

# The National Roma Infoline: Response to COVID-19

Annual Report 2020

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## **Cairde**

Cairde is a non-governmental organisation working to reduce health inequalities among ethnic minorities and supports the participation of minority communities in enhancing their health. Cairde works through a rights-based approach, believing that the absence of equality and respect for human rights is correlated to the existence of health inequalities. Cairde operates two Health Information and Advocacy Centres, one located in Dublin's North Inner City and the other located in Balbriggan, Co. Dublin. Since 2010, Cairde has been providing information and advocacy to a significant and increasing number of Roma families and individuals in Dublin, Balbriggan, and nationally.

## **Dr Marianna Prontera**

Since volunteering in an asylum seeker detention centre in southern Italy more than 20 years ago, Marianna has maintained a strong interest in ethnic minority issues and has pursued this interest during her studies at Trinity College Dublin where she completed a BA and a PhD in sociology. Marianna has extensive experience of working in the NGO sector in the Republic of Ireland. Marianna coordinates the Roma project in Cairde.

## **Danut Nae**

Danut moved to Ireland in 2008 with his family and has been working with Cairde for the past 3 years. Danut is passionate about supporting Roma communities in Ireland. He has an in-depth knowledge of health issues and the housing and homelessness system. For the past year, he has worked as the main operator on the National Roma Infoline. Danut is Roma and originally from Romania.

## **Emily Murphy**

Emily holds a BA in International Studies from RMIT University Melbourne, and an MA in Gender, Globalisation and Rights from NUI Galway. She has worked in NGOs in Australia and Ireland over the last 8 years, with a particular focus on education, health, research, and policy. Emily currently works on the Roma project in Cairde.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the HSE, especially Social Inclusion Office CHO 7, Social Inclusion Office CHO 9, as well as the National Social Inclusion Office.

Thank you to Stephen Graham for his invaluable expertise.

Thank you to Carmen Nae and Mirela Tanase, for the fundamental role they have played in supporting the work of the National Roma Infoline.

We would like to thank the member organisations of the National Roma Network for their collaboration and support during the past year. Additionally, we would like to thank the service providers and Roma who provided feedback on their experience of the National Roma Infoline.

## Note from the authors

The authors wish to acknowledge the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma communities across Europe. Through the work of the Infoline, we have witnessed how deeply COVID-19 has affected Roma communities in Ireland. We hope that this report will raise further awareness of Roma issues and inform policymaking to ensure Roma rights are fully met in Ireland.

This report specifically deals with Roma issues with the knowledge that there are other oppressed and marginalised groups in Ireland. The recommendations outlined in this report may be applicable to groups in similar situations, where appropriate.

Where case studies are given, some details have been changed to ensure the anonymity of those involved.

## Foreword

I am delighted, in my capacity as National Lead for Vulnerable Groups, to present the National Roma Infoline Report 2020. The National Roma Infoline was established on the 27th of March 2020 to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Between the 27th of March and the 31st of December 2020, the Infoline has received 2,501 calls from Roma and service providers around the country.

The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021 recognises that the Roma communities are among the most marginalised in Ireland. Roma are acknowledged as particularly disadvantaged, with unique care and support needs often compounded by low levels of education, illiteracy and issues in respect of entitlement to public services.<sup>1</sup> Roma in Ireland: A National Needs Assessment (2018), revealed that up to 20% of respondents were completely marginalised from services and supports which has been further highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

Existing issues faced by Roma, including poverty, poor health outcomes and overcrowded accommodation have been further exacerbated during this crisis and have increased their vulnerability to contracting and becoming ill with COVID-19. People from Roma communities had a higher incidence of severe illness and deaths compared with the general population especially in the first phase. By the end of April 2021 the HSE recorded over 30 outbreaks of COVID-19 among Roma with approximately 313 cases. Overall the HSE is aware of over 41 cases in hospitals with 14 in ICU. To date we know that there have sadly been at least 5 deaths.<sup>3</sup> However we also are aware that the numbers may well be an underrepresentation of the true burden given the difficulties with establishing ethnicity on phone contact tracing. The National Immunisation Advisory Committee asked the Expert Advisory Group chaired by HIQA to examine the burden of COVID-19 in vulnerable groups when considering priorities for vaccination. The report found that Roma adults (18-64 years old) were 13 times more likely to be admitted to ICU and 20 times more likely to die from COVID-19 in Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

Local Public Health specialists investigated several outbreaks of COVID-19 in Roma communities, some have been significant, including an outbreak in Dublin's North Inner City in July 2020. Many of the people involved were living in unsuitable and condemned accommodation. Later on in the year there were 70 linked confirmed cases in the South in November 2020, and 30+ cases in North West in September 2020. The figures above are likely to be a significant under-representation of actual cases.

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1 Department of Justice and Equality Strategy (2017-2021) <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/National%20Traveller%20and%20Roma%20Inclusion%20Strategy%202017-2021.pdf/Files/National%20Traveller%20and%20Roma%20Inclusion%20Strategy%202017-2021.pdf>

2 Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre & Department of Justice and Equality (2018) Roma in Ireland – A National Needs Assessment <https://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/RNA-PDF.pdf>

3 Dr. Margaret Fitzgerald and Jane-Ann McKenna, HSE National Social Inclusion Office (March 2021) HSE Vaccine approach for vulnerable groups in Ireland.

4 National Immunisation Advisory Committee, Updated Recommendations: Priority Groups for COVID-19 Vaccination. NIAC March 2021

It was evident early on in the pandemic that we needed to work in partnership with our NGO colleagues to ensure that the information and provision of care for this vulnerable group was provided. This collaborative and participative approach has ensured that Roma have had a point of contact in their own language linking them to vital services. It has also been an invaluable asset to the HSE during outbreak control with the Infoline on hand to assist communicating with families who often have a high level of mistrust and fear of authorities. The Infoline was able to assist in cases where there was a reluctance to isolate or to have close contacts tested and has linked Roma to the HSE Isolation facility when needed.

Among the key issues raised were the high number of calls from Roma who did not have a PPS number or a medical card and therefore no GP. A key development arising from the response to Roma during the COVID-19 crisis is the inclusion in the HSE Service Plan 2021 of a commitment to develop community health liaisons and supports to migrants nationally with a particular focus on the Roma community. This will reinvigorate efforts by the HSE to ensure that Roma interact fully with the public health sector in order to address the health challenges faced by the community.

The National Standing Oversight Committee on cases and outbreaks of COVID-19 in those with precarious working conditions convened by HSE National Clinical Director for Health Protection also prepared a report on Roma and made some recommendations for safer workplace practices.

With our race to beat COVID-19 in 2021 and enable our society to return to a more normal situation for all, our challenge now is to ensure a strong uptake of COVID-19 vaccination in the most socially vulnerable, and this includes Roma who traditionally have been vaccine hesitant. We continue to work on this issue.

I would like to wholeheartedly thank Cairde and in particular, Dr. Marianna Prontera, Danut Nae and Emily Murphy who have given considerable time and effort into ensuring that COVID-19 mitigating measures for Roma are provided. They have gone over and above working together with service providers and agencies around Ireland to support Roma in a variety of circumstances. This work was very difficult at times and involved working directly with families who had members who were very ill or who sadly had passed away. The Infoline provided not just a point of contact and information but reassurance at a very difficult time.

I look forward to continuing to work with Cairde to achieving tangible improvements in the lives of Roma.

Dr. Margaret Fitzgerald  
National Lead Vulnerable Groups  
HSE National Social Inclusion Office

## Preface

The National Roma Infoline was established in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This project arose from concerns made by several NGOs in relation to Roma who had no access to food, healthcare, and needed a place to self-isolate when living in overcrowded conditions. As a consequence of the COVID-19 restrictions, many Roma could not avail of their usual channels to survive.

This project is funded by Social Inclusion Dublin South West, Kildare, and West Wicklow. In order to try and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the Roma community, HSE Social Inclusion established Roma teleconferences. These teleconferences have been running on a regular basis since the beginning of the pandemic and are attended by Community Healthcare Organisation (CHO) representatives from around the country and key organisations with expertise in the area of Roma and health rights. These teleconferences are still being held regularly and during the teleconferences key issues related to COVID-19 and Roma are identified and discussed so that the HSE, together with relevant organisations, can respond appropriately.

In 2020 the National Roma Infoline responded to 1,967 calls from Roma to support them to access vital items and services. The Infoline played a crucial role, together with other agencies, to address the immediate needs of Roma including access to basic items and medical care. The Infoline not only assisted Roma in urban areas but also supported Roma in rural counties to link in with and access relevant services. Among other things, the Infoline enabled families and individuals to access the HSE self-isolation facilities especially set up for vulnerable persons who, for several reasons, could not access mainstream COVID-19 services.

The National Roma Infoline is the only number Roma people can ring 12 hours per day, 7 days a week if they have health concerns. The Infoline is manned entirely by Roma Operators. The Infoline has been an asset for both Roma and service providers. It has made a significant difference in reducing the mistrust and improving communication between Roma and health services.

Concepta de Brun

Regional Social Inclusion Specialist, HSE

## Note from a National Roma Infoline Operator

My name is Danut Nae and for the past year I have been the main operator on the National Roma Infoline. I moved to Ireland from Romania in 2008 and I live in Dublin with my wife and our 5 children. I am proud to be Roma. Family and community are very important in Roma culture. Depending on where we are from, Roma have many different cultural traditions including tinsmithing, farming, brickmaking, trading, making jewellery, cooking traditional dishes, selling horses, tarot readings, fortune telling, performing music, and dancing.

I hear new stories every day while working on the Infoline, and I now have a deep understanding of how COVID-19 has affected Roma communities in Ireland. I have been able to work together with service providers and agencies around Ireland to support Roma in a variety of circumstances. Every call is different, sometimes callers just want some general information on COVID-19, and in other cases, the call could concern a Roma person who is seriously ill. There have been many cases of COVID-19 in the Roma community and unfortunately some Roma have been very unwell, and some have sadly passed away.

Over the past year, the Infoline has received calls from Roma who have nowhere to sleep, nothing to eat, or are sick and do not know where to get help. There is a lot of fear about COVID-19 in the Roma community, and I believe this has come from misinformation that has been passed on, particularly on social media, as well as mistrust in the health system. Some Roma believe that if they go to the hospital or to the doctor to be treated for COVID-19, they will be given an injection that will kill them. The Infoline received calls from many Roma who were very distressed after testing positive for COVID-19 as they were worried about what would happen to them. I noticed that in some cases, Roma were more afraid of being harmed by the health system than of the virus itself. Through the Infoline, we were able to reassure Roma that they would be looked after, and that the healthcare professionals would take care of them. Many Roma were also worried about self-isolating as they were concerned about missing work and losing their job. Without an income they would then be unable to pay their rent, particularly if they were employed informally.

The past year has been difficult for everyone and it has clearly shown that there are some groups that are more disadvantaged than others. However, it has also shown what we can achieve when we work together to support each other. While it was upsetting to hear the hard situations that many Roma have faced during the pandemic, there was a wide network of organisations and agencies who were willing to help. I am very proud of working on the Infoline during this time. I have put my heart into this work and I hope the following report will help to improve the lives of Roma in Ireland.

Danut Nae  
National Roma Infoline

# Report Overview

The National Roma Infoline was established on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate impact on Roma communities in Ireland. Between the 27<sup>th</sup> of March and the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2020, the Infoline received 2,501 calls from Roma and service providers around the country. Across six sections, this report aims to provide an overview of the activity of the Infoline during the first nine months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland and suggests recommendations to address key issues affecting Roma communities, specifically in the areas of health, housing and accommodation, and social welfare.

## SECTION 1: CONTEXT

This section aims to provide background information on Roma in Europe, Roma in Ireland, the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland, and the establishment of the National Roma Infoline. Drawing from Irish and international sources, this section provides a brief summary of key historical events affecting Roma since they arrived in Europe including slavery, genocide, and forced sterilisation. It also addresses Roma lives in contemporary Europe and specifically in Ireland. Key events of the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland are outlined, and the section concludes with an overview of the steps taken to establish the National Roma Infoline.

## SECTION 2: OVERVIEW OF CALLS

This section presents graphs and infographics based on quantitative data extrapolated from Cairde's database on the Roma Infoline. It outlines the total number of calls from Roma and service providers, and presents a breakdown of the locations where the highest number of calls were reported. This section also includes information on gender of callers, the most commonly occurring age group, and how many calls were made by or on behalf of Roma who had no PPS number, no medical card, and/or were homeless.

## SECTION 3: FREQUENCY OF CALLS

This section outlines the frequency of calls received on the Infoline by month and by day of the week. Additionally, it addresses the importance of having the Infoline open during evenings and weekends. This section uses case studies to illustrate how the Infoline has been able to support Roma in emergency situations, particularly out of hours.

