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Roma ethnic minority risk of social exclusion in Poland

Abstract

Roma people are one of the most colourful minorities in Poland and arouse interest and controversy among contemporary Polish society, nearly monolithic in terms of ethnic origin and nationality. At present, the socio-economic situation of Roma people in Poland and in other European countries is difficult and marked with social exclusion. In the article the author identifies and describes the following symptoms of social exclusion experienced by Roma people in Poland: lack of tolerance in Polish majority, problems relating to the functioning on the labour market and access to education, low standard of living as well as the need for some actions for Roma people in Poland to be taken by governmental authorities. The author refers in the article to numerous results of current surveys on the attitude adopted by Poles towards Roma people, which prove intolerant attitude of Poles to this minority. The second fact that, in the author's opinion, confirms social exclusion of Roma people in Poland is extremely high unemployment rate (90%) among Polish Roma, a consequence of disappearance of typical Roma professions, cultural limitations, stereotypes and very low level of education. This last reason further proves social exclusion of Roma people, although the situation in this respect is dynamically changing. As a result of actions taken by governmental authorities and because of financial support and creation of a post of a Roma assistant and a support teacher since 2004 Roma children have been widely attending schools. Roma ethnic minority is also excluded because of its very low standard of living characterised by the author on the basis of her own research carried out in the Małopolska Region. At the end of the article the author indicates governmental actions aimed at fighting the symptoms of social exclusion taken within the "Program for the Roma Community in Poland".

Key words: ethnic education; labour market; Roma people; social exclusion; standard of living; state programs

The National Census of Population and Housing (2011) shows that as many as 93.9% inhabitants of Poland are of a homogeneous Polish national identity. Among a relatively insignificant number of minority representatives in Poland, 16 thousand citizens of the Republic of Poland declared a Roma ethnic minority membership in the census, however, in accordance with more precise estimates of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, in Poland there are 20,750 Roma people, while the largest community of 3,500 people resides in the Małopolska Region (Program for the Roma community in Poland, 2003).

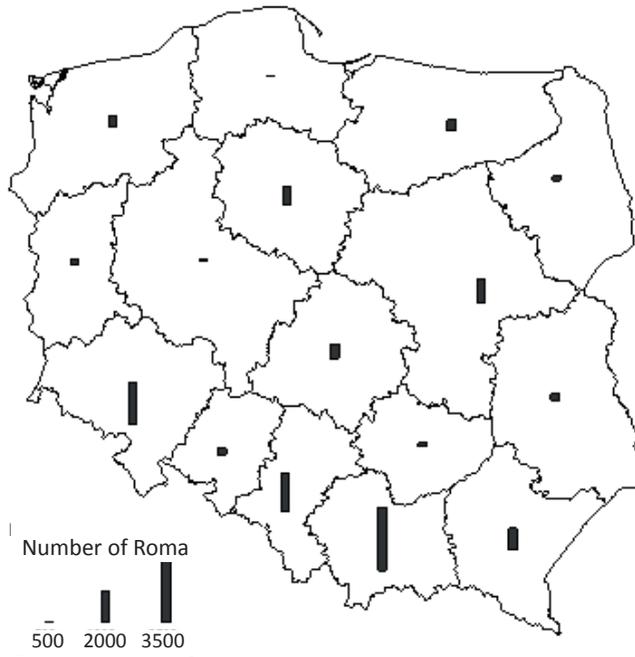


Fig. 1. Distribution and size of Roma ethnic minority in Poland in 2012 as estimated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration

Source: own work on the basis of data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration

Roma people, although at present it is a relatively small community (due to a significant decrease as a result of mass murders by Nazis during the Second World War), have been continuously inhabiting Poland for over six hundred years. The first mention of Roma people's presence in Poland was noted in Kraków (in 1401), Lvov (in 1405) and Sanok (in 1419) (Bartosz, 2004). Nevertheless, the majority still does not know and certainly does not understand the culture or customs of Roma ethnic minority. Roma community is not an object of Polish geographical research (only of historical, ethnographic and culture-related research), although this issue is widely tackled in foreign literature. It is also worth considering in Poland because most of the Polish Roma are now struggling with social and economic problems, which causes two alarming phenomena showing features of social exclusion: low standard of living of the Roma population and tense relationships with the majority.

