



# Available but not Accessible

**Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers:  
barriers in accessing purposeful activities in prison**

## Executive Summary



**March 2023**

### About the Traveller Movement

The Traveller Movement is a registered UK charity promoting inclusion and community engagement with Gypsies, Roma and Travellers. The Traveller Movement seeks to empower and support Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities to advocate for the full implementation of their human rights.

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We would like to thank Professor Margaret Greenfields and Dr Gargi Ghosh for their academic advice and input.

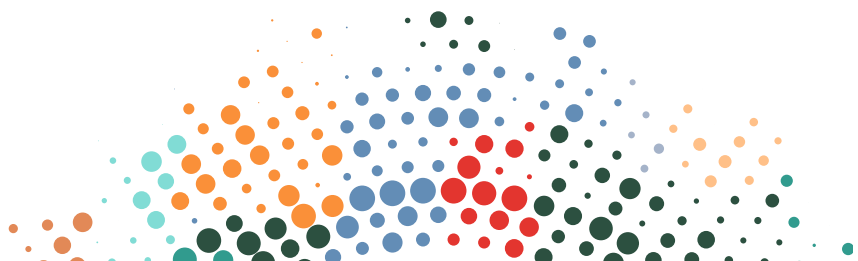
We are especially grateful to all of the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners who took part in our focus groups for their huge contribution to this piece of research. Thank you for kindly taking the time to talk to us and for your open and honest participation in the focus groups.

We also want to acknowledge the contributions of the Traveller Movement project team: Rebecca Thompson, who was the principal author of this report, Sarah Limb for her assistance with transcription and interview data analysis, Dr Jenni Berlin and Yvonne MacNamara who managed the project

We hugely value all of your contributions.



HM Prison &  
Probation Service



# Introduction

This executive summary sets out the key findings and summary recommendations of *Available but not Accessible*, a mixed-methods research study to explore the availability and accessibility of purposeful activities for Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people within the criminal justice system (CJS).

Engagement with purposeful activities and time out of cells are important for prisoner's mental and social wellbeing<sup>1</sup> as well as being important for future rehabilitation and opportunities upon release<sup>2</sup>. Given the overrepresentation of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people within the CJS<sup>3</sup> and high levels of reoffending<sup>4</sup> it is crucial to address any barriers to their engagement with activities which may impact on life chances on release. Importantly, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) prisoners report feeling unsafe, discriminated against and have higher rates of mental ill health and substance misuse<sup>5</sup> than other prison populations, all of which could potentially be improved by engagement with suitable activities. To gain a comprehensive understanding of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners' engagement with purposeful activities, this study used a mixed methods approach to explore prison statistics, and the experiences of both Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners and CJS staff with experience of working with these prisoners.

This study found that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people are engaging with 'purposeful activities'<sup>6</sup>, but these activities are rarely suited to the needs of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller individuals, and therefore, are not acting as effective tools for rehabilitation and for improving mental wellbeing in prisons.



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- 1 Stephenson, T., Leaman, J., O'Moore, É., Tran, A. and Plugge, E. "[Time out of cell and time in purposeful activity and adverse mental health outcomes amongst people in prison: a literature review](#)" (2021).
  - 2 HMIP. [Purposeful activity](#). (2021).
  - 3 According to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons' (HMIP) prisoner survey, in 2018/19 5% of men and 6% of women of the prison population in England and Wales identified as Gypsy, or Irish Traveller. Of course, this is higher in some locations. 10% of women at HMP Peterborough self-identified as Gypsy/Irish Traveller, and GRT boys making up 17% of some Young Offender Institution
  - 4 HMIP. [Minority ethnic prisoners' experiences of rehabilitation and release planning: A thematic review by HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#). (2020).
  - 5 HMIP. [People In Prison: Gypsies, Romany And Travellers](#).(2014).
  - 6 Defined in the Scottish Prison Service Purposeful Activity Review (2014) which provides a more detailed list of activities than English documents, in the following way: "Purposeful activity includes any activity or constructive interaction which promotes citizenship; develops learning and employability skills; builds life skills and resilience; addresses well-being; and motivates personal engagement with both prison and community based services."

## Gypsy and Irish Traveller people in the prison system

Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people are heavily overrepresented within the CJS. Based on the most recent statistics available, despite only making up an estimated 0.1% of the UK population, 9% of young people within the criminal justice youth estate identify themselves as being from a Traveller background<sup>7</sup>, whilst 5% of prison detainees in the adult estates identify as Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller<sup>8</sup>.