## **SECTION 4: REASONS FOR CALLING AND KEY ISSUES**

Drawing on a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data from the Infoline calls, international literature, as well as feedback from Infoline callers, this section aims to provide a detailed exploration of the most commonly occurring reasons for calling. Key issues in the areas of health, housing and accommodation, and social welfare are explored in three subsections. The issue of translation and mediation is addressed throughout these subsections as it emerged in a variety of settings.

## **SECTION 5: FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Section 5 addresses the overarching themes of antigypsyism and discrimination. It illustrates the urgent need to enact hate crime legislation in Ireland. This section also considers the role of the Public Sector Human Rights and Equality Duty in addressing Roma access to public services and supports in Ireland.

## **SECTION 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This section makes thematic recommendations in the areas of health, housing and accommodation, and social welfare. Ethnic data collection and tailored policymaking are explored in this section, as well as the value of regularly using interpretation services to increase Roma access to services. The need for the implementation of anti-racism training that addresses antigypsyism is also highlighted.



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# 1

SECTION

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## Context



## SECTION 1: CONTEXT

### Roma in Europe

It is thought that Roma originally migrated from Northern India around 1000 years ago, in a migration that travelled to the Middle East, Northern Africa and Europe.<sup>1</sup> Roma have been discriminated against throughout history, “suffering exclusion, hatred and persecution from several political regimes”.<sup>2</sup> From the second half of the 14th century, Roma were enslaved in Romania for 500 years, and after emancipation were still oppressed by local authorities.<sup>3</sup> Roma also suffered persecution and violence under Nazi rule during the Second World War. While there is a shortage of records, it is thought that between 500,000 and over 1 million Roma were killed, including approximately 2,900 Roma at Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>4</sup> Roma Genocide Remembrance Day is marked every year on the 2nd of August<sup>5</sup> to commemorate the Porrajmos or Porajmos, which means ‘the Devouring’.<sup>6</sup>



In the decades that followed, Roma continued to experience violence and discrimination in Europe. During the 1970s and 1980s, Roma women were forcibly sterilised under communism in the former Czechoslovakia, and other cases of this practice are believed to have occurred in Hungary, Switzerland, Sweden and Norway, as part of policies that targeted marginalised groups.<sup>7</sup> Due to factors including war, political changes, economic crisis, and racism and discrimination, many Roma migrated from Eastern to Western Europe in the second half of the 20th century.<sup>8</sup> In contemporary Europe, Roma communities remain “one of the most discriminated and disadvantaged groups”<sup>9</sup> with antigypsyism<sup>10</sup> “not only widespread, but also deeply entrenched in social and cultural attitudes and institutional practice.”<sup>11</sup> Roma face difficulties in accessing housing, employment, education, and health services with 80% of Roma in the European Union at risk of poverty, 30% with no tap water and 46% with no indoor toilet, shower or bathroom.<sup>12</sup>

There are now estimated to be between 10 and 12 million Roma living in Europe, making Roma the largest ethnic minority on the continent.<sup>13</sup> This includes “the Sinti/Manush, Kale/Cale, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali), Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); Travellers, Yenish, “Gens du voyage”, and others who identify as Gypsies”.<sup>14</sup> Due to the movement of Roma throughout Europe over the last 1000 years, there is “a high diversity of cultures and traditions” within Roma communities, and even within the same country, different Roma groups exist.<sup>15</sup> In 1971, the first World Romani Congress was organised by the Comité International Rom (CIR) and held in London.<sup>16</sup> At the congress, the Roma flag and anthem were established and International Roma Day was declared on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April.<sup>17</sup> The day is marked annually to celebrate Roma history and culture.

## Roma in Ireland

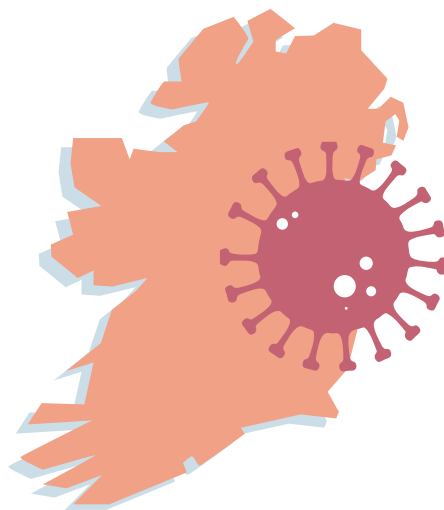
The population of Roma in Ireland is estimated to be between 4,000 and 5,000, with Roma living in every county.<sup>18</sup> Based on this estimate, and considering that the population of Ireland is 4,761,865<sup>19</sup>, the percentage of the Roma population in the country amounts to approximately 0.094%. Official data is scarce, and in general there is little information available on Roma as data on ethnicity is not yet systematically collected by service providers in Ireland. Roma will be listed as an option under ethnic group/background in the upcoming census (CSO, email, 23rd April 2021) and this may provide further data on Roma in Ireland. However, in order to collect relevant data, work will be needed to encourage and support Roma to fill out the census form.



The majority of Roma in Ireland are from Romania but there are also Roma from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland.<sup>20</sup> While the population is very small, Roma communities in Ireland face specific and very complex challenges that require special attention in order to be addressed, including in the areas of housing, social welfare, employment, poverty, health, and education. The introduction of an ethnic identifier across government departments and services would be beneficial in addressing these issues, as targeted policy measures could be developed and implemented. These issues emerged throughout the running of the National Roma Infoline and will be explored in more detail in this report.

## COVID-19 in Ireland

In late February 2020, the Republic of Ireland recorded its first case of the COVID-19 virus.<sup>21</sup> Within three weeks COVID-19 cases had been confirmed in all counties<sup>22</sup> and on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, schools, colleges, and childcare centres were closed.<sup>23</sup> Large gatherings were cancelled and on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March the majority of businesses and amenities were shut down.<sup>24</sup> On the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, the then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar issued the first 'stay at home' order and associated restrictions were introduced to combat further spread of the virus.<sup>25</sup> At this time, Ireland had confirmed an excess of 1,800 cases of COVID-19 and citizens were advised to stay home in all circumstances and not to travel further than 2 kilometres if leaving home for essential reasons. These measures had a significant socioeconomic impact and, as the Report on the Social Implications of COVID-19 in Ireland noted, by "mitigating for risk of transmission of COVID-19 through physical and social distancing restrictions and other public health measures, other challenges for individuals, families and communities are created. These challenges can be manageable in the short term, but the prolonged imposition of restrictions results in greater impacts for some, particularly the most vulnerable groups in our society".<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) emphasised that while restrictions on movement apply to everyone, "lockdown measures have taken a heavier toll on the daily life of marginalised and socially excluded Roma".<sup>27</sup> It is in this context of disadvantage and marginalisation that this report is set out.



## Establishing the National Roma Infoline

Coinciding with the first stay at home order, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March the National Roma Infoline<sup>28</sup> was established to address the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma communities in Ireland. The Infoline is funded by the Health Service Executive (HSE) Community Health Organisation (CHO) 7. Cairde's Roma Operators provide advocacy and information to callers in Romani, Romanian, and English. Since the beginning of the pandemic, CHO 7 Social Inclusion has been chairing regular national teleconferences attended by CHO representatives from around the country and key organisations working to address Roma health needs in the context of the pandemic, including Cairde, SafetyNet, Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, FDYS Roma Community Inclusion Programme, and Donegal Travellers Project. The Infoline initiative was the result of a number of discussions during the Roma teleconferences, as a way to respond effectively to the increasing and challenging issues faced by Roma communities.

A lack of access to GP services was one of the key drivers behind creating the Infoline, as many Roma were not registered with a GP practice, which hindered their access to reliable information on COVID-19 and COVID-19 testing. Although it was possible to ring any GP for COVID-19 information and testing, this was not viable for Roma who were not aware of this option or could not speak English. The idea behind the Infoline was to link Roma who did not speak English, were illiterate, and/or were not registered with any GP practice, to health professionals in the Capuchin Centre and SafetyNet. Additionally, it was vital for Roma to have a Roma point of contact from whom they could receive information about COVID-19 in their spoken languages. While initially these were the key issues, once the Infoline was running it dealt with a wide variety of health issues including translation and mediation in healthcare settings, sharing updates on changing restrictions, and support in organising the delivery of basic items.

The Infoline number was publicised by the HSE, shared with Cairde's existing Roma client base, and shared both on social media and with organisations working with Roma in Ireland. The Infoline has been one of the few services available in Ireland that is run by Roma people, for Roma people. By employing Roma Operators, the Infoline is in the unique position of hearing directly from Roma about how COVID-19 is affecting Roma communities and has often been the first point of call when Roma or service providers, particularly health professionals, need support on COVID-19 related issues. The Infoline is able to rapidly respond to these issues within Cairde's work or by referring the caller to other appropriate organisations.

From the end of March to the end of December 2020, the Infoline received 2,501 calls from Roma and service providers across the country. This report aims to provide an overview of the activity of the Infoline during the first 9 months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland and suggests recommendations to address key issues affecting Roma. The report presents quantitative and qualitative data taken from Cairde's Roma Infoline database. Irish and international literature is drawn on throughout the report to further illustrate the complexity and severity of the issues Roma face not only in Ireland, but across Europe, particularly in the context of the pandemic. Feedback collected from service providers and Roma callers also features throughout the report sections.

*"The Roma Infoline helped us with food, medicines, information about COVID-19, and how to get a test for COVID-19. We trust the Infoline because it is a person from the Roma community and the most important thing is, the operator speaks our language. As the people who work on the Infoline are Roma, we have more trust in them and we can have a better discussion about our problems."*

**Roma caller**



# 2

SECTION

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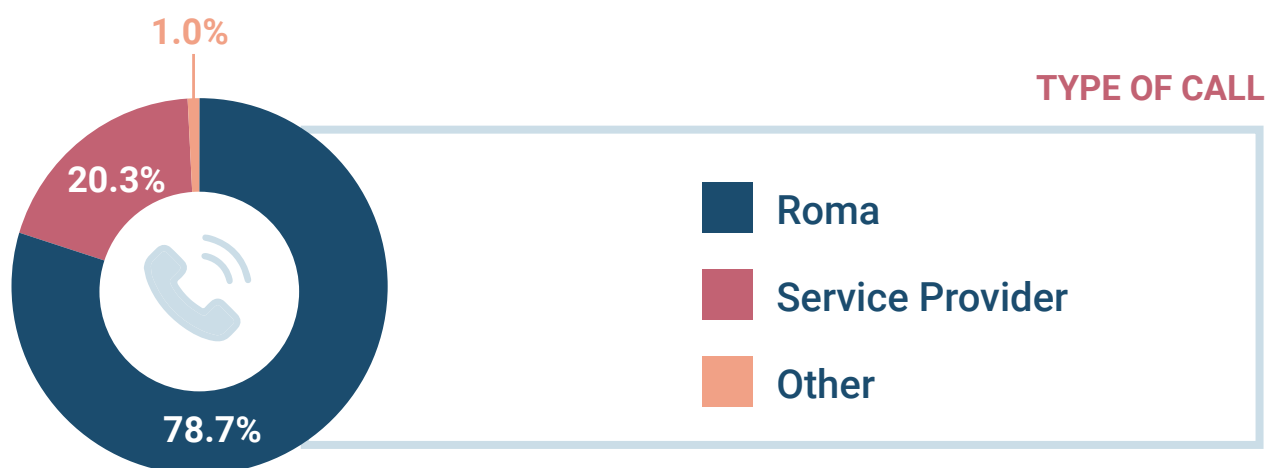
## Overview of Calls



## SECTION 2: OVERVIEW OF CALLS

Between the 27<sup>th</sup> of March and the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2020, the Infoline received 2,501 calls. Of these calls, 1,967 (78.7%) were made by Roma, 508 (20.3%) were from service providers, usually calling on behalf of their Roma clients/patients, and 26 (1%) were categorised as Other (e.g. non-Roma members of the public). The graphs below outline the data collected from these calls, including information on gender, location, homelessness, PPS numbers, and medical cards.

From November 2020, the Infoline began recording the number of follow-up calls associated with each incoming call. From the beginning of November until the end of December 2020, the Infoline made approximately 582 follow-up calls.



