



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# The Social Integration of People with Disabilities in Romania: Perceptions, Challenges and Opportunities

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### Abstract:

People with disabilities represent one of the most vulnerable social categories in Romania, often confronted with marginalization and discrimination, as well as to exclusion and unequal access to employment, healthcare, education, and public participation. This article is structured in two sections. The first section provides a conceptual overview regarding vulnerability and disability, emphasizing the main factors that contribute to and sustain vulnerability, as well as national data on the distribution and living conditions of people with disabilities. The second section presents a sociological study that examines community perceptions and attitudes toward persons with disabilities, the degree to which their rights are recognized, and the main barriers that limit their social inclusion. The survey explores social awareness regarding public policies, legal frameworks supporting disability, and community attitudes toward people with disabilities, which assess the levels of acceptance and social integration. It further examines perceived discrimination in education, the healthcare system, interactions with authorities, and participation in the labor market.

**Keywords:** *disability, vulnerability, public perceptions, sociological survey, social inclusion, Romania*

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## Introduction

In today's context, social groups are increasingly exposed to multiple types of risks- whether social, cultural, or economic. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the context that sustains vulnerability, starting from the identification of its specific causes and consequences to the development of suitable intervention and prevention strategies.

Among all categories at risk, people with disabilities are among the most affected, as they face a persistent form of vulnerability that limits their access to resources, services, education, civic participation, and social integration.

In Romania, persons with disabilities continue to face major challenges, reflected in restricted access to healthcare and education, low participation in the labor market, ongoing negative social stereotypes, and a public infrastructure that remains unadapted to their specific needs. The analysis of these realities requires both a clear understanding of the institutional and legislative mechanisms and a closer examination of social perceptions, the barriers they experience, and possible actions to enhance equality and inclusion.

## Conceptual Framework

The term vulnerable group is directly associated with the notion of vulnerability, defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the reduced capacity of individuals or groups to anticipate, respond to, and recover from the impact of disasters.

In Romania, in a general sense, vulnerable persons are considered to be “individuals or families who are at risk of losing their ability to meet daily living needs as a result of situations such as illness, disability, poverty, drug or alcohol dependence, or other circumstances that generate economic and social vulnerability” (Law on Social Assistance no. 292/2011, Article 6, letter p).

Thus, vulnerability represents the result of a complex interaction between various factors that limit the ability of individuals or social groups to exercise their rights, to access services and opportunities, or to protect themselves against risks. The most common characteristics associated with vulnerable groups include risks present across all dimensions of life, which contribute to the acquisition, maintenance, and intensification of vulnerability. These risks are related to the following dimensions:

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
<b>Material dimension</b> (Popescu, 2011; World Health Organization, 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Low material resources, inadequate living conditions</li> <li>✓ Economic dependence</li> </ul>
<b>Social and participation dimension</b> ( <i>Law on Social Assistance no. 292/2011</i> ; WHO, 2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Limited access to education and healthcare services, lack of social support, social exclusion, inability to take advantage of opportunities or to protect oneself from risks</li> <li>✓ Vulnerability is understood as weak</li> </ul>

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	social integration
<b>Identity and legal dimension</b> ( <i>Government Ordinance no. 137/2000, art. 4</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Ethnic and cultural differences generate forms of discrimination that reinforce inequality of opportunity in relation to the general population</li> <li>✓ Vulnerability is linked to social status and leads to stigmatization and discrimination</li> </ul>
<b>Access to resources and public policy dimension</b> ( <i>National Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Promotion Program 2006–2008; Law no. 116/2002</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Low access to resources, external support for ensuring minimum living conditions</li> <li>✓ Vulnerability is both structural and individual</li> </ul>

Disability is a dynamic concept, the meaning of which changes depending on the context. Its interpretation emphasizes the role of social and environmental barriers in shaping the experience of persons with disabilities, which highlights the perspective of the “social model”. In this approach, the surrounding environment becomes a decisive factor in how a person with disabilities lives and perceives their own condition (Gheorghiu, 2025, p. 333).

Thus, persons with disabilities include those “who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations, 2006, Article 1).

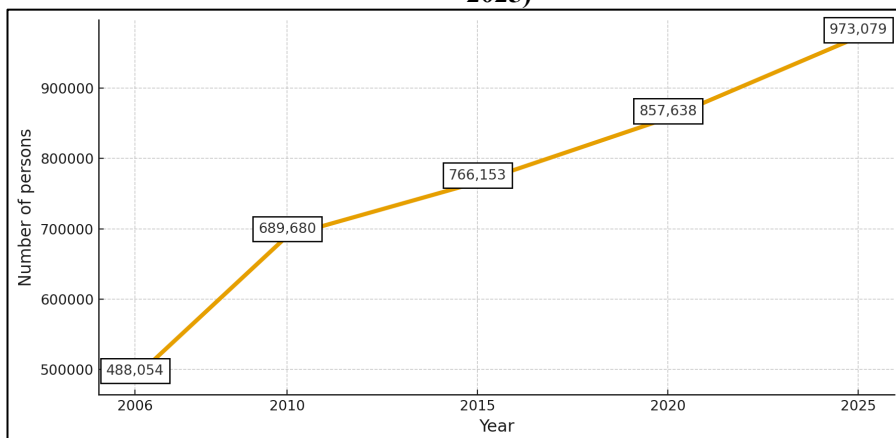
According to the World Health Organization, “disability results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition, with personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support” (World Health Organization, 2021).

Current global trends encourage the use of the term “disabled person” (as perceived by society) instead of “person with disabilities”, to illustrate that disability is not an attribute of the individual but of the person–environment relationship.

### Statistical overview of disability in Romania

Based on the data published by the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ANPDPD, 2025), the total number of persons with disabilities is 973,079, a figure that has almost doubled from 2006. This situation is the result of various demographic, social, and administrative factors, including population aging, limited access to services, and insufficient social support systems.

**Chart 1. Evolution of the number of persons with disabilities in Romania (2006–2025)**

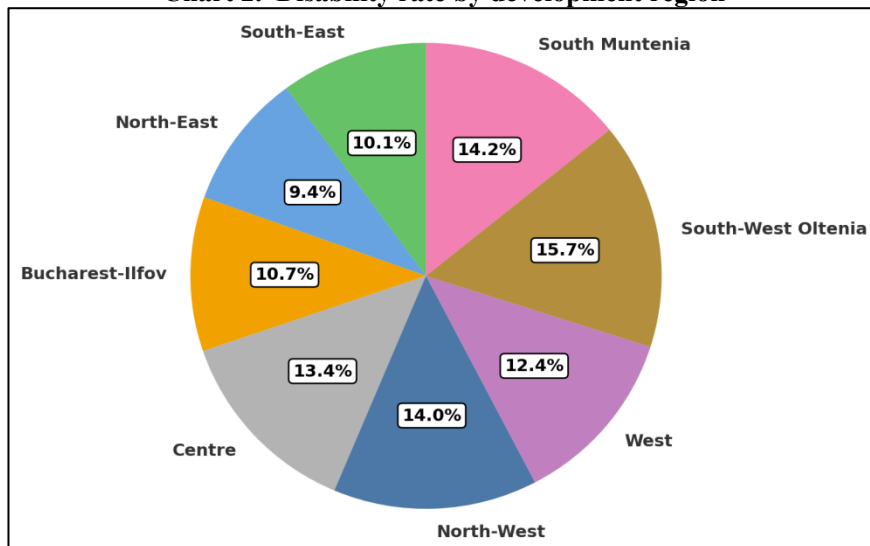


Source:

Data processed by the authors based on National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ANPDPD (2025). Retrieved from: <https://anpd.gov.ro/web/transparenta/statistici/>

At the national level, the share of persons with disabilities is 4.45%, with notable regional disparities: the highest percentages are found in the South-West Oltenia (15.7%), South-Muntenia (14.2%), and North-West (14.0%) regions, while the lowest values are recorded in the North-East (9.4%) and South-East (10.1%) regions.

