



**Debunking Myths  
& Revealing Truths  
about the Roma**



European Network Against Racism  
Réseau européen contre le racisme

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# Who are the Roma?

The 'Roma' are not a homogenous community; it's impossible to find one word which would successfully include all communities commonly associated with that name or so-called Gypsies. Important to note is that not all these communities in the world today recognise themselves as Roma. But they do have linked histories and experiences of racism, discrimination and exclusion from mainstream society. The term 'Roma', deriving from the Romani word for a man/person, is the traditional appellation for some, mainly Romani speaking groups. The EU institutions use the term 'Roma' as an umbrella term including groups of people who share more or less similar cultural characteristics, such as the Roma, Sinti, Travellers, Ashkali, Manush, Jenische, Kaldaresh and Kalé.

Many Roma are of Indian origin; their ancestors arrived from India around 1,000 years ago.<sup>1</sup> For centuries, they were evicted from country to country and were therefore doomed to flee violence and persecution in the hope of finding a more welcoming territory in which they could settle. The Roma in Europe have consequently developed specific means of survival: seasonal agricultural work, metal and leather working, street trading, etc. that have been compatible with their mobility. The centuries of their persecution reached a peak during the Second World War, during which the Roma in Europe

faced extermination under the Nazis, simply because of their ethnic identity and because they did not fit 'the norm'. The Nazis killed between 500,000 and 1.5 million Roma. Even though the Roma endured the same atrocities as Jews, they had to fight a long time to become recognised as victims of 'Porajmos' (the Roma Holocaust). Consequently, racism against the Roma never really became proscribed in the same way anti-Semitism did. Indeed, the Roma remain to this day the most discriminated minority in Europe.

While no official data on ethnicity is available across the EU, it is estimated that 10 to 12 million Roma are in Europe, and approximately 6 million in the EU, making them the largest minority group in Europe. The main sub-groups are 'oriental' Roma (85%), Sinti (referred to as 'Manouches' in France - 4%), Kalés (10%), and Gypsies/Travellers in the UK and Ireland (0.5%), as well as many smaller groups.<sup>2</sup> Romania and Bulgaria have the largest Roma populations. 80% of Roma in Europe are now settled.

## What is anti-Gypsyism/anti-Tsiganism/Romaphobia?

Anti-Tsiganism, anti-Gypsyism, and Romaphobia essentially mean the same thing:

*... a distinct type of racist ideology. It is, at the same time, similar, different, and intertwined with many other types of racism. Anti-Gypsyism itself is a complex social phenomenon which manifests itself through violence, hate speech, exploitation, and discrimination in its most visible form. [...] Anti-Gypsyism is a very specific form of racism, an ideology of racial superiority, a form of dehumanisation and of institutionalised racism. It is fuelled by historical discrimination and the struggle to maintain power relations that permit advantages to majority groups. It is based, on the one hand, on imagined fears, negative stereotypes and myths and, on the other, on denial or erasure from the public conscience of a long history of discrimination against Roma. (Source: Valeriu Nicolae, [www.ergonetwork.org/antigypsyism.htm](http://www.ergonetwork.org/antigypsyism.htm))*

1 Not all groups included under the 'Roma' denomination come from India. Irish Travellers, for instance, are an indigenous minority who have been part of Irish society for centuries.