### Service Providers

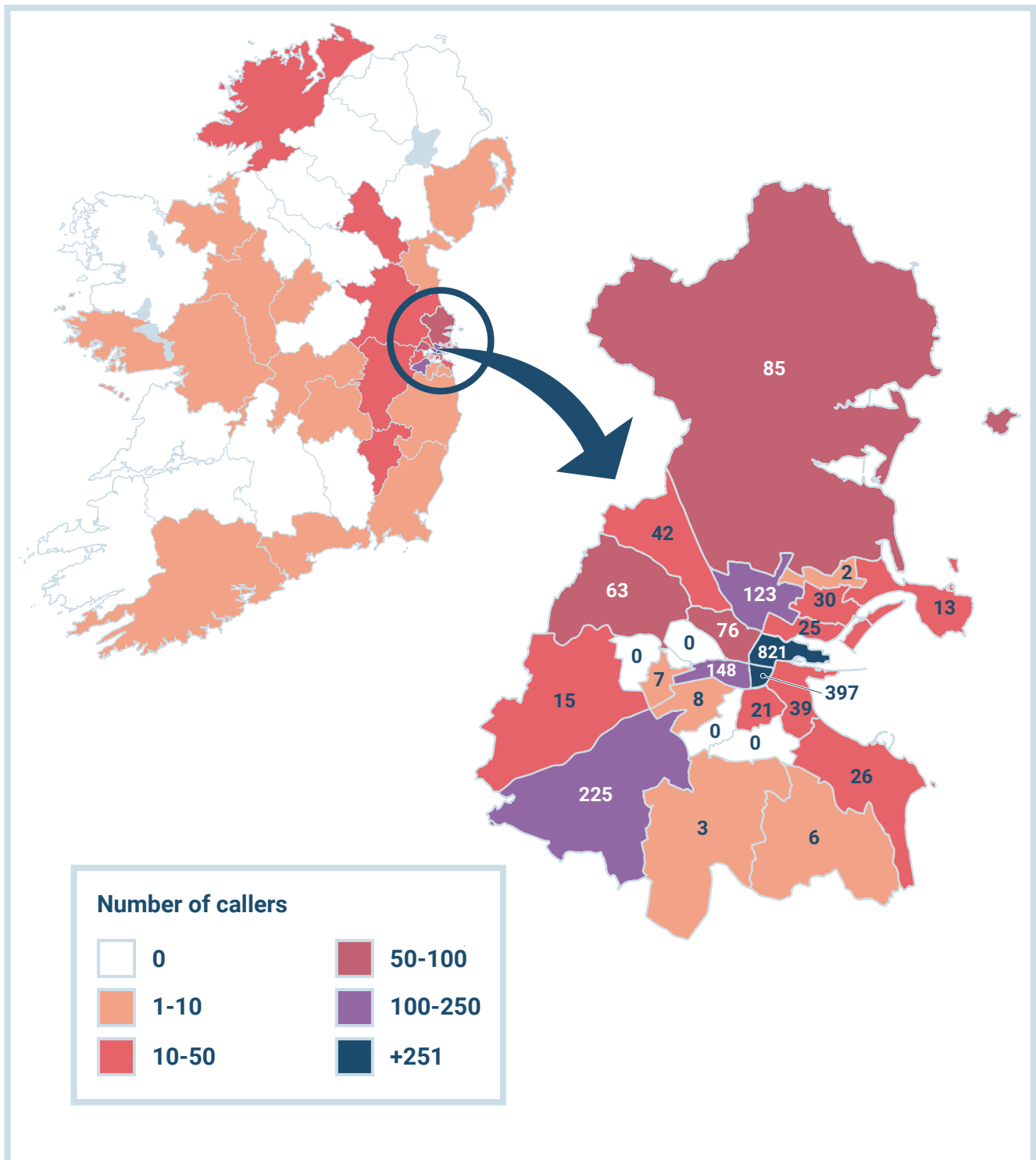
In 2020, the Infoline received 508 calls from service providers around the country. The Infoline received calls from a variety of health services including GPs, primary care centres, hospital staff, and staff from self-isolation facilities.

The Infoline worked with approximately 17 organisations in the community and charity sector nationwide. The majority of these organisations deal with issues in relation to housing and homelessness, and health. The Infoline also liaised with organisations working in the areas of education, social welfare, employment, legal support, and poverty. Additionally, the Infoline received calls from a number of public and statutory bodies, such as An Garda Síochána and government departments.

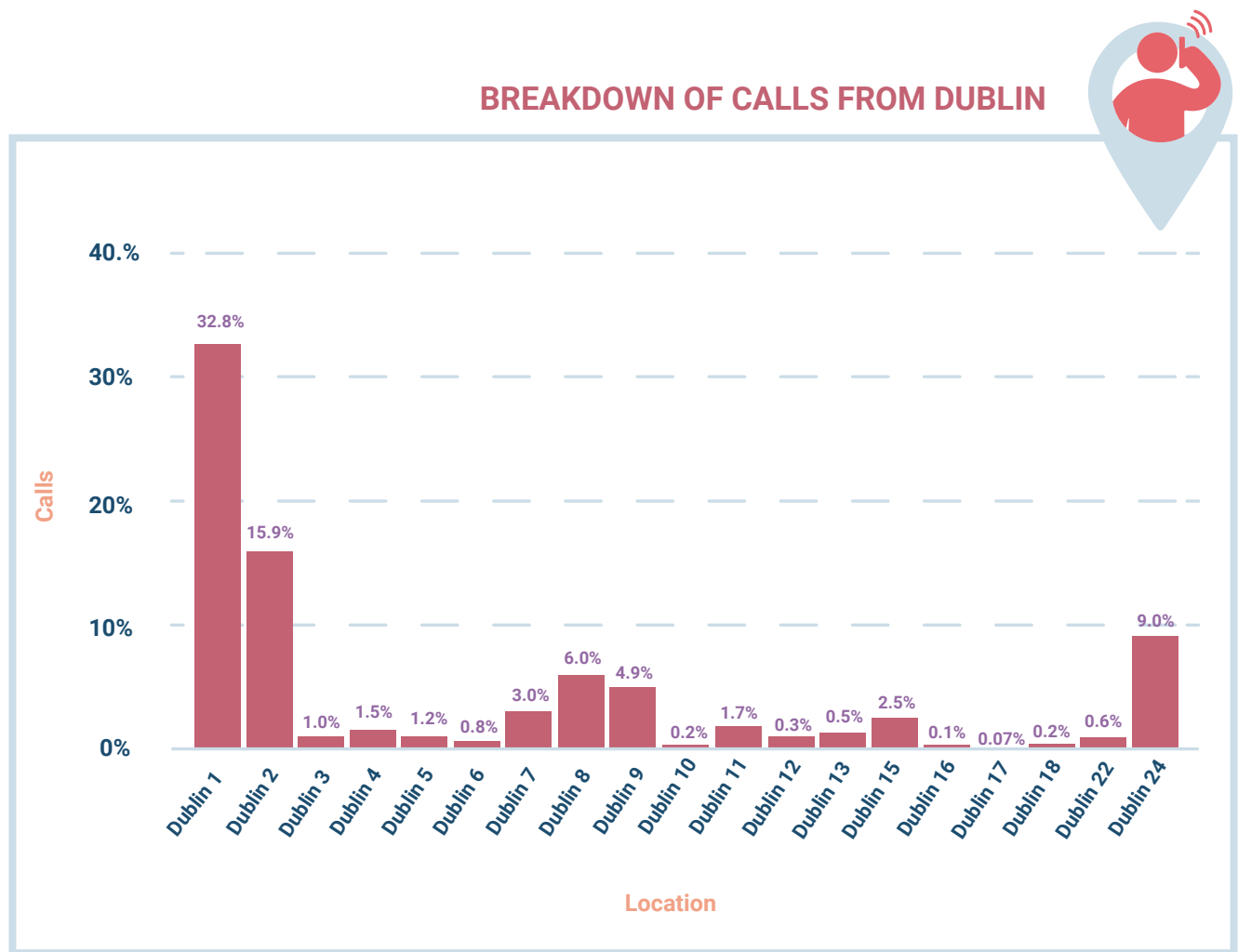
## Location

The majority of calls to the Infoline were received from Dublin, and this reflects what is known about where the highest number of Roma are located in Ireland.<sup>29</sup> A further breakdown showed that Dublin 1 was the area in the country with the highest number of calls to the Infoline.

## CALLS BY LOCATION

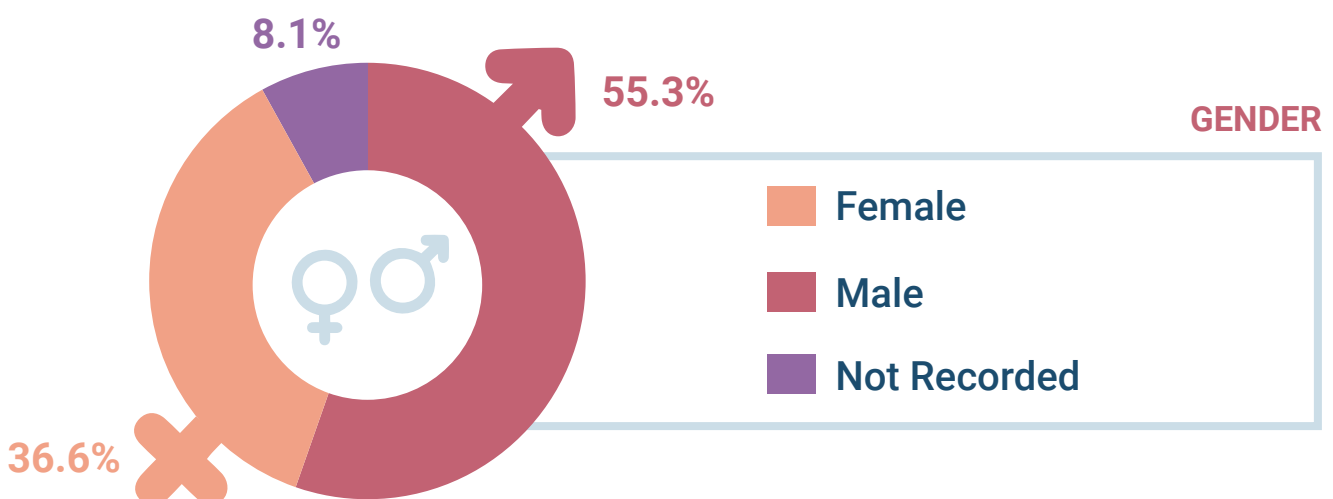


The graph below shows the percentage of calls received from each Dublin postal code.

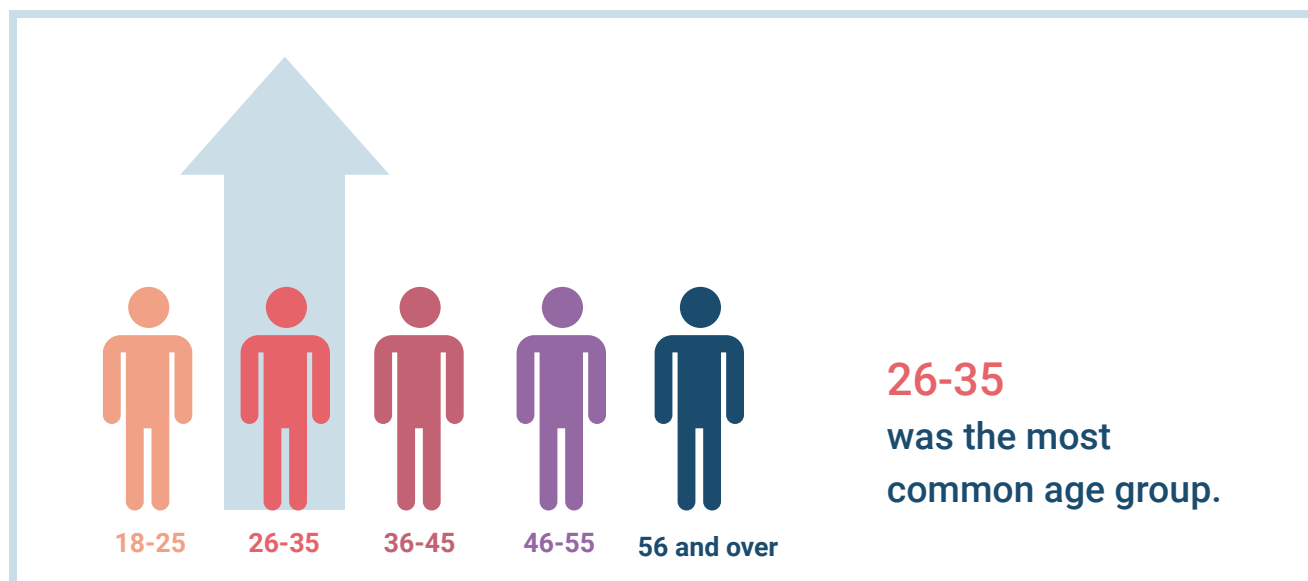


## Gender

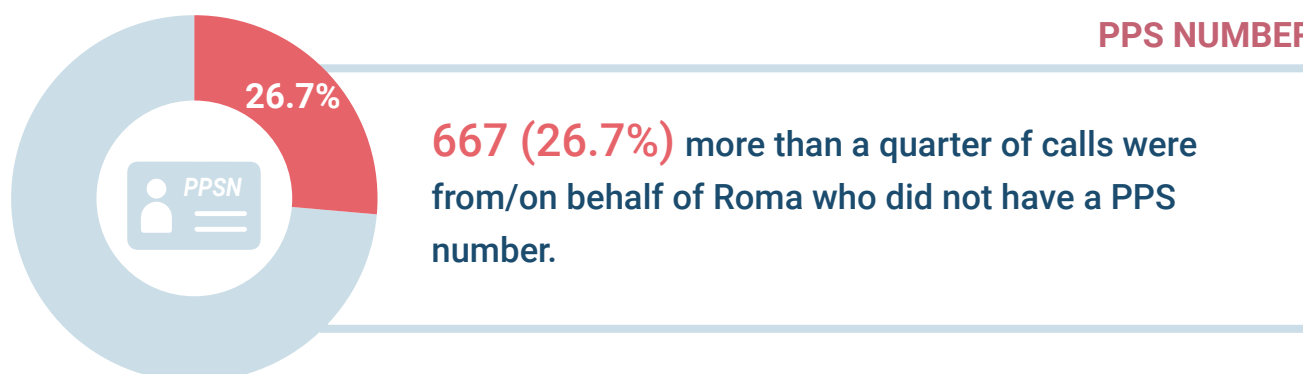
The graph below shows the gender breakdown of Roma who called or had a call made on their behalf to the Infoline in 2020. In some cases, gender was not recorded, for example in the case of a general query or when calling on behalf of the whole family.



