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



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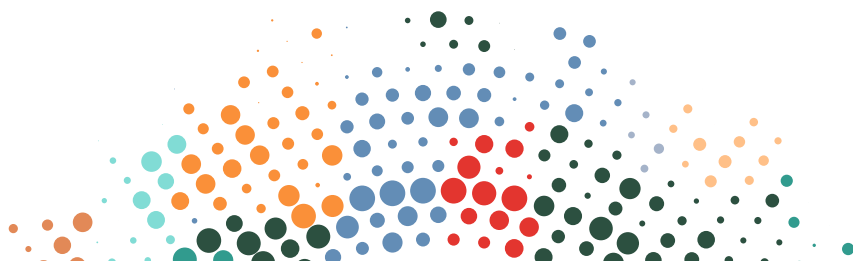
We are especially grateful to all of the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners who took part in our focus groups for their huge contribution to this piece of research. Thank you for kindly taking the time to talk to us and for your open and honest participation in the focus groups.

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



Foreword

Although the findings of this report really have no place in a modern prison system with any intention of rehabilitation, the report writers and The Traveller Movement are to be commended for their rigorous methodology and meaningful analysis.

This report is a rich account of the experience of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people in the criminal justice system and staff who directly support them.

As CEO of Clinks, I am proud to say we work alongside many organisations who directly support Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people. This experience has shown me that connecting with people with lived experience of prison from a particular perspective is often something voluntary sector organisations do well, especially small specialist organisations.

At the heart of this report are the voices of people who don't really trust the system to help them but trust The Traveller Movement to speak out for them.

In the following report Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people disclose not being able to get the support they need. The picture they paint is of the discrimination they all too often face in wider society, following them through the prison gates and back out again.

Staff are honest and open about lacking awareness of people's needs, best practice ways to support Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people and a shortage of appropriate support.

I recommend that this report be widely read by anyone working with people in prison or with prison experience.

I want to strongly encourage that specialist voluntary sector organisations, like The Traveller Movement and others who understand the specific needs of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people alongside other racially minoritised people, be sought out for their expertise, advice and support.



Anne Fox

Chief Executive Officer,
Clinks – the national
infrastructure charity supporting
voluntary organisations working
with people in the criminal justice
system and their families in
England and Wales

*“At the heart of this
report are the voices
of people who don’t
really trust the system to
help them but trust
The Traveller Movement
to speak out for them.”*



Introduction

The aim of this research is to explore the experiences of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people within the Criminal Justice System (CJS), focussing on the barriers they face to accessing purposeful activities during their time in prison.

Engagement with purposeful activities and time out of cells are important for prisoner's mental and social wellbeing¹ as well as being important for future rehabilitation and opportunities upon release². Given the overrepresentation of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people within the CJS³ and high levels of reoffending⁴ 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 misuse⁵ 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'⁶, 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.



- 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 Institutions
- 4 HMIP. [Minority ethnic prisoners' experiences of rehabilitation and release planning: A thematic review by HM Inspectorate of Prisons.](#) (2020).
- 5 [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."

Literature Review

Who are Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers?

Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers are lawfully recognised ethnic minorities in the UK and have protected characteristics under the Equalities and Human Rights Act⁷.

Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers are distinct groups from each other, with differing history, ancestry, cultures and traditions. However, as both groups historically engaged in a nomadic lifestyle, it is common for policy makers to address the concerns of both groups together using the umbrella term “Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) people”⁸. This allows policy makers to address racism and the exclusion from wider society faced by most GRT people, however it also fails to recognise distinct differences between groups.

Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people in the Criminal Justice 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 background⁹, whilst 5% of prison detainees in the adult estates identify as Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller¹⁰.

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 CJS¹¹. Inadequate ethnicity monitoring of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people in the CJS is known to be a serious problem^{12,13}. 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 changed¹⁴.

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.

7 Equality and Human Rights Commission [EHRC], [Race report statistics](#). (2020); EHRC, *Is Britain Fairer* (2018)

8 Cromarty, H. [Gypsies and Travellers. Commons Briefing papers CBP-8083](#). (2019).

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

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

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

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

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

14 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).

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,
- highest suicide rates of all ethnic groups
- And the lowest levels of academic attainment for all ethnic groups^{15,16,17,18,19}

The 'school to prison' pipeline study²⁰ 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.

“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 Committee²¹

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.

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

16 Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre. [Researching Young Travellers Mental Health](#). (2015).

17 Power, C. [Room to Roam. England's Irish Travellers. Report of research](#). (2004).

18 The Traveller Movement. [The last acceptable form of racism? The pervasive discrimination and prejudice experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities](#). (2017).

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

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

21 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 defendants²². 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 abscond²³. Being on License or a Home Detention Curfew also requires a fixed address, creating a barrier to access for nomadic Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers.²⁴ 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 sites²⁵

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 ethnic minority defendants and the justice system²⁶. 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 lives²⁷. 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 20th 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 living²⁸ for many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people²⁹, 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 service³⁰. These increased rates of negative encounters with the police are likely to deepen the already felt mistrust³¹ 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.

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

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

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

25 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).

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is a Romany Gypsy or Irish Traveller persons time like within prison?

Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller persons' experience within prison is often marred by negative experiences. Members of these communities within the prison system feel unsafe, unsupported and discriminated against³². Concerningly given the gross over-representation of young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people in custody, these young people report higher levels than other ethnic groups of feeling threatened or intimidated by other young people, great risk of physical and sexual assault, being forced to assault another young person in self-defence, theft of their food or property and feeling generally very unsafe³³. These experiences for both young people and adults, reduce the effectiveness of custody as a rehabilitative service for many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people.

Rehabilitation is further hampered by difficulties that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people have in maintaining family ties during their prison stays. HMIP (2020)³⁴ found high numbers of incarcerated Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people stated they had not seen their children while detained and were unable to contact other family members adequately. Data also indicates that a much higher proportion of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller young people in the Youth Justice System (YJS) have children; a trend that is likely to be replicated in the adult estate. Between 60-92% of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people who were due for release in the next three months stated that they needed help to contact their families. These figures are around double that than those for other ethnic groups. The research by HMIP also found that 60% of the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people who were requiring help to contact their families were not receiving the support needed. This is important as reoffending rates are significantly higher for people who do not adequately maintain family ties³⁵.

As Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people suffer from high rates of poor mental health, physical health and substance misuse within wider society – largely driven by the impact of poor socioeconomic outcomes and persistent discrimination - it is not surprising that many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people need support with these upon entry to prison³⁶. Despite this, the latest Children in Custody report³⁷ found that, whilst both groups reported drug/alcohol misuse, 0% of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller youth reported receiving required help for their drug/alcohol use whilst in custody, compared to 40% of non-Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller young people. Meanwhile, HMIP found that Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners are more likely to report feeling depressed or suicidal on arrival in the secure estate, and less likely to report receiving information about support available³⁸. Failure to adequately support people with their mental health and substance misuse increases the likelihood of future reoffending, suicide and self-harm, and constitutes a violation of prisoners' human rights³⁹.

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

33 HMIP. '[Children in Custody 2019-20](#)'. (2021)

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

35 Prison Reform Trust. [Bromley Briefings Prison Fact file](#). (2015)

36 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/360/full-report.html>

37 HMIP. '[Children in Custody 2019-20](#)'. (2021)

38 HMIP 2018

39 Equality and Human Rights Commission. [Background to our inquiry](#). (2017)





What are purposeful activities and why are they important?

Purposeful activities are activities provided to benefit the prisoner and assist in their rehabilitation.

They include educational programmes, vocational training, prison-based employment and specialised support services⁴⁰.

Engagement with purposeful activities and time out of cell is important for prisoners mental and social wellbeing during their time in prison, as well as of being of key importance for future rehabilitation and opportunities upon release. This is explicitly recognised by the positive duty placed on prisons to facilitate such activities.

“Prison authorities have a positive obligation to provide equal access to programmes and activities, and specialised support where necessary”

[justiceinspectorates.gov.uk](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk)

Given the potential benefits of engagement in purposeful activities for prisoners, and the poor experiences and complex needs of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners, exploring how Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people engage with these activities is thus of key importance.

40 Justice Inspectorates. [Purposeful activity](#). (2021).



Do Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people engage with purposeful activities?

Many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people are engaging with purposeful activities whilst in custody but this still generally represents a lower than optimal rate of Participation. A study⁴¹ conducted in 2015 found 54% of the surveyed Gypsy and Traveller prisoners had participated or were currently in literacy classes, 36% had participated or were currently in numeracy classes, and 32% had participated in vocational courses. Numerous Gypsy and Traveller inmates who took part in the 2015 research stated they were happy to be given the opportunity for education in prison, as before many only had a basic level of education and some had received none at all. The study also found that 48% of respondents took part in training that would directly lead to employment, and 45% showed a desire to undertake vocational courses in mechanics and construction. Furthermore, a survey carried out by the Shannon Trust's 'Turning Pages' reading programme (for all prisoners) showed that 9.5% of all the learners were from a Gypsy or Irish Traveller background.⁴² This is significant, as Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller are 5% of the whole prison population.⁴³ Further supporting findings of good engagement with purposeful activities, HMIP (2020) found that a higher proportion of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners were reported to have completed non-offending behavioural programmes compared to non-Traveller prisoners (58% compared to 45%)⁴⁴. The report also identified that minoritised (including Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller) inmates were more likely to be involved in training or education (83% compared with 77% of White prisoners) and in rehabilitative opportunities.

