



The Importance of accurate ethnic monitoring and data inclusion for Romani (Gypsy) Roma and ethnic Traveller (Irish/Scottish) communities

A briefing paper by the Traveller Movement

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About the Traveller Movement

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

The Equality Act

In 2010, The Equality Act ('the Act') brought together 116 distinct pieces of legislation together under a single Act. The Act provides a clear legal framework that protects the rights of all individuals from unfair and discriminatory treatment and promotes equality of opportunity for all.

The Act specifically recognises Romani (Gypsies), Roma, and Irish Travellers as distinct ethnic minorities, and builds on previous race relations legislation to establish a clear and unambiguous legal duty for public bodies to monitor and tackle discrimination in the provision of public services.

The Public Sector Equality Duty

Section 149 of The Equality Act 2010 establishes the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). Public bodies subject to the requirements of The Act must, in the exercise of their functions, have "due regard" to¹ :

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Equality Act 2010;
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

These may be thought of as the broad overarching aims of the PSED. The Act also explains that having "due regard" means:

- Removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics.
- Taking steps to meet the needs of people from protected groups where these are different from the needs of other people.
- Encouraging people from protected groups to participate in public life or in other activities where their participation is disproportionately low.

Effective ethnic monitoring is foundational in ensuring public bodies can work effectively to discharge their PSED. A robust framework gives public bodies confidence that they are accurately capturing the demographics of individuals accessing public services or otherwise interacting with public bodies. This is vital, insofar as accurate data collection can effectively inform the approach of public bodies in both the commissioning and delivery of public services. A robust and inclusive framework which, as far as is practicable, reflects the ways in which individuals understand and navigate their own ethnicities will also help build trust in public bodies.

¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>.

Whilst all public bodies have some form of ethnic monitoring and data collection in place, data collection as it pertains to Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller populations is often insufficient compared with other ethnic minorities. This is generally, but not universally, attributable to five key factors²:

- A lack of knowledge and confidence regarding terminology, definitions, and categorisations.
- Misconceptions and ignorance around Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller ‘identity’, i.e. norms, values, and culture
- Ineffective design of monitoring of design frameworks which does not accurately capture and reflect the complexity and non-homogeneousness of ‘GRT’ as an umbrella term.
- An unwillingness or inability within public bodies to drive cultural and organisational change, and to effectively embed the PSED into all decision-making processes in service delivery, procurement, and commissioning.
- The need and ability of some community members to ‘hide’ their ethnicity in a way that other minority ethnic people may find difficult. Traveller Movement research indicates 76% of ethnic Romani, Roma and Traveller people have hidden their ethnicity in order to avoid discrimination or prejudice.

This guide is intended as an aid for public bodies and wider research institutions to ensure their data collection policies with regards to Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller communities are effective and consistent with the statutory requirement to monitor and tackle discrimination.

Beyond the ‘GRT’ acronym

The acronym “GRT” (Gypsy, Roma and Traveller) was originally introduced by government bodies and has been widely adopted by organisations across the sector as an umbrella term.

However, the use of the acronym “GRT” (Gypsy, Roma and Traveller) is increasingly recognised as outdated and problematic. One of the key issues is that public bodies, policymakers, and service providers often fail to understand the fundamental differences between the communities grouped under this umbrella. This lack of clarity can and has led to harmful generalisations, poor policy design, and inadequate service provision.

² [Inclusion of Gypsies & Travellers in ethnic monitoring systems of Police forces in the UK](#), Traveller Movement

Broadly speaking, communities often referred to under GRT fall into two categories: ethnic minority groups with protected characteristics, and cultural or lifestyle-based nomadic groups. The ethnic minority communities Romani (Gypsy) - (an indigenous group with a long-established heritage) Roma (predominantly of Eastern European origin), and Irish Travellers are distinct from each other and must be recognised as such. Additionally, the acronym is also frequently and loosely used to include non-ethnic nomadic groups such as New Travellers, Showmen, Bargees, and van-dwelling individuals, further muddying the waters. New language emerging from some government departments and NGO's now referring to all these communities as "nomadic communities". Again, this term can be misleading and fails to separate ethnic communities from non-ethnic cultural groups. For instance, most Roma communities in the UK are not nomadic and only an estimated 2% of Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller people live a permanently nomadic lifestyle or live roadside. These kinds of differences demonstrate how crucial it is to drill down and know who you are intending to reach, particularly in terms of public service provision.

