

Excluded:

Misrecognition, control and the Roma experience in Bradford schools

**Simon Hood
Grace preston**



A note on terminology

Ethnic data monitoring for Roma communities in the United Kingdom remains inconsistent and incomplete. Across public bodies, different categorisation practices obscure the extent of disadvantage faced by Roma children and families. Within Department for Education (DfE) datasets, the category 'Gypsy/Roma' collapses two distinct ethnic groups: Romani (Gypsy), a group with long established heritage in the UK, and Roma communities, predominantly of Eastern European origin. This lack of disaggregated data prevents a clear understanding of the specific experiences of Roma families, limiting accountability and the design of effective interventions.¹

Throughout this report, we use the term 'Gypsy/Roma' when referring to national data, while focusing specifically on the experiences of Roma children.

¹ Women and Equalities Committee (2019) Tackling Inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities: Government and Ofsted response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2017-19, London: House of Commons, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/2411/241103.htm>.

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Please note: all names used in the following report are pseudonyms, to protect the privacy of participants.

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Summary

This report examines the educational experiences of Roma pupils in Bradford, highlighting how historical marginalisation and ongoing discrimination intersect with contemporary schooling. Originating in South Asia, Roma communities have endured centuries of persecution, slavery and genocide and continue to face stereotyping, social exclusion and economic disadvantage across Europe. Post-2004 migration to Bradford brought families into communities marked by insecure housing, precarious work and heightened vulnerability.

In schools, Roma pupils frequently encounter suspensions, informal segregation and cultural misunderstanding, with 'zero-tolerance' behaviour policies and insufficient pastoral support exacerbating disengagement. Families report challenges in advocating for their children, while schools rely heavily on the goodwill of a few committed individuals to maintain inclusion. Broader structural pressures, including the marketisation of education, funding constraints and post-pandemic increases in pupil needs, compound these issues and leave relational care fragile and inconsistent. The Traveller Movement has termed this phenomenon 'institutionally coercive exclusions', a term highlighting the systemic exclusion of Roma communities and of Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller communities from formal education. This understanding of exclusion goes beyond official exclusion data and looks at the forces which lead Roma children and their families to feel education is 'not for them'.

The experiences of Roma pupils resonate with patterns observed for other racialised minorities including Black Caribbean pupils, who face disproportionate exclusion rooted in longstanding stereotypes and low teacher expectations. In both communities, systemic pressures – from accountability metrics such as league tables to under-resourced pastoral support – intersect with poverty, special educational needs or disabilities (SEND)

status and social care involvement to produce entrenched disadvantages. While the contexts differ, the outcome is similar: **children are managed rather than understood, with exclusion and informal segregation acting as mechanisms to protect school performance rather than support learning.**

These parallels underscore the broader need for systemic reform. Culturally competent teaching, relational approaches to behaviour, and co-produced support plans have been shown to mitigate exclusion across racialised groups. By learning from these shared dynamics, policy and practice can better address both universal and community-specific barriers, ensuring that education functions as a site of support, recognition and opportunity for Roma pupils and other marginalised children alike.

This report argues that meaningful inclusion requires schools to integrate Roma culture, adopt relational and restorative approaches to behaviour, and co-produce support plans with families. At a system level, it calls for reinvestment in local inclusion hubs, equitable funding, culturally competent support services, and alternative vocational pathways. By centring belonging, recognition and practical skills alongside academic attainment, education can become a space where Roma pupils are not only visible but empowered to thrive.

Key findings

Exclusion and disadvantage

- Gypsy/Roma pupils face the highest rates of suspension and exclusion among all ethnic groups in England: 3.5 times the national average, rising sharply post-pandemic.
- At Key Stage 4, only 8.4 per cent achieved grade 5 or above in English and maths compared with 45.9 per cent of all pupils.
- Repeated suspensions and zero-tolerance policies act as a pathway to exclusion, disproportionately affecting Roma pupils.

Structural inequalities

- Poverty, housing instability and social care involvement intersect to compound educational vulnerability.
- Cuts to targeted services (Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant/EMAG, Traveller Education Services/TES) and reduced pastoral support have removed culturally competent interventions.
- Funding mechanisms such as the Pupil Premium fail to fully reach Roma families due to barriers including stigma, mobility and language.

Systemic pressures on schools

- Schools operate in a marketised, performance-driven environment: league tables, inspections, and funding pressures encourage risk-averse behaviour and informal segregation.
- Inclusion often depends on individual staff goodwill rather than sustainable institutional systems. Loss of key staff can dismantle years of trust and engagement.

Comparisons with other racialised groups

- Roma pupils experience unique compounding risks: cultural invisibility, targeted stereotyping and lack of support services.
- Intersectional disadvantage (poverty, SEND, social care involvement) amplifies their vulnerability beyond what is reflected in national data.

Lived experiences

- Families describe persistent mistrust and misrecognition by schools.
- Teachers report struggling under systemic pressures.
- Students report being sidelined or segregated in classrooms and punished disproportionately for minor incidents.

The national picture: Risk factors affecting Roma

England's schools are excluding more children than ever before, and Roma pupils are bearing the brunt. In each year following the COVID-19 lockdown, the DfE has recorded a record-breaking number of suspensions and exclusions across schools in England.

In the 2023/24 academic year alone, there was a 21 per cent increase in suspensions and a 16 per cent increase in permanent exclusions since the previous academic year.² Gypsy/Roma pupils were among the most affected: their suspension rate had risen sharply over six years, from 21.3 per 100 pupils in the last full pre-COVID years (2018/19) to 39.1 in 2023/24, an increase of 84 per cent.

Currently Gypsy/Roma pupils are suspended at 3.5 times the national average of 11.3 per 100.³ This is higher than for any other ethnic group: 1.5 times the rate of suspensions for Traveller of Irish Heritage pupils (25.3), 1.9 times that of Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils (20.6), 2.5 times that of Black Caribbean pupils (15.6) and nearly three times that of White British pupils (13.7).⁴

Beneath these numbers are stories of mistrust, misrecognition and institutional control that play out daily in classrooms and corridors. For Roma families in particular, the experience of education is shaped by a system that has long struggled, or refused, to recognise them. This research traces how national patterns, observed in suspension statistics, unfold locally in Bradford, home to one of the largest Roma populations in England.

England's school system is complex, consisting of state-maintained schools, academies, multi-academy trusts and free schools. All are subject to national accountability measures such as league tables and Ofsted

inspections. Schools are evaluated largely on pupils' attainment, with exclusions and suspensions formally recorded and reported to the DfE. Accountability measures shape the environment in which pupils learn: behaviour management policies, staffing decisions and curriculum priorities are often influenced as much by pressures to perform as by educational or pastoral considerations. In such contexts, patterns of exclusion are not reflections of individual behaviour but indicators of systemic pressures operating across the school system.

A system which comprehensively fails its most vulnerable children is one which requires radical change. Pupils categorised as Gypsy/Roma experience the highest suspension and exclusion rates across all key stages. This cannot be understood in isolation: Roma communities have experienced a long history of 'stigmatisation, dehumanisation, marginalisation and hostility',⁵ and this history continues to shape their experiences in education. For Roma children and their families, encounters with the education system are often framed by institutional hostility that misrecognises their culture, limits their opportunities and normalises their exclusion.

The Traveller Movement has identified the particular set of challenges faced by Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children as 'institutionally coerced exclusions'.

2 Department for Education (DfE) (2025) 'Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England: Academic year 2023/24', 10 July, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24>.

3 DfE, 'Suspensions and permanent exclusions: 2023/24'.

4 DfE, 'Suspensions and permanent exclusions: 2023/24'.

5 Morgan, J., McDonagh, C. and Acton, T. (2023) 'Outsider status and racialised habitus: The experiences of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller students in higher education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 44(3): 485–503.

This term describes how schools, whether through action or inaction, create a persistently harmful education environment. Behaviour management systems and formal exclusion processes are disproportionately applied to these children. In many cases these pressures can lead to disengagement from education, as the school environment is experienced as both unsafe and unaccommodating. Self-imposed withdrawals are a direct result of institutional practices, even when no formal exclusion is recorded.⁶

Educational attainment plays a central role in these dynamics. One of the main drivers behind both formal and institutionally coerced exclusions is academic performance.⁷ The Timpson Review identified a clear link between attainment and exclusion, warning that pupils who struggle academically are disproportionately at risk of being excluded or suspended. Schools are accountable for pupils' academic outcomes if they remain on the roll in January of Year 11 but not for those who leave before then, whether through exclusion, managed moves, off-rolling⁸ or withdrawal. The Review uncovered allegations by

local authorities, schools, parents and carers that some decisions to exclude seemed to be informed by cynical attempts to boost a school's performance. This is supported by the fact that suspension peaks in Year 11 – just before students sit their GCSE exams.⁹

In this high-stakes environment, Gypsy/Roma pupils are especially vulnerable. National level data shows that Gypsy/Roma pupils have not only the highest rates of exclusion but also the lowest levels of attainment at every key stage. National-level data shows that in the 2023/24 academic year, just 8.4 per cent of Gypsy/Roma pupils achieved grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE, compared with 45.9 per cent of all pupils.¹⁰ Similarly, at Key Stage 2 only 18 per cent met the expected standard of reading, writing and maths (combined), compared with 61 per cent of all pupils.¹¹ These stark disparities in attainment leave Roma pupils particularly at risk in performance-driven school environments. These gaps are reinforced by schools themselves, where low teacher expectations constrain Roma pupils' achievement.¹²

- 6 The Traveller Movement (2024) *Fought Not Taught: Addressing Coercive Exclusions of Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller Children*, London, https://wp-main.travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/TTM-Fought-not-Taught_web.pdf.
- 7 Neaverson A. and Lake, A. (no date) 'Written evidence submitted by Dr Aimee Neaverson (senior lecturer in criminology at Anglia Ruskin University) and Abbie Lake (PhD candidate) Department of Criminology, Anglia Ruskin University', UK Parliament Committees, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/117369/pdf>.
- 8 Off-rolling is a practice whereby a school removes a pupil from its roll without using the formal, lawful exclusion process, often to improve a school's performance data or avoid accountability for pupils' outcomes. It typically involves pressuring parents to withdraw their child or encouraging transfer to an alternative provision without proper oversight.
- 9 Edward Timpson (2019) *Timpson Review of School Exclusion*, London: HMSO, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf.
- 10 DfE (2024) 'National characteristics data' for All state-funded, Asian, Chinese, Mixed and 2 other filters in England between 2018/29 and 2023/24', <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/268e5a47-c678-4902-4d5f-08dce7884064>.
- 11 DfE (2024) 'Key Stage 2 attainment: Academic year 2023/24', 27 February, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment/2023-24>.
- 12 The Traveller Movement, *Fought Not Taught*.