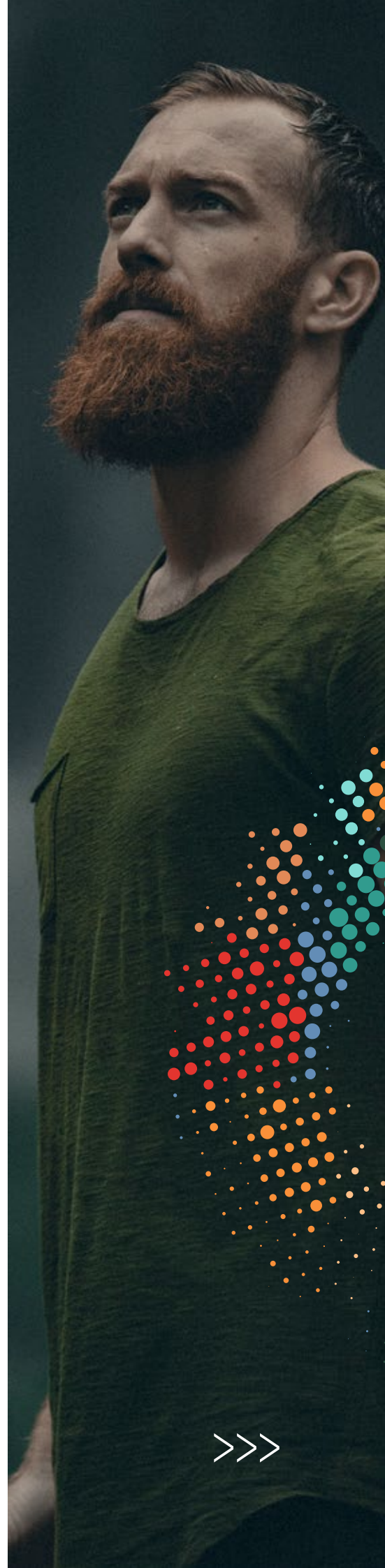
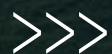
Regarding youth custody, the Children in Custody report found that in comparison to non-Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller children, children from a Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller background were more likely to be partaking in vocational training, paid work, and education. Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller children felt more positively about the education and vocational training they were receiving than did children from other backgrounds, and all Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller respondents reported that staff were supporting them to achieve their objectives or targets. Furthermore, Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller boys felt more positively than did other children, that the education or skills they had learned would help them after leaving the secure estate.

41 Mac Gabhann, C. (2015). *The Right Type of Education: A Briefing on Education and Training Provision for Gypsy and Irish Traveller Prisoners in England and Wales*. London

42 Irish Chaplaincy. [The Right Type of Education](#). (2015).

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

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



Are purposeful activities benefitting Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners?

Although the evidence suggests that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people are engaging with purposeful activities, poor levels of prison wellbeing and high rates of reoffending remain. This raises questions as to the suitability and effectiveness of services provided to Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people and if these services are meeting their needs. Ofsted's 2019/20 Annual Report concluded that only a third of prisons had a good enough curriculum that met learners' needs. In some prisons, only half of prisoners were having their progress recorded and their efforts recognised and several prisons were not offering the right support for prisoners, enabling a presumption that Gypsy and Traveller are amongst those being failed by the systems in place.⁴⁵

The 2010 Equality Act places an obligation upon the National Offender Management Service to provide appropriate services for all prisoners.⁴⁶ This means that positive action can be taken to ensure ethnic groups are given the same chances as other prisoners, and have same level of access to activities such as education and training.⁴⁷ Despite this, HMIP (2020) found that ethnic minority prisoners felt they were less encouraged to take up purposeful activities than their white British counterparts, and found them harder to access⁴⁸. For purposeful activities to produce the intended benefits, prisons need to ensure that services are of an adequate standard, suitable for their inmates needs and accessible to all those who require them.

Prison estates should take into consideration, when designing activities for their Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller population, that a staggering 68% of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners have not received a full education outside prison, often leaving school at the transition to secondary education.⁴⁹ Further, Roma inmates (who cannot be clearly identified in HMPPS data as they are recorded under country of origin rather than as 'Roma' unless they choose to identify as 'Gypsies' which may be a particularly stigmatising term in countries of origin from where they originate) often face additional language barriers that should be considered.

Studies show that not all Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners are aware of all the opportunities available to them in prison because accessing activities requires a certain level of literacy they might not have,⁵⁰ and accordingly where language barriers exist for Roma prisoners the situation will be greatly exacerbated. A Traveller prisoner representative told the HMIP 2020 study that poor literacy and embarrassment amongst Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners is often what prevents them from accessing services and the help they need. Prison education could therefore offer 'a golden opportunity for many Traveller prisoners, if the literacy and numeracy classes are pitched at an appropriate level'.⁵¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has also negatively impacted prisoners' abilities to engage with suitable purposeful activities. Many educational activities have now changed to in cell learning which require a certain pre-level of literacy to complete, and there is increased competition to secure places in the limited number of out of cell activities. In many prisons where prisoners could previously engage in multiple activities, this has been restricted to a single activity per prisoner.

45 Ofsted Annual Report 2019/20: education, children's services and skills <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-201920-education-childrens-services-and-skills>

46 Equality Act 2010, s 149.

47 Mac Gabhann, C. (2015). The Right Type of Education: A Briefing on Education and Training Provision for Gypsy and Irish Traveller Prisoners in England and Wales.

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

49 Mac Gabhann, C. (2015). The Right Type of Education: A Briefing on Education and Training Provision for Gypsy and Irish Traveller Prisoners in England and Wales.

50 Ministry of Justice National Offender Management Service, 2008. Race Review. Implementing Race Equality in Prisons – Five Years On.

51 Mac Gabhann, C. (2015). The Right Type of Education: A Briefing on Education and Training Provision for Gypsy and Irish Traveller Prisoners in England and Wales.p.12

As previously discussed, the majority of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people have negative experiences of education and often poor relationships with service providers. Further, limited literacy levels and higher tendency to have mental health issues whilst in prison are likely to make Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners more hesitant to seek help for and to take part in purposeful activities that are non-mandatory. Most Travellers value independence and stoicism as character traits and are not likely to admit they need or want help when asked, particularly if the person who is enquiring is not a trusted individual (such as a priest, or member of the Chaplaincy). Therefore, normalising participation in prison activities among Traveller prisoners and building up levels of trust, is a necessary condition if prison estates want to increase their engagement.⁵² Consequently, although Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners are engaging with purposeful activities, they may not be engaging with those most suited to their needs and rehabilitation, as they may not have the confidence to request or challenge the activities allocated to them.

According to the HMIP 2020 report there are various reasons why prisoners, (and not only Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners), are missing out on accessing the most appropriate opportunities. Data is not used in a meaningful way to identify priorities and areas of improvement, and, prisons have a limited range of activities, accredited qualification possibilities, and provisions for vulnerable prisoners⁵³. The HMIP report recommends that prison staff should seek to better understand minoritised and Romany Gypsy and Irish Travellers' individual experiences, especially when it comes to understanding the way ethnicity may influence a prisoner's access to and engagement with rehabilitative services⁵⁴.

Importance of current study

There is a deficit of research exploring the experiences of CJS staff working with Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people. Given the over-representation of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people within the CJS, it is imperative that staff have an adequate working knowledge and understanding of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people which is free from stereotypes and prejudice, to enable the creation of positive officer-inmate relationships. Understanding cultural difference can help prison officers provide suitable services and improve engagement and wellbeing within prison. Previous research has found that there is currently a lack of trust between prison officers and Traveller people in prison which makes it more difficult for Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people to engage with the activities offered in prison⁵⁵. This can be partly attributed to cultural communication barriers as many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller offenders find officers' questioning and overall conduct invasive⁵⁶. Even as simple a step as officers understanding that a lack of trust in officials and institutions, and a need for privacy, among Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people originate from the persecution these groups have experienced throughout history, would improve officer-inmate relationships. Therefore, officer awareness of the lack of opportunities Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people have outside prison, because of prejudice and discrimination, might improve officer-inmate relationships and remove the feelings of shame some inmates have about their low literacy and numeracy levels, in turn increasing access to learning opportunities.

CJS staff have previously highlighted their need for additional awareness of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people. Cottrell-Boyce (2014) conducted an informal discussion with 5 probation officers in the Thames Valley area. In this study, the group felt that they wanted to know more about Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller history and traditions. This current study seeks to expand upon these earlier findings by surveying a larger quantity of CJS staff (in diverse roles) to identify their current knowledge and training needs, and to interview Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people themselves about what they feel the barriers are. By exploring this topic in a multimodal research method, this study aims to provide practical information and recommendations that the prison service and its staff can use to improve suitability of purposeful activities for Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people within the CJS, leading to improved wellbeing and reduced reoffending.

52 Travellers in Prison Initiative. [Towards Developing a Strategy for Travellers in Prison](#). (2016).

53 Cottrell-Boyce, J. [Working With Gypsy And Traveller Offenders: A Thames Valley Probation Case Study](#). (2014).

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

55 <https://wp-main.travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Prisoners-in-the-Adult-Prison-Estate-Brief-1.pdf>

