

# Roma Attitudes: Understanding and Addressing Prejudice

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## Attitudes Toward Roma: An Encyclopedia Entry

Attitudes toward the Roma population represent one of the most persistent and pervasive forms of prejudice found across Europe and other regions globally. The term used to describe this specific form of racism is often referred to as **Antigypsyism**, a deeply ingrained hostility that transcends national borders, political ideologies, and socio-economic strata. Understanding these attitudes requires a comprehensive analysis that integrates historical marginalization, contemporary psychological theory, and the specific socio-economic conditions faced by Roma communities. Unlike generalized xenophobia, Antigypsyism targets a specific ethnic group characterized by vast internal diversity but unified by centuries of structural exclusion and negative stereotyping by majority populations. These attitudes are crucial to study because they directly fuel systemic discrimination in areas ranging from housing and employment to education and healthcare, making the Roma one of the most vulnerable and marginalized ethnic groups on the continent.

The study of attitudes in social psychology typically defines them as enduring evaluations--positive or negative--of people, objects, or ideas, comprising affective (emotional), cognitive (belief-based), and behavioral components. In the context of attitudes toward Roma, the affective component is dominated by feelings of disgust, distrust, and fear; the cognitive component is characterized by rigid, negative stereotypes; and the behavioral component manifests as avoidance, exclusion, and overt discrimination. These attitudes are not merely personal prejudices but are often supported by institutional practices and accepted social norms, making them highly resistant to change. Furthermore, the perceived ambiguity surrounding the Roma identity--often viewed as both a cultural group and a socio-economic underclass--allows majority groups to employ multiple rationalizations for exclusion, strengthening the robustness of the negative evaluation.

The complexity inherent in analyzing attitudes toward Roma stems from the intersectionality of various forms of bias. Researchers note that while attitudes toward other minority groups may be related primarily to perceived threat (economic or cultural), attitudes toward Roma often incorporate elements of moral condemnation rooted in deeply entrenched historical narratives about criminality, lack of hygiene, and an unwillingness to assimilate into the national culture. This moral dimension provides a powerful justification for segregation and neglect, allowing majority citizens to maintain a positive self-image while simultaneously endorsing policies that severely restrict the opportunities available to Roma individuals. Consequently, measuring and challenging these attitudes requires addressing not only explicit biases but also the implicit, culturally transmitted assumptions that reinforce the marginalized status of the Roma.

## Historical Roots and the Development of Antigypsyism

The historical trajectory of Roma populations in Europe is fundamental to understanding modern negative attitudes. Originating in India, the migration of Roma peoples into Europe began around

the 14th century, and almost immediately, they faced suspicion and hostility. Initially, they were often tolerated as exotic entertainers or craftspeople, but this tolerance quickly eroded, replaced by accusations of being spies, heathens, or carriers of disease. This early period established the enduring cognitive framework that views Roma as perpetual outsiders, fundamentally separate from the settled, Christian European population. This perception of eternal foreignness, regardless of centuries of residence in a given nation, is a critical psychological mechanism that maintains exclusionary attitudes today.

The institutionalization of prejudice took drastic forms throughout history, most notably the enslavement of Roma in territories such as present-day Romania for nearly five centuries, ending only in the mid-19th century. This history of chattel slavery provided a powerful socio-legal justification for viewing Roma as inherently inferior and disposable, leaving a deep structural legacy that contributes to contemporary poverty and marginalization. Furthermore, the 20th century saw the horrific culmination of Antigypsyism during the Holocaust (known in Romani as the **Porajmos** or Devouring), where hundreds of thousands of Roma were systematically exterminated by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. The relatively slow and often inadequate recognition of the Porajmos compared to the Jewish Holocaust reflects a continued societal minimization of suffering inflicted upon Roma, reinforcing the idea that anti-Roma attitudes are less serious or less deserving of moral condemnation.