It's important to note that there are no universally agreed definitions to which all individuals within these communities subscribe. While this briefing paper adopts commonly accepted terms for clarity and consistency, identity is deeply personal. Many individuals conceptualise and define their ethnicity, culture, or way of life in different ways. Practitioners and frontline workers engaging with these communities should remain mindful of the diversity of self-identification and avoid assuming a one-size-fits-all approach.

In short, while no categorisation framework can fully capture the complexity of identities within and across these communities, it is still useful to acknowledge that those typically grouped under the GRT umbrella represent two distinct but interrelated cohorts—ethnic minorities and cultural travellers—each with their own histories, needs, and experiences.

Defining Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities

Ethnic Communities

Under the Equality Act 2010, the protected characteristic of "race" encompasses colour, nationality, and ethnic or national origins. The Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities are explicitly protected under the Act due to their distinct ethnic backgrounds.

Ethnic communities encompass:

Irish Travellers

Some Irish Travellers will refer to themselves as Pavees or Mincéirs. Irish Travellers are an ethnic minority indigenous to Ireland, they are ethnically distinct from White Irish people. In Ireland, the 2022 Census recorded 32,949 Irish Travellers around 1% of the Irish population.

In the UK, the official census combines ‘Gypsy’ and ‘Irish Traveller’ into a single category, making it impossible to determine how many Irish Travellers there are specifically. According to this combined data, 71,440 people in England and Wales identified as Gypsy or Irish Traveller, accounting for 0.12% of the population. Irish Travellers have been a recognised ethnic group in the United Kingdom since 2000, they only received ethnic minority status in Ireland in 2018. Some Irish Travellers speak the Cant or the Gammon, which is a language distinct from both English and Irish.

Scottish Travellers

Scottish Highland Travellers are an indigenous sub-group with a long history of nomadism. Beginning in the 1950s, a trend away from nomadism began and today most Scottish Travellers live in some form of settled accommodation. May refer to themselves as ‘Nawken’. Scottish Travellers gained ethnic minority status in Scotland in 2008. Scottish Travellers also have their own language which is Gaelic-based called ‘the Cant’, or the Beurla Reagaird.

English Romani (Gypsies)

Romani (Gypsy) communities, also known as Romani or Romanichal, have a long history of living in the UK, with historical sources indicating a Romany population in the British Isles as early as 1515, before the formulation of the United Kingdom. Recently, the excavation of a graveyard in Norwich uncovered mitochondrial DNA markers unique to Romani people, suggesting a Romani presence as early as the 11th Century.³ The term “gypsy” is derivative of “Egyptian”, which is what the settled population considered them to be based on their dark complexion. This is misnomer, and linguistic analysis of the Romani language suggests origination in North India, having a common heritage to Roma peoples. Romani (Gypsies) were recognised in English law as an ethnic minority group in 1989. Romani (Gypsies) speak Rumnu (sometimes spelled Romanes), which is an Indo-Aryan language.

European Roma

European Roma share the same ancestry as Romani (Gypsies), though their population in the UK is much more attributable to contemporary, rather than historical, patterns of migration. In particular, the impact of Romani genocide (Porajmos) and later the expansion of the EU into Eastern European countries, has significantly influenced Roma migration into the UK. Many European Roma reject the term ‘Gypsy’, due to the pejorative connotations associated with the word in Eastern Europe. ‘Roma’ was added as an ethnic category to the UK census for the first time in 2021. In Ireland, ‘Roma’ was added in 2022.