Despite these figures already being a gross overrepresentation, these numbers are likely to be an underestimate, with many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people choosing not to disclose their Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller ethnicity to the CJS<sup>9</sup>. Inadequate ethnicity monitoring of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people in the CJS is known to be a serious problem<sup>10</sup>, obtaining accurate ethnicity statistics are essential to identify and challenge discrimination, institutional racism, and to address why a higher percentage of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people are detained in the CJS and how this can be changed<sup>11</sup>.

There are many reasons for this overrepresentation, including societal factors and factors within the criminal justice system which this report will now go on to address.

## Societal factors that contribute to overrepresentation

Previous work by the Traveller Movement has discussed how societal adversities can combine and lead to increased risk of criminal behaviour. For Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people these factors include their experiences of:

- Disproportionately high levels of poverty,
- Poor living conditions,
- Persistent experiences of racism,
- Ongoing discrimination throughout the life-course,
- Poor physical health and disability,
- Substance misuse,
- Domestic violence,
- Poor mental health,
- The highest suicide rates of all ethnic groups
- And the lowest levels of academic attainment for all ethnic groups<sup>12</sup>

The 'school to prison' pipeline study<sup>13</sup> demonstrates just one of the ways in which multiple adversities faced by Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people combine to increase the risk of engaging in criminal behaviour, which in turn leads to an overrepresentation within the CJS. The study found many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people are unfairly excluded from school or unnecessarily placed in special education classes.

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7 The Traveller Movement. [Overlooked and Overrepresented: 5 Years on.](#) (2021).

8 HMIP. [People In Prison: Gypsies, Romany And Travellers.](#)(2014).

9 HMIP. [Minority ethnic prisoners' experiences of rehabilitation and release planning: A thematic review by HM Inspectorate of Prisons. \(2020\).](#)

10 The Traveller Movement. [Overlooked and Overrepresented: 5 Years on.](#) (2021). HMIP. [Minority ethnic prisoners' experiences of rehabilitation and release planning: A thematic review by HM Inspectorate of Prisons. \(2020\)](#)

11 Lammy, D. [The Lammy Review. An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the Criminal Justice System.](#) (2017).

12 Cemlyn, S., Greenfields, M., Burnett, S., Matthews, Z. and Whitwell, C. [Inequalities Experienced by Gypsy and Traveller Communities: A Review.](#) (2009).

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Yin-Har Lau, A., & Ridge, M. [Addressing the impact of social exclusion on mental health in gypsy, roma, and traveller communities.](#) (2011).

13 The Traveller Movement. [Exploring why Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children experience the school to prison pipeline and how it can be interrupted.](#) (2022).



*“Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are frequently failed as they progress through childhood; Gypsy, Roma and Traveller boys in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) were significantly more likely to have been 14 or younger the last time they were in education, significant numbers had been excluded from school and almost half of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in Secure Training Centres (STCs) had been in local authority care.”*

**Kate Green MP**, Labour Party MP and Member of the Justice Select Committee<sup>14</sup>

This reduces academic opportunities, resulting in lower academic attainment and fewer employment possibilities in adulthood. Reduced employment opportunities increase the likelihood of poverty and its associated factors such as poor living conditions, substance misuse, poor physical and mental health, and increases resentment towards and exclusion from wider society. Together (as recognised for many minoritised groups, although these factors are particularly exacerbated for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people) these factors increase the risk of a person engaging in criminal behaviour through desperation for finances, and/or as the consequence of substance misuse and poor mental health.



The lowest rate of engagement was for White Irish Prisoners, at **61%**.

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<sup>14</sup> The Traveller Movement. [Overlooked and Overrepresented: Gypsy, Traveller and Roma children in the youth justice system](#). (2016).



## Higher rates of custodial sentences

Minority ethnic defendants are more likely to receive custodial sentences and less likely to receive community sentences than White British defendants<sup>15</sup>. This is believed to be especially true for Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people because of the misconception that they do not have a fixed abode and therefore pose a higher risk they might abscond<sup>16</sup>. Being on License or a Home Detention Curfew also requires a fixed address, creating a barrier to access for nomadic Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers<sup>17</sup>. However, according to the 2011 census for England and Wales 74 per cent of Gypsies and Travellers live in bricks and mortar accommodation with many others living in fixed locations on permanent Traveller sites<sup>18</sup>.