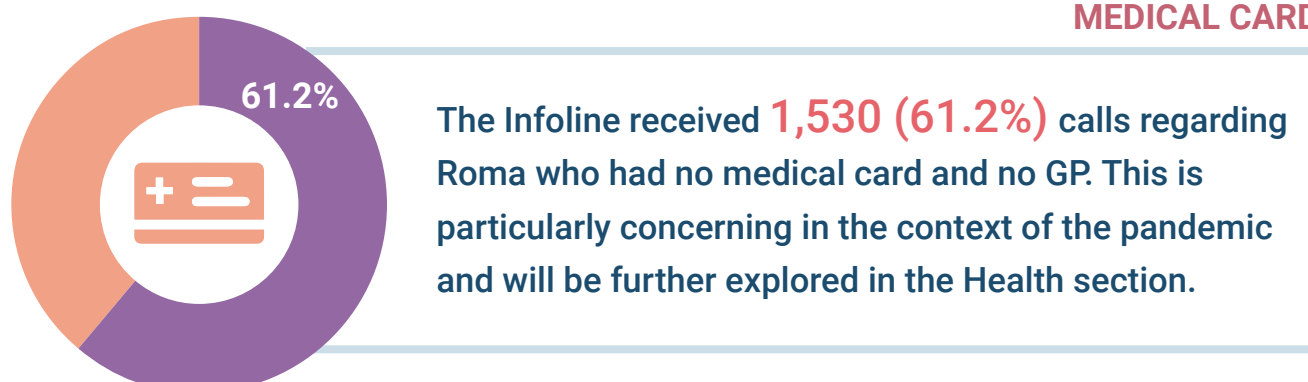
## AGE GROUP



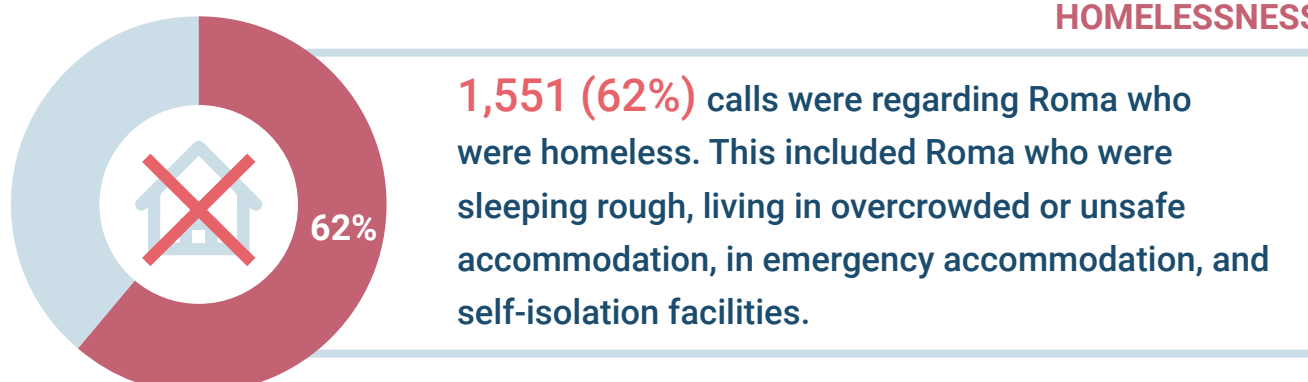
## PPS NUMBER

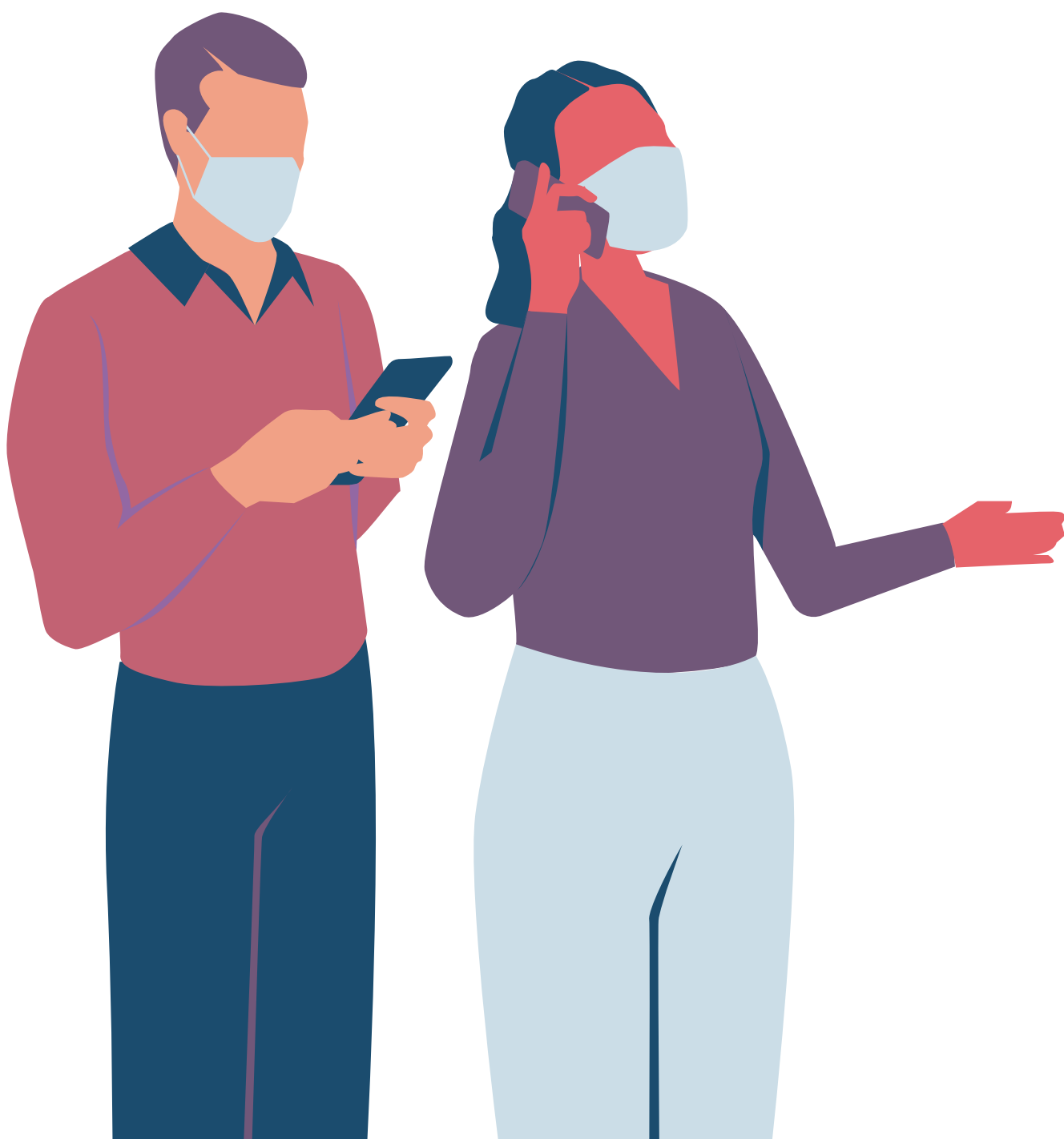


## MEDICAL CARD



## HOMELESSNESS





# 3

SECTION

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## Frequency of Calls

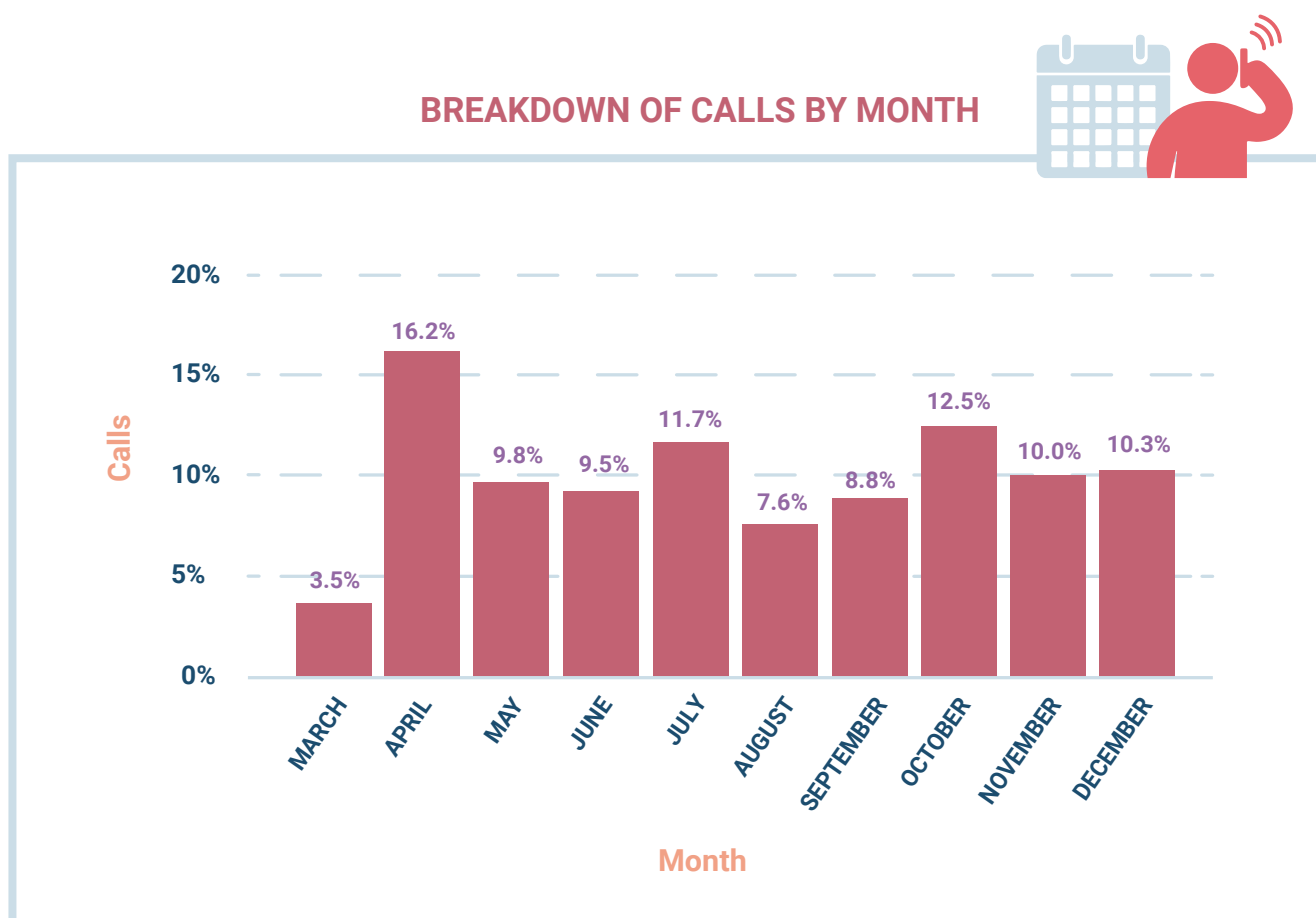


## SECTION 3: FREQUENCY OF CALLS

In the first few weeks of running, the Infoline was open from 9:00am until 5:00pm, 5 days a week. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of April 2020, the hours were extended from 9:00am until 9:00pm, 7 days a week due to the volume of calls and the urgent needs of Roma callers.