The article focuses on Roma ethnic minority in Poland and aims to determine whether it is at risk of social exclusion. In order to achieve this purpose, at the beginning of the article the author mentions symptoms of social exclusion and, based on them, seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the level of acceptance towards Roma people in the Polish society?
- What is the situation of Polish Roma on the labour market?

- What is the educational situation of Roma people in Poland?
- What is the standard of living of Roma people in Poland?
- Is the Roma community in Poland covered by public aid?

To achieve the set objectives – i.e. find answers to the questions asked, the author of the article studies reference and source materials but also uses results of her own research carried out in 2013. The research was conducted in a form of interviews on a sample of several dozen Roma people and concerned the standard of living of the Roma population in three selected localities in the Małopolska Region inhabited by the largest Roma population in Poland (approx. 17%).

Roma people in Poland – at risk of social exclusion

In reference books in the social sciences “social exclusion” is usually defined either in terms of participation, as: a limited or non-existent participation of individuals and social groups in various spheres of social and public life, or in terms of distribution, as: “limited or non-existent access to important social resources and services, in particular access to labour market [...], education (qualifications), social security system and health care” (Jasińska-Kania, Łodziński, 2009) Roma minority in Poland can be regarded as being at risk of social exclusion, if not already socially excluded, especially in the light of the second definition. Another important symptom of social exclusion, in addition to those enumerated in the above definition, is the lack of acceptance by the majority, frequently connected with signs of discrimination and stereotypes. Social categories that researchers in social sciences often categorise as those at risk of social exclusion include: the unemployed, the poor, the homeless, the disabled, mentally ill, the elderly, persons of sexual orientation other than heterosexual, but also representatives of other races, cultures, followers of other religions, immigrants, refugees as well as of course representatives of national and ethnic minorities. The author claims that the following proves social exclusion of Roma ethnic minority in Poland: intolerant attitude of Poles towards Roma people, problems relating to the functioning on the labour market and access to education, very low standard of living and the need that some actions be taken for these Roma people by governmental authorities.

Lack of tolerance in the Polish majority

The first and, according to the author, the most important symptom of social exclusion of Roma people in Poland is lack of tolerance in Poles towards Roma people and problems relating to social integration of Roma people and Poles which result from ignorance of Roma culture and customs and their different value system. Because of differences between people and especially between groups of people comprising nations or ethnic groups, in our minds people are divided into “our people”, i.e. members of the same nation and “others”, who in many respects differ

from “our people”, and absolute “strangers” whose features contradict the features of “our people” (Mróz, 1986). In line with this division, by large segments of Polish society Roma people are rather regarded as “others”. In order to decide to which category a given person belongs, “our people”, “others” or “strangers”, most people use the following criteria: language, clothes, belief system, way of life, value system and also food and food-related customs as well as anthropological differences (Mróz, 1986). Analysis of Roma customs and culture show that when these features are taken into account, huge differences can be found between Polish and Roma people. Because of these differences Polish people find it so hard to accept Roma people and lack of acceptance leads to stereotypes and finally to – acts of discrimination. Many scientific publications prove their existence. The author will enumerate some of them, in her opinion are the most meaningful.

