

Working with Gypsy, Roma, Traveller children and young people: Effective practice for Youth Offending Teams*

Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT) communities

The term *Gypsy, Roma, Traveller* (GRT) refers to several ethnic groups, each of which have their own cultural identity. It includes Romany Gypsies, Irish and Scottish Travellers, and various Roma groups, recognised and protected by law through the Equality Act 2010.¹ Like other ethnic groups, GRT communities have their own complex histories, languages, traditions and customs, which are passed on through generations.

The extent of these communities may not be fully known: A 2017 Traveller Movement survey found that 76% of the 196 GRT respondents have, at some point, hidden their ethnicity to avoid discrimination.² The 2011 census estimated that 58,000 Gypsy and Irish Travellers, approximately 0.1% of the total population, currently live in England and Wales.³ This is, however, believed to be an underestimation.

There are some values, beliefs and practices that various GRT communities have in common. Although these are shared values, the extent to which they are adopted varies from group to group and family to family. These include:

- A history of, or current nomadism.
- Greater self-reliance/independence (for e.g. through self-employment).
- High importance placed on children, family and relatives.
- Strong oral tradition.
- Strong emphasis placed on tidiness and cleanliness.
- Strong importance placed on family and community gatherings/ceremonies, such as weddings, anniversaries, funerals.⁴
- Clear, traditional gender roles.⁵

It is important, however, to recognise that there can be significant cultural and practical differences between the different groups. For example, some Roma groups might experience different barriers to access to services, as they might not speak English.

Myth-busting⁶

Myth: All GRT live in caravans.

Fact: Whilst historically GRT communities have lived a nomadic lifestyle, the 2011 census found that 76% of GRT in England and Wales lived in houses, flats or maisonettes. GRT living in settled accommodation face similar discrimination and difficulties in accessing services to those living in mobile or temporary homes.

Myth: GRT do not usually work and live off benefits.

Fact: Whilst traditionally GRT individuals have undertaken work they could do on the move and seasonal jobs (e.g. seasonal agricultural labour, peddling, basket making), this is slowly changing - more of them settle and take on similar jobs to everyone else. Only a small number of GRT receive benefits. For some, having no fixed address makes it harder to access benefits.

Myth: GRT families don't have to send their children to school.

Fact: GRT children have the same legal right to education as any other children, and their parents have the same duties as other parents.

Myth: GRT individuals don't pay taxes.

Fact: All GRT living on a local authority or privately-owned site pay council tax, rent, gas, electricity and all other charges as other households.

*The insights presented in this effective practice brief were gathered from various published sources and engagement with key stakeholders, including third-sector organisations representing GRT communities and Youth Offending Teams with experience of working with GRT children.

¹ Equality Act 2010. Available [here](#).

² Traveller Movement (2017), '*The last acceptable form of racism? The pervasive discrimination and prejudice experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities*'. Available [here](#).

³ Office for National Statistics (2014), '*2011 Census analysis: What does the 2011 Census tell us about the characteristics of Gypsy or Irish Travellers in England and Wales?*'. Available [here](#).

⁴ Traveller Movement (2019), '*Gypsy, Roma, Traveller History and Culture*'. Available [here](#).

⁵ The Children's Society (2007), '*This is Who We Are: A study of the views and identities of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller young people in England*'. Available [here](#).

⁶ Flintshire County Council (2014), '*Myths & Facts: Gypsies and Travellers*'. Available [here](#).

GRT communities and disadvantage

GRT communities face multiple disadvantages. Life expectancy for GRT individuals is 10-12 years less than for non-Travellers, and their health status is much poorer. GRT children have the highest school exclusion rates and the lowest academic attainment compared to all other ethnic groups.⁷ In 2016/17, a quarter of Gypsy/Romany and 20% of Irish Traveller children did not go into education or employment after reaching the age of 16, with some disengaging from education much earlier on. This compares to a national average of 5%.⁸

GRT children face discrimination and bullying on a daily basis: 91% of the 202 GRT respondents of a Traveller Movement survey said they have experienced discrimination because of their ethnicity at some point. To avoid it, many hide their ethnicity by: not disclosing it, speaking with a different accent, giving friends' settled addresses when required, and pretending to be Irish or Mediterranean.⁹

GRT children in the Youth Justice System

Although a lack of reliable data makes it hard to determine exact numbers, survey findings show that GRT children are overrepresented in the youth justice system (YJS). A 2018/19 HMIP report found that 8% of children in young offender institutions (YOIs), and 13% in secure training centres (STCs), identified themselves as Travellers.¹⁰ This compares to 0.1% GRT individuals in the general population, as listed in the 2011 Census.¹¹

Anecdotal evidence from stakeholders suggests that GRT children are more likely to be given custodial sentences, due to fear that they would abscond if given community sentences.

Whilst in custody, GRT children face various issues. The 2018/19 HMIP report found that 30% of GRT boys in STCs and YOIs reported feeling unsafe at the time of the survey, compared to 12% of other children; 20% of them reported having their canteen or property stolen by other children, compared to 5%; and 19% reported experiencing bullying or victimisation from other children, compared to 6%.¹²

How to support GRT children and young people

Challenge and address discrimination. Under the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies have a duty to have due regard to advancing equality and fostering good relations for protected groups.¹³ Youth justice practitioners should respect this duty by challenging and addressing discrimination against GRT communities wherever it is found. It is also important for practitioners to note when a GRT child has been subject to bullying and victimisation and ensure that appropriate provision is put in place to support that child.

