



**FRIENDS,
FAMILIES &
TRAVELLERS**

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Educational inequalities and reform: Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people

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Introduction

This briefing outlines the longstanding educational inequalities experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities¹ in England. Drawing on evidence from government statistics, academic research, parliamentary inquiries and the lived experiences of community members, it highlights significant disparities in educational experiences, participation, attainment and progression.

Despite decades of evidence demonstrating poorer educational outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people, these persistent inequalities remain insufficiently recognised and addressed within mainstream education policy. This briefing outlines some of the barriers contributing to these inequalities, including racism and bullying, inadequate support for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), lack of cultural representation within the curriculum, and limited access to vocational learning.

This briefing also considers the implications of recent education policy reforms and identifies opportunities for targeted action to ensure all children can participate fully in education and achieve their potential.

Evidence on education inequalities

- ‘Gypsy/Roma’ and Irish Traveller pupils have the lowest educational attainment at all key stages up to and including KS4², of any ethnic group in England³.
- The 2021 Census data on the ‘Gypsy or Irish Traveller’⁴ population found that respondents were three times more likely to have no qualifications and Roma had notably higher levels of no qualifications compared with the England and Wales population.

¹ There are many different and distinct communities under the umbrella term ‘Gypsy, Roma and Traveller’. Romany Gypsies, Scottish and Welsh Gypsy Travellers, Irish Travellers and Roma are recognised as ethnic groups protected under the Equality Act 2010. Not all the issues and research outlined in this briefing apply equally to all communities.

The terminology used in this briefing reflects the terminology used in the underlying research and data sources. This means that different terms, including ‘Gypsy, Traveller and Roma’, ‘Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller’ and ‘Gypsy/Roma’, may be used in different sections. This is particularly the case where data from official sources, including the ONS and Department for Education, group different communities together under a single category. These categories do not necessarily reflect the distinct identities, experiences or circumstances of the communities concerned.

² Age 14 to 16, school Years 10 and 11.

³ The Department of Education’s aggregation of ‘Gypsy/Roma’ masks differences between Romany Gypsy and Roma pupils, who are distinct ethnic groups with different experiences and needs. This category also does not align with the Government Statistical Service harmonised ethnicity standards, nor the 2021 Census categories.

⁴ The Census categories aggregate Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers into one category, which is problematic for the reasons outlined in footnote 1.

- [Recent research](#) has shown that young people from Roma and Irish Traveller backgrounds are between 2.5 to 3 times more likely to be NEET⁵ in England than the ‘average’⁶.
- Freedom of Information request [research](#) of the School Census, revealed a general trend of year-on-year decrease of Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller pupil numbers through secondary education from Years 7-11⁷, and;
- A consistent significant fall in pupil numbers continuing from Year 6 (primary) to Year 7 (secondary) (an average fall of 22%).
- In 2025, children recorded as ‘Gypsy, Roma and Traveller’⁸ made up [4.3% of the EHE population](#), compared with 0.4% of children recorded as Gypsy, Roma or Traveller in the school population.
- The [2021 Census](#) shows that 11.2% of ‘Gypsy or Irish Traveller’ people were educated to degree level, compared with 33.8% for the England and Wales population.
- Degree or above qualifications were less common for those who identified as Roma in the [2021 Census](#) than the population of England and Wales at equivalent ages.
- ‘Gypsy/Roma’ and Irish Traveller pupils have some of the highest [exclusion](#) and [suspension rates](#) of all ethnic groups in England.

Barriers to accessing and participating in education

The evidence outlined above highlights significant disparities in educational experiences between Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller communities and the wider population in England. The factors contributing to these disparities are multifaceted. The next section examines the evidence on these barriers, including statistical evidence and the direct experiences of community members.

The Office for National Statistics 2022 ‘Gypsies and Travellers lived experiences’ [research](#) highlighted some reasons for education disparities: *‘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.’*

⁵ Not in education, employment or training.

⁶ This study did not include a category for ‘Romany Gypsy’.

⁷ Data on academic years 2012/13 - 2021/22.

