



**FRIENDS,  
FAMILIES &  
TRAVELLERS**

February 2025

# **Trapped in the Turnstile:**

**Understanding the Impacts of the Criminal  
Justice System on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller  
Young Adults and their Families**

***Summary Report***

## Acknowledgements

This report was compiled by Sam Worrall, Criminal Justice Policy Officer at Friends, Families and Travellers.

Thank you to all the Equalities staff from His Majesty's Prison estate, who supported us throughout this project and who enabled us access to the prisons where we engaged with prisoners. We thank [Hibiscus Initiative](#) for organising the group session with Roma women. Thank you to our project partners [TravellerSpace](#), [York Travellers Trust](#) and [Travelling Ahead](#), and to our steering group members, for their input and interviews. Most of all, we would like to thank the prisoners who attended the focus groups, who engaged so willingly and openly to share their experiences with us. In addition, thank you to members of the wider Romany, Roma, Irish Traveller and New Traveller communities interviewed for the project for sharing their valuable time and experiences. We hope we have done justice to your views and voices.

*“I think if everyone tried to be a Traveller in our shoes for one day they would see how it is for us...*

*...You try and book a table, or go to a pub or a shop and as soon as they hear your accent you're not welcome, 'we are full, we are closed'...all that....This has a massive effect on us, every day, and all the years of discrimination my parents went through, and it makes you feel so hated and so upset and then you're like angry and you think what is the point of trying?”*

**—Irish Traveller, aged 24, currently in the criminal justice system**

## Introduction

The following report and recommendations were evidenced from engagement with young Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people, aged 18-25 years, and their families. This was a two-year project for the Transition to Adulthood Alliance, part of the Barrow Cadbury Trust.<sup>1</sup>

People from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities face systemic marginalisation and discrimination, across the whole of society and from statutory services. Within the criminal justice system (CJS), children from these communities are hugely overrepresented. Yet a reluctance to disclose ethnicity results in a significant undercount on official records. Gypsies and Travellers are often less likely to ask for support in any stage of the CJS, and community voices are seldom listened to.

## The Project Methodology

FFT carried out a [literature review](#) linking evidence from existing reports, projects and policy with the T2A Pathway. To conduct this project, a steering group was formed, with members of the Irish Traveller, Romany Gypsy and New Traveller communities. The group ensured the right questions were asked in the survey and questionnaire, based upon the key issues raised from the literature review. Three community organisations acted as partners: [TravellerSpace](#) (Devon and Cornwall), [York Travellers Trust](#) (Yorkshire) and [Travelling Ahead](#) (Wales).

Community members filmed two videos promoting the project to peers, and shared across our networks. The survey was published online and interviews were also carried out using paper copies by Service Delivery staff from FFT and project partners. Survey results were analysed, and a deep dive questionnaire formulated.

19 prisons across England were visited and engaged 91 prisoners from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, 25 of whom were in the target age group. Project partners also interviewed 6 other young people individually to add to the findings.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on T2A, please see: [Transition to Adulthood](#)

## Key Findings

The project found:

- **Alternatives to custody were not considered** for the majority of cases related to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller individuals.
- **Lack of support throughout the custodial journey** for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and their families.
- **Lack of accessible and culturally appropriate support** provided for mental health needs.
- **Prison and probation/parole staff did not have the cultural competency required** to support Gypsy, Roma and Traveller individuals.
- **Lack of resources and staff capacity** for delivering equalities requirements for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller prisoners.
- **Prisoners did not have easy access to culturally appropriate education and/or practical courses and workshops** to support them in prison.
- **Lack of consistency** across the prison estate for regular Gypsy, Roma and Traveller forums or meet ups.
- **Lack of awareness and information about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities** and significant calendar events around prisons.

