

Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller Communities and the Criminal Justice System

A review of the Evidence



About the authors



This evidence review has been produced by the Traveller Movement which is a registered UK charity promoting inclusion and community engagement with Romani (Gypsies), Roma and Irish Travellers. The Traveller Movement seeks to empower and support Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities to advocate for the full implementation of their human rights. This review was written by the Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer at the Traveller Movement, **Grace Preston**.

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Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller Communities and the Criminal Justice System

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Why read this evidence review?

Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller communities face some of the poorest outcomes across a range of indicators, including health, education, employment, and, particularly relevant to this evidence review, criminal justice. Although these groups each represent only a small fraction of the United Kingdom's overall population, it is crucial that services, governments, and organisations prioritise the needs of these highly marginalised communities in their actions and policies.

This review looks at:

- Accurate Ethnic Data Monitoring
- Policing
- Children and young people
- Sentencing disparities
- Prisons
- Women and Girls



Introduction

As some of the smallest ethnic groups in the UK, Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people are significantly overrepresented in the criminal justice system. In surveys distributed around all prisons in England and Wales for the 2019/20 HMIP Annual Report, 5% of male prisoners and 7% of female prisoners reported that they came from a 'Traveller' background.¹ Until this year Roma could not be counted within the system as there was no unique ethnic code which could track their ethnicity on P-NOMIS, as of 2025 after years of campaigning this has been changed.

Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people's overrepresentation in the criminal justice system is a result of a myriad of factors including poverty, ethnic and social inequalities, mental ill health, and poor educational outcomes. It is also a result of direct discrimination and entrenched stereotypes which disadvantage community members at every point of the criminal justice system.

Accurate Ethnic Monitoring – Beyond the GRT Acronym

The acronym 'GRT' meaning Gypsy, Roma and Traveller was originally introduced by public bodies and has been widely adopted by civil society and broader policymakers. However, the acronym GRT and the presumed grouping of these groups has led to some harmful generalisations, poor policy design, and inadequate service provision. One of the key issues is that public bodies, policymakers, and service providers often fail to understand the fundamental differences between the communities grouped under this umbrella.

Broadly speaking, communities often referred to under GRT fall into two categories: ethnic minority groups with protected characteristics, or cultural or lifestyle-based nomadic groups. The ethnic minority communities Romani (Gypsy) - (an indigenous group with a long-established heritage) Roma (predominantly of Eastern European origin), and Irish Travellers are distinct from each other and must be recognised as such. Additionally, the acronym is also frequently and loosely used to include non-ethnic nomadic groups such as New Travellers, Showmen, Bargees, and van-dwelling individuals, further muddying the waters. New language emerging from some government departments and NGO's now referring to all these communities as 'nomadic communities'. Again, this term can be misleading and fails to separate ethnic communities from non-ethnic cultural groups. For instance, most Roma communities in the UK are not nomadic and only an estimated 2% of Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller people live a permanently nomadic lifestyle or live roadside. These kinds of differences demonstrate how crucial it is to drill down and know who you are intending to reach, particularly in terms of public service provision.

Whilst all public bodies have some form of ethnic monitoring and data collection in place, data collection as it pertains to Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller populations is wildly inconsistent. For instance, the Department for Education monitors 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Irish Traveller' under the 'White' category, Census data collects 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller' and 'Roma' and HMPPS collects 'Gypsy/Traveller' under W3 category and only recently added Roma under W10. The NHS data dictionary does not include a specific ethnicity category for any of the ethnic groups. This patchy and inconsistent

data gathering leads to an incomplete picture of the disadvantages and difficulties faced by the communities in all facets of life. A lack of consistent ethnic monitoring across all public bodies makes it very difficult to cross reference data and therefore difficult to make meaningful and targeted policy interventions.

Hidden ethnicities

Despite official numbers reflecting the gross overrepresentation of community members in the secure estate these numbers are likely to be an underestimate, with many Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller people choosing not to disclose their ethnicity to the criminal justice system. This is due to fears of being discriminated against either in sentencing or by prison officers and officials if they are convicted. For instance, the Traveller Movement knows from working closely with community members in prison that Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller people will often hide their ethnicity in order to stay close to other members of the community. If they self-identify they will be separated on the wing due to allegations of 'gang' membership, community members will often report hearing that there are too many of 'your lot' on the wing.