**Chart 2. Disability rate by development region**



Source: Data processed by the authors based on ANPDPD (2025)

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The distribution of persons with disabilities differs from one region to another and is directly influenced by the socio-demographic characteristics of the counties. In large, densely populated, and highly urbanized counties (such as Bucharest, Prahova, Iași, or Cluj), the highest values are observed, while in small, sparsely populated counties with a low level of urbanization (such as Covasna, Tulcea, or Ialomița) the values are lower.

These differences suggest that the number of persons with disabilities varies depending on several factors, including demographic composition, degree of urbanization, access to medical and social services, infrastructure development level, and administrative capacity for assessment and certification.

**Table 1. Number of persons with disabilities by county**

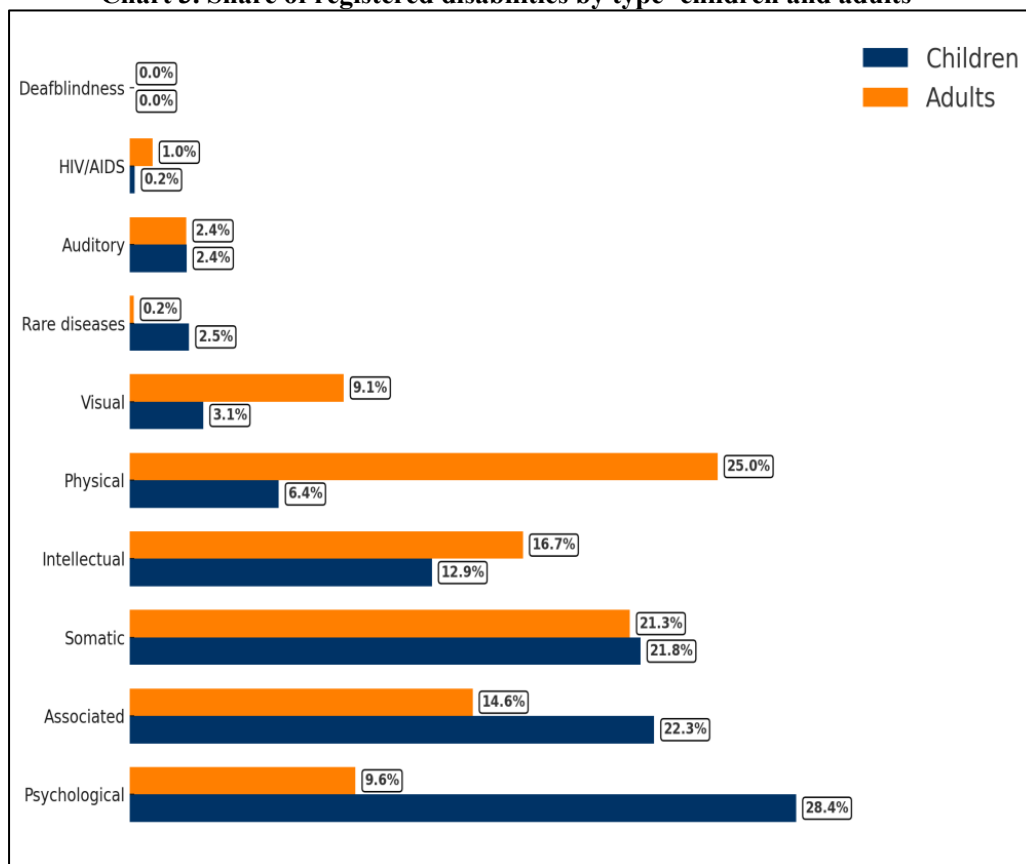
<i>Development Region</i>	<i>County with the highest number of persons</i>	<i>No. of persons</i>	<i>County with the lowest number of persons</i>	<i>No. of persons</i>
<b>North-West</b>	<b>Cluj</b>	33,838	<b>Sălaj</b>	17,363
<b>Centre</b>	<b>Mureș</b>	27,835	<b>Covasna</b>	7,212
<b>North-East</b>	<b>Iași</b>	36,316	<b>Botoșani</b>	17,027
<b>South-East</b>	<b>Constanța</b>	23,131	<b>Tulcea</b>	9,137
<b>South-Muntenia</b>	<b>Prahova</b>	38,884	<b>Ialomița</b>	11,300
<b>South-West Oltenia</b>	<b>Olt</b>	32,799	<b>Gorj</b>	14,409
<b>West</b>	<b>Timiș</b>	28,095	<b>Caraș-Severin</b>	17,572
<b>Bucharest-Ilfov</b>	<b>Bucharest</b>	82,969	<b>Ilfov</b>	19,116

Source: Data processed by the authors based on ANPDPD (2025)

Certain types of disabilities occur more frequently among adults, while others are more prevalent among children. For children, the most frequently reported disabilities include psychological disabilities (28.4%), associated disabilities (14.6%) and intellectual disabilities (12.9%). In the case of adults, the distribution is different: physical disabilities represent the predominant category (25.0%), followed by associated disabilities (22.3%), somatic disabilities (21.8%), and intellectual disabilities (16.7%).

These differences highlight the need for policies, specialized services, and interventions that are adapted according to age group and type of disability.

**Chart 3. Share of registered disabilities by type -children and adults**



Source: Data processed by the authors based on ANPPDP (2025)

The distribution of persons with disabilities by type of impairment and degree of severity reveals that the most frequent types of disabilities are somatic, physical, intellectual, and associated. The majority of registered cases fall within the moderate and severe categories, particularly in the case of somatic, physical, and mental impairments.

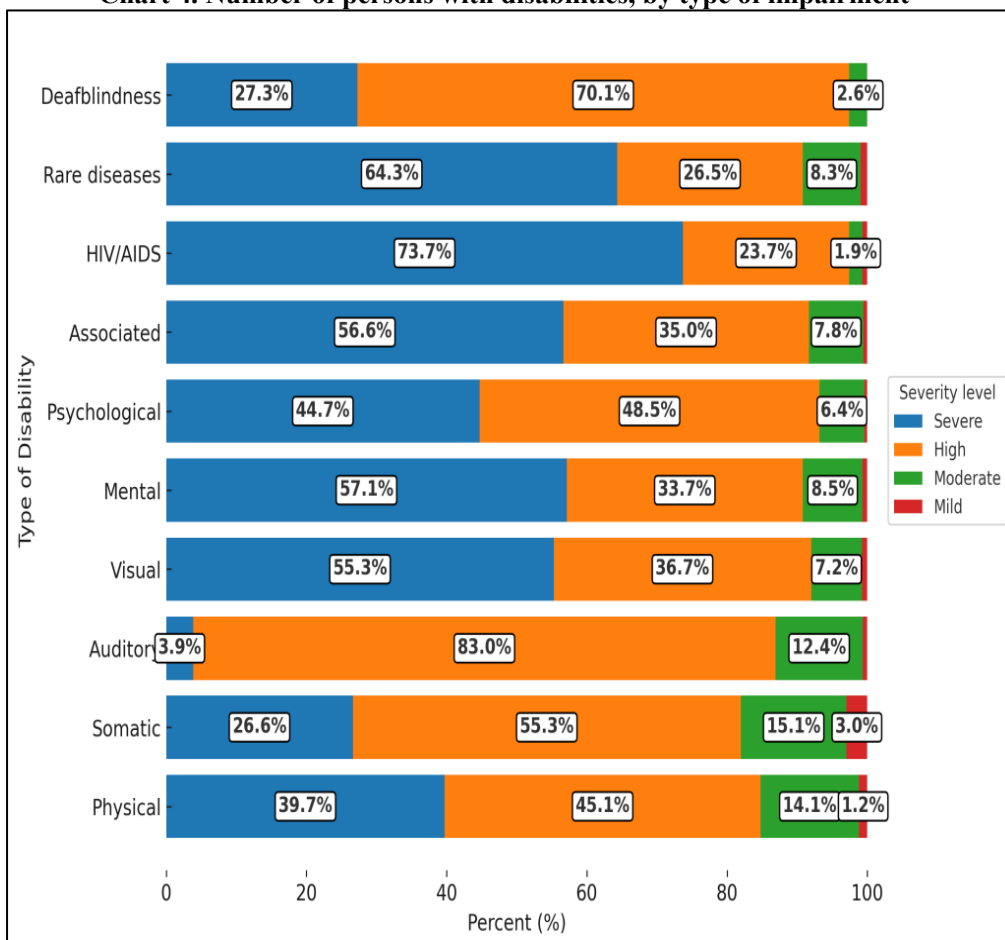
The distribution of disability types by severity level can be summarized as follows:

- ✓ Most severe: HIV/AIDS, rare diseases, and deafblindness;
- ✓ High severity: somatic, physical, and associated disabilities;
- ✓ Moderate: intellectual and psychological disabilities;
- ✓ Mild: visual and auditory disabilities.