⁸ Reported as ‘Gypsy, Roma and Traveller’ in the Equality Impact Assessment for the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Act.

Racial discrimination

Research conducted by Friends, Families and Travellers and Roma Support Group in 2024,⁹ brings to the fore, parents and pupils experiences with racism and the impact on engagement with education.¹⁰

‘My kids have experienced a lot of racism in the school, from teachers and other kids. It hasn’t been dealt with well in the school at all and I wish I could take them out.’

*‘My kids had a lot of bullying in the school, and they need to find a way to make people feel more welcome cos they can’t learn when they’re being called p***y all the time, they don’t understand our culture.’*

‘I took my children out of school recently because they experienced race hate in school, violent threats, and the school did nothing about it.’

Many Romany Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller young people experience racist bullying and prejudicial treatment within educational settings. A survey conducted by Friends, Families and Travellers in 2019 asked Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people what the biggest challenge they faced in school was. 86% of pupils reported the biggest challenge at school is bullying, followed by racism at 73%.

Research conducted by Traveller Movement in 2020 explored the reasons for Irish Traveller young people leaving school early¹¹. 61% of the research participants left school straight after primary. The majority left because of bullying (45% girls, 29% boys). 41% of those that left school, would like to have stayed.

SEND needs and barriers to support

Data from the Department for Education for the 2025/26 academic year show that the rate of SEN was highest among pupils recorded as Traveller of Irish heritage, with 26.6% receiving SEN support and a further 10.4% having an EHC plan. Of pupils recorded as ‘Gypsy/Roma’, 6.8% had an EHC plan and 23.5% had SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan. This compares with 6.0% of pupils overall with an EHC plan and 14.8% with SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan.

⁹ Research conducted as part of a Submission to the Call for Evidence on Improving the Curriculum and Assessment System.

¹⁰ 47 parents and pupils were surveyed including Irish Travellers (4), Romany Gypsies (37), Roma (5), and a Travelling Showman.

¹¹ 44 young Irish Traveller people based in London were interviewed.

These figures indicate higher levels of identified SEN among Irish Traveller, Gypsy and Roma pupils but do not in themselves explain the reasons for this difference or whether pupils are receiving appropriate support. [Evidence](#) from Government research on children with SEND who are not in school highlights significant barriers faced by families in accessing appropriate provision, including the complexity of the SEND system and difficulties securing support.

Improving access to appropriate SEND provision is therefore an important consideration in increasing participation in education for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people.

Lack of cultural representation in the curriculum

Many schools do not include Romany Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller cultures and histories in their teaching, even neglecting to include European Roma and Sinti people as targets of the Holocaust. The lack of visibility and understanding of the communities' cultures and histories can contribute to poorer educational experiences, participation and outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people.

There is also little representation of Romany Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller people in books used in schools, highlighted by a 2020 [Council of Europe research project](#) on 20 European countries, which showed that the UK came joint lowest on coverage of Roma in school textbooks. The inclusion of positive narratives about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities is a crucial component to creating a welcoming learning environment for these pupils. [Research](#) from 2024, highlights community views on the importance of cultural representation within school settings;

'Maybe schools should teach about the history of our community rather than neglecting it like they always do...If they could talk about our culture and the day-to-day problems we face with racism, stereotypes and unfair bias when it comes to someone being trialled in court plus many other things, people will understand us more and won't be afraid to come up to us and talk with us.'

'In my opinion, at the moment there is not enough emphasis around Roma culture...as is usually stereotyped into an underachieving, disengaged, unambitious and many other labels that are wrongly given to Roma children...'

‘Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Month should be celebrated as it will raise more awareness to the other people and would make the students that are part of this ethnicity feel more included in the society and proud for being part of it.’

Lack of vocational provision

Vocational learning can provide an important alternative or complementary route for pupils who prefer practical learning or for whom mainstream academic pathways have not provided an effective route to engagement and progression. The [Association of Colleges](#) found that at least 75% of 14–16-year-olds who had participated in college-based vocational learning, progressed onto post-16 education in each year between 2016/17 and 2020/21.

