

# **The underrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in higher education**

*A report on barriers from early  
years to secondary and beyond*

Research brief

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This report was written by the education and youth development ‘think and action tank’ LKMco. LKMco is a social enterprise - we believe that society has a duty to ensure children and young people receive the support they need in order to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood. We work towards this vision by helping education and youth organisations develop, evaluate and improve their work with young people. We then carry out academic and policy research and advocacy that is grounded in our experience.

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# Introduction

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) children and young people face significant barriers throughout their education, which results in them being severely underrepresented in HE. Perhaps because there is still an urgent need to address the issues faced by these groups in primary and secondary education, there is limited existing research on Gypsies', Roma and Travellers' progression to university. However, to achieve educational equality for these groups they must be given the same choice and opportunity as their peers from other backgrounds. The first step towards increasing equality in HE is to investigate how issues in compulsory education impact on progression to HE to understand and address specific barriers which reduce GRT pupils' participation in HE.

In order to work toward an effective strategy for widening participation of this group, we present a summary of the current landscape and a review of the barriers to HE faced by Gypsies, Roma and Travellers. We draw on existing literature and our own research with academics, practitioners, members of the GRT communities and pupils to explore:

- The definition of 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller' and the various sub-groups described by this collective term
- How these groups are distributed in the national and pupil population
- Their current progress and attainment throughout primary and secondary education
- The degree to which they are underrepresented in HE
- The challenges and barriers they face in compulsory education which may impact on their participation in HE
- The specific barriers they face in entering HE.

In addition to increasing 'access' to HE, the Widening Participation agenda also focuses on ensuring that pupils have fulfilling experiences of HE once they have arrived. With so few GRT pupils entering HE, our report focuses on the issue of access, whilst acknowledging that GRT experiences of HE should be a priority for future research.

Throughout the report, we point towards potential responses to the challenges and these recommendations are summarised in a final conclusion.

# Summary of findings

## 1. How are 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller' groups defined?

In the UK the term 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller' is a collective term for a number of diverse groups, (see table 1). Inclusion in these groups depends not only on ethnicity and heritage but on self-identification and these terms do not exclude those who no longer live a nomadic lifestyle.

Though distinct from one another these groups share a number of characteristics both in terms of culture and lifestyle, and the significant disadvantages they face within the education system and society more broadly. Common cultural factors include:

- The importance of family and community
- A historically nomadic lifestyle (although this only applies to around one third of Gypsy, and Traveller families today. Often, although Roma people may migrate, they do not adopt a nomadic lifestyle through choice)
- An oral tradition
- A historic preference for self-employment (Ryder and Greenfields, 2012)

However, grouping these diverse subgroups under a broad term is potentially problematic. Our research highlighted three main issues with this type of 'hard edged' categorisation including:

- the risk of stereotyping individuals through a crude categorisation of complex communities
- grouping dissimilar groups under a single term to which many do not ascribe themselves
- an over emphasis on ethnicity or heritage which may overlook intersectionality

Like all people, GRT individuals have complex identities with numerous factors influencing their decisions and experiences. However, they do not have the same experience as others when they choose to reveal their ethnicity or heritage and therefore they are often unable to disclose this as freely, as Kathleen Walsh explained:

*'We've all got multiple identities that we choose to reveal, that are important in different situations. But I think, it's not a level playing field, I can choose when I want to have one identity to the fore but I can choose at any time to reveal any of them without too much worry that I'm going to be discriminated against and that's not necessarily the same for everyone. The playing field is not even.'*

Kathleen Walsh, Trustee of the Irish Chaplaincy

We recognise these difficulties and support efforts to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of these groups. However, we use the term 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller' throughout the report for consistency with previous research and literature.

## 2. What are the current demographics of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups?

The 2011 census included a 'Gypsy, Traveller or Irish Traveller' category for the first time. Although only 58,000 people in England and Wales self-ascribed under this term, this count is considered an underestimate and research suggests there are between 250,000 and 300,000 Gypsies and Travellers in the UK (Brown, Scullion and Martin, 2013). This census underestimate is due to three main factors:

**Table 1**

<b>Ethnic Travellers</b>	<b>'Romany Gypsies'</b>	English or Welsh 'Romany' Gypsies (or Welsh Kale)	Sometimes referred to as 'Romanichal' these people have a long history of living and travelling in the UK. It is suggested that they originated in India, although their ancestry had been disputed in the literature (see Okley, 1997). Many speak one of seven distinct languages, primarily Anglo-Romanes and Romani, as well as English.
		European Roma	Though descended from the same ancestry as British Romany Gypsies this group arrived only recently in the UK from central and Eastern Europe, following the expansion of the EU to include Eastern European countries such as Romania, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Roma includes a great variety of groups, distinct in their language, culture and values. This group often rejects the term 'gypsy', preferring 'Roma'. This creates a problem of under ascription when they are asked to identify in a group under a term which includes 'gypsy'. Generally, the European Roma have only limited interaction with other Romany Gypsies.
	<b>'Travellers'</b>	Irish Travellers	Also called 'Pavee' and 'Minceir', these travellers often move between the UK and Ireland and are of Celtic descent. They speak 'Cant' or 'Gammon' also known as 'Shelta'.
		Scottish Gypsy Travellers	This subgroup consists of further subgroups and was only recently recognised as a separate ethnic group. They may also refer to themselves as 'Nachins' and 'Nawkins'.
<b>Cultural Travellers</b>	<b>Occupational Travellers</b>	Showmen: fairground and circus people	Showmen have a long history in the UK where fairgrounds have been popular for many centuries. Showmen own and work on fairgrounds and circuses and travel to different sites for seasonal work.
		Bargees and boat dwellers	Those who live on boats, primarily narrowboats, on canals and waterways. Historically bargees and boat dwellers travelled for employment.
	<b>New Travellers</b>		Though the term 'new' is seen as offensive to some, it is used to differentiate travellers who adopted the travelling lifestyle since the 1970s by choice. Often this group simply call themselves 'travellers'.