Overall, the findings indicate a high incidence of severe and high forms of disability across all categories, while low and mild forms are significantly rare.

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**Chart 4. Number of persons with disabilities, by type of impairment**

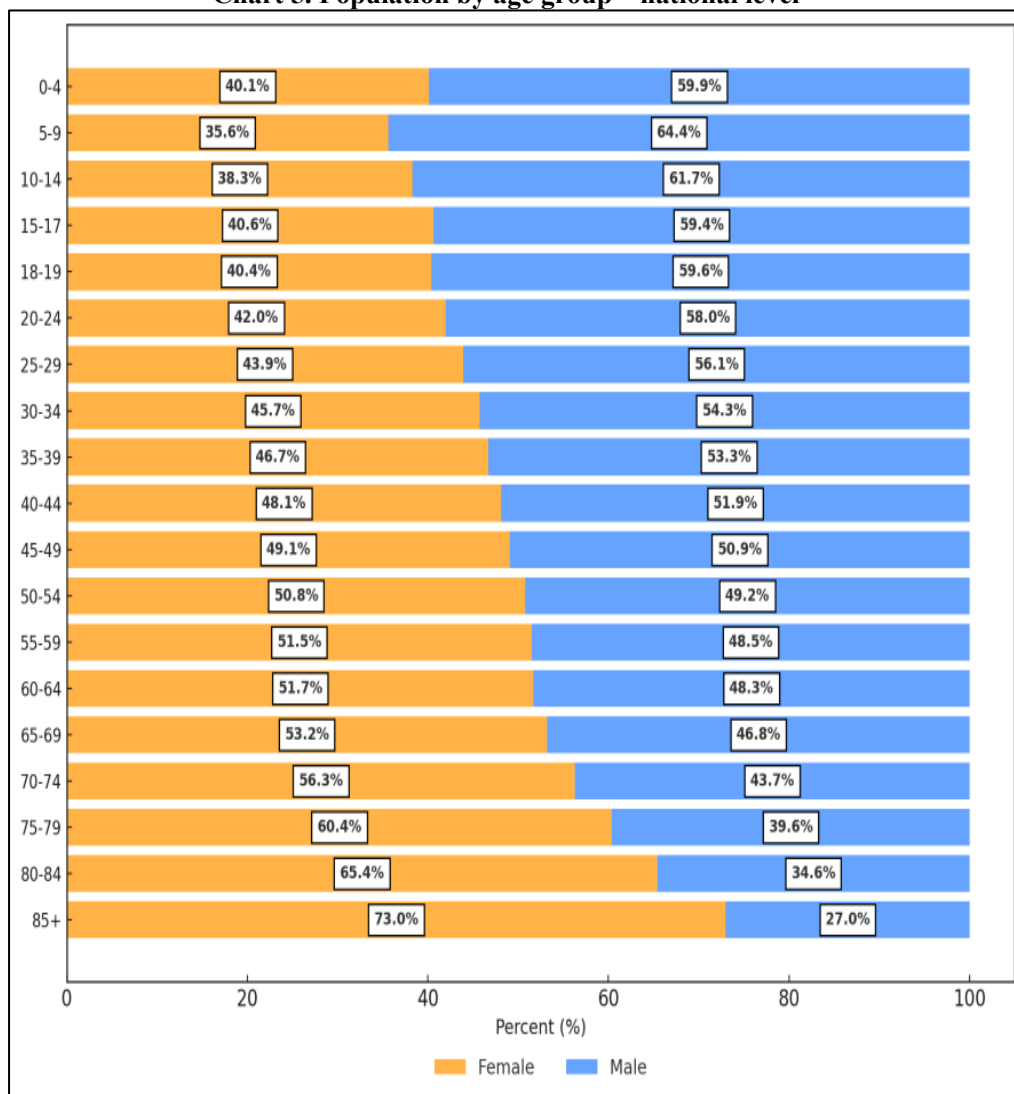


Source: Data processed by the authors based on ANPDPD (2025)

The distribution by gender indicates that, out of the total number of 973,079 persons with disabilities, approximately 54% are women (521,376) and 46% are men (451,703).

Most men with disabilities are found in the 0–19 age group, while most women are in the over 60 age group. In the 0–29 age group, the differences between the two genders decrease, reaching an approximately equal percentage for both.

**Chart 5. Population by age group – national level**



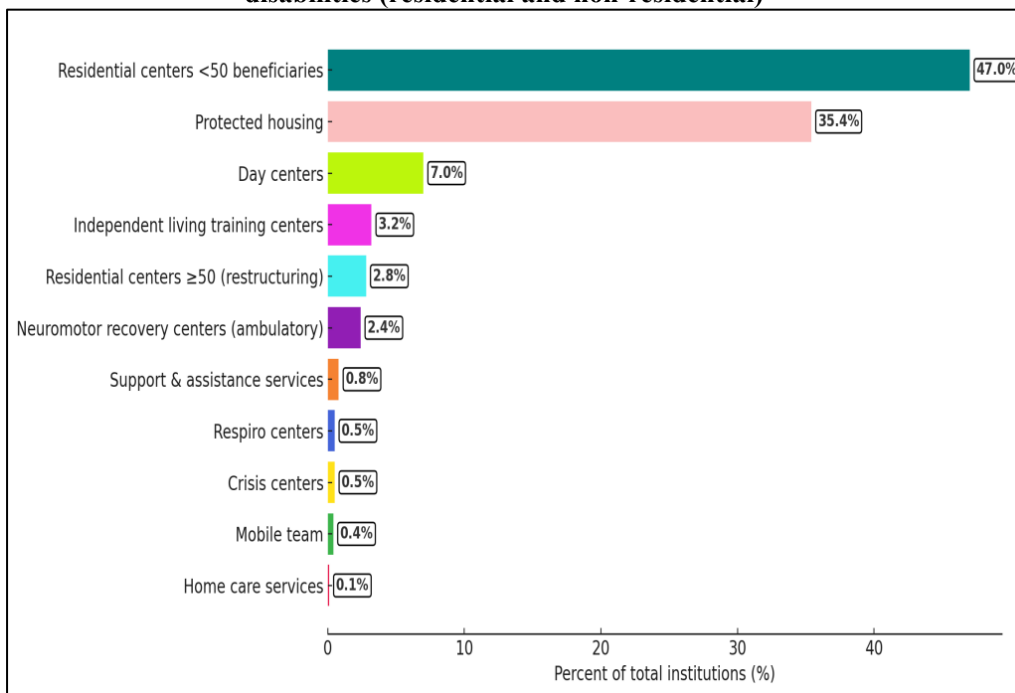
Source: Data processed by the authors based on ANPDPD (2025)

The organization of public social assistance services for adults with disabilities reflects a gradual shift toward a community-based care model, given that approximately 47.0% of institutions are small residential centers with fewer than 50 beneficiaries, while protected housing units account for 35.4% of the total. Conversely, alternative community services — such as neuromotor rehabilitation, mobile teams, crisis centers, respite care, or home care — each represent no more than 1.0% of the total.



