DANIEL, MIHAI

mihai.daniel@ubbcluj.ro
PhD student (Doctoral School of Sociology, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Babeș-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca)

Social inequalities and vulnerability of Roma children in the protection system in Cluj County

ABSTRACT

This study analyses the situation of Roma children separated from their parents and under the special protection measure of foster care in Cluj County, through a socio-demographic approach. Our research highlights the overrepresentation of Roma children in the child protection system. The results show that this disproportion is caused by factors such as extreme poverty, poor housing conditions, lack of education and structural discrimination. Approximately one third of the Roma families live in makeshift shacks with limited access to utilities and in conditions of severe overcrowding. The level of education of Roma parents is low and their access to the labour market is very limited. At the same time, institutionalized children show a high level of health problems, caused by poor living conditions and lack of medical care before the establishment of the protection measure. Our findings emphasize the need for integrated interventions to reduce the social inequalities that cause children to be separated from their families.

KEYWORDS
children, Roma, foster care, poverty, social exclusion

INTRODUCTION

This study, by exploring the family environment of children under the special protection measure of foster care in Cluj County, aims to present an overview of the situation of Roma in Cluj County, in relation to the non-Roma population and within a social category with low socio-economic status, affected by social exclusion. We started from the premise that the overwhelming majority of children separated from their parents come from families facing social problems (STĂNCULESCU et al. 2016).

The special protection of foster care is an exceptional measure which in Romania can be established in the following cases: death of the parents, abandonment, abuse, neglect of the child, or in cases where the child cannot be left in the care of the parents for reasons not attributable to them. Placement may be ordered, in the order of the recommendations, with relatives of the child up to the 4th degree, with a person or family, with a professional maternal assistant or in a residential establishment. Children under 7 years of age cannot be placed in residential care, unless the child needs special care that cannot be provided in the family environment (LAW NO. 272/2004).

In Romania, the number of children under the special protection measure of foster care is constantly decreasing. Compared to 1990, when there were approximately 100 000 children in state care (STĂNCULESCU et al. 2016), in 2023, there were 38337 children on record (ANDPCA 2024). The increased number since 1990 was mainly caused by the pro-birth policy and the economic decline in the 80s. In 2016, the number of children separated from their families, in relation to the population of children in the country, was within the average of the Central and Eastern European region (STĂNCULESCU et al, 2016), six years later, the proportion of children separated from their families was below 2%, in relation to the population of children in Romania, except for Vaslui County, in 4 counties below 1%, including Cluj County (ANPDCA 2023).

In 2022, in Cluj County, according to the Activity Report of the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection (2022), there were 818 children under the special protection measure of foster care, of which 347 were cared for in residential care, 471 in family care, 169 in the care of professional foster carers, 241 placed with relatives and 61 with families or persons.

METHODOLOGY

Our study is part of a larger research aimed at identifying and analyzing the risk factors that contributed to the separation of children from their families, to present the history and trajectory of children from the time of separation from their parents to the present and the prospects for reintegration in the natural family. In this article we present some socio-demographic characteristics of children by ethnicity (Roma/Non-Roma) and family of origin.

We used quantitative and qualitative methods, the information was collected from the children's files and from the answers of social workers responsible for the children's case, who provided clarifications and supplementary information where the file was incomplete.

We set out to cover as many cases as possible. We were able to build a database of 392 active cases as of 2022, representing 76% of the total target population. On-site, at the time of data collection, we only had access to the files of active beneficiaries. We would like to point out that there is a fluctuation of beneficiaries, children moving in and out of the system, as well as an 'internal movement' through change of placement.

Children placed with relatives, families or individuals are not the subject of this study, as their profile only partially fits the aspects we wish to analyse.

The results are representative at county level, for Cluj county.

Data processing and interpretation was done on each child individually, including siblings. Data were statistically processed in Excel and SPSS, using significance tests for correlations and associations between variables.

When analysing some indicators, such as those related to the living conditions of the families, the sample size differs, because we did not have information available on the parents of children in the adoption program (they have no contact with the natural family) or in the case of young people whose ultimate goal is socio-professional reintegration and do not wish to maintain ties with their families. In the case of separated parents, we followed the family situation of the parent who has a closer relationship with the institutionalized child.

For a better profiling of the study population, in the second phase of the empirical analysis, we used the hierarchical cluster analysis, i.e. Ward's method. The variables included in the ward analysis are those used in the first phase of the study, the qualitative ones transformed into dummy variables. The variables included in the hierarchical cluster are the following: family structure (0=single-parent family, 1=biparental family), living arrangement (0=unsegregated, 1=segregated), child's disability classification (1=not classified, 2=lightly classified, 3=medium classified, 4= accented classified, 5=severe classified), parents' health status (0=no health problems, 1=undiagnosed health problems, 2=diagnosed health problems, 3=disabled), educational level of mother/father (0=no education, 1=primary school, 2= secondary school, 3=vocational school, 4= high school without baccalaureate, 5=high school with baccalaureate, 6=post-secondary, 7 college), mother's/father's qualification (0=no qualification 1=qualification), source of income (0=no taxed earned income, 1=taxed earned income), income per household member.