Research shows that teachers' expectations, often shaped by ingrained biases around ethnicity, gender and other protected characteristics, have a powerful effect on pupil outcomes.¹³ When teachers have low expectations they may adjust their behaviour, setting less challenging work, offering limited feedback, giving less encouragement or allowing less time for response. Over time, these persistent behaviours compound, undermining pupil confidence and achievement and reinforcing the structural attainment gaps present in the education system. Pupils who are perceived as under-achieving or disengaged often come under greater scrutiny in the classroom, feeding directly into rates of suspension and exclusion.

These patterns are reflected starkly in the data, particularly in secondary schools, where academic pressure intensifies. In 2023/24, the national secondary school suspension rate for Gypsy/Roma pupils was 110.5 per 100 pupils, meaning that, on average, Roma pupils received more than one suspension each. This was the highest of any ethnic group and five times higher than the national average.¹⁴

While suspensions do not result in a pupil being removed from a school's roll, they often act as a stepping stone towards more formal exclusion or a managed move.¹⁵ For many Roma pupils, repeated suspensions create a cycle of disciplinary escalation that increases the likelihood of being

pushed out of mainstream education, particularly at the point when schools face the greatest pressure to secure academic results. Zero-tolerance policies, framed as tools for maintaining order, instead reinforce exclusionary dynamics. In practice, such policies often fail to account for cultural differences, language barriers, or the impact of poverty and discrimination on behaviour and engagement. As long ago as 2012, the Children's Commissioner warned of the overuse of sanctions in behaviour management for ethnically minoritised children, stating that 'a lack of understanding of how to manage children with differing abilities, cultural and relational expectations, may lead – in our view unnecessarily – to confrontations between teachers and children, increasing the likelihood of specific groups of children meeting disciplinary problems, and ultimately being excluded'.¹⁶

Permanent exclusion data reinforces this pattern of structural vulnerability. In 2023/24, the permanent exclusion rate for Gypsy/Roma pupils was 1.18 per 100, the second highest of any ethnic group after Traveller pupils of Irish heritage (1.35).¹⁷ The figures underline how Gypsy/Roma pupils are disproportionately affected by, and vulnerable to, disciplinary systems which operate less as behavioural interventions and more as mechanisms to protect schools' academic performance, funding and reputation, even at the expense of already marginalised pupils.

13 Rosenthal, R. and Babad, E.Y. (1985) 'Pygmalion in the gymnasium', *Educational Leadership* 43(1): 36–39.

14 DfE (2024) "Suspensions and permanent exclusions – by characteristic" from "Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England", 29 July, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/64ecca7f-06a0-4862-4581-08ddcde57a4c>.

15 Joseph, A. and Crenna-Jennings, W. (2024) *Outcomes for Young People Who Experience Multiple Suspensions*, London: Education Policy Institute, https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/EPI_Suspensions_Report_FINAL.pdf.

16 Children's Commissioner (2017) 'They Never Give Up on You': Office of the Children's Commissioner School Exclusions Inquiry, London: Office of the Children's Commissioner, <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2017/07/They-never-give-up-on-you-final-report.pdf>.

17 DfE, 'Suspensions and permanent exclusions – by characteristic'.

Intersecting inequalities: Poverty, housing and social care

Research by the Traveller Movement demonstrates how these patterns are underpinned by deep-rooted stereotypes that cast Roma children and families as disengaged or disinterested in education.

In a performance-driven school environment, such assumptions translate into practices where Roma pupils are viewed not as pupils to be supported but as threats to institutional success. Seen in this way, prevailing attitudes reveal a deep-rooted belief that Roma culture, heritage and community is a risk factor and a liability to the development and growth of an individual child.¹⁸

This pressure has intensified in recent years, especially following the pandemic, which disrupted learning, widened the attainment gap and led to an increase in behavioural challenges.¹⁹ Schools have reported increased complexity in pupil needs, but these needs are emerging in the context of reduced support. Since 2011, the dismantling of targeted services such as the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG)²⁰ and the downsizing of Traveller Education Services (TES)²¹ has left many without

culturally competent support to engage Roma pupils effectively.²² Similarly, cuts to pastoral support and mental health provision, combined with increasingly punitive behaviour policies, have created a discipline-heavy climate in schools, with little scope for early intervention.²³

The Timpson Review of School Exclusions identified that exclusions are issued overwhelmingly to children who face existing challenges in their lives, noting that '78 per cent of permanent exclusions issued were to pupils who either had SEN, were classified as in need or were eligible for free school meals. 11 per cent of permanent exclusions were to pupils who had all three characteristics.'²⁴

Structural pressures are further compounded by funding mechanisms which fail to capture the full extent of Roma deprivation. One of the most significant examples is the Pupil Premium, a grant given to schools for each pupil who is eligible for free school meals (FSM), intended to reduce the attainment gap experienced by children from low-income families.²⁵

18 The Traveller Movement, *Fought Not Taught*.

19 Education Endowment Foundation (2022) 'New: Pandemic adversely affected young children's development, with fewer reaching expected levels by the end of Reception class', 18 May, <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/new-pandemic-adversely-affected-young-childrens-development-with-fewer-reaching-expected-levels-by-the-end-of-reception-class>.

20 The Bell Foundation (no date) 'EAL provision and funding', www.bell-foundation.org.uk/resources/guidance/schools-and-leaders/eal-provision.

21 Edward, Lisa (2017) 'Written submission from Lisa Edwards', Education Select Committee, January <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/77238/html>.

22 University of Birmingham Centre for Research in Race and Education (no date) 'Written submission from University of Birmingham Centre for Research in Race and Education (GRT007)', UK Parliament Committees, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/77169/pdf/#:~:text=Unfortunately%2C%20funding%20for%20Traveller%20Education,been%20moved%20to%20other%20areas>.

23 Rainer, C., Le, H. and Abdinasir, K. (2023) *Behaviour and Mental Health in Schools*, Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, <https://cypmhc.org.uk/punitive-school-behaviour-policies-are-harming-childrens-mental-health-says-new-report>.

24 Timpson, *Timpson Review of School Exclusion*.

25 Burchardt, T., Obolenskaya, P., Vizard, P. and Battaglini, M. (2018) 'Experience of multiple disadvantage among Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children in England and Wales', CASE Paper 208, London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, LSE.

Research suggests that FSM uptake is higher among Romani (Gypsy), Traveller and Roma families than the national average – 60 per cent compared with 28 per cent.²⁶ However, many families still do not access this support.²⁷ Parents may be reluctant to claim FSM due to stigma or pride, while others face barriers linked to mobility within the EU, limited outreach or language challenges.²⁸ As a result, a significant number of Roma children fall through the cracks, missing out on both the nutritional and the educational support that FSM is designed to provide. This shortfall also reduces the funding available to schools, limiting their

ability to offer targeted help and further entrenching inequality – and increasing the risk of exclusion in the process. Although FSM support is designed to mitigate disadvantage, it does not appear to protect pupils from exclusion. **The most recent DfE data shows that in 2023/24, the suspension rate for FSM-eligible pupils was 27.6 per 100, compared with 6.0 per 100 for non-FSM pupils. This means FSM pupils were more than four times more likely to be suspended than their peers.** As Figure 1 illustrates, this suspension rate gap has increased dramatically since the 2020/21 academic year and is now at its widest.

Figure 1: Comparing suspension between those eligible for FSM and those not eligible (rate per 100, all schools in England)



Source: DfE, ‘Suspensions and permanent exclusions – by characteristic’.

26 Burchardt et al., ‘Experience of multiple disadvantage’.

27 Lane, P., Spencer, S. and Jones, A. (2014) Gypsy, Traveller and Roma: Experts by Experience – Reviewing UK Progress on the European Union Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies. Birmingham: Institute for Research into Superdiversity, University of Birmingham.

28 Burchardt et al., ‘Experience of multiple disadvantage’.

Although FSM eligibility highlights the intersection between poverty and exclusion, it is only one of several overlapping factors that place Roma pupils at heightened risk. Research by the Education Datalab using the National Pupil Database has found that alongside eligibility for FSM, the most predictive factors of secondary school exclusion are a history or permanent suspension or exclusion during primary school and a history of social care involvement.

Boys are 27 times more likely to be excluded if they belong to all three of these groups, and girls are 88 times more likely. These students are less likely to complete Key Stage 4: 48 per cent of boys and 41 per cent of girls with a history of suspension or exclusion, social care and FSM eligibility complete Key Stage 4 in a different setting than a state secondary school or had no observed destination. This could occur as a result of emigration or moves to home education but will mostly be accounted for by managed moves to state-funded special schools or alternative provision.²⁹ These are all factors which Roma families and young people are increasingly exposed to. In the most recent academic year, primary school suspensions rose by 24 per cent from the previous year. This was faster than the rate of increase in secondary and special schools.³⁰ The national suspension rate for Gypsy/Roma children in primary schools is 6.3 per 100. While this is significantly lower than in secondary schools, it is still the second highest of any ethnic group, with only Traveller pupils of Irish heritage experiencing a higher rate (10.9).³¹

For Roma pupils this also represents a 27 per cent increase in primary school suspensions since the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted above, while primary school suspensions for Gypsy/Roma pupils are rising, rates are significantly higher in secondary schools, reflecting how suspensions intersect with exam pressures and school performance targets in Years 9–11.

A history of social care involvement is another factor that places Roma pupils at heightened risk of exclusion. Research by Lancaster University has shown that Roma families continue to be drawn into the child protection system not because of parental harm but due to poverty, discrimination and systemic oversight.³²

These inequalities are mirrored in wider measures of deprivation. While UK-specific data is limited, the evidence that does exist paints a stark picture of disadvantage and deprivation. Using analysis of secure 2011 Census microdata, researchers at LSE measured deprivation across the four dimensions of housing, household income, economic activity and health.

They found that nearly a quarter of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children in England and Wales aged under 19 are deprived in three or more dimensions compared with just 2 per cent of other children. Only 15 per cent of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children in England and Wales are not deprived in any dimension – compared with 67 per cent of all other children.³³ In Europe, 90 per cent of Roma children are at risk of poverty, with 50 per cent facing nutritional risk or experiencing underlying malnutrition.³⁴

29 Thomson, D. (2023) 'Risk factors of secondary school exclusion', FFT Education Datalab, 18 October, <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2023/10/risk-factors-of-secondary-school-exclusion>.