2 <http://rroms.blogspot.com/>

## Estimated number of Roma in the EU (2009-2010)<sup>3</sup>

EU countries	Total country population (July 2009)	Official number (last census)	Minimum estimate	Maximum estimate	Average estimate	% of total population (from averages)
<i>Austria</i>	8.205.533	No data available	20.000	30.000	<b>25.000</b>	<b>0,30%</b>
<i>Belgium</i>	10.414.336	No data available	20.000	40.000	<b>30.000</b>	<b>0,29%</b>
<i>Bulgaria</i>	7.262.675	370 908 (2001)	700.000	800.000	<b>750.000</b>	<b>10,33%</b>
<i>Cyprus</i>	792.604	560 (1960)	1.000	1.500	<b>1.250</b>	<b>0,16%</b>
<i>Czech Republic</i>	10.220.911	11 718 (2001)	150.000	250.000	<b>200.000</b>	<b>1,96%</b>
<i>Denmark</i>	5.484.723	No data available	1.000	10.000	<b>5.500</b>	<b>0,10%</b>
<i>Estonia</i>	1.307.605	584 (2009)	1.000	1.500	<b>1.250</b>	<b>0,10%</b>
<i>Finland</i>	5.244.749	No data available	10.000	12.000	<b>11.000</b>	<b>0,21%</b>
<i>France</i>	64.057.790	No data available	300.000	500.000	<b>400.000</b>	<b>0,62%</b>
<i>Germany</i>	82.400.996	No data available	70.000	140.000	<b>105.000</b>	<b>0,13%</b>
<i>Greece</i>	10.722.816	No data available	180.000	350.000	<b>265.000</b>	<b>2,47%</b>
<i>Hungary</i>	9.930.915	190 046 (2001)	400.000	1.000.000	<b>700.000</b>	<b>7,05%</b>
<i>Ireland</i>	4.156.119	22 435 (2006)	32.000	43.000	<b>37.500</b>	<b>0,90%</b>
<i>Italy</i>	59.619.290	No data available	110.000	170.000	<b>140.000</b>	<b>0,23%</b>
<i>Latvia</i>	2.245.423	8 205 (2000)	13.000	16.000	<b>14.500</b>	<b>0,65%</b>
<i>Lithuania</i>	3.565.205	2 571 (2001)	2.000	4.000	<b>3.000</b>	<b>0,08%</b>
<i>Luxembourg</i>	486.006	No data available	100	500	<b>300</b>	<b>0,06%</b>
<i>Malta</i>	403.532	No data available	0	0	<b>0</b>	<b>0,00%</b>
<i>The Netherlands</i>	16.645.313	No data available	32.000	48.000	<b>40.000</b>	<b>0,24%</b>
<i>Poland</i>	38.500.696	12 731(2002)	15.000	60.000	<b>37.500</b>	<b>0,10%</b>
<i>Portugal</i>	10.676.910	No data available	40.000	70.000	<b>55.000</b>	<b>0,52%</b>
<i>Romania</i>	22.246.862	535 140 (2002)	1.200.000	2.500.000	<b>1.850.000</b>	<b>8,32%</b>
<i>Slovak Republic</i>	5.455.407	89 920 (2001)	400.000	600.000	<b>500.000</b>	<b>9,17%</b>
<i>Slovenia</i>	2.007.711	3 246 (2002)	7.000	10.000	<b>8.500</b>	<b>0,42%</b>
<i>Spain</i>	46.157.822	No data available	650.000	800.000	<b>725.000</b>	<b>1,57%</b>
<i>Sweden</i>	9.276.509	No data available	35.000	50.000	<b>42.500</b>	<b>0,46%</b>
<i>United Kingdom</i>	60.943.912	No data available	150.000	300.000	<b>225.000</b>	<b>0,37%</b>
<b>Total in the EU</b>					<b>6.172.800</b>	<b>1,73%</b>

## The emergence of myths regarding Roma

Across Europe, the Roma have historically been the minority - together with the Jews - that have suffered most from discrimination on grounds of their supposed 'inferiority' and the subsequent negative stereotyping. Throughout the centuries, myths emerged and were spread, targeting both these groups. Stereotypes and prejudices against the Roma are so deeply rooted in European culture that they are often not conceived as such and accepted as fact. The negative behaviour of one individual tends to be automatically applied to all 'Gypsies' - with no distinction either between different groups of Roma - and is attributed to Romani culture instead of to the individual.

A survey by the European Fundamental Rights Agency reveals that "Every second Roma respondent said that they were discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity at least once in the previous 12 months."

**Myth: 'The Roma are criminals'**

**Truth: Did you know that statistics can be misleading and don't provide convincing evidence that Roma are more 'criminal' than others? On the other hand we do have proof that they are systematic victims of crime, including racially motivated crime.**

Crime statistics in some countries do show higher-than-average crime rates among the Roma population. But these statistics should be treated with care. The criminal justice

systems of many European countries are not immune to prejudice and discrimination. Someone who is identified as a Roma is more likely to be stopped and searched by police, to be arrested, and to be charged with a criminal offence than a comparable member of the 'native' population. Convicted Roma are also more likely to receive longer prison terms, resulting in their being significantly overrepresented in prisons. It is therefore misleading to claim the Roma are 'prone to crime' based on crime statistics and the number of Roma in prison.