It is also essential to say that current data sets do not include Roma communities and therefore their experiences and vulnerabilities are largely invisible within the criminal justice system.

Police and Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities

The relationship between Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities and the police is often characterised by mutual mistrust and hostility. In 2018 the Traveller Movement conducted a national research project² which surveyed all 45 territorial police forces (conducted by FOI requests), and thirty-one in-depth qualitative interviews with police officers and community members living and working in five police force areas in England. The research highlighted the prevalence of discriminatory and racist language used by police officers to describe Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people. This language often goes unchallenged.

Police officers and community members who participated in the research also described the protected ethnicities being treated as a risk factor by the police, indicating that there is an entrenched discriminatory approach to policing these communities. This perceived risk manifests as forces associating Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities with crime, criminality and violence. With some perceptions within the police regarding the Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller communities leading to discriminatory police practices that automatically treat community members as suspects. Our research shows that a higher police turnout to calls with incidents involving Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities.

A pattern of discriminatory and heavy-handed policing rooted in racialised stereotypes about the communities was clearly demonstrated by the events in Manchester. In November 2024 Greater Manchester Police (GMP) placed a Dispersal Order on the entire of Manchester City Centre which explicitly targeted Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller



children. GMP forced children on to trains heading to unknown destinations, separated them from family members, and subjected them to physical aggression, including shoving, hair-pulling, and handcuffing. Several individuals reported officers making disparaging remarks about their ethnicity, such as referring to them as 'pikeys'. Witnesses also described officers removing their badge numbers.

In a Freedom of Information request submitted on behalf of the Traveller Movement³ the authorisation of the Dispersal Order was based on the intelligence that the Christmas Markets would be congested and GMP 'usually see a large groups of youths/young adults from the Traveller community attend the city centre for a social gathering.... typically see a significant number involved in anti-social behaviour and some crime'.

This incident demonstrates clearly how Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller ethnicity itself is treated as a risk factor for criminal activity and the type of policing they therefore are on the receiving end of.

Children and Young People

According to the Children in Custody Report 23/24⁴ children who self-identified as 'Travellers' made up 7% of the secure children's estate. Making up about 10% of both Cookham Wood and Wetherby and Keppel and 8% of Secure Training Centres. As these reports only ask children in custody if they identify as a 'Traveller' it is unclear what ethnic group the children are a part of. Centralised data about children in custody is not fully disaggregated and therefore it is difficult to understand the full picture of the children's secure estate.

The Children in Custody Report 23/24 shed further light on the current cohort of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children in custody. The children surveyed were considerably more likely to have health issues (63% of those who identified as 'Traveller', and 43% of the wider population) and more likely to have a disability 46% of those who identified as 'Traveller', and 34% of the wider population. They are also more likely to have children of their own (18% of those who identified as 'Traveller', and 8% of the wider population). Those who self-identified as 'Travellers' have been consistently more likely to report feeling unsafe while in custody, more likely to report having drug problems, and significantly more likely than those from non-'Traveller' backgrounds to report that they had been forced to assault another young person.

Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children have been consistently more likely to be enrolled in education (87% compared to 77%), vocational training (13% compared to 8%), and paid work (13% compared to 10%).

School to Prison Pipeline

The Traveller Movements 'School to Prison Pipeline' report⁵ looked at a child's path from exclusion to contact with the criminal justice system. Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children have the lowest attainment rate of all ethnic groups across all schooling years. This is due to several compounding disadvantages within the education system, one of



which is the high level of exclusions. The Timpson Review of School Exclusions⁶ highlight how overlapping disadvantages place pupils at an increased risk of being excluded, highlighting in particular ethnicity, economic disadvantage and being diagnosed SEND.

