



**FRIENDS,
FAMILIES &
TRAVELLERS**

October 2026

Raise the Bars:

**Co-producing practice guidance
with Romany Gypsy and Irish
Traveller people**

**Year 1 Summary Report:
Resources for prisons**

FFT Charity Number: 1112326

BCT Charity Number: 1115476

Contents

<u>Acknowledgements</u>	3
<u>Introduction</u>	3
<u>Methodology</u>	4
<u>Key Findings</u>	5
<u>Importance of correct ethnicity monitoring</u>	5
<u>The Vital Role of Traveller Reps in Prisons</u>	6
<u>How Chaplaincy Provides Wellbeing and Practical Support</u>	8
<u>Accessible Education for Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller People</u>	9
<u>Neurodivergence and Mental Health</u>	11
<u>Communication in Body and Language</u>	11
<u>Them and Us: Cultural Separation in prison</u>	13
<u>Gender Specific Issues for young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller Women in the Female Estate</u>	17
<u>Probation and coming up to parole/release</u>	18
<u>Conclusion and a Call for Systemic Reform</u>	20
<u>Guidance and Resources</u>	22
<u>About us</u>	23

Acknowledgements

This report was compiled by Sam Worrall, Development Policy Officer at Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT).

FFT would like to thank the staff working in Diversity and Inclusion teams across HMPPS for their continued support, including facilitating access to prisons and to young adult Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller participants. We are especially grateful to everyone who attended the engagement sessions and shared their experiences openly. We would also like to thank the prisoner steering groups at HMP Coldingley, HMP Frankland and HMP/YOI Isis for their support in developing and piloting the discussion questions.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge and thank the project artist, [Gemma Challenger](#) for the images used on the guidance resources.

Introduction

Friends, Families and Travellers, with support from Barrow Cadbury Trust's Transition to Adulthood Alliance (T2A), has co-produced culturally pertinent guidance for criminal justice professionals at three key touchpoints: prison, police, and probation.

The project built directly on FFT's landmark [Trapped in the Turnstile](#) report, which exposed discrimination and injustice in the systems and procedures faced by Romany and Irish Traveller young adults across the criminal justice system (CJS). This 'Raise the Bars' project seeks to address some of the report's recommendations and translate them into actionable guidance for frontline professionals. FFT convened steering groups and focus groups within prisons and communities, to co-produce practical guidance fully informed by lived experience. This included publications, online resources, webinars, policy briefings, and dissemination through national networks and statutory bodies.

The 'Raise the Bars' guidance aims to embed culturally responsive practice across the system, helping to improve outcomes for Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller individuals. By co-producing tools with community members and professionals, FFT is supporting national policy reform and contributing to long-term structural and systemic change.

The project also supports the HMPPS Race and Disparities Unit (Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Strategy Strand) and complements the work of sector partners such as Clinks, including their Race Inequalities Network.

Methodology

FFT convened two steering groups to sense test the questions drafted for the focus groups. These questions were based on issues identified during engagement sessions for 'Trapped in the Turnstile.' One steering group was made up of professionals working across the CJS and the other comprised Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people currently serving custodial sentences in HMP's Coldingley and Frankland. These prisons were chosen due to the high levels of engagement between the cohort and the prisons' Equalities Officers.

A series of focus groups were then carried out in prisons across England and Wales, with direct positive outcomes for both prisoners and staff. As one Equalities Officer said:

"I would just like to express some positive fallout from the focus group, at the end of last week, and again today, I have had members of the community approach me, thanking me for the group and asking when I can get them together again. I would consider the current engagement I am receiving a significant improvement, which is wonderful."

Between February and June 2026, a total of 57 Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller participants aged 18-25 were engaged across 20 prisons. A focus group was held in July in HMP/YOI Isis with an FFT-commissioned artist, to ensure correct representation of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller young adults.

Key Findings

Importance of correct ethnicity monitoring

Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people are often misidentified as being from White British or White Irish communities, despite being from separate minority ethnic groups. Very few had been made aware of the option to disclose as either 'Romany Gypsy' or 'Irish Traveller'.

Staff working in reception areas of prisons should make people aware they can identify as *Romany Gypsy* or *Irish Traveller* (W3) on the P-Nomis system. People may not be aware there is a box for this, especially if this is their first time in custody and/or they have low literacy requiring support with form filling.

"I wasn't asked but I changed it when I got in on the wing."