On the other hand, the fact that Roma are often *victims* of crime is not so well known. According to a recent EU survey, one in four Roma respondents has been a victim of personal crime and one in five has been a victim of racially motivated crime.<sup>4</sup>



**Myth: "The Roma are by definition nomadic"**  
**Truth: Did you know that in Eastern Europe, the vast majority of Roma are sedentary? Only some Roma in a few Western European countries (France, Belgium, Ireland, Netherlands and United Kingdom) are still nomadic.**

Over the centuries Roma did not have a choice but to move. They became nomadic because they were persistently and forcibly chased away or encountered so

much discrimination and/or violent attacks that they were forced to leave. Today, most Roma in both Eastern and Western Europe have been sedentary for generations. Only a small number of Roma (20%), mostly in Western Europe, lead a traditional nomadic lifestyle<sup>5</sup>.

4 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, EU-MIDIS Data in Focus Report, The Roma, 2009.

5 <http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/romatravellers/source/documents/toolstereotypesEN.pdf>



On the other hand, Roma and Traveller people face forced evictions (i.e. are forced to move away from the camp they live in) and/or expulsions (i.e. are forced to leave the country in which they live) in many European countries (such as Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Germany and more recently France and the United Kingdom). In the case of expulsions - which mainly concerns Eastern European Roma in Western European countries, they are forced to return to their countries of origin, where they suffer increased hardships and endure lower living standards because they no longer have a proper source of income.

**Myth: “Roma parents don’t encourage their children to go to school”**  
**Truth: Did you know that Roma parents often mistrust school institutions, because Roma pupils are subject to discrimination and exclusion in education?**

Teachers, school institutions and other pupils can exclude Roma pupils. In some countries, they are put in separate classrooms within the same school, sometimes even following a “simple version” of the curriculum, thus failing to

receive the same quality education as the non-Roma children.

An even more worrying phenomenon is the placement of Roma pupils in “special schools” for mentally disabled children, which still happens in countries like Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia and the Czech Republic. In addition, harassment, racial slurs and scapegoating at school are common. For example, in the United Kingdom, 9 out of every 10 children and young people from a Roma or Traveller background have suffered racial abuse and nearly two thirds have also been bullied or physically attacked. There is also a lack of Roma and Traveller related material and information in curricula (particularly in history). When this material is included in text books, it often spreads a negative image of Roma or completely ignores their role in history.

Other external factors can prevent Roma children from going to school. Parents may lack the necessary financial means to afford the costs of school material, clothing and food. In some situations, parents prefer their children to generate additional income through work or other activities. For those Roma who live in isolated settlements, or when schooling is linked with having a registered place of residence, the way to school alone becomes a hurdle.<sup>6</sup>



6 On another note, early marriage is generally considered an important cause of school drop-out. Yet according to a survey of Roma children in Romania, out of the 69 children interviewed, only one cited marriage as the reason for dropping out. According to the questionnaires completed by the parents, 10 cases of early marriage among the school-age children prompted dropout, which works out as 4.3% of dropout causes reported by parents. In this light, it is quite likely that early marriage among Roma children is less of a factor than previously thought. See [www.unicef.org/romania/media\\_14491.html](http://www.unicef.org/romania/media_14491.html)

**Myth: “The Roma don’t want to work”**

**Truth: Did you know that most Roma do not have access to jobs because of the high levels of discrimination they face?**

Entrenched stereotypes make access to employment for Roma particularly difficult. For example, a survey in Lithuania found that 82.4 % of the surveyed

Roma identified prejudice and negative attitudes of employers as one of the main reasons for their unemployment, and that 47% of surveyed employers believed that a Roma would probably not be offered a job in their company.<sup>7</sup> An EU survey also showed that every second Roma respondent claimed in the previous 12 months to have been discriminated against at least once (with an average of 11 incidents of discrimination). Work-related experiences of discrimination were among the most frequent.<sup>8</sup>



In some EU countries (especially ex-communist countries) the unemployment rate of the Roma is around 80% to even 90% among women. These low employment rates among Roma are mainly due to the discrimination described above and to low education levels. Roma are also the first to be dismissed when employers need to reduce their workforce. Stereotypes must therefore be challenged and overcome in order for Roma to get a fair chance on the labour market. Media should be exemplary in curbing the use of stereotypes in this regard.

When Roma do find employment, jobs are mainly casual, short-term, low-skilled and poorly paid. Some work on a self-employment basis, while many individuals in work remain poor.