Research carried out by Aleksandra Jasińska-Kania over attitudes of Poles towards representatives of minorities published in an article dated 2009 shows that over 70% of adult Poles who participated in the research accepts the fact that Roma people are allowed to enter Poland, given Polish citizenship, while less than a half would like to see them as members of local authorities or future spouses of their family members (Jasińska-Kania, 2009). A similar attitude was demonstrated (this time by students) in an earlier research conducted in 1991 by the Department of Sociological Research at the Institute for Scientific Research Policy and Higher Education. Approximately 60% of students declare a dislike for Roma people, would not like to have a Roma holiday companion, family member and especially a Roma superior (Bartosz, 2004). A different research carried out on a much smaller research group of youth in a lower secondary school in Łososina (Małopolska Region) by Wężowicz-Bochenek and Ślosarczyk shows that 84% of Polish pupils taking part in the research say they are for an inflow of permanent immigrants to Poland, but 19% of them say they do not want an inflow of Roma people (Ślosarczyk, Wężowicz-Bochenek, 2007). Research carried out among young people by Piróg (2003) on a sample of 1,032 pupils from the Małopolska Region in 2001 shows that pupils regard Gypsies (22.7%), Ukrainians (23.4%) and Russians (21.5%) as least likeable nations. In a survey published by “Gazeta Wyborcza” in 1992 nearly 30% of young Poles declared that they would not like to share a desk at school with a Roma person (equally strongly as with an HIV-positive person), with a smaller percentage among them received only in case of a mentally ill person and a homosexual. In this classification Roma people shamefully overtake drug users, children of alcoholics, the Germans, Jews and the disabled... (Bartosz, 2004). It is mainly due to a negative stereotype of a Roma person that exists among Poles. In a nationwide survey carried out by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) in 2008, 42% of Poles that took part in it supported a view that Roma people have a natural predisposition to commit crimes (Szymańczak, 2011). Such views are a consequence of the fact that Poles do not know much about Roma history, tradition and culture. Culture and history-related differences which Poles do not understand can be shown on the example

of: a social structure based on ancestral community, where “being a member of a certain family becomes for an individual a source of prestige and social position and frequently also an opportunity to achieve a higher economic status” (Nowicka, 2007), getting married at a very young age and compliance with Romanipen (a set of rules of conduct passed down orally) (Paszko, Sułkowski, Zawicki, 2007).

Problems relating to the functioning on the labour market and access to education

Another proof of Roma social exclusion are also problems relating to the functioning on the labour market and access to education. The two factors are mutually dependent and mutually driven. Roma people represent a social group which is mostly incapable of keeping up with economic development of contemporary Poland. Of course, it is not true that the whole Roma population experiences economic problems. Roma community in Poland, similarly to other European countries, is characterised by internal diversity and differences between individual groups concern among others attitude to rules and such values as work (Paszko, 2007). In most cases however, Roma people are helpless on the labour market, mainly because of the stereotypical way in which they are perceived by Poles – as thieves and slovens, but above all because of a very low level of education, a factor that has become a determinant of success on the contemporary labour market. In accordance with a report “Roma people – unemployment. Elements describing social situation of Roma people in Poland in 1999”, every third Roma person from a research sample, is not a primary school graduate and as little as 0.8% of the research sample has earned a higher education diploma (Paszko, Sułkowski, Zawicki, 2007). In consequence Roma people face difficulties in finding employment. According to data presented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, unemployment rate among Roma people in Poland has remained at a level of over 90% for years, with the highest value noted in the first year when governmental authorities conducted research – 2004, when no one among them was officially employed (Fig. 2) (Reports on the implementation..., 2004–2011). In subsequent years unemployment rate among Roma people in Poland decreased, although it is still very high. Because of that as much as 80% of Roma population depend on state-provided welfare and the result are poor living conditions and a growing crime rate (Matulayová, 2001).

Another equally important reason for the fact that Roma people do not participate in the labour market, apart from lack of tolerance for representatives of Roma ethnic minority among Polish employers, is their history, tradition and culture. Roma people live in accordance with the Romanipen code, which is a set of rules of conduct compliant with a Roma cultural pattern. If the rules of the Romanipen are breached sanctions are imposed, the most serious being permanent exclusion from the group (Nowicka, 2007). Roma people commonly live by the rule, not directly resulting from the Romanipen, which says that “Roma people work when it is

absolutely necessary” (Paszko, 2007). Roma people find work boring and not very profitable, they prefer short-term, often one-off activities that bring profits (Paszko, 2007) (Osuch, Dwojak, 2009). “Roma people hold an opinion that non-Gypsies also work improperly, in a Gadže-like manner, stupidly, monotonously, sluggishly and unprofitably” (Mróz, 1986).