- The reluctance to publicly identify as a Gypsy or Traveller due to fear of racist prejudice or discrimination
- Low literacy rates among GRT groups affecting their ability to complete the census form
- The failure to distribute the census form effectively to those in insecure or mobile housing.

It is notable that the census did not include ‘Roma’ as a response category, advising that people identifying as ‘Roma’ should define themselves as ‘White Other, further contributing to the census’ underestimation of the size of the GRT population as a whole. Studies estimate that there are around 200,000 Roma in the UK.

School census data suggests there are 20,000 GRT pupils in UK primary schools, and 14,000 GRT pupils in secondary schools, though these figures are likely to be considerable underestimates. Given that approximately 60% of European Roma populations are below 18 years old, a conservative estimate of 200,000 Roma in the national population (Brown, Martin and Scullion, 2013) suggests that there may in fact be around 124,000 Roma of compulsory school age in the UK (Penfold, 2015), not including other Gypsy and Traveller groups (see Table 2). Meanwhile, a 2003 estimate, placed the number of traveller primary aged children not enrolled in any school at around 12,000 (Ofsted, 2003). The severe underestimation of the number of GRT young people in the UK serves to underestimate the scale of their underrepresentation in HE.

Source	School Phase	Subgroup	Number
School Census Statistics	Primary School	Gypsy/Roma	16,000
		Traveller of Irish Heritage	4,000
	Secondary School	Gypsy/Roma	12,000
		Traveller of Irish Heritage	2,000
Brown, Martin and Scullion (2013) and Penfold (2015)	All phases	Roma	124,000

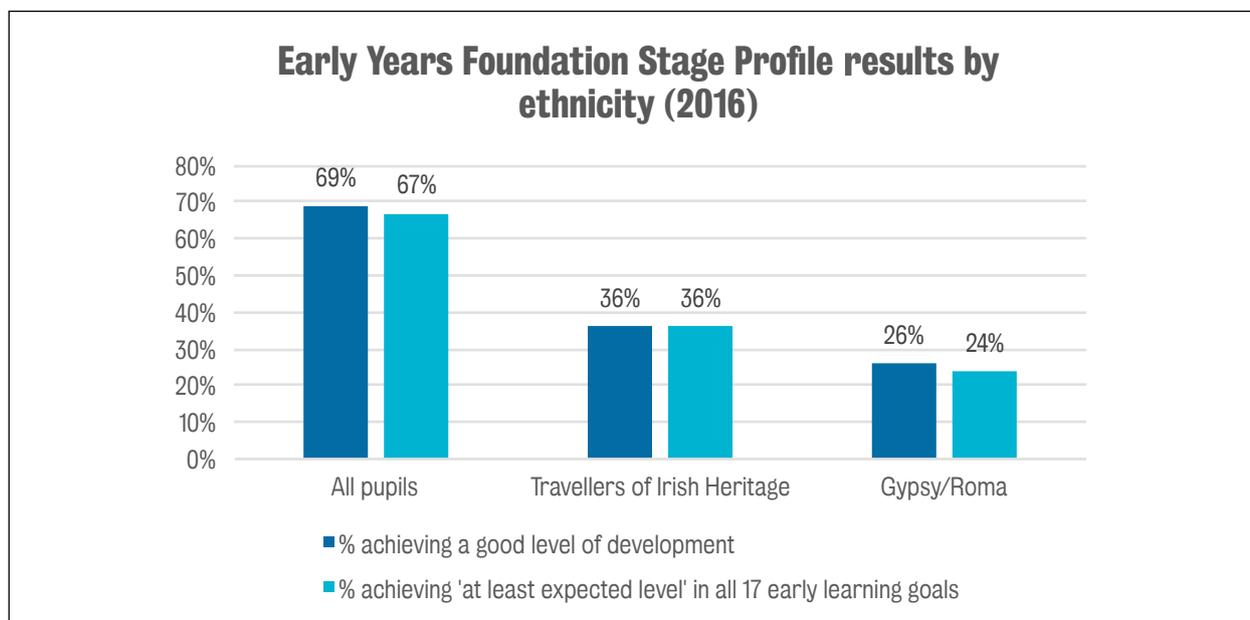
In order to widen participation, it is crucial that individuals who are underrepresented and face barriers to accessing HE can be identified. A lack of accurate, detailed data is the first barrier to addressing this issue, as Mark Penfold explained:

*‘In January 2015, there were 25,000 pupils in the DfE database ascribed as GRT and it was impossible to know out of those who was from new migrant communities, even so the figure of 25,000 is not true, the real figure is closer to 200,000. So, if you're going to widen participation in universities how are you going to do it if you cannot identify them?’*

