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## Dropout From the Primary Education System of Roma Children from Substandard Settlements in Serbia: The View of Pedagogical Assistants

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∞ A large number of Roma in the territory of the Republic of Serbia live in substandard settlements, where poor living conditions have a detrimental effect on the education of children. Pedagogical assistants maintain almost daily contact with children who live in such settlements. In addition to direct pedagogical work, their job also involves cooperating with the children's families. The present research explores the perspectives of pedagogical assistants in Belgrade's primary schools on the dropout rates of Roma children from substandard settlements, focusing on individual, school and family factors that contribute to school dropout. The sample consisted of 40 pedagogical assistants and was gender balanced. All of the research participants were interviewed individually. The main findings of the thematic analysis are that girls drop out of the primary education system more often than boys, and that the main contributing factors to dropout are related to the attitudes of parents, especially fathers, towards children's education, parental participation in children's school life, and the school's response to the child's needs, including the response of pedagogical assistants. The results are discussed within the context of potential solutions to reduce dropout rates among this group of primary school children.

**Keywords:** school dropout, pedagogical assistants, Roma, substandard settlements, Serbia

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## Osip romskih otrok iz podstandardnih naselij v Srbiji iz sistema osnovnošolskega izobraževanja: pogled pedagoških pomočnikov

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Veliko število Romov na ozemlju Republike Srbije živi v podstandardnih naseljih, v katerih slabe življenjske razmere škodljivo vplivajo na vzgojo in izobraževanje otrok. Pedagoški pomočniki ohranjajo skoraj vsakodnevni stik z otroki, ki živijo v takšnih naseljih. Poleg neposrednega pedagoškega dela njihovo delo vključuje tudi sodelovanje z družinami otrok. Ta raziskava preiskuje poglede pedagoških pomočnikov v beograjskih osnovnih šolah na osip romskih otrok iz podstandardnih naselij, pri čemer se osredinja na individualne, šolske in na družinske dejavnike, ki prispevajo k osipu v šolah. Vzorec je predstavljalo 40 pedagoških pomočnikov in je bil uravnotežen glede na spol. Z vsemi udeleženci raziskave so bili opravljeni individualni intervjuji. Glavne ugotovitve tematske analize so, da deklice pogosteje opuščajo osnovnošolsko vzgojo in izobraževanje kot dečki in da so glavni dejavniki, ki prispevajo k osipu, povezani z odnosom staršev, zlasti očetov, do vzgoje in izobraževanja otrok, s sodelovanjem staršev v otrokovem šolskem življenju in z odzivom šole na otrokove potrebe, vključno z odzivom pedagoških pomočnikov. Izsledki so obravnavani v okviru mogočih rešitev za zmanjšanje osipa v tej skupini osnovnošolskih otrok.

**Ključne besede:** osip v šolah, pedagoški pomočniki, Romi, podstandardna naselja, Srbija

## Introduction

Along with other groups of so-called Traveller peoples (Council of Europe, 2012), Roma are one of the largest transnational ethnic minorities in Europe (Leggio, 2011), simultaneously characterised by the epithet of the most marginalised (Rutigliano, 2020). The Roma people on the European continent, who constitute an extremely complex and diverse group with a rich heritage, represent the third largest national minority in the Republic of Serbia (RZS, 2023). Due to their specific and complex position, the Roma national minority has been the subject of many studies and analyses in various disciplines.

The exact number of Roma living in Serbia is hard to determine. A particular challenge in determining the number of Roma is the census within substandard Roma settlements, due to factors such as the informal nature of these communities, the lack of official records, frequent migrations, and a reluctance among some residents to participate in official surveys. In terms of their socio-economic conditions, living standards and cultural practices, Roma living in substandard settlements are notably distinct from both the Roma population living in other locations and from other ethnic groups in the Republic of Serbia. The living conditions in substandard Roma settlements are likely the most unfavourable in Serbia and represent one of the greatest challenges faced by a significant portion of the Roma national minority. The term 'substandard' clearly indicates that living conditions are below standard (UN-Habitat, 2003), as defined by five key elements: 1) inadequate access to drinking water; 2) lack of sewage infrastructure and water supply; 3) poor quality of housing units; 4) high population density; and 5) illegal and uncertain status of housing units (Živković & Đorđević, 2015). The settlements themselves may be constructed exclusively of improvised shacks. All of the settlements contain various housing units, and some also contain so-called container homes, which are mobile houses allocated to residents, usually for humanitarian reasons (Jovanović, 2014).

