

Early Development of Romani Children

Risk and Protective Factors

A case study on Romania



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Sources of Vulnerability and Sources of Resistance

- The child development: continuous interactions between sources of vulnerability and sources of resilience (Shonkoff, Phillips, 2000).
- Positive and negative experiences in childhood impact child's development especially during "sensitive periods."
- The social and economic context in which the children grow up: a strong determinant of inequalities in education, labor market, transmission of poverty (Walker and others, 2011).
- Geographical location, physical proximity, spatial mismatch, neighborhood resources, social isolation, social organization, local incentives (Hardings, Gennetian, Winship, 2010).

Risk Factors

Geographical locations

Residential segregation of Romani communities:

- educational segregation and, consequently, dropout,
- low quality education,
- lack of kindergartens in the Roma neighborhoods.
- Roma neighborhoods separated from those of the majority population by walls

Romani neighborhood resources

- Serious accessibility problems
- Problems with electricity
- Isolated neighborhoods lack electricity
- Access to drinking water is problematic

Photo credit: The Guardian, Dailymail



Risk Factors

- Children from families with a low socio-economic status learn approximately 300 words in the first three years of life vs. 1200 words in the case of children from families with a higher socio-economic status (Hart, Risley, 1995).
- Romani children: about 66% of Roma live in poverty and 20% in extreme poverty, compared to 25% of the non-Roma population living in poverty, respectively 3-4% in extreme poverty (Fleck, Righinis, 2008).



Risk Factors

- **Malnutrition** triggers negative consequences on early childhood development.
- Romania: More than 40% of Romani children suffer from severe malnutrition; they live on the verge of starvation.
- 60% of Roma interviewed in a research stated that at least one of the family members went to bed hungry, compared to 12% of non-Roma (Fleck, Righinis, 2008).



Risk Factors

- **Stress syndrome** can occur as a consequence of traumatic events for children.
- Countless instances of discrimination documented by human rights organizations in Romani neighborhoods.
- E.g.: entire Romani families banished and houses burnt, abusive police interventions in communities, forced evictions, etc.

Risk Factors

- 2009: residents of the village Sanmartin, Harghita County destroyed the Roma houses, goods, broke windows, killed dogs and set a house on fire.
- Romani families, including children ran away from their homes and slept in the woods.
- For almost a month, daily, residents chased and threatened Roma in the woods
- Around 25 children below 7 years old sheltered in the forest



Consequences:

- Walls: the Roma community “behind the wall” becomes even more undesirable for the other non-Roma community;
- Forced separation/segregation in education: diminishes Romani children’s opportunities to quality education; diminishes dramatically the interactions between Roma and non-Roma children; increases the risk of negative relationships and attitudes in the educational environment;
- Discrimination, rejection and stigma: decrease the chances for healthy early childhood development (social, emotional development) and for educational opportunities for Romani children.
- Violence against Roma: the state authorities have not developed a process of support for children to provide them with emotional security and reduce the impact on their emotional development.

The effects of such traumas can also be felt during adulthood.

Risk Factors - school environment

- Every child crosses kindergarten with certain fears, expectations, experiences and the way he or she is perceived, treated, influences his or her attitude towards the educational establishment.
- Teacher expectations are easily assimilated by children in building up their motivation for education and their self-esteem.
- The effects of unfriendly behavior of teachers are more pronounced for children belonging either to vulnerable groups or to minorities (McKown, Weinstein, 2002).
- Negative peer relations can lead to negative outcomes such as school dropout, psychological difficulties (Rubin, Both, Wilkinson, 1990).

Risk Factors- school environment

“Those who drop out of school early are Roma children.”

“Tomorrow is the only important thing in their [Roma] value system.”

vs.

“The number of Romani children in our kindergarten is increasing because we accept them.....children who attend kindergarten here also go to high school.”

“We have our heart in our work, I have never made differences and this is why things go so well in our kindergarten.”

Sources of vulnerabilities- caregivers

- Children's academic attainments: determined by the structure of the family, the number of parents or adults in the house, their level of support to perform in education.
- Role of the parents: support for homework, physical time spent with their children to read, to explore, to play.



Sources of vulnerabilities- caregivers

- Romania: 22% of Roma over 14 years old can neither write, nor read → reducing children's chances to have access to reading at an early age and to develop their language.
- In addition, Romani children from poor families and/ or living in remote areas are less likely to have equal access to kindergarten.

Protective Factors

- “Protective factors” (Shonkoff, Phillips, 2000) that optimize the chances of children: competences of maternal care, social maturity, the feeling of being aware of their capabilities, children’s academic achievements, the emotional support from the extended family, friends (Harwood,, Miller, Vasta, 2010).
- Physical presence accompanied by the parents’ attention can stimulate child achievements (Coleman, 1988).

Protective Factors

- The presence and attention of the Romani mother and other members of the extended family.
- Romani families: breastfeeding, mother-child relationship, involvement of the extended family, or neighbors in children's education and care, are values/activities counteracting institutional and societal obstacles in early childhood.
- In addition, many Romani children are extremely resilient in face of trauma, poverty, and discrimination.



Graphic 1: The ecology of the non-Roma privilege in early childhood (draft, to be developed further by the author)

Margareta Matache, *Non-Roma privilege in early childhood*, 2015

Society

- *Better access to power and resources: people who dominate powerful positions and design policies belong to the same group
- * Not affected by the slavery, the Holocaust and social exclusion based on ethnic grounds

Neighborhoods

- *Indiscriminatory access kindergartens and day care
- *Better equipped educational facilities
- *More access to water than Roma
- *Access to electricity *Institutions: more power and local resources

Kindergartens and schools

- *More qualified teachers
- *Better equipped classes
- *Welcoming environment: teachers and children speak the same language, share similar cultural values, and the teaching materials inform about their history and culture
- *Do not confront discrimination and stigma at an early age
- *Do not have to hide their ethnic identity

Family

- *Lower levels of poverty than Roma
- *No experience of ethnic stigma and discrimination
- *Lower rate of child mortality and malnutrition than Roma
- *Lower transmission of lack of education
- *Better educated adults

Non-Roma child

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