56 Cottrell-Boyce, J. [Working With Gypsy And Traveller Offenders: A Thames Valley Probation Case Study](#). (2014).

Research Design

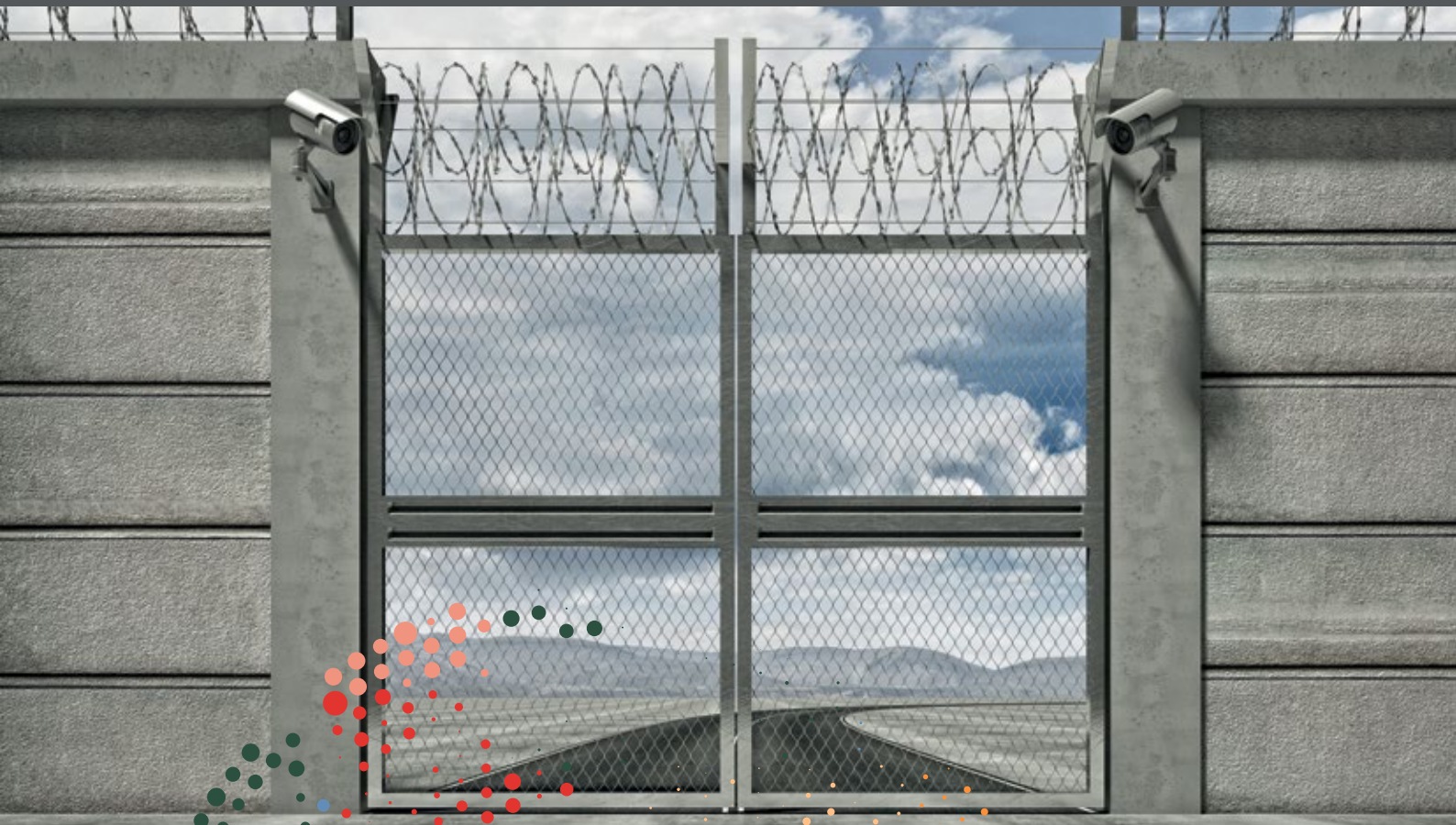
The study utilised a mixed method research approach comprised of four strands:

- a quantitative prison data set analysis of engagement with purposeful activities
- a staff survey
- Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoner focus groups
- qualitative interviews with staff members.

This study was funded by HMPPS and forms part of a review into the engagement of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners with purposeful activities within Prison Estates. The research received ethical approval from the National Research Council and was conducted by The Traveller Movement.

In addition to surveying Youth Justice staff, court staff and CJS head office staff, 8 prison estates and Youth Offender Institutions (YOI) from across the UK participated in this research:

1. HMP & YOI Woodhill (category A prison)
2. HMP & YOI Chelmsford (category B prison)
3. HMP & YOI Isis (category C prison)
4. HMP Featherstone (category C prison)
5. HMP & YOI Aylesbury (closed category YOI)
6. HMP & YOI Feltham (closed category YOI)
7. HMP & YOI Swinfen Hall (closed category YOI & category C prison)
8. One Women's Prison (Prison name withheld)



“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.”

Strand 1:

Quantitative Data Set Analysis



Method

Strand 1 of the research analysed data provided by the prisons that captured prisoners' involvement in purposeful activities and prisoners 'Incentives and Earned Privileges' (IEP) status, split by ethnicity.

Prisoners can either be on basic, standard or enhanced IEP status. Prisoners enter the prison system with standard IEP status and can move up to enhanced privileges based on good behaviour within the prison. Poor behaviour can result in the withdrawal of privileges and moving back to a lower or a basic status. Lack of engagement with purposeful activities can also result in moving to a lower IEP level.

Findings

There was considerable variability of the data collected by each prison. Some prisons kept comprehensive data for each prisoner recording disability status, ethnicity, other protected characteristics, IEP status and engagement in activities. Other prisons kept overall data that was not recorded for each individual whilst other prisons kept very limited data with one prison not recording the ethnicity of participants in activities and therefore being unable to provide any meaningful data. This made data comparison across sites very difficult and limited the analysis that could be conducted.

All of the prisons involved captured ethnicity of prisoners using P-Nomis ethnic categories. P-Nomis records all Gypsy and Irish Traveller people under the ethnic code W3: White – Gypsy or Irish Traveller. No ethnic code exists for Roma people.

Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP)

We collected the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) status and P-Nomis recorded ethnicity of **2192** prisoners from 3 different prison sites. Of those enumerated, 55 (2.5%) identified as White – Gypsy or Irish Traveller Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller.

Multiple Chi-square tests were conducted to identify which ethnic groups differed significantly from each other in relation to IEP status.

We found **no** significant differences in IEP Status between:

- Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller Prisoners compared to all other ethnic groups (aggregated category comprising all other ethnic groups)
- White British Prisoners compared to Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller Prisoners
- White British Prisoners compared to all other ethnic groups (aggregated)
- Black/Black British Prisoners Compared to Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller

We did however find a significant difference between IEP status of Black or Black British Prisoners compared to all other ethnic groups when considered as an aggregate category. Black prisoners were significantly less likely to be on enhanced IEP than people belonging to any other ethnic groups ($p = 0.01$).

This could be interpreted to suggest that:

- Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller Prisoners do not receive preferential or detrimental IEP status compared to other ethnic groups.
- White British Prisoners do not receive preferential or detrimental IEP status compared to other ethnic groups.
- Black or Black British prisoners IEP status is negatively affected by their ethnicity, indicating detrimental treatment.



The low numbers of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners enumerated (n=55 which represents potentially a considerable undercount) means however that this interpretation needs to be treated with caution when contrasting with other (considerably larger) ethnic groups/populations.

Engagement in Purposeful Activities

We collected the activity status and P-Nomis recorded ethnicity of **3,336** prisoners from 5 different prison sites, of those, 78 (2.3%) identified as White – Gypsy or Irish Traveller, or Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller. Based on available data, it was possible to collate purposeful activity data in more prisons than for IEP status.

Data was captured for individual dates providing a snapshot of the prison. All statistical data was captured between September 2021 and December 2021 and acted as a precursor to the qualitative elements of the study. Delays between initial capture of statistical data and subsequent qualitative analysis was the result of COVID-19 protocols, which created challenges in accessing prisons.

Chi-square analysis was conducted of the data and we found significant differences between ethnic groups and their meaningful activity status. 69% of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people were enrolled on, or participating in, a purposeful activity, compared to 64% of the overall prison population.

Figure 1

Percentage of Ethnic Group Enrolled in Purposeful Activity

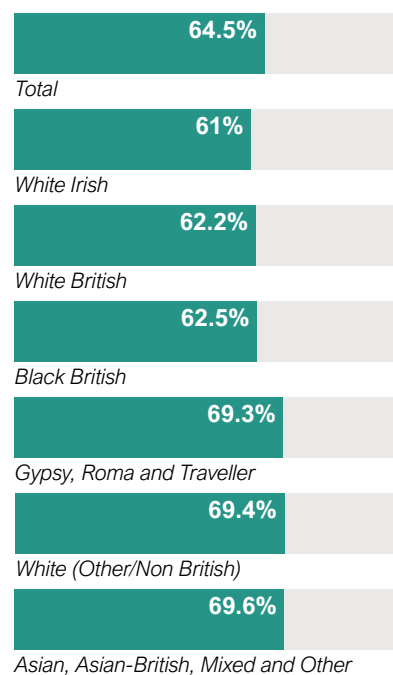
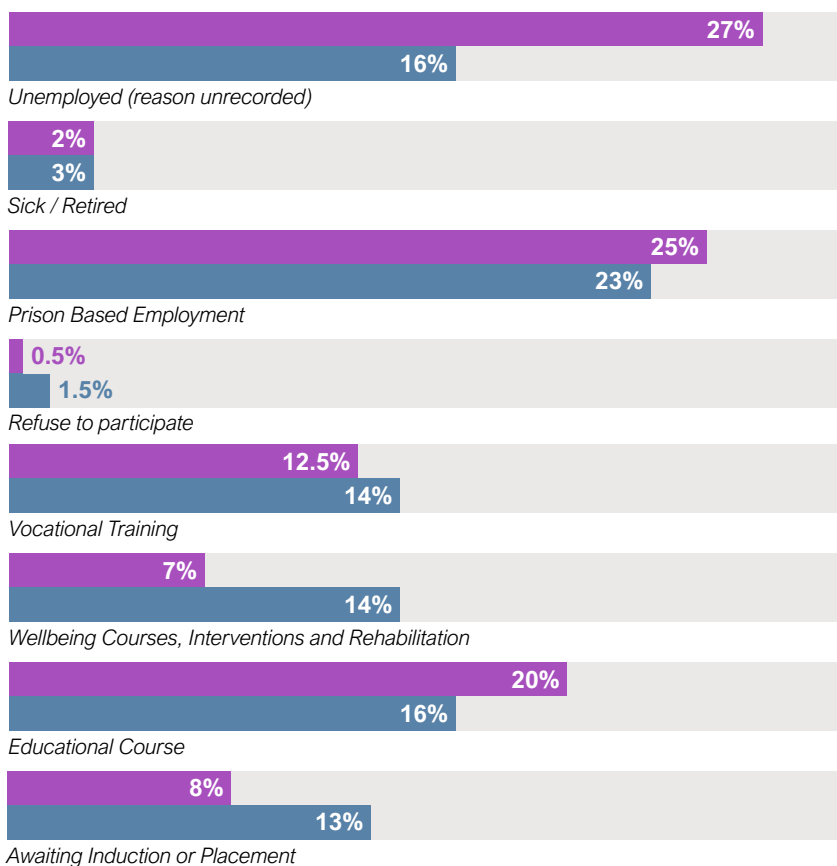


Figure 2

Types of Activities

■ Whole Prison ■ Gypsy, Roma and Traveller



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



Strand 2: Staff Questionnaire Survey



Method

Strand 2 of this study utilised an online survey hosted on SurveyMonkey.com.