Located mostly on the outskirts of cities, along rivers and marshlands, substandard settlements reflect the grotesque dimension of socioeconomic marginalization, the lack of adequate infrastructure for daily functioning, and the lack of educational and healthcare resources. According to the latest data, there are a total of 702 substandard settlements in Serbia, with the largest number (117) located in the territory of Belgrade (Đurić, 2021). The life challenges that already existed in substandard settlements were further exasperated during and after the Covid-19 pandemic (Đurić, 2021).

Educational outcomes in these settlements are significantly impacted by marginalisation and discrimination, resulting in low school attendance rates and

high dropout rates, particularly among Roma children. According to Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) reports, around 37% of Roma children in Serbia fail to complete primary school, highlighting significant educational challenges for this group (UNICEF, 2016). The main purpose of the present paper is to examine the factors that influence dropout from primary education in substandard settlements from the perspective of pedagogical assistants, whose direct involvement in the educational process offers valuable insights and data that can inform the development of targeted interventions to reduce early school leaving and support the inclusion of marginalised groups in the education system.

### Theoretical framework

School dropout is a multifaceted and complex issue influenced by a range of interacting factors, as confirmed by extensive research (Lamote et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2004). The problem is particularly prevalent in communities affected by poverty, with dropout rates being especially high in marginalised areas with high unemployment and low educational attainment (Videnović & Lazarević, 2017). This issue is particularly evident in Roma communities living in substandard settlements, which exhibit some of the lowest primary school completion rates (Krstić et al., 2017). Within the framework of Ecological Developmental Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Stepanović-Ilić et al., 2015), the problem of school dropout involves factors operating at various levels of generality (different ecosystems).

In the microsystem, immediate factors such as family dynamics, the child's relationships with teachers, peer interactions and the school environment have a direct impact on the likelihood of dropout. For instance, children growing up in large families may receive less parental care and support in their education (Dustmann & van Soest, 2008). Empirical research also reveals a disparity between parents' attitudes towards education and their actual behaviours, with many parents from substandard settlements expressing concerns about their children's education, while failing to provide adequate support (Anđelković & Pavlović-Babić, 2004; Stepanović et al., 2015). Poor living conditions and inadequate household environments in these communities further discourage children and their parents from engaging with the education system. This discouragement often stems from a lack of resources and support, which makes the education system seem inaccessible or unattainable to them, thus diminishing their motivation to prioritise schooling (Rumberger, 1983).

In the mesosystem, the connection between home and school is critical. For example, when parents are unable to effectively collaborate with schools

due to social isolation or language barriers, this disconnect can negatively impact students' educational outcomes (Foley et al., 2014; Rumberger, 2011).

The exosystem encompasses factors that indirectly impact the child, such as parental job instability, long working hours or seasonal work. These factors can increase the risk of dropout by, for example, limiting the time parents can devote to their children and their education (Allensworth, 2005; Entwisle et al., 2004; Peraita & Pastor, 2000).

At the broader, macrosystem level, societal issues such as economic instability, education policies and cultural attitudes towards education play a significant role; for instance, education policies that do not adequately address the needs of marginalised communities can exacerbate dropout rates (Ioana et al., 2015; Rumberger, 2011). Cultural attitudes towards education and social discrimination also impact the overall educational environment and student retention.

Finally, the chronosystem encompasses life events that can disrupt a child's educational journey. Significant changes, such as the birth of a sibling, family relocations, parental divorce, early marriage or pregnancy, can profoundly affect the student's ability to remain in school (Allensworth, 2005; Birchall, 2018). These disruptions can lead to increased dropout rates as students struggle to adapt to new circumstances.

### **Pedagogical assistants: Legal regulation of the profession and their role in the education of children from substandard settlements**

Pedagogical assistants play a key role in tackling the high dropout rates among Roma students by helping educators and parents to better integrate these students into the education system (Bennett et al., 2021; Kovács Cerović & Daiute, 2017; Milivojević, 2015; Webster et al., 2011; White & Kelly, 2010). Their direct involvement provides valuable insights and data for developing targeted interventions to address the dropout problem effectively. By understanding and addressing factors across various ecosystems, more comprehensive strategies can be developed to reduce dropout rates and improve educational outcomes for marginalised communities.