Recent figures show that children who are identified in Department for Education data as 'Gypsy/Roma' are 3.30 times more likely to be permanently excluded from school compared with the White British population.⁷ Exclusions have a lifelong impact on children, their families and wider communities, this can be demonstrated by the Youth Jobs Gap report which found that young people from Roma and Irish Traveller backgrounds are between 2.5 to 3 times more likely to be NEET than the average.⁸

The Traveller Movement describes the phenomenon of disadvantage faced by Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children in education as institutionally coercive exclusions. An institutionally coerced exclusion is a term used by the Traveller Movement to describe how schools, either through action or inaction, create a persistently toxic educational environment, forcing children and their families to withdraw from formal educational environments.

Although it is important to say that not all children who are excluded from school end up in contact with the criminal justice system, there is a pattern of disadvantage which leaves children without opportunities for the rest of their lives.

Sentencing Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities

We know from the findings of the Lammy Review⁹ that all ethnic minorities experience disproportionate outcomes in sentencing, the overuse of remand, and lack of opportunity to partake in community-based schemes and rehabilitative programmes, disadvantages already marginalised communities and increases existing ethnic disparities in the sentencing process. This is especially true for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller defendants. A lack of understanding and awareness about Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller histories and cultures, combined with misconceptions and unconscious bias, can lead magistrates and judges to consider simply the fact that a person is a member of the Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller ethnicities as a risk factor for flight.

There are many areas which could be targeted to improve the sentencing outcomes of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities, however, they are often overlooked in policy interventions.¹⁰ and wider work on ethnic disparities.

The Traveller Movements Fair Sentencing for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities report¹¹ specifically spoke to the pre-sentence reports (PSRs). The Lammy Review¹² highlighted the essential role pre-sentence reports play in tackling sentencing disparities and in particular the role they play in educating judges on life experiences of offenders from backgrounds unfamiliar to them. A comprehensive pre-sentence report gives the court a full and well-balanced picture of who the offender is, their background, and provides an opportunity for a judge to consider any discriminatory bias that may exist before passing a sentence. However, the use of PSRs has dropped dramatically, for

instance in 2019/20 only 3% of those produced were standard delivery reports.¹³

Although a good PSR should inform the judge of the unique positioning of that individual offender, and their path to rehabilitation, Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller individuals often receive reports which rely heavily on racialised stereotypes. For instance, the Offender Assessment System, or the OASys risk assessment questions on accommodation, for example biased towards settled modes of living as being the 'norm' which means its assessment of risk is often biased against Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller communities. A solicitor with whom the Traveller Movement works closely, recalled the use of informal and discriminatory language used in a PSR for a young Irish Traveller boy.

'The term "Billy Boy" was used throughout the report in lieu of my client's actual name.'

Furthermore, the solicitor discussed how Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller ethnicity is unfoundedly considered a 'risk factor' in sentencing. Many young Irish Traveller boys are reportedly told not to speak in court as their accent may identify them as a Traveller, which may negatively impact sentencing outcomes.

Prisons and Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities

Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller peoples experience within the secure estate is often marred by negative and discriminatory incidents. Members of these communities within the prison system feel unsafe, unsupported and discriminated against.¹⁴ In many previous annual reports,¹⁵ His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) have compared the outcomes between those who self-identified as 'Traveller' and non-Travellers. Successive reports feel that a higher proportion of those who self-identify as Travellers report having been bullied or victimised by both staff and other prisoners, and being restrained, compared to their counterparts. This treatment in custody reduces the effectiveness of custody as a rehabilitative service for many Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller people.

This rehabilitation is further hampered by difficulties that Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller people have in maintaining family ties during their prison stays. Family ties and networks are very important to the communities; they are deeply connected to the wider family network and often have more caring responsibilities than their White British counterparts. For instance, children held in the secure estate have been significantly more likely to have children of their own¹⁶ a trend that is likely to be replicated in the adult estate. However, our report Available not Accessible¹⁷ demonstrates how difficult maintaining those family ties can often be.

A key reason for this is that regulations around visits restrict the number of visitors, making it impossible for large families to attend. Mothers are not in a position to leave some of their children and therefore cannot visit themselves. Another issue is the limitation on the amount of phone credit allocated to each prisoner, many community members heavily rely on phone communication, as many of their family members are unable to engage with written forms of contact such as letters, due to poor literacy. Despite needing to rely heavily on phone calls, it is difficult for Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller prisoners to maintain adequate phone credit to keep in contact with their often-large families, both

immediate and extended.