A total of 173 staff within the Criminal Justice System completed the survey.

45% of respondents were from the prison service, while the remaining respondents were from the Youth Justice Estate, Youth Offending Teams, Magistrates, Courts and CJS Headquarters.

An opportunity sampling method was used, with the survey being shared via social media, email and in paper format.

The survey consisted of 20 questions, of which 6 were participant demographic questions and 14 were research questions. The survey also included questions about migrant Roma.

The research questions utilised a variety of question formats: 3 Likert scale questions, 3 closed choice questions, 6 closed choice questions followed by optional free text additional information, and 2 questions enabled free text responses only.

Findings

Staff Awareness and Knowledge

Most staff were aware that Roma, Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people are ethnic minorities, only 7% of staff were unaware of this fact.

31% of respondents were unaware if their establishment included Romany Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller categories in its ethnic monitoring system. For prison and youth justice estate staff, 28% of respondents were unaware if their establishment included Romany Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller categories in its ethnic monitoring.

60% of staff felt that they did not know enough about Romany Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller people in the CJS to effectively engage with them. Many requested additional training.

“Friction can be caused due to staff knowing very little about this protected group. Quick and easy guides or training which focusses on the day-to-day operational world are really useful.”

Equalities Officer, Prison Service

“I’d like to understand a little more about their cultural backgrounds, and the discrimination that they have faced over the years, which might help me understand their responses to those in authority / CJS more.”

Senior Practitioner, Youth Offending Team



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



Racism

The question was asked “Have you witnessed or are you aware of any stereotypes about Romany Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller people within the CJS”?

28%

of staff stated that they had witnessed or were aware of **stereotypes** being used about Roma within the CJS.

37%

of staff stated that they had witnessed or were aware of **stereotypes** being used about Romany Gypsies within the CJS.

48%

of staff stated that they had witnessed or were aware of **stereotypes** being used about Irish Travellers within the CJS.

Typical examples included:

“They are treated as a second-class person who drink, steal and lie.”

“They are [seen as] dirty, [that] they will cause trouble if there are too many of them together.”

“Many people think of Irish Travellers as trouble and thieves”

“

Any type of traveller is usually thought of as a trouble maker, liar, thief and uneducated.”

“Irish [are stated to be] only good for digging holes”

“Many people believe they are outright dumb, steal or are aggressive.”

Quotes from Prison staff

Have you ever witnessed, or been made aware of, discrimination towards Gypsy, Roma or Irish Traveller people in the CJS?

25% of staff have witnessed, or been made aware of, discrimination towards Gypsy, Roma or Irish Traveller people in the CJS

Staff stated that the Discrimination Incident Reporting Form (DIRF), process had been followed by many Traveller people in regards to discrimination they had experienced. The DIRF process can be used by staff, prisoners and visitors to report incidents of discrimination, harassment and victimisation. DIRF's filed by Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people often related to the use of racist language or the separation of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people from others of their own culture.

“DIRFs were sometimes submitted with a positive outcome for the complainant but it is not uncommon for Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller in prison to face repeated discrimination and submit multiple reports which could undermine their position as they may be perceived as a serial complainer, particularly if initial DIRFs are not upheld because the complainant was not familiar with the process and did not represent themselves as well as they might have.”

Chaplain, Prison Service

Purposeful Activities

Overall, staff felt that Roma,

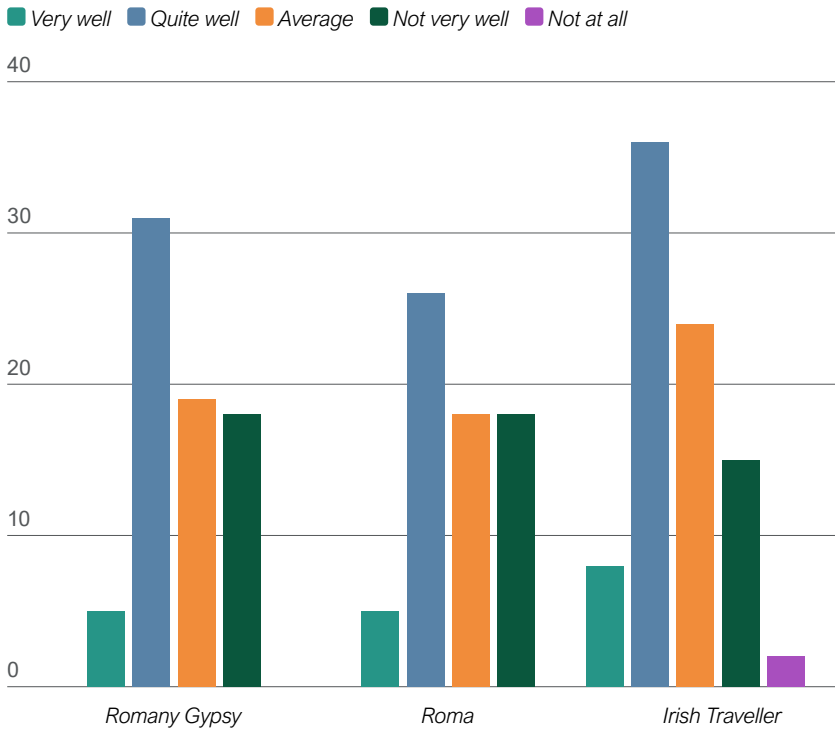


Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners engaged positively with prison-based activities.

Responses to the question: In your experience, how well do Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers engage with activities in prisons?

Figure 3

How well do Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers engage with activities in prisons?



Participants were also asked to give free text answers to the question “In your experience, what kind of purposeful activities would benefit Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers and reduce their re-offending?”

Figure 4

In your experience, what kind of purposeful activities would benefit Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers and reduce their re-offending?



Answers were coded into categories and recorded by frequency as illustrated below.

The most frequently suggested activities were basic education, including literacy skills.

Many workers, particularly YOT staff, stressed the importance of viewing each Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller person as an individual, consulting with them and listening to them.

“Speaking to the person and finding out what they have that interests them. Each person is different and the activities need to be tailored to each individual not a group.”

Probation Officer, Youth Offending Team

Many participants also recognised the need to build better relationships between Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people and the CJS.

“A support network between their communities and the CJS [would be beneficial] so that they can feel supported.”

Senior practitioner, Youth Offending Team

Barriers to activities

Participants were asked to give free text answers to the question “To your best knowledge, what are the biggest barriers for Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers in accessing activities in prison?” Answers were coded into categories and recorded by frequency as illustrated in the graph below. The graph below highlights the extent to which literacy issues are recognised as the single largest barrier by staff as well as prisoners

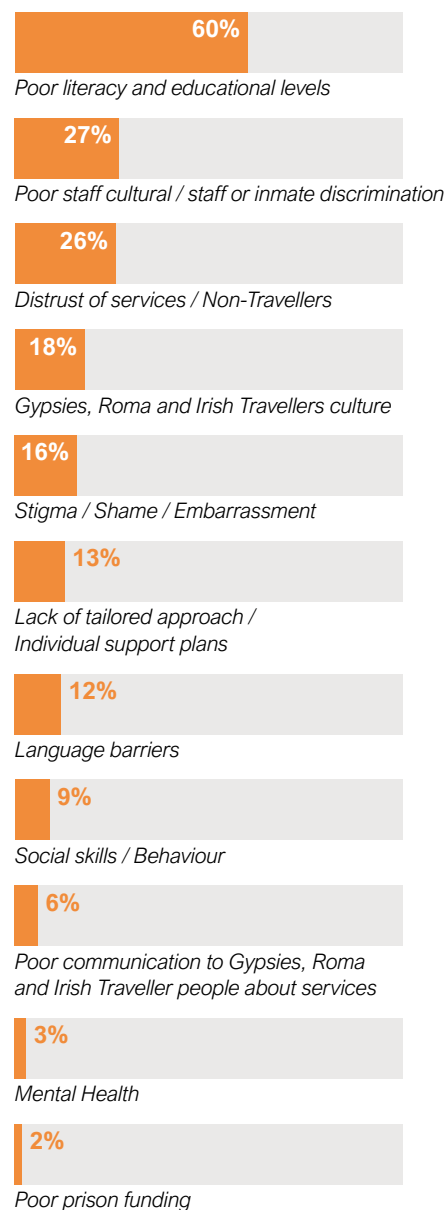
Answers captured the multifaceted nature of the barriers to Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners although the theme of literacy barriers featured prominently in a number of responses.

“Significant periods of time spent out of formal education so difficulties in adjusting to this environment, poor literacy rates, distrust of authority/ criminal justice system”

Youth Justice Officer, Youth Offending Team

Figure 5

Staff perception of the Barriers to GRT participation in Purposeful Prison Activities





“The detainees have difficulty retaining contact with families and loved ones. They may experience language and other communication barriers and have very limited understanding of the rules, boundaries and ways of engaging with token economy regimes. The institutions can be places where discrimination and lack of cultural awareness leads to unfair and oppressive treatment by staff and other detainees.”

Court Officer, Youth Offending Team

Staff acknowledged that distrust of outsiders could prevent a barrier to engagement, with statements acknowledging that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people were often victims of discrimination. Racism and negative attitudes towards Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people were also starkly captured in a number of comments.

“Their arrogance, they genuinely believe that the law doesn’t apply to them and they can ignore prison rules”

Magistrate, Magistrates Court

Finally, staff reflected that activities on offer within the prisons were often not suited to the needs of the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller community and culture, particularly the requirement of many prisons that prisoners need to obtain formal literacy standards as a pre-requisite before moving onto other practical activities.

