

OVERVIEW OF THE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC SITUATION OF SZABOLCS-SZATMÁR-BEREG COUNTY

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Abstract: This paper explores the economic and health conditions of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, with a particular emphasis on socially disadvantaged populations, especially the Roma communities living in segregated areas. The study investigates the interrelation between socio-economic determinants and subjective health status, highlighting the role of structural inequalities in shaping health outcomes. The region's economic performance remains significantly below the national average, as evidenced by persistently high unemployment rates, low average income levels, and a continuing pattern of outmigration. The Roma population is disproportionately affected by these challenges, facing both economic and health-related vulnerabilities that contribute to the overall underdevelopment of the county. The findings reveal a pronounced lack of health awareness within these communities, compounded by limited access to education, vocational training, and essential public health services. The research further confirms that poor health indicators among the Roma are closely linked to low educational attainment and unfavorable living conditions, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and socio-economic disadvantage. It is argued that any effort to improve the region's socio-economic standing must be grounded in an integrated policy approach that simultaneously targets health promotion and economic development. Priority should be given to inclusive initiatives that strengthen health literacy, improve access to preventive care, and facilitate labour market integration, particularly among marginalized groups. Based on the evidence, the paper recommends focused investment in health education programmes, the expansion of vocational training, and the active inclusion of the Roma population in local development efforts. These measures are essential for breaking the interconnected patterns of deprivation and enabling sustainable growth in the region. Ultimately, improving the health of the most vulnerable is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic condition for achieving long-term economic resilience and social cohesion in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County.

Keywords: Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County; health status; Roma population; subjective health; socio-economic factors; health education.

JEL Classification: I14; I18; J15; R23; H75

1. Introduction

The focus of our research is on the health behaviour and subjective health status of women living in segregated communities. The term refers to all actions and habits that contribute to maintaining, improving, or restoring health. These practices are particularly

relevant, as a significant proportion of deaths result from diseases linked to unfavorable lifestyle patterns. Such conditions can be positively influenced by effective interventions, and therefore deserve particular emphasis in the fields of prevention and health promotion (Bíró, et al., 2008, 149 évf.,46. szám).

An individual's health is closely linked to their economic situation. The county of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg is one of the regions with one of the worst economic indicators in the country, where Roma communities living in settlements are in a particularly difficult situation. These social groups suffer not only economic but also health-related disadvantages, which contribute to the overall socio-economic backwardness of the county (Tar & Hajnal, 2014).

The Roma community faces serious challenges, not only in terms of cultural, educational and economic deprivation, but also in terms of health. Among these, the most vulnerable group are those living in squatter settlements, for whom access to health care is particularly limited. Health is a fundamental, universal value in the life of every human being, but its maintenance depends on many factors. It depends not only on individual responsibility, access to health care and equal treatment, but also on the level of basic health literacy. In the absence of such knowledge and the awareness to build on it, maintaining and improving health becomes virtually impossible, which is a major and ongoing challenge for the Roma community in settlements. Therefore, reducing health inequalities requires not only improving access to care, but also strengthening health awareness and individual responsibility, which will empower affected groups to take active action for their health (Ember, 2019). Awareness of preventive services for Roma population should be a priority in order to improve their willingness to be screened and thus their overall health status (Libicki & R.Fedor, 2022).

Our research is also underpinned by complex social science models and focuses on subjective health, with a focus on specific social groups. Our research also presents unemployment rates and economic indicators, as this information is significantly correlated with health status.

In the present article we would like to give an overview of the economic situation in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County based on a comprehensive, short literature survey. In our literature review, we would like to focus indicators that are related to both economic and health aspects.

2.Data And Methodology

Socio-economic factors have a major impact on the health status of individuals and communities. In Ádány's view, the health of a society is fundamentally determined by the state of the most disadvantaged population group, much like the strength of a chain is determined by its weakest link. This idea highlights the fact that without improving the health of disadvantaged communities, such as the Roma population, no significant improvement in the health indicators of society as a whole can be achieved (Ádány, n.d.).

This also applies to economic indicators. If we can develop and educate those groups who are in the most difficult economic situation, we will also improve the overall economic situation of society, as they have a strong impact on each other.

The social and economic characteristics of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county are difficult to match with the national averages, as it has extreme indicators in many areas compared to other counties. This specific situation is due to a number of complex factors, including geographical location, demographic characteristics and the dominant role of the historical past. These factors have contributed significantly to the county's specific social and economic conditions and its underdevelopment (Tar & Hajnal, 2014). Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county is the sixth largest and third most populous county in Hungary. The county has a total area of 5,936 km² and comprises 229 settlements, of which 28 have urban status and the remaining 201 are villages. The county's administrative and economic center is Nyíregyháza, which is also the county's capital (Északkelet-magyarországi Gazdaságfejlesztési Zóna, 2020. november).