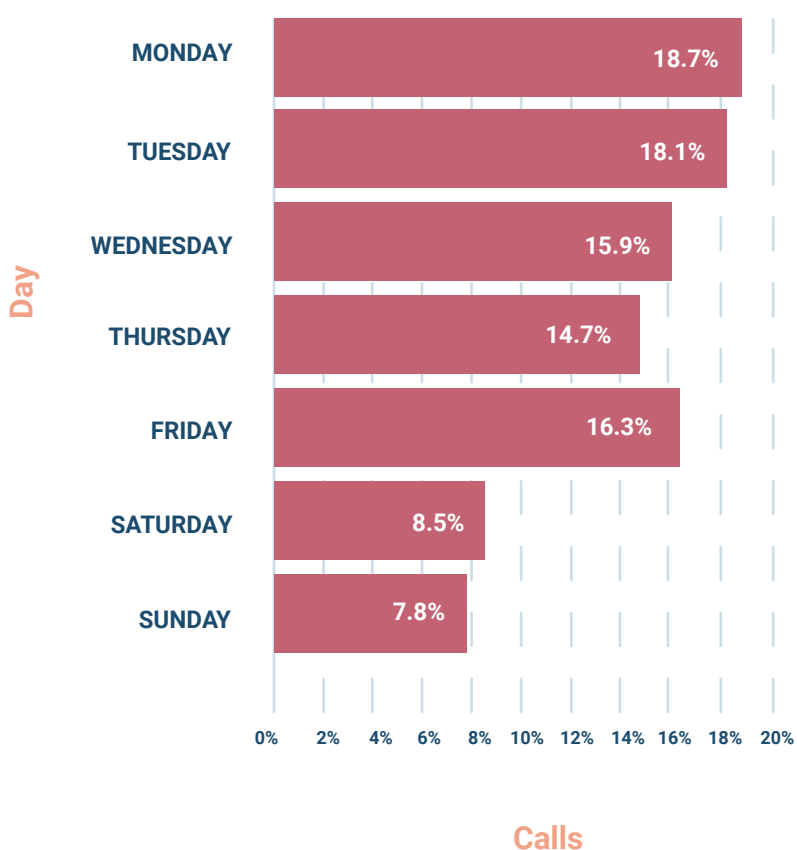
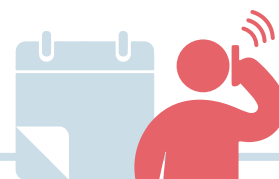
The Infoline consistently received calls throughout 2020 however, the higher call numbers in April and October reflect the times where case numbers of COVID-19 were increasing and new restrictions were brought in.

The graph below shows the percentage of calls received by the Infoline in each month of its operation in 2020.



The graph below illustrates that Mondays, Tuesday, and Fridays were usually the busiest days of the week for receiving calls on the Infoline.

### BREAKDOWN OF CALLS BY DAY OF THE WEEK



### Weekend calls

It is important to note that although the number of calls is usually less on the weekend, these calls are typically in relation to emergency situations. There is a significant amount of work involved in these cases and as many services do not operate on the weekend, the Infoline provides vital support for Roma who are in vulnerable and sometimes even dangerous circumstances.

The Infoline regularly received calls on weekends from Roma families who had recently arrived in Ireland and had nowhere to stay. Additionally, the Infoline received calls during the weekend from staff in self-isolation facilities for translation and other support in communicating with and caring for Roma individuals and families who were staying in these facilities.

### **Case study: Responding to local outbreaks**

During a weekend in August, the Infoline was contacted by HSE staff due to an outbreak of COVID-19 among the Roma community in a rural area. The Infoline assisted the HSE in contacting the families affected to offer support with testing, food, medication, and isolating. After speaking with these families, the Infoline then liaised with HSE Social Inclusion and medical staff to update them and organise testing where necessary. Two families that were contacted by the Infoline expressed they were relieved to be speaking to a Roma person. The families had previously received several calls from medical staff, but were too afraid to speak to them, even though they had Romanian translators. In these cases, the Infoline played a crucial role in encouraging the families to be tested.

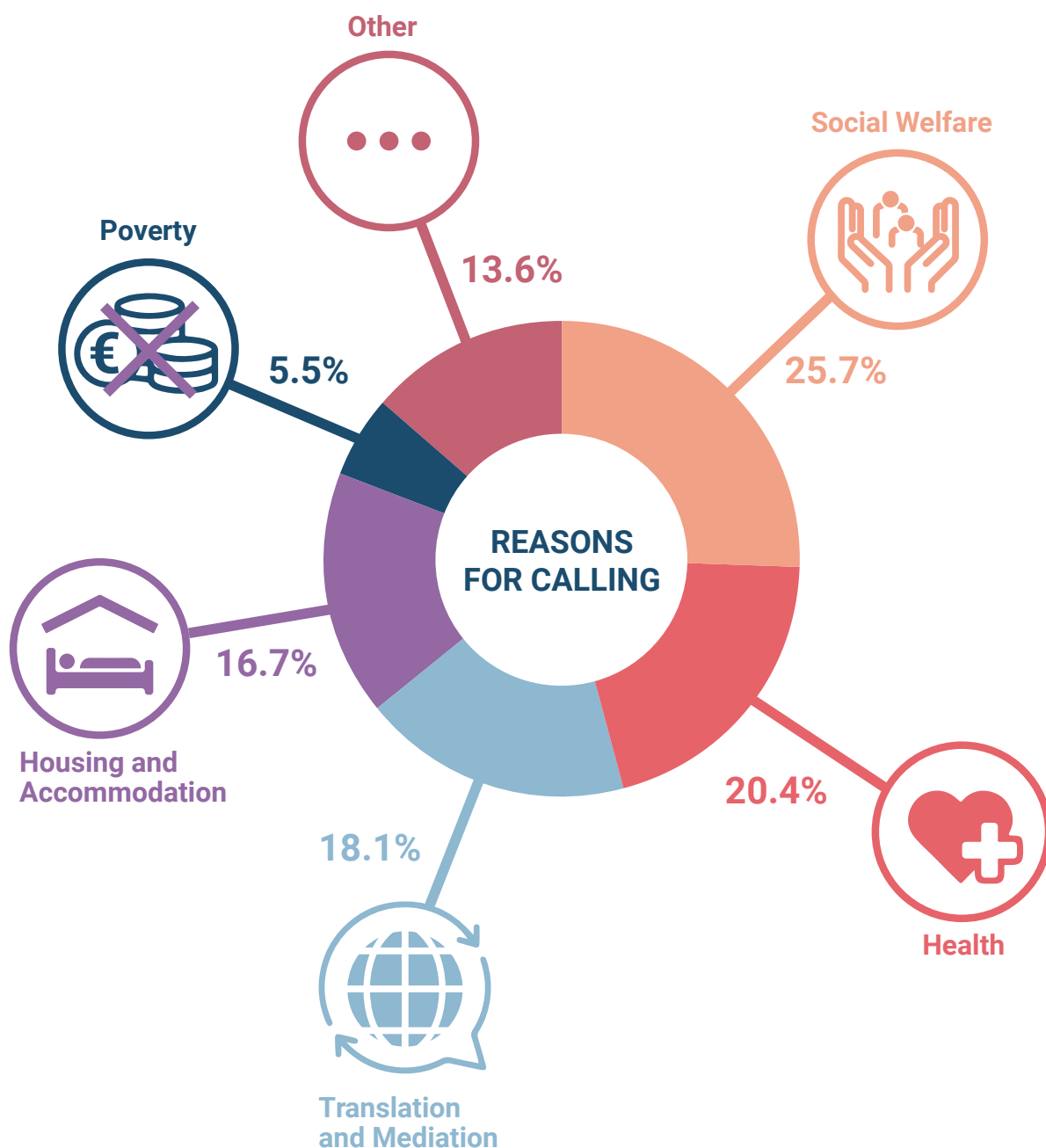
# 4

## SECTION

# Reasons for Calling and Key Issues



## SECTION 4: REASONS FOR CALLING AND KEY ISSUES



The graph above outlines some of the main reasons why callers rang the Infoline, including social welfare, health, translation and mediation, housing and accommodation, and poverty.

Callers usually mentioned one or more of the reasons above and the Infoline also received calls in relation to family issues, employment, education and training, and racism and discrimination. Family issues typically included enquiries about birth certificates and passport applications for callers and their children. Employment queries were usually from Roma who were looking for work, or were having work related issues, for example Roma who needed to self-isolate and were

worried about losing their job. Additionally, Roma called the Infoline with questions on how to open a bank account and how to register with Revenue. Roma also called the Infoline for support in enrolling their children in school or to enquire about available courses for adults. During school closures, the issue of connecting to online schooling was raised by a number of callers. With regards to racism and discrimination, in certain situations the Infoline worked closely with the Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC) and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) to address these issues, for example when Roma were denied access to shops or banks.

In the three sections below, the most frequent and pressing issues in relation to health, housing and accommodation, and social welfare will be respectively analysed. Translation and mediation is also explored throughout these subsections, as it often intersected with these issues.

## Health



*"An invaluable service for the most vulnerable. I know when we meet vulnerable Roma that they will be better off if the Roma Infoline is involved. SafetyNet would like to continue working with this excellent service."*

**Fiona O'Reilly, CEO of SafetyNet Primary Care**

Due to the longstanding discrimination and socioeconomic inequalities Roma face, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on Roma across Europe.<sup>30</sup> Research shows that Roma appear to experience higher rates of chronic disease, namely asthma, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and hypertension.<sup>31</sup> Concerningly, these are also some of the conditions that have been highlighted by the HSE as putting people at more risk of becoming seriously ill from COVID-19.<sup>32</sup> In the early stages of the pandemic, there was a high number of Roma infected with COVID-19 and based on data collected on case numbers, Roma had a mortality rate of 7.2%, nearly twice the national mortality rate (3.9%).<sup>33</sup> Later research by the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) stated: "Members of the Roma community were noted to have comparable rates of infection relative to the general population, but an elevated risk of severe disease across the outcomes assessed in those aged 18- 64 years (that is, hospitalisation, ICU admission and death). The results presented are considered to underestimate the true prevalence given the reliance on outbreak data and the hard to reach nature of this population."<sup>34</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the difficulties Roma face in accessing mainstream healthcare and having their most basic and urgent needs met. Moreover, the pandemic has also highlighted the mistrust that many Roma have towards the health system, specifically in relation to treatment for COVID-19. FRA research has identified the essential role that Roma health mediators can play in responding to these issues as they “are among the few who have trusted access to the most marginalised people.”<sup>35</sup> This was evident through the work of the Infoline as the operators were often able to bridge the gap between health professionals and their Roma patients.

## **Issue 1: Accessing reliable information on COVID-19**

Due to language, literacy, and financial barriers in availing of GP services, it was difficult for many Roma to access accurate and reliable information on COVID-19. During the reporting period, the Infoline provided general information on COVID-19 and communicated the latest government restrictions as they changed throughout the year, including providing updates on workplace and school opening dates. Callers wanted to know about the symptoms of COVID-19 and how to recognise them, as well as what services and supports were available for Roma during the pandemic. Practical concerns, such as how to shop for food safely and avoid contracting the virus were addressed by the Infoline. More broadly, general information on COVID-19 was usually given even in cases where Roma were calling concerning another issue, for example a social welfare or housing query.

Throughout the reporting period, the Infoline received calls about travelling abroad during the pandemic, as well as information on COVID-19 restrictions across Europe. As per the government guidelines, the Infoline advised against travel unless it was essential. Additionally, callers wanted to know about inter-county travel in Ireland and some asked for support in contacting the Romanian embassy in Dublin. Sadly, the Infoline also received calls from Roma who wanted to repatriate loved ones who had died of COVID-19. This involved liaising with relevant services to find out what restrictions and processes were in place in such circumstances and relaying this information to the families affected.

The Infoline played a significant role in correcting harmful misinformation spreading by word of mouth and on social media about COVID-19, including conspiracy theories. This again illustrated the benefits of employing Roma Operators on the Infoline as there was a basis of trust between the callers and operators which meant Roma callers were more likely to share their fears or concerns about COVID-19. Due to generational experiences of antigypsyism and discrimination in healthcare settings there is often substantial mistrust among Roma of health services and other institutions and these challenges are compounded by the pandemic.<sup>36</sup>

This was evident during numerous calls the Infoline received, when Roma called in a highly distressed state as they were afraid of being tested for COVID-19, treated for COVID-19 or involved in contact tracing. The Infoline provided reassurance and told the callers they would be looked after in the Irish health system and that it was best for themselves and their families to access appropriate healthcare. This support from the Infoline ensured that Roma who were unwell, and sometimes seriously ill, could avail of the medical care they required.