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

Prison Service Staff Member

“Usually it is literacy/numeracy skills however, due to their culture, forcing them to engage in education is counterproductive as they manage to cope in the community without these skills and forcing them to do education they can push back.”

Prison Offender Manager, Prison Service

“Literacy levels, feeling like a minority, not recognising the benefits of learning and how this applies to their reality, lack of mentors from similar backgrounds”

Equalities Lead, Prison Service

Strand 3:

Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoner focus groups



Method

Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted between May and July 2022, within six approved prison estates. The interviews followed a topic guide compiled by the Traveller Movement and approved by HMPPS.

The interviews were conducted by two Traveller Movement staff researchers. Participants were invited to take part in the research by prison staff.

A total of 29 participants took part in the focus groups, participant numbers per group ranged from 2 to 7 participants (M = 6).

Participants were aged between 19-65, with a mean age of 26 years. Only one female participant agreed to be to take part in a focus group, and an interview was undertaken in lieu of a focus group. 28 participants were male. Nine participants identified as Romany Gypsy, one as mixed Irish Traveller and Romany Gypsy and 19 as Irish Traveller. Sentence length varied, some prisoners were held on remand and yet to be sentenced. Many prisoners had been incarcerated multiple times and had served sentences in various prisons, both pre- and post- COVID-19 pandemic.

Focus groups were split into three stages.

- **Pre-Interview Stage**

Participants were provided with the 'research information pack' which contained information about the study (including their right to withdraw), the consent form and the demographics recording form. In addition to paper copies of the form, papers were read aloud to the participants by the researcher and assistance to complete forms was provided where required. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions as they arose.

- **Interview Stage**

Participants were asked questions relating to their experiences of education outside of prison, purposeful activities within prison, experiences within prison and expectations for post-prison. Interviews/focus groups lasted an average of 1 hour and 1 minutes (range: 43 minutes – 1 hour 44 minutes).

- **Post-Interview Stage**

Following the interviews, participants were given a debrief including information regarding their right to withdraw their data from the study, and an opportunity to ask any further questions.

Throughout the research, no safeguarding concerns were raised and the researchers did not need to break confidentiality.



Findings

Negative childhood experiences in education

Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners frequently recalled negative experiences and bullying within the schooling system as a child, speaking to concerns about the accessibility of education in later life due to earlier negative and/or traumatising experiences:

“...one teacher used to keep saying.. it’s a saying... oh somebody’s “pikey’d” my pen basically stolen his pen I mean, obviously things like that. Umm and just they’d rather take somebody else’s word, a non-Traveller’s word, than your word.”

“Well, I went to primary school. And then I went to secondary school, and then after that, they kept name calling me, this that and the other, and then obviously I got kicked out of school, excluded. And then I went to Special School didn’t work out.”

Very few of the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners interviewed had completed full mandatory education

“I got kicked out in primary, and then I went to my secondary, got kicked out of four [schools], and then went to assemble(?), and then obviously I passed my exams there and that was it, and then I never went to college

“I never had a chance [to go to school]. It’s [common for] the older generations, constantly living in caravans, living on the roads. I’ve learnt myself as I was going along from the motorway signs. So I was picking things up as we were going along.”

“I didn’t go to school because I never found time for it”

“Never put me foot in the door of a school.”

Although some Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller participants left school early due to a nomadic lifestyle, the majority of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people that had left school early did so to pursue work and employment opportunities, often alongside their family.

“I went to primary school. Did a little bit of secondary school. Didn’t really enjoy it. Stopped going after about a year or two. ... I just didn’t like it. I wanted to work and stuff.”

“I went to school till year five. My dad got out of jail and it was time to go to work.”

“I enjoyed the upbringing that I had and the lifestyle that we lived, moving from place to place, and if I’d stayed in school longer; that means we would have had to stay in a house, and would have never had the experience and lifestyle that we did.”

“... my mom got court letters saying you’re gonna get this and get that if your children don’t come back to school, and she said well, I can’t really control them. They’re off traveling around with their older brothers, so they don’t live here anymore. And I mean, they’re off traveling around working and having their own money.”

It was also felt that the skills taught in school, weren’t useful for traditional routine Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller professions which often focus on manual labour:

“... when you’re 12-year-old is like, “that’s a bit old to be in school” ... So in a way it was, I’m going to work what do I need this for? What do I need that? ... We was like 19 years old, going and doing our own little thing. Collecting bits of metal, going to work, doing what we had to do, and obviously school was just... just a place to be you know”

“As my man was saying here, with the reading with Travellers, you don’t see many Travellers sitting in office buildings and using a computer and so on. So, the main basis for reading and writing [isn’t there]...”



Mandatory literacy lessons

All prisons that participated in this strand of the research (focus groups and interviews), held a policy that prisoners could not apply for a prison job until they had completed stage 1 literacy:

“When you do stage 1, 2 and 3 [literacy] you get a certificate for it, and then you can obviously put in for maths and the other subjects. And when you done them you can put in bids for jobs.”

“I was like.. I was the next one to do the cleaning, and she was like oh “you have to do your English and Maths before you can do it””

“You see the issue in here, in this prison itself ... and each one’s the same, you’ve got to be at Level One to apply for a job, for Travellers or whatever. We’re not getting that. It’s not the fact that we’re dumb or we’re stupid. We just never had the chance to get an education, and now we’re not getting it even in here.” [because their lessons were cancelled after COVID-19 and due to staff shortages]

Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners frequently presented as conflicted about the value of education. It was often seen as beneficial but not essential, to be able to read and write.

“It’s on the change, children these days they need to learn how to read, they need to learn how to write, because it’s so much technology now. Everything you need to read, everything’s on apps, everything is on phones.”

“I want to learn how to read because it would make my life easier but I want to do on my own turns, not like “do this, do that”. I would learn more if I wasn’t forced to do it.

“I’ve got three children and I want them to stay in school as long as possible, I want them to get an education.”

Mandatory education in the prison estate removed the prisoner’s choice to pick activities that they would enjoy and that could be beneficial for their mental health and rehabilitation, and could in fact add to stress.

“They put me in English class and give me some papers, and I just flick through them like this, and they ask what are you doing, can you not read? I say “no”. They ask what are you doing here then? And I say you tell me, I don’t want to do this shit. Just give me a job because I don’t want to sit in here.”

In addition, most prisons paid prisoners significantly less for completing education than participating in work.

“You get £2.50 for doing an English course. Cleaning you used to get £7-8 a week”

Prisoners often felt forced to participate in the mandatory literacy classes however, as refusal to participate could damage their IEP status, result in the removal of privileges and reduce the possibility of moving to lower category prisons with less restrictions.

“They try to stick all the Travellers in education. We don’t want to do education because we have never done education in our lives, we don’t need education. So why do we have to start now? Then they stick us with IEP’s and then the IEP’s stop you if you want to go the D-cat or C-cat.”

“In D-cat you have plastering, mechanics, groundwork. You get an outside job. You got roofing, you got carpentry, painting. If you got a driving licence, they even get you a driving job to drop other prisoners to outside jobs like charity shops or farms.”

“They force you onto it and you don’t want to do it. We literally don’t have a choice. Literally we cannot say nothing. You get IEPs. If you get three IEPs you lose [status and go] from standard to basic [privileges], like your TV, all that kind of stuff. And then you get placed on report and then you will get put on losses or something like that, so you can’t order canteen⁵⁷ and you can’t come out your cell.”

“You want to make your time in prison as easy as possible, but these people make it hard and they pressure you with education and IEPs”

“But what we were getting at anyways, if you can’t read and write in this jail – You’re screwed”

57 Canteen is the term used within prison for the weekly delivery of items you have bought for yourself.



Lack of an individually tailored approach to learning

Participants accessing the education services felt that the methods of delivery were also often not suitable for their needs. Prisoners felt that one-to-one learning, such as the 'Toe-by-Toe' programme - a one-to-one literacy scheme managed by the Shannon Trust⁵⁸ - are more beneficial than a classroom setting.

"I've done them all before and now when I came back they want me to do them again. I'm 28 years old, I don't want to be sitting in a class."

"I know some Travellers used to learn how to read in prison because the Toe-by-Toe people brought in a newspaper"

"Only available education in here is that you go into a room and teacher come in and teach you while you sit in a row. That's why people want no education here. Imagine inside kindergarten, that's how it is here"

"It is a bit shameful to go there and you have to read those baby books and stuff, but you got to start somewhere."

However, the Toe-by-Toe service was not highly available and many prisoners were unable to access this much needed service.

"They do Toe-by-Toe in here, well they used to do, but they stopped it. The last Travellers meeting we had, the Miss said they are going to start that up. But they can't even increase the showers and exercise [after COVID-19] how are they gonna start Toe-by-Toe."

Participants reported that during COVID-19, education was even less suited to their needs with participants being given activity packs to complete independently in their cells. However, participants often did not have the basic skills needed to be able to complete these packs.

"I've done a lot, a lot of in-cell work. Like if you know what to apply to, like addiction - But the likes of him, who can't read and write, he couldn't do none of them in-cell packs unless he had a toe-by-toe mentor."

"Miss, between me and you, if I can't read and write, all I've got to do is give it [the in-cell learning pack] to the fella in the bottom corridor and say, "Fill it.""

When prisoners were given support more suited to their needs, they reported that they learnt more efficiently and spoke positively of those experiences.

"I learnt how to read and write in prison by the toe-by-toe. I knew me ABCs, I knew that, but I didn't know how to pronounce me ABCs. So, so once I learnt how to pronounce me letters, my alphabet, sorry, I could read, just break it down."

Tailoring the educational experience to individual needs is important as not only were there Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller participants who needed additional support with basic literacy, but in contrast, some participants were engaging in higher education during their prison experience and were keen to have the opportunity to continue with this outside of prison.

"I study every day, if its 20 minutes, if it's an hour, it's going to be hard but when I get out, I will be half way through my degree"

This range of experiences, clearly demonstrates that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners need to be treated as individuals with support and education tailored to their individual needs; and raises the potential that some would feel more integrated – and likely to succeed – if they could mix in educational classes with people from other backgrounds.