According to the latest data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), the population of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county was 521 000 on 1 January 2023, a decrease of 1.2% compared to the previous year. Over the last twenty years, the population of the county has been steadily decreasing, by an average of 2 500 persons per year. In recent years, this trend has accelerated, in particular due to the emigration of young people of working age. Both natural attrition and a negative net migration balance play a significant role in population decline (KSH, 2023).

Currently the county has a population density of 88 persons per km², which is significantly lower than the national average.

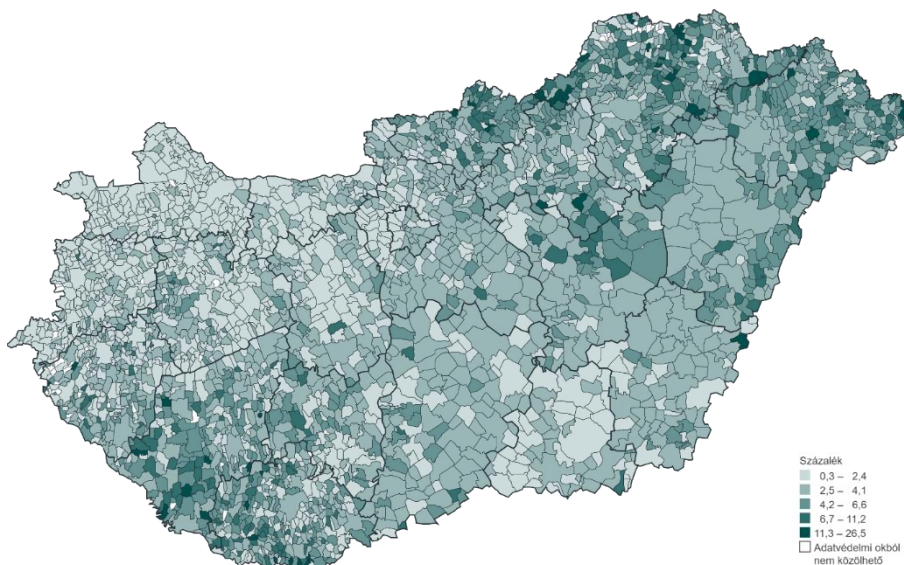
Current demographic trends suggest that population decline will continue in the coming years (KSH, 2023).

Labour market situation in the county

In the 4th quarter of 2023, the unemployment rate in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county was at the highest level in the country, at 10.6%. This figure is significantly higher than the national average of 3.8% for the same period. In general, the unemployment rate in the country varied between 1.8% and 10.6%, but Szabolcs County stood out in terms of negative statistics (KSH, 2023).

For comparison, for example, the unemployment rate in Győr-Moson-Sopron County was among the lowest at only 1.8%, clearly showing the regional economic disparities within Hungary. In comparison, the difficult economic situation of Szabolcs county, its less diversified industrial base and its less educated population contribute to its higher unemployment rate.

A munkanélülék aránya, 2022



**Figure 1. Unemployment rate, 2022,
Source: (KSH, 2022) , viewed 05.01.2025.**

Furthermore, the employment rate in Szabolcs County was 68.1%, which is also below the national average. The counties with the most favorable data in the country, such as Pest and Győr-Moson-Sopron, achieved employment rates above 75%, indicating that these regions are economically stronger and more stable.

Several factors may be behind the high unemployment rate in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county. These include youth emigration, low levels of industrial development and a limited number of high value-added jobs. A large part of the county's economy is based on agriculture, which is seasonal, making it even more difficult to ensure continuous employment.

These indicators highlight the need for significant development interventions to stabilize the county's labour market, including industrialization, raising educational standards and diversifying the local economy. Long-term strategic solutions would be needed to bring the county closer to the national average, which could encourage the retention of the workforce and economic development (KSH, 2023).

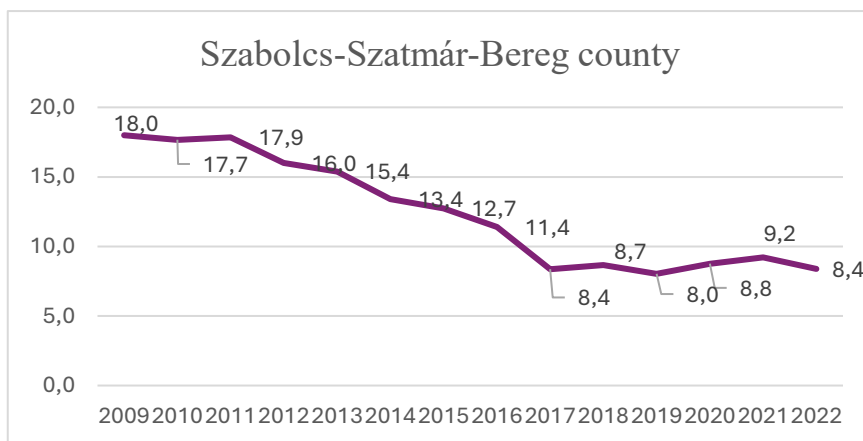


Figure 2. Unemployment rate 2023.
Source: (KSH, 2023). own edit, 2025.01.05.