Following the hierarchical cluster analysis (Ward's method), by analysing the dendrogram (see appendix 1) we grouped the analysed population into 5 clusters that we will interpret in the second part of the study.

ROMA CHILDREN IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

In Cluj County, the majority (50.8%) of children in state care belong to the Roma ethnic group, one out of three are Romanians (33.2%), 4.3% are Hungarians, 2.8% are of mixed ethnicity and 9.2% of undeclared ethnicity. Ethnicity was primarily noted as it appeared in the official documents in the files. Where this information was missing, we asked social workers to indicate ethnicity, also taking into account the opinion of the beneficiary. Some refused to answer, citing ethical reasons, especially in situations where even the beneficiaries refused to declare their ethnic identity.

Even though we used a multiple data collection method, we have a rate of 9.2% of children with undeclared ethnicity. The high number of non-responses to this question among (pre)adolescents (12-18 years old), as 61.1% come from this age group, also indicates an identity crisis, fear of stigma or even outrage in case of their association with Roma ethnicity, facts reported by case managers.

As a basis of comparison, at the 2021 national census, in Cluj County the ethnic composition was made up of Romanians, who form the majority with 71.9%, Hungarians with 11.6%, being the largest ethnic minority, followed by Roma with 2.6% (INSSE 2021). We may see that in the target population studied, Roma children placed under foster care are overrepresented compared to the ethnic composition of the country or county, regardless of whether we take into account the official data from Romania or sociological studies, which estimate that the number of Roma is at least double what the national statistics indicate (CACE et al. 2014; HORVÁTH 2017; VERES 2015). The official data are distorted due to the large number of people who are taken into account with undeclared ethnicity, for example within the census of 2021, their proportion was 13% (GHETAU 2023; VERES 2023). According to the study by STĂNCULESCU et al. (2016), at national level, 10.3% of children in foster care were Roma, in the context of 31.3% of children with undeclared ethnicity. Even so, the proportion of Roma children in foster care was three times higher than their proportion in the total population, according to 2011 census data (STĂNCULESCU et al. 2016).

The reasons why the proportion of the Roma population in our study is so high compared to the national level data can be multiple. Sociological studies (CACE et al. 2014; DUMINICĂ – IVASCIUC 2001, EMIGH – SZELÉNYI 2001; RAȚ 2012; VERES 2015, 2023; VINCZE 2019) on Roma in Romania and Eastern Europe highlight the social inequalities, discrimination and social exclusion they face compared to the non-Roma population. We did not include children placed in extended families who, we assume, have more resources and, as such, their socio-demographic indicators also differ. The differences are due in part to the method of collecting and centralizing data at the national level. In the study conducted by STĂNCULESCU et al. (2016), a high proportion of children with undeclared ethnicity was observed. We also observe that the proportion of Roma in Cluj County is almost similar to the national average, with an insignificant difference of -0.4% (2021 CENSUS).

In Romania, when the special protection measure is established, placement of the child in the extended family is considered, as far as possible, then with a professional maternal assistant and only lastly in a residential facility. Children under 7 years of age cannot be placed in residential units, unless they need special care that cannot be provided in a family environment (LAW NO. 272/2004). In our sample, 34.4% of the children were placed with professional foster carers, employed persons, who raise the children in their own family. Contrary to our hypotheses, we found no discrimination in where children were placed. We relied on studies (VERES 2024; ANGHEL – FOSZTÓ 2022) which show a high degree of rejection of Roma ethnics by Romanian and Hungarian ethnics in Romania and particularly in Transylvania, as well as on the fact that there is a shortage of foster carers and therefore a prioritization of cases that can be assigned to foster carers is made. Hence, there is a rigorous selection in hiring, including the acceptance of minority children by the candidates.

The distribution of children according to the residence they or their parents had at the time of the establishment of the protection measure is uneven. Rural children are more at risk of separation from their parents - 51.5% come from rural areas, 60.4% of the county's population live in urban areas, according to INSSE (2022) - but there are also inequalities within the same type of locality. For example, 17.7% of institutionalized children come from six rural settlements,

whose inhabitants account for 2.9% of the population of Cluj County. In five of these settlements the proportion of Roma is much higher than the county average, ranging between 5.4% and 23.4%. The exception is one village, but there all institutionalized children are Roma, their families live isolated from the rest of the villagers.

In urban areas, in the municipalities of Turda and Câmpia-Turzii, two neighbouring former industrial towns that are physically close to each other, the proportion of children in state care is higher than the proportion of the county's population. On the outskirts of these localities, near the garbage dump and on the platforms of disused factories, families, mainly Roma, live in difficult conditions. In Cluj-Napoca, 38% of institutionalized children come from the segregated Pata-Rât community, representing 9.7% of all children separated from their parents. Overall, three out of five Roma families are physically segregated (61.5%), while 29.4% of non-Roma families are segregated. Irrespective of ethnicity, two thirds of those segregated (66.9%) live on the outskirts of the locality.

