



**(Friends of) Romano Lav**

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### **Briefing Paper: Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Roma Communities in Scotland**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Roma communities face specific additional risks and vulnerabilities which must be addressed in order to prevent the spread of the virus, as well as to prevent the exacerbation of existing social and economic inequalities. Roma communities already face high levels of social exclusion and destitution and there is a danger that the outcomes of COVID-19, and the resultant climate of uncertainty, will further marginalise the communities. The response to COVID-19, and the related issues highlighted here, needs to be both swift and holistic, or the implications for Roma communities and their neighbours could be severe.

#### **Housing**

The housing conditions that many Roma people live in are unacceptable, with many facing problems of overcrowding, exploitative landlords, high rents and poor conditions. Some large family groups live together in flats with limited garden access, and this makes social distancing more difficult and stressful for both parents and young children.

- Overcrowding presents a serious challenge due to the fact that if one person in the household has symptoms of the virus then it is difficult for them to isolate themselves from the rest of their family. Similarly, overcrowding means that the Scottish Government advice for those in the 'shielding' category to 'avoid all non-essential contact with other people in your household' is almost impossible to follow.
- Govanhill is one of the most densely populated areas in Scotland (National Records of Scotland, 2019) and research shows that cramped living conditions accelerate the spread of the virus. Given that Roma families are disproportionately impacted by overcrowded accommodation in Govanhill, the virus will potentially affect Roma communities more quickly, and potentially more severely, than other communities. This is already becoming apparent from our preliminary work identifying community needs and concerns.
- There is a danger that the benefits of government initiatives, such as mortgage holidays, are not passed onto Roma people. Roma families are disproportionately represented within the private rental market and often rent accommodation from exploitative landlords. Some Roma people may not be aware of their rights in relation to these new housing initiatives and close attention should be paid to the adherence by local landlords to the housing eviction moratorium. Further, if landlords renting to Roma families benefit from mortgage holidays this should be passed on to their tenants via rental holidays.

- In the absence of formal support or disposable income to access safe temporary accommodation, it appears that unsuitable and unsustainable informal alternatives are arising. We understand this to be the case via preliminary community development work in Govanhill. Worryingly, these informal solutions pose not only further health risks but other material consequences in the wake of the crisis, such as families potentially accruing large debts which they may have no means to repay. No evictions for non-payment of rent should be carried out during this crisis period.

## **Health**

Poor housing and poverty are major contributors to inequalities in health outcomes for Roma people in Scotland. These inequalities mean that the health risks faced by everyone in relation to COVID-19 are potentially exacerbated for many Roma people. Further, Inequalities in education, as well as language and literacy barriers, may present greater difficulty for Roma people in accessing key health messages. Digital social exclusion compounds all of these issues.

- Roma people are likely to be disproportionately represented within the 'high risk' categories, for whom the COVID-19 virus is likely to pose threat of serious illness due to underlying health conditions (e.g. diabetes, respiratory problems, anxiety etc.).
- Attention must be given to the disproportionate health risks faced by Roma due to inequalities in income, education, employment, and safe and stable housing. These are all factors that are compounded by experiences of discrimination.
- The sense of isolation from family and friends during this difficult period pose consequences in terms of wellbeing and mental health for us all. However, due to disproportionate rates of digital exclusion, these issues are likely to be compounded for Roma people who may struggle to keep in touch with others within the community, as well as with relatives back home in central and Eastern Europe.
- Roma communities are more likely to need government advice and public health information translated into community languages. Accurate, reliable and trustworthy data and information is an essential resource in the wake of the spread of Coronavirus. Local community groups have been very quick to respond to this need and translate government guidance. However, this work is stretching the capacity of local organisations and additional resources are required to meet this urgent need.

In the absence of reliable and accessible resources, rumours can quickly spread and be regarded as fact. Most recently we became aware of one such rumour that suggested there was a risk of contracting COVID-19 through tap water. This resulted in local families being too afraid to drink tap water and spending their limited incomes on bottled water instead. We require increased resources to develop rapid response messages in multiple community languages to tackle misinformation before it becomes widespread.

## **Education**

Roma communities have historically been discriminated against in access to education across Europe. Some of the reverberations of this are still being felt today by Roma communities in Scotland. The circumstances around COVID-19 risks a reversal of the real educational progress made in recent years by local schools and Roma pupils.

- Roma families face disproportionate digital exclusion as they do not have tablets, PCs, or laptops that are required to access online learning. The majority of school and college curriculums are now being delivered via such technologies. For primary and secondary students in the area, many of whom previously relied on the library for internet and computer access, this means any online learning provided by schools will be of little benefit to them. This will only exacerbate already existing educational inequalities.
- Where families have access to a phone (or other device) to use for learning, there may be further difficulties with no internet access and/or a reliance on limited mobile data.
- There is an urgent need for digital devices to be distributed for primary and secondary school students. In addition, pupils need to be given free SIM cards for unlimited internet use or internet access should be provided to children in need.

