



MOBILITY POVERTY

MOBILITY POVERTY OVERVIEW IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

ROMANIA

Project: Mobility poverty in CEE and SE Europe

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RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Mobility poverty (MP) in some countries has been relatively unexamined and no clear definitions are available at EU or national levels. However, it is a problem that is becoming more pressing as fuel prices are rising and some countries face high car dependency thus commuting to work or for daily errands can become very expensive. The most important factor that causes MP is the household's income. But then the mobility expenses are lower if the family members have good access to public transport and can go on foot/by bicycle to do their daily errands. It seems that the low-income households in peripheral and (by public transport) less accessible areas might be the most affected and vulnerable groups.

Against this backdrop, project Mobility poverty in Central and Eastern Europe aims at reviewing the policies and assessing the state of mobility poverty in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. It also aims to raise awareness of policy- and decision- makers about the mobility poverty issue. The overview in selected countries will result in a 4-pager policy brief for each country. The policy briefs will be disseminated to 20-30 stakeholders in each country. These reports will be based on an accessible EU database and quality insight (e.g. interviews). These policy briefs will be a good basis for further project activities, especially stakeholder awareness and communication.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1/** Mobility poverty definition and indicators (p.3)
- 2/** Situation in the field of mobility poverty (p.5)
- 3/** Mobility poverty policies and measures (p.8)
- 4/** Key actors in the mobility poverty field (p.10)
- 5/** Research gaps (p.12)
- 6/** Expert evaluation (p.13)
- 7/** Literature (p.14)

1/ MOBILITY POVERTY DEFINITION AND INDICATORS

Mobility poverty definition

The phenomenon of mobility poverty or transport poverty has not yet been defined anywhere within the Romanian legal framework. While the existing transport legal framework does contain some limited legal provisions which implicitly address mobility poverty (see the third section of the current analysis for an overview), there is **no specific legal term or concept** in Romanian referring to mobility poverty. Following the Romanian-language versions of official European Parliament and European Commission documentation, we recommend that the concept of mobility poverty should be introduced in the Romanian legislation as “sărăcie în materie de mobilitate” (Parlamentul European, 2022).

The term mobility poverty has been used to refer to the inability of **vulnerable** categories of persons to access services and work due to lacking or reduced transport or mobility access (Kiss, 2022). Mobility poverty has recently become one of the central problems to be addressed under the recently adopted **EU Climate Law**.

To prevent actions taken under the EU Climate Law to reach the 2050 goal of net zero greenhouse gas emissions from disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable energy consumers, EU institutions have agreed to implement the **Social Climate Fund**. The Fund will invest EUR 65,000,000,000 from 2026 until 2032 in EU member states for the purposes of alleviating energy poverty and mobility poverty as the primary components of a just transition from polluting to ecologically responsible energy use. Romania will have access to 10% of the Social Climate Fund, conditioned upon the submission of a Social Climate Plan by 2025. The national Social Climate Plan is meant to target support towards categories of population vulnerable to energy poverty and mobility poverty, and to implement investments reducing energy costs and carbon emissions.

It is likely that some of the measures which will be included in Romania's Social Climate Plan will have to be supported by changes to the national legal transport and energy framework. We propose that the Romanian policy makers should adopt the **terminology and definition of mobility poverty** from the European Social Fund: “individuals' and households' inability or difficulty to meet

the costs of private or public transport, or their lack of or limited access to transport needed for their access to essential socio-economic services and activities, taking into account the national and spatial context” (European Parliament, 2023, para. (2a)).

Indicators of mobility poverty

Likewise, there are currently **no indicators** measuring mobility poverty in Romanian legislation or institutional practice. Annex IV of the Social Climate Fund (European Parliament, 2023) lists a series of indicators that all EU member states should implement. Romanian policymakers should also conceive individual indicators tailored to the national context. The indicators proposed by the fund aggregate beneficiaries of investments under vulnerable households, vulnerable transport users and vulnerable micro-enterprises. We suggest that the Romanian authorities should disaggregate the category of vulnerable transport users by category of population. For instance: persons under the poverty threshold, students in primary, secondary and tertiary education, pensioners, persons with mobility impairments (separately for physical and visual impairments), Romani minority. This recommendation is based on finding a high degree of heterogeneity in transport poverty among these different groups as reported in the second section of the current analysis. Additionally, indicators should be disaggregated by rural and urban areas, given the different levels and sources of mobility poverty specific to these different areas in Romania.

