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Education inequalities facing Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in England

Friends, Families & Travellers

Briefing: Education inequalities facing Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in England, November 2023

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Key facts

- It is estimated that there are approximately 300,000 Gypsies and Travellers and 200,000 Roma in the UK.
- Gypsies, Roma and Travellers have the lowest educational attainment at all key stages up to and including KS4, out of any ethnic groups in the UK.
- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children have amongst the highest rate of exclusions out of any ethnic groups in the UK.
- The Department of Education report on the ethnicity recorded in schools under the categories of 'Romany Gypsy/Roma' and 'Irish Traveller'.
- The [National Barometer of Prejudice and Discrimination](#) found that people held the highest level of prejudice towards Gypsies and Travellers out of any protected characteristic group.

Key issues

- Student drop-off rates are consistent through secondary education and are particularly high at key points in education, including entering secondary education, continuing to Year 11, and continuing to Years 12 and 13.
- Lack of inclusive teaching environments to acknowledge and celebrate Gypsy, Traveller and Roma cultures and histories.
- Large numbers of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are bullied at school.
- Digital exclusion presents barriers to learning, where there is limited access to devices or sufficient parental digital literacy to assist with home learning.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has further widened the attainment gap.
- Insufficient support and mechanisms for travelling families to access and maintain education.

Educational inequalities experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children

Despite a comprehensive evidence base of issues and good practice, little has been done to remedy the stark educational inequalities experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children. [The Department for Education](#) published a comprehensive [report](#) in 2009, yet the findings and recommendations have not been acted on, allowing the inequalities to persist.

Key educational inequalities:

- Gypsies, Roma and Travellers have the lowest educational attainment, at all key stages up to and including KS4, out of any ethnic groups in the UK.
- In the [2021 to 2022 school year](#) only 15% of Gypsy/Roma pupils and 16% of Irish Traveller pupils met the expected standard in KS2 reading, writing and maths combined for 10 to 11 year olds (compared to 59% of all)¹.
- In the [2021 to 2022 school year](#), only 8.5% of Gypsy/Roma pupils got a grade 5 or above in GCSE English and Maths, and 14.4% of Irish Travellers (compared to 49.8% for all).
- Gypsy/Roma (67%) and Irish Traveller (72%) pupils were the least likely to stay in education [after GCSEs](#).
- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children have amongst the highest rate of exclusions of all ethnic groups in the UK. In the [2020 to 2021 school year](#), Gypsies/Roma had a suspension rate of 15% and Irish Travellers of 11%. Gypsy/Roma pupils also had the [highest permanent exclusion rates](#) in the same school year. However, many of these exclusions are overturned at appeal.

Student numbers and drop off rates

Data extracts based on the [School Census](#) received in response to FOI requests from Friends, Families and Travellers in 2022, show that 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' pupil numbers recorded from the 2012/13-2021/22 academic years fall significantly at key points in a pupil's education: Years 6-7/age 10-11 (between primary and secondary education); Years 10-11/age 15-16 (prior to taking GCSE exams); Years 11-12/age 16-17; and Years 12-13/age 17-18 (prior to taking further education exams e.g. A-levels or Baccalaureate).

¹ The Department of Education report on ethnicity in schools under the categories of 'Romany Gypsy/Roma' and 'Irish Traveller'.

When looking at snapshots comparing different year group numbers, in one year, figures show:

- in 2012/13, a 55% lower number of Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller pupils attending Year 11 (960 pupils) when compared with reception (2119 pupils);
- in 2021/22, a 44% lower figure in Year 11 (1706) compared with reception (3022).

It should be noted that in the academic year 2020/21, most pupils spent significant time studying at home due to national lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When following each cohort through from the 2012/13 academic year to the 2021/22 academic year², there was:

- a general trend of year-on-year increase of pupil numbers through primary education from Reception to Year 6;
- a general trend of year-on-year decrease of pupil numbers through secondary education from Years 7-11;
- a consistent significant fall in pupil numbers continuing from Year 6 (primary) to Year 7 (secondary) (an average fall of 22%);
- a consistent significant fall in pupil numbers continuing into Year 11 (an average fall of 10% from Year 10);
- a consistent very significant fall in pupil numbers continuing into Year 12 (an average fall of 88% from Year 11);
- a consistent significant fall in pupil numbers continuing into Year 13 (an average fall of 43% from Year 12);
- By the second academic year of the pandemic, numbers had fallen in every year group. For almost all cohorts (the only exception being those returning to Year 2), numbers did not return to pre-pandemic levels in the following academic year.

The actual figures for Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller students in education after secondary school are extremely low. The lowest figure over the period 2012-21 is 62 students in Year 13 (in the 2013/14 academic year), and the highest figure over the period is 199 students in Year 12 (in the 2015/16 academic year), nationwide.

Other trends in the data over the period 2012-21 show:

- an increase in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in educational settings over the 9 year period, up 44% from 23729 (2012/13) to 34255 (2021/22)

² The most recent data available at the time of writing.