The role of pedagogical assistants in supporting minority groups has been a recognised global practice since the early 1960s, with significant development across European countries in the 1980s (Breyer et al., 2021; Milivojević, 2015). Initially, the initiative to engage assistants from the Roma community was driven by the civil sector and supported by local authorities and educational institutions in countries such as Spain, the Czech Republic, Slovakia,

Finland, France and Romania during the 1980s and 1990s (Rus, 2004). Pedagogical assistants are responsible for supporting both students and educators, enhancing educational outcomes for children from minority groups and promoting inclusive educational environments.

In Serbia, the implementation of pedagogical assistants began in 1997 within preschool settings and was extended to primary schools in 2002. This initiative was initially driven by project initiatives from international organisations focused on the Roma community (Milivojević, 2015). The role of Roma assistants gradually gained recognition through a socio-political framework that included political documents such as the *Roma Decade (2005–2015)*, the *Strategy for the Improvement of the Status of Roma in Serbia (2009)*, and the *Law on the Foundations of the Education System (2009)*. Financial support from organisations such as the Open Society Foundation, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Roma Education Fund further supported this initiative (Starčević et al., 2016). Over time, with backing from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, the role of Roma assistants evolved from providing targeted support for Roma students to offering assistance to all students in need, which led to the formalisation of their role within the legal framework in 2009 (Milivojević, 2015).

According to the Regulation on Pedagogical and Andragogical Assistants (The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2019), these professionals are responsible for providing additional educational support to Roma students and assisting teachers, educators and other professionals in both teaching and extracurricular activities. Their duties include supporting students in learning and continuing their education, aiding schools in creating inclusive learning environments, empowering Roma families, and facilitating collaboration between Roma families, communities and local institutions (Klaus & Siraj, 2020). Research in Central and Eastern European countries shows that pedagogical assistants positively impact attendance rates, reduce dropout rates and improve the academic performance of Roma children (Bačlija-Brajnik & Prebilić, 2019). Given their critical role, it is essential to review the legal foundations and sources related to pedagogical assistants to enhance their effectiveness and integration into the education system.

As highlighted in the report *Educational Inclusion of Children of Roma Nationality* by Jovanović et al. (2013), several key legal and strategic documents serve as the foundation for implementing inclusive educational mechanisms and improving the status of Roma in the EU and Serbia.

As in most areas, there is abundant Serbian legislation regarding the institution of pedagogical assistants, with a range of legal, sub-legal and strategic

documents regulating the status, rights and obligations of pedagogical assistants, while also emphasising their significance in the education of children from the Roma population.

### **Research aim and research question**

The present research aims to explore the perspectives of pedagogical assistants employed in primary schools in Belgrade regarding the dropout rates of Roma children from substandard settlements. By analysing the practical insights provided by these assistants, the study seeks to address the following key research question: *What are the primary individual, school and family factors contributing to the dropout of children from primary schools?* The research takes a specific approach by focusing on a largely overlooked perspective, i.e., the experiences of individuals who work directly with children from substandard settlements. This viewpoint offers valuable insights from those who are both experts and actively engaged in the educational processes regarding these children.

### **Method**

The research utilised the method of semi-structured individual interviews. The questions posed to all of the respondents are available at OSF (2023), while additional questions, designed to explore specific topics in more depth, were tailored for respondents with relevant expertise or experience. Each pedagogical assistant responded to 15 questions, providing a rich description of their own experience and insights from practical work with this population and school staff. It is important to note that all of the participants had been actively involved in the work of primary schools over the three years prior to the interviews, which was an additional factor contributing to the freshness of the information source for this research. The pedagogical assistants were asked a set of questions focusing on individual, family and school-related factors that contribute to school dropout among Roma children. The questions aimed to explore the assistants' insights into various dimensions of this complex issue; for example, one question addressed whether boys or girls are more at risk of dropping out. Follow-up questions inquired into the reasons for this, prompting the assistants to elaborate on why they believe boys or girls are at greater risk. Another question examined whether behavioural problems are more prevalent among boys or girls, and how these issues might relate to school dropout. In addition to individual and family factors, we also explored school-related risks;

for example, we asked, “What are the main risks within schools that impact dropout?” This question aimed to identify systemic or environmental factors within the school setting – such as teacher attitudes, curriculum relevance or peer discrimination – that contribute to the high dropout rates among Roma children. Some researchers consider this method as a prototype of qualitative research (Warren, 2002). Unlike structured interviews or certain other methods, the semi-structured interview offers more freedom in following the dialogue process, allowing greater content production by the participants based on different perspectives on the issue. All of this provides opportunities for the interviewer to be more visible in the interview and to emphasise questions that are considered more important for the research goal (Brinkman, 2014).

