

Acknowledged by the European Commission for having “significantly reduced the prevalence of shanty towns over the past 15 years,” the problem of shanty towns or slums persists in Spain, disproportionately affecting the Roma population. Three authors from the Fundación Secretariado Gitano, explain that to overcome this residual but structural problem political will must be combined with available funds.

SPAIN AS A SLUM FREE COUNTRY: IT IS POSSIBLE



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HOUSING SITUATION OF ROMA IN SPAIN

The housing situation of Roma in Spain has improved significantly in the last decades. According to the latest research on the housing situation of Roma in Spain² carried out in 2015 by the Fundación Secretariado Gitano and the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, many Roma families have gained access to standard housing and basic housing utilities have also improved considerably: 92.88% of the Roma live in urban areas with a growing tendency towards standardisation with overall Spanish society (which dismantles the social image that most Roma live in slums or segregated settlements in Spain); 91.37% live in standard housing (houses or flats); 54.5% are social housing/public subsidised housing (either for rent or property), with an average of 4.74 persons per household.

But these data also show the persisting existence of 8.63% of sub-standard housing³ (over 9,000 Roma persons), being 2.17% of it, of slums (over 2,200 Roma households, over 11,000 Roma persons). While it is true that the dimension of slum-housing of Roma has been declining in the last years in Spain (down from 10% in 1991, to 3,9% in 2007 and 2,17% in 2015), this severe residential exclusion persists and seems to have stagnated. Its persistence is threatening the guarantee of the fundamental rights of Roma families, having a much graver impact when it comes to children with the risk that their development will be affected for life.

