



**FRIENDS,
FAMILIES &
TRAVELLERS**

Joint briefing: Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and the right to social security

**Report compiled by Friends, Families and Travellers,
with support from Amnesty International UK**

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About us

Friends, Families and Travellers is a national charity working to end racism and discrimination against Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities and to protect the right to a nomadic way of life. Founded in 1994, we work to transform national and local systems to address the root causes of racial, health, accommodation and education inequality faced daily by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people, and connect community voices to power. Together with our policy and campaign work to create societal and systems change, we support Gypsies and Travellers through casework and outreach services.

Introduction

Social security is crucial to poverty reduction and alleviation, forming a core component of international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). This states that a well-functioning social security system should protect the adequate standard of living of marginalised and vulnerable groups, and that the UK Government is obliged to provide a social security system which is human rights compliant. Governments must support people through forms of support such as a social security system, which allows people to afford their basic needs if they cannot make their own income, or if their income is insufficient.

This briefing examines multifaceted barriers and disparities faced by Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in accessing social security/welfare benefits. It will also focus on inequalities which further impede the rights to social security, health, work, education, and an adequate standard of living.

Gypsies, Travellers and Roma – a Contextual Overview

The umbrella term ‘Gypsy, Roma and Traveller’ includes many different and distinct communities.¹ Romany Gypsies, Scottish and Welsh Gypsy Travellers, Roma, and Irish Travellers are separate ethnic groups, and experience similar inequalities and levels of racism and discrimination. Alongside protections stipulated by the UK’s international human rights obligations², Romany Gypsies, Irish Travellers, Scottish Travellers and Roma are protected in UK law against race discrimination by the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010. Unless otherwise specified, this briefing will focus on Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers.³

Despite legal protections, Gypsies, Roma and Travellers’ enjoyment of their human rights can be obstructed in multiple ways, with disproportionately high levels of inequality across a range of social indicators. Combined, these can create a ‘domino effect’ of rights violations. The barriers faced by Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are interwoven with violations of the right to non-discrimination, and high levels of racism and prejudice in a range of contexts. These disproportionate inequalities and human rights violations can worsen life chances, perpetuating intergenerational inequalities and traumas.

Gypsies, Roma, and Irish Travellers in the UK experience high levels of economic exclusion and deprivation. Of respondents to the 2021 UK Census who identified as “Gypsy or Irish Traveller”⁴:

- 53% of those aged 16-63 were ‘economically inactive,’ compared to 25% of the general population;
- 24% of Gypsies or Irish Travellers and 28% of Roma were working in jobs that required no qualifications, compared to 10% of the general population.^{5,6}

A 2023 analysis⁷ of income-related benefit receipt levels across ethnic groups illustrated severe inequalities, including 58.9% of “Gypsy/Traveller” respondents reporting receiving income-related benefits, a significantly higher proportion than White British respondents (26.5%). This research found that persisting ethnic and socioeconomic inequalities were exacerbated by Covid-19. It highlights both Roma and “Gypsy/Traveller” ethnic groups as experiencing “the highest levels of socioeconomic deprivation; they are more likely to have no educational qualifications, less likely to be in the highest occupational positions, and have high rates of financial difficulties and benefit receipt.”⁸

The prejudice and discrimination experienced by Gypsies, Roma and Travellers pervade many aspects of life, fundamentally impeding on Article 2 and 7 (UNDHR) rights to live free from discrimination, and the Article 25 (UNHCR) right to an adequate standard of living. The 2018 National Barometer of Prejudice and Discrimination in Britain found 44% of respondents expressing openly negative feelings towards Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, a much higher percentage than attitudes towards any other protected group⁹, while 2020 research¹⁰ on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people’s experiences of hate, found 94% had experienced exclusion and discrimination from and within services (e.g., health and education).

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities also experience disproportionate levels of ill health and disabilities, which can make working difficult or impossible and social security more vital in meeting basic living needs and costs. 15% of “Gypsy and Irish Traveller” respondents to the 2021 Census reported being economically inactive¹¹ due to long-term sickness or disability; three times higher than the general population (5%).¹² This highlights the importance of accessible social security, sufficient to allow an adequate standard of living for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma in the UK.