### Sample

The research sample included 40 Roma pedagogical assistants, 57.5% of whom were female, aged between 31 and 60 years ( $M = 44.93$ ,  $SD = 7.14$ ). All of the participants had at least three years of work experience in primary schools in Belgrade and were proficient in the Romani language. Regarding educational level, 7 of the assistants (17.5%) had completed higher education and held either a bachelor’s or master’s degree; 11 (27.5%) had completed four-year secondary education and were actively pursuing further studies, while 22 (55%) had completed four-year secondary education. All of the participating assistants were employed in Belgrade schools where Roma students from substandard settlements made up 5–10% of the student population.

### Data collection and analysis

The interviews were conducted by a qualified psychologist with over six years of experience in humanitarian work focused on Roma people in Belgrade.

The research was conducted from April to September 2023. The majority of the interviews were conducted in schools, at local civic organisations and during home visits. Information related to the identity of the participants was carefully protected through specially designed codes, ensuring a high level of confidentiality in the research process. There were no major issues regarding comprehension of the question content during the data collection process. An assertive approach to conducting the interviews provided the participants with additional freedom to illustrate their opinions with examples from practice, with all of their variations, differences and informality (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).



Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed in detail and analysed using thematic analysis methodology (Vilg, 2016). This descriptive and interpretative method is used to answer research questions that include personal experiences, opinions, practices and the like, with the aim of obtaining the overall story revealed by the identified themes. The thematic analysis itself consisted of the following steps: familiarisation with the data through repeated readings of the transcript, generation of the initial codes, observation of themes, and generation of final themes.

## Results

Table 1 lists the generated themes and the number of codes for each theme.

**Table 1**

*Themes and codes*

Theme	Number of codes
INDIVIDUAL FACTORS	
Gender	14
Behavioural problems	9
Lack of motivation	9
School as preparation for the labour market	5
FAMILY FACTORS	
Single parents	8
Large number of siblings	6
Illness of parents	6
Severe poverty	6
Migration inside Serbia and abroad	6
SCHOOL FACTORS	
Discrimination	15
Irregular attendance and absenteeism	10
Problem with or lack of implementation of individualised teaching	10
Decrease in the number of pedagogical assistants in schools	9
Insufficient support from the school psychologist or pedagogue	9
Cancellation of material aid from the school and associates (textbooks, accessories)	8
Lack of motivation among teachers	8

### Individual Factors

Thematic analysis identified four key individual factors that contribute to the primary school dropout rates among Roma children from substandard settlements.

Gender was highlighted as a critical factor influencing dropout rates,

with girls dropping out more frequently than boys due to early marriages and cultural expectations. For example:

*“Among the Ashkali, who hold strong patriarchal beliefs, girls are more likely to drop out, as they are expected to stay home and bear children.”* (F6)<sup>3</sup>

*“One of the girls in my class is already pregnant at the age of 13, while still in the seventh grade.”* (F11)

*“I had a situation with two girls whose father is in prison. They bullied all the other children in school.”* (F11)

Both boys and girls exhibit behavioural issues, but girls are often more vulnerable to violence in the community and school:

*“Two girls in my class, whose father is in prison, bully the other children.”* (F11)

*“There is a girl in my class who was physically abused at home.”* (F6)

*“Now in my class, one girl is about to give birth, even though she’s in the seventh grade, only 13 years old.”* (F6)

Boys, in particular, show less interest in school, perceiving it as impractical for their lives:

*“Boys often say that what they learn in school is irrelevant for real life.”* (M8)

*“They often give up because they believe it’s not necessary for their lives, and because they’re not learning anything practical.”* (M17)

Many boys prioritise entering the labour market over completing their education:

*“For boys, it’s about growing up quickly and starting to work early to support their family. That’s why they believe school isn’t necessary.”* (M17)

*“Boys are expected to become independent and take care of themselves early, and they often see school as an obstacle to achieving that.”* (M17)

The main individual factors leading to dropout among Roma children include cultural expectations surrounding gender roles, behavioural challenges, lack of motivation, and the pressure for boys to enter the labour market early. These factors are interwoven with the broader socioeconomic and cultural context of Roma families living in substandard settlements.

3 The letters F (female) and M (male), along with the numbers in parentheses preceding the quotes, represent the respondent’s gender and years of work experience.

## Family Factors

The analysis also identified family-related factors that significantly influence school dropout rates. The effects of these factors are as follows.

