

# Gypsy and Traveller Children

*'The experience of racism and negative stereotyping was pervasive and was automatically anticipated... Most described a feeling of complete rejection by society'.<sup>1</sup>*

*'Ordinary, innocent people – hard-working, normal, straightforward people...want to get on with their lives in peace, but they want protection under the law when they are invaded by this scum. They are scum, and I use the word advisedly. People who do what these people have done do not deserve the same human rights as my decent constituents going about their everyday lives.'<sup>2</sup>*

## Introduction

A Mori poll revealed that one in three respondents admitted personal prejudice against Gypsies and Travellers.<sup>3</sup> This prejudice manifests itself in many ways, including through aggressive and negative media coverage. The tabloid campaign, 'Stamp on a Camp' in spring 2005 was prompted by the Housing Act 2004 (the Act gives local councils stronger powers to act against unauthorised camps whilst placing a statutory duty on councils to assess and provide for the needs of Gypsies and Travellers who wish to live in caravans). Media coverage of the expansion of the European Union provoked fears about 'problem' Eastern European immigrants entering the UK. On a more subtle level, public services are generally planned and delivered for children and families in sedentary communities. While media and political attention often focuses on linking Gypsies and Travellers with crime and anti-social behaviour, the dominant theme presented by reviewing research on Gypsy and Traveller children and young people is that of social exclusion.<sup>4</sup>

There is an increasing body of work exploring the experiences of Gypsy and Traveller communities. Most studies are localised because Gypsy and Travellers are inconsistently recorded in national monitoring figures.

## Statistics

Roma Gypsy (often referred to as English Gypsy) and Irish Traveller are recognised ethnic groups according to race relations legislation,<sup>5</sup> but there was no dedicated category for these groups in the 2001 Census. This means that we do not have a clear idea of the size of the Gypsy and Traveller communities. An estimate of the Gypsy and Traveller population can be gained from the bi-annual Caravan Count carried out by local authorities for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The July 2004 count revealed nearly 15,000 Gypsy and Traveller caravans in England. The count has been criticised for being inaccurate and is treated with suspicion by Gypsies and Travellers who are not involved in the counting process.<sup>6</sup> The Traveller Law Research Unit estimates a UK Travelling population of around 200,000.<sup>7</sup>

Local studies suggest that the Gypsy and Traveller populations are 'young' populations. A baseline census study of Gypsy and Traveller families in Leeds revealed that 75 per cent of households contained children.<sup>8</sup> Forty five per cent of the Gypsy and Traveller population in Leeds was 16 years or under compared to around 20 per cent of the Leeds population as a whole. The absence of national statistics makes strategic planning problematic. It is also difficult to evaluate the broad impact of policy implementation on this population. In spite of the diverse foci and occasionally contradictory findings the local studies are invaluable; they provide detailed information about service delivery to Gypsy and Traveller families and children and young people, while giving voice to highly marginalised communities.

## Legal protection and rights

By law, many Gypsies and Travellers are entitled to protection against racial discrimination. Romany Gypsies have been recognised as a racial group for the purposes of the Race Relations Act 1976 since 1989 and Irish Travellers since 2000.<sup>9</sup> The Race Relations Act, amended in 2000, made it a legal duty for public authorities to assess if and how their policies and functions affect ethnic groups in different ways. Public authorities also have a statutory duty to promote race equality – and this includes equality for Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers.

This means that services such as housing, education, health and play should be accessible and suitable for Gypsy and Traveller children and young people.

Not all Gypsies and Travellers define themselves as Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers, though there is a campaign to widen the ethnic groups entitled to protection under race equality legislation. (There is also a counter-argument that ethnic categorisations help sustain unhelpful debate about who is and who is not a 'genuine' Gypsy, potentially legitimising abuse against perceived 'bogus' Gypsies.<sup>4</sup>) The majority of Travellers live in houses, and some do not refer to their ethnic background for fear of racist reprisals. Even though Gypsies and Travellers may be protected under race equality and human rights legislation,

*'The range of legislation, from the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act to Planning and Housing Acts and a multiplicity of new and old local authority bye laws and DoE Circulars, Directives and Guidance Notes means that for Gypsies and Travellers the concept of civil rights can appear very remote.'<sup>8</sup>*

Gypsy and Traveller children share with their non-Gypsy and non-Traveller peers rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Equally, like their peers in the settled communities, they must be expected to achieve the outcomes set out in the Children Act 2004. However, research suggests that significant disparities in health, education and life chances remain.