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**Chart 6. Percentage of public social assistance institutions for adults with disabilities (residential and non-residential)**



Source: Data processed by the authors based on ANPDPD (2025)

### **Sociological research on perceptions and attitudes toward persons with disabilities**

The sociological research aimed to investigate the perceptions, attitudes, and level of social acceptance toward persons with disabilities, as well as to identify the barriers that influence the process of social inclusion.

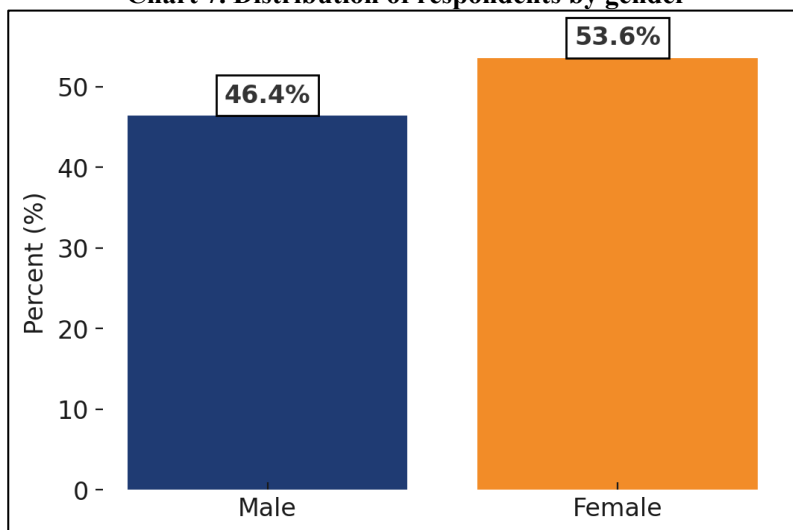
#### ***Methodological framework***

The research method is quantitative, based on an opinion survey, and the research instrument was a questionnaire. The exploratory sample consisted of 360 participants, and the data collection and interpretation were carried out between February and May 2025.

#### ***Socio-demographic profile of respondents***

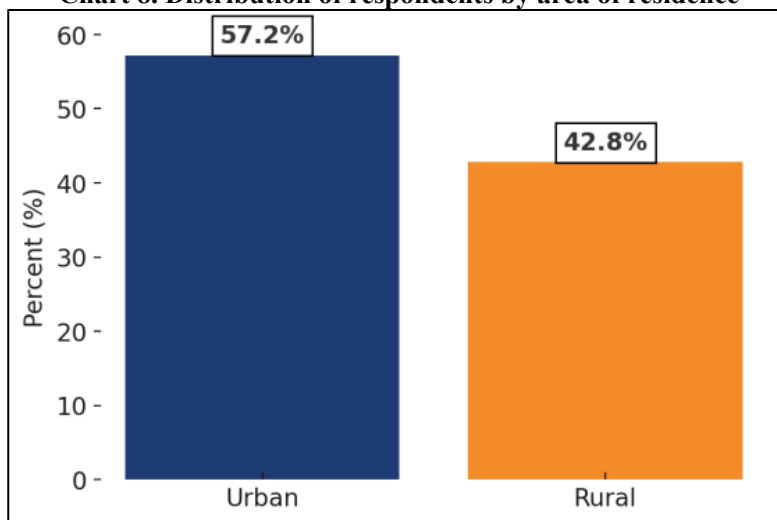
The socio-demographic profile includes gender, place of residence, age, and marital status. Based on the gender criterion, the distribution of respondents shows that 53.6% are women and 46.4% are men.

**Chart 7. Distribution of respondents by gender**



The distribution by place of residence indicates that the majority of respondents come from urban areas (57.2%), while 42.8% live in rural areas.

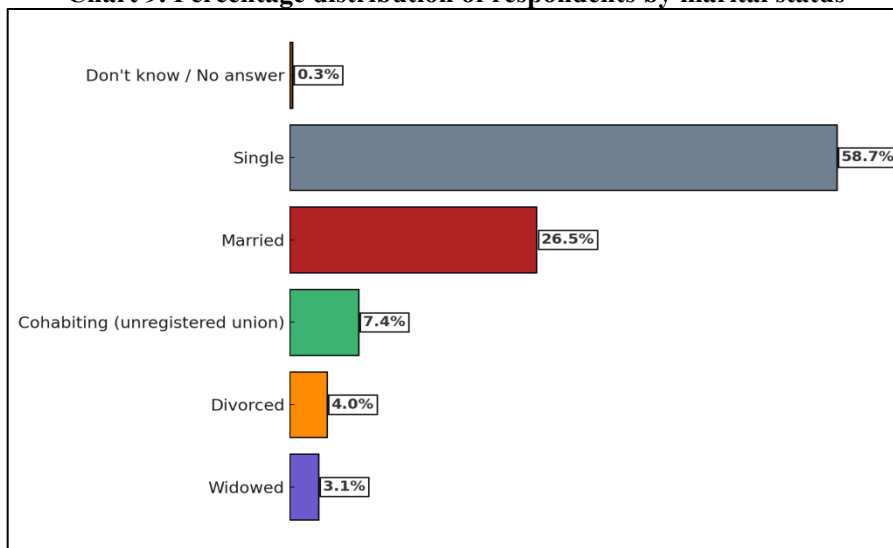
**Chart 8. Distribution of respondents by area of residence**



The majority of respondents are unmarried (58,7%), while 26.5% are married. They are followed by respondents in a consensual union/cohabitation (7,4%), divorced (4,0%), and widowed (3,1%).

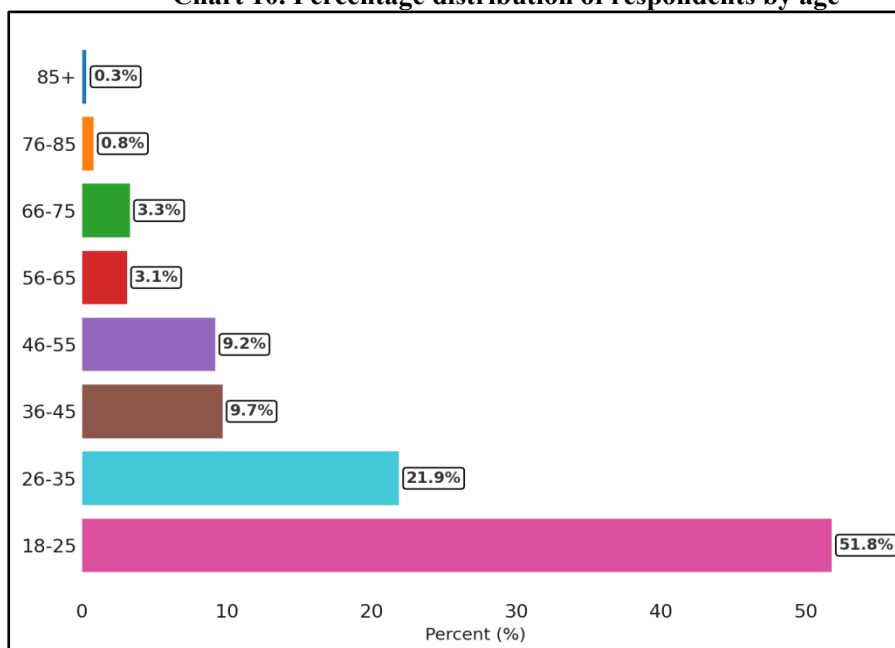
## The Social Integration of People with Disabilities in Romania: Perceptions, Challenges and Opportunities

**Chart 9. Percentage distribution of respondents by marital status**



More than half of the respondents are young adults aged 18–25 years (51,8%), while 21,9% fall within the 26–35 age group. The remaining 26,4% of the sample consists of persons over 35 years old, distributed across the 36–85+ age groups, which together account for much smaller percentages compared to the younger categories.

