



# The housing exclusion of Roma Families in Italy

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According to the The National Strategy for Roma inclusion, ratified by Unar<sup>1</sup> in 2012<sup>2</sup>, “the homelessness of Roma is the most extreme example of poverty and social exclusion in Italian society”, that should be addressed by “increasing access to a wide range of housing solutions for the Roma and Sinti in order to overcome emergency and large sized mono-ethnic settlements”. Nevertheless, in 2018, 26.000 Roma still live in formal or informal slums<sup>3</sup>, in conditions of severe housing exclusion. Over 16.400 Roma, 43% of whom are of Italian nationality, live in formal municipal settlements, while over 9600 Roma, most of them Romanian, live in informal settlements, in severe housing and social exclusion. The homelessness of Roma in Italy can be linked back to several factors, even if one seems to prevail: the persistence of widespread prejudice, which has been affecting the Italian housing policies for homeless Roma in the last 3 decades.

## Italy, Campland<sup>4</sup>

Over 16.000 Roma - spread across 147 municipal settlements built by Italian authorities to house Roma families – are faced with housing exclusion, which originated in the 80s.

At that time, most housing policies for the homeless Roma by local authorities were based on the belief that Roma communities were *nomadic, hostile to sedentary life*, and therefore in need of housing solutions that should be *temporary and transitional*<sup>5</sup>. However, most of the Roma families settled in these municipal camps were not nomads<sup>6</sup>, and so the transitional and temporary accommodation provided for them became permanent. Although direct stakeholders, like Roma and Sinti NGOs, pointed out that correlating Roma with nomadic was wrong, local Authorities continued to build these sites in the 90s, in response to the housing needs of the Roma that were escaping the Balkan wars by coming to Italy. In the following years, parallel and diversified housing policy systems for Roma and Sinti Communities became a widespread practice, and after 2000, similar policies were adopted by many local Authorities to face

Roma families’ increasing need for housing as they migrated from Eastern Countries. Living conditions in these camps are far below the minimum standard foreseen by the national and European regulations on housing, as the housing facilities provided are small, deteriorate quickly, and often do not provide access to sanitary services. The social exclusion faced by the inhabitants of these sites has a negative impact on their integration to the job market as only 33,3% of their residents are employed, mainly in the black market (50,2%), while 29,5% of them are unemployed and 22,6% inactive<sup>7</sup>. Scarce access to regular income makes it harder for the families to break the circle of exclusion they are in and limits their possibilities to find access to adequate housing. Moreover, many Roma have been effectively denied access to regular, unsegregated social housing, due to the lack of national investments to increase the availability of affordable accommodation in line with the needs of the general population. The target group that is more heavily affected by this condition of housing exclusion are the romani children, who constitute over 55% of the total residents of these sites. Data collected by Associazione 21 Luglio<sup>8</sup> and Casa della Carità<sup>9</sup> underline that housing exclusion has a negative impact on both their mental and physical health and their social inclusion. Their life is scarred by poverty, scarce access to sanitary and social services, and impacts their schooling opportunities<sup>10</sup>. As reported by the Jo-Cox Committee set up by the Italian Chamber of Deputies in 2017, “the so-called nomad camps, authorized or informal, are places of exclusion, where special and housing segregation becomes social and cultural ghettoisation”<sup>11</sup>. The Committee also reports that the creation of these settlements is an integral and crucial element in the creation of “a Roma issue in Italy”<sup>12</sup>. Although the National Strategy stated there was a need to find alternatives to camps as places of relational and physical degradation, very little action has been taken, and new camps have even been built to house Roma families<sup>13</sup>. This underlines the existence and the persistence of a differentiated and discriminatory approach in the implementation of housing policies for homeless Roma, on which urgent action is needed.

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1 Unar is the National Office against racial discrimination, entitled by the Italian Government to safeguard equal treatment of religious and ethnic minorities, LGBT and disabled people

2 Unar, National Strategy for the inclusion of Roma, Sinti e Camminanti in Italy, European Commission Communication n.o. 173/2011, (Roma UNAR, 2012).

3 21 luglio, I Margini del Margine, Comunità Rom meglio insediamenti formali e informali in Italia, Rapporto 2018

4 Definition used for Roma housing condition in Italy by the European Roma Right Center in ERRC, Campland: racial segregation of Roma in Italy Report on Italy, Country report Series n.9, Budapest, 2000

5 ERRC, Campland: racial segregation of Roma in Italy Report on Italy, Country report Series n.9, Budapest, 2000

6 According to the European Commission, Only 3% of the 180.000 Roma present in Italy live in semi-nomadic

7 Soros Foundation Romania, National report on Labour and social inclusion of Roma in Italy, 2012

8 Associazione 21 Luglio, Uscire Per sognare, Roma, 2016

9 Soros Foundation Romania, National report on Labour and social inclusion of Roma in Italy, 2012

10 As reported by 21 Luglio, 1 out of 5 Roma children living in a formal camp never attend a class, while 9 out of 10 children do not attend school regularly. As a consequence of that, 1 out of 2 children that attend school is in school delay, and that impacts on his/her possibilities to continue schooling, and get a high school diploma.