"Never got told there was that option. Only when the others told me once I got settled and met them."

It is important to be aware of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller heritages within prison populations, in order to recognise the significance of family and extended family. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins are often considered as important and close as immediate family members. This is important to be aware of when people request access to family members during illnesses and funerals after bereavement.

Some prisons displayed notice boards with posters in reception, showing photographs of each Rep for the protected characteristic groups. However, almost all participants said they did not or would not see these boards, as they could not read them, or were too anxious or stressed to look around and take in their surroundings.

Young adults said how important it is to have visual indicators at reception and induction to help make them feel their needs will be met in the prison.

“If there was something in reception that would help us feel safe, or staff asked us instead of assuming we are White British or White Irish. When you first come in you don’t know and it’s all confusion and rush.”

The Vital Role of Traveller Reps in Prisons

When asked about the importance and role of members of the communities acting as ‘Traveller Reps’, the overwhelming response was that having a trusted peer in this position was one of the most important steps a prison could take to engage positively. This view was echoed by Equalities Officers, who reported that in prisons without a Traveller Rep staff often struggle to engage effectively with Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller young people.

Traveller Reps provide a range of valuable support, including helping peers complete forms, facilitating communication between staff and community members, explaining misunderstandings and cultural factors that may have contributed to difficulties, and ensuring that people are aware of meetings and forums. They also support Equalities staff in organising culturally important events, such as celebrating Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month.

One staff member said:

“Having a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller prisoner representative provides an important voice for a traditionally under-represented group [sic], helping to identify barriers, raise concerns and improve access to prison services. Our Rep has also helped me better understand the needs and experiences of this community [sic], enabling me to provide more informed and effective support while promoting equality, inclusion and cultural awareness across the prison.”

Young adults who are new to prison said how the Traveller Rep became a person they could confide in, helping to navigate the prison regime and remain calm at times of crisis or stress. Many of the Reps during the prison visits are young adults themselves who enjoyed the role and learnt a lot from the responsibilities it holds. Where the Rep was older, the young adults greatly benefit from their experience and

advice. Elders often hold trusted positions within Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities.

“A Rep is really important to us. It’s familiarity, someone else from your own community who understands you, gets where you come from, your shared sense of humour. We wouldn’t really talk that much to someone who wasn’t one of us, they wouldn’t understand what it’s like to be us.”

Trusted Reps can provide a vital peer mentoring role, supporting individuals with their mental health. Having a Rep or a Listener from the communities for people to talk to means young adults can have a safe space to confide in someone. Reps did not have any training around peer support for mental health, and this was something young adults mentioned would be of help to them.

“If someone was doing mediation and anger management that would help but it would have to be someone who understands our ways.”

There appear to be some structural barriers to appointing Traveller Reps, such as there not being any money for a paid role. Another barrier is finding a person who is ‘Red Banded’ or on ‘Enhanced’ and can access wider areas within the prison.

This research found a reluctance for prisons to give Red Bands or Enhanced status to Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people. This could be seen as discriminatory as each application should be judged on the individual, not on ethnicity or association by family name.

“You won’t see many Travellers on Enhanced, they don’t seem to let us.”

Flexibility in the system is required to enable young Romany Gypsy and Irish Travellers to access the positions on an equitable footing and enable progression, creating more positive outcomes.

How Chaplaincy Provides Wellbeing and Practical Support

As well as providing religious services, chaplains give other vital support. Virtually all the focus group participants were actively seeking out chaplains and attending

Sunday services. These also provide a valuable and often rare opportunity to meet up with peers, which can have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing.

“It’s just so important to us, especially in here. We go to service once a week then have some time to socialise. The bible studies group is really good, every week about half an hour of bible chatting about the passage then we get to have a bit of a chat. You feel better after, you know, calmer.”

Chaplains helped communicate the importance of visiting sick family members in hospital, arranging visits to graves after bereavements, and liaising with prison staff to enable funeral attendance. Being allowed to visit relatives or go to graves had a positive effect on mental health, general wellbeing and trust building with staff. It is important to recognise that family is central to the lives of many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people. Extended family members may also take on primary caring responsibilities. Therefore, any illness, or bereavement of extended family can be upsetting. A Romany Gypsy or Irish Traveller person may refer to older family members as 'aunty' or 'uncle', even where there is no immediate relationship, but they will still be regarded equally important.

“He helped with my request to visit my gran before she passed. I can’t tell you how important that was for me, it was amazing he got that permission.”