"Miss, by all means, we just don't want a class for us [Gypsies and Travellers]. We mix in with everyone. We're human beings you know. Like let us go in the normal classes as well"

Preference for practical skills to aid rehabilitation

When asked about opportunities for in-prison learning that prisoners felt would aid their rehabilitation and prevent reoffending, participants spoke about the benefits of being able to engage in practical and vocational training.

“I would personally like to do a bricklaying course in here”

“Give us something useful to do, like to build a house or something”

“In 2019 [in prison] I got my railway licencing and forklift licence.”

“Before I came here I was doing [construction work] but I didn’t have a CSC card so I would like to do that yeah”

***“Bricklaying, plumbing, electrician, multi-skilled programme – that’s why we wanna get to C cat”
[where such training is available]***

“I’d like to have different skills and be able to branch out. I do landscape gardening and I’d like to be able to build walls as well. Be a jack of all trades.”

Many participants felt that they would like to be able to obtain driving licenses during their prison sentence, something that is sometimes available to prisoners in lower category prisons. Participants displayed both a relatively detailed understanding the opportunities available as well as a strategic approach towards attainment

“We’d like to make it to a C cat so we can try and achieve these skills, life skills... I haven’t got a driver’s licence. ... me father wants me to get out and the man’s working, he always does a lot of work, and what he wants me to do is achieve me driver’s licence, so when I get out I can go working with him. But he said, look if I don’t get my driver’s licence and I get out this time, if I’ve made it to a C cat, got me skill, made it to a D cat, then you can do your driver’s licence”

“A D cat pays for it [driving licence] and makes sure you get it. It’s called progression. So if I stay here for another [period of time], and they release me from here, it’s not going to be okay [as won’t be able to transfer to a Category D prison].”

“I want to try and progress. I want to try and get out and do something, because if I get out ... I’m going to be brought back in, no driver’s licence, I’m in a car driving with no licence. Police car behind me, I’m not pulling over. One thing leads to another and it’s just I’m wanted then, and then all of a sudden I’m back into a deep vicious circle. And there’s going to be a repetition of in and out, in and out, in and out, because there’s no help inside these places. There really isn’t, especially here, where we are.”

Prisoners frequently stated that they felt that it was often difficult to get legitimate work on the outside of prison, and that they had turned to crime in order to provide for their families.

“When you’re working, you don’t really want people to know that you’re a Traveller, because people would be like “oh he’s a Traveller, I don’t want him to work here, he’s going to rob me, or do a shit job.”

“The fucking police used to go to the home [we were working at] and they’d be like, “you do know that you’ve got Travellers working for you?” And trying to fuck it up. And we’re working hard. Or “we’ve had reports you’ve got Traveller’s working on the site”. Whenever you get a proper job. And even if [the employers] say “I was happy with the price they give me and they’re doing a good job. I’ve got no problem”. They [the police] say “Yeah, but they are Travellers”

“It’s a hard life, miss. People like us, we don’t get jobs on the outside. So it’s hard to get a job on the outside, so it’s twice as hard in here, know what I mean. If we had more jobs and people saying, “You can work here, you can work here, this job, that job,” we wouldn’t be doing what we’re doing. We wouldn’t be in prison.”

“They wonder why we sometimes turn to crime. And I’m not being funny. I’ve got four kids. I’m not gonna sit down and watch them have no shoes. I’m not the type of person to live on benefits. I’ve got to go and do what I’ve got to do. If I can graft, I graft, like I said. But sometimes you don’t want the people that you’re working with to know that you’re a Traveller because you aren’t going to get the work.”



***“Its money miss innit. The root of all evil. Money, money, money.
Like I don’t want to be here but its money”***

There was a widespread sense that support in securing outside employment would help reduce reoffending but that this support was rarely provided to Gypsies and Travellers:

“You come to prison for crimes usually to try and get money, and then when you get out of prison, that moneys gone so what are you meant to do?”

“People come in here with a business and when they get back out, they’ve lost it.”

“And when you’ve been in here the last few years, listening to stories about the other crimes people have done to get money, you don’t know anything else. So then you think if they can do it I can do it. I need clothes on my back. I need food in my belly.”

“When you get out, you get the opportunity to get on the dole. But we don’t claim the dole. They take the dole off you for stupid things anyway and then you end up going back to crime for money anyway.”

Some prisoners also stated that they were not able to undertake the purposeful activities that they would find most beneficial because they are deemed high risk, which in turn exacerbates the spiral of lack of training and risk of re-offending on release.

“I put an application in but I couldn’t have it because of my offense.”

“We was in for burglary so he couldn’t have [the role he wanted] because he was high risk.”



Experiences of racism and discrimination

Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners felt that although there was racism from other prisoners, with instances of racially aggravated violence being described, that these experiences were interestingly often less frequent within prison than they were on the outside.

“Basically, two black boys got him [fellow Traveller] in a laundry room trying to beat him up. So [the Traveller] got nicked for that today. He didn’t even start it. He’s got a couple of weeks like no social, no pay. The other boys said he started it, he’s the aggressive one, but actually one of the other guards stood up for him.”

“To be honest, it’s bad coming to prison, but when you’re in and say you’re here anyway or say you’re a Traveller... keep my head down and get on with it. I don’t want to be fighting, don’t want to be messing. I don’t want any of that.”

Prisoners reported that they also experienced discrimination from prison staff, confirming findings from the survey where respondents noted discrimination or racist stereotypes being used against Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers.

“Some prison officers are very racist.”

“A [staff member] said to me here the other day, an officer, they said, “How do I go about being a Traveller? That way I don’t have to pay taxes.” I said, “That’s a bit rude.” ... I didn’t like it. I only challenged them to a certain extent, because if I took it up any more than that, obviously my word against theirs.”

Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners said that they were often treated like gang members and kept apart unfairly. Previous Traveller Movement research explores the nature of policing that Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people are subject to in greater detail.⁵⁹

“I think some of the officers in here because I was on [redacted] wing with my own people, and basically because we were all together, they classed us as a gang. So now they’ve moved me on my own. So now I’m on a different wing, and I’m around no Travellers. So now I’m around people I don’t feel comfortable with. I was comfortable on my old wing. But they sort of thought if they kept us all together we’d be causing trouble”

“I got B Cat, with no nicking, no IEP, no police, no nothing, just because I’m a Traveller and because they said, “He’s got an active activity to a criminal organisation and gangs. We do believe that the travelling community in this prison, he can organise a lot of stuff.” I’d done nothing wrong, I’m an enhanced prisoner.”

“When mass come on Sunday, all the Travellers weren’t allowed to come to mass at one time. Because in this jail, yeah, I’ve been in a few different jails, they don’t let Travellers mix.”

A number of prisoners said that they had tried to engage with the complaints procedure and had filed Discrimination Incident Reporting Form’s (DIRF), but that the outcomes were rarely satisfactory.

“I submitted a DIRF form because an officer called us ‘you lot’. The only thing that DIRF form got me is it got me moved to a crack head wing. I never got response or nothing, I just got evicted from my wing away from my own people.”

“It doesn’t get you anywhere, just sitting down in your cell writing a complaint form, it’s a waste of time”

“So basically, “if you put a DIRF form in we will punish you, so don’t put a DIRF form in””

“There is a legal way of going about doing things here, but once you go through the legal way it goes beyond the point where your voice is not being heard”

The prisoners felt that this failure of prison authorities to engage with legitimate complaints, and experiences of discrimination hindered their rehabilitation and increased likelihood of reoffending.

“Coming to jail is meant to rehabilitate you. But coming to jail just makes you resent everyone even more. It turns you completely different. Because you’re treated like animals.”

59 <https://wp-main.travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Policing-by-Consent-Report-long.pdf>



Joint importance of peers and integration

Although participants strongly felt it was important to be around others of their own ethnicity, they also felt it was important to be able to integrate with others from other backgrounds. As a relatively small ethnic group in the UK, many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people know each other and it was expressed by some prisoners, that the closed nature of the communities can make discussing confidential or sensitive issues difficult.

“If they had a Traveller listener⁶⁰ they wouldn’t necessary talk about their problems with [them] just chat about life with someone who understand. There is a risk sharing problems with another Traveller [though], you could get scandalised up and down the country.”

Participants felt that it is very important to be able to be around other Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people.

“You can’t have a conversation with a non-Traveller. I mean, because when you talk to a non-Traveller, you talk fine but it’s not your conversation. You’re talking about completely different things. When I talked to another Traveller, you talk about things that you know about, you mention things in your own lingo.”

Being able to talk to people who had similar life experiences and culture was also seen as important for their mental health.

“I applied and asked for one [Travellers representative]. They just smiled and went, “We don’t do Travellers’ reps.” So I said, “Okay,” but I said, “what if I’m depressed?” “We’ve got a listener.” I said, “He mightn’t understand where I’m coming from, or I mightn’t understand his lifestyle. I should have my own.”

Participants were proud of their ethnicity and enjoyed opportunities to celebrate and share their culture in the prison setting.

“I’m proud to be a Traveller. I’m proud of my family as Travellers.”

“Talking about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History month [GRTHM] “The whole prison should be celebrating. We celebrate Black History Month, all sorts of other things. When I heard about this [GRTHM] I was so surprised.”

Generally Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller groups and meetings were spoken of positively and participants enjoyed the opportunity to bond with each other. Participants wanted the opportunity to attend these types of meetings although they reported that such events were often inconsistent, had reduced drastically in number since the COVID-19 pandemic, and that the ability to hold such meetings often depended upon the staff that were working in the prison at the time.

“When I came here first time in 2015 we had them [Traveller meetings] every month. Then in 2019 it was every three months, and then when I came here now I haven’t seen any and it’s been over three months”

“[We only have a Traveller group now because of] these two ladies who’s now took over the equalities, this prison has never ever done anything [before]. It’s never had a Travellers’ group. It’s never had nothing.”