Accessibility of social security: Barriers for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers

Racial prejudice and discrimination

The systems and processes to access social security in the UK can be complex to understand and navigate for any potential claimants.¹³ Gypsies and Travellers can face further difficulties when interacting with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in claiming social security: the 2024 Scottish Government Tackling Child Poverty Progress Report for 2023-2024¹⁴ found that “Gypsy/Traveller” respondents “felt that DWP staff held derogatory attitudes towards them and were discriminating in their interactions...[making] them feel stressed and anxious every time they had to speak to [the DWP].” Universal

Credit (UC) applications were seen as complex and difficult to navigate, and it was felt that questions in forms and assessments were designed to stop people making successful UC applications.

Digital exclusion and literacy

Disproportionate and stark education inequalities¹⁵ persistently disadvantage Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, while low literacy levels and digital exclusion make accessing social security more difficult still, exacerbating existing barriers. FFT research found 1 in 5 Gypsy and Traveller participants had never used the internet in 2018, compared to 1 in 10 members of the general population.¹⁶ A 2024 study¹⁷ into Gypsies, Roma and Travellers' literacy and health concluded that a "wide range of socioeconomic and cultural factors...combined with low literacy act synergistically to worsen the physical and mental health of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups." Given rapid technological change and increased reliance on online access to information and services, disparities in access to health and social security risk becoming more pronounced, further increasing inequalities.

A 2024 report into health inequalities and digital exclusion notes, "the main protected characteristics impacted by digital exclusion are age (especially older age) and disability. These often intersect with other characteristics (e.g., digital exclusion compounds significant health inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities)."¹⁸ Similar problems are evident in social security, where application processes are substantially more difficult for people with low literacy and/or who are digitally excluded.

Challenging social security entitlement decisions at tribunal following unsuccessful applications can also be a long, complex and difficult process requiring extra support, such as through non-profit advice and casework services. UK rates of social security decisions being overturned at tribunal stage highlight the difficulties in accessing claimant entitlements, and inadequacies in current decision-making processes:

- 69% of DWP PIP decisions were overturned at tribunal (2024);¹⁹
- 59% of appeals are won by the claimant because the tribunal reached a different conclusion based on the same facts.²⁰

This illustrates the importance of professional advice and support for many UK citizens in applying for, and accessing, the fundamental right to social security. In 2024, FFT's Service Delivery team assisted 153 clients with 274 benefits issues (indicating multiple problems for many people across different benefit elements), and helped clients to access 427 grants for essential items (such as white goods, furniture, food, fuel, clothing, heaters and bedding, etc).²¹ The need for such support is arguably even more pronounced for communities where literacy is low and digital exclusion is high, creating extra barriers for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma, in obtaining correct decisions on benefits they are entitled to.

Barriers to accessing an adequate standard of living for Gypsies and Travellers

The benefit cap and two-child limit

Welfare policy reforms implemented as part of government austerity measures in the UK since 2010 have created severe economic hardship for certain groups, especially those with disabilities, and those with larger families. Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are more likely to live with poorer health, and to have larger families, than the general UK population.^{22, 23} With higher-than-average rates of overcrowding and people per household,²⁴ Gypsies and Travellers also face greater risk of experiencing punitive social security restrictions.

The two-child limit²⁵ and benefit cap²⁶ in particular disproportionately disadvantage larger families, and families with health conditions.²⁷ These can “drastically increase the risk of deep poverty, particularly among larger families.”²⁸ A 2023 report²⁹ found inadequate social security in the UK to be a driver of destitution, noting that the “basic rate of social security is now so low it fails to clear the extremely low-income cash threshold set for destitution.”³⁰ Experiencing poverty has lifelong consequences for health, social, behavioural and emotional development, cognitive development and school achievement.³¹ The Labour government’s 2025 decision to target £5 billion of further cuts at overall benefits expenditure is anticipated to have a disproportionately harmful impact on people with health conditions;³² many of whom are already struggling to afford day-to-day life. Early analysis of the proposed changes³³ suggests a potential cumulative impact of around 340,000 additional people being pushed into poverty as a result.

Additional barriers for Gypsies and Travellers living on site or without a fixed address

Living in caravans or mobile homes brings extra costs, including high rent costs and supplementary charges, e.g. pitch fees and deposits. Gypsies and Travellers living on sites usually pay rent for the pitch on which the mobile home is stationed, and the rental of the mobile home itself. However, the housing element of Universal Credit³⁴ tends not to be sufficient to cover both rents and the process for applying is inaccessible, with reports of JobCentre staff not knowing how to apply the housing element of UC to two rents.³⁵

Residents with a shortfall may apply for ‘discretionary housing payments’ (DHP) to cover the full cost of their rent. However, DHP can only be applied for a maximum of 6 months, meaning the impact of these benefit restrictions limits the enjoyment of the right to an adequate standard of living. DHP does not provide security other than in the immediate or short term, and the discrepancies between Local Housing Allowance³⁶ and housing costs, in conjunction with the additional costs faced by Gypsies and Travellers living on sites,³⁷ suggests further inadequacy with the UK’s social security system in providing its citizens with the necessary means to enjoy the right to an adequate standard of living.