**Chart 10. Percentage distribution of respondents by age**

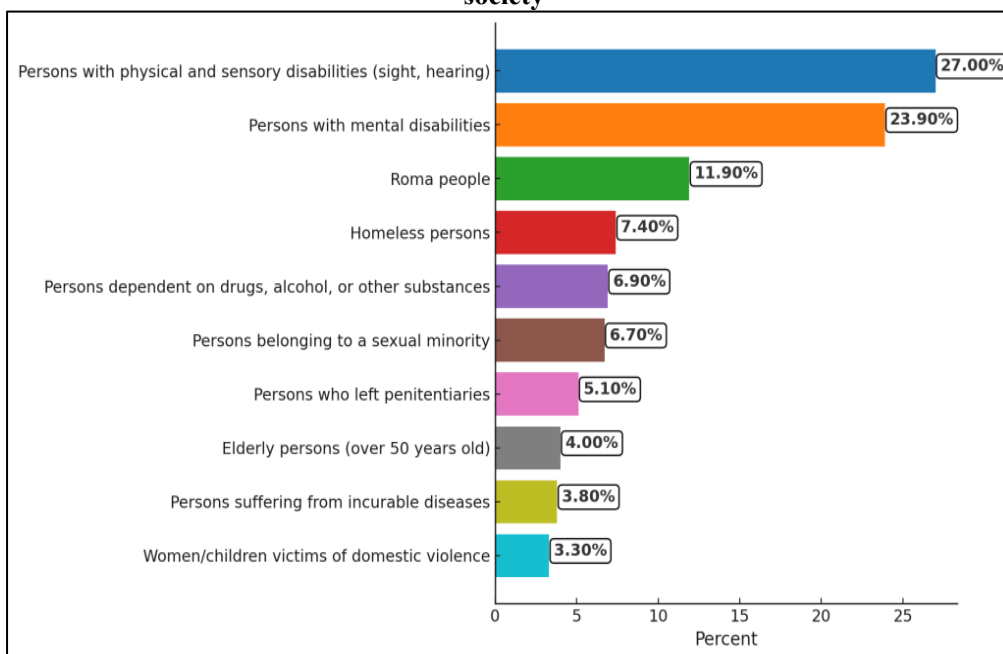


### Results

Disability is most strongly associated with the risk of marginalization and social exclusion. Persons with physical and sensory disabilities (26.9%) and those with mental disabilities (23.9%) are perceived by respondents as the groups most exposed to such risks in Romanian society.

Other vulnerable categories mentioned include Roma people (11.9%), homeless persons (7.4%), individuals with alcohol or drug dependence (6.9%), and persons belonging to sexual minorities (6.7%).

**Chart 11. Groups most at risk of marginalization and social exclusion in Romanian society**

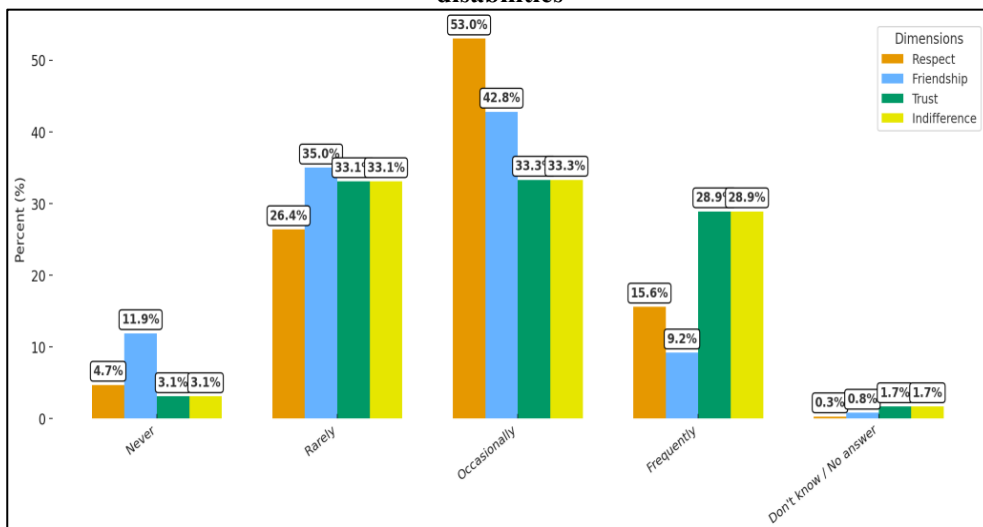


In response to the question “In general, how do you think community members relate to persons with disabilities?”, the analysis of the four indicators (respect, friendship, trust, and indifference) shows that respondents’ perceptions are generally reserved: positive attitudes are assessed as being occasional and moderate, rather than constant and favorable.

For all four positive dimensions, the majority of responses are concentrated around the options “occasionally” and “rarely”, indicating that while persons with disabilities are tolerated and not explicitly rejected, they still do not benefit from active inclusion or genuine social appreciation.

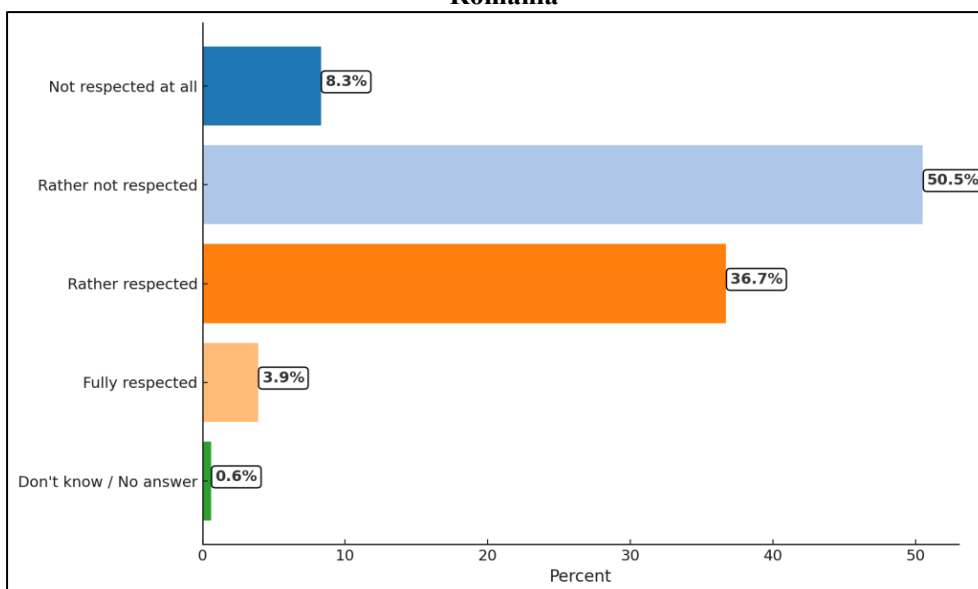
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**Chart 12. Perceived frequency of community attitudes toward persons with disabilities**



To the question “In your opinion, how well are the rights of persons with disabilities respected in Romania?” a predominantly negative perception was observed, with 58% of respondents choosing the options “rather not respected” (50.5%) or “not respected at all” (8.3%). At the opposite end, 41.0% of respondents stated that these rights are respected, selecting “rather respected” (36.7%) or “fully respected” (3.9%).