## Health

The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services reiterates the importance of antenatal services to children's healthy development.<sup>9</sup> There is no national evidence about Gypsy Traveller mothers' take-up and experience of maternity services, but local studies suggest effective antenatal support is not reaching all women. One review asserts that for the Traveller population as a whole, 'stillbirth is seventeen times higher than the national average and infant mortality is twelve times higher.'<sup>10</sup> A report in 2004 by Sheffield University on the health status of Gypsy Travellers in London, Bristol, Sheffield, Leicester and Norfolk compared the health of Gypsy Travellers with comparators from other English-speaking minority ethnic groups.<sup>1</sup> The Gypsy Traveller women surveyed experienced more miscarriages and stillbirths.

There are many reasons suggested for the discrepancies. Some women interviewed for the Sheffield University report revealed how they avoided early antenatal care or had difficulty accessing care and first time mothers in particular feared 'unknown' services.<sup>1</sup>

Pregnant women and those with small children can be exposed to stressful environmental factors associated with accommodation, including eviction. A survey of members of the Association of Metropolitan Authorities about their provision for Traveller families found that nearly a third of those that responded would evict or move a pregnant woman and more than a third would evict or move a mother with newborns.<sup>11</sup>

Site provision for mobile Gypsies and Travellers remains a controversial issue. Prior to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, local authorities had a duty to maintain and provide caravan sites, with central government funding. The Act released local authorities from the duty to provide sites and advised Gypsies and Travellers to meet their own needs through the planning system. As a result, many Gypsies and Travellers bought their own land, but 90 per cent of Gypsy and Traveller planning applications are initially refused.<sup>12</sup> The Gypsy and Traveller Caravan Count in 2004 estimated that of the 15,000 caravans counted, 16 per cent were on unauthorised encampments.<sup>3</sup> At least 4,500 additional pitches are required.<sup>3</sup>

Children and young people living on authorised sites, either provided by local authorities or private landowners, have no guaranteed access to good facilities. A study in 2002 found that most local sites in England are located at a distance from shops and services and are near to motorways, runways and rubbish tips.<sup>3</sup> Many Gypsies and Travellers are forced to use unauthorised encampments in unsuitable locations and sites that may lack basic facilities such as toilets, rubbish collection, water supplies and pest control. There is little security of tenure – a Gypsy or Traveller child can be evicted from a site that s/he may have lived in all their life with minimum notice.<sup>3</sup> Evidence suggests a high level of anxiety in many

adult Gypsies and Travellers, and a far lower life expectancy. In Leeds, the life expectancy of Gypsies and Travellers is around 50 years – nearly 30 years less than the settled population.<sup>8</sup>

## Safety

In its green paper, *Every Child Matters*<sup>13</sup>, the Government outlined its aims to ensure that all children are safe from accidental injury and from maltreatment and neglect in the home. While local authorities may argue that they have to balance the needs of often hostile settled communities with those of Gypsies and Travellers, it needs to be acknowledged that eviction and scarce, poorly maintained sites have an impact on the physical well-being of Gypsy and Traveller children and young people. Most sites lack safe play areas or basic fire-fighting equipment. Reports suggest that Traveller children have a higher accident rate than average.<sup>14</sup> Irish Travellers of all ages are seven times more likely to have fatal accidents and children living in official sites are more likely to become 'looked after' in the care system.<sup>4</sup> The experiences of Irish Travellers interviewed across England for the 'Room to Roam' research project support this. Travellers described one site next to a concrete factory where dust was a considerable health hazard, particularly to young children. The exit from the site was often blocked creating a fire hazard, which was exacerbated by over-crowding and malfunctioning fire-fighting equipment. A different site was infested with rats, lacked regular rubbish collection and had inadequate and potentially dangerous cooking facilities.<sup>10</sup>

