

Street-Involved Children in Serbia

The Centre for Youth Integration is an independent Belgrade-based non-profit charity that provides specialized services and personal support to street-involved children and children at risk of becoming street-involved, aged five to fifteen, and their families.

The UN estimates one hundred and fifty million children live and work on the streets worldwide. The number of children that are street-involved in Serbia is **unknown**.

Currently, the Centre for Youth Integration provides support to **496 street-involved children** and **children at high-risk of becoming street-involved**, and their families.

Since 2007, we have provided support to 1,024 children and their families.

In 2018, we are conducting research to identify how many children are street-involved or at risk of street-involvement throughout the city of Belgrade, which will provide vital information for planning services in the future.

The services we provide and our approach are unique in Serbia. We treat children with care and their families with respect, no matter their situation. We take pride in knowing the children and families we support, and in understanding their circumstances and needs from their perspective. Building long-lasting trust and cooperation is the foundation of our work.

Every child we assist benefits from **individualized support**, tailored to their personal circumstances and needs. Children choose when and how to access services – **participation is completely voluntary**. We help children to learn how to articulate their needs and to understand what they need to do to fulfill those needs. We also **mediate** with other service providers on behalf of children and their families to ensure they are able to access social welfare, health care and education services in accordance with their rights.

The services we provide are mandated by law, fulfill all official child-care service standards and are fully licensed. However, we receive no financial support from local or national authorities.

The Centre for Youth Integration provides support to children and their families at **specialized facilities**, on the **streets** and in the **communities** where they live through our **Drop-In Shelter and outreach services, education programme and youth inclusion and employment programme**.

Street-involvement is not recognized by social protection (or other) institutions as a specific category of vulnerable children or youth; there are therefore no official data regarding the number or circumstances of street-involved children or youth in Serbia.

Together, our programmes aim to **prevent** the most at-risk children from becoming street-involved, **meet the immediate needs** of children that are street-involved and support them to **participate in education** and **achieve social inclusion**, and support street-involved youth to gain **formal employment** and benefit from genuine **social inclusion as adults**.

Understanding why and how children become street-involved

In Serbia, **poverty drives children to become street-involved**. Children from poor families invariably become street-involved because they have no other options: it is necessary to work – very often begging – in order to secure their basic needs.

For many children **street-involvement begins at a very young age**. It is common for children to gain their first experience of street-involvement with their parents, who are often themselves street-involved (engaged in the collection of secondary raw materials – i.e. recycling) or while in the care of older siblings or peers, who are street-involved. In this way, children often become accustomed to spending time on the street before becoming actively engaged in working on the street.

There are real **incentives for children to become and remain street-involved**. Research by the Centre for Youth Integration and Save the Children found that through begging and other activities children are able to earn on average three hundred euros per month on the street in Belgrade – above minimum wage – providing extremely poor families with a vital source of income.

Children earn €300 per month working on the street in Belgrade

Children are often acutely aware of the important role they play in securing their family's livelihood. The income children earn on the streets also empowers them with independence in their families and status in their communities. Children therefore commonly perceive working on the street as a **successful** strategy for overcoming their circumstances.

However, as children get older they are less able to garner sympathy from the public and their ability to earn on the streets, particularly through begging, decreases. Lacking the education and skills necessary to access formal employment, children typically have no other option but to **transition into other arduous street-involved activities**, primarily collecting secondary raw materials.

Parents of street-involved children often **lack basic parenting skills and have little or no education**, and are experiencing serious social and economic exclusion. Many families suffer from dysfunctional relationships and poor communication, with violent discipline methods common. Parents usually **neither know nor understand their rights** as citizens or the rights of their children, and are often **unable to manage administrative procedures** necessary to acquire identity documents or access basic services. This does not mean parents do not or cannot care for their children. It is a sign that they need support.

Some children are street-involved because they are **exploited by their families or other people** – usually people they know. However, this does not always mean that children have entirely negative relationships with their families (or other persons exploiting them), or that the child perceives that they are being exploited. This can create very challenging conditions in which to encourage children (and their families) to cease working on the street. Even when children are being exploited, it is often driven by one parent (typically the father), in which case it is important to support the other parent (mother) and child[ren] to stay together.