When prisoners felt that prison staff respected their ethnicity, and as such they were less fearful of discrimination, prisoners were also more likely to accurately record their ethnicity.

“We had a meeting the other day, [for] Travellers, the ladies organised it, and only people who registered in reception when they come in [could attend]. Some of them registered afterwards as Travellers. If you come into this jail and said, “Yes I’m an Irish Traveller,” then you could attend that day. Although we know [many other] Travellers are in the jail, they can’t come to it, because you did not register as a Traveller. But they don’t register as a Traveller because of [fear of] discrimination.”

Similarly, participants were concerned about mixing with certain Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller families and enjoyed having the opportunity to mix with non-Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people.

“[I’d only like groups with] Travellers [from families] I know, like I don’t like strange Travellers. I wouldn’t want to meet them, miss. I’m alright with settled girls [running workshops].”

60 The Listener scheme is a peer-support scheme within prisons. <https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/prisons/listener-scheme/>

Poor ability to maintain family ties

Participants consistently reiterated that it was very important for them to be able to stay in touch with their family, particularly their partners and children. However, visits are difficult as large families cannot visit due to visitor number restrictions.

“I mean, I’ve got four kids, but you’re only allowed three people up. So I got to have two visits just to see two children and I got another visit to see another two children. So it makes it awkward.”

Participants therefore depend heavily on being able to contact their family via telephone. Dependency on phone calls is further increased as many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller family members are unable to engage with written forms of contact such as letters, due to poor literacy.

Despite needing to rely heavily on phone calls, it is difficult for Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners to maintain adequate phone credit to keep in contact with their families.

“If you get a bit of bad news, you’re ringing up asking are you alright, and before you know it your credits gone and you’re thinking I’ve got four days left before my credit can go on, and even then I’ve only got a tenner.”

“I’m in here, she’s out there, and she’s got family support but there’s no money coming in. I spend £25 a week on credit if I’m lucky to get away with it. And when you’re not earning any money that’s a lot.”

Many family members may live abroad, including the Republic of Ireland, and foreign numbers are also more expensive to call.

“I have nine boys and three girls. They’re all married. They’re all in Ireland, so I have my three boys over here. And I have 63 grandchildren, seven great-grandchildren.”

In addition, it can be difficult for participants to contact their extended family over the phone due to the size of their large families.

“We’re only allowed 20 numbers on a normal pin. I’ve got a massive family, so every time I put a new number on, I’ve got to take one off. So I keep having to do that.”

Some prisons allowed prisoners to have additional credit on their phone on the foreign national scheme⁶¹ however this was not implemented consistently and many prisoners had not heard of the scheme.

“One jail I’ve been to I had Travellers credit [phone], I’ve been to five jails, and there’s only one jail that does it.”

“I asked for Travellers’ pin credit. They didn’t have it. They changed the name of that and put it down as a foreign national payment, credit.”

Participants said that one solution to maintaining family ties was allowing more community sentences.

“I’d prefer being on tag because I’d be out with my family. Same with community service. I didn’t mind that, I was painting schools, cutting back trees, and in a way I felt better about myself because I was actually helping back.”



61 <https://www.gov.uk/staying-in-touch-with-someone-in-prison>



Poor access to health and wellbeing services

Participants reported both mental health and physical health difficulties, however they also reported finding it difficult to access health services.

“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.”

Mental health was reported as being bad within prison, and particularly bad during COVID-19.

“I watched four or five people kill themselves in that jail over there”

“It’s hard, very hard. I’m struggling. I just can’t wait to get out, miss. To see the end of this sentence.”

“We were out [of our cells] seven, eight hours a day before COVID. Now we’re out two hours a day after COVID.”

Participants worried that health care provisions in the prison were not adequate and reported incidents where they felt adequate health care measures were not taken. One participant spoke of the death of another prisoner and the impact that this had had on other people within the prison and expressed concern that the mental health and wellbeing of other prisoners was not taken into consideration by staff responding to the death.

Importantly, some of the research participants did not recognise the meaning of the word ‘disability’ and so did not take the necessary actions to declare their long-term health conditions and access the care they needed whilst in prison.

Furthermore, some participants – particularly those who were highly mobile or foreign nationals - did not have health records which made it difficult for them to produce evidence of conditions.

In relation to health and well-being participants felt that having access to exercise and the outdoors was important for their mental health.

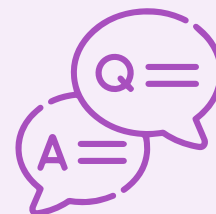
“I never actually tried to get mental health support here. For me mental, I just try to go to the gym. Even simple things like exercise, walk around outside, it helps with your mental health”

“Doing a job that you want to do, that’s good for your mental health.”



Strand 4:

Prison Staff Interviews



Method

We interviewed six prison staff members from across four prison sites about their experiences in working with Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners. Interviews were conducted remotely either via teams or over the telephone, and recorded for accurate transcription. We spoke to staff in a variety of roles including Chaplaincy, Safer Custody Officer, Ward Officer, Diversity and Inclusion Officer and Equality officer. A semi-structured interview method was used following the topic guide approved by HMPPS.

Thematic analysis of the interviews was completed and the results discussed below.

Findings

The themes that emerged were:

- Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners' preference for employment over education
- Importance of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller peers to support prisoners
- Mental health
- Impact of COVID-19
- Relationships with staff
- Racism and discrimination

Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners' preference for employment over education

Similarly to findings from the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoner focus groups, and the staff questionnaire survey, the staff who participated in the interviews reflected that many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners would prefer to be in employment during their time in prison, than engaging in mandatory literacy and maths education. The preference for employment over education may reflect material need – e.g. for additional phone credit to maintain contact with larger extended families.

“I’ve found that most of the time, they prefer to be earning some money rather than going to education ... People going to education get less money than the ones who go to work, so maybe they prefer at least to gain some money. Maybe the governor can increase their pay for attendance to education. Maybe that way some of them can be encouraged to attend education.”

“You need basic English and Maths before you can go and do something else, so they’ll stick them on English and Maths, something that they don’t like doing or feel embarrassed to be sat in a classroom. So there are a few that won’t engage and would just rather be on the wing or go and work in recycling or the yard.”

“The Travellers love doing the cleaning and they love serving the meals... They prefer jobs. By the sweat of their brow, they earn every penny... They love the building courses, they love anything like that.”

“They’re very willing to do paid employment, such as cleaning ... When I think of examples about younger girls, they’re point-blank: “I’m not going to school to learn anything, I want to work and do a job, I can’t read or write and I’m not going to any education because I don’t do it in the community”. The inference is almost that we’re impacting on their culture negatively by making them go to education. But, of course, our whole ethos is rehabilitation and education is a massive part of that ... Where you are trying to get the best out of a young person, it becomes a battle because they’re stubborn and become bloody-minded, and we’re saying, “Well, it’s the rules”, so it ends up being a real head-to-head. They could work full-time, but some of the good jobs that will aid them on release, we’ve set them up in such a way that they require that level of literacy and numeracy.”

It was felt that reluctance to engage in education was partly due to feelings of embarrassment.

“They find it very hard, as adults, to be bottom of their class ... You won’t get a job in the prison until you’re able to read. You have to have certain literacy skills like Level 1, especially for cleaning. Some of them aren’t Level 1.”

“Some of them are happy to work wherever, others have been wanting to do more hands-on things, like working in the garden. There’s a couple that have tried to steer away from the education side because they struggle with reading. But slowly, we have got some who are receiving help with their reading. At first, it came across that they were embarrassed, but some of them have started to work with education [services] on their reading.”

Staff felt that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners often engaged better if education was in a one-to-one setting than in a classroom setting.

“One-on-one education [would help Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people in prison] because their education is a lot less than others ... A re-occurring issue in prison is Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller men who have lower educational skills. Maybe giving them a one-on-one will help them read and write, but also help staff to realise that their mental health state will always be less [worse] because they are community-based, but are always stuck behind a door which will cause them to have more mental health issues.”

“I think the one-to-one tutoring is better than sitting in a classroom with a group. They feel a bit more ‘all eyes on them’ or more uncomfortable, or there might be some people in the group who are more advanced, so I think the one-to-one element definitely works better and can be alongside their physical activity as well.”

Importance of Peers

Staff noted the importance of peer support and peer influence on the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners’ engagement with purposeful activities.

“They don’t mind doing the literacy if it’s a Traveller teaching them. It isn’t for want of brains, they are very clever; they’ve travelled all over Europe. We had one prisoner who couldn’t read or write but was a fluent Italian speaker because in travelling to Italy, he learned the language.”

Staff also noted that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners often rely on each other for moral support to access activities and that they particularly enjoy activities where they can engage with others from the same ethnic background.

“With the academy stuff, if one’s not going, the other’s not going. They need each other. That can apply to academy, exercise, it could be anything ... I don’t know if it’s an un comfortability thing, if they think that they don’t have as much access to opportunities. I think it could be many factors as to why they wouldn’t want to go to education and stuff like that.”

“I’ve noticed that they do like to go out and exercise, but when it comes to the education, they’re very reluctant, and job opportunities, they’re very reluctant. Anything to do with socialising though... they love it.”

In addition to peer engagement supporting, accessing purposeful activities, staff reflected that many of the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners are more confident and happier when housed with others of the same ethnic background.

“I know there are a lot of Travellers in [this prison] and they prefer to stay in one wing together so that they can see each other, because they get along better than being with other people.”

Mental Health

Staff recognised that many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people had poor mental health, particularly during COVID-19.

“Self-harm was a big thing for the Travellers not long ago. It’s a lot better now, but I think they were really struggling with being locked away for so much of the day ... They struggled mostly with not being able to get out and walk around the landing.”

“We had minimal staff, so we didn’t have our psychiatrist in all the time. Mental health suffered very badly.”



Staff felt that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners seemed able to recognise that they required mental health support, but that they were sometimes reluctant to access the support they needed.