Mark Penfold, teacher and researcher

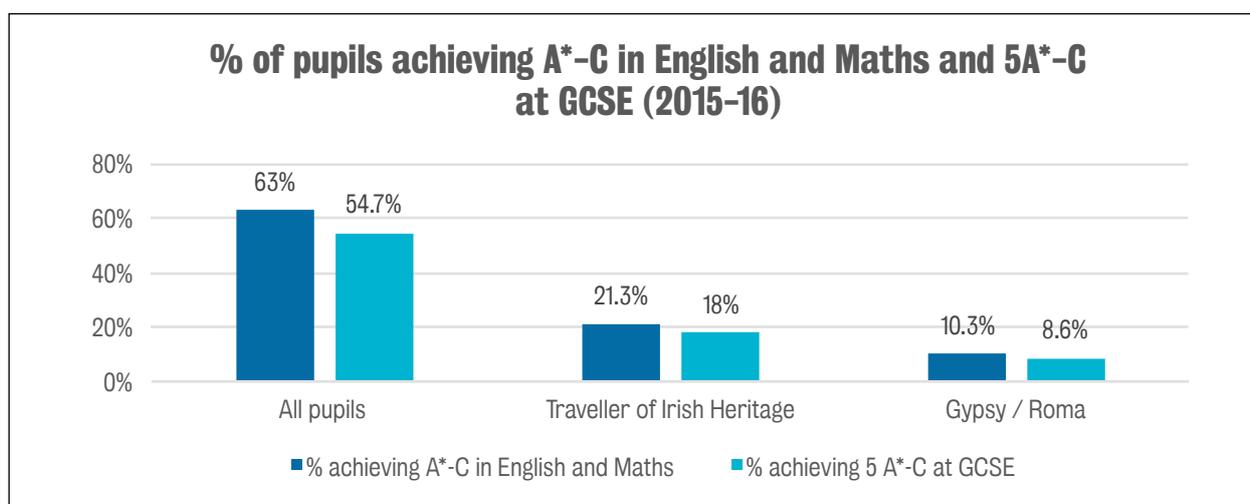
### 3. How do Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people perform in compulsory education?

Solid foundations in the early years, primary and secondary school are crucial in order for pupils to progress to further education and HE. GRT children are the lowest performing groups in primary and secondary education in the UK on all measures of attainment, progress, behaviour and attendance. School data groups Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children under ‘Traveller of an Irish Heritage’ or ‘Gypsy/Roma’.



In the early years, only 36% of Irish Traveller pupils and 26% of Gypsy/Roma pupils achieve a ‘good level of development’, compared to 69% of all pupils nationally (see Figure 1) (DfE, 2016a). Only 36% and 24% of Irish Traveller and Gypsy/Roma pupils, respectively, achieve the ‘expected level’ in the 17 early learning areas of the Early Years curriculum, compared to a national average of 67%.

These trends continue throughout primary school and secondary school. GRT pupils progress less well than their peers and are considerably less likely to leave school with a set of good GCSE grades.



1 Children are defined as having reached a good level of development at the end of their reception year if they have met the expected level in the three prime areas of learning (personal, social and emotional development; physical development; and communication and language) and the specific areas of mathematics and literacy.

- Irish Traveller pupils make over one grade less progress across their 8 best GCSEs at secondary school than other pupils with the same attainment at primary school. Meanwhile Gypsy/Roma pupils make over half a grade less progress across their 8 best subjects than other pupils with the same prior attainment (DfE, 2016d). They therefore not only begin behind their peers but also make less progress as they progress through secondary school, widening the gap over time.
- Fewer than 10% of Gypsy/Roma pupils and fewer than 20% of Irish Traveller pupils achieve 5 GCSEs graded A\* - C, compared to approximately 60% of all pupils nationally. This means that many do not leave school with the requisite qualifications for entering HE.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils also have the lowest attendance of all groups and the highest exclusion rates.

#### **4. How severe is the underrepresentation of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in HE?**

Data describing the ethnicity of the student population taken from UCAS applications includes 'Gypsy/Traveller' and 'Traveller of an Irish Heritage' categories, with no distinct classification of 'Roma' students.

All groups are significantly underrepresented in HE: 3 to 4% of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers aged 18-30 accessed HE in 2014, whereas 43% of the national 18-30 year old population did so (Danvers, 2015).

However, it is difficult to accurately determine the extent of this underrepresentation as underestimates of the total size of the GRT population mean underrepresentation may be even more severe than the statistics suggest. On the other hand, the recorded total of GRT students could also be an underestimate. Furthermore, the characteristics and circumstances of individuals who are willing and able to ascribe their GRT identity may not be representative of this population as a whole. For example, GRT families experiencing a high level of hardship may come in to contact with more support services who then encourage them to ascribe their ethnicity, or ascribe for them.

#### **5. What are the barriers to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils' access to all levels of education?**

Barriers to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils' achievement in compulsory education, in turn, reduce their access to HE as their likelihood of gaining the requisite grades at GCSE and A level needed to access HE is diminished. Furthermore, the barriers which limit their success in school are likely to continue and possibly intensify in relation to HE. Therefore, we explore the following barriers faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in school and how they impact access to HE.

- Cultural barriers including: mobility; language and system knowledge; norms, aspirations and expectations; and cultural identity
- Material barriers including: poverty; inadequate housing and homelessness; and access to healthcare and the prevalence of special educational needs
- Prejudice and discrimination including: discriminatory attitudes and media prejudice; schools' response to discrimination; self-exclusion from mainstream education as a result of discrimination; and discrimination in HE.

