



CWS

Roma Inclusion *in Serbia*

Context

Belgrade, Serbia is home to the greatest concentration of Roma settlements in the country with a total of 110 informal settlements. Living at the edges of town with limited access to clean water, electricity and education, the Roma community is left to inhabit a parallel society – out of sight, out of mind.

Discrimination and other factors contributing to marginalization, such as where people live, how they are supported (or not supported) by government institutions, socioeconomic status, and exposure and vulnerability to shocks have serious implications for children's development, well-being, futures, and for the intergenerational transmission of poverty and other adversities. Growing up in prolonged and persistent poverty strongly affects Roma children's early development, educational achievement and employment prospects. This leaves an often unbridgeable gap between Roma children and their non-Roma peers. **Only 28% of Roma children ever make it to secondary school.**

For most Roma girls, school is replaced by early marriage, teen pregnancy, and childcare responsibilities. The harsh cycle of poverty has forced many Roma children to work at young ages by panhandling, working at intersections and collecting and selling recyclables. This exposes them to many risks including discrimination, child labor, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, substance abuse, diseases and inadequate nutrition.

CWS Response

Through integrated Child Protection, Education and Inclusion programs in Belgrade, CWS aims to strengthen protective factors for Roma children through access to drop-in shelters and to health, nutrition and education services.

Drop-In Shelter Program

In partnership with the Center for Youth Integration in Belgrade, CWS provides a Drop-in Shelter program for street children, serving approximately 400 children annually. Currently, this program is the only service in Belgrade that specifically works with at-risk Roma street-involved children and youth. The children are provided with immediate care

and connected to health and psychosocial services. In the case of any form of child abuse, exploitation, neglect or any form of violence against a child, relevant institutions are notified. Each shelter is equipped with a team of child protection professionals including educators, social workers, a psychologist, and a nurse who work with children in building their lives away from the streets.

Street to School: Education for Roma Children

An important factor in breaking the cycle of poverty is education. CWS' Street to School program works with 150 Roma families in Belgrade to break inter-generational cycles of poverty by increasing access to and retention in formal schooling for their children. Focusing on early childhood education and enrollment in primary school, the program provides enrollment assistance, academic and psychosocial support to children, and training for parents.

CWS has seen firsthand that when Roma children are provided with support systems and necessary tools, they succeed. Based on research from 2020, **81% of program participants remained in school.** This is more than double the city average for Roma children. The school dropout rate reduced from 21% to 4% overall. The program works closely with municipal welfare centers in Belgrade and conducts advocacy to increase and improve access to formal services.

In 2023, the program will work with researchers from the University of Belgrade to examine the prevalence of risk factors, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their consequences in terms of health and educational outcomes on a representative sample of Roma adults (18+). Further programming and new potential activities will use this fresh body of data and evidence on Roma communities, and will support policy and advocacy at the local, national and international levels.