2/ SITUATION IN THE FIELD OF MOBILITY POVERTY

The most important cause of mobility poverty is **economic poverty**. However, other factors can contribute, and sometimes they can cause limited access to mobility even in the absence of economic poverty. Among these we include: geographical areas with low accessibility, areas with a lack or a limitation of public transport options, sub-optimal public transport systems, desynchronised timetables between urban, peri-urban, rural, and regional public transportation, and urban and transport infrastructures not adapted to users with physical and visual impairments.

The **differences between urban and rural public transport systems** are a particularly important source of mobility poverty in Romania. This is because, on the one hand, 99.2% of the country's territory is rural and 45% of the country's population lives in rural areas (Dumitrescu, 2019), and, on the other hand, public transportation in rural areas is expensive, limited, or non-existent. Moreover, according to a World Bank report, 75% of people in poverty live in rural areas (2018).

In 2021, 50% of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion lived in rural areas, compared to an average 22.5% at the EU level (EUROSTAT, 2021d). Overall, 34.4% of Romania's population was at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2021, while the European average for the same indicator was 21.2% (EUROSTAT, 2021c).

People living in rural areas with a poor or absent public transportation system are forced to rely on **personal cars** for access to services, shops, and work. The use of personal cars has grown from 78.5% of all modes of transport used in 2011 to 82% in 2020. At the same time, the usage of public transport modalities such as buses, trolley buses and motor coaches has fallen from 16.2% in 2011 to 15% in 2020 (EUROSTAT, 2020). People living in rural areas may fall into mobility poverty when they have a lower income, when energy prices increase, when they cannot afford a personal car and are forced to either rely on neighbours with cars or forgo access to services and work altogether. In 2012, 31% of Romanians who reported having high or very high difficulty in accessing public transport lived in rural areas, 27% in towns and suburbs and only 12.5% in cities (EUROSTAT, 2012). More recent data shows that 21% of Romanians cannot afford a personal car, while only 5.7% of Europeans, on average, are in the same situation (EUROSTAT, 2021a). Moreover, even for those who can afford personal cars, the quality of infrastructure

in rural areas may further restrict access. Research has shown that **poor transport infrastructure** is one of the main causes of demographic vulnerability in the rural geographic areas of Romania (Muntele et al., 2021).

When it comes to the **affordability** of public transport, Romania has a good balance, on average, between the average income and the cost of public transportation. In 2021, about 11% of a household's expenses were related to public transportation, a rate in line with the EU average of 12% (EUROSTAT, 2021b). Commuting times in Romania are comparable to the EU average. In 2019, the share of people reporting commutes higher than 30 minutes was 26%, close to the 23% share at the EU level (EUROSTAT, 2019).

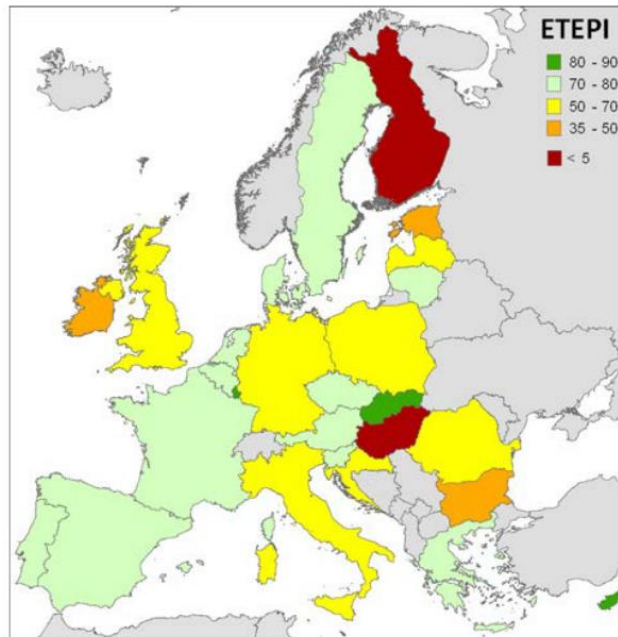
There are very few policy or empirical evaluations of mobility poverty in Romania. A recent study (Gheorghiu and Iordache, 2020) on public transportation services in the city of **Buzau** presents a situation which may be typical of smaller cities across the country. The study found information access problems (absent real-time information at stations), de-synchronized timetables for urban and regional routes, lack of bicycle lanes, low access to ticket kiosks and surcharges for buying tickets on the bus which can overburden persons commuting from rural areas and persons with low physical mobility, policy makers who lack information about transport-poverty-vulnerable groups, and the absence of a top-down regulatory framework for addressing transport poverty (Gheorghiu and Iordache, 2020). The study also found that the typical measure of offering free passes on one route to students and pensioners is wholly insufficient for their needs, as one route does not cover access to curricular and extra-curricular activities for students and access to the whole palette of services needed by the elderly (e.g., bureaucratic appointments, the market, doctor's visits, etc.) (Gheorghiu and Iordache, 2020). It should be noted that for pensioners, the at-risk-of-poverty rate is 19.8% (EUROSTAT, 2021e).