[Lived experience research](#) conducted by the Office for National Statistics found that Gypsy or Traveller participants valued practical and vocational learning, however, some felt that vocational courses were not accessible. All 47 parents and pupils surveyed in the [2024 research](#) felt that increased availability and earlier access to vocational courses would be hugely beneficial and well aligned with their educational needs. For example:

‘There should be more funding available for these courses, I struggled to get into the 14-16 vocational courses when I was in school.’

‘My kids have both autism and ADHD and they really struggled in school, there needs to be more facilities for practical learning, my son has thrived since he can do more practical learning in college. Practical learning should be embedded in the system from the start, not just an add-on, because all children learn differently.’

‘Most Gypsies and Travellers are better at doing hands-on stuff and more mature for their age, so vocational courses would be good for us.’

[The Association of Colleges’ November 2024 report](#) highlights that demand for college places for 14–16-year-olds exceeds supply, with access often dependent on schools providing funding. Evidence indicates strong demand for practical and vocational learning options among Gypsy, Traveller and Roma young people, suggesting that earlier access to vocational routes could improve engagement and participation in education.

Education reform

Given that such pronounced inequalities and barriers to education are evident, and have been for decades, it is crucial to establish sustained, targeted action and funding to support Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children to participate in education, whether that be mainstream provision, home education, or vocational learning.

Despite the glaring disparities, the [Department for Education maintain](#) that; *‘The department does not design education policy to target certain groups of pupils based on ethnicity.’* This position is reflected in recent education policy, with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils receiving little or no targeted attention in the key policies outlined below.

‘Every child achieving and thriving’

The Government published its education white paper, [‘Every child achieving and thriving’](#), in April 2026. The paper sets out a range of reforms aimed at tackling educational inequality, improving attendance and strengthening SEND provision, alongside an ambition to halve the disadvantage gap. It also recognises disparities in suspension and permanent exclusion affecting Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller pupils.

However, it is not clear how the measures set out in the white paper will reach Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils or translate into meaningful improvements in their educational experiences and outcomes. While the Government’s wider ambition to tackle educational disadvantage has the potential to benefit Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils, the white paper does not set out a comprehensive approach to the wider and longstanding inequalities outlined in this briefing. Without targeted action, monitoring and accountability, there is a risk that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils will not benefit equitably from the Government’s wider education reforms.

The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Act

The Government enacted new duties via the [Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026](#) which require local authorities to keep a register of all children of compulsory school age who are not registered with a school, referred to as the ‘Children not in School Register’. This presents an opportunity to understand the reasons for elective home education because while in many cases this is a preference, [other reasons](#) include, bullying, mental health, lack of SEND provision, and school dissatisfaction. The data suggests that, for some children, leaving school may have been linked to difficulties accessing appropriate support or provision. The ethnicity data on EHE is

published in the five high level ethnic categories, which masks data on Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller pupils under the 'White category'.

However, in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act [2026 Equality Impact Assessment](#), it states *'In the Autumn 2025 EHE data collection, local authorities recorded that 4.3% of the EHE population in England were known to them to be GRT.'* This is compared with 0.4% of children recorded to be Gypsy, Roma and Traveller in the school population in England. Given the disproportionate representation of Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller children within the EHE population, data on the reasons for this are sorely needed.

The Act also includes a duty on local authorities to provide support for parents of children on the register. This 'support' is not defined in the Act itself but is just a minimum requirement to give advice or information (when requested by the parent or carer).

Technical educational routes

As part of plans to reduce the number of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), the [Government has announced](#) a commitment to prioritise technical education alongside core subjects in areas such as advanced manufacturing, AI, digital and technology, clean energy, life sciences, construction, health and care, and the creative industries for 14–16-year-olds.

The limited access to vocational courses and college-based provision for 14–16-year-olds should also be addressed as part of these reforms, rather than focusing solely on increasing vocational subjects within schools. This is particularly important given the demand for practical and vocational learning among Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people, alongside the existing barriers to participation and progression identified in this briefing.