## **Key Recommendations**

- 1) Offer effective alternatives to remand for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller offenders.**
- 2) Provide effective signposting for individuals at every stage of the criminal justice pathway.**
- 3) Offer programmes of support to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller prisoners to support future diversion.**
- 4) Ensure individuals receive mental health support at all stages.**
- 5) Co-produce accessible resources** such as videos for young Gypsy and Traveller people and their families.
- 6) Develop cultural competency training for staff** including probation/parole staff across CJS.
- 7) Provide culturally appropriate education and additional practical courses for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller prisoners.**
- 8) Provide specific resources for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities to be available in forums and libraries.**
- 9) Include regular evaluation and monitoring of all of the above** as part of the delivery of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller strategy for the criminal justice system.

## Findings with quotes

- **Generational experiences of discrimination from policing among the communities affects attitudes and behaviours of young people:**

*“We were told not to speak to [the police] and if we did it would lead to trouble. But they used to follow us every time we left site so we were scared of them, and we would always run away, to stay safe.”*

*“As a kid, I just thought Gorgers [non-Gypsies] and police were just there to take us away. Into care if we were kids, or to put the adults in prison.”*

*“As a child you were taught that the police were the bad people, we were brought up to tell lies to protect ourselves and our families and that the police wanted to take our trailers off us, our homes.”*

- **Having a family member being in prison is commonplace in Gypsy and Traveller communities yet leads to lifelong effects upon participants:**

*“My mum, dad, uncle, grandad...all been in when I was a kid...at one point my older brother had to step up to be the parent cos they were all in at once.”*

*“I think I blocked it out a lot. My dad was in and out, he wasn’t really around at all, but it felt normal I guess as other people in my family were in prison and out all the time.”*

*“I had an older brother inside and I remember thinking how interesting it sounded...like quite exciting... I think I wanted to be cool like him, silly really cos now I been inside I know what it’s like and it’s not cool.”*

- **Exclusion and negative experiences of education negatively impacts literacy levels and leads to further marginalisation from wider society:**

*“It was painful. I didn’t know what discrimination was when I was young though.”*

*“It was just hassle at school; our lifestyle is not in books, so I’m not interested in what school teaches you.”*

*“I got expelled cos I was always angry and fighting but that is because I was always being provoked cos I am a Traveller and the other kids provoke you into fighting.”*

*“School was a bad place; I wasn’t there for long. I was a little s\*\*t when I was a kid, I just didn’t get it, so I didn’t want to learn then.”*

- **Early negative experiences of policing influence attitudes to the law and police growing up:**

*“We were always being accused of stealing cars or being pulled to check licences. They always assumed you were doing wrong or something illegal. They look at you differently.”*

*“What you see happening and what happens to you makes you fear them or makes you angry or both, so you react that way.”*

*“We moved around a lot, so we had contact with police a lot...the hate felt overwhelming. The police turn up with extra precautions that are just silly, and it was scary when you are a kid. They would turn up in the night to move us on, we were living roadside cos all the sites were shut down...my mum didn’t sleep much a lot of the time and nor did we cos we were just waiting for them to come.”*

*“We were just used to the way the police stopped and searched us all the time, we just kind of knew that was how it would always be for us.”*

- **First experiences of arrest suggest that the reason for most of these contact points, was the participant’s identification as a Gypsy or Traveller, rather than as a result of the participant having broken the law:**

*“I was arrested first when I was 12, for fighting and my 17-year-old brother was too, and he got a prison sentence for that. We were fighting against someone calling us names. We were fighting together and they were against us.”*

*“I grew up living on site and sometimes roadside, and we got pulled over and moved on or hassled all the time, but then when I got married she was a Gorger girl so I moved into a house with her in a different town and that was when I really realised the difference because after that I never got pulled or stopped or hassled or even seen the police for ages, so that was an eye opener to me.”*

*“My first offence was for violence because I was being called the P-word...I was being racially abused and stood up for myself, but none of this got considered at court.”*

- **Participants described how all of these formative experiences made them feel towards ‘Gorger’ (non-Gypsy) laws. Most felt their previous experiences were a factor in their journey towards the criminal justice pathway:**

*“It feels like society doesn’t let us dream big, it seems our lives are controlled and we can’t achieve like others can.”*