Whether children are being exploited, become street-involved out of desperation or gradually transition from spending time on the street with family members or peers to actively working on the street, in almost all cases the background to street-involvement is extreme poverty: for some children, working on the streets is the only solution available.

Understanding the risks and dangers faced by children on the street

Children that are street-involved are among the **most vulnerable in any society**. The impact of street-involvement is invariably **severe** and **long-lasting**, with detrimental consequences for a child's health, development, emotional wellbeing and behavior, and raises the prospect of life-long social and economic exclusion, chronic ill-health and reduced life expectancy.

Street-involvement is among the most extreme forms of social exclusion experienced by children.

Street-involvement is inherently dangerous, exposing children to serious and continuous risks of injury, violence, abuse and sexual exploitation. In Belgrade, the risk of violence on the streets and in other settings against street-involved children arises from numerous sources, including peer-violence among children, institutional violence perpetrated by police, social workers and health workers (among others), violence within families, and violence perpetrated by other citizens. The risk of abuse, sexual violence and sexual exploitation can arise from persons known to children, including in a small proportion of cases from intimate and extended family members, and from strangers that take advantage of vulnerable and unsupervised children, both on the street and in other settings.

Street-involvement is **harmful to children's health**. Malnutrition, unhygienic conditions, freezing temperatures, injury, exposure to infection and communicable diseases, and lack of access to adequate health care pose a serious risk to street-involved children's health. Many street-involved children in Belgrade suffer from chronic respiratory conditions, such as asthma, skin infections and dental disease. Hepatitis B and C, as well as sexually transmitted

Many street-involved children themselves have children at a young age. Many girls will give birth by the age of fifteen and most will have at least one child by the age of twenty. Pregnancy at such a young age presents additional risks to the health of both mother and child.

diseases, are persistent and prevalent risks to street-involved children and youth. Substance abuse, including glue and heroin use, which is widespread among street-involved youth in Belgrade, pose a further serious risk to the mental and physical wellbeing of young people and raises the risk of exposure to other serious diseases.

Street-involvement harms children's **development and emotional wellbeing**. Many street-involved children often work unaccompanied or solely in the care of an older child for extended periods of time. Children that are regularly unaccompanied by parents or other adult cares at a young age are denied vital opportunities for safe-play, nurturing stimulation and opportunities to establish caring bonds with adults that are crucial for children's intellectual development and emotional wellbeing.

As a consequence, street-involved children often fail to develop fundamental language, social and motor skills and exhibit a basic lack of comprehension and ability to communicate and cooperate with peers. Street-involved children are also denied both formal and informal opportunities for learning and development at school and at home, particular of core skills such as reading, writing and basic arithmetic that are essential for children to master other skills in childhood and in later life.

Children that become street-involved commonly develop behavioral strategies, which are typically aggressive, violent and weary of institutional authority, in order to **cope with the dangers inherent to street-involvement and to exploit the opportunities available to them on the street** to generate income for themselves and their families.

Achieving social inclusion for street-involved children is almost always a challenging and gradual process of learning new behaviors, in which children need consistent and persistent long-term support.

Because of a lack of other experiences, street-involved children often believe that the behavior they learn on the street is the only way to cope with the many challenges in their lives. However, these behavioral strategies are themselves **barriers to coping and thriving in other social contexts**, particularly formal rules-based environments such as schools.

The impact of becoming street-involved is, for most children, life-long. Children that become street-involved in Serbia are overwhelmingly likely to never gain formal employment as adults and to remain street-involved, suffering social exclusion, poverty, poor housing conditions, and chronic ill-health for their entire lives.

Understanding the circumstances of children that become street-involved

In Serbia, street-involvement is common only among one very specific group of children: **children from extremely poor Roma families that live in informal settlements**. These communities suffer severe segregation, social exclusion and discrimination. It is extremely rare for children from other backgrounds to become street-involved in Serbia, even for a short period.

Understanding the circumstances of the Roma community and the conditions in informal settlements is essential for understanding the context in which street-involvement occurs.