- an increase of children joining at reception (start of primary school), up 42% from 2119 (2012/13) to 3022 (2021/22);
- an increase in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children starting secondary school Year 7 (up 45% from 1595 (2012/13) to 2318 (2021/22)) and in final year at secondary Year 11 (up 77% from 960 (2012/13) to 1706 (2021/22));

The educational inequalities and reduction of pupils continuing in educational settings through the academic years must be understood through a range of factors. This briefing goes on to cover some of those factors.

The need for more inclusive teaching environments

Many schools do not include Gypsy, Roma and Traveller cultures and histories in their teaching, even neglecting to include European Roma and Sinti people as targets of the Holocaust. The lack of visibility and understanding of the communities' cultures and histories is a contributing factor to the poor educational outcomes experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children.

Positive actions, such as including the histories of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in school curricula and celebrating Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month in June, would contribute to a wider understanding that the communities are an integral part of both national and European societies.

There is also little representation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people in books used in schools, highlighted by a 2020 [Council of Europe research project](#) on 20 European countries, which showed that the UK came joint lowest on coverage of Roma in school textbooks. The inclusion of positive narratives about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities is a crucial component to creating a welcoming learning environment for these pupils.

Equally, it is important to include historical periods of persecution as a way of challenging hate. Whilst teaching on the Holocaust is mandatory as part of the curriculum, the experience of victims other than Jewish people is not. [Research commissioned by Friends, Families and Travellers with YouGov](#) in 2019 found that 55% of British adults surveyed did not know that over 500,000 Roma and Sinti people were killed by the Nazis in the Holocaust. Including teaching on Roma and Sinti victims of the Holocaust would act as an effective tool to combat hatred, discrimination and prejudice.

There is also a need for teacher training on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller cultures and histories, to help promote and embed a better understanding of the communities, which in turn helps to promote an inclusive learning environment.

Another key aspect of creating inclusive learning environments is employing teachers, teaching assistants and schools' links officers from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. This helps ensure positive role models and crucial links between schools and parents.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children's experiences of bullying

Many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children experience racist bullying and prejudicial treatment within educational settings. [A survey](#) conducted by Friends, Families and Travellers in 2019 asked Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people what the biggest challenge they faced in school was. 86% of pupils reported the biggest challenge at school is bullying, followed by racism at 73%.

In our research with the Anti-Bullying Alliance '[Bullied, Not Believed and Blamed: The experiences of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Pupils: Recommendations for Schools and Other Settings](#)', the experiences of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people included:

- being negatively labelled, judged and having presumptions made about them being trouble-makers or not willing to learn;
- feeling that they were treated differently from other pupils and could not access additional support when they needed it;
- racist and offensive language about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and communities going unchallenged;
- not being believed when they reported bullying;
- presumptions about them having a tendency to bully others;
- feeling they had to retaliate to bullying or racist language, or hide that they are Gypsy, Roma or Traveller;
- that they had learned to expect bullying because no action was being taken to prevent or respond to it.

Experience of racist bullying is a factor leading to low educational attainment, and high exclusion rates. The [Office of the Children's Commissioner's School Exclusions Inquiry](#) of 2012, '[They never give up on you](#)', outlined the high rates of wrongful exclusion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, stating that:

'Success rates of appeals give a reasonable proxy measure indicating that, for whatever reason, a school has made a mistake in deciding to exclude a pupil. In the course of this Inquiry, we examined success rates for appeals by different groups of pupils in 28 Local Authorities, representing every region of England.'

The data demonstrate that some groups are much more likely than others to lodge a successful appeal which proves they have been unfairly excluded. In many cases, those most likely to be permanently excluded were also most likely to have successful appeals. For example, for Gypsy and Roma Traveller and Irish Traveller children, who are the most likely ethnic group in the system to be excluded, 100 per cent of appeals were successful’.

Digital exclusion and barriers for parental engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic was a stark reminder of the individual circumstances of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, and some of the difficulties in digitally focused approaches to accessing education.

Larger family groupings and small living spaces (for those living in caravans/mobile homes) led to huge challenges in accessing online schooling during the pandemic. This was coupled with a lack of access to laptops for home learning, along with challenges for many families relating to parental literacy and digital skills to assist with home learning. Before the pandemic, the 2020 annual [Education Policy Institute report](#) found that Gypsy/Roma pupils were almost three years behind White British pupils at GCSE level. The EPI published [a further report](#) in 2022, focused on the effects of COVID-19 on the disadvantage gap, which showed that the attainment gap had widened further.

In July 2021, the Government announced a [£1 million education fund](#) for programmes to ‘focus on boosting educational attainment, tackling exclusion and drop-out rates and improving pathways to employment’ for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children. The scheme aimed to reach 150 schools and 600 pupils and whilst this is a welcome initiative, it is vital to have a broader set of measures that reach pupils in schools and pupils who will not benefit from the programme, as outlined in the recommendations of this briefing. No evaluation bringing together the learning from the funded projects had been published.

