

Statistical bulletin

Gypsies' and Travellers' lived experiences, justice, England and Wales: 2022

Qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of Gypsy and Traveller communities, relating to justice.

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1 . Other pages in this release

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2 . Main points

- Participants recurrently described a fear of authorities, feeling misunderstood and treated unfairly, which led in some cases to feeling unable to report a crime, and reluctance to seek help from the police.
- Gypsy and Traveller community member participants described themselves or others they knew having had challenging experiences with the police, and there was a sense that the police tend to presume criminality of Gypsies and Travellers, with perceived differential treatment linked to this.
- Perceived disproportionality and a sense of injustice were common in participants' narratives of encounters with the justice system, including in the described use of force, presumption of crime and arrests, denial of bail and perceived over-representation of Gypsies and Travellers in prisons.
- Laws were also perceived as criminalising Gypsies' and Travellers' ways of life, exacerbating the sense of marginalisation and injustice.
- Community members were not always aware of the introduction of such laws, including the Scrap Metal Dealers Act (2013) and the Control of Horses Act (2015), meaning that people could inadvertently face being arrested for engaging in their traditional activities and occupations.
- Raising awareness, respect and involvement of Gypsies and Travellers within systems and processes affecting their lives were seen as important for improving relationships and experiences in the future.
- Examples of more positive relationships with the police included engaging with a familiar community liaison officer who listened and understood Gypsy and Traveller culture, providing flexibility in requesting people to move on, and appearing to show respect to Gypsies and Travellers.

3 . Experiences and relationships with the police

This bulletin focuses on Gypsies' and Travellers' experiences with the police and justice system that emerged as part of participants sharing their life histories. The issues were not explored systematically and in detail with all participants, and they were linked to broader questions about experiences with a range of service providers and authorities.

The issues highlighted are drawn largely from the accounts and perspectives of Gypsies and Travellers, though perspectives from interviews with local government officials are also included, where relevant. The perspectives of police officials are not represented here as they did not take part in the research.

Although some positive experiences were reflected in participants' descriptions of their relationships and experiences with the police, there were a variety of ways and circumstances where these were described as fraught and difficult. This emerged in the accounts of different generations of Gypsies and Travellers in the study, suggesting longstanding tensions.

4 . Perceived presumed criminality

There was a recurrent sense among participants that Gypsies and Travellers are automatically presumed to be criminals by the police.

Participants showed a desire for the police and others to judge people based on the individual's own actions, rather than any possible pre-existing beliefs about Gypsies and Travellers more broadly. Participants also noted that Gypsies and Travellers, similarly to any other group, represent a microcosm of broader society, in which a majority of people do not engage in crime and a minority do.

My first conversation with a police officer... can I guarantee that any resident of these unauthorised encampments will not commit crime when in your town? Absolutely not. They're a microcosm of every other society. Can I guarantee they will be a victim? 100% probably before they've unhitched the caravan and made a cup of tea.

Civil society organisation (CSO) worker, Focus Group 1

5 . Perceived heavy-handed approaches

Participants described what they viewed as heavy-handedness in how police deal with incidents involving Gypsies and Travellers. For example, there were accounts of several vans, helicopters and armed police arriving at Traveller sites for what were perceived to be minor incidents. Some felt that this was a different approach to that taken outside of sites, and that this happens more now than in the past.

I think [it's]... absolutely ridiculous and the attitude towards you even when they come on the site is they come armed... They come on the sites, they come like there's been a murder, they come armed where little children are... [It's] not necessary. When I was younger, you would have a policeman on a bike, or you would have a panda car come in. Now they come in droves and droves, you've got helicopters over the top of the caravan sites in the middle of the night. No one knows what they do it for.

Female, aged 50 to 60 years, local authority site

6 . Perceived disparities in how Gypsies and Travellers are treated compared with others

Participants shared examples of how they felt the police had treated them differently because of their Gypsy or Traveller ethnicity. They felt they could be identified as a Gypsy or Traveller by living on a Traveller site or speaking with an accent common among Gypsies or Travellers, and felt this could automatically trigger a presumption that they had committed a crime.