30 Thomson, 'Risk factors'.

31 DfE, 'Suspensions and permanent exclusions – by characteristic'.

32 Centre for Child and Family Justice Research (2025) 'When poverty is judged as neglect: Why Roma children continue to be removed from their families', April, www.cfj-lancaster.org.uk/files/documents/blog_April_2025.pdf.

33 Burchardt et al., 'Experience of multiple disadvantage'.

34 Council of Europe (20219), 'Extreme poverty afflicts many of the 10–12 million Roma in Europe', 17 October, www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/-/extreme-poverty-afflicts-many-of-the-10-12-million-roma-in-europe.

Housing instability is another major risk factor: 27 per cent of Roma experience overcrowded living conditions, surpassing the 8 per cent average in England and Wales.³⁵ Poor-quality and overcrowded housing creates both immediate and long-term health and wellbeing impacts that affect a child throughout their life, and has a specific impact on a child's learning and education. Children in overcrowded homes are more likely to miss school due to illness and infection, and overcrowding has been linked to delayed cognitive development.³⁶

One consequence of overcrowding is the lack of space for play. Research shows that play is central to children's cognitive growth, supporting language

development, problem-solving, memory and creativity. Some studies suggest that limited space to play can lead to depression or aggressive behaviour, with a study in London showing that homeless children were four and a half times more likely to have a behavioural problem than other children of the same age.³⁷

Altogether, these risk factors converge to form a deeply unequal educational experience for Roma pupils. Attainment gaps, structural disadvantage, systemic bias, poverty, overcrowded housing and inadequate school support do not act in isolation: they compound each other, creating a layered and wpersistent vulnerability that defines the experience of many Roma pupils.

The local picture: Bradford in context

This national picture sets the context for examining how these dynamics play out locally. In Bradford, home to one of the largest Roma populations in England, these systemic challenges are not only visible but acutely felt.

In 2023/24, Bradford had the fifth-largest population of Gypsy/Roma pupils in England (889), behind only Leeds (1,185), Birmingham (1,173), Sheffield (1,667) and Kent (2,082). Yet the local suspension rate for Gypsy/Roma pupils is notably higher than in comparable areas. While Kent, with the largest number of pupils, recorded a suspension rate of 22.3 per 100 and Birmingham 13.9 per 100, the rate in Bradford is significantly higher – an alarming 145.1 per 100 (meaning that some pupils were excluded more than once), exceeding that of Leeds (41.8) and even Sheffield's 61.6.³⁸

When data across schools is aggregated, however, the extent of inequality is partially masked. Suspension rates among Gypsy/Roma are significantly higher in secondary schools than in any other setting, where academic pressures and behaviour management policies intensify. Figure 2 highlights this pattern, showing the local authorities in the top decile for suspension rates across England in 2023/24, focusing on the five most excluded ethnic communities. In 43 per cent of local authorities the most frequently suspended cohort was Gypsy/Roma pupils; in another 43 per cent it was Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils. As ethnic groups with fewer than 100 pupils in a given local authority area were not included in the analysis, Black Caribbean and Traveller of Irish Heritage groups all fell outside of the top 10 per cent. Removing these small groups helps to avoid misleading results while showing an accurate national picture.

35 Council of Europe, 'Extreme poverty'.

36 Shelter (2006) Chances of a Lifetime: The Impact of Bad Housing on Children's Lives, London, https://assets.ctfassets.net/6sxxmndnph0s/4LTxp3mya7ligRmNG8x9KK/6922b5a4c6ea756ea94da71ebdc001a5/Chance_of_a_Lifetime.pdf.

37 Play Scotland (2012) 'The power of play', www.playscotland.org/about/the-power-of-play.

38 DfE (2026) "Suspensions and permanent exclusions – by pupil characteristic" for Gypsy/Roma in Birmingham, Kent, Leeds and Sheffield between 2023/24 autumn term and 2023/24 summer term', <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/41c1e78d-a499-4f52-b023-08de5297c491>.

Figure 2: Secondary school suspension rates by local authority (top 10%, pupil groups under 100 removed)



Source: DfE, ‘Suspensions and permanent exclusions – by characteristic’.

When filtered in this way, the trend remains stark. Bradford’s position represents not an anomaly but a concentration of national inequalities in a local context. **The secondary suspension rate for Gypsy/Roma pupils stood at 304.1 per 100 pupils, meaning that there is an average of three suspensions for every Gypsy/Roma pupil.** Figures this high cannot represent isolated incidents or outlier behaviour: they expose how persistent and entrenched disparities sharply play out at the local level.

Underneath the data are the everyday realities of families navigating a school system that all too often views them

with suspicion rather than providing them with support. In Bradford, where Roma families have settled over the past two decades, these challenges intersect with the city’s own issues, including high levels of deprivation and services weakened by austerity.

The rest of this research explores how Roma pupils experience exclusion and education in Bradford, drawing on local data and lived experiences. Before this discussion, however, it is important to give an account of who the Roma are, and the social, economic and political factors that have led to the community settling in Bradford.

Who are the Roma? A history of persecution and migration

The Roma are a diasporic people with origins in South Asia, who migrated a thousand years ago, moving through the Middle East and the Balkans and into Europe.³⁹ It is estimated that between 7 and 9 million Roma live in Europe, with approximately 70 per cent living in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The Roma population has reached between 9 and 11 per cent of the overall population in countries such as Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Romania and Slovakia.⁴⁰ Over centuries the Roma have formed numerous unique ethnic communities, each with their own language, culture and traditions, including the Kalderash in south-eastern Europe, the Romanichals in England, the Sinti in Germany, Italy and France, the Kalé in Wales, Finland, Spain and Portugal, and many others.⁴¹

The Roma have long faced discrimination and persecution. In many regions, Roma were forced into slavery – a practice that continued into the nineteenth century in Romania. Roma were also sentenced to death throughout medieval England⁴² and were widely expelled from Europe. In England the Egyptians Act 1530 banned

Romani⁴³ from entering the country and required those already there to leave. Fourteen years later, the act was amended to include the death penalty as punishment for remaining in the country. Similarly, in Scotland in 1603 the Privy Council ordered Romani to leave, never to return on pain of death.⁴⁴

Persecution in the twentieth century

In the twentieth century, the Roma were perceived as racially inferior in Nazi Germany, deprived of civil rights, subjected to forced sterilisation and interned in concentration camps. It is estimated that between 250,000 and 500,000 Roma were killed by the Nazi regime during the Second World War.⁴⁵

Following these atrocities, the fall of the Soviet Union triggered a further period of significant hardship for Roma communities,

as sweeping economic and social changes, combined with the disappearance of state-supported programmes, disrupted many of the services and support networks they had relied on.⁴⁶ It is estimated that 50,000 Roma left Central and Eastern Europe for Western Europe in the early 1990s in search of both employment and asylum, with more still fleeing from the countries of the former Yugoslavia during the violent ethnic conflicts between 1991 and 2001.⁴⁷

39 Font-Porterías, N., Arauna, L. R., Poveda, A., Bianco, E., Rebato, E., Prata, M. J., Calafell, F. and Comas, D. (2019) 'European Roma groups show complex West Eurasian admixture footprints and a common South Asian genetic origin', *PLOS Genetics* 15(9): e1008417.

40 Ringold, D. (2000) *Roma and the Transition in Central and Eastern Europe: Trends and Challenges*, Washington, DC: World Bank, <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/103529/1/CASEpaper208.pdf>.

41 Amnesty International (2015) 'The Roma in Europe: 11 things you always wanted to know but were afraid to ask', 23 April, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2015/04/roma-in-europe-11-things-you-always-wanted-to-know-but-were-afraid-to-ask.

42 Franceschin, L. and Sáez del Álamo, J. (2019) *Guide to Roma Communities for Police*, Brussels: Facing All the Facts, www.facingfacts.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/10/FAF-Cultural-Awareness-guide-to-Roma-communities.pdf.

43 The act was so called based on a false belief that Roma people originated in Egypt. Linguistic, historical and genetic evidence instead traced the Romani to the Punjab region of northern India. This mislabelling arose due to their darker skin colour. The English term 'Gypsy', widely seen as derogatory, evolved from the earlier European descriptors for 'Egyptian'.

44 Franceschin and Sáez del Álamo, *Guide to Roma Communities for Police*.

45 Franceschin and Sáez del Álamo, *Guide to Roma Communities for Police*.

46 Lucero, F. and Collum J. (2007) 'The Roma: During and after communism', *Human Rights & Human Welfare* 7(1): article 47, <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1294&context=hrhw>.

47 Ringold, *Roma and the transition in Central and Eastern Europe*.

The fall of the Soviet Union

Since the fall of communism, Roma have increasingly been victims of hate crimes in Central and Eastern Europe. This includes incidents of unprovoked assault, fatal police beatings and attacks on whole villages in which houses have been burned and residents lynched.⁴⁸ In 1993, a pogrom took place in the village of Hadareni, Romania, where three Romani men were killed and 18 homes destroyed by a mob which included the local police commander and several officers. Twenty-five Romani were displaced from their homes.⁴⁹

Roma are victims of deliberate state violence across Europe too. In 1997 in the Czech Republic, more than two-thirds of Roma children were diagnosed with special educational needs or disabilities and placed in special, often inferior schools.⁵⁰ In Slovakia in the early 2000s, it was reported that Romani children were educated in segregated schools, with almost 80 per cent of children placed in special schools being of Romani heritage. Only 3 per cent of Romani children reached secondary school.⁵¹ This practice is still widespread. In a 2016 EU report, one in ten Roma living in EU member states were reported to have either attended a special school or been placed

in a class that was mainly for Roma, with many being educated in entirely segregated schools.⁵² In the early 2000s it was reported that in some countries up to 90 per cent of Roma were unemployed.⁵³

Although the Roma have a long history of social and economic marginalisation within Europe, now more than ever Roma communities and neighbourhoods lack electricity and clean water.⁵⁴ The EU has long reported that Roma families live in poor, overcrowded and segregated housing in a number of member states, and that this is sometimes the result of deliberate government policy.⁵⁵

In Slovakia, for example, most Roma live in the east and south of the country, often on segregated land. These settlements lack basic amenities and many homes have dirt floors and no heating. Entire families with sometimes a dozen family members share a space no bigger than a living room, in living conditions that have been described as among the most impoverished in the EU.⁵⁶ Similarly, in 1999, a 60-metre-long, 1.8-metre-high wall was installed in Ústí nad Labem in the Czech Republic to separate single-family homes of long-term non-Romani residents from buildings owned by Romani inhabitants.⁵⁷

48 Huma, 'Assessment of human rights violations'.

49 Moldovan and Others v. Romania (Applications 41138/98 and 64320/01), Judgment no. 2, European Court of Human Rights, Strasbourg, 12 July 2005, www.ucc.ie/en/tejp/traveller-law-database/moldovan-and-others-v-romania-no-2.html.