Aside from the challenges of lockdown learning, many schools have moved almost exclusively to online systems, for example for accessing and submitting homework, for lunch/trip payments and for booking parents evenings. For parents with literacy and digital literacy issues and for those experiencing data poverty, this creates barriers in engaging with the school and supporting a child’s learning, which can lead to disengagement from schooling altogether.

Support for travelling families to access and maintain education

Gypsy and Traveller parents who are travelling for work are permitted absences from school during these periods if the child has attended school as regularly as possible (and for at least 200 half day sessions in the year). Gypsy and Traveller children can have 'dual registration', with the place at their 'base' school being kept open for them, and their absence while travelling recorded as authorised. The children can then (technically) register at other schools while the family is travelling, although finding and securing a place is challenging.

Local authority Traveller Education Services, which were established to help Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children access and maintain education, helped link children in to educational settings and resources when travelling. Most of these have disappeared in recent years, due to the removal of ring-fenced funding, and financial cutbacks. Some do remain, such as that in Brighton and Hove, which employs a part-time peripatetic teacher, a teaching assistant and a welfare officer, to provide extra support and teaching to children and families. All pupils under the service have learning targets and the service can prevent disengagement if that is an issue, while also providing support with liaising between families and services.

Higher Education and qualifications

In April 2022, the [Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity](#) at the University of Manchester published [the results from the Evidence for Equality National Survey](#), a survey carried out from February-November 2021, looking into the experiences of ethnic and religious minorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This indicates disproportionately low numbers for university attendance and high numbers of those having no qualifications from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups. The ethnicity categories used by the survey were 'Roma' and 'Gypsy/Traveller'. The survey showed:

- 55% of Roma and 51% of Gypsy/Traveller respondents had no qualifications;
- Compared to the 'White British' group (32%), higher proportions of degree-educated people were seen in most ethnic minority groups, except people from 'Roma' (6%), 'Gypsy/Traveller' (19%) and 'Any other Black' (27%) ethnic groups;
- Although some ethnic minority groups were more likely to be in higher occupational positions, people from ethnic minorities were more likely to be represented in the lowest occupational class of semi-routine and routine occupations compared to 'White British' people. This was particularly pronounced for 'Roma', 'Gypsy/Traveller', 'Mixed White and Black Caribbean' and 'Eastern European' people.

In a [data and analysis release](#) from the 2021 Census, information was published on qualifications and higher education compared across ethnic groups.

- Those who identified within the ‘White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller’ ethnic group had:
 - the highest proportion of people with no formal qualifications at 57%;
 - the lowest proportion of people with a higher-level qualification ([Level 4 or above](#)) at 11%.
- Those who identified as ‘White: Roma’:
 - had the next highest percentage with no formal qualifications at 31%;

Recommendations

- The Government should develop and publish the promised cross-departmental Strategy to tackle the inequalities experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, with educational outcomes firmly embedded in the Strategy.
- The Department for Education should ensure the consistent and disaggregated collection and reporting of data of ‘Romany Gypsy’, ‘Irish Traveller’ and ‘Roma’.
- Data on children, who may not be present on School Census days (due to travelling), should be captured, so that they are not invisible in data sets.
- The Government should publish and share the learning from the £1m education funding.
- The Government should re-introduce ring-fenced targeted funding for local authorities across the country to ensure Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children can be supported to access and maintain education (as formerly existed through a network of Traveller Education Services).
- Schools should receive the Pupil Premium for all Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children to provide resources to bolster their educational outcomes.
- The Government should implement the Council of Europe’s recommendation of July 2020 that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller histories and cultures, including the Romani Genocide, is on the school curriculum.
- The Government should support schools to celebrate Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month in June.

- Schools should sign up to the '[Pledge for Schools](#)' which commits schools to creating a warm, welcoming, inclusive and celebratory environment for Gypsy, Roma, Traveller, Boater and Showmen children.
- Universities should sign up to the '[GTRSB into Higher Education Pledge](#)', a firm commitment by a University, College or educational institution to undertake certain steps to support Gypsy, Traveller, Roma, Showman and Boater students into and within higher education.
- Schools should explicitly name Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in their anti-bullying policies, and ensure there is zero tolerance of bullying and racism towards Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils.
- Teachers should receive training on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller cultures and histories.
- Schools should liaise with parents to overcome any barriers digital systems might present, offering alternative methods of engagement.
- Ofsted should ask specific questions about the attainment of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in their inspections.
- Sufficient funding should be made available to schools and Pupil Referral Units for vocational courses for Gypsy/Traveller children at age 14, including for those not on the school roll.

About us

Friends, Families and Travellers is a leading national charity that works to end racism and discrimination against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and to protect the right to pursue a nomadic way of life.

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