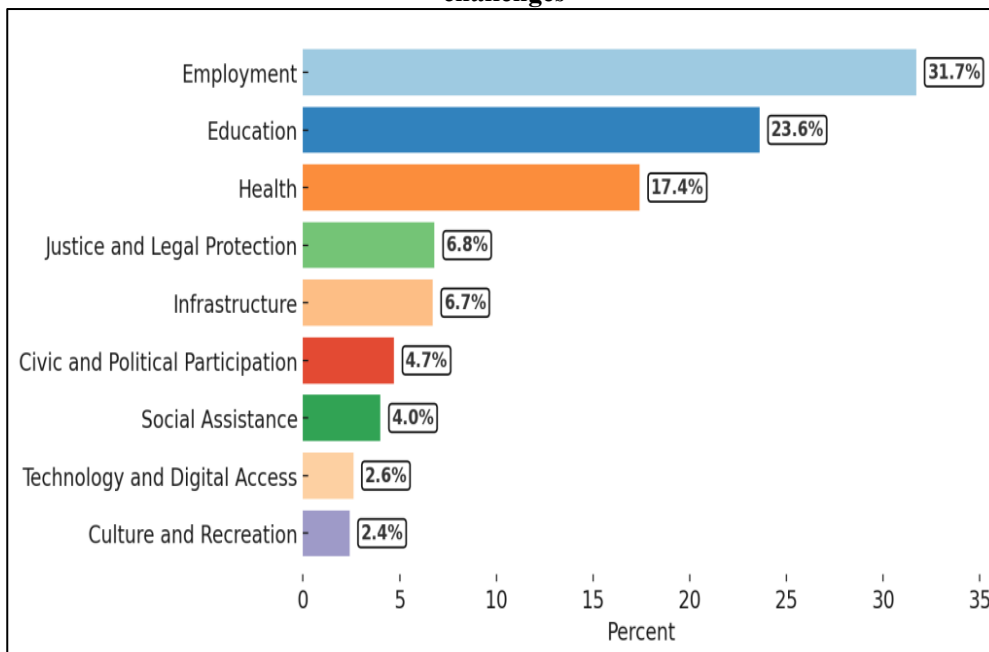
**Chart 13. Perceived level of respect for the rights of persons with disabilities in Romania**



Employment (31.7%), education (23.6%), and health (17.4%) are perceived as the main areas in which persons with disabilities face the greatest difficulties in achieving inclusion.

Fields such as culture, technology, social assistance, or civic and political participation are considered less problematic. This highlights a predominant orientation toward meeting the basic needs of persons with disabilities, to the detriment of those related to social participation and access to opportunities.

**Chart 14. Areas where inclusion of persons with disabilities faces the greatest challenges**

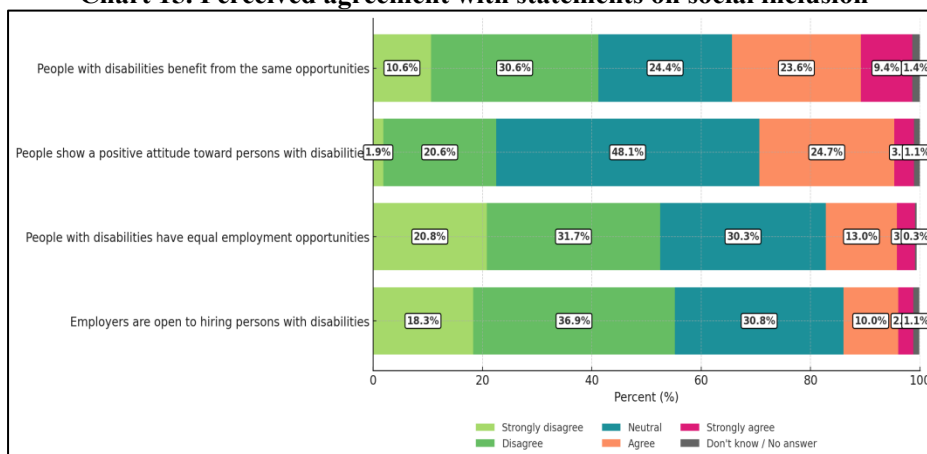


Respondents' perceptions regarding the social inclusion of persons with disabilities reveal a major gap between declared attitudes and actual access to opportunities. Although approximately 73.0% of participants believe that people generally display a positive attitude toward persons with disabilities, this openness is not reflected in key areas such as the labor market.

Thus, it is emphasized that persons with disabilities do not enjoy equal employment opportunities (52%), while employers remain reluctant to hire them (41%).

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**Chart 15. Perceived agreement with statements on social inclusion**

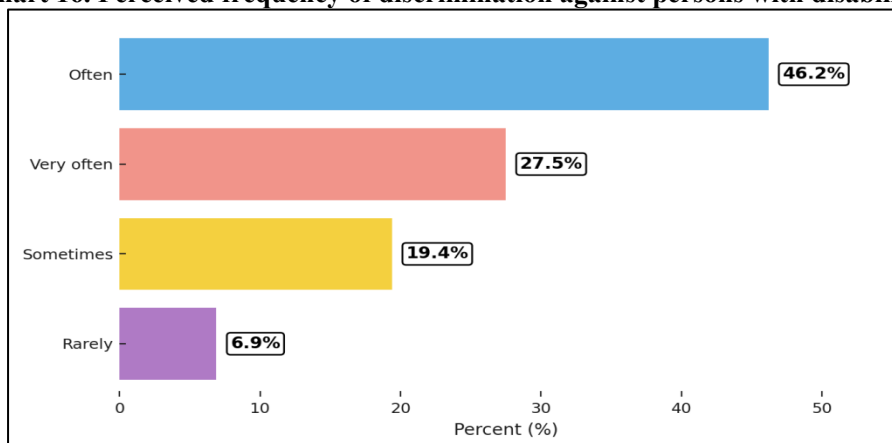


In response to the question “How often do you think persons with disabilities are discriminated against in Romania?”, the answers reveal a strongly negative perception of the phenomenon.

Approximately 74.0% of respondents believe that persons with disabilities are discriminated against “often” (46.2%) or “very often” (27.5%), suggesting that discrimination is perceived as a constant and widespread practice, deeply rooted in negative attitudes and prejudices that question the professional competence of persons with disabilities.

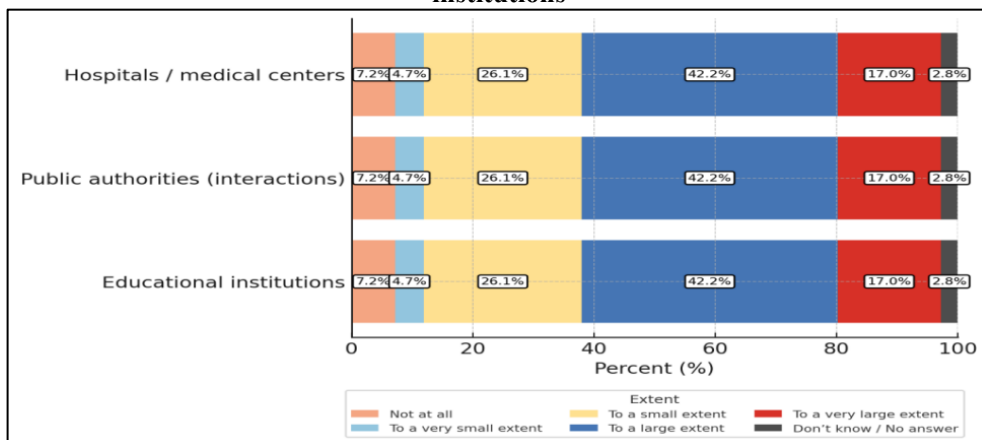
On the other hand, 19.4% of respondents believe that discrimination occurs only “occasionally”, while just 6.9% think it happens “rarely”, a percentage that indicates a low perception of improvement in the current situation.

**Chart 16. Perceived frequency of discrimination against persons with disabilities**



Across all the institutions analyzed — education, public authorities, and the healthcare system — respondents believe that persons with disabilities are predominantly discriminated against. Approximately 60% of participants state that discrimination occurs “to a great” or “very great extent,” while only 12% consider that it happens “to a very small extent” or “not at all.”