11 Commissione Jo-Cox, relazione finale, pg 89

12 Ibid.

13 21 luglio, I Margini del Margine, Comunità Rom meglio insediamenti formali e informali in Italia, Rapporto 2018



## The homelessness of Roma migrants

According to recent monitoring reports<sup>14</sup> over 9600 Roma find shelter in informal settlements, self-built in private or public areas throughout the Italian territory. In these sites, Roma families live in shacks made of wood, metal sheets or tents, and have no access to running water, heating, lighting or a sewage system. Rome (300 sites) and Milan (130 sites) are the urban areas where there is a higher concentration of these settlements, while in Naples these sites are bigger in size<sup>15</sup>. As to Roma Municipal Camps described previously, the word that best describes these sites is *precarious*: over half of these settlements are small in size, located in very peripheral areas, in proximity to train tracks, motorways, dumps or rivers. The majority of Roma living in these settlements are European citizens, mainly Romanian families that arrive in Italy by activating family or community ties. These ties will later work as pulling factors for other Roma belonging to their community in Romania, that will end up migrating and settling in the same location and condition. The groups' ties to the country of origin appears to be very strong, which is mirrored in the reason of their migration: they migrate to earn money through begging or underpaid work, in order to pay remittances for their families, or build a house in their country of origin<sup>16</sup>. Their social exclusion makes them valuable manpower to exploit in the building-, services and agricultural sectors, where many Roma end up in underpaid work and without a regulated contract. The lack of contract and of sufficient income, paired with housing exclusion, has a negative impact on their chances of obtaining a permanent residence permit, which is a requirement in Italy to accessing basic rights like sanitary services and social care. This condition activates a spiral of exclusion that violates their fundamental rights and limits their possibilities of interaction and inclusion in the Italian society. The situation is worsened by

the fact that local authorities keep on evicting families from the sites where they have settled, without providing the necessary safeguards such as consultation and adequate notice, which violates the country's international and regional human rights obligations and is carried out in contrast with other forms of evictions carried out in Italy<sup>17</sup>. Often, when this happens, Romani' families are not provided with adequate housing alternatives, and as a result, they end up homeless. The National Strategy for Roma inclusion acknowledged the excessive use of evictions from informal settlements, and how these were highly inadequate to address the housing situation of Roma people, yet recent reports confirm that Italy continues to evict Roma families without providing proper housing alternatives<sup>18</sup>, leaving the families homeless. In the few cases where they are offered an alternative housing solution, local authorities place these families into new mono-ethnic settlements, reiterating their paths towards social and housing exclusion that are faced by the Roma residents in municipal camps. In recent years, certain NGOs and Local Authorities have been promoting successful interventions, pointing out that there are solutions to homelessness<sup>19</sup> of Roma families, but they remain isolated good practices that are not widely promoted. While the National Strategy committed to go beyond camps as places of relational and physical degradation<sup>20</sup>, currently camps remain the only housing option provided for Roma. This underlines the existence of a parallel and discriminatory housing system for Roma.

Over 7 years after the ratification of the National Strategy for Roma inclusion, no progress has been observed on the housing exclusion of Roma families. Segregation in camps, discrimination in social housing access, and forced evictions in Italy still represent breaches of the Race Equality directive. The European Commission should start combating these breaches through the use of infringement proceedings, in order to promote proper access to housing for Roma families and defend their fundamental rights.

14 Ibid., and Roma Civil Monitor II, report on the implementation of the National Strategy on Roma inclusion in Italy, European Commission, 2019

15 Ibid.

16 Caritas Ambrosiana, *In-visibili, La presenza Rom e gli insediamenti spontanei*, 2018

17 Associazione 21 Luglio, *I Margini del Margine, Comunita' Rom meglio insediamenti formali e informali in Italia, Rapporto 2018*

18 Associazione 21 Luglio, *I Margini del Margine, Comunita' Rom meglio insediamenti formali e informali in Italia, Rapporto 2018*

19 Soros Foundation Romania, *National report on the good practices of Roma Inclusion in Italy, 2012*

20 Unar, *National Strategy for the inclusion of Roma, Sinti e Camminanti in Italy, European Commission Communication n.o. 173/2011.* (Roma UNAR, 2012).