Our Available not Accessible report also highlights that although the communities are engaging in purposeful activities, these are rarely suited to the needs of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller individuals, and therefore, are not acting as effective tools for rehabilitation and for improving mental wellbeing in prisons. Many community members had negative experiences of education, and a mistrust of service providers and therefore hold conflicting views about the value of further education or literacy lessons while in prison. Many found it beneficial to have the opportunity to engage in learning that they were unlikely to engage in outside of the prison. However, some felt that literacy lessons were 'pointless' as they had coped well in life previously without higher levels of literacy. Many Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller prisoners said that they would benefit more from practical skills courses and that these would aid rehabilitation through providing employment opportunities upon release. Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller ethnic groups have the lowest attainment rate of any ethnic group in England & Wales¹⁸, therefore prison education offers a 'golden opportunity for many Traveller prisoners, if the literacy and numeracy classes are pitched at an appropriate level'.¹⁹

As Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller people suffer from high rates of poor mental health, physical health and substance misuse within wider society which is largely driven by the impact of poor socioeconomic outcomes and persistent discrimination, therefore, it is not surprising that many Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller people need support with these upon entry to prison.²⁰ A 2022 INQUEST report²¹ looking at racialised deaths in prison found that self-inflicted death as a percentage of total deaths were highest amongst people of Eastern European nationality, Mixed Other people, and White Gypsy or Irish Traveller people respectively. This reflects what we know of community members in the community, a report by PAVEE Point suggests that the number of Irish Travellers in Ireland who take their own lives in seven times higher than the wider population.

Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller Women and the Criminal Justice System

There is no up to date data on the number of women in prison who identify under the W3 category (Gypsy/Traveller), this data is not disaggregated by HMPPS or the Ministry of Justice. The most recent count of Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller women in prison comes from a 2017 Prison Reform Trust²² report which found that Gypsy/Irish Traveller women make up 6% of the prison population. This makes the disparities faced by community members in women's prisons the highest of the secure estate. However, there is very little targeted research, and therefore very little understanding, of their experiences within the secure estate.

Women represent a small minority in the criminal justice system, comprising less than 5% of the prison population and 15% of those serving a community sentence. Women in the criminal justice often have different and more complex needs than men. Higher numbers of women (53%) than men (27%) experienced abuse as children. Far more women than men are primary carers for children, with significant consequences for the children of those who go to prison, as well as for the mothers themselves. This will be especially true for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller women

who sit at the juncture of many vulnerabilities and disadvantages.

In general, as found in the Sentencing Review, the majority of women in contact with the criminal justice system are victims as well as perpetrators of crime; almost 70% of women supervised in the community or in custody report are known to be victim/survivors of domestic abuse.²³ For many this is directly linked to their offending. This will be no different for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller women. However, it is important to note that there is no accepted evidence to suggest that the rates of violence and abuse against women is higher for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller women than the settled population. However, structural inequalities such as discrimination, lack of educational attainment, unemployment, lacking access to accommodation and significant health inequalities make it more difficult for Traveller women to move out of violent or abusive relationships and seek help through mainstream services.

The Traveller's Equality Project stated that domestic violence was raised as a key concern when working with Traveller offenders. Several probation officers said they had dealt with Traveller women who were being victimised by their partners but were unwilling to report it.

A leaflet by the Roma Support Group notes that health professionals need to be aware that victims of rape and domestic violence are often stigmatised by their peers, leading to an understanding that deters survivors from talking about their traumas. This is something that impacts Traveller women, as talking about abuse can be seen as 'airing dirty laundry' and the interactions between a families or a husband and wife are considered to be private. Further, for some Irish Traveller Women, their understanding and experiences with their Catholic faith can be a powerful cause that deters divorce.

Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller women's poor experiences of custody are in keeping with system wide critiques of a criminal justice system that disproportionately impacts minority women through over-policing and disproportionate rates of custodial sentencing.

