

affecting the health of Roma children are the early marriages, a tradition among Roma, which results in underage mothers giving birth to premature infants (I. Tomova, 2000).

Although the increasingly worsening health status of Roma is a wide-known fact, no official statistics have been compiled to give a more detailed account of the problems and serve as a background for developing a comprehensive healthcare program targeted to the Roma community. This is what motivated the present pilot research.

The health condition of Roma was studied using the door-to-door method in three communities with consolidated Roma population in Southwestern, Northeastern and Southeastern Bulgaria: a big town – Kyustendil, a small town – Senovo, and a village – Tulovo. The three communities were chosen because in all of them there were Roma coordinators who could help collect more detailed and truthful information.

One and the same inquiry was conducted in the three places to establish the health status of Roma, their attitude to healthcare reform and to their general practitioner and dentist, their access to state-subsidized healthcare services, private medical practices, emergency medical care and prophylactic programs, and their use of unconventional methods of treatment. The questionnaire was developed by the Public Health Institute for the purposes of the research (see Appendix). Interviews were also held with general practitioners, local government officials, and representatives of local Roma NGOs.

Iztok District – The Roma Ghetto of Kyustendil

Kyustendil has 78,919 citizens. 11,000 of them live in the Roma neighborhood, Iztok, which is situated in the Eastern part of the town. Being slightly removed from the town, the neighborhood has gradually turned into a ghetto. Approximately 55% of the people living there are below 25 years of age and only 4.6% are above 60. The main problems of the Iztok District, as is the case with most Roma neighborhoods, are unemployment, poverty and poor infrastructure: unpaved streets, lack of water piping, sewerage, and street lighting.

A Roma association, Nevo Drom, has been registered in the neighborhood and has more than 90 members, young Roma. The association develops different social activities targeted to education, healthcare and vocational training. Among the activists are also two Roma nurses, one of which, Vassilka Alexandrova, helped us examine the health status of Roma living in the neighborhood and evaluate their attitude towards healthcare reform. Interviews were held in more than 100 houses. Three general practitioners, the mayor of the district and activists of the Nevo Drom Association were also interviewed.

Healthcare Services in Iztok District

Primary healthcare services in Iztok District are provided by five general practitioners. They see patients in the primary healthcare unit, which is situated in the center of the neighborhood. One of the consulting rooms is equipped with an electrocardiograph. Each month one of the general practitioners invites gynecologists and pulmologists to consult his patients. Approximately 90% of the population in the neighborhood have chosen their general practitioner and are covered by health insurance, nearly 60% have also registered with a dentist. However, there are more than 100 children who do not have a family physician.

The results of the inquiry show that 85% of Roma evaluate the reforms in healthcare as negative, 10% see no change at all, and 5% think that there have been some improvement. Most of the people living in the neighborhood admit that their access to healthcare, especially to specialized medical services, is encumbered. Buying medicines is a universal problem. Often days and weeks elapse before patients are able to buy the medicines that have been prescribed to them, provided they are not too expensive, and in the meantime their condition worsens. In fact, many Roma often choose not to see their general practitioner because they know that they