50 Pohanka, V. (2024) 'European Commission to Czechia: End discrimination of Roma children!', Radio Prague International, 10 April, <https://english.radio.cz/european-commission-czechia-end-discrimination-roma-children-8830774>.

51 Amnesty International (2007) Slovakia: Still Separate, Still Unequal. Violations of the Right to Education of Romani Children in Slovakia, London, www.amnesty.org/es/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/eur720022007en.pdf.

52 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014) Education: The Situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States. Roma Survey Data in Focus, Vienna, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-roma-survey-dif-education-1_en.pdf.

53 International Labour Organization (2003) Discrimination against Roma, Geneva, www.ilo.org/resource/discrimination-against-roma.

54 Huma, 'Assessment of human rights violations'.

55 European Commission (2021) EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation for 2020–2030, Brussels, https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/eu_roma_strategic_framework_for_equality_inclusion_and_participation_for_2020_-_2030_0.pdf.

56 European Commission, EU Roma Strategic Framework.

57 Albert, G. (2024) 'Czech racial segregation in history: Roma and their allies committed civil disobedience against the building of the wall in Maticni Street 25 years ago', Romea.cz, 15 October, www.romea.cz/en/czech-republic/czech-racial-segregation-in-history-roma-and-their-allies-committed-civil-disobedience-against-the-building-of-the-wall-in-maticni-street-25-years-ago.

In 2003, the military court in Slovakia fined two members of the military for racist statements directed at Roma, with reports claiming that one Colonel Pančík had told a meeting of professional soldiers that '97 percent of Roma are unable to adapt and should be shot dead'.⁵⁸ Later, in February 2004,

benefit cuts in Slovakia led to large-scale protests by Slovak Roma. At this time, unemployment rates in some villages reached 100 per cent. After clashes with police during initial protests, the Slovakian government mobilised its entire 20,000-strong police force to shut down future protests by Roma.⁵⁹

Settlement in Bradford

Against this background, many Roma chose to migrate when the EU was expanded in 2004. They migrated from new EU accession states, including the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia, into Western Europe.⁶⁰ Bradford is one destination where Roma have settled. Studies on Roma communities in Bradford are rare, but it is important to note that the population is not a single community: it is diverse. It is generally agreed, however, that most Bradford Roma are of Slovak origin, with other communities from Czech, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Romania.⁶¹

While there had been Roma migration into Bradford prior to 2004, many families in Bradford arrived between 2004 and 2007, when the EU expansion made movement across Europe easier. 'Chain migration' continued to happen after this initial wave, meaning that once family or community members settled in the area, friends, family or other members of the community followed. Lack of opportunity, discrimination and

status as second-class citizens, all discussed above, have continued to push Roma out of EU countries and into the UK.⁶²

Irrespective of the fact many were leaving systemic discrimination, social exclusion and economic marginalisation in Europe, Roma arriving in the UK during and after the 2004 enlargement were met with deeply hostile public discourse. Writing at the time, the Minority Rights Group pointed to sensationalist coverage in UK newspapers which referenced an incoming 'Gypsy horde', a 'Gypsy crisis' and a 'huge Gypsy invasion'.⁶³ Sir Andrew Green, then chair of Migration Watch, warned, 'If Roma do come to Britain in significant numbers there will be a very strong reaction against the European Union and indeed against migrants'.⁶⁴ Mirroring this media rhetoric, the UK government introduced a Worker Registration Scheme in May 2004 to monitor the impact of participation in the labour market of new arrivals from EU accession states and to restrict their

58 European Roma Rights Centre (2003) 'Slovak soldiers fined for racist statements', 29 October, www.errc.org/roma-rights-journal/slovak-soldiers-fined-for-racist-statements.

59 Reuters (2004) 'Slovak police mobilised against Gypsies', Aljazeera, 24 February, www.aljazeera.com/news/2004/2/24/slovak-police-mobilised-against-gypsies.

60 Roma Support Group (no date) 'History of Roma migration'/'History of the Roma Support Group', www.romasupportgroup.org.uk/history.html.

61 Bradford for Everyone (2021) European Roma Communities: A Strategy for the Bradford District 2021–2025, Bradford, <https://bradfordforeveryone.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Roma-Strategy-2021-2025.pdf>.

62 Bradford for Everyone, European Roma Communities.

63 Minority Rights Group International (2004) 'Rights group deplores media racism on occasion of EU enlargement', 29 April, <https://minorityrights.org/rights-group-deplores-media-racism-on-occasion-of-eu-enlargement>.

64 Politics.co.uk (2004) 'Roma fears prompt migrant rethink', 3 February, www.politics.co.uk/news/2004/02/03/roma-fears-prompt-migrant-rethink.

access to tax-funded welfare benefits.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, total migration from the accession states was modest: the gross

inflow was estimated at 151,000 people between 2004 and 2006, with no official data stating how many were Roma.⁶⁶

Local inequalities and the geography of exclusion

Economically, the Roma population in Bradford suffer considerable disadvantages, often related to issues in their country of origin. Many adults arrived with limited formal education, having attended segregated or under-resourced schools, and without qualifications recognised in the UK. These barriers have contributed to a concentration of Roma in low-paid, insecure and short-term work, often in the black-market economy.⁶⁷ Poverty is both a cause and consequence of histories of marginalisation in Europe, and these histories continue to shape the conditions in which Roma families live in the UK.

When these patterns are mapped, the relationships between ethnicity, deprivation and educational

vulnerability become clear. Figure 3 shows the spatial distribution of Roma communities across Bradford, while Figure 4 overlays the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

Roma communities remain concentrated in the centre and north of the city: neighbourhoods which fall into the most deprived areas nationally. This geography of deprivation mirrors the geography of school exclusions. In the north of the city, Beckfoot Oakbank recorded a suspension rate of 90.2 per 100 pupils. In the inner-city areas, suspension rates are still higher at Hanson Academy (167.8), Bradford Forster Academy (182.2) and Grange Academy (207.1). The last of these featured regularly in our discussions with the local Roma community.

65 Hall, M. (2006) 2005 Annual Review for the UK, Dublin: Eurofound (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions), www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/resources/article/2006/2005-annual-review-uk.

66 House of Commons Treasury Committee (2008) Counting the Population: Eleventh Report of Session 2007–08, Volume I, London: The Stationery Office, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmtreasy/183/183.pdf>.

67 House of Commons Treasury Committee, Counting the Population.

Figure 3: Roma population of Bradford (Circles show local schools and suspension rates)

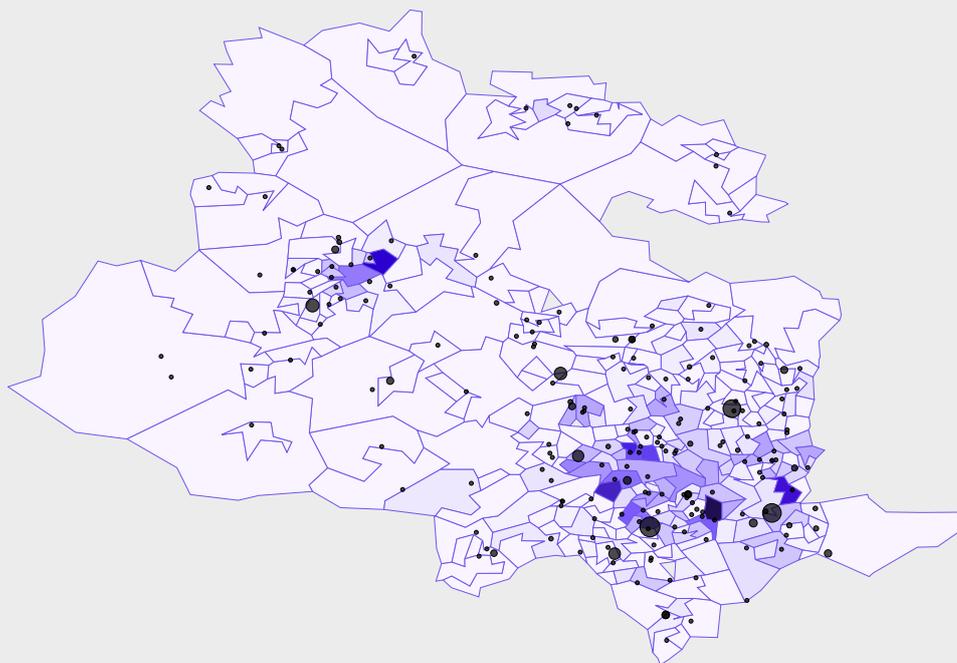
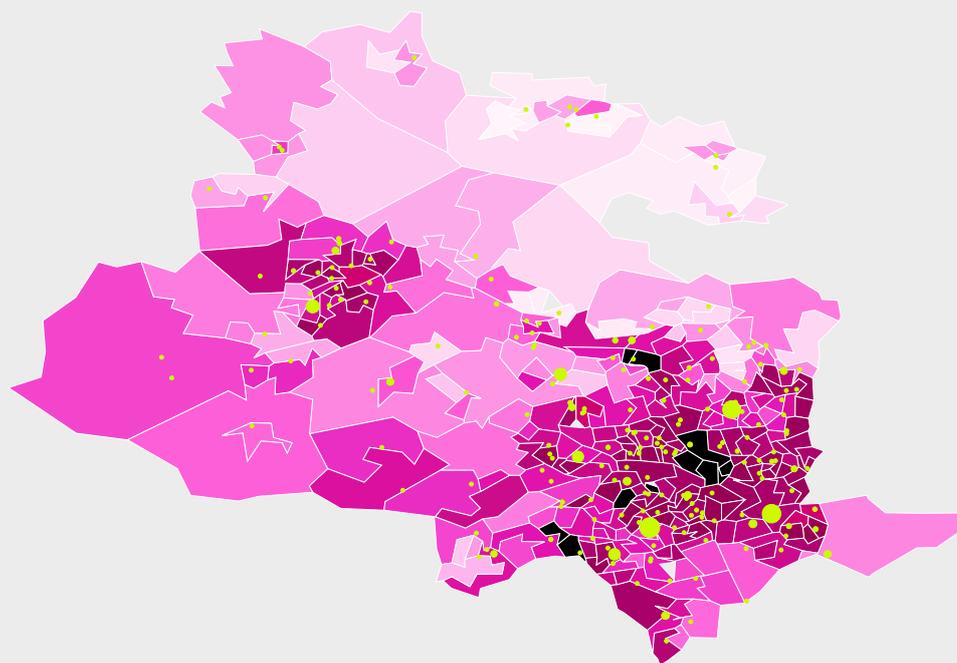


Figure 4: Bradford Indices of Multiple Deprivation (Given as Deprivation Rank out of 33,755 LSOA, circles show local schools and suspension rates)



Source: DfE (2024) 'Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England, academic year 2022/23'; Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities/Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2025) English indices of deprivation 2025.