The historical narrative of nomadism, though often exaggerated and misapplied--as many Roma groups have been settled for generations--plays a crucial role in maintaining negative attitudes. The image of the rootless, non-contributing traveler contrasts sharply with the majority society's emphasis on settled domesticity, national belonging, and consistent employment. Psychologically, this narrative feeds into the perception of cultural threat, suggesting that Roma culture is inherently incompatible with the norms required for a functioning modern state. This narrative of incompatibility allows majority groups to attribute socio-economic disparities not to systemic failure or historical discrimination, but to the alleged cultural deficiencies or "lifestyle choices" of the Roma themselves, thereby absolving the majority society of responsibility for inclusion.

## Psychological Mechanisms of Anti-Roma Bias

Social psychological research identifies several key mechanisms that sustain negative attitudes toward Roma. One prominent explanation involves the application of **Integrated Threat Theory (ITT)**. This theory posits that prejudice arises from four types of perceived threat: realistic threat (economic competition, safety concerns) and symbolic threat (differences in values, beliefs, or moral standards). For Roma, both types are intensely activated. Majority populations frequently perceive Roma as posing a realistic threat due to competition for scarce resources (jobs, social welfare) and as a symbolic threat because their perceived cultural norms--often mischaracterized as non-conformity or reliance on informal economies--are viewed as undermining national values.

The combination of these threats yields particularly intense negative emotional responses, which are highly predictive of discriminatory behavior.

Furthermore, personality variables such as **Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)** and **Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)** are strongly correlated with high levels of anti-Roma prejudice. Individuals high in RWA tend to adhere rigidly to social conventions, exhibit submission to perceived authorities, and show aggression toward outgroups deemed violators of these conventions. Since Roma are often stereotyped as non-conformist and resistant to assimilation, they become prime targets for RWA hostility. Conversely, SDO reflects a desire for group-based hierarchy and dominance; individuals high in SDO endorse policies and attitudes that maintain the lower status of marginalized groups. Given the historical and contemporary subordinate position of the Roma, SDO provides a powerful ideological justification for maintaining structural inequality and resisting efforts toward equality and integration.

The concept of **In-Group Favoritism and Out-Group Derogation**, central to Social Identity Theory, also plays a critical role. Attitudes toward Roma are often utilized by majority citizens not just to express dislike, but to affirm their own positive social identity and sense of belonging. By contrasting the perceived negative traits of the Roma (e.g., laziness, criminality) with the perceived positive traits of the majority group (e.g., industriousness, law-abiding citizenship), the in-group's status is elevated. This mechanism is particularly potent in contexts where national identity is fragile or undergoing stress, as derogating a highly visible and marginalized outgroup like the Roma serves as a psychological tool for strengthening majority cohesion and reducing internal anxiety about societal change or economic insecurity.

### **Manifestations: Stereotypes, Stigmatization, and Discrimination**

Anti-Roma attitudes are sustained by a pervasive and remarkably consistent set of negative stereotypes across various European nations. The most common stereotypes fall into three categories: moral deficiency (e.g., dishonesty, propensity for crime, unreliability), cultural incompatibility (e.g., refusal to work, lack of hygiene, excessive fertility), and socio-economic dependency (e.g., welfare abuse, drain on public resources). These stereotypes function as cognitive shortcuts that simplify a complex reality, allowing majority individuals to justify their negative emotional reactions and discriminatory actions. For instance, the stereotype of inherent criminality is frequently used to justify disproportionate policing, harsher judicial treatment, and general avoidance by non-Roma citizens.

The stigma resulting from these attitudes translates directly into profound systemic discrimination. In the labor market, Roma individuals face significantly higher unemployment rates, often due to employers explicitly or implicitly rejecting applications based on perceived Roma identity, name, or appearance. Studies using audit methods confirm that identical résumés receive drastically

different call-back rates depending on whether the applicant is perceived as Roma or non-Roma. In housing, segregation is severe, fueled by discriminatory practices by landlords, real estate agents, and even local governments that tolerate or actively promote the creation of segregated settlements or ghettos, often lacking basic infrastructure like running water and sanitation. This spatial segregation reinforces the negative attitudes by reducing opportunities for meaningful intergroup contact.