With the police you could be pulled over two or three times a week for no reason. You could be fully insured, you'd have tax on your car, you have everything. You'd be completely legal with everything and you'd get pulled just because they know where you're from and if they see you coming out of [the site].

Male, aged 20 to 30 years, local authority site

7 . Experiences of seeking help

Participants described examples where the police had been called to an incident and community members felt they were treated as suspects and threatened with arrest despite being the victim, with help or protection not offered. This was described when Gypsies and Travellers were trying to report experiences of perceived hate crime, for example, as well as in other cases.

A man, couple of times went past threatening us to burn us out. We went to the police and said, look, he's threatening to burn us out. The man looked at us and said, 'Listen, don't you go near him because if you touch him, you'll be locked up'. And you just think, where do you go from there? Who do you tell what's going on?... My husband said I don't want to go near him. I want you to go near him and... arrest him. He's threatening to burn me out... And at the time my kids were there on their own... They were terrified.

Female, aged 70 to 80 years, bricks and mortar

Some also described having experienced a lack of support or feeling penalised by the police for having protected themselves against experiences of discrimination and abuse.

I had an episode with some foreign people down the street a few years back, and they picked on us and started calling us Gypsies, and God knows what else... They called the police first [and] I asked the police to take our statement. They wouldn't bother taking our statement at all. They just took their side... and they come in and... arrested my two children at two o'clock in the morning for affray. And [they had] to come in for 14 hours in a police cell, but they wouldn't still hear our side of the story that we was racist abused... I even wrote a statement and never heard from the police about it.

Female, aged 50 to 60 years, bricks and mortar

A sense that it would be counter-productive to call the police for help and previous experience of having done so to their own detriment dissuaded some people from engaging with the police and led to avoiding them instead.

People won't get no respect from police, tell you that much. We never have done... And I wouldn't trust the police. I wouldn't trust the police anyway, honestly.

Community member, Focus Group 5

In their life history accounts, participants also described early experiences with the police that had instilled a sense of fear from a young age, for example when their families were moved on from where they had stopped while travelling.

... when we did get moved in them days, we got moved quickly, sometimes [in] the middle of the night the police would come and move us. I can remember getting pulled out of the trailer with just me underpants on, just pulled out by me feet, by the police.

Male, aged 40 to 50 years, local authority site

There were also examples of more positive relationships with police officers. Common factors among these more positive experiences included:

- trusting relationships developed over time
- a sense of mutual respect
- experiences where people felt supported, listened to and treated fairly and with empathy

There was a family and they needed help... the woman [police officer], she tried to help them to stay there, and the local authorities were like 'No move them'. And so, she wouldn't move them because of the medical issues.

Community member, Focus Group 5

They did sit and listen to you. Even though they weren't Travellers, they worked for Travellers. I remember [Police Community Support Officer name] had a barbecue and he invited us all to his house.

Female, aged 50 to 60 years, local authority site

8 . Navigating the justice system

Those with direct experience of the criminal justice system sometimes described having difficult family histories, not dissimilar to people in similar circumstances among the settled community.

I never went to school... I was bounced from one care home to another care home. I ended up in... a care home in a secure unit... They had prison bars up the windows, you know. So I just bounced all over the country.

Male, aged 50 to 60 years, local authority site

A local government participant expressed the view that some people experience a “cycle of abuse and imprisonment”, whereby early life circumstances were seen to create a cycle of vulnerability that can be hard to escape.

The voice that the Travelling community have around national debates is usually either from Travellers who have broken away from that cycle of, you know, the revolving door of abuse and imprisonment... They've made themselves a success because of their own, probably determination...

Local government participant, Wales

Where participants identified having familial criminal history, this was also linked with described ongoing negative encounters with the police.