In most urban public transportation systems, **accommodations for people with disabilities** consist only in the existence of a ramp for wheelchair users, while few cities have adequate tactile and audio accommodations in vehicles and at stops for those with vision impairments. In rural areas, even minimal wheelchair accommodations are likely to be lacking from public transportation vehicles. Even where they exist, the public transport personnel may resist to assist users with disabilities when needed (Grigoras et al., 2021). Those relying on guide dogs cannot access public transportation due to bans on pets. These cumulated barriers to mobility lead to a lower rate of use of public transport among people with disabilities (23% among people with some disabilities and 18% among people with

severe disabilities) compared to those without disabilities (32%) (Grigoras et al., 2021).

The **EU-level indicator for transport poverty** ranked Romania as the 20th out of 28 member states in addressing energy poverty in 2018 (OpenExp, 2019).

Figure n°1: Scores on ETEPI.



Source: OpenExp, 2019, p.11.

3/ MOBILITY POVERTY POLICIES AND MEASURES

The national legal framework for the public transport system is established by **Law no. 92** of 2007 and its amendments. The law awards local public administration authorities the responsibility of managing public transport within their administrative borders. Local administrations can also associate and coordinate or integrate regional or inter-locality transport systems (in associations of intercommunity development). The law offers some protections against mobility poverty:

- ◆ Tariffs of public transport services should be “bearable” (Parlamentul Romaniei, 2007, para. 1.4.h).
- ◆ Prices are compensated for disadvantaged categories of transport users (Parlamentul Romaniei, 2007, p. 1.4.m).

The **definition of categories of disadvantaged transport users** is also the task of the local administrative authorities (Parlamentul Romaniei, 2007, p. 17.1.o). Usually, these categories are students in primary, secondary and tertiary education, pensioners, and persons with disabilities. Gratuities to students and pensioners typically cover one route only, which is insufficient and may lead to limited access to certain services (e.g., one route may cover the route to school but not extra-curricular activities, the route to school in the summer but in the winter when changing buses may be needed, the route to the market but not the doctor’s office).

While gratuities for students and pensioners are mandatory and fully covered from the local budgets, **compensations for people with disabilities** are offered only to those public transport companies who opt in for a compensation scheme. This leads to an underutilisation of these gratuities due to companies not opting in or users not being aware of which companies offer the gratuities (Grigoras et al., 2021).

There is currently no legislation mandating modalities of adapting public transport vehicles and infrastructure to users with disabilities (Grigoras et al., 2021).

In Romania, like in most other EU countries, there is no national policy dedicated to specifically regulating **rural mobility** (Consortiul SMARTA, 2020b). Most local administrations do not harmonize the timetables of intraurban transport with those of interurban transport.

An example of good practice when it comes to alleviating mobility poverty is the **Metropolitan Area of Alba Iulia**. Alba Iulia was the first city in Romania

which implemented an integrated urban-rural system of public transport in 2012. It introduced a single information service and ticketing scheme, coordinated timetables, real-time travel information at stops, dynamic display system in vehicles, audio announcements on both vehicles and at stops, WIFI access on routes and ICT solutions among other elements. These changes increased usage of public transport in the region by 43% from 2012 to 2020 (Consortiul SMARTA, 2020a; SMARTA, 2020).

4/ KEY ACTORS IN THE MOBILITY POVERTY FIELD

The legal framework within which national-level rules can be introduced to address mobility poverty (Law no. 92/2007) falls under the responsibility of the **Ministry of Transport**. However, due to the highly decentralized manner in which public transport is being administered, it is the **local administrations** in each city, town and commune and the **local and regional councils** which have the most power in taking appropriate measures to remedy mobility poverty. One particularly effective method that local administrations can use is to associate in so called associations of intercommunity development in order to harmonize regional transport between associated cities, towns, communes, and villages. Strategic planning of routes, matching timetables and a unitary provision of information and ticketing can have a major impact on making public transport more accessible and especially in alleviating mobility poverty in rural areas and in smaller urban areas. The local councils and administrations are also the main stakeholders when it comes to the development, optimization, and adaptation of the local public infrastructure.

