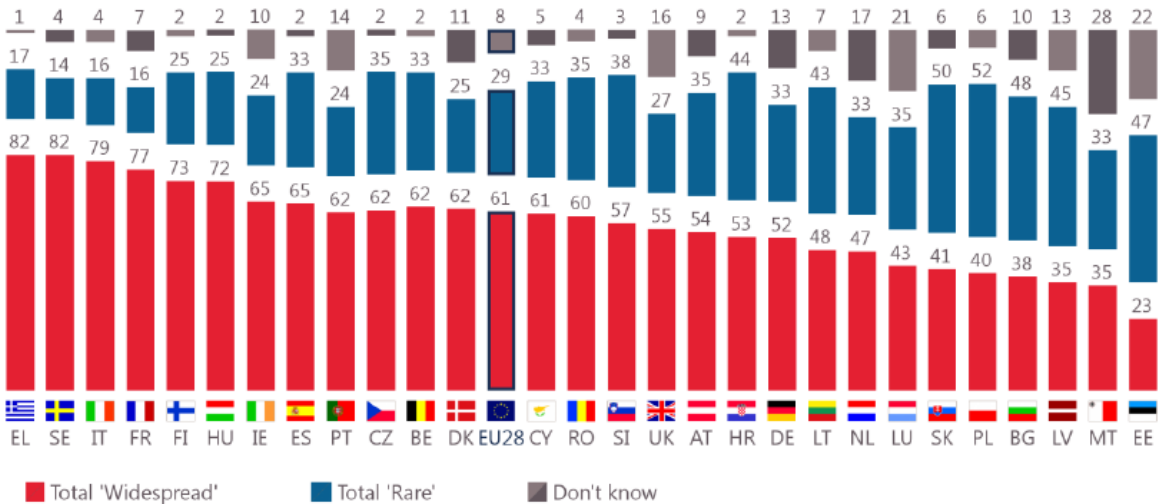
There is evidence that prejudice against the Roma is wide-spread in Central and Eastern Europe, and it is also well-documented that the labour market exclusion of the Roma is partly due to employer discrimination. Discrimination against Roma in public services is much less documented (Hojsik et al 2018).

This policy brief presents the main findings of a project<sup>1</sup> that used discrimination testing in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Hungary, to examine discrimination in public services. The focus is on public education, where we have comparable findings. The lessons of the project may be useful for all levels of policy making and implementation in public education, as well as for equality bodies, advocacy organisations and NGOs providing after-school tutoring or other educational services.

### Discrimination is wide-spread against the Roma

Population surveys recording public perceptions show that discrimination against the Roma is wide-spread across Europe, but with large variations across countries (Figure 1). According to the latest available Eurobarometer survey on this topic, the population perceiving discrimination to be wide-spread was relatively low in Bulgaria, much higher in Hungary, and about the EU average in the Czech Republic in 2019.

**Figure 1.** Public perception of discrimination against the Roma in EU countries\* in 2019



Source: Eurobarometer Special Survey 2019/493 (QC1.3)

These perceptions tend to underestimate actual discrimination, as they depend on culturally and legally determined norms of what constitutes discrimination as well as the sensitivity and exposure of respondents to discriminatory practices. In the same survey, when asked about feeling comfortable about having a Roma colleague at work, the refusal rate is much higher in Bulgaria (at 37%) than in the Czech Republic (30%) or Hungary (22%).

Discrimination against ethnic minorities in the labour market is well documented by studies based on correspondence testing (Bartos et al 2016, Neumark 2018; Zschrnt and Ruedin 2016, Lippens et al 2020, Lancee 2021). There is much less evidence on discrimination in

<sup>1</sup> Project “New methods in data collection on discrimination against Roma in public services (ADinPS)” implemented by a consortium led by Central European University and funded from the European Union’s Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (REC 2014-2020).

public services, and studies focusing on Central and Eastern Europe are especially scarce ([Bertrand and Duflo 2017](#), [Hansen, J.A. and Tummers, L. 2020](#)). However, there are a few recent studies that find discrimination against the Roma in the private rental market (Bartoš et al 2016) and in public employment services (Mikula and Montag 2022) in the Czech Republic, and in access to various municipal services in Hungary (Simonovits et al 2021). These studies document both explicit and tacit forms of discrimination, i.e. the response rate of public services as well as the quality of the response varies according to the ethnic background of the client. Some recent studies suggest that this may partly be explained by the fact that public officials are short of time and may discriminate as a way of coping with high workload (Andersen and Guul 2019, Olsen et al 2021, Taghizadeh 2021).