The formation of segregated areas on the outskirts of cities, with a predominantly young population marked by serious health problems, is closely linked to the process of deindustrialization (PETROVICI, 2019). Following the closure of industrial units and the loss of jobs, vulnerable communities, especially Roma, have faced an intensification of precariousness and poverty. In this context, many families have been forced, either by material constraints or public administration policies, to retreat to marginal areas where the cost of living is lower but which lack infrastructure and basic services. These areas are not only the result of economic dynamics, but also the expression of deeper mechanisms of political economy, which perpetuate social inequalities, segregation and structural racism by creating distinctions even among disadvantaged workers, placing Roma in a position of extreme marginalization (VINCZE-HOSSU 2014; VINCZE 2019).

The formation of the Pata-Rât area, composed of four communities, Rampa, Canton, Coastei and Dallas, each with a particular history, indicates the ways of marginalization of certain social groups, predominantly Roma (ADORJÁNI-ANTAL-TONK, 2023). The Rampa community is formed by Roma who settled on the edge of the city's forest and were relocated by the police in 2003 to the immediate vicinity of the landfill, where Roma families from other localities lived, earning their living from waste recycling activities (RAȚ 2013; VINCZE 2013).

The Cantonului and Coastei communities were formed as a result of evictions organized by the authorities: the Cantonului residents moved or were gradually relocated from various neighbourhoods of the city, while the Coastei community was born in 2010, when 76 families were forcibly relocated from Coastei Street by the authorities of the municipality of Cluj-Napoca (BĂDIȚĂ-VINCZE 2019).The oldest community, Dallas, is made up of individuals and families who moved out of the city due to their precarious economic situations (VINCZE 2013).

The housing situation of Roma families

According to EUROSTAT (2018), one in five Romanian citizens are affected by severe homelessness. State authorities through the Romanian Government Strategy for the inclusion of Romanian citizens belonging to the Roma minority for the period 2022-2027 (GOVERNMENT DECISION NO. 560/2022) highlight that 78% of Roma live in overcrowded housing and only 58% are owners, compared to 87%, the average for the country.

Analysing the factors that contributed to the separation of children from their families, poverty is invoked in 81.6% of the cases. Roma children's families are categorized as poor in a similar proportion as non-Roma, but the intensity is more serious, the inequalities are reflected in living conditions. Over the years, non-working families have accumulated capital, however modest, or inherited it from predecessors. This can be seen, for example, in the housing situation.

The majority of parents with children in foster care are faced with housing poverty, which is cited as a reason for the institution of foster care for three out of five children. Before the separation, significantly more Roma children and families lived in poor housing conditions (70.5%) compared to non-Roma (52.6%, p≤0.001). The data collected show significant inequalities in favour of Roma in terms of type of housing (p≤0.001), physical segregation (p≤0.001) and access to certain utilities and facilities.

A third of Roma families (33.5%) live in makeshift buildings and 32.4% in small houses made of cheap materials, with rudimentary finishes and little comfort. In contrast, a higher proportion of non-Roma families live in small houses (32.8%) or in blocks of flats built before the 1990s (27%). 76.3% of all families living in makeshift buildings are Roma, 76.3% of whom are concentrated mainly on the outskirts of urban areas, while small houses with rudimentary finishes are more common in rural areas.

Roma dwellings are considerably smaller (p≤0.001) and more crowded: 65.5% have only one room, which is usually also the only room, compared to 44.4% for non-Roma. On average, Roma households contain 2.72 persons, compared to 2.32 for non-Roma.

We find differences (p≤0.001) with regard to access to toilets. Overall, only half of the households have indoor toilets. The difference is given by those who do not have any at all, with 21.3%, and the proportion of Roma households is twice as high.

As a result of poor housing conditions, a higher proportion of Roma families live in an environment that affects their health, in rooms with damaged roofs, mouldy walls or damaged floors (43.8%, p≤0.001) or without sufficient natural light (38%, p≤0.001).

Comfort is severely affected by lack of access to basic amenities and goods. Families of children in foster care, especially Roma children, face severe deprivation. In 2022, one in three Roma families had no access to electricity, almost three out of four were not connected to the water network, and sewerage and natural gas were available in even smaller proportions (22.5% and 15.7%). Essential household appliances such as a fridge or washing machine were found in less than half of households, and a mobile phone, vital for keeping in touch with children, was missing in one third of Roma families (Table 1).