They knew what I was, they knew who my mum and dad was, because there was criminal history on my mum's side... I remember them following us around literally all the time. They kept pulling us over for absolutely no reason at all in the motor... They decided I must be lying about my name and demanded that I walk around with a passport on me at all times... They absolutely demanded it and then the next morning we got told that they had got sent out from [the police station] to see that I had a passport on me. Otherwise, they were going to bring me in. Under what law?

Male, aged 30 to 40 years, local authority site

Several laws were seen by participants as penalising Gypsies and Travellers for their traditional cultural practices. For example, participants described being deemed as causing a nuisance for having a fire, being moved on for stopping in unauthorised places while travelling, having their horses removed while stopping, and being considered to be committing an offence by collecting scrap metal without a licence, a commonplace means of securing income for Gypsies and Travellers (see [Gypsies and Travellers' lived experiences, education and employment, England and Wales: 2022 bulletin](#)).

Collectively, this legal framework was viewed by participants who were aware of it as unfairly targeting Gypsies and Travellers and their traditional way of life.

They're not the most positive policies in the world, it feels like there's a lot of the policies nationally, that are to undermine us, to criminalise us, to segregate us, or to squash every last remaining element of Gypsy or Traveller out of the country. In the meantime, we're making living roadside without a proper camp illegal. So you've got [many] of the people that are homeless.

Female, aged 30 to 40 years, bricks and mortar

At the time of this research, the [Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act \(2022\)](#) was due to be passed (and has subsequently been so). Some participants described a sense that the Act was further criminalising the travelling way of life, unfairly targeting Gypsies and Travellers. They were concerned about the implications of this for the culture and wellbeing of Gypsies and Travellers, as well as the potential for those who travel to be severely penalised.

The Police, Crime and Sentencing Bill that they are bringing in just now actively criminalises Travellers... Every fundamental right is being stripped away from us and we are just letting it happen.

Male, aged 30 to 40 years, local authority site

While some expressed real concerns about the implications of the Act, others appeared to have little or no awareness of it and the new regulations that would come into force.

At [area] they will fetch you like toilets and pick your rubbish up and things like that. But with this new law, I think they're gonna struggle with that now... Where before we was allowed to but now with this new law I don't know if we will be or not... So, because half of us kind of people won't know we'll just probably pull straight on the road, don't know about these laws. Where half of us will know about them and half won't.

Community member, Focus Group 5

Some participants also described being unaware of other existing laws until they found themselves in difficulties. For example, participants who had been collecting scrap metal for a living for years did not realise it had become illegal to do so without a license under the [Scrap Metal Dealers Act \(2013\)](#). Similarly, others did not realise that they had to obtain a new license in each area where they travelled.

One night, me and the missus are out, I've got tax on my motor I've got an MOT on my motor, got insurance on my motor. We are out and we are loaded with scrap we have got a bit of metal on the motor, tied down, ratcheted properly. Police car comes by, he turns round [and] stops me outside some shops... 'What are you doing?' I said collecting scrap. 'No you're thieving it,' I said 'No mate. Another man's rubbish is another man's gold'. I said that's all I do is pick rubbish up and sell it as scrap.

Male, aged 50 to 60 years, local authority site

9 . Experiences of bail, remand, sentencing and imprisonment

Some aspects of the justice system were perceived as disproportionate and unfair towards Gypsies and Travellers, such as being denied bail following arrest because of living on a Gypsy and Traveller site or having no fixed address.

I was denied bail by [the regional] police because my address was a caravan site. So on someone's word, they found it better for me to go on remand for...about six weeks before it got chucked out of court [and] they give me bail... It got dragged on for about another 13 months, going backwards and forwards to courts and eventually got chucked out. I can honestly say that any experiences I've ever had with police being a Gypsy man haven't been good ones.

Male, aged 30 to 40 years, bricks and mortar

Local government participants also noted a sense that Gypsies and Travellers may be disproportionately represented in prisons and felt that this warrants further scrutiny.