Educational attainment indicators

Unfortunately, the level of education in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county continues to lag significantly behind the national average, which has a serious impact on the county's economic situation and labour market prospects. According to the most recent data for 2022, 22% of the population aged 15 and over in Hungary will have a degree, while another third will have a school leaving certificate. Based on the 2022 data, it is clear that the share of people aged 25-64 with less than primary education in Szabolcs county is much higher than the national average. This ratio is particularly unfavorable, as it represents a serious barrier to entering the labour market, which further exacerbates economic disadvantages (KSH, 2022).

The table below presents the national education indicators:

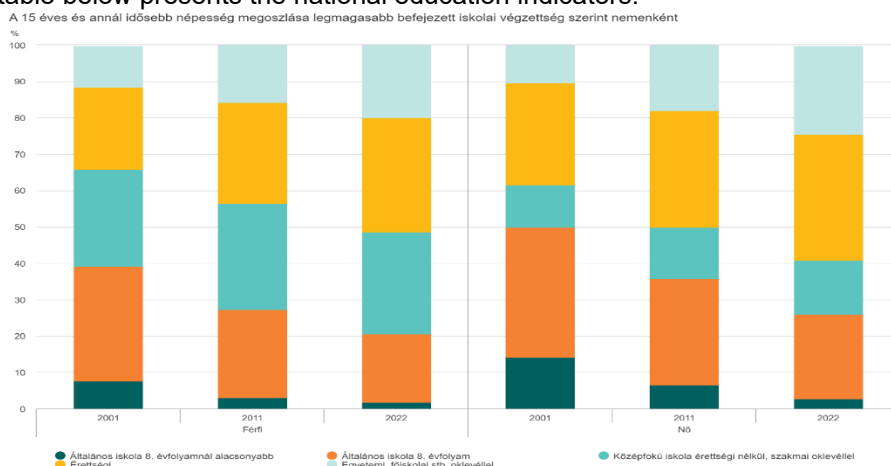


Figure 3. Distribution of the population aged 15 and over by highest level of educational attainment by sex.

Source: (KSH, 2022) , viewed 05.01.2025.

The share of people with secondary education and a school leaving certificate is also below the national average, which also reduces competitiveness and limits job opportunities in the region. And the share of graduates is even more strikingly low. For example, while the share of graduates in the Central Hungary region reaches 18.3%, the share is much lower in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county. This difference not only highlights the lack of higher education tradition, but also the county's difficulty in attracting high value-added industries, which is a fundamental constraint on economic development (KSH, 2022).

The share of people with tertiary education in the working-age population is very high in Budapest: 44%. In rural cities, almost one third of the working-age population has tertiary education, while in villages only 15% have it, as shown in the figure below.

A diplomával rendelkezők aránya a 20–64 éves népességben, 2022

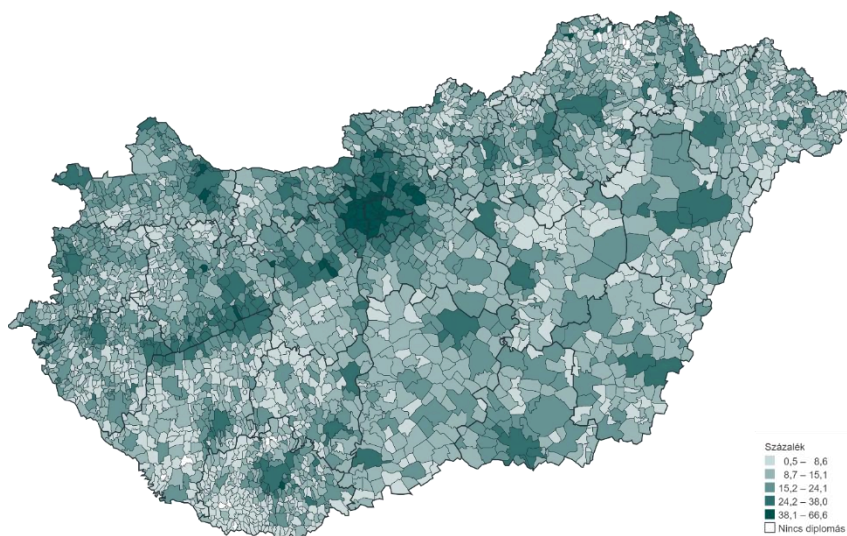


Figure 4. Share of people with a degree in the population aged 20-64, 2022

Source: (KSH, 2022) , viewed 05.01.2025.