We understand that local Roma families are facing multiple barriers to continuing education at home for their children. In addition to the digital inequalities discussed above, which necessitate that resources be put in place so that families can access online learning, some parents also struggle with literacy, as well as English language proficiency. This means that parents may struggle to understand any instructions and materials that can be accessed. Moreover, due to issues of poverty and overcrowding, many families are struggling to maintain their children's education in cramped, stressful environments with limited resources. If the education of Roma children is to continue at all in this climate, urgent resources are required to facilitate this. In the absence of such resources, we fear that the significant progress made by local schools in recent years will be come undone and the attainment gap will only widen.

### **Income Inequality**

There are severe levels of poverty within Roma communities in Scotland already and the risks are exacerbated by the current COVID-19 crisis. The impact of stockpiling in local shops has made access to essential supplies difficult. However, income loss makes accessing these scarce resources close to impossible for many families.

- Roma people are often self-employed mainly in jobs which involve travelling or require face to face contact with people, which are not possible under conditions of quarantine. Many endure significant financial insecurity often without the safety net of savings as a result of a complete loss of income.
- Many Roma people are employed on casualised and zero-hour contracts and in precarious and undocumented forms of work. The majority of these jobs are not translatable into 'work from home' employment. Moreover, these jobs are often exploitative in nature and involve insecure employment contracts, which lack any provisions of sick pay. As a result, these communities are at a particular risk of destitution and financial hardship.
- Due to the aforementioned issues with employment, Roma communities are not likely to benefit from state-sponsored initiatives, such as the furlough scheme. This requires attention moving forwards to ensure an equivalent/comparable scheme can apply to vulnerable/casualised workers.
- Roma individuals who continue to work as key workers, often without protective equipment, are at risk of contracting the virus and spreading it though larger than average households. This fact needs to be acknowledged more widely.

- Households reliant on a sole earner are particularly vulnerable to the devastating consequences of losing their income, due to contracting the virus and being unable to work. Moreover, there are bereaved families with children who will lose their household income indefinitely, exacerbating their grief at this time via financial insecurity and potential destitution.
- Our work and research in the local area has shown that Roma communities are some of the most discriminated groups with regard to accessing welfare and benefits support. Welfare conditionality restricts entitlement to social welfare for EU migrants, such as Roma. However, where eligible, digital exclusion compounded by a lack of interpreting support at home can make online applications for welfare extremely difficult.

The multitude of consequences connected to a loss of income is particularly acute for families with young children and babies. For example, we are aware of families with children who have been without nappies or wipes for some time due to local shortages and the subsequent hiking of prices by local convenience stores. Again, other inequalities experienced by Roma families come into play here, as alternatives, such as shopping for such essentials online instead, are inaccessible due to digital exclusion, which means that families have no other options and must go without.

### **Increased Racism**

The widespread structural and institutional racism directed towards Roma people is central to their social exclusion across Europe. Structural racism produces vast inequalities in terms of outcomes, as well as frustrating already unequal access to opportunities and resources. Roma are also disproportionately subject to widespread discrimination, racist attacks, and hate speech. COVID-19 stands to exacerbate many of these longstanding existing inequalities.

- Across the UK in the shadow of Brexit, there has been an increase in racism faced by Roma and other BME communities. COVID-19 has the potential to further fuel, perpetuate and exacerbate this rise in hostility towards migrants that is already evident.
- It is evident that newspaper reporting on Roma communities and comments on social media has not been accurate or fair. False and spurious claims by The Sun, for example, have been made that Roma people are routinely breaking social distancing rules. This has wrongly scapegoated Roma communities and perpetuated discriminatory divisions. This discourse needs to be challenged.
- In the early days of the spread of COVID-19, it was suggested that the virus ‘does not discriminate’ and that its spread is ubiquitous and has the potential to affect us all. However, institutional and structural racism are being exacerbated and deepened as a consequence of COVID-19. Whilst we do all indeed experience this risk, we now know that BME communities face a greater risk of severe illness from COVID-19. Early evidence suggests that these structural inequalities in health outcomes are reflected in disparities in mortality rates in the context of COVID-19, as those from BME communities who contract the virus seem to be disproportionately represented amongst those who lose their lives to it (for example, staff working in the NHS).

Locally, we know of at least three deaths within the Romanian Roma community in Govanhill, which has understandably caused panic and increased existing fears and anxieties. Many members of our local communities are reporting symptoms, but have been unable to access hospital treatment and have been advised instead to self-isolate. This is standard protocol and in keeping

with NHS guidance, however self-isolation for many is impossible due to overcrowded accommodation as noted above. This has resulted in significant departures to Romania as many families do not feel able to protect themselves or others from the spread of the virus.

In the absence of flights, local Romanian Roma families are risking their lives by travelling to Romania via private minibuses, as well as via hired vans and cars. Those who left initially were quarantined for fourteen days upon entry to Romania. Those who left later were unable to enter Romania by vehicle when the Hungary-Romania border closed to foreign vehicles and following being kept there overnight, abandoned their vehicles and crossed the border with their children via foot. Those who have left since, which has continued to happen in recent days in smaller numbers due to the border closure, face an even more precarious situation as the border has now closed entirely. Such families risk being stuck in Hungary with no means to enter Romania and with limited means to return to the UK.

***Briefing paper prepared by Romano Lav; 17 April 2020.***