³ Biol Lett. 2005 Jul 5;1(3):280–282. doi: 10.1098/rsbl.2005.0314.

Non-Ethnic Nomadic Communities

There are communities within the United Kingdom who share a cultural tradition of nomadism or as individuals have chosen a nomadic way of life, they are sometimes referred to as cultural Travellers or New Age Travellers. As with ethnic communities many experience adverse outcomes across a number of indicators; but they are not considered an explicit ethnic minority under the Equality Act 2010.

These include:

Showpeople

Fairgrounds, circuses, and other travelling events have been an important part of British culture for centuries. As such, Showmen have a long history in the UK of owning and working on fairgrounds, and often travelling with their families in a seasonal working pattern.

Bargees

Bargees live on boats, generally narrowboats or barges which can navigate canals and other man-made waterways. There is a long historical trend of Bargees travelling for employment.

New or New Age Travellers

New/New Age Travellers is a term usually reserved for individuals who have adopted a nomadic lifestyle – generally within their own lifetime, although some families claim a heritage spanning at least three generations. The New/New Age Traveller culture grew out of the counter-culture movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Differences between ethnic Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities

In both the UK and across Europe, Romani (Gypsies), Roma, and Irish Travellers are often grouped together under broad umbrella terms “Roma” in the European context and “GRT” (Gypsy, Roma, Traveller) in Britain. While these terms are used for administrative and policy purposes, they risk oversimplifying the complex and distinct ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities of these communities. Other nomadic groups, including Scottish and English Travellers, Showpeople, and New Travellers, are also sometimes included under the GRT umbrella. Despite their diversity, Romani (Gypsies), Roma, and Irish Travellers share certain characteristics such as strong familial and community networks, histories of nomadism, high rates of self-employment, persistent social and economic marginalisation, and some of the worst health outcomes in the UK.

Roma, who are believed to have originated from India between the 10th and 12th centuries, have experienced centuries of systemic persecution, including slavery and genocide. Today, they remain one of the most marginalised and discriminated ethnic minority groups across Europe. In countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece, Roma communities are often ghettoised and subjected to institutional exclusion, despite sometimes representing up to 10% of the national population. It is also important to note that 'Roma' is a political umbrella term used by European institutions and adopted by many activists. However, European Roma populations are internally diverse, comprising various sub-groups with distinct dialects, cultural practices, and localised identities, many of whom prefer to self-identify with their subgroup rather than under the broader 'Roma' label.

Within the UK context, Romani (English Gypsies), Irish Travellers, and Scottish Travellers are recognised as ethnic minority groups under the Equality Act 2010. While the term 'Gypsy' is considered offensive in some European contexts and is generally avoided in EU policy literature, it remains a commonly used and self-identified term among Romani communities in Britain. By contrast, many Roma living in the UK do not identify with the term 'Gypsy'. Similarly, Romani and Irish and Scottish Travellers find it offensive and inaccurate to be labelled as 'Roma', given their distinct heritage, culture, religion, and linguistic traditions.

Policy frameworks, data collection, and service delivery must therefore recognise the specific needs, identities, and lived realities of each community. Oversimplified categorisations risk reinforcing further exclusion and failing to respond appropriately to the rights and aspirations of these groups.

Values and Culture of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Traveller (Irish/Scottish) Communities

Irish Traveller and Romani identities are deeply held cultural identities that are distinct from the settled, majority population who are often referred to within communities as 'Gorja' or 'country people'. This identity is expressed through strong familial and community bonds, as well as longstanding traditions that include religious ceremonies, communal celebrations, and a respect for intergenerational relationships. Key life events such as births, weddings, anniversaries, and funerals are typically marked through large, extended gatherings, often rooted in religious or spiritual customs. Among Irish Travellers, Catholicism remains prevalent, while many Romani (Gypsies) have embraced a growing Christian Evangelical movement.