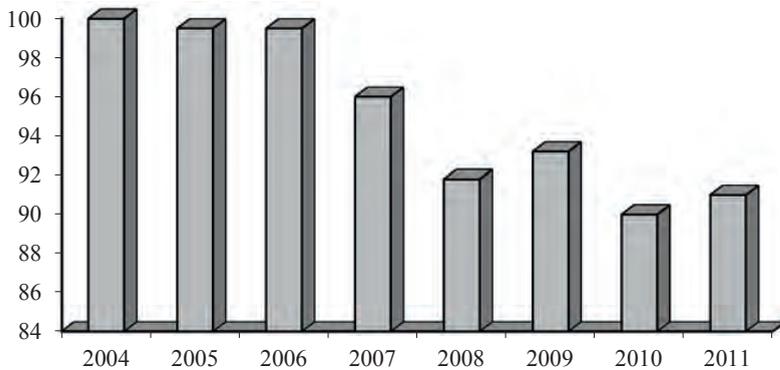


Fig. 2. Unemployment rate of Roma people in Poland in the years 2004-2011 (%)

Source: own study on the basis of Reports on the implementation of the “Program for the Roma Community in Poland” for 2004–2011

Specific attitude towards work among Roma people is reflected in unconventional jobs that they did in the past. They include: playing musical instruments, blacksmith’s craft, manufacturing wooden spoons, spindles, bowls, sieve-making, comb-making, horse-trading (sometimes in a dishonest way – they knew special tricks of how to make a horse look younger and healthier at the time of sale), boiler-making, bear shows (showing around tamed bears) and fortune-telling (Paszko 2007).

These days Roma people cannot pursue their traditional professions as there is no demand for their goods or services. The only typical Roma profession, apart from fortune-telling, which has preserved on the modern market is trade, that is why most working Gypsies trade in imported second-hand cars or clothes. They find it easy thanks to relations with representatives of their own group in other European countries (Paszko, Sułkowski, Zawicki, 2007). However, a group of those officially employed is definitely not large. Most of them still work illegally or not at all (Osuch, Dwojak, 2009). Because of this non-entrepreneurial attitude combined with a very low level of education and inability to use entrepreneurship support tools the Gypsy community in Poland is at risk of long-term unemployment (Osuch, Dwojak, 2009).

Due to a permanent shortage of money Gypsies struggle on a daily basis for existence, resources for basic needs of their multiple children families. It is obvious that in the light of such problems purchase of textbooks or school supplies must pale into insignificance. This fact is confirmed in a publication by Kwadrans (2007), who among material things that Roma children lack enumerates season-appropriate

clothing, funds for school transport as well as housing conditions, by which he means having a regular place to study. Wężowicz and Ślosarczyk (2007) also refer to this hopeless financial situation in their article, in which they mention a common phenomenon practised in southern Poland, where they conducted their research, of Roma parents applying for a certificate to confirm that their children are disabled and unable to pursue education so that they could obtain a family supplement, which for them is one of main sources of income (Osuch, Dwojak, 2009).

Unemployed parents who cannot afford to send their children to school or offer them any assistance in receiving education cause their children to follow in their footsteps making the already huge group of the unemployed even larger. Thus, lack of education and the resultant unemployment somehow become hereditary (Osuch, Dwojak, 2009b). However, hopefully this situation will be changing in the nearest future. Since 2004 within the "Program for the Roma Community in Poland" (described in more detail in the paragraph "Actions taken by governmental authorities") education of Roma children in Polish schools has really become common practice. Within the program, Roma children receive support which enables them to attend school and includes co-financed: stay in kindergartens, school kits (textbooks, notebooks and the necessary accessories), school transport, meals at schools, remedial classes and funds for doing homework at school under the supervision of a teacher. Hobby circles are provided, community centres are opened, classes focussed on Roma culture and tradition and also educational and remedial classes are organised for children and youth.

