



YCS Briefing: Working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities

This YCS Effective Practice Briefings has been produced by the YCS Quality Development Team, The Traveller Movement and NHS England. It is based on up to date evidence and engagement with staff and children and young people. It aims to provide concise and easily accessible advice and guidance for front-line staff across all three sectors within the Children and Young People Secure Estate. These briefings are not intended as a complete review of all evidence but an initial summary of helpful information and guidance.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) Communities

The term GRT refers to several different ethnic groups, including English and Welsh Romany Gypsies, Scottish Gypsy Travellers, Irish Travellers and Roma (Roma usually refers to recent European arrivals and whilst Roma is used as a collective term this can include Sinti, Kalderash, Finnish Kale, Gitanos etc), each of which has its own rich history and complex identity. There are, for example, numerous Roma communities with different languages and religions. Whilst there are significant differences these groups do have several things in common e.g. a history of nomadism and strong oral traditions. Be aware that the term GRT is civil service specific and may not be understood by children and young people so it is important the meaning is explained to them.

Good Practice in supporting Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children and Young People

- **Take account of cultural difference:** Understanding that GRT children and young people have different cultures is the key starting point for effective engagement and support. Use Youth Offending Teams (YOT) and establishment assessment information to get a good understanding of a child or young person's history and let them know the service aims to support them and address their individual needs.
- **Make it as safe as possible for GRT children and young people to discuss and disclose their ethnicity:** Not feeling safe is significant factor in GRT children and young people not wanting to disclose their heritage: Assure them that their identities will not be disclosed to their peers unless they want it to be, and make sure this is understood amongst the staff group.
- **Be 'persistent without being invasive' to develop trust:** In an unfamiliar setting developing trust can take time. Don't be put off by initial reluctance or hostility, and give those from GTR communities time and space to adjust without withdrawing.
- **Work to maintain family ties:** Keeping links with families and carers is particularly important for these groups and engaging families provides vital connections with their roots and support networks. It is also important to include their families in sentence planning and transitions back into the community.
- **Provide help in understanding rules and structures:** Many of the restrictions and rules in a custodial environment will be unfamiliar to GRT children and young people. This can disadvantage them in important areas such as accessing incentives. Provide more 1-2-1 time if necessary and take time to explain why the rules are there, how they can benefit from them and support them as they learn to comply.
- **Help GRT children and young people adjust to the loss of liberty and freedom in play:** Many GRT children and young people are used to playing outside with minimal restrictions. This may make it particularly difficult for them to be 'locked in', even in larger association areas. Make efforts to facilitate positive play, within the limitations of the regime. It is also good practice to be aware that these restrictions can impact on their mental wellbeing, and to monitor and support them e.g. through first night monitoring, personal officers, case workers, listeners and access to the Chaplaincy. In 2010 the All Ireland Traveller Study (AITHS) found that suicide rates in the GRT communities was 7 times the national average for men, with the primary age range for suicides being 15-25, and 6 times the national average for women. A briefing from the [Prison and Probation Ombudsman, Investigations into Traveller deaths in custody 2015](#), noted that:
 - separation from families can be particularly acute for Travellers for whom family life is central.
 - high levels of mental illness are prevalent in the Traveller population: nearly three times more likely to suffer from anxiety and over twice as likely to be depressed compared to the rest of the population.
 - not being able to read and write is a barrier to accessing information and taking part in prison life.
 - bullying in prison has been identified as increasing the risk of suicide and self-harm.
- **Help to respect modesty:** Most GRT communities consider it immodest to undress in front of anyone else, even their parents, and girls' underwear would never be hung on display. These cultural practices can be impacted by personal or full searches and shared washing facilities, which should be handled as sensitively as possible.
- **Support conflict resolution where this is needed:** Dispute resolution in GRT communities are mainly kept to within the extended family and for many issues it is an effective way of dealing with problems. Parallels can be drawn with

Gypsy Roma and Traveller Communities

Traditional travelling groups have lived in Great Britain and Ireland for centuries. They include diverse groups such as Romany Gypsies, Irish Travellers, and Scottish Gypsies and Travellers.