*“You are judged if you’re a Gypsy so you have to fight, even if you don’t want to...there is an image that we are all tough and fighters and yes though we are taught to fight that doesn’t mean we want to but other people think we do so they always try and pick on us and provoke us into fighting.”*



*“You try and fit in just to have some normality in life but it’s too hard and there are too many barriers in the way. You just have to learn to live with the discrimination.”*

*“We got our own code and our own way of dealing with things and we don’t see why we should respect any Gorgor law cos what do we get from them...no respect, no acceptance, not left to live our culture, just being squashed down all the time. It’s like our whole way of life is criminalised, taking away our stopping places, banned from travelling, new laws so we can’t deal scrap, all the things we been doing for generations. How are we expected to make a way in life if it’s all taken away from us? It just makes us feel like f\*\*\* it what’s the point?”*

- **Alternatives to custody were not considered for the majority of cases related to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller individuals:**

*“It was my first offence, but I was told by the magistrate in court ‘You’re from a well-known Gypsy family who have made careers out of crime’.”*

*“I punched someone and that was my first ever arrest and I just got prison straight off.”*

*“If you’re a Traveller, you’re a liar, you’re this you’re that, whatever...you’re guilty.”*

*“The magistrate said to me ‘Mr... As a minor from the Travelling community...’ at the start.”*

*“A big point was made by the prosecution that I was a Gypsy. If the judge I had when I was 15 had been a bit more understanding I really think it would have been different for me.”*

- **Lack of signposting and accessible support (including mental health support) throughout the criminal justice journey for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and their families:**
- **i) Entering the CJS and throughout custody:**

*“No support, not any of the time at any point. I was 14 and it was just a blur really, I had no idea what was going on.”*

*“I don’t tell the officers if I need support, cos they all chat and tell tales to each other so it all gets spread around.”*

*“I think a lot of us just wing it and keep going and pretend we are okay. I don’t tell my family about how I am feeling, I don’t want to worry them, I keep it in prison.”*

*“You have to get bad and make a noise about it before they take you seriously. I put a form in but the officers said I was taking the mick and it didn’t get taken seriously.”*

*“Actually, I think we are all traumatised you know, by the things we saw and what happened to us growing up and the way we get treated every day in society and in the papers. I think we are all traumatised, but we can’t get any help.”*

- **ii) Lack of support towards the end of custody and post custody:**

*“I was a mental wreck after I was released, but I just powered on, sadly it didn’t last for long then I lost the plot and got arrested again.”*

*“I want to change now cos its exhausting, but I don’t really know how or who can help.”*

*“Well, it’s a turnstile isn’t it...once you are in it you just go round and round...they know your face, you can’t get work, you do one little thing out of line...back through the turnstile.”*

*“Last time I was out it was three months; it was lovely to have that three month break with my family before I got back in again.”*

*“I keep a bag packed under my bed, ready for when I get recalled, cos I know no matter how I try, it will happen.”*

- **Prison and probation/parole staff did not have the cultural competency required to support Gypsy, Roma and Traveller individuals:**

*“They target us, but I don’t think they understand how we speak sometimes so they take a bit of lip the wrong way and we get punished for it but it’s just how we talk.”*

*“We get called bad names but it’s like done in a jokey way and you know I think lots of them don’t realise it’s bad and hurtful, so I don’t think they really mean it. Some of them anyway, they just don’t understand. They don’t call other people from other communities the names because they know they can’t do that anymore, but society is slow to accept that some of the names we get called are just as bad.”*

*“Hear bad words used about us all the time, it’s just a given. I’ve been hearing the P word since I can remember: school, police, screws etc. You get used to it.”*

*“I have offered to wear GPS (Global Positioning System) tags, anything they want really so I can get back home with my family but they said it’s too high risk and they want the names of everyone on site...that’s nuts! They don’t get how site works and how many people there are and moving on and off all the time...they wouldn’t ask for all the people’s names in a street would they so why on a Gypsy site...it’s discrimination.”*

*“I am way over my sentence cos I won’t go into a house. They should have let me out on tag but I said I am not going into a house so I am still here.”*