In addition, parents and children are provided with psychological and pedagogical counselling (meetings with parents focussed on compulsory school attendance and compulsory school education) and a scholarship system has been introduced for Roma students and artistically-gifted Roma children and youth.

However, the most important action taken in Poland with a view of providing education for Roma children was the creation of a post of a support teacher and a Roma assistant. Support teachers, specially prepared to work with Roma children, supervise children's work and progress, work with them during classes and after school activities (help in doing homework, conduct remedial classes) and overcome problems resulting from bilingualism. Educational support that they provide is necessary to ensure that Roma children in Polish schools have equal opportunities and are treated as foreign and bicultural students, otherwise, given additional difficulties with integration and huge backlog at school, they have no chance to fulfil compulsory school attendance requirements.

An equally important role, if not more important, is played by Roma assistants – respectable representatives of Roma community selected by Roma people themselves, who become a kind of "liaison officers" between the Roma world and the world of Gadže. Their main duty is to be at school on a daily basis (which often includes taking children to and from school as well) and offering support in day-to-day school problems. Assistants are responsible for attendance and safety of children (otherwise many parents worried about their children's safety would never let them

go to school) and usually initiate and organise activities for children. They perform care and educational functions and offer invaluable support to Gypsy children who struggle on a daily basis with learning and language difficulties, cultural differences and lack of acceptance in Polish-Roma classes.

As a result of what has been done, nowadays Roma children in Poland are educated in Polish-Roma integration classes, which brings about positive outcomes: school dropout rates have decreased significantly, in most regions in the country compulsory school attendance requirements are met at a level of over 80%, Roma children attendance rate exceeds 70% and they achieve a grade point average of about 3 (Reports on the implementation..., 2004–2011).

While the present situation of Roma people on the labour market can be regarded as a proof of social exclusion, the educational situation seems to be different. Adult Roma people carry a burden of exclusion because of their lack of education, while Roma children of school age are not burdened with exclusion thanks to actions taken by governmental authorities.

Low standard of living

Unemployment and lack of education are to blame for a low standard of living of Roma people, which in the author's opinion provides further evidence of their social exclusion. So far this issue has not been widely researched although it has been noticed by governmental authorities and local communities that Roma people belong to. This is also confirmed by preliminary results of research carried out by the author since 2012 among Roma community representatives in the Małopolska Region. The author will present results of a diagnostic survey conducted in a form of interviews among several dozen Roma people living in three localities in the Małopolska Region that differ in size and character: Krośnica (a village with a population of 6,702 (including 56 Roma people)), Limanowa (a small town of about 15,132 people (including 145 Roma people)) and Nowy Sącz (an important city in the region with a population of 84,129 (including 750 Roma people)). In order to assess the standard of living of her respondents, the author focusses on indicators relating to: respondents' situation on the labour market, the sources of household income, opinion on the level of satisfaction of their financial needs, place of residence and household infrastructure.

Adult Roma people who took part in the Author's research are in a very difficult situation on the labour market. Unemployment rate is the highest in Krośnica (nearly 100%), high in Nowy Sącz (65%) and the lowest in Limanowa (over 45%). Therefore, in all three localities Roma respondents' households have income from non-work sources. A vast majority of Roma people in Nowy Sącz (82%) live off social assistance benefits and in Krośnica more than a half (54.2%). While Roma people in Limanowa most often indicate an unemployment benefit as their source of income (63.5%).