“I can think of some [Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners] who have asked for help [with their mental health] and then when it comes to it, or we’ve identified and offered the help, they’ve then withdrawn. Another example is one where it was clear that there were some needs but they just wouldn’t engage and then another example of a [prisoner] who explained that she’d been through significant trauma, but almost saw that as the norm and didn’t really want us to intervene with any kind of mental health help.”

Relationship with Staff

Staff recognised that the relationship between prisoners and staff members is important. The staff interviewed often felt that they tried hard to build positive relationships with the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners they knew, but that not all staff made the same effort.

“Every staff member is different. You’ll have some who are really empathetic, you have some who are just here to do the job ...”

Generally, the staff interviewed felt positively about Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners and did not report any more negative behaviour over from the communities, than found amongst other ethnic groups.

“Most of the Travellers that we have here are well-behaved. We don’t get many problems from them.”

“I might have 1 or 2 occasions where I’m like, “Come on guys, you’re taking the p**s” - with anyone, not just the Travellers – we might have a bad day, but because we have such a good rapport, by the end of the day they end up apologising and we move on.”

Staff did however often feel that it could be difficult to build trust with Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners, and that they could sometimes be defensive upon first entry into the prison system. Staff recognised that it was very important to follow through with agreements made with Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners, and to keep them regularly updated with how any requests are progressing. Communication and trust were thus viewed as essential to building positive relationships.

“I know that trust is an issue, so you really have to be trustworthy and be true to your word, be reliable, because they value all those things.”

Experiences of Racism & Discrimination

Staff consistently commented that the most racism that they had witnessed towards Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners was from other staff members, rather than other prisoners.

“I’ve heard the [racist] terminology more from staff members than prisoners. If anything, the most I’ve heard the prisoners say is “Are those the Gypsies over there? They’re mad!” ... But I’ve never heard [other prisoners] say the P-word, I’ve always heard them say “Gypsies”.”

“It’s a shame, but there’s a lot of racism, discrimination, stereotypes – it’s disgusting. You can tell everyone’s doing their part to try and make a change in terms of minorities, but it’s the culture, it’s the system. It’s really a shame, but I know it’s not going to change. It’s been like this for years ... It’s disgusting because I’ve never been in a job where my skin [colour] has been brought up so much and it’s the one job where racism is real. Discrimination, real. Stereotypes, real.”

“I have witnessed inappropriate comments by senior managers ... We just can’t have that type of behaviour.”

Staff reported that complaints raised by Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners were not taken seriously or investigated properly.

“There was definitely a feeling from [an inmate] that she was being treated differently because she was an Irish Traveller and the other girl was English. Just a clash, it could have happened with anybody, probably, but she felt very aggrieved that she wasn’t getting her TV back and her perception was that it was given back to the other girl sooner than it should have been ... She was hesitant [to make a complaint] because she felt like nothing was going to be done. From a personal perspective, I think there have been times when they haven’t been investigated fully.”



“We have had complaints about discrimination. I don’t think, at the minute, that any of them have been upheld because a lot of it is ‘he said, she said’ sort of thing, but [the prisoners] have said – say if one of them went to the office and asked if something could be done, and then a White English lad went to ask for the same thing, they’ve said they’ll give it to him but not them.”

Although staff recognised racism from their colleagues towards Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners, interviewees also wondered if sometimes prejudiced beliefs and inappropriate terminology were used by their colleagues due to a lack of education about Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people, rather than as intentionally harmful racism.

“I would hear other officers making comments that I’ve learned recently are disrespectful to the community, but because there’s not a lot of Travellers within the system, I don’t think a lot of officers are knowledgeable about what’s offensive, what’s not offensive, how to interact or cooperate with them ... But now I’m looking back, do I think that was unintentional because I didn’t know anything about it, or do they know [the P-word] is offensive and they’re just using it? ... So now that you’ve asked that now, I’m starting to question it, maybe they do know better and just choosing to use the [P] word, which is not ok.”

Staff felt that there were also circumstances where miscommunication between staff and Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners often led the prisoners to believe they were being treated unfairly.

“I think miscommunication is a big thing between staff and the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller group ... I think they think, “They know I’m a Traveller and that’s why they’re treating me this way”, when really half of the staff don’t even know [of their ethnicity].”

Impact of COVID-19

Some interviewees felt that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners were particularly negatively affected by the impact of the measures and restrictions introduced during and after COVID-19. In contrast however, some other staff felt that all prisoners were negatively affected regardless of their ethnicity.

“Because we were really short-staffed, that massively restricted our regime and we had to close everything. It’s nothing to do with your ethnicity, who you are as a person, it just came down to the fact that we didn’t have enough staff [to run employment sessions].”

“With Covid, the Travellers have been very harshly dealt with because they’re not people who can be kept locked up or sit still within an 8-by-8 [cells]. They don’t like sharing, they’re private people, and they don’t want to watch television all day and all night. During the lockdown, I tried to get them to do press-ups and things like that. Covid hasn’t done us any favours at all.”

“To be honest, Covid affected a lot of people from different backgrounds and during that time, people weren’t concentrating on a particular group of people – everyone was affected. I don’t think it made any impact to [Travellers] as a group.”

Staff felt that covid restrictions within the prison had very negative impacts on Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners’ engagement with purposeful activities. As noted by prisoners, many activities required in cell independent learning, such as completing workbooks and activity packs, that the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners often did not have the literacy levels to complete, and moreover they were not able to access support to complete these tasks during the Covid restrictions.

“I think a lot of confidence was lost during that time because you didn’t have those face-to-face lessons or tutoring. It was literally just sending work to your cell. If you required help, you have the officers on the unit, but they’re not qualified to help you in the best way ... During Covid, that was lost because the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller lads, they couldn’t read or write, they wouldn’t have had that help [with education] during that time.”

It was also noted that poor literacy levels during COVID-19 also impacted Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners’ ability to contact their families, particularly as many in person visits were unable to take place.

“A lot of them have said, because they’re ringing mobile phones, it costs more so they’ve run out of pin credit. But then if they can’t write, they can’t send letters, so pin credit was all they had to rely on. So they lost that alternative form of communication during COVID.”

Discussion

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 of 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 groups.



Recommendations

HMPPS should give serious consideration to prison out-of-cell time and recreation

- Increase time spent out of cell and reintroduce activities that were available pre COVID-19
- Increased outdoor recreational time (encouragement to physical activity)
- Including vocational courses and one-to-one learning.

HMPPS should undertake mandatory tailored assessments of purposeful activities to address the needs of minoritised communities.

- Improve access to toe-by-toe learning or other one-to-one learning schemes for adults who may struggle in a classroom setting.
- Ensure appropriate diagnoses of neurodiversity needs, including dyslexia and other learning disabilities.
- Improve access to age-appropriate and meaningful reading materials.
- Introduce combined education and employment courses which include literacy and numeracy alongside practical skills.
- Strong consideration should be given online learning models (i.e., Open Doors Education and Training model).

The existing mandatory education model needs redevelopment, specifically in relation to minoritised communities

- The historic trauma and negative lived experience of many Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers within formal education settings needs to be recognised.
- To develop positive relationships between staff and prisoners, introduction to mandatory education should be delivered in a sensitive and creative format including culturally competent and appropriate learning materials. This will assist with understanding and avoid conflict and frustration.
- Consideration should be given to the inequality caused by preventing fair access to employment opportunities and equal pay.

Improve communication with family.

- Prison staff need enhanced understanding of, and compliance with, the Traveller phone credit allowance scheme
- Prison services and those employed within them, need enhanced understanding of the importance of extended family and cultural diversities, for example the importance to attend family funerals and expectations of remaining in contact with large numbers of extended family members.

Cultural competency training programmes for HMPPS staff should be targeted and mandatory. Training should reflect the specific prison populations of each establishment.

- Train new and existing staff on Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities' needs, improve knowledge and challenge prejudice.
- Improve the awareness and visibility of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller History Month amongst staff.
- Improve staff ability to request and receive training on the culture and history of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities within their day-to-day role.
- Improve staff communication with Diversity and Equality Officers so that misunderstandings can be avoided and staff are better supported at communicating with diverse communities including Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers.



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.

- The investigation of all complaints of discrimination needs to be open and transparent.
- Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners should be supported and encouraged to engage properly with the complaint's procedure and receive clear notification of outcomes, decisions made, processes and the reasons for particular outcomes.
- More robust whistleblowing mechanism needs to be put in place to help HMPPS staff to lodge complaints against their colleagues.

Encourage and enable Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoner peer support, and more pro-active leadership roles in prison life

- There is a need to increase Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller representation within prisons and to understand the importance of both peer support and integration with other prisoners from diverse backgrounds.
- Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller prisoners should be encouraged to engage as wing reps, diversity reps and to take up roles such as listeners. Prison staff should facilitate these opportunities in a way which takes account of issues such as (where applicable) reduced literacy skills.
- Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller groups and activities should be held regularly. These should be positive experiences with an opportunity to socialise, celebrate their culture – for example through GRT History Month activities and build pride and openness to support confidence in self-identification.

HMPPS must introduce a consistent and uniform data collection system across all its establishments as high priority

- All systems should include separate Romany Gypsy, Irish Traveller and Roma ethnic categories to enable understanding of the variable experiences of different ethnic groups in prison.
- Prisoners should be supported sufficiently when completing entry forms so as to enable them to understand and report protected characteristics. It should be explained to prisoners the benefits of identifying their ethnicity correctly.
- It should not be assumed that prisoners understand terminology such as the definition of “disability”, “learning disability”, “educational needs” or “mental health”. These should be explained to them clearly, ideally verbally and without the use of jargon, and assistance should be provided when filling in paperwork. Prisoners should understand the benefits of declaring any disabilities and long-term conditions so that their health needs can accurately be met.
- Prisons should record protected characteristics, IEP status and engagement in purposeful activities consistently across sites. This allows for better comparison, the ability to efficiently identify and challenge any inequalities and appropriate monitoring of longitudinal change impacting prisoners from the diverse Romany Gypsy, Irish Traveller and Roma communities.



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



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