The reforms should also consider whether current requirements to study English and maths alongside vocational programmes create barriers to participation and progression for some young people. While maintaining access to high-quality English and maths education is important, greater flexibility in how these subjects are delivered alongside vocational learning could help ensure that these requirements support, rather than restrict, access to practical and technical pathways.

‘Building a world-class curriculum for all’

The Government commissioned an independent [review of the curriculum](#) in 2025 which explicitly highlighted Gypsy and Irish Traveller pupils as groups experiencing particularly poor attainment outcomes and states; *‘When the curriculum is designed thoughtfully, it can reduce unnecessary inequities and barriers to learning, provide clarity and coherence for teachers, and better support young people with diverse needs.’* Two recommendations are particularly relevant:

- ‘The national curriculum is for all our children and young people. As such, it should reflect our diverse society and the contributions of people of all backgrounds to our knowledge and culture.’
- ‘Develops a programme of work to provide evidence-led guidance on curriculum and pedagogical adaptation (as well as exemplification) for children and young people with SEND, including those in specialist provision, who experience various barriers to accessing the curriculum.’

Given the limited representation of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller cultures within the school curriculum, alongside the high proportion of the Irish Traveller, Gypsy and Roma pupils formally identified within the SEND system, these recommendations provide an important opportunity. This review must be leveraged to address existing educational inequalities through meaningful engagement and co-design with community members.

Education funding

In 2026, the Government has announced funding to improve educational attainment and inclusion, yet it remains unclear how, if at all, these resources will filter down to support Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller pupils.

A dedicated pilot programme was [funded in 2021](#) to address the significant inequalities experienced by the communities. However, the Government [did not undertake a national evaluation](#) of the programme and its impact. Consequently, no evidence base was developed to support the expansion of successful interventions, leaving some of the most disadvantaged pupils without a clear strategy for improvement.

Recommendations

The Government's ongoing reforms to attendance, SEND, curriculum and educational disadvantage provide an opportunity to address the longstanding inequalities experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils. To address these inequalities, the following actions are needed from Government:

- Publish a dedicated strategy to improve educational participation, attainment and progression for Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller children and young people.
- Establish a dedicated funding stream to address entrenched educational inequalities experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller pupils.
- Improve data collection and publication, with separate reporting on Romany Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller pupils.
- Recognise and address anti-Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller racism as a significant barrier to educational participation.
- Monitor outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller children as SEND reforms are implemented.
- Ensure the curriculum reflects the histories, cultures and contributions of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.
- Ensure Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are consulted on upcoming education reforms.
- Expand access to vocational and technical pathways for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people, including increasing funded vocational and college-based provision for 14–16-year-olds and reviewing and addressing further barriers to participation.
- Commission an independent review of the high exclusion and suspension rates of Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller pupils.
- Consult home-educating children and parents on the forms of support they want and need.
- Ensure guidance for local authorities on the Children Not in School Register supports appropriate responses to children who leave school due to bullying, mental health, SEND or school dissatisfaction, including helping children and families who want to return to school to access suitable provision.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this briefing demonstrates that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities continue to experience significant educational inequalities.

Across measures of attainment, participation, exclusion, progression and qualification levels, outcomes remain substantially worse than those of the wider population. These disparities are longstanding, well-documented, and reflected in government statistics, academic research and the lived experiences of the communities.

Importantly, the evidence highlights the impact of persistent barriers including racism and bullying, inadequate SEND support, lack of cultural representation within education, and limited access to vocational pathways that meet the needs and aspirations of many young people.

While recent and ongoing education reforms have set out plans to reduce disadvantage and improve educational outcomes, there remains a notable absence of targeted action to address the specific challenges faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils. Unless policy, funding and accountability frameworks explicitly account for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people, existing educational inequalities risk persisting across education policy and practice.

About us

Friends, Families and Travellers is a leading national charity that works to end racism and discrimination against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and to protect the right to pursue a nomadic way of life.

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