### ● **Case Study: Testing and tracing**

● A Roma woman tested positive for COVID-19 while in hospital and the HSE wanted to organise testing for the woman's husband, to prevent further transmission of the virus. However, the staff could not get in touch with the man as he did not want to be tested. The HSE called the National Roma Infoline for support and the Infoline Operator managed to speak to the man and convince him to take a COVID-19 test. Furthermore, the Operator realised that another family was living with the couple and convinced that family to be tested too. The HSE staff had suspected there were two families living together but could not confirm this without the work of the Roma Infoline. The Infoline also played a crucial role in ensuring that these families had food and other necessary supplies while self-isolating.

## Issue 2: Accessing testing and treatment for COVID-19

*"I am from the Roma community and I received help from the Roma Infoline. They helped me with information and if it wasn't for the Roma Infoline, I wouldn't do the COVID-19 test because I didn't trust the health system in Ireland. The Roma Infoline explained the process for COVID-19 testing and the importance of doing a test even if you have no symptoms."*

Roma caller

As previously mentioned, the lack of access to GP services was one of the key drivers for establishing the National Roma Infoline. As a result of this, a system was established with the Capuchin Centre and SafetyNet where Roma who were unwell could ring the Infoline and be referred for testing by the Roma Operators. Sometimes these calls were made by Roma callers who asked to be tested but more often these calls were made by health professionals who rang the Infoline asking for support in trying to persuade Roma to take a test if they were unwell, or a close contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case. The Infoline was able to provide information about testing, refer Roma for testing, communicate test results, and support contact tracing efforts. Some service providers called with general queries about Roma, for example the difference between the Romani and Romanian languages.

It was clear that Roma generally trusted advice and information provided by other Roma, in this context the Roma Operators, and in some cases were reluctant to communicate with medical staff and non-Roma interpreters. Some Roma callers stated that they wanted to speak specifically to another Roma person or expressed gratitude that they were speaking to a Roma person. Throughout the year, the Infoline received 508 calls from service providers across the country and actively worked to build trust and communication between these service providers and their Roma clients.

Many Roma in Ireland have low levels of literacy or no literacy<sup>37</sup>, and often do not speak English. This makes it difficult to access information through the mainstream channels, which is particularly important in the context of the pandemic. Through the work of the Infoline, it has been noted that professional interpreters are not systematically utilised across health services, amongst others. Consequently, many Roma rely on family, friends, and NGOs to access these services although these options are not always available when needed. In a recent survey conducted by the HSE, 62% of Roma respondents "reported that they had not been offered the services of an interpreter while accessing HSE services".<sup>38</sup> The Infoline has played a critical role in supporting

both Roma and service providers and ensuring Roma patients understood information that was being communicated in healthcare settings, including self-isolation facilities. The Roma Operators were able to support the HSE Vulnerable Groups Isolation Facility by explaining to Roma clients how to use equipment to record their temperature and oxygen levels and how to report this to staff through video calls. The Infoline also interpreted general information about the process and rules of isolation accommodation facilities to Roma who were staying there, and provided staff with important health information about new clients.

Additionally, the Infoline was able to provide reassurance and assistance to Roma who called in a distressed state due to a variety of reasons including fear of receiving their COVID-19 test results, worry about dying from COVID-19, concern for family members who had been hospitalised with COVID-19 and were unreachable, grieving for loved ones who had died from the virus, or Roma who had been moved into a self-isolation facility or changed homeless accommodation and did not understand where they were or why they had been moved. In cases where the issue of mental health emerged, several Roma were encouraged to speak to their own GP or avail of relevant services. However, in many cases, issues such as accommodation and social welfare were so urgent that mental health concerns were not prioritised among the callers.

### **Case Study: Access to testing**

A Roma man living in rural Ireland with his wife and three children contacted the Infoline as he had been experiencing COVID-19 symptoms for three days and wanted to be tested. As the call was received after 9:00pm, the Infoline contacted the caller's local out of hours GP service, and was told that the man needed to contact his own GP or could call back in the morning. This conflicted with the HSE's official advice which states "If you have any common symptoms of COVID-19, you should self-isolate and phone your local GP out of hours service straight away to get a COVID-19 (coronavirus) test".<sup>39</sup> When the Infoline contacted the client to try and organise a test through the out of hours service, the client refused to pass on his details as he said he had spoken to that service earlier in the day and had an unpleasant experience where they refused to help him. The Infoline contacted the Capuchin Centre and they managed to organise for the man to be tested locally.

### Issue 3: Accessing general healthcare

While COVID-19 was the key focus, the Infoline was able to support Roma to address other healthcare needs in a variety of settings. This included assisting with medical card applications, organising delivery of prescriptions, providing information on GP services, and providing translation and mediation for Roma in isolation accommodation, at GP practices, and in hospitals. The Infoline also received calls from Roma who had been turned away from GP services when unwell, wanting to be tested for COVID-19, or wanting to register with a GP as a new patient. In order to facilitate access to health services, health application forms should be available in languages other than English and Irish, including languages commonly spoken by Roma i.e., Romanian, Czech, and Slovak, among others.

The Infoline supported healthcare workers and service provider staff with communicating information to Roma parents about their children's health, including information about appointments and check-ups for newborn babies. Roma women also contacted the Infoline for support and translation with pregnancy and post-natal care, relevant check-up appointments, and vaccination appointments.

Some of the health issues mentioned by Roma callers were diabetes, kidney conditions, high blood pressure, and heart conditions. This mirrors evidence that suggests a "higher incidence of major chronic diseases in the Roma community compared to the general population".<sup>40</sup>

#### Case Study: Accessing prescriptions

A Roma man called the Infoline because he had no medication to treat his diabetes and did not know how to organise a prescription. The man spoke very little English and had no medical card and no GP. The Infoline contacted the Capuchin Centre, and through this link, the man was able to receive his prescription. This case was especially concerning due to the man's health condition as diabetes is mentioned by the HSE as putting people at more risk of becoming seriously ill from COVID-19.<sup>41</sup>



Across Europe, Roma are more at-risk of becoming homeless than non-Roma<sup>42</sup> and in the context of the pandemic they often “do not have the option of sheltering in place.”<sup>43</sup> As the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) highlights, “housing systems play a central role in generating or mitigating poverty and social exclusion”,<sup>44</sup> therefore the denial of the right to adequate housing may impact on the enjoyment of basic human rights such as the rights to work and health, among others.<sup>45</sup>

Cairde welcomes the Council of the European Union’s adoption of a recommendation that focuses on “Roma equality, inclusion and participation, stepping up the member states’ commitment to effectively fight discrimination against Roma people and to promote their inclusion in the key areas of education, employment, health and housing.”<sup>46</sup> Cairde urges the Irish state to embrace this recommendation and particularly welcomes point 10 (f): “measures to provide social support and access to mainstream services for homeless Roma people”,<sup>47</sup> which should be provided particularly “where Roma experience homelessness, especially when exercising their free movement right.”<sup>48</sup> As FEANTSA argues, “it is time that no Roma finds themselves homeless, particularly when travelling to another MS (member state) to look for income opportunities that they cannot access in their own country of residence.”<sup>49</sup>

The new *EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation for 2020 – 2030* aims to reduce the gap in housing deprivation between Roma and the general population and to ensure that the majority of Roma no longer live in overcrowded households by 2030. However, there are concerns that these targets will likely remain unmet without “a binding character for the Member States in terms of Implementation”.<sup>50</sup>

In an Irish context, this binding element is necessary as the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government has so far not included any actions on Roma and accommodation in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) 2017-2021, the primary policy document that deals with Roma in Ireland. This is highly problematic as Roma face very urgent and specific issues when it comes to housing as the current Irish housing crisis is seriously affecting Roma families and individuals. Many Roma are homeless and/ or are living in substandard and overcrowded accommodation in contemporary Ireland.<sup>51</sup> In the following section, where ‘homeless Roma’ is used, this refers to both Roma families and individuals.

*"The Roma Infoline played a crucial service to the Roma community/organisations during the pandemic and would be essential despite COVID-19. This service allowed us to support one of the most vulnerable groups in society and enabled us to have meaningful engagements with these clients. The Infoline has been there to support our service users with documentation to get social welfare, explaining landlord agreements, and relaying crucial information that the clients need. I am confident to say that if it wasn't for the support of the Infoline our service would have found it very difficult to provide the urgent support these service users needed."*

**Rachel McMahon, Case Manager, De Paul**

## **Issue 1: Accessing emergency accommodation**

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been difficult for homeless Roma to access emergency accommodation if they were not already registered in the Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS). This is one of the most pressing issues, particularly in the current context, and as such requires an urgent solution. For Roma who have recently arrived in Ireland and find themselves homeless and unemployed, it is impossible to find emergency accommodation through the One Night Only (ONO) system – an option that was available, at least in the Dublin region, until the pandemic began. The ONO system was both inhumane and unsustainable, and Cairde welcomes its current suspension, which hopefully will be permanent. However, this is an extremely complex issue as while the ONO system appears to have been suspended, there does not seem to be a system in place for Roma who find themselves in need of emergency accommodation, unless they are in employment or on a local authority housing list. This is despite the fact that the Homeless Freephones are still operational. Through the Infoline, Cairde has noted a reduction of the provision of emergency accommodation provided through the Freephone option to Roma who are homeless and unemployed in the Dublin region. As the Freephone operates in English and does not provide services in other languages, it is difficult for Roma who do not speak English to avail of this service and they are usually dependent on family, friends, or NGOs to call the Freephone on their behalf. It is important to note that these options are not always available when needed.

In a recently published report by the Mercy Law Resource Centre, data provided by Crosscare on their service users in 2019 shows that of 123 families who had at some point accessed ONO accommodation, 57 (almost half) were Roma.<sup>52</sup> This is extremely concerning given the small population of Roma in Ireland. The overrepresentation of Roma within the ONO system

leaves the unresolved issue of where homeless Roma can be accommodated if they cannot find emergency accommodation through the Freephone.

Homeless Roma calling the Infoline have reported that if they moved from one county to another, they were usually told that they should have been assessed in the county where they originally became homeless. However, in the Housing Act 1988 and Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, there seems to be nothing that suggests such a procedure. As a result of this practice, some Roma were refused an assessment for emergency accommodation by both the local authority where they became homeless and the local authority they had moved to while homeless, for example to seek employment. Finally, information collected through the Infoline shows that emergency accommodation around the country is being provided predominantly to homeless Roma who are on their local authority list. However, the provision of emergency accommodation should not be dependent on being on the local authority housing list.<sup>53</sup>

### **Case study: Accessing emergency accommodation**

A Roma family of six (2 adults and 4 children) were renting a house in rural Ireland however due to the pandemic, they no longer had the money to pay for the rent. Consequently, the landlord intimidated them and asked to leave the accommodation. Although this happened in the early stages of the pandemic, when eviction was banned, the family was new to the country and did not know their rights and entitlements. Moreover no one in the family spoke English. When the family left their home, they were hosted by another family for a number of weeks before they ultimately were asked to move out. When the family initially became homeless the Infoline rang the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) and An Garda Síochána however, since the family had already moved out of their home, there was nothing that could have been done to move them back in. The Infoline also contacted the relevant Local Authority, and the family were refused emergency accommodation because they were not on the Local Authority Housing List. Additionally, the Infoline was aware that due to the 41/2012 Housing Circular (explored in the following section) it would be impossible for the family to meet the requirements to be deemed in need of social housing support. The family then moved to the Dublin region because the father had a job offer, however it took some time before they were deemed to be homeless and then accommodated through the emergency system.

## Issue 2: Accessing Social Housing Support

The 41/2012 Housing Circular was issued to provide advice to local housing authorities “when considering whether to accept an application for social housing support from a non-Irish national.”<sup>54</sup> However, this Housing Circular has had a negative impact on the Roma community as one of the qualifying criteria is employment. The Housing Circular states that “all EEA nationals may be considered for assessment for social housing support from housing authorities if;

- 1) they are in employment/self-employed in the State; or
- 2) where they are not currently working/employed it is because –
  - they are temporarily unable to work because of illness/accident;
  - they are recorded as involuntarily unemployed after having been employed for longer than a year, and they are registered as a job-seeker with Department of Social Protection and FÁS.”<sup>55</sup>

As the unemployment rate is extremely high among Roma communities in Ireland,<sup>56</sup> many Roma do not meet this requirement and are systematically excluded from the social housing support system. Consequently, Roma are heavily relying on the private rental market when looking for accommodation.<sup>57</sup>

It is difficult for Roma to find accommodation through the rental market and, if they are on the local authority housing, to avail of schemes such as Homeless HAP/HAP due to the prohibiting prices and the issues of antigypsyism and discrimination. The broader issue of racism will be further explored in the final section of this report.

Cairde has observed that large families who are in emergency accommodation tend to stay in these structures for a considerable amount of time. This may be due to a lack of large public houses available through either the local authorities or the private rental market.