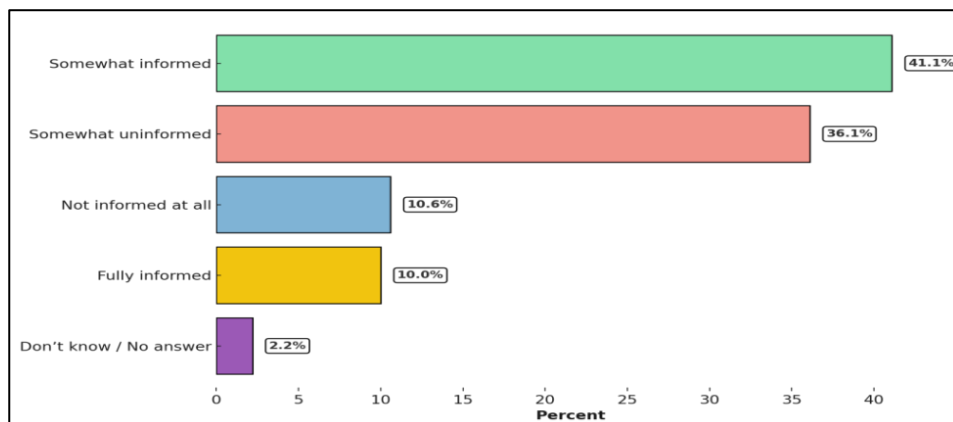
**Chart 17. Perceived discrimination/marginalization of persons with disabilities by institutions**



When asked how well informed they are about policies and legislation on the inclusion of persons with disabilities, 41.0% of respondents stated that they are partially informed, while approximately 36.0% said they are “partially uninformed.” In addition, 11.0% reported being not informed at all, and only 10.0% considered themselves fully informed.

These results indicate a generally low level of awareness regarding the legislative framework for the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

**Chart 18. Level of awareness regarding policies and legislation on the inclusion of persons with disabilities**



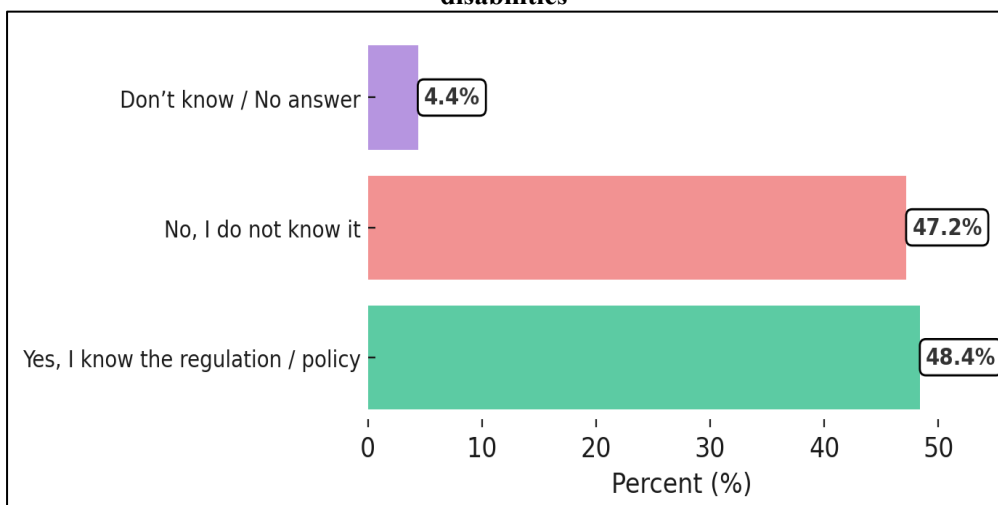


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Responses to the question “Are you familiar with the legal regulations or public policies that guarantee free access to career evaluation and guidance services for persons with disabilities, regardless of age, type, or degree of disability?” show an approximately equal number of people who report being informed and those who state they are not aware of such regulations.

Approximately 48.4% of respondents said they are familiar with these regulations, while 47.2% declared they are not familiar with them. This highlights a low level of public awareness, which represents an important barrier to the effective access of persons with disabilities to their legal rights.

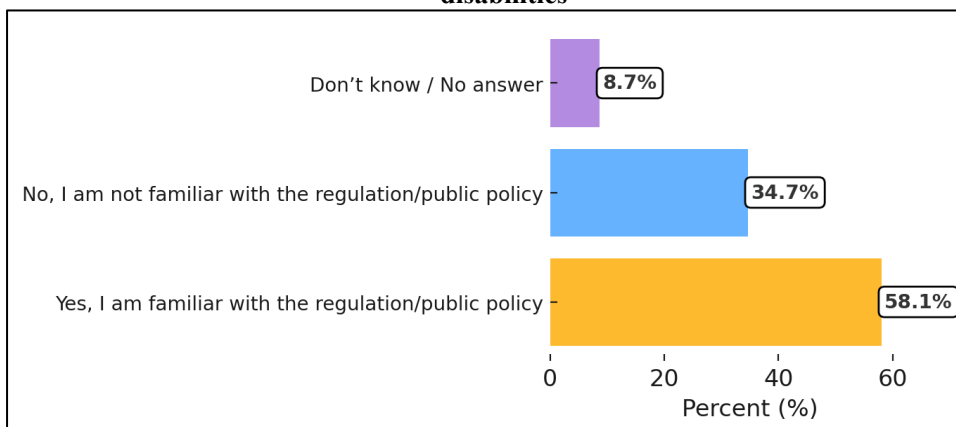
**Chart 19. Awareness of legal provisions on career guidance access for persons with disabilities**



Approximately 58% of respondents stated that they are aware of the existence of tax incentives and other legal benefits granted to employers who hire persons with disabilities.

Although the level of awareness is higher in this case compared to other aspects of disability legislation and the rights of persons with disabilities, the fact that 35.0% of respondents are not familiar with these provisions highlights a deficiency in public communication regarding such incentives — a factor that may negatively influence the employment opportunities of persons with disabilities.

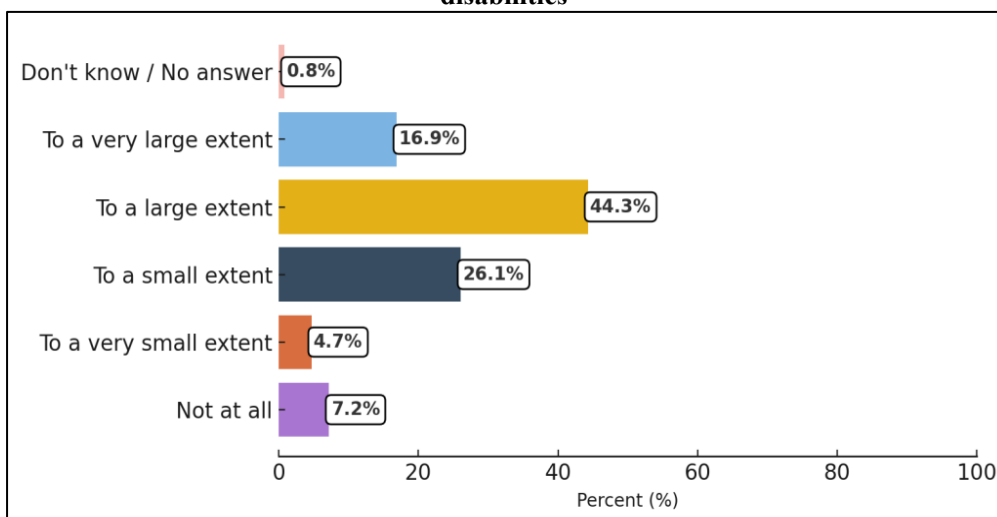
**Chart 20. Awareness of fiscal facilities granted to employers of persons with disabilities**



The perception of discrimination against persons with disabilities in the workplace is predominantly negative. Approximately 59.0% of respondents believe that persons with disabilities face discriminatory behavior “to a great” or “very great extent” in the workplace.

On the other hand, 38.0% of respondents consider that discrimination is not a significant issue, reporting that it occurs “to a small” or “very small extent.”

