

Article

Gypsies' and Travellers' lived experiences, overview, England and Wales: 2022

Overview of qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of Gypsies and Travellers in England and Wales.

Contact:
Alex Buckley, Shona Horter,
Dawn Snape (media contact)
equalities@ons.gov.uk
+44 1633 455674

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1 . Other pages in this release

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2 . Background to this research

In October 2021, the Inclusive Data Taskforce, a group of independent experts, made their [recommendations](#) to the National Statistician on how to ensure that everyone counts and is counted in UK data and evidence. They placed particular emphasis on understanding more about the views and circumstances of those currently under-represented in UK data. They suggested using a wider range of methods to explore their lived experiences, and to engage with communities throughout all phases of the research.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) commissioned Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group in November 2021 to collaborate on a research project into the experiences, priorities and needs of Gypsy and Traveller communities in England and Wales. These are some of the currently under-represented groups identified by the Taskforce.

Over 50 community members and 30 central and local government officials from England and Wales participated in either in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, or both. These were analysed to identify themes and patterns relating to people's life experiences, focusing on areas such as homes, education, health, and justice.

An open-ended, life history approach was taken to interviews, to ensure they were participant-led. This open-ended approach was augmented by questions about specific areas of life, such as housing and health, based on recommendations from the project's advisory group, comprising community members, civil society organisations (CSO) workers and academics. This helped to ensure the relevance of the research findings both to Gypsy and Traveller communities and to policymakers and service providers working with them.

The advisory group also recommended that the experiences of Roma people should be the focus of separate research. This is because their priorities and the issues affecting them are perceived to be different to those of Gypsy and Traveller communities. For this reason, this study only included participants identifying as of Gypsy or Traveller ethnicity.

We aimed to ensure diversity of characteristics and circumstances among those participating in the research to reflect the wider diversity among Gypsies and Travellers in England and Wales. As participants were recruited through Gypsy and Traveller CSOs, the findings may best reflect the characteristics and circumstances of those in contact with, or known to, these organisations.

A brief [video](#) of the main findings is also available.

Use of quotes

In this report, "community members" and "participants" refers to people currently living in England and Wales, aged 16 years and over, identifying as Gypsy or Traveller, who took part in this research. Where quotes have been used from local or central government participants, this is explicitly stated. We aim to portray the views of participants and to reflect their words as closely as possible. Some quotes have been edited for language and grammar to improve accessibility, without changing the content or meaning.

3 . Culture and identities

Participants' life stories suggest that people differ in their desire to choose a nomadic lifestyle today, and the personal value it has to them. This can be affected by their individual circumstances, such as health, ageing, family relationships and priorities, and employment. Some Gypsies and Travellers also felt that legislation in England and Wales makes it challenging to live this way, in practice.

The importance of close-knit family and social groups, and of shared moral values, was described by participants as fundamental to Gypsy and Traveller culture, communities, and well-being. At the same time, there was recognition that things may be changing. Some people described widening disparities between individuals and groups, and between generations across many aspects of life. This left some participants with a sense of uprootedness and loss of belonging. Others saw new opportunities for themselves and the next generation, embracing new ideas in relation to education, housing, healthcare, and gender roles.

There was also diversity in how participants described the nature of their relationships with others from non-travelling communities. This varied between people and situations. Some said they felt generally comfortable and accepted by non-Travellers while others were more wary, having had more difficult encounters in the past. The nature of their past experiences also affected their decisions about whether to share or avoid sharing their ethnicity with others. People also described situations in which they felt "outed" because their ethnicity became known to others in ways over which they had no control. Throughout discussions about sharing their identity, participants recurrently expressed a desire to be recognised as an individual, not on the basis of preconceived ideas about their ethnic group.

4 . Homes

Participants' living situations varied greatly. Some lived in houses or flats (often referred to as bricks and mortar), some lived in chalets on private land with only a small number of neighbours, and others on large sites owned and managed by the local authority.

Some participants continued to live a mostly nomadic lifestyle, stopping at transit sites, or on the side of the road where they could; however, this was described as increasingly difficult. They described a lack of authorised stopping places, apprehension about being moved on by police if they stop elsewhere, and fears of prosecution because of the recently introduced [Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act \(2022\)](#). Among those who opted to live in a house, or on one site permanently, some lamented the loss of a nomadic lifestyle. Others said they had adapted and, in some cases, preferred living in bricks and mortar.