# Cultural barriers

**G**RT pupils face cultural barriers in accessing education. Differences between GRT culture and mainstream culture can create conflicting priorities and a lack of flexibility in the education system can make it difficult to ensure that mainstream education is compatible with GRT lifestyle. Mobility; system knowledge; language and literacy; aspirations and expectations and fears surrounding cultural identity may act as barriers to educational success.

## Mobility

Mobility can be an important barrier to GRT pupils' educational engagement. Regular travel for work or insecurity due to a lack of legal sites pose challenges for both school enrolment and attendance. Although around two thirds of GRT families no longer live a traditional nomadic lifestyle, frequent moves can still affect children's education as some may spend a considerable portion of the school year travelling with extended family (Greenfields, 2008). Showman Caroline Wynn explained how her family's travel impacted her education:

*'Up to the age of 7, I was in and out of schools, two weeks here or there and there was no continuation. When I was 7, I couldn't read at all... my parents put us in boarding school and I really loved it... but when we were 12 and 13 we had to come out.'*

Caroline Bagnall, showman and parent

Mobility is a particular challenge for the estimated one-third of families who continue to live in mobile or insecure housing. The most vulnerable families and children experience the largest negative impact of mobility as families that have no legal place to stay may be forced to move frequently and unexpectedly. Marks (2006) argues that these vulnerable families struggle to make sustainable links to schools.

However, discussions surrounding mobility often leave aside the educational potential to be gained in travelling and in operating as part of a family business. Often, children working alongside their family, especially during term time is viewed negatively, or even as 'child labour' by mainstream society, however, many individuals from the community reject this notion.

*'The fear is from a council perspective that when those children are out of school with their families they are working, and in that respect it's seen as 'child labour'- the idea that there is not cultural value whatsoever they are just being used to fill in gaps so the family can earn money but I can't agree with that at all. It's vibrant culture and community and children have brilliant experiences regarding business that stand them in great stead in terms of coming back into education [in later life].'*

Lisa Galloway, researcher and Irish Traveller

Traditional university courses require an individual to stay at the university for at least three years. For young people that want to continue travelling, this limitation acts as an additional barrier to their participation.

## Language and system knowledge

Low literacy levels; language barriers and a limited knowledge of official systems make it hard for GRT families to navigate the education system. This can further limit educational engagement and make it difficult for families and young people to navigate higher education applications. Poor literacy and language skills can compound difficulties navigating official systems, including schools and university admissions: GRT adults are considerably more likely than the general population to be illiterate or to lack basic literacy skills (Liegeois and Gheorghe, 1995; Fraser, 1995; Levinson, 2007).

Many of the practitioners we spoke to who work with these families recognise that GRT parents have little knowledge of how to support their children in school, often as a result of their own brief, sometimes negative, experiences of education. Initiatives which support parents to access this knowledge can be successful but are becoming increasingly limited due to cuts to services and are often only provided to families at ‘crisis point’.

Lack of knowledge of the education system, and the lack of cultural capital to navigate it, persists and may intensify as pupils move beyond compulsory education towards further and HE. Historically, even fewer GRT people attended HE than do so today, leaving many parents uninformed about the nature of the system or even what ‘university’ itself entails. The Roma college student we interviewed planned to apply to university after seeing his cousin do so, but highlighted that his situation was not the norm for many of his Roma peers:

*‘There’s not a lot of people that have Roma background that have got someone to speak to about [university]. It would be great if they did... it’s sad because if they did they would be more encouraged to go to university. I think most of them are scared of what university will be like. I think it’s a great thing, but they might think it’s a waste of time, because they don’t have the people that I have around me to tell me differently so they might have really difficult time...Some of them might think it’s a waste of time because the way the education system is in Slovakia it would be a waste of time because even if I got in there and I got a degree at university I would not get a job after because I’m Roma and that is a fact.’*

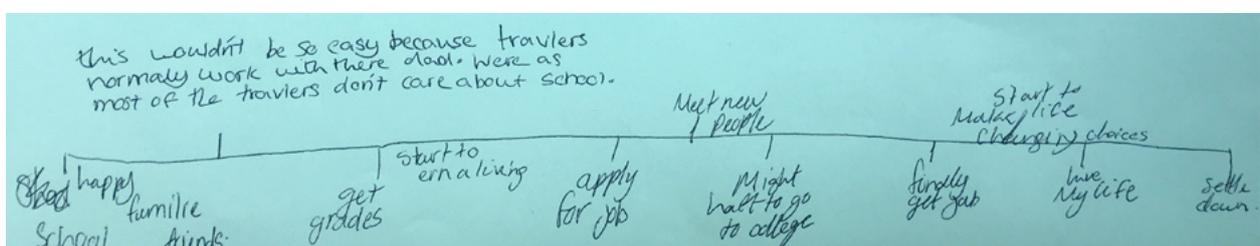
Roma college student, age 17

Most pupils we spoke to said that they had had few experiences of talking to parents, teachers or other people about university, especially if they had not yet reached year 11.

A basic knowledge of HE is also only the first step in a parent being able to support a child’s progression to university. Beyond this, there are a variety of forms of knowledge, dispositions and personal resources, captured by the notions of ‘social capital’ and ‘cultural capital’ (OFFA, 2017; Moskal, 2014) that are conducive to navigating university admissions and some GRT families do not have access to these.

## Aspirations, expectations and cultural identity

A clash between community and school or HE norms, aspirations and expectations can result in ongoing tensions and strain and a sense of an impossible choice. GRT families are often keen for their children to take on traditional employment or continue a family business as they reach adolescence (O’Hanlon, 2010; Levinson and Hooley, 2013; Harding, 2013). These expectations may not be compatible with the priorities of formal schooling or HE, as exemplified in a life map drawn by one Gypsy pupil.