Previous research has found that minoritised defendants are more likely to plead “not guilty” compared to White defendants due to a lack of trust between BAME defendants and the justice system<sup>19</sup>. This lack of trust may mean that minoritised defendants do not feel able to cooperate with the police or follow the advice of solicitors. Lack of an early guilty plea increases the likelihood of harsher sentencing, including increased time in custody. Mistrust of the police and the justice system is strongly felt within the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities, with many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people feeling unfairly treated and persecuted throughout their entire lives<sup>20</sup>. These strong feelings of mistrust are often generational, stemming from years of persecution (for example) the Gypsy Holocaust in Nazi Germany, and then reinforced in younger generations through concerns over children being removed into care, historically, earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century often associated with concerns over nomadic lifestyles, enforced settlement through the closure of sites and traditional stopping places, and incidents such as the high profile Dale Farm eviction and the regular evictions of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people from temporary encampments by the police.

## Looking to the future

With the passing of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 which criminalises trespass and prohibits and criminalises nomadic living<sup>21</sup> for many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people<sup>22</sup>, it is likely that many more Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people will find themselves in contact with the CJS and potentially detained in the coming years, increasing the over-representation within the prison service<sup>23</sup>. These increased rates of negative encounters with the police are likely to deepen the already felt mistrust<sup>24</sup> exacerbating the likelihood of lack of cooperation in a range of circumstances involving the CJS, reducing the likelihood of early guilty pleas and increasing the already increased likelihood of custodial sentences for members of these communities.

To reduce the over-representation of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people within the CJS, it is therefore clear that work needs to take place within wider society to address and reduce the disadvantages and adverse risk factors experienced by Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people.



**Only 30%** of staff were aware if their organisation celebrated Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller history month.

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15 The Traveller Movement. [Reducing the number of women in custody](#). (2021).

16 HMIP. [People In Prison: Gypsies, Romany And Travellers](#). (2014).

17 [FINAL-+Understanding+the+needs+of+Gypsies+and+Travellers+and+their+experience+of+probation+2022.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

18 Office for National Statistics. [2011 Census analysis: What does the 2011 Census tell us about the Characteristics of Gypsy or Irish Travellers in England and Wales?](#) (2014).

19 Centre for Justice Innovation. [Building Trust](#). (2019).

20 Thompson, R. M., Stone, B. & Tyson, P. [Mental health support needs within Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities: a qualitative study](#). (2021)

21 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-police-powers-to-crack-down-on-unauthorised-encampments-come-into-force>

22 Wainwright, S. [How the policing and sentencing bill will deepen inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people](#). (2021)

23 The Traveller Movement. [Reducing the number of women in custody](#). (2021).

24 Thompson, R. M., Stone, B. & Tyson, P. [Mental health support needs within Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities: a qualitative study](#). (2021)

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*“They wonder why people self-harm, suicide. You have to wait for a month for an appointment, so you are sitting there waiting for that appointment. And then on that day, they don’t come get you. And then you try to book another one and then you have to wait another month. People’s heads are going crazy. It’s not getting funded properly, that’s the truth.”*

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# Main Findings

## Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners are engaging with purposeful activities - when they have the opportunity to

Our study found that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners are more likely to be enrolled in purposeful activities than the rest of the prison population. 69% of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners in our study were enrolled in purposeful activities compared to 64% of the prison population overall.

However, although they were more likely to be enrolled on the activities, many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people said that they were often not collected from their cells to actually take part in the activities so could not meaningfully participate. Staff felt that this was because of staff shortages and competition for places on the activities. Prisons did not have a set system for who was selected to take part in activities each day, with Romany Gypsy and Irish Travellers being unable to participate as often as they would like. Staff felt that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners would sometimes make excuses to avoid taking part, such as faking illness. They felt this was particularly the case when prisoners were required to participate in literacy lessons and attributed this to Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people often feeling embarrassed about their poor literacy or not seeing the value of educational activities.

## Activities are often not suited to Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners needs

Most Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people felt that they would rather engage in prison-based work than education, however our study found that only 23% of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people were enrolled in prison-based work, which is less than other ethnic groups.