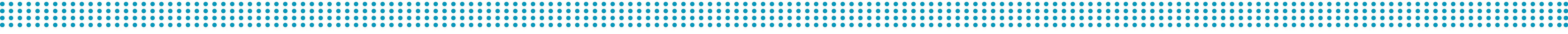
How to help Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller prisoners

The Third Sector plays a crucial role in supporting Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities throughout the criminal justice system. However, it is essential to tackle entrenched biases held by members of all communities about these marginalised groups, ensuring any staff who work with these communities are provided with cultural competency training delivered by by-and-for organisations who have experience working with these communities.

There is a significant amount of good practice in supporting Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller prisoners. This includes providing tailored services, ensuring fair representation, and creating dedicated support groups within prisons. Key recommendations for effective practice include:

- While education should be adapted to the individual needs of all prisoners, many Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller individuals prefer learning that feels relevant to their lives beyond prison. Community members often highlight the value of one-to-one teaching. Organisations such as Open Doors Education and Training offer online, personalised educational support that meets these needs.
- Participants expressed that hands-on learning and skills-based training are crucial for rehabilitation and reducing reoffending. Opportunities such as obtaining a driving licence or training in construction and trade-related fields were seen as highly beneficial for improving post-release employment prospects.
- Many Roma prisoners speak English as their fourth or fifth language. It is essential that prisons provide qualified interpreters who do not hold prejudiced views against Roma communities to ensure effective and respectful communication.
- All prisons should host dedicated Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller groups, as well as separate groups for Roma prisoners, at least once a month. These groups provide critical emotional and cultural support, contributing significantly to rehabilitation and moral amongst community members who find support and camaraderie amongst their own people.
- Regular family days (particularly to celebrate key dates in the calendar, GRT History Month, St Patricks Day, Appleby Horse Fair) for Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller prisoners are vital, helping maintain family ties and support networks during their time in the secure estate.
- Prisons should actively celebrate GRT History Month to acknowledge and respect the cultural identities of these communities.
- Each of the three communities should have a designated representative who can liaise with the prison's equalities lead. Importantly, these representatives must be members of the communities they represent, as prisoners are often unwilling to engage with them same candour with those outside their own background.

When advocating on behalf of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities it is essential to understand



and challenge the perceptions and discriminatory ideas around the communities. For instance, many community members report being separated inside prisons because they are seen as a 'gang', often risk assessments will speak about family feuds and criminality being a community-wide issue, these assumptions are discriminatory and must be directly confronted by advocates.

Further to this, in court many community members report being afraid to speak, fearing their accent would identify them and negatively impact their case. This form of bias must also be addressed through active challenge and awareness-raising within the justice system.

Effective advocacy requires treating individuals with respect and responding to their specific needs, while also acknowledging and working to dismantle the systemic discrimination that affects the communities as a whole.

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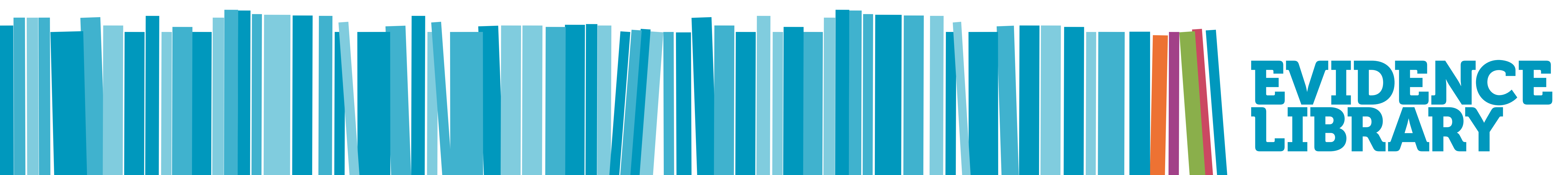
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- 1 To increase the extent to which the voluntary sector bases its services on the available evidence base
- 2 To encourage commissioners to award contracts to organisations delivering an evidence-based approach.

Each article has been written by a leading academic with particular expertise on the topic in question. The topics are selected by Clinks' members as areas of priority interest. With the support of Russell Webster, Clinks is working towards building a comprehensive directory of the best evidence available across a wide range of criminal justice topics.

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