

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

Methodology explaining the approach to the qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of Gypsy and Traveller communities.

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2 . Background and rationale

In October 2021, research and recommendations from the [Inclusive Data Taskforce \(IDTF\) report](#) set out a programme of work to ensure that the lived experiences of currently under-represented groups are fully reflected in UK data and evidence, including through using qualitative approaches to better understand people's needs. Gypsy and Traveller communities are currently under-represented in UK data for a variety of reasons, leading to difficulties in shaping policies and providing services that suit the needs of a marginalised population.

At the Office for National Statistics (ONS), we engaged with a range of civil society organisations (CSOs) and academics, alongside officials from the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), the Department for Education (DfE), and the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC). This allowed us to get their views on the most significant gaps in data and evidence available for Gypsy and Traveller communities, as well as understanding the priority questions needing to be addressed.

Through the findings of the IDTF and from consultation with stakeholders, it was established that research which involved community member stakeholders as participants and co-researchers would be valuable in identifying the priorities of the communities. This approach would also address the potential power imbalances between the researchers and those researched.

An official advisory group was formed to advise on the most suitable methods, approach, and ethical aspects of the project. The advisory group consisted of community members, staff of CSOs working with Gypsy and Traveller communities, some of whom were also from these communities, academics from the communities, and academics with previous experience of working with the communities. The advisory group met regularly throughout the project to provide guidance on the commissioning, aims, interpretation and dissemination. The project also received approval from the National Statistician's Data Ethics Advisory Committee (NS-DEC).

The main aim of the research was to explore the lived experiences of Gypsy and Traveller people and to understand more about their priorities. We took a life history approach to the interviews, leaving the scope of the interviews as wide as possible to ensure participants' own priorities could emerge. To maximise the potential impact of the research, the interviews also looked to uncover people's experiences in the context of service provision, in the spheres of accommodation, health, education, employment, and justice. These were highlighted as spheres in which Gypsy and Traveller communities face particular challenges. UK government, Welsh Government and local government officials responsible for policy development and service provision were also included in the research. These interviews provided further insight into the processes and perceived priorities surrounding policies and services relating to Gypsies and Travellers.

In November 2021, we commissioned Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group (DGLG), a national CSO that provides support and advice to Gypsy and Traveller communities, as a research partner. From January to April 2022, DGLG commissioned four local CSOs and one independent researcher to carry out life history interviews with 52 members of the Gypsy and Traveller community living across England and Wales. During the same period, we carried out 19 online in-depth interviews with central and local government employees from a range of policy and service departments. Both sets of interviews were followed by five focus group discussions, held in areas where community member interviews had taken place, and attended by Gypsy and Traveller community members, and members of the policymaking and service provision community.

3 . Approach to sampling and recruitment of participants

The research consisted of three main phases:

- 48 community member life history interviews (48 interviews with 52 participants), to explore experiences, needs and priorities of those living in a range of accommodation types across England and Wales
- 19 in-depth central and local government interviews (from England and Wales), to explore the policymaking and service provision process affecting Gypsy and Traveller communities
- five focus groups in a variety of locations, attended by community members, and local and central government employees, and one discussion group with civil society organisation (CSO), community members and one central government participant, to review findings from interview phases and work together to find suggestions, solutions and ways of moving forward

The CSOs and the independent researcher undertook the sampling process on our behalf as they already had established relationships with the community. We provided input into recruitment materials and incentives. CSO researchers used a maximum variation purposive sampling approach to ensure the inclusion of community members from a variety of living situations, and with a wide range of experiences.

The ideal sampling frame, co-produced by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) and Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group (DGLG), included 10 participants each from five locations across England and Wales. In each location, a range of people were chosen. These included those living in bricks and mortar buildings, private sites, local authority sites, transit sites and roadside, as well as a mixture of male and female participants across a range of ages (see the [sample information table, Excel 26.4KB](#)).

CSO researchers recruited community members, many of whom were already known to them through their support work, to participate in the study during visits on sites or through word of mouth. Initial telephone calls were made to some participants to outline the research, gauge interest in taking part, and discuss any concerns. It is important to note that this number included CSO researchers as participants, who provided their accounts from a community member perspective.

Participants with a diverse range of important characteristics were recruited. However, CSO researchers acknowledged that community members who had, and were willing to discuss, more extreme or notable life experiences were included in the research over those who were reluctant to discuss their experiences or were not interested in the research.

Officials in UK government departments, in Welsh Government, and in local authorities in England and Wales participated in the research to provide insights into the national and local policy contexts relating to Gypsies and Travellers in their areas. They also participated in focus groups bringing together policy officials, service professionals, staff from civil society organisations, and Gypsies and Travellers to discuss possible future directions, responding to and building on early findings of the research.