When considering conflicting priorities and the value placed on education, it is important not to conflate the perceived value of formal schooling or 'mainstream education' with the overall perceived value of education itself (O'Hanlon, 2010; Levinson and Hooley, 2013). Many GRT families value education highly and recognise and prioritise children and young people's need to develop knowledge and skills. However, the skills and knowledge valued in GRT communities can differ considerably from the knowledge and skills valued and taught in mainstream education (Harding, 2013; Wilkin et al., 2009).

Gendered expectations and fears that young people's cultural identity may be corrupted by mainstream values can also result in GRT pupils being withdrawn from mainstream education. One Romany Gypsy graduate interviewee explained that this fear extends, or possibly intensifies, when it comes to HE as many parents and young people lack any experience or knowledge of university. They may also hold concerns about the dilution of their culture.

***'Imagine that for a lot of people they've never set foot on a university campus and there's a lot of fear; fear that they'll go there and be 'de-gypsified', becoming a 'gaujo' and a fear that people will leave their values and their culture will dry out.'***

Romany Gypsy graduate

However, research has detected a shift in attitudes, with an increasing number of GRT parents feeling that formal education is necessary in the modern world (Bhopal, 2004).

# Material barriers

Some researchers argue that an excessive focus on cultural barriers as a cause of poor attendance and low educational attainment can lead to ‘cultural pathology’, with the role of material barriers and discrimination being under-emphasised or even overlooked (Derrington and Kendall, 2003). In this section, we consider the material barriers to GRT pupils’ engagement with education: specifically, their access to well-paid and stable employment, good housing and healthcare.

## Poverty

Poverty has a well-documented negative impact on children and young people’s educational attainment in both compulsory and higher education. Research on the prevalence of child poverty experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups is limited, but unemployment is high in these communities and many individuals prefer self-employment in trades which are in decline. This results in a large proportion of families in these communities having intermittent, sporadic and unreliable income.

As a result of elevated poverty rates, teenagers may need to leave school early to enter paid employment and contribute to the family income, or certainly to enter paid employment after school rather than progressing to HE.

Chris Derrington’s research found that factors which are unrelated to poverty such as participation in extra-curricular activities and self-confidence were more influential than poverty in determining whether children would remain in school. Moreover, participation in extra-curricular activities and confidence could, in some cases, allow pupils to mitigate the difficulties caused by poverty. As Chris explained during our roundtable:

*‘We also found that the children that did go through and went on to Higher Education were the children that engaged in extra-curricular activities, who had that social capital within the school, who felt that they belonged there and were treading a bicultural path, they had a mixture of gaujo and traveller friends... a couple came from quite poverty stricken backgrounds who were just very, very confident people who had broken away from what their parents expected, compared to some from affluent families who ended up not following their dreams.’*

Chris Derrington, researcher and author

## Housing

Poverty also causes and exacerbates issues of insecure and unsafe housing: there is a shortage of legal, authorised sites and those that do exist are often poorly maintained and do not provide adequate facilities.

It is estimated that around 25% of the GRT population in the UK are legally homeless. Around 3,000 to 4,000 families live in caravans on unauthorised sites, mostly due to the chronic undersupply of legal, authorised sites. These families face repeated evictions resulting in children moving school unexpectedly (The Traveller Movement, 2014). This can cause substantial disruption to education as well as being damaging to children’s physical wellbeing (Lloyd et al. 1999, in Wilkin et al. 2009).

## **Access to healthcare and special educational needs**

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers experience the poorest health outcomes in the UK and may have difficulty accessing adequate health care. Poor health is a key barrier to pupil attendance and attainment at school. The Traveller Education Service recently found that poor health (largely due to inadequate living standards) was still the primary reason for school absence. Poor health can also delay early child development, meaning that GRT children are less likely to enter education 'school ready' (The Traveller Times, 2014).

Poor access to healthcare also causes problems when children have special educational needs or disabilities requiring support. GRT pupils are more likely than pupils of any other ethnicity to have a special educational need or disability (SEND) (DfE, 2016h). The literature is unclear about the reasons for this trend, although there is evidence to show that the prevalence of SEND is linked to poverty (Shaw et al., 2016).

# Discrimination, bullying and self-exclusion

Prejudicial attitudes towards Gypsies, Roma and Travellers remain common. This prejudice is reinforced by negative portrayals of these groups in the media and leads to widespread discrimination. Experiencing discrimination in school can result in self-exclusion or school exclusion where pupils retaliate. Some GRT young people may avoid university due to a fear of continued discrimination and the perception that universities do not address discrimination effectively.

50% of British people admit having an 'unfavourable view' of Roma people and 1 in 3 admit personal prejudice against Gypsies and Travellers (Pew Research Centre, 2014; Valentine and McDonald, 2004). In 2004, the chair of the Commission for Race Equality, Sir Trevor Phillips described prejudice and discrimination directed at GRT groups as 'the last respectable form of racism' due to the lack of social stigma surrounding prejudice against this group (Foster and Norton, 2012).

Fear of or experience of discrimination is a primary cause of parents withdrawing their children from schools. In some cases, parents may choose to home educate or privately educate their children to mitigate this issue, and a disproportionate number of GRT pupils are home educated. While this may be appropriate and beneficial for some, it is problematic if schools, due to league table pressures, encourage parents who are not able to adequately support their children to educate them at home.