Higher energy costs

The energy arrangements on local authority Gypsy and Traveller sites can exacerbate fuel poverty for households. 2022 research³⁸ revealed that on 32% of permanent local authority

sites in South-East England, the local authority was the account holder for the electricity contract to the whole site. These residents have no freedom to choose electricity providers and secure a competitive rate. 97% of permanent local authority sites in the South-East of England had no access to mains gas.³⁹ Without a mains gas connection, households rely on gas bottles for cooking and heating, which are significantly more expensive.

Where site owners hold the electricity contract and sell energy to residents on a third party basis, this can affect residents' eligibility for, and access to, certain grants and schemes designed to alleviate energy poverty, which require direct payment to account holders. Gypsies and Travellers were initially excluded from government grants designed to alleviate sharp increases in energy costs for households from 2022. This was eventually rectified following campaigns from community organisations and civil society,⁴⁰ however, it serves as an example of exclusionary policymaking which risks increasing inequalities for already marginalised communities.

Postal exclusion

People without a fixed address face additional barriers to accessing and maintaining social security, as receiving post is challenging. Correspondence regarding social security benefits can be lost or missed, even where a care-of address is used, meaning letters and information are never received. This can lead to benefits being withdrawn or reduced, increasing financial hardship. Citizens' Advice found that 79% of those who have lived in a Gypsy and Traveller community and experienced postal insecurity in a 10-year period had missed health-related appointments, while 71% reported financial losses, as a result of not receiving post.⁴¹ Post exclusion can have a direct impact upon the right to social security, and a concomitant impact on the right to an adequate standard of living.

Case Study: Michael (Irish Traveller)

Michael approached FFT three years ago regarding a rat infestation and disrepair in his council property. Michael has very low literacy, and after his children moved out, FFT supported him to access financial grants for disrepair and essential furniture. Michael accrued rent arrears of over £1900, as his Universal Credit (UC) payments left a £182.94 monthly shortfall in his rent payments. After the council sent Michael an eviction notice, his FFT caseworker found his UC had been wrongly deducted for having two non-dependents living with him—despite Michael living alone for 9 months. Michael was unaware of this, so approached the Job Centre to give consent for FFT to help him communicate with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), as past requests to manage Michael's UC claims via telephone⁴² were ignored – although the DWP knew of Michael's literacy needs.

Michael experienced discriminatory attitudes from Job Centre staff, telling FFT that once the work coach saw Michael's ID and heard his accent, they became very dismissive towards him, refusing to make eye contact. Michael felt blamed for creating “all this [extra] work” because he could not read or understand the complexities of the benefits system. This was humiliating and distressing for Michael, who “felt so awful and embarrassed and...just wanted to leave.” The work coach subsequently made further errors when correcting the dates on his UC claim—only rectified after his FFT caseworker noticed discrepancies which would have caused Michael to fall further into debt.⁴³

Conclusions and recommendations

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers experience disproportionately high levels of intersecting inequalities across a range of social indicators. These include multiple barriers to accessing health services, high rates of disabilities and long-term health conditions, huge outcome disparities throughout the education system, and insufficient access to culturally pertinent accommodation. All of these affect economic inclusion and the need to access social security.

Michael's case shows the multiple barriers experienced when accessing social security and an adequate standard of living—navigating the complex UK benefits system with low or no literacy can be extremely difficult without engaging independent professional support and advocacy. Combined, the inaccessibility of the benefits system for people with literacy needs (often requiring professional support to access social security at all), and the discriminatory attitudes and errors of some staff working within it, and further challenges for Gypsy and Traveller site residents, can all threaten Gypsies' and Travellers' rights to social security, an adequate standard of living, and to live free from discrimination.

Recommendations

- UK Government should fully incorporate ICESCR into domestic legislation.
- The Government should review and improve measures to ensure social security is equally accessible for people with low/no literacy and/or digital literacy, and/or without a fixed address.
- Future planning for government and public services' further utilisation of technology and artificial intelligence must take into account the impacts of digital exclusion, especially where this intersects with protected characteristics.
- The Government should abolish the two-child limit and benefit cap.
- The Department for Work and Pensions should review the housing benefit element of Universal Credit, to accommodate for the extra financial costs associated with living on Gypsy and Traveller sites.
- The Government should implement a review into fuel poverty and energy access on Gypsy and Traveller sites, and plan for provision to reduce energy access inequalities.