LOCATION OF ROMA SLUMS IN SPAIN

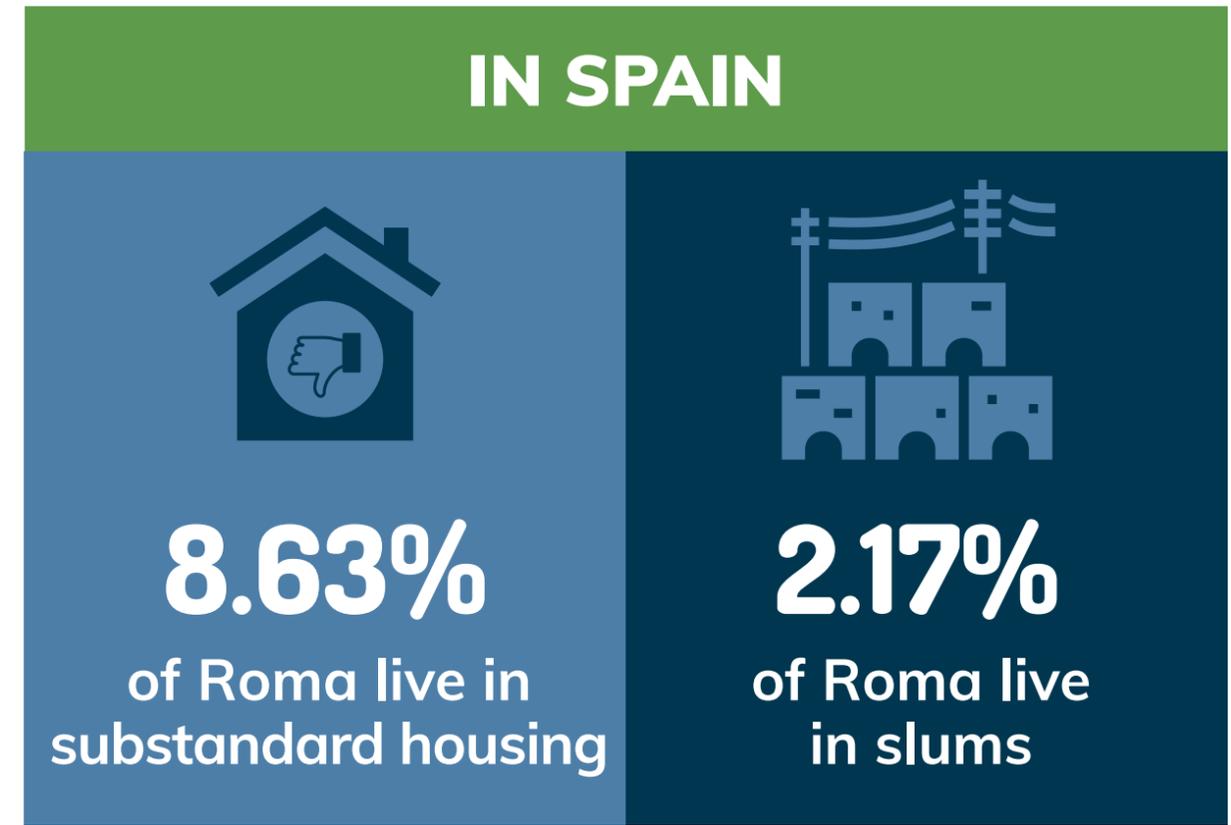


Study-Map on Housing and the Roma population in Spain, 2015
<https://www.mscbs.gob.es/ssi/familiasInfancia/PoblacionGitana/informesyEstudios.htm>

Ethnic discrimination against Roma is another key element, impacting Roma's right to adequate housing. While underreporting of discrimination cases in relation to housing is very common, we have gathered over 242 discrimination cases through our work on the ground in over 60 Spanish cities.⁴ Although these cases are not a representative sample, they show the existence of a generalised problem of racial or ethnic discrimination when accessing ordinary housing.

The 2008 economic crisis also affected the socio-residential situation of the Roma population through: a downward trend in the access to free-market housing (which is considered an important element of social inclusion processes); an increase in social housing (which means that many families had to resort to public support); and an increase in other forms of access to housing (an indicator that housing needs have not been fully covered and families have been forced to look for non-standard options like self-construction or living in other types of constructions).

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As a consequence of that economic crisis, the most vulnerable neighbourhoods had been the most neglected in terms of public investment, and faced the deterioration of their utilities, facilities and services.

In 2020, with the arrival of COVID-19 in Spain, the residential and social exclusion of many Roma households has been aggravated, placing broad sections of the Roma population in a situation of serious lack of protection with regard to the enjoyment of their fundamental rights. COVID-19 has had a greater negative impact in contexts of serious residential exclusion or segregation such as

neighbourhoods with substandard housing, particularly slums and segregated settlements.⁵

Therefore, and despite significant advancement in the housing situation of Roma in Spain in the last decades, there is still a need to solve the overcrowding in some households and other problems such as the precariousness of services and deterioration of housing and the surrounding urban environments. While most of these circumstances are shared by other disadvantaged groups in Spain, there are two specific housing features that characterise the situation of the Roma: the prevalence of slums and the discrimination when accessing housing, both matters relate to the lack of a human rights guarantee.

SLUM ERADICATION IN SPAIN: A RESIDUAL BUT STRUCTURAL PROBLEM THAT NEEDS TO BE TACKLED

While fighting against discrimination is a long process, throughout which different instruments come into play (legislation, awareness-raising, funding, political will, action plans...), slums in Spain have a minor dimension. While the presence of slums can be considered a residual problem, it must also be understood as a structural problem given its persistence in time. That is why political determination, together with financial support, is needed to eradicate slums in Spain in the short-term.

Roma parent after being relocated to ordinary housing from a slum, North of Spain: *“Then, they asked me what I wanted: To get out! I got an apartment for rent and my first job for 6 months (...) I had happiness, dreams, pull forward, I made friends ... We are very pleased, it changed our lives. (...) My friends came for coffees (...) Now, I value every little thing a lot: buy a chair, very simple things, go to a gym and register, pay by bank... it is different”.*

As part of the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategy 2012-2020, Spain has been acknowledged by the European Commission for having “significantly reduced the prevalence of shanty towns over the past 15 years leading to desegregation as part of an integrated approach with sustainable improvements in education, health and employment,” with the support of local, regional governments and NGO.⁶

Indeed, although Spain has broad experience in housing relocation programmes that have failed, it has an ever longer experience of programmes that learnt from failures and have had very good results. Experience shows the best path to follow. It demonstrates not only that the eradication of slums is possible, but the best methodology for achieving a long-lasting positive effect on the Roma population that is moved out of slums into ordinary, non-segregated housing. Cooperation between NGOs, local and regional authorities has been key to success.⁷

On the other hand, despite having European funding at their disposal, public authorities have neglected to develop and use research on how best to carry out re-housing programmes, an improved welfare system for social, educational and health services, an increased awareness of the right to decent housing, and better qualified Roma NGOs, thus missing the opportunity to fully eradicate slums.