Table 1.
Housing facilities and equipment

Housing facilities and equipment	Ethnicity			Asymp. Sig.
	Total	Roma	Non - Roma	
Electricity**	73,5%	64,3%	84,7%	p≤0,001
Water supply**	37,1%	27%	50,4%	p≤0,001
Sewage**	30,6%	22,5%	43,5%	p≤0,001
Households connected to Gas Grid *	20,9%	15,7 %	32,1%	p≤0,05

Central heating unit	13,1%	10,1%	17,9%	p≥0,05
Cable TV	34%	27,9%	41,8%	p≥0,05
TV set**	64,5%	54,7%	78,4%	p≤0,001
Fridge**	59,9%	46,9%	76,9%	p≤0,001
Washing machine**	67,9%	36,3%	50,6%	p≤0,001
Mobile phone	72,7%	66,5%	80,6%	p≥0,05

Observation * p ≤,0,05, ** p ≤,0,001(Chi square test)
Source: Generated and data collected by the author

Because of unpaid bills or of the legal situation: they are not the owners of the real estate (only 19.3% are), the real estate, the shack is built without legal forms, the domicile is not identical with the residence (41.2%), some of the dwellings are connected to electricity illegally, from neighbours, with their consent. This practice can be either a form of mutual support or, in some cases, a form of exploitation, where those receiving electricity are forced to pay excessive tariffs.

According to the ETHOS Typology (FEANTSA 2024), a significant proportion of parents of children, especially Roma parents, can be categorized as homeless, including not only those who actually live on the streets or in homeless hostels, but also those who live in makeshift, overcrowded buildings, staying with friends, relatives or employers without paying rent. BREITNER (1999) suggests the use of the term 'homeless' to describe these people, given their survival-cantered lifestyles, time management and limited social relationships, which are generally similar to those of homeless people.

ADORJÁNI-ANTAL-TONK (2023) consider that people who live in precarious, degrading conditions, without prospects, gradually tire and become demoralized. VERES (2023) draws attention to the extreme vulnerability of families living in insecure, segregated communities with a majority Roma population in crisis situations, giving the example of the COVID pandemic period, when they were excluded from some vital aids for economic or political reasons.

The lack of minimally decent living conditions for parents affects not only the reintegration of children in the family, but also the maintenance of family ties, as parents cannot accommodate them even for the short term. Thus, children are deprived of privacy with family members (parents' visits are monitored, often even by the presence of an employee), they are deprived of contact with relatives, friends and members of the community they come from. All this gradually contributes to the alienation of the child.

SCHOOLING AND PARENTAL OCCUPATION

There are major inequalities in education in Romania. The participation of Roma children is significantly lower at all levels of education. In schools with a high number of Roma children, the quality of education is poorer, schools are overcrowded, and insufficiently equipped (CACE et al. 2014; DUMINICĂ-IVASCIUC 2010; STOICA-VAMSIEDEL 2012). The European Commission (2016) estimates that 27% of children learn in segregated schools. FRA (2014) points out that 31% of Roma ethnics are considered illiterate, most of them have dropped out of school citing economic reasons. In Cluj County, in 2011, the proportion of Roma out of school was

16.7%, of those with primary education 32%, of those with secondary education 36.7%. After this level, only a few continued their studies, 5% graduated vocational school, 6.6% high school, 0,3% post-secondary, and 1.3% university (VERES 2015.77-80).

The parents of institutionalized children make up a mass of people with even lower levels of schooling (Table 2 and Table 3), low qualification and very low employment rate on the labour market (Table 4).

The educational profile of parents, regardless of ethnicity, resembles that of the Roma population in the county in 2011 (see VERES, 2015), in the sense that the proportion of those who have not attended school is high and the proportion of those who have continued their education after secondary school is low. At the same time, in our sample we find major differences in the level of schooling of parents by ethnicity. Parents of Roma children have a lower level of education, the difference being more pronounced in the female population (for mothers $p \leq 0.001$, for fathers $p \leq 0.05$).

Just over half of Roma mothers (51.4%) have no schooling, and the number of those who have continued their education after secondary school is very low, 3.9%. Fathers had access to education in a higher proportion, but one in three is without education, which is three times higher than for non-Roma.

Table 2.
Educational attainment of mothers by ethnicity.

Ethnicity	Educational attainment						
	No formal education	Primary education	Middle school	Vocational education	High school	University	Information unavailable
Non - Roma	22,2%	20,0%	26,7%	11,9%	7,4%	0,7%	11,1%
Roma	51,4%	18,2%	19,9%	3,3%	0,6%	0,0%	6,6%
Not stated	20,0%	10,0%	40,0%	0,0%	16,9%	0,0%	13,3%
Total	37,,%	18,2%	24,3%	6,4%	4,7%	0,3%	9,0%

Source: Generated and data collected by the author

Table 3.
Fathers' educational level by ethnicity.