Fear of discrimination or the need to hide their identity to avoid bullying is likely to act as a disincentive to GRT young people considering HE. Our own research revealed some instances of discrimination in higher education: the Romany Gypsy graduate we interviewed explained her experience of discrimination at university and the way this affected her, despite the fact that most of her university experience was positive.

*'While I had a fantastic experience at [university] and I'm really pleased I went there... at the same time I did sit in a lecture theatre and have a lecturer make a joke about 'pikeys' and had 200 people around me actually belly laughing while I sat there knowing I'm from that community and actually 'pikey' is derogatory term. It's the fear of things like that, it's one of the reasons that people pull kids out of school and why they are scared of university...so if universities are seriously committed to helping to raise aspiration and attainment they've got to also be making sure that when the kids get there, things like that aren't happening..'*

Romany Gypsy graduate

This highlights the need for universities to address and challenge prejudice and discriminatory comments as a first step to widening participation.

## 1. What are the specific barriers to accessing HE faced by Gypsies, Roma and Travellers?

There are additional barriers to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils' HE progression, beyond those that exist at school level, which specifically limit or disincentivise participation in HE, even where pupils complete compulsory schooling and achieve the necessary grades and qualifications. There is limited

research on these barriers, perhaps due to the size of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller populations in HE. However, the report draws on the limited literature, supplemented by our own research, and suggests that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers face the following five barriers to HE access:

- A lack of policy attention and supportive initiatives
- Issues of identity and inclusion
- The relevance of HE curricula to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture
- Pupils' perceptions of HE
- Financial issues and attitudes to debt

### **Relevance of university curricula**

A conference held by The Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER) in 2016 encouraged GRT students within HE to share their experiences and the issues they face. These students felt that GRT issues and culture were not present or were even 'silenced' in university curricula leading to feelings of isolation and a view that course content was less relevant to them. Students also highlighted that university staff have extremely limited experience and understanding of GRT culture (CHEER, 2016).

Emily Danvers explained that despite some efforts to include students of all backgrounds in university curricula, by discussing marginalised groups, this often did not extend to GRT culture. Improving practice in this area could allow HE institutions to improve inclusivity with a small change.

*'The notion of decolonising curricula is a really important debate in higher education. This is essentially the idea that experts on your reading lists and theory modules are western, white males and that's about it. And I think that it does send really strong messages about who and whose knowledge is included and who isn't. When we talk about different kinds of marginalisation or the experiences of those with different ethnicities in the classroom, we don't talk necessarily refer to Gypsies, Roma and Travellers. But we should. They have a right to be there. So that's a space where academics could make real practical changes - in their curricula and in their classroom examples - to think about inclusion in the everyday classroom stuff, as well as the bigger issues of access in the first place'*

Emily Danvers, Lecturer and researcher

### **Identity and Inclusion**

Given that pursuing HE remains an extremely unusual choice for GRT young people, the decision to progress to HE can lead to an 'identity clash' and feelings of marginalisation. 'Leaving' to study can distance individuals from their home communities whilst poor inclusion simultaneously leaves them not fully included in the 'mainstream' cultures of HE and professional employment due to their background. Small scale research focusing on Roma HE students in Europe found that many Roma students experience feelings of 'un-belonging' in both HE and, later, in professional employment (Danvers, Hiton-Smith and Jovanonic, 2016).

Promoting individuals from these communities as role models for younger individuals may be one approach to encouraging participation. In time, this could lead to better inclusivity. On the other hand, such an approach could also place extra burden on individuals who already face pressures on their identity from both education institutions and their communities and families. Emily Danvers explains how this is the case with some Roma students she has worked with:

*'I worked with the Roma education fund who provide scholarships for HE in Europe...they ask you to self-identify as Roma... which is obviously really positive but also relies on a lot of social and cultural resources to make that happen. Following that what happens is the students talked about*

*feeling a real burden of responsibility that they have to be a shining light of 'romanness' instead of just being themselves. There is a balance to be struck between getting that scholarship and the support that comes along with it, but also that they don't want to be defined by that through any initiative they decide to take up.'*

Emily Danvers, Lecturer and researcher

Some GRT young people hide their identity in school and other educational settings; a strategy known as 'passing' (Lloyd and McCluskey, 2008; Derrington and Kendall, 2004; Hancock, 1997). There is some evidence that Roma students in Europe adopt this strategy in HE suggesting that hiding their ethnic identity is a necessary condition for inclusion (Danvers, Hiton-Smith and Jovanonic, 2016). Harding (2013) highlighted that 'maladaptive' strategies such as Travellers hiding their identity in order to deal with the cultural dissonance between home and mainstream education had 'detrimental effects on wellbeing' (p. 7). The prospect of hiding their identity is likely to act as a disincentive to many GRT young people considering progressing to HE.

### **Attitudes to finance and debt**

Attending HE incurs a considerable cost both in terms of fees and living costs. While there is very little existing literature on GRT attitudes toward the cost of HE, in our research, knowledge of financial systems and attitudes to debt was consistently revealed a key consideration for GRT families and young people. Four main themes were identified:

- cultural debt aversion
- a lack of knowledge regarding the cost of university and financial support systems
- reluctance to engage with government financial support or loans
- young people's perception that university was highly expensive and in some cases

A number of individuals we interviewed, primarily those from Gypsy and Showman backgrounds, highlighted a reluctance to get into debt as a disincentive to university participation. This debt aversion was also consistently linked to the fact that the high cost of university may reinforce the view, among some families, that HE is not valuable in comparison to paid work.