Experiences with the crime and justice system were also linked to concerns about social services involvement, particularly among women. While men described experiences of presumed criminality, arrests and in some cases imprisonment, women were also concerned that imprisonment of family members could result in social services taking their children into care.

When someone goes in prison and there's no communication, that really damages families and that exacerbates the situation with social services, which means you know, five times higher chance of children being taken, obviously it's a trigger for that.

Community member, Focus Group 2

Some participants shared reflections on the perceived impacts of prison on the mental health of those involved who can become isolated from their families in a system very alien to their own cultural norms.

If you are an Irish Traveller man, and you're illiterate, and you've got to the age of 20, and you're in prison, you don't want to go and tell people that... You become angry and...you don't want to engage. And then you know... about getting the letters and Traveller boys put them on the shelf [because they] can't read them. What does that do for mental health and suicide? Because we live very intergenerationally you know, children live with adults, live with grandparents, live with great-grandparents. So when you've got that break in when someone goes in prison and there's no communication, that really damages families... And cultural norms. So for us a cultural norm, excuse my French, but [using the toilet] where you sleep is just not something we do. So that [affects] the mental health of a Gypsy man being in a cell sharing with another man, defecating and eating in the same space is very difficult.

Community member, Focus group 2

10 . Towards solutions

Participants highlighted the importance of Gypsies and Travellers having involvement with government and having their voices heard by officials, to improve justice experiences and described relationships with the police.

I would just love them people to give us a voice in Parliament. That's the only thing I'm wishing for. Because I'm thinking about the future of all of our grandchildren, our grandchildren's children.

Male, aged 50 to 60 years, local authority site

Participants also spoke about wanting to feel understood, the importance of police officers having awareness of Gypsy and Traveller culture, the need for training, and the potential to build upon good relationships to improve experiences with police, crime and justice in the future.

If we had a bit more respect from [police] people, if we were recognised for what we are, not what they think we are. Because they've had probably experience with one bad Gypsy man or a bad Gypsy woman, they've classed us all the same... I can't read, I can't write. But I know right from wrong. I know not to steal.

Community member, Focus Group 5

Some participants also suggested thorough vetting of police officers in addition to training, to protect against the perceived risk of individual officers' personal views influencing the way Gypsies and Travellers are treated.

Vetting needs to be continued right the way through. So as much as you're giving people training, you don't really know what's in their heart and that's what comes out when they come to do this job.

Community member, Focus Group 1

Examples were given of work with Gypsies and Travellers in the prison system to address and help to improve mental health, literacy and substance abuse, and provide better opportunities for the future.

[We're] try[ing]... to take a drug programme into [prisons] as well... to try and get older Roma people, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people... to stop using because of their... mental health, and then to think about something else...about the possibilities that could be for [them] next [in the] future when they come out.

Community member, Focus Group 2

11 . Gypsies and Travellers in England and Wales, lived experiences, data

Please note, as this is a qualitative study based on data collected from interviews and focus groups, there is no accompanying dataset.

12 . Glossary

Bricks and mortar

This term is used commonly by Gypsies and Travellers when talking about homes which are permanent structures, such as houses or flats.

Participants

In this bulletin, “community members” and “participants” refers to people currently living in England and Wales, aged 16 years and over, identifying as Gypsy or Traveller, who took part in this research. Where quotes have been used from local or central government participants, this is explicitly stated. We aim to portray the views of participants and to reflect their words as closely as possible. Some quotes have been edited for language and grammar to improve accessibility, without changing the content or meaning.

Roadside

Living at the roadside means staying temporarily on public land, such as in a car park or on a verge next to a road.

Sites

Gypsy and Traveller sites are authorised places of residence which may be owned and managed by the council or privately.

13 . Methodology

More information about the background and rationale, approach to sampling and recruitment, strengths and limitations, design of the material and approach to analysis can be found in the [accompanying methodology article](#).

14 . Cite this statistical bulletin

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