These maps illustrate the spatial concentration of vulnerability. Those communities most affected by poverty, poor housing and other markers of deprivation are also facing the highest rates of exclusion, pulling together the threads of ethnicity, poverty and place.

Behind these spatial patterns are communities who are navigating these experiences every day. To understand how these structural inequalities are lived, and how they affect Roma pupils, schools and the wider community, we turn to local voices.

‘They don’t understand us’: Roma voices on school suspensions

The following account draws on field notes from a community discussion and is included to situate the analysis that follows.

We met in Romalandia, an old pub turned community centre in Bradford's city centre. Twelve people joined the discussion: a mix of young adults who had recently left school and older community members who had lived in the area for over a decade and whose children were currently in the educational system. The conversation started with laughter: the young men were buoyant, with Tomas playing traditional music on the acoustic guitar as I entered. We shared Slovak snacks and cans of cold fizzy drinks, but underneath the lively atmosphere was frustration. I awkwardly fumbled with the dictophone, explaining that it was new and I was not sure how it worked:

**'You just turn it on!',
Tomas helpfully chipped in.**

Around the table, parents, young

people and community advocates spoke in rhythm with one another, switching between English and Romani. Throughout the discussion, young people described schools that 'don't understand us' and how 'they got this idea that you've done something wrong before you even have'. The conversation was occasionally punctuated by older community members shouting, 'That's called segregation!' to raucous agreement and applause. **Overall there was a feeling that the situation locally had got much worse over the last ten years**, with those who had been in the area for a long time explaining, 'we are starting to experience those things that we did experience in Slovakia or Czech. It's starting to be like Europe. Discrimination!' The applause that followed carried a tired edge. Beneath the frustration there was a consistent message: Roma families want an education system that recognises them as they are, not as problems to be managed.

Divergent understandings of schooling and success

Across both community and institutional accounts, the most persistent and consequential issue was attitudes to education. The gap between schools' assumptions and the lived experiences of the Roma community appears to be widest on this issue. For schools, education represents both aspiration and mobility. While this attitude is widely felt among many Roma, school still feels externally imposed and its logic and benefits feel unclear to them at best.

A local education professional, working at a primary school, explained this in everyday terms when describing a student with good attainment but who, for various reasons, struggled to stay in the classroom. The response to encouragement revealed a deep difference in how the purpose of education was understood. In responding to feedback, the young person would say:

Well, why does it matter? I'm not going to get a job when I'm older. I'm just going to stay at home.

To which the professional replied:

Do you not want to have a job when you get older? You could be the one that goes out for your family and does something different.

For the teacher, this raised a moral and pedagogical dilemma. She wanted to inspire ambition but felt she was pushing against familial and cultural norms:

We need to change the aspirations for them for there to be any impact, and it's got to come from families as well, hasn't it? Families have got to want more for their children, but equally, without disrespecting them, some of our communities are not education-driven.

Her reflection captures the uneasy mixture of care, frustration and distance that shapes many school–community encounters in Bradford and beyond. The sense of feeling that Roma families ‘do not want’ for their children expresses a collision of values between a system that equates learning with advancement and a community that often experiences education as external and constraining. While these attitudes are not universal, they are none the less present and require acknowledgement and analysis.

This tension should not be understood through the lens of cultural values or a cultural deficit. It is deeply intertwined with structural forms of exclusion. Longstanding experiences of marginalisation – social, economic and spatial – have shaped a collective sense among many Roma families that mainstream institutions are not built for them.

When routes into stable work appear blocked, when discrimination in housing and employment remain common, and when contact with public services is characterised by surveillance and stigma, education can feel like another mechanism of control rather than empowerment. In this context, aspirations are not absent but constrained, experienced through a sense of limited possibility, where formal education feels disconnected from lived realities.

Back in Romalandia, Elena, a mother of two children, described schools as follows: ‘Because of the law in the UK, for our children it’s like a prison’. This was not merely a figure of speech: it describes how wider social exclusion overflows into everyday school life and shapes how Roma children experience education. More specific factors too were outlined by the group, and we go on to discuss these below.

Starting too early: The weight of mistrust and the importance of representation

For many Roma families, schooling has been associated with control rather than empowerment and a site where difference is punished rather than valued. Families have seen education used to separate and to discipline, making them visible to authorities. Joshua, a community advocate with Connecting Roma, commented:

In Czech we don’t start school until seven, so when our kids over here start at four it’s a real struggle for the community.

Lolo, a father of two and longstanding member of the Bradford community, emphatically added:

Four is too early for Roma, four years old is too early for us!

Starting school early, sometimes with limited English and without cultural mediation, leaves many children and parents feeling alienated before learning has begun. What schools understand as early support and readiness is often experienced by Roma as premature separation, with children being taken from the family into an unfamiliar and rule-bound environment.

For many families this is also bound up with a deep fear of social services involvement. Participants spoke about how early contact with schools can trigger anxiety about safety and ‘interference’ – fears which are rooted in historical experiences of surveillance, forced assimilation and child removal in parts of Eastern Europe.⁶⁸

68 Lancaster University (2024) ‘Study reveals unique challenges facing Roma migrants in children’s services’, 2 August, www.lancaster.ac.uk/news/study-reveals-unique-challenges-facing-roma-migrants-in-childrens-services.

The moment of first contact with schools thus carries significance and weight, as this is a key point at which families become visible to the state. This anxiety is magnified by language barriers and bureaucratic processes that parents find difficult to navigate.

Joshua articulated a deeper logic that sits behind these differences too, hinging on entrenched experiences of deprivation:

With Roma people, it's more like, if you have talent, you can work straight away, you know? You don't have to educate yourself just because you want to be a barber. You've got the talent, just go and work, earn money.

Skills and self-reliance are of vital importance for a community with a long history of experience of discrimination, and having been marginalised throughout their history, Roma acquire both through family and community networks rather than institutional pathways. At the same time, there is recognition that these norms are shifting. Tomas, a young adult who had been through university, captured a generational awareness of constraint:

We don't have, I'm going to be a doctor or whatever. We don't have that.

Meanwhile, Elena who gained qualifications later in life and now works as a social worker, reflected an effort to model change when talking to two young Roma girls who liked the car she drove:

I would say to them, if you actually go to school and do the education, you can be even better than I am. You can drive Ferrari. You have to educate yourself, it's important, you know.

When viewed in this way, education is reframed as a path towards agency and Roma identity rather than as a route away from it, even if these examples feel uneven and structurally unsupported.

From the school perspective, the absence of visible Roma role models reinforces disengagement. As one professional explained:

They don't see it's for them. They look in a mirror and see they have no examples of them. Unless they see themselves in someone, it's really hard to win them round.

Without representation among staff or in the curriculum, without success stories, school remains someone else's system, and one that feels compulsory and exclusionary. There was, however, an acknowledgement that change will take generations to implement.

If you can find a Romani teacher for me, I would recruit them tomorrow, but I've never had one apply to me in 15 years. If we can get one generation through the GCSEs, we can get a generation believing that they can go to university. In 15 years' time, we might have Roma teachers arriving to teach in our schools.

In the absence of Roma teachers, integrating Roma culture and traditions into the school and the local town was seen as a vital way to make sure education felt safer and more relevant. Joshua describes how this had transformed engagement in one school, Oasis Academy Lister Park:

We served soup in Oasis. I tried in every school to serve soup and in Oasis the teachers agreed to it. It was a huge deal. Even the other students thought it was nice. I remember the parents found out, they couldn't believe it. Kids went home and told their parents they saw Joshua serving proper zumi. The parents loved it even more than the pupils, they were amazed by it.

These gestures of recognition had had a clear impact. 'That week the attendance goes up,' Joshua recalled. 'Your mum made you go to school, she said "Get up now!" and you're thinking "Ehh, what's going on, eh?" It changes your perception. The parents felt welcomed in that.'

The idea of cultural visibility extended beyond food. Others spoke about the impact that a teacher opening their music room to Roma children had. Participants also spoke about public celebration of Roma identity in schools, streets and civic spaces. As Elena put it, 'Even the lights in town', referring to the Diwali lights in Bradford city centre. Lolo imagined what this could mean: 'If we had St Nicholas all over town, everywhere. Boom! Beautiful! Everybody would be happy!'

For Joshua, such recognition should not be confined just to 'Roma schools' but should become part of Britain's broader multicultural story:

Now schools are like, they got lots of Roma people, Joshua? What can we do? I'll make a board of famous Roma people, celebrate St Nicholas Day, do International Roma Day. That's nice. But I also go to fully English schools, and they still celebrate Diwali and talk about all of these things. So you think, wait a minute, why are we only doing that in Roma, or more Roma-populated schools? Shouldn't that be a national thing?

When inclusion happens only where marginalised communities are concentrated, it reinforces the idea that belonging is conditional. Instead, it is crucial to make the case that inclusion and representation are important for all communities.

Respect, relevance and recognition

The conversation around culture leads directly to a wider question of respect. While cultural visibility can help Roma pupils to feel seen, it must be accompanied by everyday recognition for families and their values. For community members, the problem was not only what schools taught but also how they related to Roma. As Elena put it, 'They don't know who we are. They think of Gypsies, they think of smelly houses.'

Teachers too expressed the desire to take this forward, although they felt uncertain about how to do so respectfully. One explained to us, in an unprompted moment:

I've got lots of Muslim children and I've got lots of Muslim staff who can teach me what my expectations around Ramadan and things are. I would love to be celebrating Roma festivals too. I don't want to offend anyone, but I don't understand them [Roma]. Anything we can gain around understanding from people would be really useful.

These are not unbridgeable divides. Both schools and community members described wanting the same thing: a sense that education belongs to everyone. The changes they imagined – serving familiar food, celebrating St Nicholas, playing Roma songs in music class – would be small in practice, but they would be meaningful in signalling that Roma identity is part of the social fabric, not an exception to it. While these steps alone cannot address structural inequalities, failing to take them risks deepening a cycle of mistrust, where invisibility hardens into disengagement and where low expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies. These are the kinds of low-cost and high-impact interventions that can reshape everyday experiences of inclusion in schools – but both schools and local authorities need to choose to act.