Both parents and pupils from GRT communities reported that they had limited knowledge regarding the cost of university and the financial support systems available. None of the pupils we spoke to in the focus group appeared to be aware of student loan systems despite being aware that 'university is expensive'. The Irish Traveller pupils were particularly surprised that they were able to receive financial support if they did want to go to university.

Beyond debt aversion and a lack of knowledge about the cost of HE, a further issue for some GRT communities accessing financial support to fund HE is a reluctance to use a government system for such a purpose. This is due to both mistrust of the government and a reticence to disclose financial information about parents' income. An inability to provide official documentation may exacerbate this problem. Lisa Galloway explained:

*'Getting into debt is something that's discouraged and when you're talking about getting student finance then you are talking about exploring parent's incomes and that's something that can be a real problem because the levels of privacy... so it can be about not wanting to disclose that and about the perception of debt... they see it as government loan and there can be this issue that they are not supportive of the current government and their attitude to GRT so anything that is seen as state controlled is not seen in a positive way.'*

Lisa Galloway, researcher and Irish Traveller

The Roma pupils we spoke with mentioned the expense of university as problematic and in some cases perceived it as something that ‘people like me’ could not afford. When Roma pupils were asked what they had heard about university, their responses included some concerns about finances.

***"That it's hard to get there and it costs lots of money. If you have money you can go, they're rich guys, but if you don't have, if you don't have, you have to be responsible to get your own money."***

Roma pupil, age 14

### **Perceptions of university**

We found that pupils’ perceptions of university were a mixture of positive and negative expectations often characterised by fear of social isolation, a preference for modern universities and a positive perception of people that go to university alongside a feeling that it ‘wasn’t for us’.

Pupils also had some negative perceptions of, and misconceptions about, university. For some this was primarily about a fear that university would be too hard or beyond their ability, for example one pupil said it was ‘too much work’ and they weren’t sure if they ‘would be able to do it.’

***'No [I wouldn't go to university]. It's like too far forward for me like it's too much. I'd have to be smarter to go to a place like that...probably a normal college like I would learn it at...I visited [my brother's college], he does construction there. I'll probably just go there.'***

Gypsy pupil, age 14

Others believed it would be boring or that they would feel nervous or scared in old universities or traditional lecture theatres. In one case a pupil who had previously considered university had changed their mind because they would have to be there for ‘a long time’. For other pupils, concerns about how long they spent in university was linked to a fear of missing out on time that could be spent working.

Talking about HE during our focus groups made some pupils more positive about university and addressed some of their misconceptions. This highlights that the opportunity to ask questions and receive information about HE can impact pupils’ perceptions.

### **Lack of policy attention**

CHEER (The Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research) highlight GRT groups as the ‘UK’s forgotten higher education minority’ and call for a clearer, stronger agenda for tackling this issue (CHEER, 2016). OFFA’s current guidance requires institutions to ‘consider’ targeting underrepresented groups such as ‘students from Gypsy and Traveller communities’ in their Access Agreements (OFFA, 2015 as cited in Danvers, 2015). However, this may not constitute a ‘strong enough impetus’ to affect change (CHEER, 2016). Lisa Galloway echoed this as she suggested that weak and tokenistic policies are insufficient to deal with the disadvantages faced by people from Gypsy and Traveller communities. She also highlighted that communities may not be aware of policies designed to support them or promote their inclusion in HE and that even when they are aware, such policies may not address the fact that they do not value mainstream education.

***'There is a lack of understanding sometimes when it comes to policy in the thinking that it can solve everything and that if there is a policy of inclusion it automatically 'includes'. It doesn't. While it's important that we get policies right, if we assume that the families know anything about that institutional policy and university's policies then we are kidding ourselves. So it's about how we implement and negotiate with the families and bring out real lived experiences. We also have to accept the views of some families who do not want their children to come into mainstream'***

***education, we have to acknowledge that we do very little to support those young people, what we deem as good education is not always the right education for all children.'***

Lisa Galloway, researcher and Irish Traveller

Moreover, our roundtable discussion highlighted that while educationalists and practitioners working with GRT communities are supportive of policies that will widen participation, current cuts to funding and services in other areas are likely to undermine the value of any such initiatives. In 2008, the ring fencing of the traveller achievement grant was removed and funding was absorbed into non-specific 'Area Based Grants'. The loss of this specific funding, alongside wider cuts to public spending in recent years has reduced the national network of Traveller Education Services by half (Themelis and Foster, 2013).

# Recommendations

Our findings highlighted several avenues to pursue in overcoming the barriers explored in this report and both schools and universities have an important role to play.

## Recommendations to schools

### Addressing and eliminating discrimination

Schools must address discrimination by ensuring that:

- The discrimination and prejudice towards GRT groups is acknowledged, and publicly stated to be unacceptable
- Prejudice, derogatory language and discrimination must be directly and explicitly challenged by all members of staff at all levels
- To avoid pupils retaliating to bullying, schools must encourage pupils to report incidents to staff and respond appropriately when pupils do so.

### Encouraging ascription

- Schools' admissions procedures (whether in-year or during enrolment) should include processes to encourage ascription. When schools enrol new pupils, they should have open, honest conversations with parents about ethnicity and ascription, reassure parents that their children will not be subject to discrimination and build relationships with families.
- The school censuses should include appropriate categories for GRT people to ascribe to. This will require expanding the total number of categories available and ensuring that certain terms e.g. 'Roma' and 'Gypsy' are not combined.