Living conditions in informal settlements are commonly extremely poor. Most families live in *improvised housing* – known locally as *Baraka* – made of recycled materials, such as corrugated iron, loose bricks, cardboard, tarpaulins and tires. Settlements are often sited on waste ground or former-industrial sites, which are often unsafe and/or unfit for human habitation.

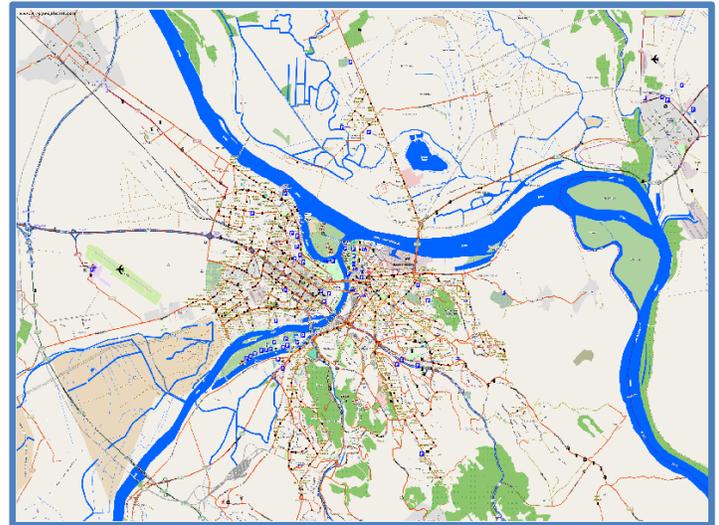
Informal settlements are not officially recognized by municipal or city authorities. They have been constructed without formal building permission and in most cases have remained unregistered and are regarded as illegal. Residents of informal settlements are therefore unable to formally register as residents of the municipality in which they *de facto* live – and in many cases have lived for generations. These **families are denied formal residency rights**. Because informal settlements are regarded as illegal, most households **lack access to municipal utilities**, such as clean running water, sanitation, electricity and heating. Due to a lack of formal residency documentation, residents are also often **denied access to basic services** provided by the local authorities, including health care, social protection, education and employment services. Residents of informal settlements do not have a formal address, which creates further barriers to other services, such as a bank account or a telephone.

394 of the 496 (79%) of the street-involved children currently receiving support from the Centre for youth integration live in **informal settlement** communities. The remaining 21% of children supported by the Centre for Youth Integration live in social housing. **All of the children** currently supported by the Centre for Youth Integration are from the **Roma community**.

Families living in informal settlements can **register their children with the municipal centre for social work**, in order to provide the child (only) with a formal address and local residency status, which in principle grants the child access to local health care, social welfare and education services. However, **this procedure is under-used**, because social workers often site the circumstance of families living in informal settlements, particularly when children are street-involved, as ground for taking the child[ren] from their parents –as a protection measure– and **placing them into alternative care**, rather than providing vulnerable families with the **support they need** to improve their circumstances and stay together.

Even when residents of informal settlements, including children, are able to fulfill the formal requirements to access local services, the **physical distance** between many informal settlements in Belgrade and the institutions where services are provided presents a further **practical barrier**. This is a particular problem for young children that are allocated places at preschools (kindergarten) and primary schools in far-away districts of the city. **In principle, the local authorities should provide transport** for these children to travel to preschool/school, but **in practice this obligation is rarely fulfilled**.

Moreover, not only are residents of informal settlements denied access to basic utilities and statutory local services, **emergency services** - principally the law enforcement and health care services – commonly **refuse to respond to emergency calls** requesting assistance at residences in informal settlements.



Belgrade

This highlights the nature of **discrimination against these communities**: discrimination is not only a barrier to equal participation and forceful exclusion, but a **disregard for their basic rights**. In accordance with the law, it does not matter if a citizen requires emergency assistance in an informal, unregistered and illegal settlement or in a field or a shopping mall, or any other setting; the emergency services are obliged to respond, and in almost every other situation in Serbia, they do.