Ethnicity	Educational attainment						
	No formal education	Primary education	Middle school	Vocational education	High school	University	Information unavailable
Non - Roma	11,7%	14,9%	26,6%	24,5%	3,2%	2,2%	17%
Roma	33,1%	22%	18,1%	9,4%	0%	0%	17,3%

Not stated	23,5%	17,6%	41,2%	17,6%	0%	0%	0%
Total	23,9%	18,9%	23,1%	16%	1,2%%	0,8%	16%

Source: Generated and data collected by the author

The rate of unskilled Roma parents is extremely high, 87.3% for mothers, 74% for fathers, differences by ethnicity are only for fathers (p≤0.001). The qualifications of mothers are mainly in agriculture and trade, those of fathers in construction or agriculture. As a result of low levels of schooling and vocational training, parents' access to the labour market is very low, overall, less than a quarter of households (23.8%) have income from taxed work. Roma ethnics have more limited access (14.3%, p≤0.000) to legal employment (Table 4). EMIGH – SZELÉNYI (2001) shows that access to the labour market of the Roma population is also influenced by discrimination, not only by low educational attainment, the rate of the unemployed with similar education is higher than for other ethnic groups.

There are no major differences in terms of social income, most of them have received the state child allowance, a universal social right. The guaranteed minimum income and the family allowance, designed to prevent and combat social exclusion, was only accessed by 13%. Their access is limited by bureaucracy and the low educational level of those entitled, the lack of identity documents and the modest value of this social benefit (DANIEL 2019; RAȚ, 2012).

Table 4.
Source of household income by ethnicity.

Source of income	Ethnicity			Asymp. Sig.
	Total	Roma	Non - Roma	
Employment – with legal contract**	23,8%	14,3%	25,2%	p≤0,001
Employment – without legal contract**	10%	12,6%	8,1%	p≤0,001
Occasional work**	26,9%	21,4%	36,3%	p≤0,001
Material recycling**	5,2%	6%	5,2%	p≤0,001
Social benefits	47,9%	50%	44,4%	p≥0,05
Retirement pension	3,8	1,1%	7,4%	p≥0,05
Disability / sickness pension	13,2%	13,7%	12,6%	p≥0,05

Observation ** p ≤0,001(Chi square test)
Source: Generated and data collected by the author

In terms of income, Roma households have higher incomes, the median is 3000 Ron, for non-Roma households 2500 ron, but because Roma families are larger, their income per family member is lower, the median being 750 ron (151.80 Euro), compared to 1200 ron (242.91 Euro). The amounts are very modest, in 2022, in Romania, the gross minimum wage per economy (GOVERNMENT DECISION no. 1071/2021) was 2550 ron (516.19 Euro).

Even if fathers of Roma children are less educated, this is not reflected in their income. Therefore, below a certain level of schooling, the level of education does not significantly influence the income for the work done.

The information on the indebtedness of households is limited, the non-response rate is 47.4%. From the data obtained, there are no differences by ethnicity, on average, one in 4 families declared debts.

As a result of low incomes, the vast majority of families are living on the brink of subsistence, regardless of ethnicity. Their ability to meet essential expenses is extremely limited. Roma people find it more difficult to ensure their thermal comfort (Table 5). The payment of bills and heating are the most frequently paid services, but it should be borne in mind that the majority of households have electricity (26.5% have no electricity at all).

Table 5.
Ability of households to meet some categories of expenditure by ethnicity

Categories of expenses that families can afford	Ethnicity			Asymp. Sig.
	Total	Roma	Non - Roma	
Paying utility bills	52,6%	44,1%	61,9%	p≥0,05
Home heating*	56,4%	47,5%	64,9%	p≤0,05
Meat or fish consumption every two days	17%	13%	23,9%	p≥0,05
Unexpected expenses	6,4%	2,8%	11,9%	p≥0,05
Vacations	1,5%	1,1%	2,2%	p≥0,05

Observation * p ≤,0,05 (Chi square test)
Source: Generated and data collected by the author

HEALT

When analysing the data on health status, we have to take into account the very limited access of parents to health services, most of them do not have health insurance and do not have the financial potential to pay for consultations, treatments or medicines. Among parents we found no significant differences by ethnicity, one in 5 parents have a diagnosis of a chronic disease. The number of diagnoses is very close to the number of disability classifications, from this we conclude that many parents only go to the doctor when they have severe symptoms. Roma people were classified as disabled in a smaller proportion (12.6%), compared to the non-Roma population (19.7%). Since Roma are more affected by severe deprivation, we do not consider their diagnoses, as a whole, to be less severe. Even under these conditions, the ratio of parents with documented disabilities is very high, regardless of ethnicity, in relation to the county population. According to the Annual Report of DGASPC Cluj, in 2022, in Cluj County there were 26 664 adults and 2287 children with a Certificate of Disability, i.e. 4.9% and 1.7% of the total population of the county, respectively.

In 14.8% of the cases of special protection through foster care, the child's disability was cited as a reason. There were no significant differences between ethnicities in the health status of the children, neither at the time of entry into the protection system nor afterwards. 46.5% of the children had a diagnosis of illness and 31.5% were classified as disabled at the time of data collection. The number of children with disabilities in special protection measures in centres and foster care is 17.7 times higher than for all the children in the county.