The unfavorable educational composition of the population and the fact that a significant share of jobseekers is unskilled make it difficult to achieve sustainable employment. The lack of qualifications, low educational attainment and the associated skills shortages all contribute to the high share of long-term unemployed among job seekers. In the long term, this problem has not only economic but also social consequences, as it increases the risk of income poverty and social exclusion resulting from unemployment.

It can be seen that the disadvantaged situation in the county is also greatly influenced by the fact that the number of under-schooled people, the majority of whom are Roma, is significantly higher than the national average. This not only has an impact on the labour market, but also has a major impact on the health and health awareness of the people concerned (KSH, 2022).

The research of Róza Ádány and János Sándor focuses on the health status of Roma women and health inequalities. The research shows that the health indicators of Roma women lag significantly behind those of non-Roma women, due to a number of factors such as low educational attainment, high unemployment rates and poverty. They are more likely to suffer from chronic diseases such as cardiovascular problems and diabetes, which are exacerbated by social and economic disadvantages. Low levels of education and exclusion from the labour market significantly reduce access to health care, while knowledge about healthy lifestyles is also lacking. These factors not only lead to shorter life expectancy, but also significantly reduce the quality of life of affected people (Ádány & Sándor, 2019).

Unemployment is not only an economic but also a source of psychosocial stress, which exacerbates the health situation of Roma women. Low incomes and segregated living conditions make their situation even more difficult. The research of Ádány and Sándor (2019) emphasizes the need for complex interventions that target education, employment and health at the same time, paying particular attention to the specific needs of Roma women. (Ádány & Sándor, 2019) We believe that such integrated programmes are key to reducing health inequalities. In this context, it is important to highlight the significance of programmes aimed at preventing and alleviating health risk behaviours, particularly as the prevalence of smoking is very high in the Roma population, with a prevalence more than twice that of the average Hungarian population (M.Kornyicki, et al., 2022).

Lampek (2004) examined in detail the relationship between educational attainment and health status, particularly among women. The research found that women with higher levels of education tend to report better health, suffer less frequently from chronic diseases and live longer than their lower educated counterparts. Women with higher education have a higher prevalence of health-conscious lifestyles, such as regular exercise, good nutrition and screening, while women with lower education have a higher prevalence of smoking and other unhealthy habits. In addition, women with a higher level of education have easier access to health services and make better use of preventive opportunities. The study shows that investment in education, educational attainment and health status is closely linked and that increasing 's educational attainment could have a significant impact on reducing health inequalities (Lampek, 2004).

3.Conclusions

Overall, increasing the level of education is essential to improve the economic and social situation of the county. Increasing the number of people in vocational training and promoting adult education could be key steps. It is also important to promote higher education, which can not only strengthen the region's competitiveness but also help reduce social inequalities. Thus, one of the main challenges for economic development in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county is to increase the level of education, which is the result of a long-term and complex process.

Reading between the lines and the data, we can see that there is still a lot of work to be done in the county in terms of development. The development and future of the county depend primarily on more people being able to earn a decent income and to do useful, value-creating work.

Exclusion from the labour market poses serious challenges not only at the individual level but also at the societal level. Increasing the activity rate is a prerequisite for increasing employment, as the more people can participate in the economy, the more they can contribute to economic growth and social welfare. Comprehensive programmes that take account of the real needs of individuals are needed to help people who have dropped out of the labour market to return to work. Retraining, personalized job search counselling and skills development can be effective tools to help these people find their place back in the world of work.

Particular attention should be paid to groups for whom finding a job is particularly difficult, such as people with low educational qualifications or the long-term unemployed. They should be offered opportunities that help them to become competitive again in the labour market. A key role here is played by subsidies and training programmes for employers, which can encourage them to offer jobs to these groups. To increase employment, a well-designed, multi-level strategy is essential, taking into account the current labour market situation, economic and social challenges and individual needs. Such initiatives can not only improve the lives of the individuals concerned, but can also contribute to reducing social and economic inequalities in the long term.

Reducing the impact of inequalities as part of prevention is another priority. In this case, equality of opportunity means that access to health care is not equal for all. (Uzzoli, 2019) It is important that prevention is present at both individual and societal levels, and this requires continuous research and a well-structured prevention plan. An important step in the research work is to identify the reasons for the inadequate health-conscious behaviour of a particular social group (e.g. the Roma population living in a settlement), which we also want to investigate in our research. We highlight them in this article because they are the most economically disadvantaged group.

It is hoped that in the future, even with the help of our work, health education programmes can be developed that can make a significant difference to the health-conscious behaviour of certain groups in society, and thus to the perception of self-rated well-being.

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