Perhaps the most damaging manifestation of these attitudes is found in the education system. Despite legal prohibitions, the practice of placing Roma children into segregated schools or, even worse, inappropriately assigning them to schools designated for children with intellectual disabilities remains widespread across Central and Eastern Europe. This educational segregation is a direct consequence of negative attitudes held by teachers, administrators, and non-Roma parents who fear the presence of Roma children will lower educational standards or pose a behavioral risk. This institutionalized discrimination ensures that Roma children receive substandard education, severely limiting their future employment prospects and perpetuating the cycle of poverty and marginalization, thereby reinforcing the very stereotypes (lack of achievement, dependency) that fueled the initial discrimination.

## Prevalence and Measurement of Anti-Roma Attitudes

Empirical data consistently demonstrate that attitudes toward Roma are significantly more negative than attitudes toward almost any other ethnic or minority group across Europe. Large-scale surveys conducted by organizations like the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and the Pew Research Center repeatedly highlight this trend. For example, when asked about comfort levels regarding having a Roma neighbor, colleague, or family member, majority respondents consistently express the highest levels of discomfort compared to other minority groups, including immigrants or members of other religious minorities. This high level of social distance indicates the profound depth of the negative affective component of Antigypsyism.

Measurement of these attitudes utilizes both explicit and implicit methods. Explicit measures involve direct self-reporting via questionnaires assessing stereotypes, perceived threat, and willingness to engage in social contact. While useful, explicit measures can suffer from social desirability bias, where respondents conceal highly prejudicial views. Therefore, researchers increasingly employ implicit measures, such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which measures automatic associations between the Roma category and positive or negative attributes. Results from implicit measures often reveal strong, automatic negative biases among majority populations, even among individuals who explicitly deny being prejudiced, suggesting that negative attitudes are deeply embedded in cultural schemas and cognitive structures.

The prevalence of anti-Roma sentiment is particularly high in countries with large Roma

populations and historical legacies of oppression, such as Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria. However, negative attitudes are also significant in Western European nations, often manifesting in debates over migration, begging, and public order. The consistency of these negative attitudes across diverse national contexts underscores the fact that Antigypsyism is not merely a localized issue of intergroup conflict, but a structural feature of the broader European social and psychological landscape, rooted in shared historical narratives of exclusion and the enduring psychological need for in-group superiority.

## Interventions and Strategies for Attitude Change

Changing deeply ingrained negative attitudes toward Roma requires multi-faceted interventions addressing both individual biases and structural discrimination. One of the most theoretically grounded approaches is the **Contact Hypothesis**, which posits that intergroup prejudice can be reduced through high-quality contact between members of different groups, provided certain conditions are met: equal status within the contact situation, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support from authorities. However, applying the contact hypothesis to Roma is complex because existing structural segregation often prevents equal-status contact; when contact does occur, it is often asymmetrical (e.g., interactions between a social worker and a welfare recipient), which can reinforce negative attitudes rather than reduce them.

Effective interventions must therefore focus on creating structured, meaningful, and equal-status contact opportunities, particularly in early educational settings where attitudes are still forming. Programs that foster joint learning projects or cooperative activities between Roma and non-Roma children have shown promise in reducing implicit bias and improving affective evaluations. Beyond individual contact, interventions must also target the cognitive component of prejudice by actively challenging negative stereotypes through education and media representation. Counter-stereotypical information, especially when delivered by credible sources, can help dismantle the rigid belief systems that underpin Antigypsyism.

Finally, attitude change must be supported by robust policy and structural reforms. Focusing solely on changing individual minds without addressing systemic issues like residential segregation or educational tracking will inevitably fail, as the environment will continuously reinforce the negative attitudes. Effective strategies include:

**Anti-Discrimination Enforcement:** Rigorously prosecuting instances of discrimination in housing and employment to signal that discriminatory behavior is socially unacceptable.

**Desegregation of Education:** Implementing mandatory, monitored programs to ensure Roma children are integrated into mainstream, high-quality schools, thereby facilitating early, equal-status contact.

**Media Literacy and Ethical Reporting:** Encouraging media outlets to adopt ethical guidelines that avoid stereotypical or sensationalist portrayals of Roma communities, which fuel public prejudice.

Ultimately, achieving a lasting shift in attitudes toward Roma requires a comprehensive societal commitment to acknowledging the historical injustices of Antigypsyism and actively dismantling the psychological, social, and institutional structures that perpetuate the marginalization of this significant European minority group.

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