Make it as safe as possible for GRT children to discuss and disclose their ethnicity. Not feeling safe is a significant factor in GRT children not wanting to disclose their heritage. Practitioners should reassure GRT children that their identities will not be disclosed without their permission, unless certain safeguarding concerns intervene (e.g. the child is at risk of harming themselves or others), and should ensure that this is understood by all members of staff.

Consider cultural differences and provide tailored support. Understanding that GRT children have different cultures is a key starting point for providing appropriate support for this group. Practitioners should make use of information provided by other agencies that the child might have come into contact with (e.g. school, social services) to get a good understanding of the child's history and their individual needs. It is also important not to make assumptions that GRT children know each other or are connected, and to treat each child as an individual. Practitioners are encouraged to think about ways to tailor the delivery of support and their engagement around the child's preferences. For instance, feedback from GRT communities suggests that GRT children may not want to meet together in a forum and may prefer to be consulted individually.

Build trusting relationships with GRT children and their families. Given the level of discrimination that GRT communities face in society, their trust in authorities is usually low and staff might need to put extra effort in building relationships with these groups. Practitioners should recognise that this may take time and should not be put off by the potential initial reluctance of GRT communities to engage with the service. GRT children should be given time and

⁷ House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2019), 'Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities'. Available [here](#).

⁸ Department for Education (2019), 'Destinations of school pupils after key stage 4 (usually aged 16 years)'. Available [here](#).

⁹ Traveller Movement (2017), 'The last acceptable form of racism?'. Available [here](#).

¹⁰ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2020), 'Children in Custody 2018-19: An analysis of 12-18-year-olds' perceptions of their experiences in secure training centres and young offender institutions'. Available [here](#).

¹¹ Office for National Statistics (2014), '2011 Census analysis: What does the 2011 Census tell us about the characteristics of Gypsy or Irish Travellers in England and Wales?'. Available [here](#).

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ Equality Act (2010), 'Section 149 Public Sector Equality Duty'. Available [here](#).

space so that they can adjust to the service without withdrawing. Listening to the concerns of GRT families and offering support, in a non-intrusive manner, wherever possible, can help with building trust and improving engagement.

Provide help in understanding rules and structures. As with other children and families, many of the rules and structures involved in the YJS will be unfamiliar to GRT children and their families. Practitioners should take time to explain these, trying to overcome any potential barriers to understanding (e.g. using visual materials and simple language in cases in which the child or the parents might have limited literacy). One of the aims of these efforts should be to ensure that the child is not disadvantaged from complying with any requirements of their sentence due to a lack of understanding of what is expected of them.

Recognise the importance of family, community and cultural practices. Strong family ties, and an emphasis placed on community and specific cultural practices, might mean that GRT children who get in trouble with the law might feel like they are losing the support of their family/community, or that they have let their family down. This might impact on their behaviour and wellbeing. It is important for practitioners to embrace a whole-family approach when engaging with GRT children, including thinking about the role of the father as the head of the family, but also the role of mothers, siblings and extended community, and engaging the family at each stage of the child's journey in the YJS. When GRT children talk about their families, practitioners should spend time listening - this can be a sign of increasing trust.

Support conflict resolution where it is needed. Dispute resolution within GRT communities is usually kept within the extended family. For many issues, it is an effective way of dealing with problems; for others, this may not be appropriate. There is a potential that this way of managing conflict is seen as acceptable by GRT young people, so sensitivity around understanding this when introducing them to appropriate ways to manage conflict should be thought of.

Celebrate GRT cultures and break down prejudices and misconceptions. Encourage cross-cultural learning between GRT children/families/community representatives and members of staff, and ensure that members of staff are appropriately trained to deal with cultural sensitivities. Celebrating events – such as the GRT History Month (June), carefully-designed and delivered cultural training, myth-busting sessions and cultural exchange opportunities - can all help in breaking down barriers, challenging stereotypes, prejudices and misconceptions, and raising awareness.

Consider increasing GRT representation in your staff and on different decision-making panels. If working in an area with a high GRT population, practitioners are encouraged to consider ways of improving GRT representation in their workforce, but also on different decision-making panels, such as Referral Order Panels. Having a GRT professional involved in the child's journey can help in building trust with the child and their family. It can also help safeguard panels from conscious or unconscious bias and raise awareness of specific needs that GRT children might have.

Pay extra attention when using translation services. This applies to cases in which the child, usually a Roma child, does not speak English as their first language. Practitioners should find out from the family and the child what language they wish to use - in some cases this could be only Romany, in others the child and their family might speak Romany and another language, usually the language of the country in which they might have lived in the past (e.g. Slovak, Polish). This is to ensure that there is no confusion when contacting translation services. Practitioners should treat with caution what the interpreter translates, sense-checking for any potential bias and challenging this, where needed. Feedback from some Youth Offending Teams suggests that there have been instances in which perceived bias against a child's ethnicity by the interpreter was felt to affect the quality of the translation.

Support GRT children with their education and training. Recognise that GRT children's perceived educational ability may reflect family responsibilities and travelling, not a lack of desire to learn. GRT children may be willing to engage with education, if given the right opportunities and support. Feedback from GRT communities suggests that education and training that catches their interest will be far more effective in engaging these children. Modular learning, with rewards at the end of each module, is also a helpful way of encouraging them to succeed. Support with literacy can also make a significant difference for some GRT children.

Consider using restorative justice. The use of restorative justice is encouraged in the YJS, and there is evidence to suggest this can have benefits for both the offender and the victims.¹⁴ Engaging GRT children in restorative justice can be key in supporting their rehabilitation. Understanding issues as relationships and within the wider community context, and ensuring that the child can share these experiences without fear of prejudice, can facilitate resolution.

¹⁴ Youth Justice Board (2019), 'How to use community interventions: section 6 case management guidance'. Available [here](#).