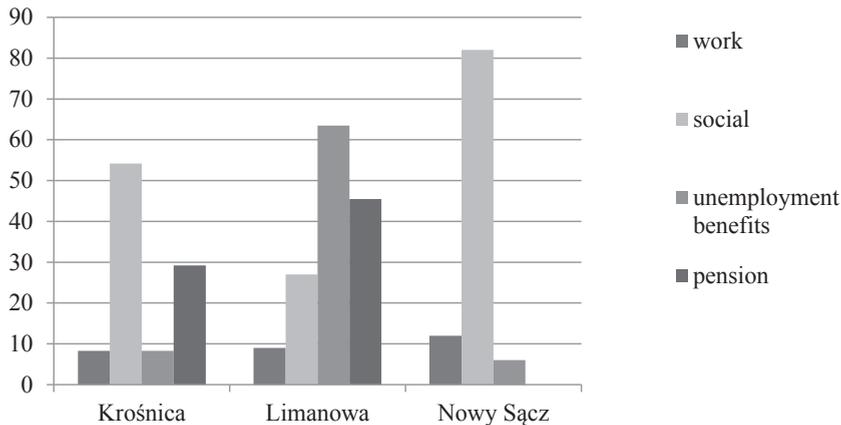


Fig. 3. Sources of income declared by Roma households (%)

Source: own work on the basis of own research

In consequence, financial needs of those Roma people are satisfied only to a very insignificant degree. The worst situation is in Krośnica, where a half of respondents claimed that sometimes they cannot even afford food whereas in Limanowa and Nowy Sącz most respondents (73% and 82% respectively) declare that they can afford food but find it difficult to pay utility bills and make other purchases. Monthly gross income per household among Roma people who took part in the survey amounts to: Krośnica: 694 zlotys, Limanowa: 1,173 zlotys, Nowy Sącz: 1,011 zlotys.

Housing situation of Roma people who participated in the survey is difficult as well. They live in multi-generational and multiple children families. An average number of people per respondent's household is high: the highest in Nowy Sącz (on average 9.8 persons), in Limanowa 6.6 persons and in Krośnica 4.75. An average number of children is also high: in Nowy Sącz – 4.9, in Limanowa – 4.7 and in Krośnica – 4.25. The situation is very different among the majority, where fertility rate is very low, lower than replacement fertility rate, and the bigger the locality the lower the rate – quite the contrary than in the case of the Roma people who participated in the survey. Most Roma in Nowy Sącz and Limanowa live in council flats (77% and 73% respectively) located in blocks of flats or temporary buildings adapted for residential purposes. It is different in Krośnica, where most premises are Roma property (91.7%), but they are in a very bad condition (these are mostly barracks with no foundations or heating).

The level of infrastructure that Roma premises in localities covered by the survey are provided with significantly differs from household to household. The worst situation is noted in Krośnica, where buildings used for residential purposes are not provided with running water, central heating, underground drainage, not to mention other facilities. Roma people from Limanowa have better living conditions as nearly half of their flats have been provided with basic infrastructure, while nearly all Roma people residing in Nowy Sącz live in blocks of flats and their flats are provided with all typically available utilities and devices.