Although the accommodation needs and preferences of participants varied, there were fundamentals people wanted; which included living somewhere they felt safe, with access to basic amenities like electricity, water, and showers. Living near to loved ones was also described as a priority by participants, as was feeling they have a degree of choice over where, and how, they live.

In circumstances where these basic conditions were not met, people described experiencing negative impacts on their mental and physical well-being.

Increasing provision of permanent and transit sites, designed through consultation with communities, was suggested by participants as a way forward in addressing the current housing and accommodation challenges reported by Gypsies and Travellers and by central and local government participants.

5 . Health

Participants described experiencing a range of health conditions, which, coupled with delayed healthcare seeking, and barriers to accessing healthcare, could create vulnerability to negative health outcomes among Gypsies and Travellers.

Participants identified environmental factors, such as site locations and standards, and occupational hazards, which they believed to have negatively impacted their own health and the health of others in their communities. They also described challenges in registering with a GP surgery without a fixed address, particularly those living in sites or at the roadside. Delayed access to healthcare could have negative health consequences through delays in diagnoses and treatment, as well as in screening and preventative care.

Experiences of perceived discrimination and derogatory attitudes of health care providers were also described by those who had accessed health services. This could further undermine access to healthcare, as participants worried about whether they would receive help, and whether they would face negative judgement or discrimination.

Familiarity, understanding, and open communication with trusted health practitioners appeared to support access and engagement with healthcare.

6 . Education and employment

Participants shared varied histories of access to education and educational attainment. This ranged from some who had never been to school, to others who had completed compulsory education, or gained higher level qualifications. While some spoke of enjoying their education, others described having faced numerous challenges, including perceived discriminatory behaviour from other students and teachers.

Education and skills development were valued by participants, particularly for children, and were seen as important to employment prospects. More positive accounts of educational experiences were described by those who felt accepted by teachers, and able to be themselves at school without hiding their ethnicity. However, such positive experiences were not universal. Participants also cited perceived discrimination, inflexibility of the education system, and aspects of the curriculum seen as contradictory to Gypsy and Traveller values as reasons for withdrawing their children from mainstream education.

Participants described barriers to employment, including a lack of skills, education or formal qualifications, and perceived discrimination from employers, colleagues, and the settled community. They spoke of facing difficulties in re-skilling from traditional occupations to new types of work, including a lack of technical skills. The introduction of new licensing requirements, for example for selling scrap metal, could also make continuing employment in occupations traditionally common among Gypsies and Travellers more difficult.

7 . Justice

Participants recurrently described fearing authorities, feeling misunderstood, and a sense of being treated unfairly, linked to their own and others' experiences.

An aspect of this was a recurrently described fear of the police and a perception that they are untrustworthy, which made participants reluctant to report crime, or seek help from the police.

Perceived disproportionality and a sense of injustice threaded through participants' accounts of experiences with the police including in the described use of force, presumption of criminality and frequency of arrests, denial of bail and imprisonment. This was at odds with participants' own perception of their communities as microcosms of broader society, where the majority do not engage in crime.

Several laws were also viewed as criminalising Gypsies' and Travellers' ways of life, adding to a sense of marginalisation and injustice. Community participants were not always aware of the introduction of such laws, or familiar with their content, including the [Scrap Metal Dealers Act \(2013\)](#) and the [Control of Horses Act \(2015\)](#). This led to participants describing the risk of inadvertently breaking the law, for example through engaging in occupations seen as traditional among Gypsies and Travellers, such as collecting scrap metal (see [education and employment bulletin](#)).

Understanding, awareness, respect and involvement of Gypsies and Travellers within systems and processes affecting their lives were seen as important for improving relationships and prospects for the future.

Examples were also shared of more positive relationships with the police, which were aided by familiarity, for example through engaging with an established community liaison officer over time, who listened to the community and was viewed as understanding Gypsy and Traveller culture. Police officers being more flexible in their requests, such as allowing people time to move on, was also seen as helping to have a greater sense of mutual trust, respect, and more positive engagement.

8 . Gypsies and Travellers in England and Wales, lived experiences

Please note, as this is a qualitative study based on data collected from interviews and focus groups, there is no accompanying dataset.

9 . Methodology

More information about the background and rationale, approach to sampling and recruitment, design of materials, strengths and limitations and approach to analysis can be found in [our accompanying methodology article](#).

10 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 7 December 2022, ONS website, article, [Gypsies' and Travellers' lived experiences, overview, England and Wales: 2022](#)