The data on the health status of parents are partly conclusive from a medical point of view, rather they implicitly reflect their social exclusion, their very limited ability to exercise their rights. For children, the increased number of diagnoses is due to better access to health services after entering the protection system, as well as to possible inherited health problems or health problems caused by poor living conditions and lack of medical care in the early stages of life.

POPULATION PROFILING BASED ON CLUSTER ANALYSIS

For a more in-depth knowledge of the population studied, we made a classification of the institutionalized children included in the study, using the main variables of social background and social situation reflecting social status, family situation, financial situation and health-related vulnerabilities of parents (if any). The variables used in the cluster analysis are presented in the methodology chapter.

Based on the hierarchical cluster analysis carried out using the variables mentioned and studying the dendrogram (appendix 1), we identified five relevant clusters into which the included children were grouped. Next, we examine the ethnic distribution for each cluster. Associations between component variables and hierarchical clusters obtained are presented in Table 6.

Cluster 1: Families are characterized by a higher socio-economic status than the average of the children studied, with a higher degree of integration into society, with more educated parents, but with health problems/special needs (degree of disability). All parents live in a non-segregated environment (100%). In more than half of the families (51.9%), at least one parent has health problems, almost one in four (24.1%) is classified as having a degree of disability. The high number of adult diagnoses and disability classification may be influenced by the fact that in 35.4% of households there is at least one person legally employed, which gives them access to free health care services as insured or co-insured.

Due to better integration into the labour market and the presence of both parents in the family, social income for people with disabilities, the median income per household member (950 ron, 192.30 Euro) is 52% higher than the average of the five groups. About 59% of mothers have completed at least secondary school, and a slightly higher percentage of fathers (16.5%) have completed a vocational school.

Among the children we did not notice any major health problems, 16.5% are in grade, below the average of the five clusters.

Cluster 2: This is where most children with health problems fall, 47.4% are classified as disabled, one in four (25.5%) are classified as severely disabled.

The vast majority of children come from two-parent families (87.3%) who live segregated (68.2), but where there are fathers, they are more educated, in 19.7% of families there is a

father who has at least a vocational school degree. The majority of mothers (55.5%) are un-educated. Access to the labour market is the second highest (27.3%) of the five clusters, the median income of 643 ron (130.16 Euro) is close to the general median.

Cluster 3 is composed only of single-parent families living segregated. The parents' level of schooling is one of the lowest, most of the parents are out-of-school, only 2.6% of the mothers have continued their education after secondary school. None of the parents have qualifications and only in 5.3% of the households there is someone legally employed. The median income is 666 ron (134.81 Euro) per person, well below the average. The highest proportion of parents with health problems (52.6%), with and without a diagnosis, are in this cluster, but the rate of disability is lower, 10.5%. The number of children with disabilities (23.7%) is close to the population average of the five clusters.

Cluster 4: Composed exclusively of single-parent families that are not segregated, but with serious financial problems, where the average is 502 ron (101.61 Euro), the median per household is 0 ron. Only 8.5% of households have income from legal work. The majority of mothers (57.3%) are out-of-school, only 6% continued their education after secondary school. In this cluster parents reported the least health problems (29.1%), even among children the rate of children with disabilities is not above average (23.9%).

Cluster 5: It is made up exclusively of single-parent families living in segregated communities, with the lowest level of schooling of parents (72.7% of mothers and 90.9% of fathers have no education) and no access to the labour market (0%).

This cluster has the highest number of parents with undiagnosed health problems, most likely due to extremely limited access to health services. In contrast, the health status of children is better compared to the other clusters, with only 11.3% being classified as disabled.

The median income of these families is 600 ron (121.45 Euro), below the average of the five clusters.

Table 6.
Association between component variables and hierarchical clusters obtained