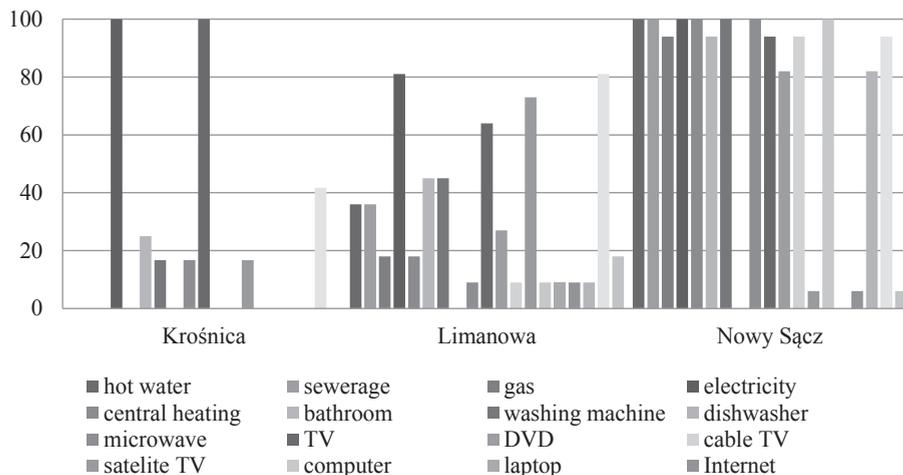


Fig. 4. Infrastructure of Roma households in Krośnica, Limanowa and Nowy Sącz (%)

Source: own work on the basis of own research

It must be concluded on the basis of preliminary results of research on the standard of living of Roma people in localities representative of the Małopolska Region that it is low, though differs from locality to locality in terms of some aspects. Undoubtedly it is an important symptom of social exclusion of Roma people in the region of Poland where their population is largest.

Actions taken by governmental authorities

The conditions signalled must be treated as symptoms of social exclusion suffered by Roma people in Poland.

At present marginalization and exclusion have a wider connotation and relate not only to social problems but also to areas that determine general socio-cultural situation of children, youth and adults. That is why now it is necessary to monitor (diagnose) the state and reasons as well as consequences of marginalization and exclusion, [...] so that assistance measures could be taken (Tropała, 2005).

The mere fact that governmental authorities take actions for a given community can act as a determinant that social exclusion takes place in case of this community.

The first one and so far the most important state program that addresses the problems of Roma minority in Poland is the "Program for the Roma Community in Poland". The Program was implemented in 2004 within the entire territory of Poland after its pilot version had been introduced in the Małopolska Region under the name the "Pilot Government Program for the Roma Community in the Małopolska Region for 2001–2003". The nationwide program for 2004–2013, which can be continued in subsequent years, was created on the basis of the pilot version.

Every year 10 million zlotys are designated for the program from a special reserve set up in the state budget. This amount is supplemented with additional resources from budgets of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration (approx. 300 thousand zlotys) and the Ministry of National Education (approx. 700 thousand zlotys) (Szymańczak, 2011).

International and national foundations and organizations also contribute some amounts from their resources. The program aims at equalizing levels and opportunities between Poles and Roma people in such fields as: education, employment, health, hygiene, housing conditions and ability to function in the civic society. Beginning from 2014 further actions aimed at Roma people will be taken under the “Program of the Social Roma Integration in Poland for 2014–2020”. According to the author, state aid is definitely necessary, but sometimes not well allocated. Despite the above described obviously positive actions and support provided in the area of education, other funds spent within the program on other fields could have been more effectively allocated. One of the most important problems experienced by Roma minority is large-scale unemployment. Unfortunately in this key area operation of the program leaves a lot to be desired. For example, in the Małopolska Region, where Roma population is the largest in Poland (approx. 3,500), number of trainings aimed at increasing their qualifications with a view of giving them better chances on the labor market in the years 2004–2011 never reached 10. Also the number of subsidized jobs created in the years when the survey was carried out was usually below 10. Investments were commonly made in renovations of existing premises rather than in building new flats – the greatest number of them was renovated in 2010 – as many as 130. Taking into account the size of Roma population in the Małopolska Region and existence of several member households, it is possible to conclude that the premises are renovated every few years. Given the deplorable condition of the premises coupled with lack of care among the inhabitants (since these are council houses) this is a waste of money.