### Early school-based information, advice and guidance in primary and secondary schools

- Both primary and secondary schools should talk to pupils and parents about HE options on a regular basis. In primary schools these conversations may focus on general information, discussions about careers and further study including HE, and broadening aspirations. Secondary schools should then provide specific, detailed information about universities and progression to HE and should begin these activities when pupils join the school in year 7, rather than waiting until year 9 or 10.
- Information, advice and guidance schools should be tailored to GRT families' specific concerns which may sometimes differ from other parents' concerns.

### High teacher expectations

- As well as providing information about HE to all pupils and families, teachers and school leaders should ensure that they hold and promote high aspirations and expectations for all.

### Supporting effective home education

- Schools should end the practice of encouraging home education where it is not in the best interest of the pupil and the parents. These decisions and recommendations should not be influenced by school based accountability pressures.

- Schools should provide support to families who choose home education during the transition from school to home.

### Teacher training

- Schools with GRT pupils should ensure that at least one senior member of staff receives training and CPD that increases their understanding of GRT culture, norms and values. Their learning should then be disseminated internally to all staff members and embedded in school policy and practice.
- Schools should ensure that classroom teachers and support staff are trained to communicate sensitively with GRT parents.

### Engaging and informing pupils and families

- Schools should ensure they engage and inform any GRT families who are deemed ‘hard to reach’ for example, by translating resources and working with experts and specialist services such as The Traveller Education Service. This information should include general information about school processes and ways to support pupils, but must also recognise previous experiences of discrimination and reassure families that any instances of discrimination will be addressed and dealt with appropriately.
- Information from schools should also reference university progression and direct pupils and parents to sources of more detailed information provided by HE institutions.

## Recommendations to HE institutions

### Addressing and eliminating discrimination

HE institutions must address discrimination by ensuring that:

- The discrimination and prejudice towards GRT groups is recognised and acknowledged, and deemed unacceptable
- Admissions and applications processes are reviewed to ensure they do not discriminate against GRT applicants
- Prejudice, derogatory language and discrimination are directly and explicitly challenged by all members of staff at all levels
- ‘Diversity Champions’ or similar should be appointed to ensure that support is available for students and discrimination is always challenged

### Encouraging ascription

- HE institutions should have conversations with students and families about ascription during open days, visits, welcome talks or student orientation. Where possible they should build relationships with families before asking them to ascribe/identify their ethnicity.
- UCAS and other university forms should include appropriate categories for GRT people to ascribe to. This will require expanding the total number of categories available and ensuring that certain terms e.g. ‘Roma’ and ‘Gypsy’ are not combined.

### Early, primary school based intervention and outreach

- HE outreach initiatives, both those aimed at families and pupils, and those aimed at raising aspirations or providing information, should focus more on primary school level.
- Universities should identify GRT graduate role models who may be able to provide mentoring in schools.

## Supporting effective home education

Where families choose home education, a concerted effort between schools, local authorities and HE institutions is needed to ensure that parents are supported to deliver effective home education and pupils are given access to HE outreach initiatives.

- Widening Participation teams should actively target pupils who are home educated to ensure they are included in outreach which seeks to promote HE and inform pupils about their future options.

## Staff training

- Widening participation teams should receive training to help them understand which groups and ethnicities the term 'GRT' refers to and how these groups' culture and experiences impact on their perception of HE.
- Teaching staff should include GRT issues and culture in curricula, where relevant.
- Widening participation teams should understand the barriers to HE access faced by GRT groups in order to better address these issue in their policies.

## Information, advice and guidance for pupils and families

- Outreach initiatives and mentors should aim to disseminate information to ensure that GRT pupils and families are well informed about university.
- As with schools, universities must engage and inform any GRT families who are deemed 'hard to reach'. Information that explains HE and its potential benefits should be translated where necessary and universities should work with specialist organisations such as ACERT and The Traveller Education service to disseminate these resources to GRT families.
- Outreach initiatives should inform parents about financial support and loan systems, as well as anti-discrimination and inclusion practice and the pastoral support offered to students at university.

## Distance Learning

- HE institutions should promote distance learning as a flexible HE option for GRT students. They should ensure that distance learning students are adequately supported in terms of their access to technology and their contact with and inclusion in the university community.

## Recommendations for future research

### Larger scale research

- There is limited research focusing on GRT groups' access to HE. Though this report has contributed to the research base, and crucially, includes the voices of experts and practitioners working with GRT communities and individuals from the communities, there is an urgent need for further research. Future research should seek to include input from these groups but should work with larger numbers of GRT community members and parents to add to the research base and further interrogate the findings of this report.
- Quantitative research and longitudinal studies should be undertaken as these would make a valuable contribution to current research.

### Beyond access

- This report has focused on the issue of access. However, we recognise the important role of widening participation practice in ensuring that students are supported and successful in HE. Therefore, as research and access initiatives move towards including GRT groups in HE, research should go on to consider which factors support GRT students to be successful in HE.
- European research on Roma students in higher education could offer insights that help improve support for GRT students in the UK.

This report was written by the education and youth development 'think and action tank' **LKMco**. We believe society has a duty to ensure children and young people receive the support they need in order to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood. We work towards this vision by helping education and youth organisations develop, evaluate and improve their work with young people. We then carry out academic and policy research and advocacy that is grounded in our experience.

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