Variables		Cluster					Total
		1	2	3	4	5	
Family structure**	Single-parent family	1,3%	12,7%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	55,2%
	Two-parent family	98,7%	87,3%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	44,8%
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Residential segrega-tion**	Non-segregated	100,0%	31,8%	0,0%	100,0%	0,0%	59,5%
	Segregated	0,0%	68,2%	100,0%	0,0%	100,0%	40,5%
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Disability classification of the child**	Not classified	83,5%	52,7%	76,3%	76,1%	88,6%	72,4%
	Mild disability	1,3%	0,9%	5,3%	2,6%	0,0%	1,8%
	Moderate disability	10,1%	15,5%	15,8%	4,3%	0,0%	9,3%
	Progressive disability	2,5%	5,5%	0,0%	4,3%	4,5%	3,9%
	Severe disability	2,5%	25,5%	2,6%	12,8%	6,8%	12,6%
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Parents' health status**	No health issues	48,1%	56,4%	47,4%	70,9%	61,4%	58,8%
	Health issues without a diagnosis	10,1%	10,0%	13,2%	5,1%	29,5%	11,1%
	Diagnosed health issues	17,7%	26,4%	28,9%	8,5%	2,3%	16,8%
	Health issues leading to disability status	24,1%	7,3%	10,5%	15,4%	6,8%	13,4%
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Educational attainment of mothers **	No formal education	30,4%	55,5%	57,9%	57,3%	72,7%	53,1%
	Primary education	10,1%	20,0%	21,1%	17,1%	11,4%	16,2%
	Middle school	45,6%	11,8%	18,4%	19,7%	11,4%	21,6%
	Vocational education	12,7%	8,2%	2,6%	1,7%	0,0%	5,7%
	High school without baccalaureate degree	1,3%	3,6%	0,0%	4,3%	4,5%	3,1%
	High school with baccalaureate degree	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
	Post-secondary education	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
	University	0,0%	0,9%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,3%
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Fathers' educational level**	No formal education	49,4%	50,0%	65,8%	74,4%	90,9%	63,4%
	Primary education	6,3%	15,5%	21,1%	9,4%	9,1%	11,6%
	Middle school	27,8%	13,6%	13,2%	10,3%	0,0%	13,9%
	Vocational education	16,5%	19,1%	0,0%	3,4%	0,0%	9,8%
	High school without baccalaureate degree	0,0%	0,9%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,3%
	High school with baccalaureate degree	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	1,7%	0,0%	0,5%
	Post-secondary education	0,0%	0,9%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,3%
	University	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,9%	0,0%	0,3%
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Mother's qualification**	No qualification	100,0%	81,8%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	94,3%
	With qualification	0,0%	18,2%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	5,7%
	Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Father's qualification**	No qualification	100%	80,0%	100%	100%	100%	100,0%
	With qualification	0,0%	20,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	100,0%
	Total	100.0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Source of income**	Income from undeclared and untaxed work	64,6%	72,7%	94,7%	91,5%	100%	82%
	Income from formal / taxed employment	35,4%	27,3%	5,3%	8,5%	0,0%	18,0%
	Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Income per household member**	Median	950 ron 192,30 euro	643 ron 130,16 euro	666 ron 134,81 euro	0 ron 0 euro	600 ron 121,45 euro	625 ron 126,51 euro
	Mean	1058 ron 214,17 euro	904 ron 182,99 euro	599 ron 121,25 euro	502 ron 101,61 euro	524 ron 106,70 euro	741 ron 150,00 euro

Obs. *p<0.05, **p<0.01 significance level (Chi square test)
Source: Generated and data collected by the author

Therefore, following the cluster analysis, based on family background, children entered the special protection foster care system according to the following vulnerabilities:

Children from two-parent families, with higher socio-economic status than the average of the families studied, but whose parents face diagnosed health problems.

Children with health problems from two-parent families, mostly segregated.

Children from single-parent families living segregated, parents with low educational level, with undiagnosed health problems.

Children from single-parent families, not physically segregated, no major health problems of parents, but very low labour market participation and severe financial problems.

Children from single-parent families, severely socially excluded, living in segregated households, with very low parental schooling, no access to the labour market and no access to health services.

The composition of the population by clusters is very different by ethnicity (p≤001). Roma people form the majority in clusters where the degree of segregation is high (Table 7).

Table 7.
Population distribution by ethnic clusters

Ethnicity	Cluster					Total	Asymp sig..
	1	2	3	4	5		
Non - Roma	51,9%	32,7%	23,7%	48,7%	22,7%	39,4%	
Roma	30,4%	62,7%	73,7%	46,2%	56,8%	51,5%	p≤001
Not stated	17,7%	4,5%	2,6%	5,1%	20,5%	9,0%	
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	

Source: Generated and data collected by the author

Therefore, the distribution of the population by ethnic clusters shows that within a population with low socio-economic status, Roma are more affected by social exclusion.

In Cluster 3 with the lowest income households and most parents with a diagnosis, Roma children and families are present in an overwhelming proportion of 73.7% , Cluster 5 with the most marginalized population, where Roma form the majority, non-Roma are present in only 22.7% and the proportion of people with undeclared ethnicity is double the proportion of the total population studied. We assume that some of them are families of young people who refuse to declare their identity.

Only in cluster 2 we find Roma families who live segregated but are still connected to society to some extent through access to the labour market. However, this is also where most children with health problems come from.

CONCLUSIONS

More than half (50.8%) of the children in foster care in Cluj County are Roma, although according to the 2021 census, Roma officially represent only 2.6% of the county's population. This disproportion indicates an increased vulnerability of Roma families, generated by factors such as extreme poverty, poor housing conditions, lack of education and systemic discrimination.

A significant aspect is the reluctance of some teenagers to declare their ethnicity, especially those aged between 12 and 18. Approximately 61.1% of non-respondents to the ethnicity question come from this age group, suggesting an identity crisis and fear of stigmatization.

The reintegration of children into their biological family is often impossible due to the poor living conditions of their parents. One third (33.5%) of Roma families live in makeshift shacks without minimum living conditions, 65.5% of Roma families' dwellings have only one room, leading to severe overcrowding. Access to utilities is very low - only 27% have running water, 64.3% electricity, and some households use illegally obtained electricity.