Children from single-parent families, particularly those headed by mothers, are at a higher risk of dropping out:

*“Many of the mothers are sick and rely on their eldest daughters to take care of household chores, which leads to absenteeism.” (M10)*

*“Their oldest daughters stay home to help when their mothers are in poor health.” (M10)*

In larger families, children, especially girls, often take on more household responsibilities, which impacts their ability to attend school:

*“Older children, especially girls, take care of their younger siblings, which means they miss a lot of school.” (M10)*

Parents with health issues or families living in extreme poverty find it difficult to prioritise their children’s education:

*“I have cases with several mothers who are in poor health and rely on their eldest daughters to help around the house, which leads to irregular school attendance.” (F14)*

*“The child is absent when they have to take care of the family while the parent goes to collect secondary waste for recycling.” (F14)*

Frequent family migrations, both within Serbia and abroad, further disrupt children’s education:

*“When families move abroad and then return, they often can’t get their children back into school because they have no documents proving their previous education.” (F7)*

The family environment, particularly in terms of single-parent families, poverty and frequent migration, creates significant barriers for Roma children in maintaining consistent school attendance and staying engaged in the educational process.

## School Factors

Several school-related factors contribute to the high dropout rates among Roma children. This concerns the following.

Roma children often experience discrimination in schools, which exacerbates their marginalisation:

*“Roma children are still seated at the back of the classroom or even in separate rooms.”* (F9)

*“If children are cleaner and better groomed, they are more accepted, but poorer children face greater discrimination.”* (F6)

*“The poorer the settlement, the worse the discrimination children face.”* (M9)

Absenteeism is one of the key issues that pedagogical assistants are expected to address:

*“Our main task is to track down children who are frequently absent, which often requires going into the settlements to understand the root of the problem.”* (F7)

*“Due to absences, we often have to go out into the field, but we also face bigger issues like drug abuse and child trafficking.”* (F18)

Despite legal requirements, individualised education plans (IEPs) for Roma children are often poorly implemented:

*“In our school, IEPs are rarely applied, and when they are, Roma students are segregated into combined classes, which is not allowed by law.”* (F8)

*“The psychologist even tells parents that IEPs are no longer valid, which is not true.”* (F6)

The reduction in material support from schools and the lack of involvement by school psychologists and pedagogues also negatively affects the retention of Roma children:

*“Since the pandemic, schools have stopped providing free school supplies, and there is little support for these children.”* (F11)

*“Teachers pass the responsibility of extra classes to pedagogical assistants, which is unfair.”* (M8)

School-related factors such as discrimination, absenteeism and a lack of adequate support systems contribute significantly to the dropout rates of Roma children. Addressing these issues requires a systemic change in how schools engage with marginalised communities and enforce inclusive educational practices.

## Discussion

The most vulnerable part of the Roma minority suffers the most from the inequalities in the educational process. In the prevailing narrative about Roma inclusion in education, it is commonly believed that Roma people do not value education sufficiently, resulting in less effort being invested in their children's schooling (Bašić, 2021). The narratives of the pedagogical assistants interviewed in the present study show the opposite: the parents of these children place a high value on education, want their children to attend school, and want to participate more in the educational process of their children, but little has been done to support their involvement. These claims are consistent with the previous findings of Kovács Cerović et al. (2012), which showed a similar trend in parental attitudes towards the inclusion of their children in the education system.

The pedagogical assistants also noted that the challenges faced by Roma children, resulting in an increased risk of dropout, are numerous, complex and interconnected, and cannot be considered separately. Probably the most critical point regarding individual and family reasons is the lack of measures aimed at the impoverished population, which would primarily reduce the existential vulnerability of families. This issue often results in girls skipping school to manage household responsibilities due to their parents being overwhelmed or working, while boys are forced to earn money to support the family. Our respondents frequently highlighted the fact that almost no institution deals with this aspect of the dropout problem, which is similar to the conclusion drawn from previous research conducted by the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (SIPRU) of the Government of the Republic of Serbia (Milivojević, 2015).

Our respondents linked the high dropout rates to various school-related factors. The most critical issues identified include segregation occurring through several school service procedures, deficiencies in the material assistance provided to children through the social welfare system, and challenges related to the work of pedagogical assistants.

Further analysis of the pedagogical assistants' statements reveals that dropout and absenteeism from school are influenced not only by general poverty, but also by the varying levels of poverty within individual communities. When families can provide their children with basic living conditions, it helps reduce the risk of dropout. These insights are in accordance with the findings of previous studies that examined this issue (Jovanović, 2014; SIPRU, 2020).