As housing services do not collect ethnic data, it is difficult to quantify the extent of Roma living in emergency accommodation and the impact of the housing and homelessness system on Roma. However, through the work of the Infoline, as well as Cairde’s previous work with Roma, it is clear that Roma in Ireland face significant and specific challenges in accessing accommodation. Finally, housing application forms should be available in other languages, including languages commonly spoken by Roma i.e., Romanian, Czech, and Slovak, among others. Roma who are not literate in English cannot fill out the existing forms and this leaves them in a difficult position. This gap in service provision is usually filled by family, friends, or NGOs however, these options are not always available when needed.

### Case Study: Social Housing Support

A young Roma mother of 3, who has been living in Ireland for about 17 years, contacted the Infoline for assistance in applying for Social Housing Support. As she is an EEA member state national, but not an Irish national, the Housing Circular 41/2012 was applied to her and she was asked for evidence of 52 weeks of employment in Ireland, which she could not provide. The woman's Social Housing Support Application could not be processed without this information. This woman arrived in Ireland in 2002 at the age of 3 with her parents who were seeking asylum and Cairde advocated for the woman on the basis of this long-term connection with Ireland. After Cairde's advocacy intervention, the woman's application was assessed favourably.

During the work of the Infoline over the past 9 months, as well as Cairde's advocacy work over the years, there have been a number of cases where the Housing Circular has been applied inflexibly. This issue is also highlighted in the Mercy Law Resource Centre's *Minority Groups And Housing Services: Barriers To Access 2021* report. Both the content and the application of the Housing Circular needs to be revised in order to guarantee that Roma in need of housing support can avail of it. Moreover, in their 2021 report, the Mercy Law Centre emphasises 'local connection' as a barrier when it comes to being assessed for social housing support. This issue has also emerged in the work of the Infoline when Roma families and individuals had moved or wanted to move to a different county, often in response to the housing crisis.

## Issue 3: Eviction

During the reporting period, the Infoline received several calls regarding the issue of eviction. Despite a number of different protections established by the Irish government to support tenants during the pandemic<sup>58</sup>, including eviction moratoriums, some Roma in Ireland were still experiencing eviction or the threat of eviction, even in the worst stages of the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, the Infoline played a crucial role when Roma who often did not speak English rang the Infoline asking for support as their landlords wanted to evict them. In a number of cases the Infoline managed to stop the eviction either by calling RTB, An Garda Síochána, and/ or Threshold. The Infoline also informed callers of the moratoriums on evictions and therefore of their rights and entitlements during the pandemic. Additionally, for Roma who spoke English, the Infoline played a key role in linking them with the relevant housing bodies to inform them of their rights directly.

### Case Study: Eviction

A young Roma single mother was living with her baby in rental accommodation in the Dublin region, and could no longer afford to pay her rent. Despite a moratorium on evictions being in effect during this time, her landlord moved the tenant's belongings outside the house and asked her to leave the property. The Roma woman did not know what to do and called the Infoline for support. The Roma Operator informed the caller that the landlord was acting unlawfully and provided information on her rights and entitlements as a tenant. The Roma Operator also contacted RTB and in a phone conversation between the Infoline, RTB, the landlord and the Roma tenant, RTB informed the landlord of the potential legal consequences of not letting the young mother and child stay in their home. In this call, the Roma Operator was able to interpret for the Roma woman. As a result of this intervention, the tenants were able to remain in their home.



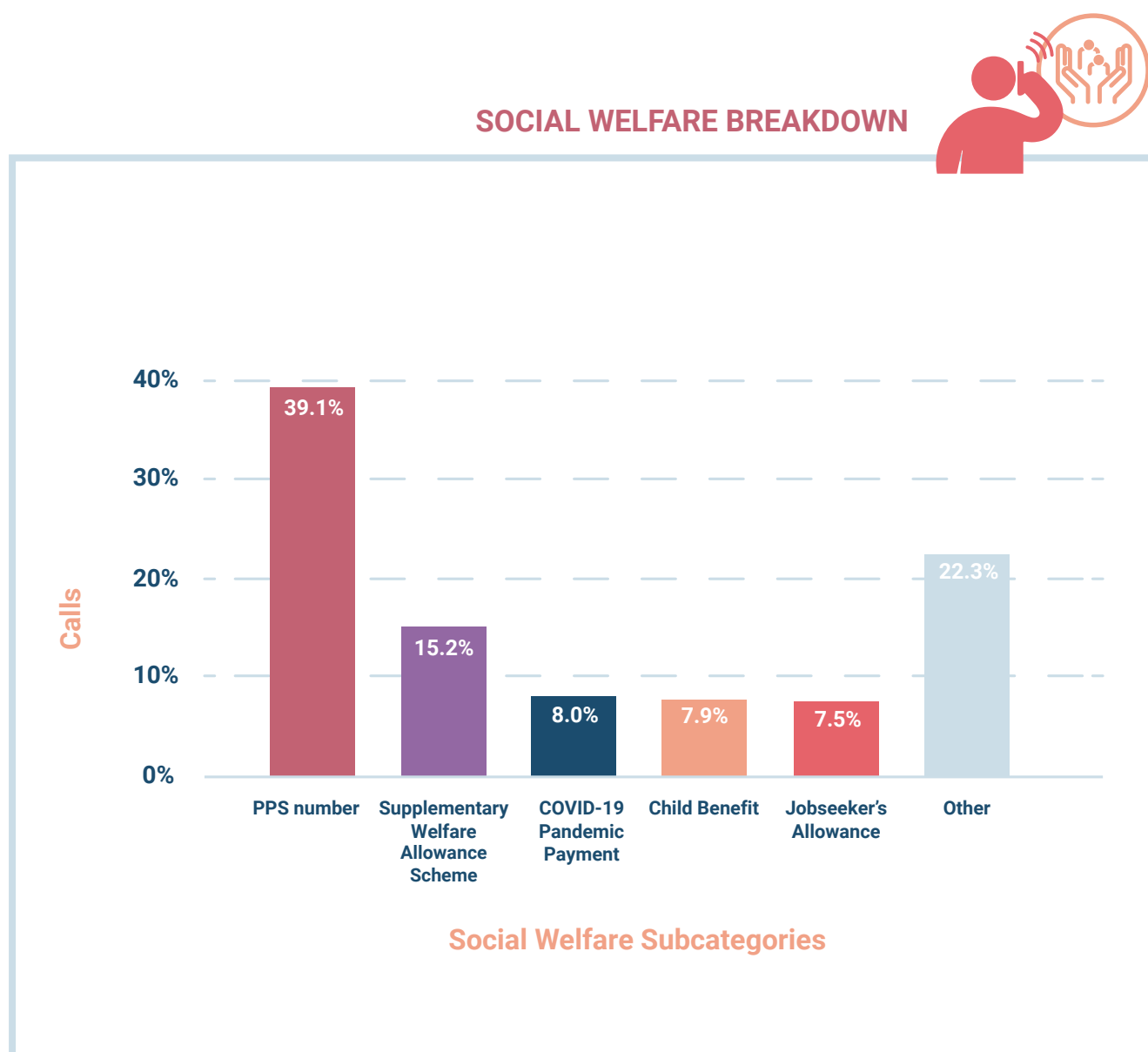
*"I have a big family and when the pandemic started, I didn't have food because we could not leave the house. I contacted the Roma Infoline and they helped us with food, baby milk, and nappies and gave us information about COVID-19."*

**Roma caller**

Across Europe, Roma "living in marginalised conditions and suffering from social exclusion and poverty face particular challenges"<sup>59</sup> that have been further highlighted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Ireland, the unemployment rate among Roma is very high<sup>60</sup> and due to difficulties in proving that they are habitually resident it is challenging for some Roma to access social welfare, including Child Benefit. As a result of this, many Roma are living in substandard and overcrowded accommodation and struggling to have their most basic needs met. It is vital that the structural inequalities Roma face are recognised and that "humane and protective measures" are tailored to address these challenges.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, responding to the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic requires direct cash payments and other supports for those most in need.<sup>62</sup>

It is important for the Department of Social Protection, when shaping their policies, to note that many Roma find difficulties in finding employment due to antigypsyism and discrimination. This is particularly relevant for Roma women who wear traditional clothes such as head scarfs and long skirts. As FLAC highlights in their Annual Report 2019, "it is notable, that most of the discrimination cases taken by FLAC on behalf of members of the Roma community are on behalf of Roma women."<sup>63</sup> This raises a concern in relation to gendered discrimination against Roma women. In 2019, FLAC won a case on behalf of a Roma woman who was denied access to employment in the hospitality sector on the basis that she wore traditional Roma attire.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, in Proiectos Romano, among the respondents who state that they 'have never experienced racism in Ireland', there are those who clarify that this is the case because they tend to cover their Roma identity in a number of ways, such as by not wearing traditional clothes and not mentioning their ethnicity<sup>65</sup>. This shows the high level of antigypsyism present in society where in order to fit in and find employment, it is often necessary to hide Roma ethnicity.

COVID-19 lockdowns and associated restrictions have disproportionately impacted the areas of work that many Roma are engaged in, for example informal or seasonal work, which leads to a loss of income.<sup>66</sup> Many Roma callers have no income and are trying to make ends meet in very precarious living conditions. This is important to note as social welfare was the most frequent reason for calling the Infoline in 2020. The graph below illustrates a further breakdown of the most common reasons for calling related to social welfare. Queries regarding PPS number applications was the most often occurring, followed by information about the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme, and then enquiries about the COVID-19 pandemic payment.



## Issue 1: PPS Number Applications

Having a PPS number is essential in accessing even the most basic services in Ireland. However, in order to apply for a PPS number, proof of address is required. Since many Roma are homeless and are frequently hosted informally by friends and family members, it is often very difficult to provide proof of address. While there is the option to provide an original household bill with a note from the bill holder to confirm residency,<sup>67</sup> Roma who are in receipt of social welfare payments and are hosting other Roma that the landlord may not be aware of, may be reluctant to provide this proof out of fear of it affecting their own payment or living situation.

During the pandemic, applications for PPS numbers were mainly available online, which was an added barrier for Roma who wanted to apply but had limited language and computer literacy. Throughout the reporting period, the Infoline received calls from Roma who needed assistance in applying for a PPS number, and was able to assist these callers with applications. In the first months of the pandemic, Cairde worked closely with the Department of Social Protection to ensure that Roma were not excluded from the online system. The Infoline was able to support Roma over the phone in completing their applications and provide translation and mediation support with Intreo staff where necessary.

### Case Study: Applying for a PPS number

A Roma man contacted the Infoline because he wanted to apply for a PPS number. This caller was living in overcrowded accommodation and had been relying on begging to survive as he could not find a job. Due to his accommodation situation, it had been difficult for the man to provide documentation of his address which is required for a PPS application. The caller also spoke no English. The Infoline worked with the Department of Social Protection to support the caller with his application and once he received his PPS number he was able to find a full time job.

## Issue 2: Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme

Data from the first month of the Infoline's operation showed that 83 (16%) calls were received with the reason for calling being poverty. Of these calls, 79 (95%) were in relation to the delivery of basic items including food, medication, and milk and nappies for babies. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, it was not possible for Roma who usually sell The Big Issue magazine to earn their living and this contributed to the high number of calls received in relation to poverty.

Enquiries about the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme (i.e., Exceptional Needs Payments - not subject to the HRC) was the second highest subcategory under social welfare. Usually, many Roma would access NGOs in person for support in emergency situations however this was nearly impossible during the early months of the pandemic. The Infoline played a key role in linking Roma families who needed basic items but also in applying for emergency payments for this cohort.

Although the purpose of the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme is to help those facing an emergency situation, Cairde encountered cases where Roma had either been refused an Emergency Needs Payment on the first instance, or they had been refused a second or a third payment during the reporting period. The difficulty of reapplying each time for an emergency payment created an extra layer of complexity for both Roma and NGO workers trying to support them while working remotely. Moreover, these applications, along with other social welfare applications, are not available in languages other than English and Irish which further complicates this issue.

### Case Study: Child Benefit and Working Family Payment

In the early stages of the pandemic, a family contacted the Infoline for support in applying for Child Benefit and Working Family Payment. This family (2 adults, 2 children) were living in emergency accommodation and the father was employed. No one in the family spoke English so it was impossible for them to complete the forms themselves. The Infoline helped the family to complete the forms and the family was awarded these payments.

### Issue 3: Child Benefit

As mentioned above, the Infoline received a number of calls from Roma parents who needed food, medication, milk and nappies for their children. These callers were not in receipt of any social welfare payment, including Child Benefit, and had been relying on charitable organisations to support their families. The Infoline worked closely with a variety of local organisations to organise delivery of food and other essential items to Roma families, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic. This demonstrates the need for Child Benefit to be a universal payment, so that the most vulnerable children in Ireland can have their basic needs met. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child made this recommendation to the Irish state in 2016<sup>68</sup> and expressed particular concern about “the habitual residence condition which hinders entitlement to child benefit payments”.<sup>69</sup>

The Habitual Residence Condition is a requirement not only for Child Benefit but for many social welfare payments.<sup>70</sup> It is often difficult for Roma to meet the HRC requirements due to a lack of documentation such as proof of address and proof of employment. This is because Roma often find themselves in informal living and working settings. Moreover, Roma who have just arrived in the country but cannot find employment are usually disqualified from social welfare payments because of the Habitual Residence Condition. They can apply for the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme however these payments are awarded on a discretionary basis and are not guaranteed. Although HRC affects all applications regardless of nationality, it can be argued that to prove a close link to Ireland is more difficult for non-Irish nationals.