**Chart 21. Perceived extent of workplace discrimination against persons with disabilities**



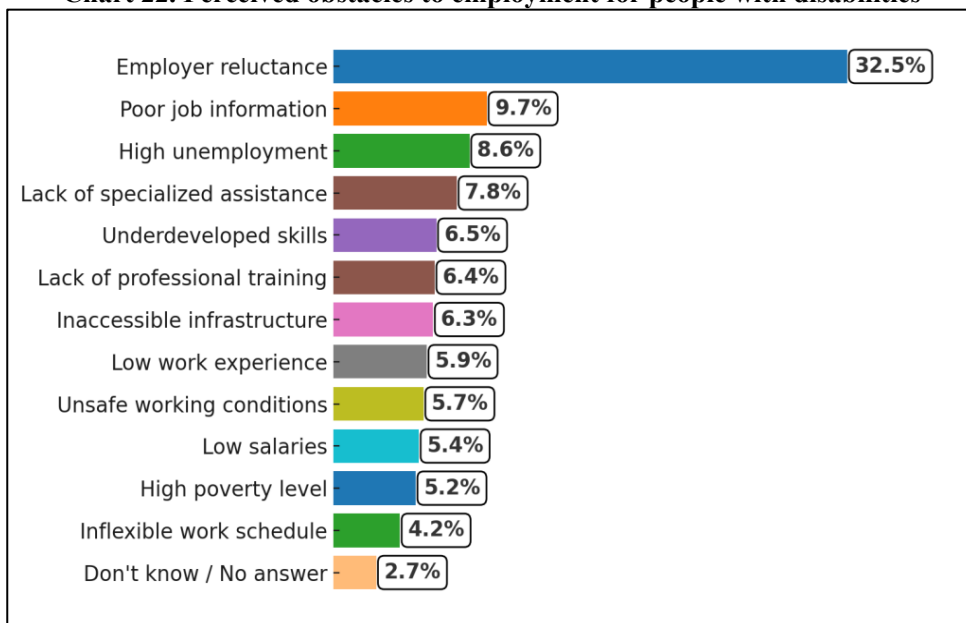
The most important obstacle perceived in the employment of persons with disabilities is employers’ reluctance, mentioned by 32.5% of respondents. The next significant barriers are the lack of information about job opportunities (9.7%), the high unemployment rate (8.6%), and the lack of specialized assistance (7.8%).

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Respondents also pointed out additional obstacles such as insufficiently developed skills, lack of professional training, and inaccessible infrastructure (percentages between 6.3% and 6.5%).

Other barriers, mentioned to a lesser extent (under 6.0%), include low professional experience, unsafe working conditions, low salaries, and high poverty levels.

**Chart 22. Perceived obstacles to employment for people with disabilities**



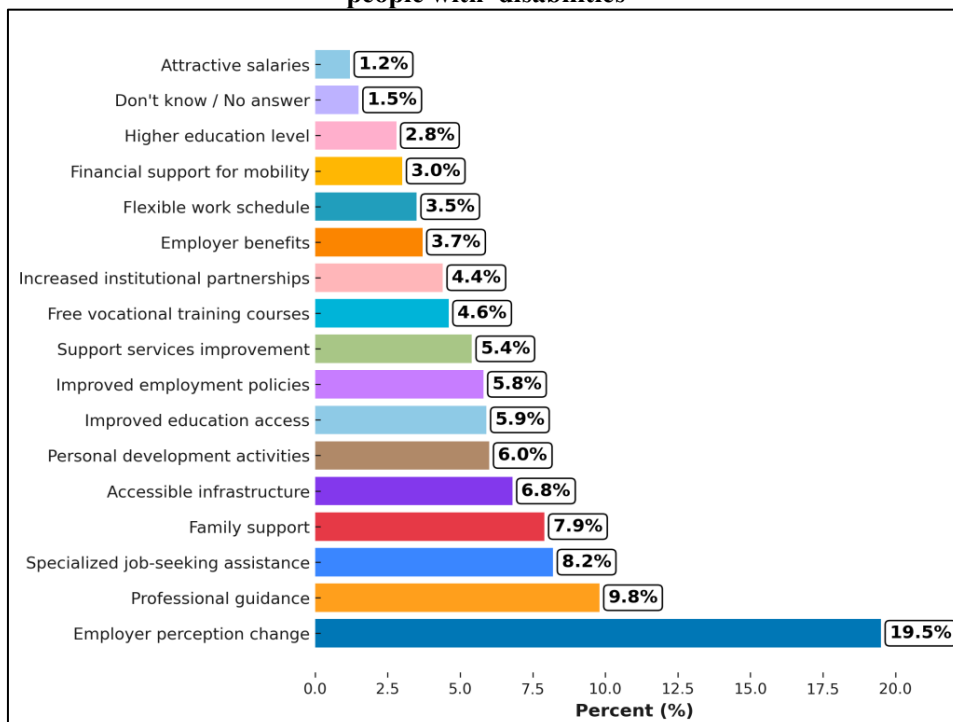
Respondents identified the need to change employers' perceptions (19.5%) as the most significant factor for improving access among persons with disabilities.

This finding suggests that the main obstacles are not administrative or physical in nature, but rather cultural and attitudinal, deeply rooted in prejudice, stereotypes, and limited confidence in the professional competencies of persons with disabilities.

Additionally, other solutions mentioned by respondents included career guidance (9.8%), specialized job mediation (8.2%), family support (7.9%), and accessible infrastructure.

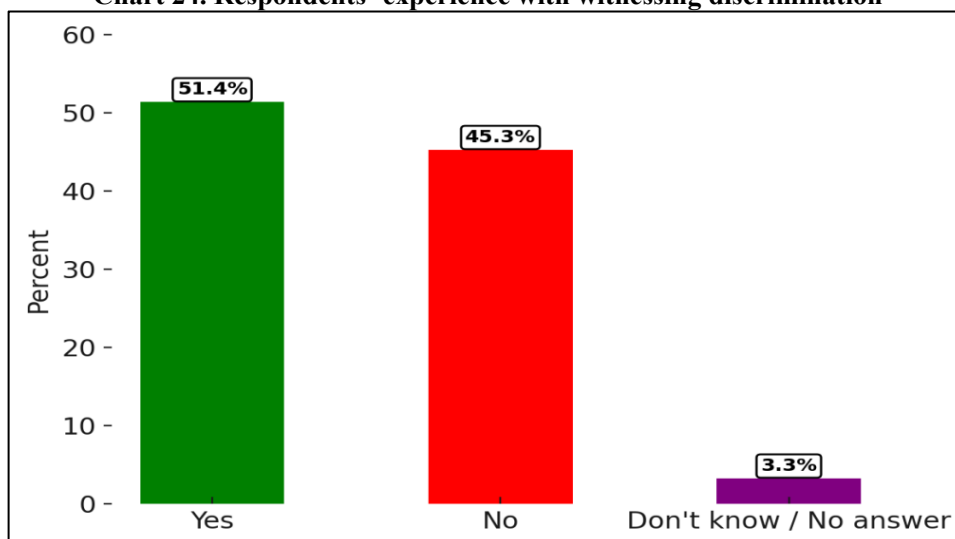
The remaining aspects referred to various issues such as personal development opportunities, improved access to education and employment-related social policies, flexible work arrangements, and targeted financial support.

**Chart 23. Main perceived solutions for enhancing labor market access among people with disabilities**



Nearly half of the participants reported witnessing situations of discrimination against persons with disabilities. Specifically, 51.4% confirmed having observed at least one act of discrimination, while 45.3% said they had not encountered such experiences.

**Chart 24. Respondents' experience with witnessing discrimination**



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### **Conclusion**

In the specialized literature, disability is defined as the result of the interaction between the individual and the social environment—an interaction that can generate socio-economic, institutional, and cultural barriers.

The social integration of persons with disabilities in Romania is influenced by cultural, structural, and institutional barriers. Although the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities is legally regulated and reflected in public policies, there is a gap between the normative framework and its implementation.

The research results indicate the existence of negative attitudes deeply embedded in social mentalities and practices related to access to resources, education, the labor market, interaction with public institutions, and participation in social life. Regarding the labor market, the most evident obstacles described include employers' reluctance, lack of information, lack of specialized services, and insufficient accessible infrastructure.

### **Authors' Contributions:**

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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