Stories shared within the group underlined how misunderstanding and mistrust can escalate into deeply harmful experiences. Joshua recounted an incident where a child was forced to shower at school, with staff mistaking the dark pigment on the back of his neck for dirt, presumably operating under the racist assumption that Roma children are unclean:

The teachers had seen that he's got a black neck. They went to take him to pee and he has black knees. Then he must have soiled himself. Normally you give them new trousers, but the teacher don't do nothing. Two teachers put him in the shower, fully naked. The kid's scared. They put him home and didn't say anything, they didn't ring mum beforehand.

This incident underscores how a lack of awareness among educational professionals can turn into experiences of humiliation and fear for children. Such incidents only reinforce mistrust among Roma families and highlight an urgent need for schools to develop their understanding of Roma pupils. Further underlining this, several community members expressed frustration that schools seemed uninterested in who Roma pupils were or what they could offer. Others stressed that teachers needed to 'learn about what Roma are' before setting expectations of students.

Joshua's remarks on cultural expression captured this, while also revealing tension between different communities:

The Muslim community are allowed jewellery, the Hindus are allowed to wear bangles. But apparently gold has nothing to do with our culture. That's the basis of our culture. It's music, food and gold. Those are the basic elements of our culture.

Others agreed, adding:

When girls become five or six, they're getting gold earrings.

It's embedded in us. It's in our genes

A young girl wearing gold earrings and a heavy gold chain, Miriam, took part in the discussion alongside her dad, Lolo. She explained:

What I have on now, this type of earring, I wouldn't be able to wear this in school at all. They would say 'Give it to me, or you're going home'. Sometimes I was really angry because it's not fair, right? So I would

call my dad and I would say to him, 'I'm going home, I'm not staying in school. They can't have this.'

For Miriam and other Roma present, resisting the rules was not about defiance but about reasserting their sense of self and of identity, often in spaces that feel external and controlling. Joshua framed the wider tension sharply. Pursuing education can make a young person a gorja (someone who is not from the community) if they are seen to be adopting values or practices from outside of the community. Lolo added that even peers and family could enforce these boundaries:

If you go to school after 16, your parents or girlfriend think you're stupid. When you're 16 and still going, they think something's wrong.

These pressures reflect a complex negotiation for Roma. Education is desired by many, but it is also feared because it can feel like a form of assimilation and of stepping outside of cultural norms. Almost in the same breath, participants pointed to role models in the community. Lolo cited Roma professionals who lived more than 200 miles away in Great Yarmouth but who were still known to the community in Bradford – 'A pilot, two police officers' – showing that success is possible, although, he noted, it was achieved only 'here and there ...It's not quick enough'.

It is apparent that there is a dual challenge for schools. On one hand, there is a practical need to respect cultural practices and to include Roma voices in everyday life. On the other, there is the deeper and harder work of supporting pupils and families in navigating the pressures, so that education feels not like a choice between belonging and learning but like a space where both can exist. Meanwhile, however, the space outside of school remains increasingly hostile for the community.

Exclusion inside and out: Schools and the streets

Even when families navigate education successfully, wider experiences of discrimination reinforce a sense of constraint. Lolo described encountering prejudice when trying to rent a house or find work.

As soon as they find out you're Roma, that's the end of the conversation. The same thing is happening here as what is happening in Slovakia.

Elena added that stereotypes of laziness or unreliability shape experiences of work, and that this is used by employers to justify illegal employment practices such as paying below the minimum wage. This is an example of employers taking advantage of recently arrived migrant communities, who sometimes have limited language skills, who very rarely know their employment rights and who are taking jobs out of necessity.

When you have a partner that can speak good English, they'll find you a job. But when you pick up the phone and they find out you're from Czech or Slovakia or whatever, they'll be like, okay, put your price down. They think that we're lazy, we can't actually do it. But when they do the job, it's like, 'Wow!'

Significantly, many community members hide their Roma identity, particularly from employers, in order to avoid discrimination in the workplace. A 2017 Traveller Movement report found that half of respondents had experienced discrimination in employment and that many chose to hide their ethnicity in order to secure stable employment.⁶⁹ Joshua emphasised how pervasive employment practices were locally:

Did you hear that? 'We're not

going to give you minimum wage. We'll give you half price.' Official companies. These are official companies!

These experiences demonstrate the broad and overlapping social exclusions experienced by Roma families, which limit their opportunities. Lolo expressed frustration that despite decades in the UK, Roma remain confined to low-paid factory work or the black-market economy, with limited opportunity for progression:

We been here for over 30 years, and nobody is a manager ... It's very hard ... Right now, it's just cash-in-hand, black-market jobs. They're in survival mode. You're not making any money and you never will. These guys who have been here 10, 15 years are perfect builders. You've never seen a builder like that before. But he's never going to get a proper job because he doesn't have a resume. There's no portfolio.

For many, the pain comes not only from limited opportunity but from watching others move forward while they remain stuck. There is a feeling that other European communities, such as Polish or Ukrainian, are able to advance within the employment structures ahead of Roma, reinforcing structural exclusion.

This sense of being sidelined is not confined to work: it also shapes how families approach school. Parents' experiences of discrimination in the wider world had often led them to adopt protective strategies, such as concealing their child's Roma identity. Even so, simply being Roma can still trigger stereotyping and discrimination. Elena described how this played out in the administrative process and the different treatment her child received once it was discovered he was Roma:

69 The Traveller Movement (2017) The Last Acceptable Form of Racism? The Pervasive Discrimination and Prejudice experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities, London, <https://wp-main.travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/The-Last-Acceptable-Form-of-Racism-2017.pdf>.

Now, when I come to the school, I put Asian and White. I don't put Roma. But because the teacher saw me talking to Roma people ... straight away, boom, boom, boom! It was completely different.

For many in the group, experiences in school and in the wider community were inseparable. The social and economic exclusion faced by adults in their lives had shaped how families navigate education, which in turn had influenced how their children experience school. In this way, exclusion operates across generations: adult marginalisation informs strategies that shape children's experience, while incidents within schools can reinforce and amplify wider patterns of marginalisation and disadvantage.

At the same time, the relationship between school and community is bidirectional and mutually reinforcing. Conflicts that occur in school, whether bullying, fights or disciplinary incidents, often spill into neighbourhoods, escalating tensions and creating further risks for children and families. Joshua explained this dynamic:

What's happening in school is taken outside, so the bullying is happening on the streets. If you retaliate, you're probably going to get a visit at your home. Your mum and dad will be involved.

Lolo illustrated the intensity of these confrontations, noting how his relationship with Asian community members and his neighbours had helped him to de-escalate a confrontation.

[My daughter] had a fight. I opened the door. Thirty people, baseball bats, everything. If I was new and didn't know anybody there, it would have been a big fight.

Elena described children facing intimidation on the streets, including masked groups in the neighbourhood, leaving parents fearful and anxious. She was particularly worried for

her son, who has ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), as his impulsivity could make him especially vulnerable:

Can you imagine ten-year-old kids? Can you imagine balaclavas? I'm telling you on my street I'm having a hell. That's why I've got these two dogs that I have in my house. They're like monsters! They're Harry Potter dogs! I've got an autistic and ADHD son. He's full of swear. He's running to BD7, BD8 [Bradford postcodes]. He's everywhere, that child. He's 11. Balaclavas? What's going on here, you know?

Bullying and intergroup tension on neighbourhood street corners was a primary concern for community members. For young people, school feels like one arena among many where conflicts play out. The daily experiences of violence have consequences for schools too; and exclusions and suspensions are in no way equipped to remedy this and do nothing to resolve the underlying tension. As Joshua noted, families feel they have little choice but to respond if the system offers no protection:

If they come again, hit them. Fight back. We'll deal with the consequences.

The combined effect is a reinforcing cycle: the discrimination and lack of opportunity experienced by adults heighten community feelings of marginalisation; incidents in school spill into local streets; tensions outside find their way into school in the form of conflict, anxiety or mistrust. Amid widespread social and economic exclusion, when school responses appear to families to be punitive, bureaucratic or lacking in understanding, they can deepen the community's sense that institutions are not on their side. Exclusions and suspensions therefore become amplifiers of broader social marginalisation, creating a system in which exclusion inside and outside of school continually reinforce each other.

For many Roma families, this strengthens the belief that the systems and institutions around them are not built to protect, value

or support them, leaving education as another arena in which they must navigate marginalisation and risk largely on their own.

Exclusion within schools: Discipline, isolation and mistrust

These dynamics are reinforced by everyday practice in schools. Pupils reported being placed into separate classes, isolated or put on reduced timetables – moves which were frequently described as humiliating and pointless. As Tomas summarises: ‘Isolation is a waste of time. It’s like prison.’

Parents and young people were clear: school responses often miss the point and do little to resolve ongoing issues of bullying and violence. Jaro, a recent school leaver, described how he was excluded ‘three or four times in high school’ and received little or no academic support. Eli, another school leaver who is now working informally as a builder with other Roma, described repeated exclusions for fights that stemmed from bullying targeted at Roma pupils. When families had tried to explain the context – that a child had been bullied or provoked, or lives with ADHD – they had frequently felt unheard.

When parents come to talk, they don’t care what the parents say. They just make the rule.

From a schools perspective, staff reported seeing a rise in physical aggression, linking this to pupils’ difficulties in self-regulating after experiencing the COVID-19 lockdowns. However, this perspective was given to us by someone working in primary education rather than secondary, where most of these issues more frequently play out. There was also a worry about new patterns of online exposure and desensitisation. One professional observed:

Physical aggression and fighting. Refusal to follow instructions, which has resulted in damage

to walls, doors, kicking things. Those are the main reasons why pupils have been suspended ... I think social media has an impact, Snapchat, TikTok. The world feels like a more violent place because of what our children our seeing.

Later, the same interviewee, describing the experiences of all children, not just Roma, explained:

They don’t have the ability to self-regulate. They don’t have the ability to go out and play games that we’d have been brought up playing. All of those play skills have gone. You can introduce them to a game and they’ll love it. But they don’t know how to play Duck, Duck, Goose, they don’t know how to play What Time Is It, Mr Wolf? or Scarecrow Tig without really aggressively pushing. But I understand why children are not playing out. We live in a different world now. I can remember playing out on the street with my friends, but I don’t let my children. I want to know where they are every minute of the day. Is it more dangerous? I don’t know.

The teacher also commented on the thin line between support and sanctions in schools, describing the difficulty of investing time and developing personal relationships in order to ‘win one family over’ because the school’s phone calls would disproportionately be to the same families.

They are the parents who are getting the calls saying, ‘Your child’s had a fight today, your child’s punched the wall, smashed the door and refused to learn’.