*“The Infoline provided a point of contact with members of the Roma community, particularly during lockdown. Families at high risk were identified through the Infoline and Daughters of Charity provided food vouchers, as well as fruit and vegetable packs for them. It has been a great link between individuals and families as well as community services and statutory organisations to ensure provision of services, information, and accessing health services.”*

**Patricia Tallon, Community Development Outreach Worker,  
Daughters of Charity Community Services**

### **Case Study: Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme**

During the first lockdown, the Infoline received a call from a Roma man who needed support for himself, his wife, and their six children. The family were living in emergency accommodation and had no income as the man had lost his job just prior to the pandemic. This man did not qualify for Jobseeker's Allowance because of the Habitual Residence Condition and could not apply for the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment as he was not employed when the pandemic started. The family had no food and did not have milk or nappies for their baby. While the man's appeal for Jobseeker's Allowance was pending a decision, the Infoline supported the family to apply for the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme. The family could not complete the application without this support as both adults were illiterate and could not speak English. As a result of this intervention, the family were awarded an Emergency Needs Payment.

# 5

SECTION

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## Further Considerations



## SECTION 5: FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

### Antigypsyism and discrimination

*“Antigypsyism is a historically constructed, persistent complex of customary racism against social groups identified under the stigma ‘gypsy’ or other related terms, and incorporates:*

- 1. a homogenizing and essentializing perception and description of these groups;*
- 2. the attribution of specific characteristics to them;*
- 3. discriminating social structures and violent practices that emerge against that background, which have a degrading and ostracizing effect and which reproduce structural disadvantages.”*

*-Working definition of antigypsyism by The Alliance Against Antigypsyism<sup>71</sup>*

Antigypsyism and discrimination permeate every single aspect of Roma lives. It can be argued that these issues are the root causes of many, if not all, the challenges faced by Roma in contemporary Ireland and globally. In *Proiectos Romano*, 79% of the Roma respondents stated that they have been victims of several forms of racism and discrimination since they moved to Ireland, and 90% of these respondents did not report any racist incidents to the Gardaí.<sup>72</sup> Based on the concept of *intersectionality*<sup>73</sup> it is important to note that Roma women face double discrimination not only for their ethnicity but also their gender.

As stated by the Department of Justice, “Ireland does not currently have any specific legislation to deal with hate crime. The only legislation in Ireland that deals with hate-based offences is the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act 1989. Although criminal hate speech is an offence there have been very few prosecutions since its introduction.”<sup>74</sup> In this respect Cairde endorses the Irish Network Against Racism’s (INAR) call for the immediate enactment of hate crime legislation in Ireland, due to the insufficiency of the Hatred Act 1989.<sup>75</sup> While experiences of antigypsyism were consistently mentioned by Infoline callers, due to urgent needs such as shelter and food,

reporting antigypsyism was often overlooked. There is a widespread sentiment among Roma callers that even if they did report racist incidents, nothing would change. This is very worrying and one of the reasons why hate crime legislation is urgently needed in Ireland.

Alongside hate crime legislation, there is an immediate need for a renewed National Action Plan Against Racism in Ireland. Cairde welcomes the recently established *Anti-racism committee* that has been appointed to draw up the Plan in consultation with civil society stakeholders.

In order to alleviate the impact of direct and indirect antigypsyism in Ireland, special measures in key policy areas such as access to health services, housing, and social welfare, should be introduced. Finally, both statutory and non-statutory bodies should implement anti-racism training that addresses antigypsyism, as well as establish systems and procedures that respect cultural diversity. Understanding the impact of antigypsyism and the importance of addressing it are preliminary requirements for Roma inclusion in society. It is important that the specificities of antigypsyism are recognised at all levels, as “what sets antigypsyism apart is its high level of social acceptance.”<sup>76</sup>

## The Public Sector Human Rights and Equality Duty

The Public Sector Duty has a vital role to play in improving Roma access to public services and realising the rights of Roma in Ireland. Sector 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 “imposes a statutory obligation on public bodies in performing their functions to have regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination;
- promote equality of opportunity and treatment for staff and persons to whom it provides services; and
- protect the human rights of staff and service users.”<sup>77</sup>

The Public Sector Duty is a “permanent and ongoing obligation” that requires public bodies to consider the issues of discrimination, equality, and human rights “at every level across all functions of their organisations.”<sup>78</sup> As outlined in this report, Roma experience discrimination and difficulties in accessing key public services, including health, housing, and social welfare. In their Guidance Note on COVID-19 and the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, IHREC encourages public bodies to consider a variety of key access issues in their COVID-19 response. For example, for public bodies to ensure that information they are sharing is accessible to all in the community, and to consider the need for targeted measures “to ensure that all persons are covered and no-one is left behind”.<sup>79</sup>

IHREC suggests that while the Irish state has committed to progressing human rights and equality through plans and strategies including NTRIS 2017-2021, in instances where “the commitments contained in these plans and strategies fall to a public body or bodies, implementing the Duty can provide a coherent framework for progressing actions.”<sup>80</sup> Cairde supports the principles of the Public Sector Duty and welcomes IHREC’s decision to move towards effective compliance and enforcement of the Duty as stated in their most recent strategic statement.<sup>81</sup> Cairde calls for an immediate enforcement of the Duty as there are concerns that otherwise the Duty will not be applied effectively across all public bodies.

*“It has been helpful to have the option to refer people to the Roma Infoline, especially in the case of Roma who do not speak very much English. I think the continuation of the Roma Infoline going forward would be a very positive step in terms of providing ongoing supports and advocacy for Roma in Ireland. For example, where people are newly arrived in the country or move to a new area within Ireland, the Infoline can provide general information but also forward details of local organisations that work with Roma, such as ourselves who can provide specific local supports, ideally in-person once the COVID-19 situation changes. In many cases, it takes time to build up trust with members of the Roma community due to many reasons including the discrimination Roma have faced, so for a member of the community to be referred by one of the Roma community members who are working on the Infoline could support the building of necessary relationships with local organisations such as ourselves, ultimately helping to facilitate a better service and working relationships locally on the ground for Roma.”*

**Joleen Kuyper, Community Development and Advocacy Worker with the Roma Community, Donegal Travellers Project**

# 6

SECTION

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## Conclusion and Recommendations



## SECTION 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From its establishment in March 2020, the Infoline has provided an essential service to Roma living in Ireland. Although Roma are a small population in Ireland, they face complex challenges in having even the most basic and fundamental human rights met. These challenges have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as Roma were at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 due to inadequate accommodation. Roma are also at risk of getting more seriously ill due to their higher incidence of chronic illness or experience of health inequalities. As mentioned throughout the report, health, housing and accommodation, and social welfare emerged as the most serious concerns among Roma callers to the Infoline in 2020.

The need for an ethnic identifier emerged across these key areas, particularly housing and accommodation, and social welfare, and the need for systematic use of interpretation services and translation of key forms/applications is clear. Additionally, the requirements in place when applying for supports, whether for health services, housing, or social welfare, are extremely difficult for many Roma to meet, often due to informal living or working arrangements. Cairde's recommendations in addressing these issues, among others, are outlined below.

The Infoline has played a key role in bridging the gap between Roma and service providers, from supporting the daily running of services, to assisting in serious emergency situations. Collaboration between organisations and agencies was a vital component of the success of this work, as was the trust established between the Infoline and Roma callers. While the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the barriers Roma face in accessing the most basic of services, it has also shown the value of supporting Roma-led initiatives in addressing these issues.

*"The Roma Infoline has been invaluable to the work of the Capuchin Clinic and to SafetyNet during the COVID-19 pandemic. The support of the Infoline has been available to us every single time we needed it over the past year. It has provided:*

- a way for Roma people to seek and get medical help from us when they are unwell, with COVID-19 and other problems, by providing a number they can phone directly, answered by a person who is fluent in relevant languages. This is the only such number in the country that they can phone.*
- an insight for us into the culture of Roma people, their beliefs and fears, the barriers they face in accessing services, and the extreme poverty that some of them endure, enabling us to adapt our services to be more appropriate and accessible to them.*
- a gateway to building up trust in the service we provide, among Roma people. Many times people have refused medical care and have then accessed it because the Roma Infoline reassured people that we were well intentioned toward them and were trying to provide them with good care.*

*For example, a Roma woman phoned the Infoline saying that her husband had a cough and a fever. He was working but had no PPSN, hadn't been to work for 2 days, and he wouldn't get paid if he didn't work. The family spoke Romanian and no English. The Infoline phoned us and after much persuasion the man agreed to be seen by a doctor and tested for COVID-19. We provided support for him and his family to self-isolate at home – medication, food, and an oxygen monitor. The Infoline helped the man to apply for a PPSN so that he could apply for the COVID-19 Illness Benefit. One of the elderly members of the family had run out of diabetes medication so we were able to provide that. When the man became very unwell and wouldn't go to hospital because he feared he would be given an injection to kill him, the Infoline reassured him that he would be safe there, and he got into the ambulance and went. Without the help of the Infoline, the man might well have died, the family would not have been able to self-isolate and would probably have spread the virus to many more people.*

*We would not have been able to provide most of the Healthcare support to the Roma community that we have, without the Infoline - undoubtedly it has saved lives. The Infoline should continue for as long as there are Roma people living in Ireland who do not speak English well, or who are marginalised/disenfranchised/vulnerable. For many people it is the only way they can connect with the services that are available to them, and it is the only bridge that helps to build trust."*

**Dr Angela Skuce, Medical Director, SafetyNet/ Capuchin Centre**

## Health Recommendations



- Interpretation services should be used systematically across all health services for Roma patients who do not speak English fluently. The Department of Health should consider making funding available for interpretation services.
- Due to the health inequalities experienced by Roma, the Department of Health and the HSE should consider removing certain qualifying criteria, such as proof of income and proof of rent, when Roma apply for a medical card but cannot meet these requirements.
- Health application forms should be available in languages other than English and Irish, including the languages commonly spoken by Roma in Ireland: Romanian, Czech, and Slovak, among others.
- Ethnic data should be collected consistently across all health services in Ireland.
- Anti-racism training that addresses antigypsyism should be implemented across relevant health services as well as systems and procedures that respect cultural diversity.

## Housing and Accommodation Recommendations



- Interpretation services should be used across all housing services for Roma who do not speak English fluently.
- Housing application forms should be available in languages other than English and Irish, including the languages commonly spoken by Roma in Ireland: Romanian, Czech, and Slovak, among others.
- The Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government should introduce actions on Roma and accommodation to NTRIS as a matter of urgency. These actions should be drafted in conjunction with organisations working on Roma issues.

- The Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government should introduce an ethnic identifier across all their services in order to assess current policy and to develop more targeted policy measures going forward.
- The Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government should ensure that the provision of emergency accommodation is not dependent on the result of a social housing support assessment.
- The Department of Housing, Planning, Community, and Local Government should review the 41/2012 Housing Circular and consider removing some of the qualifying criteria that are excluding Roma from accessing social housing when needed.
- Anti-racism training that addresses antigypsyism should be implemented across relevant housing and accommodation services as well as systems and procedures that respect cultural diversity.

## Social Welfare Recommendations



- The Department of Social Protection to accept local Intreo offices around the country as an address point to receive PPS numbers for Roma who are currently homeless and cannot provide any proof of address.
- As the Department of Social Protection is mainly operating an online system for PPS number applications, Cairde is requesting a generic MyGOV ID account that can be used to apply on behalf of service users. This is because many Roma are computer illiterate and are unable to use the online system to apply for a PPS number.
- Due to the hardship some families/ individuals are experiencing, payments under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme should be administered on a weekly basis during the pandemic and should not be subject to discretionary powers.
- The Department of Social Protection should introduce an ethnic identifier across all their services in order to assess current policy and to develop more targeted policy measures going forward.

- In line with the recommendations made by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2016, Child Benefit should be made a universal payment that is not dependent on meeting the Habitual Residence Condition.
- Interpretation services should be used systematically across all social welfare services for Roma who do not speak English fluently.
- Social welfare application forms should be available in languages other than English and Irish, including the languages commonly spoken by Roma in Ireland: Romanian, Czech, and Slovak, among others.
- Anti-racism training that addresses antigypsyism should be implemented across relevant social welfare services as well as systems and procedures that respect cultural diversity.



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