

SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACTION

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Challenging Bigotry Toward the Roma

In the spring of 2013, a group of students from St. John's University in Queens, New York, were involved in a study abroad program in Rome, Italy, and performed weekly service work in a Roma (Gypsy) population to better understand an ethnic group that experienced discrimination. In the process we, as college students, learned we could raise awareness of the discrimination against the Roma and its impact. We worked one on one with Roma children living in Monachina, a settlement camp of Roma that is not officially recognized but is tolerated by the Italian government. Through our work at the camp, interviewing Italians knowledgeable about the Roma and interacting closely with one of the families at Monachina, my peers and I were able to better understand the Roma lifestyle and the discrimination they face in Rome.

To deepen our understanding of the Roma population in Rome, we interviewed two Italian women involved in a *doposcuola* (after-school) program at Monachina. These women had been visiting Monachina for several years and understood the culture at the camp and the views of Italians toward the Roma. We also read and researched all we could about the Roma to supplement the information given to us by the women involved in the *doposcuola* program. The Roma who reside in Rome and other European cities have come from dozens of different countries. Most have fled political unrest in their home countries. The Roma at the Monachina camp, for example, migrated to Rome in the early 1990s when the country of Yugoslavia dissolved, and ethnic wars broke out across the area.

Italians were not pleased by the arrival of the Roma. Generally, Italians stereotype them as an inferior ethnic group that is lazy, dirty, uncooperative, and unwilling to assimilate into Italian culture. This has led to a self-fulfilling prophecy. The discrimination

the Roma face prevents them from obtaining reputable jobs, owning property, receiving a good education, and generally integrating into Italian society.

Our response to this discrimination against the Roma, which we saw evidenced in the Monachina community, was to raise awareness. We invited students from several U.S. universities to visit Monachina with us and meet the Roma. Through this experience, they gained a deeper understanding of the Roma and how they are an oppressed minority group in Italian society. They were able to see that the stereotype of all Roma being lazy pickpockets was far from the truth. We also took time to discuss with them how this discrimination negatively impacts Italian society, as well as all other European countries that host these Roma populations and see them through the eyes of negative stereotypes. Being seen only as a societal nuisance hurts both the life chances of the Roma and their ability to fully contribute to the societies in which they live.

After experiencing the plight of the Roma population firsthand, my peers and I were able to use our sociological imagination to relate what we saw to the social issue of racial and ethnic discrimination. Sociology has taught me that a well-functioning society has institutions that support and respect the rights and dignity of all its members. Seeing the discrimination against the Roma at the Monachina camp in Rome has brought this truth home to me in a very real way and made me more committed than ever to teach others that racial and ethnic discrimination hurts everyone in a society—not just those who are its direct victims.

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