The staff member’s frankness – ‘Touch wood, we have no suspensions yet. We’re three weeks in.’ – shows how fragile the gains are.

The next sections will take a closer look at school policies, in particular three commonly cited drivers of school exclusions – zero-tolerance policies, the erosion of pastoral support and market pressures. The policies that schools adopt and the

pressure on the school system do not exist in isolation: they are interpreted, resisted or absorbed into local patterns of mistrust, and can either break or deepen the cycles described above.

Zero tolerance: Control and compliance

Staff and community members described a tightening of behavioural regimes across Bradford schools, a move that many linked to the spread of large academy trusts and zero-tolerance models of discipline. Reflecting on the shift, an educational professional told us:

Our behaviour policies have become more strict. There's a very well-known trust within Bradford that's military style. You have an equipment check when you arrive at school. If you walk on the wrong side of the corridor, you're going to get corrected. I think for some of our families, that probably works, but I worry about what we are setting our children up for in the future by being so regimental. They can't make decisions for themselves. I've had to go to a policy that I think is stricter than something I've felt comfortable with, but I am being the person that our children need right now.

The veneer of control in Bradford schools had created a sense of unease for this teacher, leading her to worry about what it is teaching children. She worried that over-compliance and strictly enforced disciplinary policies were leaving children anxious rather than resilient, noting that pupils 'wake up in the night checking their pencil case', terrified of the morning equipment check: 'What are we creating for the future here? They're anxious about a pencil. It's not really a big mistake.'

For Roma pupils, cultures of surveillance and punishment collide with long histories of over-policing and cultural misunderstanding. The same practitioner explained:

Being really dictatorial with our

Gypsy Roma children doesn't work. They need movement breaks, physical release. It doesn't work trying to get them to attend to the same expectations as other pupils.

Attempts to enforce uniformity are frequently met with resistance, exclusion or withdrawal by Roma pupils, with strict school policies being identified as one of the primary sites of tension in schools. Joshua described how this feels from a community perspective:

You go to school and within five minutes you've got a headache because everybody is screaming. Maybe when you become a teacher, they tell you if you don't scream, you're not a teacher? The environment is so patronising, so disrespectful. What are you screaming at? I don't scream at my child, so why should a teacher?

For many pupils, but for Roma in particular, an environment built around control can feel culturally alien and emotionally unsafe. Jaro, a recent school leaver, reinforced this sense of dissonance.

If we're not getting treated like that at home, why should we be treated like that here? If you're not giving me respect, why should I give you respect?

Andrej, another recent school leaver, emphasised the feeling of domination that is experienced by Roma:

Teachers think they've got some type of control of Roma students. They'll tell you 'Sit down, go sit down!' and to them it's normal. But they go too far, trying to boss you around, going over the limit.

Rigid systems, fragile trust

Much of the discussion on behaviour in schools relates to notions of respect between community and school. When pupils already feel socially marginalised, corrective and harsh disciplinary practices reinforce the feeling that they do not belong and are not welcome.

Some schools in Bradford – mainly primary schools – have tried to soften this approach through creative practices. Small ‘corridor gyms’ or sensory breaks were mentioned as ways to meet children’s needs in culturally resonant ways. One practitioner explained:

It links quite nicely for our Gypsy Roma children, because they’re quite into wellbeing and fitness. They haven’t realised that when they go out to do the gym, it’s actually meeting an internal need.

These small yet effective adaptations show that inclusion does not mean enforcing conformity but rather involves designing systems that recognise and respond to difference.

For many Roma children in Bradford, though, behaviour policies have a much more punitive face. Isolation rooms, reduced timetables and off-site placements are experienced as warehousing. Andrej described being in an isolation room:

It was only for three, four hours. They put all the ‘bad’ students in one room, expecting us to mess about. For four hours a day you’re not really doing anything. If they kept you in the room and tried to work with you, it would have worked better. You’re missing out on other benefits as well, like your social [life].

Tomas added:

Isolation is a waste of time, like how are you gonna put kids that are bad in one place and then sit in one corner and be like, here’s the paper. You’re getting nothing from that day.

The absence of meaningful educational input and emotional support leaves many feeling adrift in education. As Jaro recalled, ‘I’ve been excluded three or four times. I don’t think I got any support.’

These experiences reinforce the perception that schools are about discipline and assimilation. Andrej described being put ‘on watch’ by a teacher who positioned him at the front of the class. ‘She didn’t give me stuff to do. She just wanted to keep an eye on me’. Lolo, sounding tired, added, ‘Schools are very strict nowadays.’

For Roma families, these rules appear to be applied unevenly and discriminatorily. Community members recounted experiences where English parents were spoken to calmly but Roma families were met with suspicion. ‘They’ll speak to an English parent and it feels different’, Andrej said. A parent described how stereotypes persist across siblings: ‘My daughter had fights in school, so when my son started they already said “You’re going to be like your sister”. They were watching him too much.’

This institutional gaze extends beyond the classroom. Joshua described a growing sense of hostility:

Now, before our kids even start, schools like Oasis or Grange are already preparing for the consequences. They see Czech or Slovak names and start contacting social care, just to be on standby. It’s a hostile environment.

Parents who try to challenge decisions often feel powerless. Joshua again explained:

That’s created a culture where parents are breaking down in our offices because they can’t communicate with the school. They come home and find their child excluded again. Teachers are angry, parents are angry. Now it’s just two angry sides fighting.

When care becomes contingent

Zero-tolerance policies supposedly promote fairness through uniformity. Equality of rule, however, does not equal equality of experience. For children who face discrimination, poverty or trauma, consistency without context can feel like control without care.

In Roma communities, where histories of surveillance and exclusion are intergenerational, regimental discipline feels all too familiar. The most effective interventions found in this research were those that combined structure with empathy, high challenge with high support. Behaviour policy should not just manage conduct but understand that all behaviour is communication and be responsive to the needs of different communities. Reimagined in this way, behaviour policies can move from discipline to a pathway which builds belonging.

Yet even where teachers recognise the need for empathy and flexibility, their capacity to act is shrinking. As discussed earlier, pastoral teams, specialist services and trusted intermediaries that once helped between school and community have been steadily dismantled. What remains is a landscape of growing complexity and dwindling support: more students with unmet needs and fewer professionals unable to respond, with schools reliant on individual staff doing meaningful work on thin resources. As one practitioner told us:

Without my behaviour and inclusion manager, it would be impossible. She's the cog that makes it all turn. If I didn't have her, or couldn't afford to have her, I wouldn't have anyone that could bring these children together. She does community work with our families, she runs a community fridge. She's literally the organ grinder of everything these families are accessing.

This is a telling detail. Schools are surviving on the commitment of a few exceptional individuals rather than on well-resourced systems. When one person holds all of the relational

threads between pupils, families and staff, inclusion becomes precarious. The loss of a staff member, a change in leadership or a drop in school funding can unravel years of trust in an instant.

That fragility is mirrored in Joshua's story about serving Roma soup at lunchtime. This small, low-cost act improved attendance and morale, but it disappeared when the supportive teacher who sanctioned it left.

This reveals a deeper structural failure too. Inclusion depends on personal goodwill rather than institutional design. When belonging is contingent on the presence of an empathetic teacher or support staff, it is fragile rather than sustainable. Too often, the wider school system is not equipped to develop systems of support. Staff spoke about being prevented from scaling successful programmes because of the funding pressures of short-term commissioning:

We got a Gypsy Roma charity to work with the family and then within three weeks, the local authority turned around and went 'Oh, it's £50 a session. We can't carry on paying for this'. So between us and the PRU [Pupil Referral Unit], we carried on paying because it was important and made an impact for the family.

Funding constraints such as these are lethal for building trust. Schools and communities co-produce solutions, only for these to be withdrawn because they do not fit within narrow budget lines. The result is stop/start provision that convinces families not to invest emotionally in school contact.

Neurodiverse children face these structural gaps most sharply. Elena described how schools disciplinary policies often override pastoral care:

My son's got ADHD, they put him in this box room where you couldn't hear the child. Everything in there was really soft. I thought, is this a jail? It's because they found out I was Roma and talking to Roma families, this all started then with

my son. He was red, he was scared and crying for mummy. I kicked off. The school told me I needed to calm down or they would call the police. How do you want me to calm down if my son's got special needs? I give you all the paperwork and you know that he's got special needs!

The same lack of pastoral support shows up in teachers' responses to disability more broadly. Lolo described pupils mocking an autistic child during maths class while a teacher completely ignored it:

All the kids were laughing at him. And the teacher didn't say a thing. Why should they be allowed to take the piss out of an autistic child and the teacher says nothing?

Moments such as these reveal a wider truth about the education system: schools and staff are overstretched and under-supported, meaning that empathy often gives way to avoidance. Teachers may not be indifferent, but they are operating in systems that value compliance over care. Whether this means failing to intervene in bullying, overlooking additional needs or misunderstanding cultural context, the pattern is the same. Individual pupils become invisible in institutions designed to manage rather than understand.

Ultimately, when the system can no longer manage a child within these narrow parameters, exclusion is used. This was felt acutely in Bradford, as explained to us by a primary school teacher:

Teachers are really hard to get in Bradford. We had a really good skills team where I'd come from in Leed and Kirklees. There's a real gap in that mid-tier support that is pushing some headteachers to exclude because you know that

they're going to get the support they need at a PRU, support that they're not going to get here, and that's a real shame. Plugging it here would be so much better for our children.

The post-pandemic years have intensified these pressures. Pupils are arriving with more complex needs, greater emotional volatility and less access to early support: 89 per cent of teachers, including 93 per cent of primary teachers, say that they have seen greater emotional and social issues in the classroom since the pandemic.⁷⁰ Each year, suspensions are climbing to record highs, signalling a shrinking safety net that too many pupils are falling through. Schools, especially in deprived areas such as Bradford, cannot continue to absorb these pressures without systematic reform.

As the primary school teacher we spoke to put it:

Special schools are handling it really well. They've got the money to do that. They've got the training to do it ... The children who are the most difficult need the greatest amount of support. How we put support around them is going to have to drastically change in the next five years.

The issue is no longer whether individual schools can go the extra mile but whether the system itself can evolve to meet the realities of today's classrooms. Without new initiatives on care and inclusion – approaches that restore capacity, training and relational infrastructure – the promise of education will remain out of reach for many Roma children. The next section explores how that logic has reshaped school priorities and hollowed out the social purpose of education.