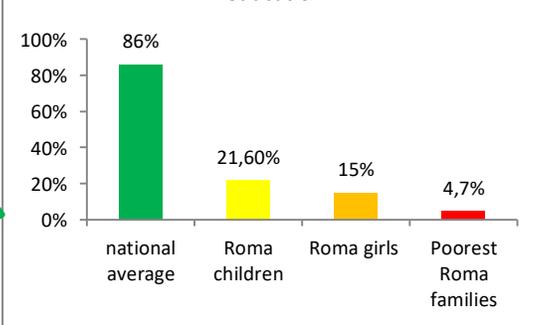
Children are **DISCRIMINATED AGAINST** because they are **STREET-INVOLVED**, because they live in **INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS**, and because they are **ROMA**.

It is in these severe conditions – in which children and their families experience exceptional social and economic exclusion – that children are at highest risk of becoming street-involved. These settlements are therefore key locations in which to target actions aimed supporting the social and economic inclusion of the most vulnerable families in the country and, in turn, preventing street-involvement.

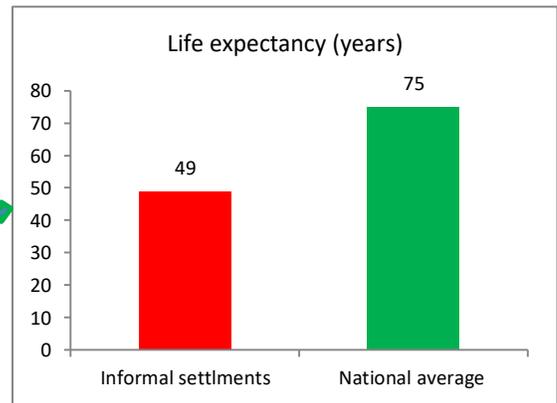
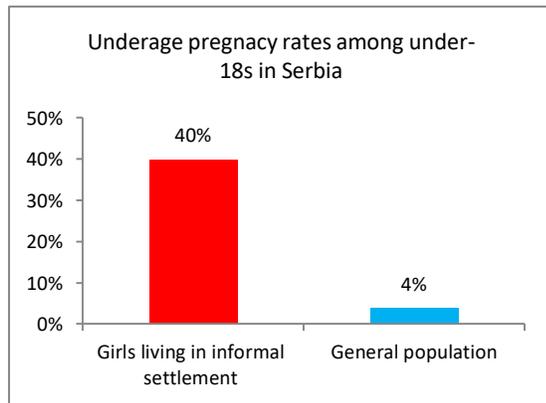
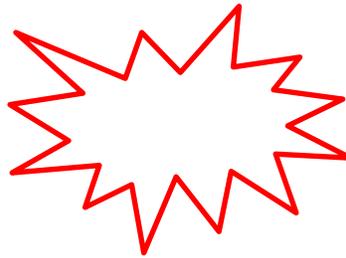
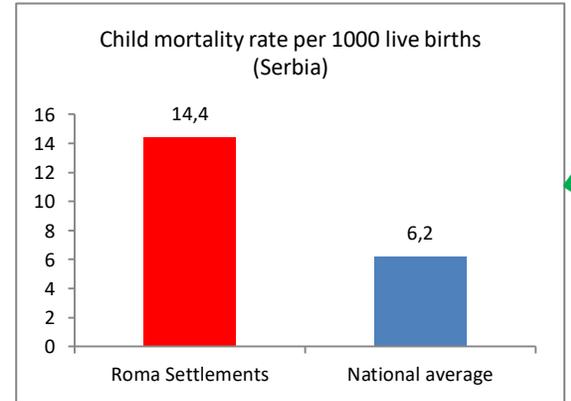
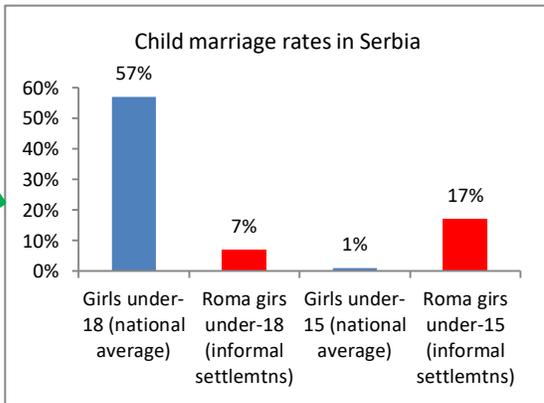
IN NUMBERS: the catastrophic impact of segregation and exclusion on women and children that live in informal settlement