Like other minority ethnic groups, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities have their own languages, traditions and customs that guide their way of life, which are passed on through the generations. Within all groups cultural values are strong, with emphasis on the extended family supporting each other: *'who we are is in our culture, our blood and our rearing'*¹.

There are some values, beliefs and practices that GRT communities have in common:

- A history of, or current nomadism.
- Greater self-reliance/independence, such as self-employment.
- High importance placed on children, family and relatives.
- Importance placed on family, community, gatherings and celebrations.
- Strong oral tradition.
- Strong emphasis placed on tidiness and cleanliness.
- Clear, traditional gender roles.²

It is important, however, to recognise that there can be significant cultural and practical differences between the different groups e.g. Roma experience very different barriers to access as they may not speak English or be familiar with rules and processes.

The extent of these communities may not be fully known. The Traveller movement publication *'The Last Acceptable Form of Racism'* found that 76% of those who participated in its work, had hidden their ethnicity to avoid discrimination.³

GRT Representation in the YCS Estate

In 2017/18 11% of CYP in the Children and Young People Secure Estate identified as GRT. This figure is high when compared with the 2011 census data, where this group represents 0.1% of the population⁴. It is likely, however, that it underrepresents the numbers of GRT children and young people within the estate as not all will disclose their ethnicity willingly.

Almost 50% of GRT children and young people in the Young Offender Institutes identified as having a disability, compared with 17% of the non-GRT population.⁵

GRT Views of Safety with the Secure Training Centres (STC) and Young Offender Institutes (YOI)

The Traveller Movements Publication, [Overlooked and Overrepresented: Gypsy, Traveller and Roma children in the youth justice system](#) (December, 2016), found that GRT children and young people (CYP) reported the following:

In STCs:

- A quarter had felt unsafe on their first night, compared to 12% of other CYP, and 40% had felt unsafe at some point, compared to 22% of other CYP.
- 42% felt threatened or intimidated by other CYP, compared to 15% of other CYP, with 37% having had their property or canteen taken from them, compared to 7% of other CYP.
- 30% of GRT children and young people were afraid to make a complaint for fear of what would happen to them if they did, compared to 14% of other CYP.

In YOIs

- 57% reported feeling unsafe at some point.
- Over half reported having been victimised by other children, compared to a third of other CYP.
- GRT children and young people were three times more likely to have their property or canteen taken, compared to other CYP.
- They were more likely, 36% compared to 22% of other CYP, to state that they felt staff would take them seriously if they reported they were being victimised.

(Although the report referenced did not include the SCH estate it would be important for that sector to also recognise the potential for this group to feel unsafe and be victimised)

Breaking the Myths

While historically GRT communities have lived a nomadic life style, 90% now live in traditional forms of housing.

Strict codes of cleanliness, learnt over centuries of nomadic life, exist. Concepts on which GRT communities place strong emphasis on being *'ritually clean'* and place strict guidelines, for example, on what objects can be washed in what bowls and that animals sleep outside. In custody this may present itself in having separate bowls for washing the body and washing dishes.

¹ [The Last Acceptable Form of Racism. 2017 Traveller Movement](#)

² [Show Racism the Red Card - Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children in the Welsh School System](#) (Tina Simbo, Lizz Bennet and Laura Pidock, July 2009)

³ [The Last Acceptable Form of Racism. 2017 Traveller Movement](#)

⁴ Office for National Statistics (2014) *What does the 2011 census tell us about the characteristics of Gypsy or Irish Travellers in England and Wales?* London: ONS.

⁵ [Children in Custody Report 2017-18](#)

Parents have the same legal obligations to educate their children as other parents including having the legal right to educate at home. A nomadic life and family responsibilities placed on children sometimes mean school attendance is sporadic and they leave earlier than they should.

If living on a local authority or privately-owned sites, GRT communities pay council tax, rent, gas, electricity, and all other charges, in the same way as other households.

GRT communities have a right to lead a nomadic lifestyle, but there are insufficient authorised sites to accommodate this. Many traditional stopping places and LA/private sites have closed in the last ten/twenty years which has worsened the situation leading more people to set up unauthorised encampments.