70 Save the Children UK (2024) 'Thousands of teachers reveal "deep problems" in classrooms four years on from school lockdown', 16 March,

Markets and metrics: Control and moral strain

What holds all of these threads together is not the failure of individual schools but the architecture of the system itself. The erosion of care, the rise of zero-tolerance policies, the fragility of inclusion, and the breakdown of trust between schools and Roma families all stem from a deeper logic: the marketisation of education.

Over the past decade, competition, accountability metrics and funding pressures have recast schools as performance-driven organisations rather than public institutions of care. League tables, inspection frameworks and funding formulas have turned children into data points and teachers into risk managers. Success is measured in attainment scores and failure – whether of a pupil or of a school – is treated as an individual shortcoming rather than a systemic one.

The educational professional we spoke to articulated this with striking honesty:

League tables make it really hard. I got the lowest outcomes in my [academy] trust last year, and that can't happen again. I literally will not be sitting here next year if I do. I come under no illusions.

She continued:

But if a child leaves me at the end of Year 6 without a standardised 100, they've got a 9 per cent chance of getting a maths GCSE. If you don't get a maths GCSE, your chances of employment are diminished. The need to improve outcomes is an important agenda. But we all know as professionals that we're making it work until we can't afford to.

The impossible bind of marketisation means that school leaders are forced to choose between relational care and statistical survival. The reflection

shared with us above captures the moral exhaustion of market accountability, where compassion for children must be justified in terms of future productivity.

The consequences of this are vast and affect all students, but the Roma families we spoke to are experiencing its sharpest edges. This is found not just in headline statistics concerning suspension rates but in the unrecorded experiences that precede them. Segregated 'special' classes and reduced subject access are described as normal practice:

Every school has a special class for Roma. Every Bradford school. They put us all together during English, maths, science.

This is a form of informal streaming, stemming from market incentives. When a school's reputation and funding are tied to exam results, the incentive to sideline pupils who might 'drag down the data' becomes structurally embedded. What appears to be a behavioural or cultural issue often disguises the fact that these decisions are management strategies for survival.

This dynamic shapes exclusion decisions. As Joshua recalled, a minor disagreement over wearing a jacket led to his removal from lessons essential to his future. Teachers who once supported him began to act differently as accountability pressures rose, typically in Year 11:

In year 11 ... I had a really good relationship with some teachers. Never any issues. But suddenly, they were acting differently. They took me out of ICT [information and communication technology]. Something I needed for my future.

In a system designed around exams and performance metrics, teachers' relational instincts are overruled by institutional risk management.

Pupils with specific needs and communities that are marginalised become liabilities, and empathy becomes a luxury. For many Roma young people, this is confirmed in what Andrej plainly articulated:

The system itself is just to make you work. It's nothing to make anything special. It's just for you to listen to orders.

Towards a different future

Yet in these conversations there was also a different version of what education could offer, if it were to recognise that skills, culture and belonging are foundations of learning.

Joshua: All of these [members of the focus group], 80 per cent of them, are labourers. They can probably build a house on their own.

Simon (researcher): And what would you think if schooling was less about maths, English and science, and more about skills?

Eli: It would be next level.

This exchanges shows that, against commonly adopted cultural deficit models, Roma do not reject education – but there is a frustration with a model that does not see the value in what communities already know. The Roma community in Bradford spoke with pride about practical skills, cultural continuity and care as forms of intelligence – qualities that the current system neither measures nor rewards:

We're definitely pro-education ... But the system makes Roma the lowest. Actually being skilful, knowing how to build, knowing how to cook, that's education too.

At its core throughout the discussion

with the community, there was a call for recognition. For education to work, it must expand what counts as knowledge and recognise that both trust and cultural literacy are not distractions from learning – they are learning. As Elena reflected:

It's getting worse, because who we are is not out there. We need more teachers to actually learn about Roma, about Gypsies, about who we are.

The current education system, built around market competition, is not designed to deliver this. The conversations in this research, both with the teacher and with the community, show that an alternative exists. There is a shared desire for dignity, skills and understanding when it comes to the educational experiences of Roma children, but these desires are too often curtailed by performance-driven outcomes and funding restrictions which mean that care and compassion are frequently replaced with compliance and punishment.

The challenge in Bradford and beyond is to rebuild education not as a marketplace but as a place where every child is recognised not as data to be managed but as an individual to be known and nurtured.

Policy recommendations

The voices of Roma children, parents and community members in Bradford reveal a consistent set of challenges and dynamics. Schooling is experienced as externally imposed rather than personally meaningful. Early contact with schools, language barriers and fears of surveillance contribute to mistrust, while broader social exclusion, including discrimination in employment, housing and community life, reinforces disengagement.

Structural factors, marketisation, zero-tolerance policies and the erosion of pastoral support amplify these experiences. Inclusion efforts that rely on individual teachers or small acts of recognition, while meaningful, are fragile without systemic support.

Despite these barriers, Roma children and families do aspire to

education, but in ways that connect to identity, agency and belonging. Effective strategies require not only structural reform but everyday cultural recognition. Schools must be spaces where Roma are seen, respected and supported, not just managed. The following policy recommendations build on these insights.

1. School-level actions

1.1. Broaden the definition of school success

- The current Ofsted inspection framework places too much emphasis on attainment and attendance, which can often result in inclusion being overlooked. We propose that exclusion rates and elective home education (EHE) withdrawals be included in school inspections, with schools required to justify high figures. Mandatory recording of withdrawal reasons would provide accountability and highlight coercive practices.

1.2. Introduce relational practice training for all staff

- Instead of relying on a single 'inclusion champion', all staff should receive basic training on relational practice, trauma-informed approaches and cultural competence (especially around Roma families). Peer-led 'twilight' sessions can deliver this without major funding.
- Schools must work to ensure inclusion is a shared responsibility across a whole school, not assigned to a single liaison officer. Appointing a 'Race and Social Justice' lead can provide strategic coordination while ensuring all staff are trained and supported to promote cultural understanding and inclusion in their daily practice.
- Local authorities should provide regular funding for schools to conduct cultural humility training. Such training must be a sustained commitment, constantly refreshed, and not a simple one-off tick-box exercise.
- Local authorities must increase outreach to Romani Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller families in early years settings, and support school readiness via children's centres and health visitors.

1.3. Rebalance behaviour policies towards repair and support

- Schools should move away from 'zero-tolerance' rules and adopt restorative and preventative behaviour frameworks. These should emphasise an understanding of behaviour as communication and embed clear escalation routes which involve pastoral, not just disciplinary, staff.
- Ofsted must conduct a thematic review of behaviour policies across the country. This review should have a specific focus on the contribution of such policies to the disproportionate exclusion of ethnically minoritised children.
- The DfE should conduct a review of its 'Behaviour in Schools: Advice for Head Teachers and School Staff' guidance and ensure that it recommends a broader shift towards early intervention, contextual understanding and proportionate discipline.

1.4. Celebrate and integrate Roma culture within the curriculum

- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) History Month (June) should be used to build curriculum links, through arts, oral history and local heritage projects. This should be a starting point for wider engagement and not just adopted by schools with large Roma populations.
- The DfE's curriculum review should formally acknowledge the importance of embedding Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller histories, cultures and contributions into the national curriculum. This is essential to promote visibility, foster a sense of belonging and support inclusive education for all pupils.
- All local authorities should play a proactive role in supporting the celebration of GRT History Month, by developing and distributing high-quality resources to enable meaningful engagement across the education sector.
- Schools should actively recruit and retain teaching and support staff from Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities, ensuring greater representation and lived experience in schools.
- Schools should celebrate and foreground positive Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller role models through the curriculum, including across subjects and learning materials to challenge deficit models and broaden pupils' aspirations.
- Funding from local authorities must be made available to support Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller attendance mentors and family mediators to address disengagement and school refusal.
- The DfE must provide specific bursaries for members of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities to complete teacher training.

1.5. Establish local peer networks for inclusion leads

- In cities such as Bradford, local authorities, working with academy trusts, should establish informal local clusters (across academies, local authority schools and Pupil Referral Units) to enable inclusion and behaviour leads to share strategies, contacts and resources, bypassing competitive silos and support mutual learning.

1.6. Co-produce support plans with families

- Parent meetings should be used as collaborative planning sessions for this purpose. Co-designed inclusion plans build ownership and reduce adversarial relationships. Schools can draw on local Roma mediators to help build bridges with the community.

2. System-level structural reforms

2.1. Reinvest in mid-tier support and local inclusion hubs

- Central government should reverse the hollowing out of local authority services, by funding multidisciplinary 'Inclusion Hubs' that provide early intervention, specialist advice (on SEND, English as an additional language, attendance) and cultural liaison to groups of schools.

2.2. Reform accountability metrics

- There must be a shift from reliance on raw attainment and exclusion data to inclusive performance indicators, e.g. tracking re-engagement, wellbeing and reduction in managed moves. Ofsted and multi-academy trusts' performance-monitoring dashboards should weight such indicators equally with exam outcomes.

2.3. Mandate fair admissions and anti-segregation oversight

- The Department for Education should strengthen accountability for schools found to be streaming, isolating or informally segregating Roma pupils by requiring local authorities and academy trusts to introduce an annual equity review for local authorities and trusts, including anonymised qualitative reporting for families.

2.4. Restore culturally competent support services

- Central government should introduce ring-fenced funding for services such as the EMAG and TES, either locally commissioned or centrally supported. Priority should go to staff with lived community knowledge.
- Local authorities must provide ring-fenced inclusion funding specifically for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller pupils and support groups.

2.5. Reform funding incentives

- The Department for Education should introduce an Inclusion Premium, similar to the Pupil Premium, that rewards schools for retaining, not excluding, vulnerable children. Funding should follow the child while they remain included, rather than rewarding high-attaining schools.

2.6. Integrate vocational and skill-based pathways from KS3

- Areas with high exclusion rates should pilot alternative curriculum models, blending core literacy and numeracy with trade, technical and community-based learning. This would recognise and value diverse forms of intelligence and practical skills, as voiced by Roma participants.
- The DfE must issue Key Stage 4 and 5 guidance to encourage vocational routes aligned with the cultural and economic contexts of Romani Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller communities.
- The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) must reform Attainment 8 to ensure a more balanced valuation of academic and vocational qualifications that respects all learning routes. English and maths remain essential, but vocational and alternative subjects must also be properly recognised.

2.7 Commission a national Inquiry on exclusions and marketisation

- Building on the Timpson Review, the DfE should commission an updated, post-COVID-19 review examining how funding, league tables and inspection frameworks drive exclusion and segregation, especially for communities most affected – Black Caribbean pupils, FSM recipients, those with SEND and, in particular, Roma pupils.

Excluded:

Misrecognition, control and the Roma experience in Bradford schools

**Simon Hood
Grace preston**