Not all prisons had access to a culturally competent chaplain working with Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller cohorts. Historically, this has been a gap where third sector organisations, such as [Irish Council for Prisoners’ Overseas](#) (ICPO), have helped to address.

Where no chaplain was available to support Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people, some negative experiences were reported. The example below, from a Category C prison, may partly reflect a lack of staff capacity to check the individual’s belongings and return them to him. Nevertheless, the evident distress this caused, and its wider impact on his behaviour in prison, should have been treated as a priority. Chaplaincy could have played a crucial role by advocating on his behalf and helping to provide suitable religious or cultural artefacts for his immediate use:

“My cross and my rosary have been held up at reception for 6 weeks now, since I came in. It’s causing me crazy anxiety, they don’t understand how much I need them to help with my anxiety. I can’t cope much longer without them.”

Accessible Education for Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller People

“I won’t go. It feels like stepping into a spaceship for the first time, it feels like daycare, and brings back all the trauma I had at school. We wouldn’t put ourselves in that position, it’s too difficult.”

Educational inequalities experienced by Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities can mean that some young people enter prison with limited literacy or digital skills. As a result, accessing education in prison may be difficult and even traumatic for some. The majority felt that participating in education offered limited value within a wider system that excluded or discriminated against them and their cultures. For many, leaving education to earn money and learn the family business was seen as a more meaningful and practical use of their time.

“You got to understand that I left school at 12 yes, but I was out with my dad, learning the business. I learnt how to talk to people, how to do quotes, order materials, logistics, scheduling, billing, accounting, advertising, everything. I knew more about how to run a business by the time I was 13 than anyone else my age at a school. I was making a lot of money. I didn’t need to be at school and I don’t need to be in education here.”

While some young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller adults may be reluctant to engage in education in prison, many are willing to do so when the appropriate support is available. With additional support, persistence and tailored or one-to-one provision with an appropriate staff member, many of the young people described their experiences of education in custody as very positive. They had learned to read and write and had developed some mathematical skills during their time in prison.

“I didn’t engage at first, but then I learnt to read and write here with Shannon Trust so that has been good. They need to offer one to one more though cos its hard in a classroom setting for lots of us. I do a one to one every week. I wouldn’t do that in the classroom; it would be awful.”

However, experiences of trauma and bullying at school continued to affect young adults, meaning that even stepping into a classroom could require enormous courage:

“Staff don’t understand that it’s not just about not being able to read and write, it makes us feel embarrassed and ashamed and we don’t have any confidence. They need to know that so they can support us more.”

“Confidence is a big thing, we don’t like asking for help. A lot of the staff and keyworkers are part time, or don’t stick around long, so we don’t feel confident approaching or trusting another new member of staff over and over. It’s really embarrassing to go into a group of people when you can’t read or write, so I wouldn’t do it.”

Ultimately, the majority of participants did not feel that education offered sufficient benefits to encourage them to engage. The requirement to obtain Maths and English qualifications before becoming eligible for training courses or employment was an additional barrier.

Following the recent reduction in the education budget, the current one-size-fits-all approach to gaining qualifications in prison would benefit from becoming more person-centred to improve accessibility.

Neurodivergence and Mental Health

Neurodivergent conditions may remain undiagnosed among young people who have not attended full-time education or whose needs were not recognised or adequately supported at school. This can significantly affect whether young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller adults feel able to enter a classroom setting. Support for neurodivergent people in prisons has historically been inadequate, but more recently, HMPPS has begun appointing Neurodiversity Officers. This role was having a clearly positive impact and was regarded as an important and necessary form of support.

“I have ADHD and I was never good in classrooms; it’s too much pressure. I had a one to one with someone in my last prison from an outside organisation and they were really great and used to come to my cell and we worked there and I got my Level 1s that way. There was a staff member at HMP Altcourse who was Gypsy and

she was great at helping us with education. They need staff who understand about our worries around education and the support we need.”

Poor mental health, neurodivergence and a lack of access to educational opportunities seemed to overlap for some participants. During one focus group session, a participant took the opportunity to ask for help directly, raising his hand and staying behind afterwards to speak with the Equalities Officer. He reported:

“I find it more difficult to get help in here for my mental health than outside. I need support as I’m pretty sure I got ADHD and bad anxiety. We get access to the Forward Trust but we don’t have an ND officer here at the moment.”