Our focus groups and staff interviews found that most prisons had a policy that prisoners could not engage in prison based work or vocational courses until they had attained a mandatory literacy and numeracy standard. Non-participation would often result in IEP 'strikes' and prisoners could lose privileges if they failed to attend. Prisoners often resented not having a choice of whether they participated or not in educational activities.

Since many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people leave school at a young age, the requirement of a literacy and numeracy standard before being able to access employment disproportionately impacts the ability community members to engage in prison based work or vocational courses. Our research found that prison-based work usually pays prisoners a higher wage than the educational courses meaning that routinely Romany Gypsy and Irish Travellers are failing to earn as much as other prisoners. It is important that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people are given the opportunity to earn equal amounts to other prisoners through raising awareness of the literacy barriers which they face as a result of prior experience.

The Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners themselves often held conflicting views about the value of forced literacy lessons. Many found it beneficial to have the opportunity to engage in learning that they were unlikely to engage in outside of the prison. However, some felt that literacy lessons were 'pointless' as they had coped well in life previously without higher levels of literacy.

Prison staff also held conflicting views about the value of forcing literacy lessons on Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers. They felt that literacy is important for rehabilitation, but also that forcing prisoners to take part in activities that they didn't want to engage with, introduced unnecessary conflict in the prisoner-staff relationships.

Many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners said that they would benefit more from practical skills courses and that these would aid rehabilitation through providing employment opportunities upon release.

One prison in our study provided an example of good practice as it allowed prisoners to participate in both basic literacy classes and prison-based work at the same time.



## **Maintaining family ties outside of prison is crucial, but difficult**

Maintaining contact with their families was very important to the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners that we spoke to, particularly for their mental health, however they face significant barriers when trying to do so.

Our research found that it is difficult for Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners to maintain adequate phone credit to keep in contact with their families. People who live on sites or who actively travel rarely have access to landlines, however it is more expensive for prisoners to contact mobile phones than it is landlines. Many family members may live abroad, including in the Republic of Ireland, and foreign numbers are more expensive to call.

Dependency on phone calls is high as many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller family members are unable to engage with written forms of contact such as emails and letters, due to poor literacy. Visits are also difficult as large families cannot visit due to visitor number restrictions.

This is in line with previous research which has also found that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people often have difficulty maintaining family ties within prison. Surveyed staff supported the view that engaging with families decreased reoffending also supporting previous research.

Previously, some prisons had allowed Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller ethnicity prisoners to register on the 'foreign nationals prison scheme' which gave them extra minutes on their phone card, however this is not consistent and most prisons did not have this scheme.

## **HMPPS staff feel that they lack knowledge of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people and culture and require further training to work with them efficiently**

Both staff that were surveyed and interviewed, said that they did not feel that they knew enough about Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people and their culture to support them.

Well-meaning staff were concerned that they held misconceptions about Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people and wanted the opportunity to be educated to make sure that they did not feed into prejudice or unknowingly make racist comments.

Prisoners and staff felt that relationships between individual officers and prisoners founded on trust and respect were the most beneficial.

## **Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people experience racism from some HMPPS staff whilst they are in prison**

Both Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners and HMPPS staff reported that prisoners experienced discrimination due to their ethnicity. This discrimination was largely through comments and complaints not being upheld or investigated properly. This is in line with previous research which has also found that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people experience racism and discrimination during their prison time.