There have been several initiatives under EU Funds in the current programming period to tackle housing segregation and slums, for instance, through the so called EDUSI (Sustainable and Integrated Urban Development) with the support of ERDF and specific regional multi-fund Operational Programmes (ESF/ERDF).⁸ However, in too many cases most of these planned actions benefiting Roma families were left aside, prioritising other types of actions for other target groups and, in sum, not implemented as foreseen. This is an example of how too often most disadvantaged social groups, such as Roma, are left out and disregarded as housing policy priorities. There needs to be a monitoring and follow-up mechanism in place that make public authorities accountable for not complying with the implementation

of the assigned targets regarding eradication of poverty or housing needs of the most disadvantaged groups.

In the other cases where the political will to eradicate slums for Roma exists, the bureaucratic procedures to manage funds for the acquisition of (social) housing or the rehabilitation of houses usually blocks such initiatives. Apart from some European rules, Spanish national and regional administrative rules on housing down and block the use of EU Funds for eradicating slums, as also happens in many other EU Member States. These national and regional limitations need to be simplified as they have become one of the main barriers to fully implement EU Funding for the housing needs of the most disadvantaged groups, such as Roma. In many other cases, short-term initiatives lacking an integrated approach when planning a housing relocation process (socio-labour measures along with residential infrastructures) have led not only to failures in terms of social inclusion impact on Roma families, but they have been a waste of public resources.

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There is a need for a determined political impetus to solve this structural and residual problem, not only for social justice but to comply with international human rights standards.⁹ We now have the best ever political and financial instruments to do so: the new EU Strategic Framework for Roma equality, inclusion and participation 2021-2030¹⁰ establishes the common commitment for Member States, including Spain, to increase effective equal access to adequate desegregated housing and essential services in order to ensure that by 2030 the majority of Roma do not face housing deprivation, no longer live in overcrowded households, and have access to tap water. Residential segregation and unregulated housing will be also be in the agenda.

At the same time future EU Cohesion Funds will allow for investments towards the eradication of slums, mainly through ERDF Specific objective 4.3 which is aimed at increasing the socioeconomic integration of marginalised communities, migrants and disadvantaged groups, through integrated measures including housing and social services. It could also be developed complementarily with ESF+ Specific objective 8 (a) which is devoted to promoting socio-economic integration of marginalised communities such as the Roma.

Investments are urgently needed to tackle the most severe conditions within substandard housing situations affecting 2,273 Roma families across Spain who need to be resettled in adequate housing in an inclusive surrounding. Now, it is the time for public authorities (national, regional, and local) to commit to the eradication of slums, to guarantee the right to decent housing. To that end, they can take advantage of

the opportunities offered by next EU Cohesion Funds programming period to eliminate; Roma slums and settlements; support Roma families in the relocation process into a new non-segregated home with social accompaniment; and offering structural and definite solutions, avoiding the trap of temporary and cheaper solutions that maintain existing problems.

Let's do it!

ENDNOTES

- 1 [Fundación Secretariado Gitano](#), Spanish Intercultural NGO working for Roma equal opportunities and treatment in Spain and in Europe.
- 2 [Study-Map on Housing and the Roma population](#), 2015. FSG/ Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality.
- 3 Following [ETHOS Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion](#)
- 4 [Discrimination and the Roma community. Analysis of Discrimination in the access to housing](#). Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2019
- 5 [Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Roma Population](#), Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2019
- 6 [Report on the implementation of national Roma integration strategies – 2019, COM\(2019\) 406 final final_report_on_the_implementation_of_national_roma_integration_strategies_en.pdf](#)
- 7 As examples: Housing relocations in Pena Moa, A Coruña, and in Segovia among others.
- 8 <https://www.rediniciativasurbanas.es/convocatoria-de-ayudas/estrategias-dusi>
- 9 [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)
- 10 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1813