These housing inequalities not only hinder the reintegration of children into their families, but also make it difficult to maintain relations with their parents, as they do not have the necessary conditions to accommodate them even in the short term. Moreover, the physical segregation of Roma families on the outskirts of localities, in isolated areas or near former industrial zones and rubbish dumps, exacerbates social exclusion and marginalization.

Another factor contributing to the over-representation of Roma children in the protection system is the extremely low level of education of their parents. 51.4% of Roma mothers, 33.1% of fathers, had no schooling. Only 3.9% of Roma mothers and 9.4% of fathers attended vocational school. Roma parents are extremely unlikely to continue their education after secondary school, which severely limits their employability. This lack of education results in very limited access to the labour market, with only 14.3% of Roma households having a taxed source of income from work. The lack of a stable source of income makes them more vulnerable to economic crises and reduces their ability to provide decent living conditions for their children.

Roma parents have very limited access to health care, as many are uninsured and cannot afford consultations or treatment. In addition, one in five parents suffers from a chronic illness, irrespective of ethnicity, but Roma parents are less likely than other parents to be classified as disabled, which indicates that they are unable to get their certificates for bureaucratic reasons.

For institutionalized children, 46.5% are diagnosed with a chronic disease and 31.5% of Roma children are classified as disabled. This reflects both better access to health services for children in the care system and possible inherited health problems caused by poor living conditions and lack of health care in the early stages of life.

The cluster analysis of the population studied revealed five distinct groups, differentiated by socio-economic status, family structure, degree of segregation and access to the labour market. In two-parent families with a higher economic status, children end up in the special protection system mainly because of serious health problems of the parents. Children in two-parent families living in segregated environments are the most affected by health problems, almost half of them being classified as having a disability. Children in segregated single-parent families are most at risk of separation from their parents. These families are characterized by low levels of parental education, very low income and limited access to health services, which places them in

a situation of severe vulnerability.

The factors leading to separation are diverse. The analysis by ethnicity shows that for non-Roma children the main causes are health problems and disabilities, while for Roma children poverty and segregation dominate.

In conclusion, the over-representation of Roma children in the child protection system is a direct result of social inequalities. Poverty, lack of education, poor housing conditions and structural discrimination all contribute to the separation of children from their families.

Appendix 1.
Dendrogram

Appendix 1.

Dendrogram
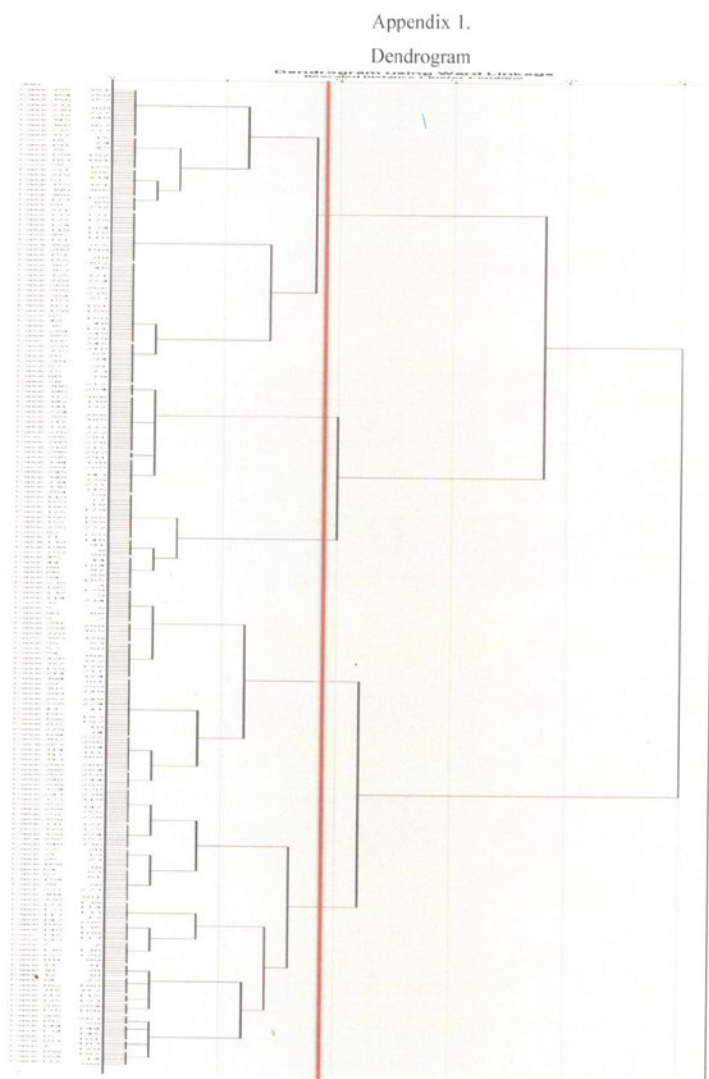
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