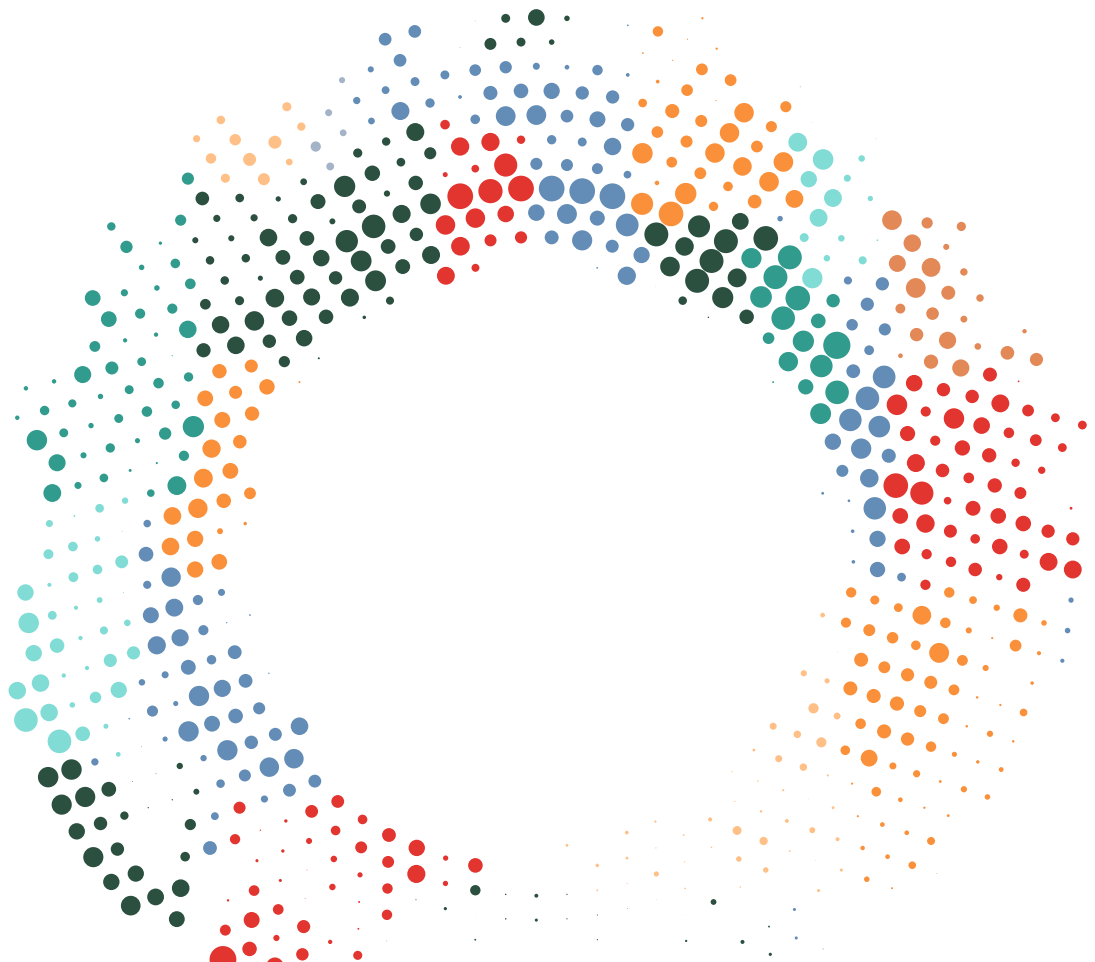
## **It is important for Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people to be around others of their own ethnicity**

Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people felt that being around others of their own ethnicity felt more comfortable for them, as they were able to talk using their own languages, use terminology familiar to them and talk about shared experiences.

The opportunity to meet in groups was regarded positively by the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners. Staff members also talked positively about groups that they had conducted and been part of and enjoyed the opportunities to bond with the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller group

# Recommendations

- HMPPS should give serious consideration to prison out-of-cell time and recreation, including the re-introduction of activities that were available pre COVID-19, increased outdoor recreational time, and access to vocational courses and one to one learning.
- HMPPS should undertake mandatory tailored assessments of purposeful activities to address the needs of minoritised communities, including appropriate diagnoses of neurodiversity needs and access to online learning models.
- The existing mandatory education model needs redevelopment, specifically in relation to minoritised communities. Negative outcomes experienced in formal education by many Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers should be recognised within the model
- Improve communication with family via enhancement of the Traveller phone credit allowance, and the development of greater awareness of the importance of extended family networks in Gypsy and Traveller communities amongst prison staff.
- Cultural competency training programmes for HMPPS staff should be targeted and mandatory. Training should reflect the specific prison populations of each establishment.
- HMPPS needs to ensure racism from staff towards Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers is given due regard in the investigation process. All incidents need to be logged and recorded for impact assessments.
- Encourage and enable Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoner peer support, and more pro-active leadership roles in prison life
- HMPPS must introduce a consistent and uniform data collection system across all its establishments as high priority, by adopting separate Romany Gypsy, Irish Traveller, and Roma ethnic categories, and ensuring that prisons record IEP status and engagement in purposeful activities by protected characteristic status.





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*“The requirement to meet a basic (formal) literacy & numeracy standard can be embarrassing for some and prevent [prison based] employment”*

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**The Traveller Movement would like to say  
THANK YOU to our funders for their support**



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