**Myth: “The Roma don’t want to integrate into mainstream society”**

**Truth: Did you know that, given the choice, Roma prefer to integrate, rather than live in a segregated, parallel society - wouldn’t you?**

The Romani culture has historically been relatively closed and inaccessible to outsiders, which might be expected from a community

constantly at risk. The period of persecution - based on anti-Gypsy laws in Western and Central Europe (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) - had huge consequences, forcing most Roma into a nomadic way of life. While in Eastern Europe Roma have become almost entirely sedentary due to communism, some Roma in Western Europe remain more inward looking and protective of their traditions.

7 <http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/pdf/The%20situation%20of%20Roma%20in%20Europe%202007.pdf>

8 [http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/research/publications/publications\\_per\\_year/2009/eu-midis-roma\\_en.htm](http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/research/publications/publications_per_year/2009/eu-midis-roma_en.htm)



However, the closed character of the Romani culture is no more. Research has shown<sup>9</sup> that, given the choice, Roma prefer to integrate, rather than live in a segregated, parallel society. Roma today are struggling for equal and just participation in mainstream society, while wishing to preserve their unique culture.

In addition, negative experiences such as discrimination and poverty have led many Roma communities to live in segregated areas and build their own housing in isolated areas. A further challenge is that some municipalities also use a

variety of techniques to prevent Roma from living in more desirable urban neighbourhoods.

**Myth: “The Roma are child traffickers”**

**Truth: Did you know that people are vulnerable to trafficking for various reasons including ethnic and gender discrimination, poverty and social exclusion, which can affect anyone, Roma or non-Roma?**

Roma are highly vulnerable to trafficking due to ethnic and gender discrimination, poverty and social exclusion. These vulnerability factors are closely linked

to those commonly associated with non-Romani trafficked persons.



In addition, many factors such as domestic violence, high school dropout rates, homelessness or being in state care make children and youth disproportionately vulnerable to trafficking. The fact that family members are involved in the trafficking of Roma children is similar to the situation in other communities throughout the world. In other words, there is no unique “Roma vulnerability factor”, and no indication that trafficking is a “cultural practice” of Roma.<sup>10</sup>

9 See, for instance, World Bank and Open Society Institute, ‘Current Attitudes Toward the Roma in Central Europe: A Report of Research with non-Roma and Roma Respondents’, 2005. <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/EXTROMA/0,,contentMDK:20749979~pagePK:64168445~piPK:64168309~theSitePK:615987,00.html>

10 See [www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/breaking-the-silence-19-march-2011.pdf](http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/breaking-the-silence-19-march-2011.pdf) and <http://esaconf.un.org/wb/default.asp?action=9&boardid=51&read=2776&fid=471>

**Myth: 'All Roma from Eastern Europe come to Western Europe to beg'**

**Truth: Did you know that it is for economic and political reasons - just like many other citizens of Eastern European countries - that Roma from Eastern Europe migrated to Western Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall?**

E a s t e r n European Roma migrants coming to Western Europe are only human beings pursuing their own interests, rights and visions of a good life, and trying to improve their p e r s o n a l

circumstances, which are often extremely difficult.

However, because of the discrimination and social exclusion they also experience in Western countries, they often end up being obliged to beg to survive.



Most Roma are forced to move from their own countries as a result of extreme and constant harassment, discrimination and social exclusion (including poverty), combined with repeated forced eviction from (usually shanty/informal) housing. Some of them, like any other non-Roma migrant, migrate to Western European countries with a stronger economy than their home country. Some Roma are refugees, mainly from ex-Yugoslavia, who fled war and persecution in these countries and acquired refugee status in Western European countries. Some of these have been living long-term in the respective countries (for example, many thousands of Yugoslav Roma have acquired protection in Germany, some on a permanent basis and

some only temporarily, sometimes still threatened with deportation).

In addition, since the accession of Central and Eastern European countries to the European Union, many Roma and non-Roma from these countries have exercised their right to free movement and moved to other EU Member States in search of work and better life conditions and opportunities. However, it seems that the Roma are less free to move than other EU citizens, as shown by the expulsions of Roma by the French, Italian and several other European governments in recent years.



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The European Network Against Racism (ENAR) is a network of some 700 organisations working to combat racism in all the EU member states and acts as a voice of the anti-racist movement in Europe. ENAR aims to fight racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, to promote equality of treatment between European Union citizens and third country nationals.

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ERIO is an international advocacy organisation promoting political and public discussion on Roma issues by providing factual and in-depth information on a range of policy issues to the European Union institutions, Roma civil society organisations, government authorities and intergovernmental organisations.