References

¹ There are other travelling groups in the UK, such as Travelling Showmen, Liveaboard Boaters and New Travellers, who are not defined as ethnic groups but continue to maintain a nomadic way of life.

² UK Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/human-rights-the-uks-international-human-rights-obligations> [accessed 15th Jan 2025]

³ Ethnic categories used by different governmental departments and other data sources used in this report vary; where datasets refer to specific groups, data source categorisations are quoted for transparency. Romany Gypsies, Irish Travellers and Roma are distinct, separate ethnic groups and not all of the issues outlined in this report apply to all three groups equally. More detailed information by and on Roma and migrant Roma communities in the UK is available at: <https://www.romasupportgroup.org.uk/our-research.html>

⁴ UK Census ethnicity categories: In 2011, "White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller" was first introduced as an option for Census respondents; the 2021 Census included "White: Roma" for the first time. Census categorisation which aggregates distinct communities in this way can

fail to accurately show differing experiences and outcomes. Further reading: 'Making sense of the Census 2021 for the outcomes and experiences of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people,' Traveller Movement, June 2023.

⁵ Census 2021 Gypsy or Irish Traveller populations.

⁶ Census 2021 Roma populations.

⁷ Finney, N., Nazroo, J., Bécarea, L., Kapadia, D., & Shlomo, N. (Eds.). (2023). *Racism and Ethnic Inequality in a Time of Crisis*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press. Retrieved Jan 15, 2025, from <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447368861>

⁸ Ibid., p.141.

⁹ Research Report 119: Developing a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination in Britain. Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018. Available at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/national-barometer-of-prejudice-and-discrimination-in-britain.pdf> [accessed 9th January 2025] (The same research found that 22% of people surveyed expressed openly negative feelings towards Muslims; 16% towards transgender people; and 9% towards gay, lesbian or bisexual people.)

¹⁰ Greenfields, Margaret and Rogers, Carol (2020) *Hate: "As regular as rain" A pilot research project into the psychological effects of hate crime on Gypsy, Traveller and Roma (GTR) communities*. Available at: <https://bnu.repository.guildhe.ac.uk/id/eprint/18142/> [accessed 16th Jan 2025]

¹¹ Not working and not seeking work or being available to work. UK Census 2021; Office for National Statistics. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/ethnicgroupdifferencesinhealthemploymenteducationandhousingshowninenglandandwalescensus2021/2023-03-15> [accessed 16th Jan 2025]

¹² Gypsy or Irish Traveller populations, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics

¹³ Mears, R. and Howes, S. (2023) "YOU REAP WHAT YOU CODE: Universal credit, digitalisation and the rule of law." Child Poverty Action Group and Legal Education Foundation. Available at: <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/You%20reap%20what%20you%20code.pdf> [accessed 16th Jan 2025]

¹⁴ Gov.Scot: Tackling Child Poverty Progress Report 2023-2024: Annex B - focus report on other marginalised groups at risk of poverty – poverty/pages/3/ [accessed 10th January 2024]

¹⁵ Briefing Paper, November 2023: 'Education inequalities facing Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in England.' Friends, Families and Travellers. Available at: <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Education-inequalities-faced-by-Gypsies-Roma-and-Travellers-in-England-briefing.pdf>

¹⁶ Friends, Families and Travellers (2018): "Digital Exclusion in Gypsy and Traveller communities in the United Kingdom." Available at: <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Digital-Inclusion-in-Gypsy-and-Traveller-communities-FINAL-1.pdf>

¹⁷ Dunn M, Turner-Moss EJC, Carpenter B, Speed E, Dixon KC, Blumenfeld T. The effects of literacy on health in Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (GRT): a systematic review and narrative synthesis. *BMJ Glob Health*. 2024 Nov 28;9(11): e017277. doi: 10.1136/bmjgh-2024-017277. PMID: 39613394; PMCID: PMC11605813.

¹⁸ 'Health inequalities and mitigating risks of digital exclusion (2nd Edition): A guide for policy makers, providers and commissioners from a voluntary and community sector perspective.' Good Things Foundation, 2024. [accessed 16th Jan 2025].