A purposive sampling approach was taken for the central, devolved and local government participants, to include those who could provide insight to the policy context, from a range of departments, relevant to the research topic areas. We used existing cross-government contacts to recruit participants from a range of positions focusing on policies and services affecting Gypsy and Traveller communities. The aim was to interview at least one person from each UK and Welsh Government department responsible for policy on homes, education, health and social care, and justice. This equated to 10 participants.

For local government, participants were sampled from local authority departments responsible for the provision of services for Gypsy and Traveller communities, such as housing or specific "Gypsy Traveller section" teams. This was reflective of the locations of participants from the community member sample, aiming for five participants from local authorities. We achieved a total sample of 19 government participants (10 central and nine local government, from across UK government and Welsh Government, and local authorities).

The aim for focus groups was to have in attendance the same community members who had participated in the life history interviews in each location, alongside local authority participants and central government participants. The sample achieved across five focus groups was 25 community members, nine local government, and six UK government and Welsh Government participants. Some of these participated in phase one and two interviews, and some were newly recruited to participate in the focus groups. There were also 11 CSO researchers and workers who participated in discussions from a community member perspective. One focus group was comprised entirely of CSO employees who were also of Gypsy or Traveller ethnicity.

4 . Design and materials

To ensure that the research was participant-led in each aspect, a life history approach was taken for the community member interviews, with participants encouraged to discuss any aspects of their life they felt to be significant to them. This involved beginning the interview with the question: “please tell me about your life, starting as far back as you can remember”. This was followed by a series of questions covering the policy topic areas of interest, if they did not arise spontaneously. The topic guide for community member interviews was developed with input from the study’s advisory group. Civil society organisation (CSO) interviewers received training on research ethics relating to the study by Dr Lynn Tammi (Moving for Change), and interview methods by Dr Vanessa Heaslip (Bournemouth University). Community member participants were reimbursed by their recruiting CSO with cash to the value of £75 for their time, and verbal consent was sought before interviews. The decision to seek verbal rather than written consent was recommended by the advisory group because of high levels of literacy issues in the community.

Central government topic guides covered the policymaking process, and local government topic guides covered the implementation process. Both also included questions around barriers, the participants’ views of issues facing Gypsies and Travellers today, and views on moving forward.

Focus group topic guides were developed based on an initial analysis of the community member interviews where they were held, and they contained questions on three to four of the following topics: accommodation, education and employment, health, and justice. These were selected based on the main issues raised in the interviews that were carried out in the particular geographic location. Community members who had participated in the life history interviews were invited to participate in the focus groups to explore initial findings and any emerging areas further, and generate ideas for possible solutions or ways of moving forward.

5 . Approach to analysis

All government interviews, the five focus groups and 48 community members interviews were audio recorded with the participants’ consent, and then transcribed verbatim. One community member did not provide permission for the interview to be audio recorded, so detailed field notes were taken instead. Transcripts were analysed thematically using coding to identify themes, patterns and concepts in the participants’ accounts. Initial community member and government interview transcripts were first coded using open, descriptive coding, forming two initial coding frameworks. Further codes were developed and adapted in NVivo 12 (QSR, Australia) as the analysis progressed. Eventually both sets of coding frameworks were combined, and focus group transcripts were coded in the same file. Differences and similarities between cases were actively sought while developing the analysis, and regular discussions around the findings were held.

6 . Strengths and limitations

Strengths

- Flexible, participant-led approaches to interviews enabled exploration of the perspectives of Gypsy and Traveller people themselves, rather than testing pre-determined hypotheses or exploring pre-defined areas of interest.
- Support from advisory groups throughout the research process ensured the appropriacy and relevance, maximising the potential benefit and minimising the potential risk of harm.
- A collaborative approach to the research maximised trustworthiness between the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and community member participants, by ensuring that research was focused on topics of importance to the community, and that data collection was carried out by trusted individuals; this also included a thorough review process whereby the research partner and civil society organisations (CSOs) provided input into the report findings.
- A three-step approach to data collection ensured a diversity of perspectives surrounding the topics of interest, as well as the opportunity for some community members to review the findings of the interviews, ensuring appropriate representation of views and issues.

Limitations

- The generalisability of the research findings are limited to the concepts presented by participants, which may not apply in different contexts or settings, and may change over time.
- The lived experience of the CSO and independent researchers meant that some “taken for granted” concepts when raised by community members in interviews were not always directly explored.
- Recruitment through CSOs may have led to the recruitment of community members who have previously engaged with CSOs for support; this may be more likely to be those who are experiencing difficulties, so community members who are experiencing relatively high levels of difficulties may be overrepresented in the sample.
- The transient nature of community members living roadside led to difficulties with recruitment and a lower number in the sample of people living in this accommodation situation.

7 . Acknowledgements

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