There seems to be growing awareness that discrimination is harmful for the whole society and more should be done to reduce it. In all three countries, the majority of the population believe that better integration of the Roma would be beneficial for society, though public support for integration efforts is much higher in Hungary (72%) than in the Czech Republic (58%) and Bulgaria (49 %). At the same time, a high share of the population believe that government efforts for integration in the fields of education, health, housing and employment are non-existent or ineffective (48% in HU, 54% in BG, 58 % in CZ).<sup>2</sup>

## Discrimination in public education

Discrimination against the Roma is wide-spread in the public education system across Central and Eastern Europe (Ohidy and Forray 2019). The underlying reasons are closely connected and difficult to disentangle. Teachers may be prejudiced against the Roma (just as their fellow-citizens, cf Kisfalusy et al 2021, Lambrev et al 2020), or may adjust their conduct to the (perceived) prejudices of non-Roma parents, or may be trying to avoid the additional workload they expect to be required when teaching Roma children (most of whom come from families of a low socio-economic background). Free school choice and spatial segregation tends to magnify these underlying factors as it allows schools to select children who are considered easier to teach (and achieve higher in exams), and allows parents to avoid schools where the share of low-status children is high.<sup>3</sup> The general lack of teaching skills required for teaching mixed-ability classes also contributes to a tendency towards school segregation.

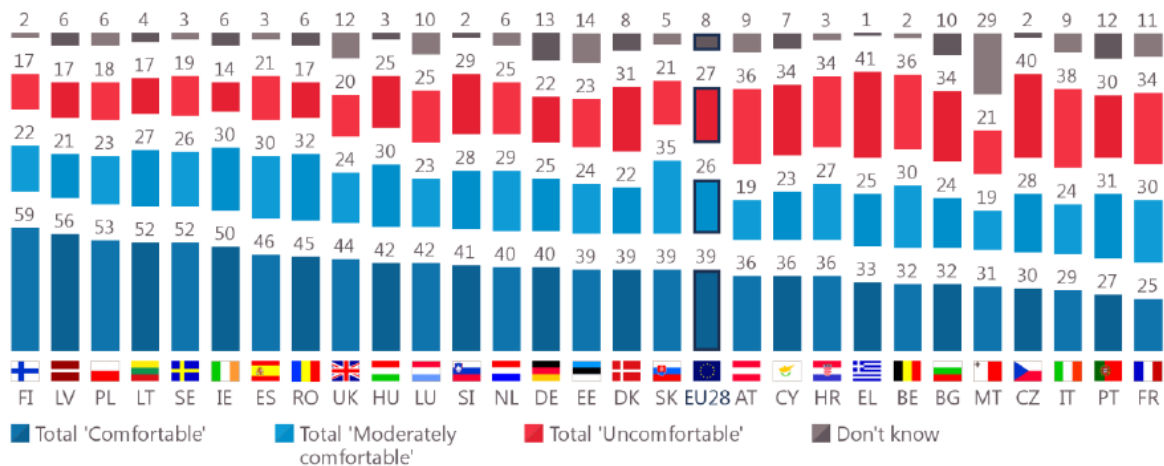
Survey data on public attitudes indeed suggest that majority parents' prejudice against Roma children is one of the factors driving school segregation and discrimination. As Figure 2 shows, the share of respondents who would feel uncomfortable about their children having Roma schoolmates is among the highest in the Czech Republic (40%), and Bulgaria (34%), and slightly below the EU average in Hungary (25%).

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<sup>2</sup> Eurobarometer 2019. QC8R.

<sup>3</sup> Free school choice may lead to stronger segregation in towns, where more schools are available: children of disadvantaged minorities are less likely to commute to distance schools, because of informational disadvantages, the larger burden of commuting costs on the family budget, or because of fear of the unknown (Kézdi and Kertesi 2013).

**Figure 2.** Acceptance of own children having Roma schoolmates in EU countries



Source: Eurobarometer Special Survey 2019/493 (QC14R). The question was asked of all adults, irrespective of whether they had children: those who had no children were asked to think of a hypothetical situation.