¹⁹ UK Government Tribunal Statistics Quarterly: April to June 2024 available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tribunals-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2024/tribunal-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2024#social-security-and-child-support> [accessed 16th Jan 2025]

²⁰ Hansard UIN 42121, Question to Department for Work and Pensions, tabled 21 July 2022: Personal Independence Payment: Tribunals. Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-07-21/42121#> [accessed 16th Jan 2025]

²¹ Friends, Families and Travellers: Annual Report, 2024. Remaining areas of casework focussed on health, racial discrimination, and accessing education.

²² *Evidence from Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessments indicates that 'ethnic Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller women' had an average of between 3.5 and 5.9 children, compared with an average of just under 2 for the general population in England and Wales in 2009. Cemlyn et al (2009)*

²³ Office for National Statistics (2024)

²⁴ "People who identified as Gypsy or Irish Traveller were over three times more likely to live in overcrowded accommodation than the overall population (26.5% compared with 8.4%). Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 13 October 2023, ONS website, article, Gypsy or Irish Traveller populations, England and Wales: Census 2021. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/gypsyoririshtravellerpopulationsenglandandwales/census2021/pdf> [accessed 16th Jan 2025]

²⁵ Child benefit is only paid for two children per family.

²⁶ The benefit cap is a limit on the total amount of benefit that can be claimed, if working-age adults in the household are not working, or working fewer than 16 hours a week.

²⁷ Beatty & Fothergill (2016)

²⁸ 'Things will only get worse: Why the two-child limit must go.' Child Poverty Action Group, July 2024. [accessed 16th Jan 2025]

²⁹ Destitution in the UK 2023: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

³¹ Cooper, K. and Stewart, K. (2017) Does money affect children's outcomes? An update. CASEpaper 203.

³² Matejic, P. and Tims, S., (2025) "How health-related benefit cuts add up," Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/how-health-related-benefit-cuts-add-up> [accessed 4th April 2025]

³³ Pollard, T., Wright, H., Mosley, M. (2025) "The true scale and impact of benefit cuts for ill and disabled people," New Economics Foundation. <https://neweconomics.org/2025/03/the-true-scale-and-impact-of-benefit-cuts-for-ill-and-disabled-people> [accessed 4th April 2025].

³⁴ Universal Credit is one single monthly payment encompassing six 'legacy benefits': Income-based Jobseekers Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Housing Benefit, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit.

³⁵ This is a common barrier reported by Friends, Families and Travellers' Service Delivery team.

³⁶ Local Housing Allowance is the maximum amount of housing support claimants of Universal Credit and Housing Benefit can usually get for private rented homes of different sizes.

³⁷ See p. 14, *'Freedom of Information research: Local authority transit provision for Gypsies and Travellers across the UK'* Friends, Families and Travellers, November 2024.

³⁸ Gilmore, V. and Kirkby, A., (2022), 'Access to energy for Gypsies and Travellers living in caravans.' Friends, Families and Travellers.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See: <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/news/thousands-of-gypsies-and-travellers-access-energy-grants/>; <https://www.gov.uk/get-help-energy-bills/offgrid-park-mobile-care-home>; <https://www.gov.uk/get-help-energy-bills/alternative-fuels> [accessed 16th Jan 2025]

⁴¹ 'Millions Without Mail.' Citizens' Advice (2020)

⁴² JobCentrePlus, 2019 – 'What to do if you are unable to use the online Universal Credit system.'

"Most people are expected to claim and manage Universal Credit (UC) online and communicate with the Jobcentre online through their Universal Credit account. There is some help for those who do not have access to or have difficulty using a computer [...] However, there are various reasons why some people may not be able to manage their UC claim digitally for example: • physical or mental ill health or disability • visual impairments • lack of basic literacy • lack of skills and training • legal limitations such as Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) or Terrorism Prevention Investigation Measures (TPIM) In circumstances such as these claims can be made by phone using the Universal Credit Helpline: 0800 328 5644 (Textphone: 0800 328 1344) Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm (closed on bank holidays)."

⁴³ FFT has since supported Michael to raise two complaints with the DWP about the discrimination and poor treatment he experienced from his work coach, and the maladministration of his UC claim. Michael received an apology from the manager of his local Job Centre, an assurance that training is being arranged for DWP staff to address micro-aggression. Michael has been reassigned to the Job Centre's Vulnerable Clients' Team. His material situation is now significantly improved with the threat of eviction quashed, his UC housing element restored, and arrears paid, and new furniture and flooring in his home.