- **Prisoners did not have easy access to culturally appropriate education and/or practical courses and workshops to support them in prison:**

*“They need to do more hands-on courses in adult, like useful ones...woodwork, mechanics, how to grow food, get water etc, life skills. I have done maths and English here and it was good, and they actually supported me. I would like to do a mental health course so I can help people.”*

*“It would be good if we could do bricklaying, carpentry, but the woodwork classes are good if you can get in there. Getting a CSCS [Construction Skills Certification Scheme] card would be great so help with that and the exam would be great here.”*

*“All I am able to do is break up old covid testing kits in a workshop. I mean how is that meant to inspire or help anyone?! I think if there were things like gardening or building qualifications it would be more appealing to us.”*

- **Lack of consistency across the prison estate for regular Gypsy, Roma and Traveller forums, electing community Reps and holding events:**

*“We are forgotten about. Black history month is always celebrated but we get forgotten. We don’t get any information, leaflets or posters go up. We don’t even have a Rep here, one of us.”*

*“We automatically help each other but we need more forums with all of us from the wings. Traveller wings work, like when we are all together...I know a lot of prisons want to split us all up, but it really helps our mental health if we are with at least some others from our communities.”*

*“Having a regular group meeting or just a catch up over a cuppa would help stop the feeling of being isolated.”*

*“The other older guys are a huge support, cos they tell you the rules of the prison and how it all works and help calm you down and talk to officers they trust if you go a bit crazy.”*

## Recommendations in detail

- 1) Offer effective alternatives to remand for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller offenders.**
  - Instead of holding an individual on remand, the prison system could offer programmes to support diversion, improve mental health and offer meaningful community service.
  - Ensure magistrates and judges are culturally aware of the experiences faced by young Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and the barriers faced.
  
- 2) Provide effective signposting for individuals at every stage of the criminal justice pathway.**
  - From the point of accusation, through custodial sentence and post-custody (after prison), ensure young people are in contact with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller friendly legal support and organisations who support individuals and their families throughout the Criminal Justice System (CJS).
  - Ensure police stations and courts are signposting to trusted organisations.
  
- 3) Offer programmes of support to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller prisoners to support future diversion.**
  - Develop peer-led support and programmes.
  - Co-produce resources with community members and specialist Gypsy, Roma and Traveller and other trusted organisations working with young people in custodial settings.
  
- 4) Ensure individuals receive mental health support at all stages.**
  - Develop a consistent model across the Criminal Justice System, especially in the prison estate.
  - Examples of possible models could be pastoral support, and/or a programme of community mentor listeners, gym programmes.
  - Remove barriers that prevent individuals from accessing this support, for example, allowing pastoral care to be available to those on basic mental health support.
  
- 5) Co-produce accessible resources** such as videos for young Gypsy and Traveller people and their families.

- 6) **Develop and co-produce cultural competency training for staff** including probation/parole staff across CJS.
  - Explore options such as Q&A sessions with community members and display boards raising awareness.
  
- 7) **Provide culturally appropriate education and additional practical courses for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller prisoners.**
  - Offer educational workshops and programmes such as those run by the Shannon Trust, ensuring extra support is in place to encourage young people to enrol.
  - Increase vocational workshops and run CSCS card access courses.
  
- 8) **Provide specific, co-produced resources for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities to be available in forums and libraries.**
  - Hold regular Gypsy, Roma and Traveller forums in prison.
  - Celebrate key community events, ensuring safe spaces, and prisoner interaction and other activities.
  - Raise awareness of the communities to non-community prisoners and prison staff.
  
- 9) **Include regular evaluation and monitoring of all of the above** as part of the delivery of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller strategy for the criminal justice system.
  - Ensure funding is targeted to increase Equalities teams and ensure those in post are committed to equality across all communities.
  - Build in targets and actionable improvements to the Ministry of Justice Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Strategy.

## About Us

Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT) is a leading national charity that seeks to end racism and discrimination against Gypsies, Travellers and Roma communities and to protect the right to pursue a nomadic way of life.

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