Unequal access to public education has a long-term impact on the skills formation of disadvantaged children and consequently on their employability, incomes and wellbeing in their adult life (OECD 2019). Messing (2016) shows that school segregation (especially segregated classes of ethnically mixed schools) may also have a devastating effect on the development of young people’s identity, self-esteem, and interethnic relationships.

### Test results: schools discriminate in providing information

To measure discrimination in enrolment to primary education, we sent standardised email messages to a large sample of schools, in the name of four types of parents (avatars),<sup>4</sup> asking for information about school admission about 2-3 weeks before the official application deadline to first grade in the Spring of 2021. In Bulgaria, the message concerned a child in 4th grade wanting to change school, while in the other two countries it was about a child starting 1st grade. Discrimination is identified by comparing response rates and quality of response across the avatars. The email messages included 4-6 questions concerning the application process and details of the school’s offer that typically concern working parents.

We used four avatars varying in their level of education and ethnicity. Markers included the names of the mother and the child, the writing style, and residence in the case of Bulgaria. In the Hungarian experiment, some additional information was provided to explain the motivation behind school choice, which we also used to signal social status.

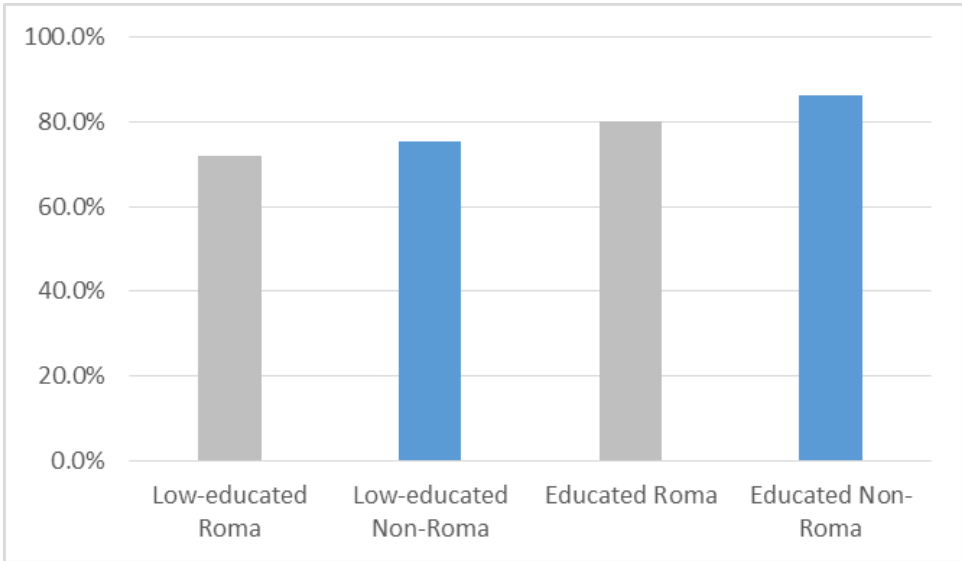
In all three countries, we found some evidence of discrimination against Roma parents.

In Hungary, Roma parents (or mentors representing Roma children) were less likely to receive a response (Figure 4), and when they did get one, it was less likely to cover all the information they asked for, less likely to be „nice” and more likely to be neutral or rude compared to non-Roma parents. They were also less likely to receive a second response asking them about their decision to enrol their child to the school. The difference in

<sup>4</sup> The four avatars were allocated to four, randomly selected subsamples of primary schools. In the Hungarian case, we had a fifth avatar representing an educated parent of partly Ukrainian origin.

response rates varied across regions: in the South-West of Hungary, we found no evidence for discrimination against Roma parents.

**Figure 4.** Response rate by avatar in Hungary



Less educated parents were less likely to receive a response and those who did, were more likely to receive a neutral or rude one, compared to educated parents.<sup>5</sup> The responses they received were also more likely to refer to some barrier, such as that they need proof of residence in the school’s catchment area, that they should have applied earlier as the pre-application process has closed or that there are no more places in the school.

**Table 1.** Response rates by ethnicity and education of parent (%)

	Un-educated Roma	Un-educated non-Roma	Educated Roma	Educated non-Roma	Ethnicity gap, percentage points	Education (social status) gap, percentage points**		
				Un-educated	Educated	Roma	Non-Roma	
Bulgaria*	83	95	64	78	13	14	-18	-17
Czechia	84	91	90	93	7	3	6	2
Hungary	72	75	80	86	3	6	8	11

\*In Bulgaria, response rates are adjusted for the date of sending (the last batch of emails were sent on a Friday at the end of the school year, and the response rate on these was much lower). \*\* Note that this gap may not measure the same thing for Roma and Non-Roma parents (Mikola and Montag 2022).