Other key actors who could contribute to addressing mobility poverty through the creation of top-down regulations or instruments of investment and monitorisation of progress are the **Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration**, especially through its subordinated institution, **The National Authority for Governing Public Utility Community Services**. Moreover, in conjunction with the **Ministry of Labour and Social Protection**, these institutions could create a legal framework for the protection of social categories vulnerable to mobility poverty.

The Ministry of European Investments and Projects has an important role in ensuring that EU funding from the Social Climate Fund and other EU funding instruments are fully and efficiently absorbed. **The Ministry of Finance** can support local administrations in adopting measures meant to increase the local budgets through local taxation such as through development impact taxes. These additional funds could be then directed towards improving the local infrastructure, replacing old or polluting transportation vehicles with energy efficient non-polluting alternatives, introducing ICT solutions for information provision, scheduling, and ticketing, hiring specialists, studying the needs of public transport users, and identifying local sources of mobility poverty, etc.

It is also within the prerogatives of the **Ministry of Environment** to ensure that Romania complies with the requirements of the EU Climate Law. The ministry could direct investments in public transport and private transport

initiatives which are carbon neutral or encourage ecological behaviour change in the utilization of transportation. For instance, apart from the decarbonization of public transport, private companies offering green transport solutions should also be supported.

5/ RESEARCH GAPS

All aspects of the study of mobility poverty in Romania can be considered under research gaps. There are two main domains in which more information about the state and span of the phenomenon is needed: **policy** and **academic research**.

Firstly, local administrations cannot address the problem of mobility poverty due to a **lack of awareness** about its existence (Gheorghiu and Iordache, 2020). Even where awareness of the phenomenon exists, it is difficult to create solutions without having **descriptive data** about who are the social categories exposed to mobility poverty and what are its sources. Therefore, local administrations should direct resources towards hiring specialists or commissioning studies scoping the current state of the issue in their administrative units.

Secondly, the **literature research** conducted for the current analysis turned up a single academic study dedicated specifically to the problem of mobility poverty in one Romanian town (Gheorghiu and Iordache, 2020). Additional information was derived from policy-focused reports on other topics, implicitly intersecting with the issue of mobility poverty (e.g., the reports produced as part of the SMARTA project (Dumitrescu, 2019; Consorțiu SMARTA, 2020b, 2020a; SMARTA, 2020), reports on energy poverty (Koukoufikis and Uihlein, 2022), or the situation of people with disabilities (Grigoras et al., 2021). It is not surprising that academic literature is lacking, considering the concept of mobility poverty is relatively new. However, the urgency of solving this issue under the new EU Climate Law is pressing, and academic exploration of mobility poverty can offer a better understanding of how to solve it.

Research should focus on the specific difficulties in accessing transport, services, and work as experienced by different **vulnerable social groups**. We have already seen from the existing results reported here that, for instance, pensioners living in cities have different accessibility issues compared to pensioners living in rural areas. People with different disabilities living in the same city have different accessibility issues. It is not enough for buses to have low floors and spaces reserved for wheelchairs to address all disability-related access issues.

As more administrations introduce measures addressing mobility poverty, research should **evaluate their efficacy**.

6/ EXPERT EVALUATION

When it comes to addressing mobility poverty under the EU Climate Law and the new Social Climate Fund, it is easy to think first of improving urban public transport through carbon-neutral transport solutions like bike-sharing, ICT improvements, transitioning to a carbon-neutral bus-park, etc. While these aspects are important, given Romania's demographic and geographic specificity, policymakers and decisionmakers are faced with even simpler and more pressing problems whose alleviation could have a large impact in ameliorating mobility poverty at the national level: optimising the accessibility of public regional, inter-urban, peri-urban, and rural transport. A great deal of carbon emissions comes from the use of personal cars and most Romanians living in rural areas and small towns are forced to rely on them due to lacking public transportation systems. We believe that this should be Romania's first line of attack in addressing mobility poverty. This can be done through creating more associations of intercommunity development, harmonizing timetables, improving existing public transport offers, introducing new transport solutions such as Demand-Responsive Transport for the most remote areas and lowering the cost of rural and inter-urban public transportation.

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