Over half of girls living in informal settlements are **married by the age of 18** (eight times higher than then general population) and nearly one-fifth of girls by the

Participation rates in **education** among children living in informal settlements is **extremely low** – with less than a quarter of children attending secondary schools (only 15% of girls), and **only one in twenty children from the poorest families**; compared to a national average of 86%.



The **mortality rate** among children under-5 living informal settlement is **over twice the**



Under-age pregnancy rates are **far higher among girls that live in informal settlements** than the generation, with nearly half of girls under 18 living in informal settlement having given birth to at least one child, compared to less than one-in-twenty among the general population. Globally, **pregnancy related deaths are the leading cause of mortality among girls aged 15-19**. Girls are also far more likely to experience child-birth related complications than older women.

Life expectancy of people that live in informal settlements is **forty-nine years** – a third lower than the national average (75 years). Research conducted by the Centre for Youth Integration in 2016 in ten informal settlement communities in Belgrade found no persons over the age of 65 years, indicating that **children born in informal settlements have almost no chance of living to a pensionable age**.

Why Street-Involved Children rely on the Centre for Youth Integration for Support

The issue of street-involvement is **not recognized or adequately understood** by state institutions in Serbia, despite substantial research and policy advocacy on the subject locally and globally by networks such as Consortium for Street Children, of which the Centre Youth Integration is an active member, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, and many national governments, among others.

In Serbia, street-involved children are **not officially recognized** as a specific vulnerable group. **No specialized state institution** or services or trained staff exist to address the needs and rights of street-involved children. There are **no official data** regarding the number or circumstances of street-involved children in the country. There is **no strategy** at national or local levels to tackle the issue, protect street-involved children or fulfill their rights. As a consequence, **many street-involved children are undocumented and invisible to the state.**

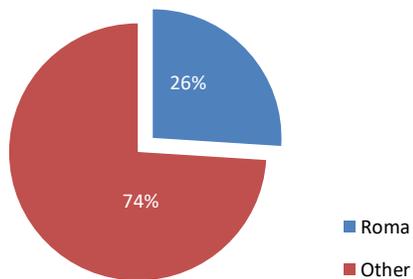
Zero data

There is no official data regarding street-involved children in Serbia.

This policy is a **clear violation of the rights of children to a family life** under international law (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). The Convention clearly and unambiguously obliges states to prioritize the **best interests of the child** and to **provide families with the necessary support** to mitigate risks, such as neglect, improve their material circumstance and to help families to **stay together**. The Convention demands that, without exception, **no child should be separated from their parents solely or because of circumstances arising from poverty.**

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: The best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children.

Children in alternative care (separated from their parents) in Serbia



In practice, police rarely detain children on the streets because they **lack actual operation protocols and procedures** to do so: police officers do not know what to do with street-involved children, so they typically ignore them. There is, however, **clear evidence of the discriminatory application of protection measures** that favor separation of Roma families. Children from the Roma community are massively over-represented in alternative care: **26% of children in alternative care in Serbia are from the Roma community** (while only 2% of the population declare themselves as Roma, according to the 2011 national census). Moreover, most children (and their families) supported by the Centre for Youth Integration have only received material (financial) support from social protection institutions – rather than the tailored, individualized support that they need and which international law obliges the Serbian state to provide.

In the City of Belgrade, **protocols for coordination and cooperating** among police and communal police, social workers, health workers, children's shelters and non-governmental organizations regarding children that live and/or work on the street have been developed in principle, but have **not been implemented in practice.**

The Centre for Youth Integration is the sole provider of specialized services for street-involved children in Belgrade. Our team is often therefore the only professional support or assistance available to hundreds of street-involved children and thousands of children at risk of street-involvement, and their families, in the city.