In the Czech Republic, response rates were slightly (but significantly, in statistical terms) lower for low-educated Roma parents, but were the same for educated Roma as for the non-Roma parents. However, the quality of responses varied considerably. Roma parents, whether low-skilled or educated, as well as low educated non-Roma parents were much more likely to get an unhelpful response, and much less likely to get a very helpful one compared to educated non-Roma parents.

In Bulgaria, Roma parents were less likely to receive a response, irrespective of their level of education. Also, Roma parents were more likely to receive a condescending or rude and unhelpful response. The experiment did not reveal any negative discrimination against low-educated parents, in fact, they were somewhat more likely to receive a response.

<sup>5</sup> In a similar experiment in Sweden, Adman and Jansson (2017) find that schools discriminate mainly in this informal way (rather than not responding at all).

Both the rate and quality of responses tended to vary with school size: on average, larger schools were less likely to respond and less likely to cover all the questions asked. This may be partly due to lack of administrative support (or centralisation of decisions) to school directors and partly due to financial incentives attached to class size. In the Hungarian case, we found that schools struggling to reach the minimum class size for receiving per capita funding were more eager to respond and provide all information.

The responses of schools also revealed very wide variations in how schools organise information provision to parents, which likely depends both on their interests (popular schools need no „marketing“) and on their technical facilities and attitudes. Some schools seem very organised and skilled at using IT to facilitate the informing of parents, as well as managing the application process. They set up groups on Google or Facebook for prospective applicants, create and share videos, publish Q&As on their website and organise webinars. Other schools stick to the traditional formats and channels (telephone and in-person meetings) and seem much less proactive and forthcoming in providing information.

While these results reliably reflect the actual experience of Roma parents asking for information about school enrolment, we cannot be used to identify discrimination on the basis of ethnicity as opposed to socio-economic status. This is because due to the fact that Roma need to invest much more effort to obtain secondary education compared to the majority population, a highly literate Roma parent is likely to be perceived by schools as a high-achiever, compared to a non-Roma parent signalling the same level of education (Mikula and Montag 2022). Conversely, while a poorly written message from a parent with a Roma-sounding name conforms to the stereotypical average Roma, schools may interpret a similar message from a non-Roma as coming from an under-achieving parent. This implies that the two sources of discrimination work in opposite ways in the observed gap in response rates, or, in other words, the gaps provide a lower-bound estimate of discrimination based on ethnicity.<sup>6</sup>

## What can we do to reduce discrimination in accessing public education: recommendations

### *For policy makers*

Policy makers should consider all the potential sources of discrimination: perceptions of parental attitudes, prejudice by teachers and administrators, and lacking administrative capacity.

As prejudice against the Roma is wide-spread among parents, schools cannot ignore the risk of white-flight, that is, when (higher-status) non-Roma parents leave schools if they perceive that the share of Roma children is too high or increasing. This may be the strongest driver of discrimination as school directors have very good reasons for wanting to prevent white flight: it can increase the share of low-status and special needs children in the school, who require more attention and better teaching skills, while highly skilled teachers are difficult to attract to such schools, so the school is set on a slope of declining enrolment and declining performance. White flight is a much greater risk in systems of free school choice (which applies to all the three countries in our project) and is much more

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<sup>6</sup> The markers we used in the Hungarian case may create a similar bias: for low-educated parents, the inquiry was written by an informal mentor helping the older, school-age sibling of the child to be enrolled. For Roma parents this may signal parental motivation above the stereotypical average, while for the non-Roma (where such mentoring is rare) this may signal problems in the family.

difficult to tackle. There are nevertheless some measures that may mitigate or counterbalance this risk.

(1) Governments should introduce or strengthen incentives for inclusive admission policies and upskill teachers.