Contrary to negative and often misleading media portrayals, Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller communities place a high value on cleanliness, tidiness, and order, both in their homes and personal conduct. Respect for elders and early family formation including marriage at a younger age are cultural norms that remain central across many of the three ethnic groups traditions.

Cultural adaptability and resilience have long been defining features of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities. However, rapid economic change, the decline of the informal or “grey” economy, and the increasing criminalisation of nomadism have disproportionately affected these communities. The shortage of safe, accessible, and authorised sites, coupled with planning policy restrictions and growing anti-Traveller rhetoric, has resulted in acute housing insecurity. As described by community members and civil society organisations, this has contributed to what is widely recognised as a “community crisis”.

Research by the Traveller Movement has highlighted the severe health inequalities facing ethnic Travellers, with suicide rates up to 6.6 times higher than the general population. Estimates from the House of Commons Library indicate that life expectancy among Travellers is 10 to 12 years shorter than for the wider population, underscoring the urgent need for targeted health interventions and culturally competent services.

Despite these challenges, Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities continue to evolve. Many younger and increasingly, older members are engaging with digital platforms, using social media to sustain networks, share information, and connect with broader society. There is also growing recognition of the importance of literacy and formal education. Encouragingly, a rising number of Romani (Gypsies), Roma and Travellers are now pursuing further and higher education, entering professions such as law, teaching, journalism, business, and finance often with the full support of their families.

Historically and today, Romani (Gypsy) Roma and Traveller communities have demonstrated a strong tradition of entrepreneurship, with many successful family-run businesses, some of which are well-known in their sectors, though the ethnicity of the owners often remains concealed due to fear of discrimination. Likewise, many Romani (Gypsies), Roma and Irish Travellers have made significant contributions to sports, music, and the arts, and continue to enrich British cultural life.

Ethnic Categorisations and 19+1

In England and Wales there is an agreed list of ethnic groups you can use when asking for someone’s ethnicity, this usually matches the Census categories. Census data remains the keystone of public and demographic statistical data. As of Census 2021 that categorisation is known as 19+1, the main changes made to Census 2021 categories was the 'Roma' group was added under the 'White' ethnic group. However, the Census 2021 ethnic categorisations still groups ‘Gypsy or Irish Traveller’ together under a singular ethnic group. The inclusion of Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller as distinct ethnic groups occurred for the first time in the 2011 Census.

Since the 2011 Census there has been a slow move by most public bodies to ensure some form of ethnic monitoring for the Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities. However, the ONS system is not universal across public bodies, whilst most public bodies have some form of ethnic monitoring and data collection in place, data collection as it pertains to Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller populations is often insufficient compared with other ethnic minorities. For example, no two public bodies collect the same 'groupings' of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller, Ministry of Justice collects W3 'Gypsy/Irish Traveller' whereas the Department for Education collects 'Roma/Gypsy' and 'Irish Traveller'.

A lack of consistent ethnic monitoring across all public bodies makes it very difficult to cross reference data and therefore difficult to make meaningful policy interventions which take into account the overlapping inequalities faced by the Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities.

For this reason, the Traveller Movement advocates for a full disaggregation of all three distinct ethnic groups.

Conclusion

The Traveller Movement continues to advocate for a full disaggregation of all three distinct ethnic groups, i.e. Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities. Effective ethnic data monitoring is a cornerstone of effective policy making at a government level, without so called 'big data' it can be very difficult to meaningfully tackle the disparities facing any ethnically minoritised community. In order for public bodies to discharge their duties under the Act they must have the ability to accurately capture the demographics of individuals accessing public services or otherwise interacting with public bodies. This is vital, insofar as that accurate data collection can effectively inform the approach of public bodies in both the commissioning and delivery of public services. A robust and inclusive framework which, as far as is practicable, reflects the ways in which individuals understand and navigate their own ethnicities will also help build trust in public bodies.

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