In schools, significant problems arise from staff insensitivity and a lack of education in the field, as well as inadequate monitoring and supervision of

inclusion measures. This often leads to children being placed in adult education facilities or segregated classes. Additionally, there is an issue with the insufficient number of pedagogical assistants as well as their unregulated legal status, which prevents them from addressing all of the personal and family issues faced by children at risk of dropout. Consequently, pedagogical assistants have less time to focus on education, which is their primary role. Nearly half of the assistants in the sample report that supplementary classes are not implemented in their schools, despite these classes being suggested by UNICEF (2014) as a key mechanism for reducing student failure and dropout rates.

The pedagogical assistants also pointed out several factors that they believe strongly influence the educational process of these children, increasing the risk of dropout. These include the role of minority coordinators, social welfare centres and the language of instruction in schools. On further examination of the reasons highlighted by the pedagogical assistants, it is clear that these factors play a significant role, particularly given that the issues leading to dropout are multifaceted and cannot be confined to just the micro level. However, these aspects were not explored in detail in the interviews and analysis.

The conclusions drawn from the present research align closely with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Developmental Theory, which emphasises the interaction of various environmental systems in shaping individual development. The findings illustrate that dropout rates among Roma children are influenced by multiple interconnected factors across different levels of their environment.

At the microsystem level, individual factors such as gender, behavioural problems and lack of motivation are directly impacted by family dynamics and interactions with school personnel, especially pedagogical assistants. The mesosystem, which involves the interaction between family and school, is reflected in the challenges that arise from single-parent households, parental illness and a lack of family support for children's education. At the broader exosystem level, external factors such as poverty, parental job instability and migration patterns exacerbate the difficulties faced by children, often leading to irregular attendance or complete dropout. Finally, societal-level macrosystem factors, including discrimination within schools and insufficient support from educational institutions, further contribute to the exclusion of these children from the education system. By recognising how these systems interact, the present research highlights the need for comprehensive interventions that address not only the individual needs of children, but also their family circumstances, school environments and broader societal influences. This approach is essential for effectively reducing dropout rates and promoting inclusive education for marginalised communities.

## Practical implications and recommendations

Based on the analysis of problems from the perspective of pedagogical assistants and the groups of factors influencing dropout, as well as considering the systemic factors that are directly related and have a causal relationship, recommendations can be made to primarily address the root issue: poverty. An essential step in planning and implementing dropout prevention measures is establishing a system that assesses the vulnerability of the Roma minority across Serbia, including specific settlements. This will require a thorough census and an accurate count of Roma in informal settlements. After an initial assessment of the poverty level through an analysis of the settlements where children live, appropriate measures can be predicted. These measures should focus on enhancing the social welfare system through more substantial and less formalistic material benefits, which would improve the overall socioeconomic status of families. However, it is important to note that this approach assumes the need for stronger cooperation between the social welfare system and the education system.

In addition to addressing individual and family factors influencing dropout rates, it is crucial to consolidate dropout prevention efforts into a single legislative act. This act should define key concepts and principles, assign responsibilities to relevant institutions, and establish mechanisms for cooperation and collaboration. It should also designate entities responsible for comprehensive oversight of inclusion measures and specify penalties and sanctions for non-compliance with legal provisions.

## Limitations and future research

While the present study offers potentially valuable insights, it does have several limitations. The findings are specific to Serbia and may not be applicable to education systems in other countries. The research focuses on Roma children in substandard settlements and relies on interviews with 40 participants, which could limit the generalisability of the results. Moreover, the face-to-face interviews may have been influenced by social desirability bias.

Future research should delve into the dropout-related issues mentioned in our interviews but not thoroughly explored in this study, such as the role of minority coordinators, social welfare centres and the language of instruction in schools. Using techniques like online questionnaires could also prove beneficial, as they would enable the inclusion of a larger number of teaching assistants and ensure anonymity, thereby minimising socially desirable responses.

## Conclusion

The present study highlights the multifaceted factors contributing to school dropout among Roma children in substandard settlements, with key influences stemming from individual, family and school environments. The insights provided by pedagogical assistants emphasise the critical role of socio-cultural norms, poverty and inadequate support systems in exacerbating dropout rates. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach, including improving collaboration between families, schools and social services, and strengthening the role of pedagogical assistants to better support at-risk students.

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