- An obvious, though hard way to reduce white-flight is via restricting free school choice, which may be politically costly, though not impossible.
- Strengthen coordination of incentives and support at the regional level (covering the catchment area of several schools), especially in areas where Roma live in segregated settlements, implying that school-level incentives are not enough to achieve an ethnically and socio-economically mixed school population.
- For teachers who have the necessary skills, teaching mixed-ability classes and children from low-status families can be very rewarding and also enable their pupils to do well in school. Schools should receive additional funding to attract and keep highly trained teachers, as well as professional support and training for their existing staff to equip them for teaching low-status children. To ensure that school desegregation improves social inclusion, disadvantaged or at-risk students also need additional support to increase their school performance.
- Providing additional resources and equipment to schools suffering from (or at risk of) white flight and supporting schools in providing additional services that appeal to high-status parents (such as language teaching, IT equipment, eco-friendly school space that also support modern, learner-centred teaching methods) may convince high-status parents to stay.
- Governments should strengthen the monitoring of school quality and set measurable targets regarding equity in education and the added value of schools. Strengthen financial incentives (and reduce disincentives) for inclusive admission policies.
- Central and regional government should monitor school enrolment procedures and outcomes and notify schools where enrolment is apparently selective, offering support for increasing diversity. Harsh measures, such as sanctions may not be effective as they may only lead to more subtle strategies to maintain selectivity or alert high-status parents and escalate the political costs of desegregation.

(2) If the existing legal framework cannot be changed, governments can promote equity by ensuring that all parents have the necessary information to choose the right school for their children (OECD 2019).

- Central and local governments should inform parents of their rights regarding school choice and the procedure in applying to a school in an easily accessible way, using plain language. As kindergartens are compulsory in all countries, an easy way to reach parents may be via kindergartens or social and healthcare services in regular contact with families (such as home-visiting nurses in Hungary, or social workers and counsellors in Czechia).
- Governments should inform parents of the available choice of schools, providing user-friendly and reliable information on the quality and special features of public schools. Such efforts should be supported by NGOs and local social service providers, otherwise the policy may backfire as higher-status parents are more likely to access such information.



(3) There are also some measures that may reduce discrimination caused by negative attitudes of school staff or limited administrative capacities in schools.

- Governments should provide guidance to schools on how to inform parents, and set minimum standards for the information to be provided to parents as well as guidelines on cooperating with kindergartens. Supporting schools in cooperating with all kindergartens in their catchment can also be beneficial (except in areas where Roma live in geographical segregation).
- Include or strengthen diversity training in teacher education and in-service teacher training.
- Relieve schools of administrative burdens by supporting digitalisation of administrative processes, providing high quality and user-friendly software and platforms and adequate funding to hire administrative staff.

#### *For school directors*

While most discrimination in school enrolment is likely to be due to systemic incentives that drive schools to be selective, the personal attitudes of school staff and lack of awareness about the needs of Roma parents may also play a role. School directors committed to ensuring equal opportunities to disadvantaged children can do a lot to eliminate this secondary source of discrimination.

- School directors should provide easy to understand information for low-status parents, via communication channels they use, such as organising information sessions in kindergartens, or asking visiting nurses, social workers, or NGOs to pass on written information to the parents of school-ready children in their clientele.
- School directors should provide diversity training to their administrative staff handling inquiries and regularly monitor their work.
- Schools should regularly collect information (from existing surveys) on the actual preferences of high-status parents about diversity in the classroom rather than act on their perceptions of what parents want. Schools should also make an effort to inform and sensitise high-status parents about the potential risks and benefits of diversity and also about the high social costs of segregation, which are born both by low and high-status children.
- Schools should strengthen their cooperation with the parent community (e.g. by employing educational mediators) and proactively encourage the participation of Roma parents in such activities.

#### *For NGOs and advocacy organisations*

NGOs and advocacy organisations may put pressure on officials and also facilitate efforts to reduce discrimination in several ways. As the political and institutional context varies across countries, NGOs should carefully consider what is feasible and what may have the highest impact in their case.

- NGOs may support Roma parents by providing easy-to-understand information and advice on school choice and good quality schools near their home, using communication channels that are accessible and comfortable to parents.
- NGOs may also lobby at the local and national level for governments to provide/finance the necessary additional support that disadvantaged children need. This may range from simple measures (such as financing a bus service between a

good school and the segregated Roma settlement) to structural reforms curbing free school choice.

- To put pressure on officials, advocacy organisations may collect and publicise cases where schools mistreated minority or low-status parents
- NGOs may also support schools by cooperating in the schools' efforts to reduce discrimination, e.g. by providing diversity training to school staff.

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