Under the Children Act 1989, all children and young people have the right to receive support from social services. Recent research noted that social services departments were the least likely of statutory welfare agencies to visit Gypsy and Traveller sites.<sup>15</sup> Whilst there are people across all communities who are suspicious of social services, Traveller communities face particular challenges.<sup>16</sup> Cemlyn reports on the perceived threat of children being removed from families because they are Travellers.<sup>17</sup> Power accuses social services departments of an 'institutionalised blindness' towards Irish Traveller children and

'... an unwillingness ... to acknowledge responsibility for transient populations due to bureaucratisation, self-imposed territorial limitations, understaffing, poor morale and lack of awareness of Travellers, but also SSDs will usually only engage with 'at risk' people on their own set of terms'.<sup>10</sup>

## Education

The Plowden Report<sup>18</sup> in 1967 and the Swann Report,<sup>19</sup> published 18 years later, demonstrated that the education system frequently does not meet Gypsy and Traveller children's needs. The average attendance rate for Traveller pupils is around 75 per cent, a figure well below the national average and the worst of any minority ethnic group.<sup>20</sup> For those children who do attend school, there are serious concerns that they are not reaching their full potential.

The DfES strategy to raise the achievement of Gypsy and Traveller students outlines a number of factors influencing attainment.<sup>21</sup> Obstacles to achievement include ongoing issues of racism and social exclusion,<sup>22</sup> teachers' low expectations and lack of knowledge of Gypsy and Traveller cultures, inconsistent school attendance and Gypsy and Traveller parents' own negative educational experiences. Kiddle explores parents' reluctance to send their children to school in some detail. Parents, she suggests, may be anxious about hostility towards, and harassment of, their children and fear that the values promoted by the schools and pupils may impact negatively on their cultural heritage and family networks.<sup>23</sup>

The majority of Gypsy and Traveller young people do not complete secondary school. In 2004, Derrington and Kendall reported on a three-year longitudinal study of 44 Gypsy and Traveller secondary school students.<sup>24</sup> When the study concluded, twenty young people had completed the first three years of study in secondary school. This was a higher proportion than expected, though the authors point out that all but three of the young people were in reasonably secure accommodation – either housing or authorised sites. Many of the conclusions support evidence from previous studies, including the importance of parental involvement. The report highlighted parents' concerns about their children's moral, physical and emotional welfare in schools. There was uneasiness about issues such as sex education, possible contact with illegal drugs and the impact of youth culture on the family's lifestyle. Half of the families hoped their children would leave school to support economic and domestic activities within the home. A study of Traveller children's experiences of post-primary education in Northern Ireland found that the curriculum was perceived as being irrelevant to the vocational and cultural aspirations of the Traveller community.<sup>25</sup>

## Other measures

Many studies have made strategic or practical recommendations to reduce the inequality in opportunities faced by Gypsy and Traveller children and young people through service delivery and policy implementation. A review of health studies by the South West Public Health Observatory set out recommendations

made by a number of reports to improve health service provision to meet Gypsy and Traveller needs. These offered practical ideas such as family-held medical records, the provision of specialist services, outreach workers and mobile units and inter-agency working.<sup>14</sup> In education, researchers have highlighted proposed areas for reflection for secondary school practitioners,<sup>24</sup> including the role of the Traveller Education Services,<sup>26</sup> the flexibility of the curriculum to meet individual needs and schools' policies and practice in inclusion and equality.<sup>27</sup> Power highlights the work of the Traveller People's Unit, a dedicated team of social workers offering supportive help in social welfare issues such as disability, housing and domestic violence.<sup>10</sup>

However, whilst significant inter-agency initiatives do exist, inclusive practice remains underdeveloped.<sup>17</sup> For services to Gypsy and Traveller children and young people to improve, local authorities need to meet their statutory, enforceable duty to promote equal opportunities and race equality.

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