Traditional work includes seasonal agricultural labour, peddling, basket making, and horse dealing. Other work includes landscaping, gardening, laying tarmac, motor trading, scrap metal dealing, tree felling, teaching, academic and public-sector workers, as well jobs in the entertainment industry.

The Public-Sector Equality Duty

The [Public Sector Equality Duty](#) makes clear that public bodies have a duty to have due regard to advancing equality and fostering good relations between protected groups. This includes challenging and addressing discrimination wherever it is found. GRT communities face a range of discrimination in the UK and this should inform the way establishments engage with GRT children and young people.

Supporting GRT Children and Young People

Be *'persistent without being invasive'* in order to develop trust: In an unfamiliar setting developing trust can take time so have a range of mechanisms to gather feedback (group sessions, one-to-one, questionnaires). Don't be put off by initial reluctance or hostility and give GRT children and young people time and space to adjust without withdrawing. It is also important not to make assumptions that GRT children and young people know each other or are connected: Treat each child as an individual and *'don't "they" or "group" us'*.⁶

When GRT children and young people take the time to show you family photos, spend the time listening - this is a sign they are starting to trust you as their family is very important to them.

A 2007 study of GRT children and young people found that 63% had been subject to bullying and 86% had received racist comments in the community.⁷ Have an anti-bullying policy in place and continue to encourage staff to

challenge all bullying appropriately, swiftly and consistently ([Building Bridges Framework see 5.7](#)).

Don't be afraid to have discussion around room or unit moves. If they have come from a nomadic background this may help them adapt in custody better.

Recognise that perceived educational ability may reflect family responsibilities and travelling, not a lack of desire to learn. GRT children and young people may be willing to engage with education, if given the right opportunities and support. They might be embarrassed by their lack of or limited literacy and numeracy which may manifest itself in a reluctance to engage in formal education, disruption or behaviour perceived as aggressive. Admitting their struggles with education may feel like a weakness. Building relationships prior to classes and holding conversations privately can offset and reduce some of these reactions. Encourage cross-cultural learning without pointing out GRT identities unless they are happy for you to do so. Even then, ensure that prior conversations are held so that they are comfortable with the planned content of the session etc. This helps:

- Children and young people learn about themselves and each other;
- Encourage confidence by breaking down barriers, such as stereotypes, prejudices and preconceptions. (cultural evenings/exchange opportunities, myth-busting, workshops etc.;
- Build trust, as differences are explored and cooperation is supported.⁸

Help support GRT children and young people when they wish to keep their room tidy and possessions safe and enable them to adhere to cleanliness codes.

Feedback from GRT communities suggests education and training that catches their interest will be far more effective in engaging them. Modular learning, with rewards at the end of each module, is also a helpful way of encouraging them to succeed, and is also a good mechanism for those who have a range of time scales for their sentence. Support with literacy can also make a significant difference for some GRT children and young people.

Offer them opportunities to engage in physical exercise and cultural activities. Many GRT children present as hyper-active as they are used to playing outside a lot. Consider alternative ways to allow this energy to be used constructively.

Think about how to work to engage children and young people and seek their views on how they can meet the needs of GRT individuals: Feedback from GRT communities suggests that GRT CYP may not want to meet together in a forum and may prefer to meet with wider groups or be consulted individually. The important thing is to have the

⁶ Feedback given at the Travellers Movement Conference 2019

⁷ [This is Who We Are: A study of the views and identities of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller young people in England \(The Children's Society, 2007\).](#)

⁸ [The 10 Benefits of Cross Cultural Training – \(Neil Payne MD of Kwintessential 2019\)](#)

conversation with the children and find out what will work for them.

Having a GRT mentor or representative that can meet other GRT children or young people on induction and when they are struggling is an effective support, and encourages information sharing as many are wary of those not from their community.⁹

Celebrate events such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History month, held in June, as a way of raising awareness of these communities and their contributions to society and to try and address negative stereotyping and prejudice.

Make sure connections with appropriate translators are made e.g. Roma have many different languages and English may be a second language or not spoken.

⁹ [Gypsy and Traveller Prisoners A Good Practice Guide \(Conn Mac Gabhann and Joe Cottrell-Boyce, 2018\)](#)