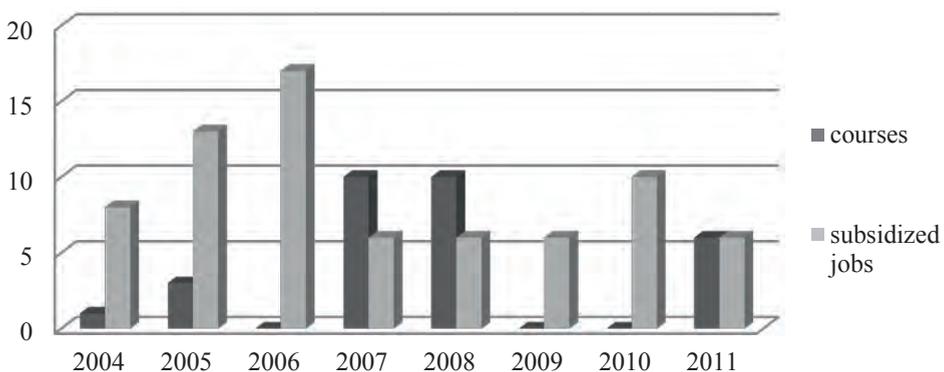


Fig. 5. Number of Roma participating in courses for lifting or changing skills and benefiting from subsidized jobs in the Małopolska province in the years 2004–2011

Source: own work on the basis of own research

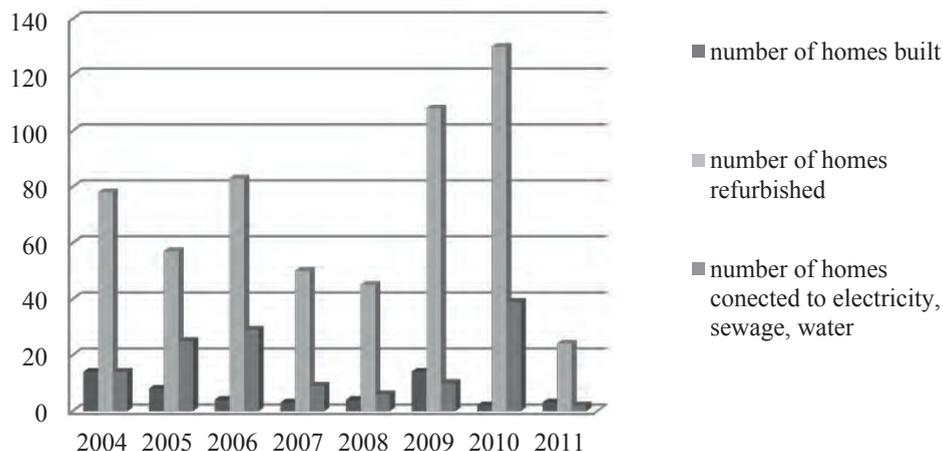


Fig. 6. Public actions taken to improve the living conditions of the Roma in the Małopolska province in the years 2004–2011

Source: own work on the basis of own research

Conclusions

Analyses of reference books, ministerial reports and results of research carried out by the author and others lead to a conclusion that Roma people in Poland are a group at a serious risk of social exclusion. This is confirmed by answers to questions set as the paper's objective which at the same time constitute a summary of the discussion conducted in the article:

- Level of acceptance of Roma people in Polish society is very low. When social relations become more intimate Roma people are rejected by Polish people of different ages. This is accompanied by strong misunderstanding and lack of knowledge of Roma culture which is to blame to a significant extent for a negative stereotype of Gypsies formed among Polish people.
- The situation of Polish Roma on the labour market is dramatic. Approximately 90% of them are unemployed and most are helpless on the labour market due to lack of education.
- At present the educational situation of Roma people in Poland is bad which is confirmed by a low level of education among adult Roma. However, the situation has been getting decidedly better in recent years as a result of actions taken by governmental authorities leading to the creation of conditions conducive to effective education of Roma children and giving Roma children a chance to avoid the fate of their unemployed parents.
- The standard of living of Roma people in Poland determined on the example of research carried out in the Małopolska Region is low. Many Roma people live in council flats not equipped with basic infrastructure.

- Roma community in Poland is covered by and requires state aid within the “Program for the Roma Community in Poland”. Actions taken by governmental authorities confirm the risk of social exclusion. Most of these actions are intentional but the method of funds distribution within particular areas of the program should be verified.

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