Communication in Body and Language

“It’s a big problem, because other people just don’t understand the way we talk and express ourselves, so we are always being accused of being aggressive.”

Communication and body language was reported to lead to misunderstandings amongst staff, resulting in punishments or removal of Enhanced status, creating resentment and breakdown of trust and relationships between individuals and staff.

Family size, living arrangements and the physical environment can influence how people communicate. The use of expansive gestures was reported to be used to communicate and to emphasise points. Differences in communication and body language may be misunderstood, particularly where neurodivergence has not been recognised or supported.

A young woman who told her story around the issue of communication said:

“... we are blunt people, we grew up that way, we don’t use fancy words; we say it how it is, we use our hands a lot when we talk and we get a bit excited or frustrated about things if we don’t understand and that gets us into trouble. We ask questions. All our lives we were taught to ask questions and learn that way and be inquisitive, not learn from a book or the internet, but staff think we are trying to find out intel or being challenging or manipulative, and they get annoyed then we get into trouble or accused of being troublemakers or acting suspiciously.”

HMPPS use of force statistics show the rate for 'White Gypsy or Irish Traveller' was approximately x1.65 the rate for 'White British or Irish'¹. Whilst the way these figures are collected may not reflect the full extent of the issue, the scenarios described by participants suggest that misunderstandings relating to physical and verbal communication, including where neurodivergence may be present, could contribute to the escalation of situations involving young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller adults. This raises the possibility that, in some cases, the deployment of force might have been avoided through greater awareness, more effective communication and appropriate support.

Them and Us: Cultural Separation in prison

"Being here makes us anxious all the time cos of the lack of understanding of our culture and also as its totally alien to us to be away from family etc., and here with Gorgers [non-Romany Gypsy or Irish Traveller people], it's like a game of chess every day, how will it affect our heads."

The above quote illustrates the anxiety and uncertainty that some young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller adults may experience when separated from their families and staying in an unfamiliar environment. It also highlights the impact of perceived cultural misunderstanding and the challenges of navigating relationships with people outside their communities. These experiences can contribute to feelings of isolation and have implications for mental health, wellbeing, behaviour and engagement.

"It really winds me up when they say 'you lot', it happens all the time. 'What are you lot up to?', if we go and chat together even. Constantly. I have even started to avoid talking for long with anyone cos it makes me anxious and I am just waiting for a staff member to come up and say something."

Almost all participants had recent experiences of hearing the deeply offensive racial slur '*pikey*', or being grouped as 'you lot' by prison staff. When challenged about this, staff have reportedly made a joke out of it or wrongly believed '*pikey*' is not racist or offensive.

“The other day I was stood out on the grass having a chat with some of the other lads, and an officer came over and said, ‘What are you lot talking about?’ Like he automatically assumed we were going to be causing trouble. But I’ve seen other people in groups standing around chatting and not seen any officers go over to them and say the same. We don’t report it though, no point. So, I find I try to act different and change my behaviour so it doesn’t upset the staff! I try not to hang out with the others in groups, I try and talk more quietly too so I don’t get told off for being too loud, cos that has happened before a lot and I don’t want them to think I am out of order for anything, just keeping quiet like.”

Separation from peers across different wings was described by participants as a source of frustration, suggesting that this contributes to feelings of isolation and negatively affects mental health and wellbeing. Where individuals were challenged or reprimanded during the limited opportunities they had to spend time with peers, particularly when they perceived other groups to be treated differently, this appeared to reinforce feelings of unfairness and discrimination.

“It’s really important we get to see our peers sometimes, so having more of us on one wing is good for our morale you know. We chat with anyone of course, but only another one of our kind really gets us. On our wing there is me, and him, and him, and it’s spotless. We keep it so clean and the officer there knows it’s always the cleanest.”

“Been told that there are too many Travellers on one wing so we get moved but other groups don’t. We have asked to stay together more as it’s helpful for our mental health and we never cause any trouble, but it gets ignored. We keep each other together like, keep each other out of trouble, disciplined, you know.”

When Discrimination Incident Reporting Forms (DIRFs) were ignored, never followed up, or confidentiality broken, participants reported losing trust in prison staff and stopped engaging. Most participants said they would not bother putting in a DIRF due to a lack of belief that anything positive would come of it, or due to previous negative experiences that got them into trouble.

“I put in a DIRF because a staff member on my wing was just hassling me all the time, goading me to react it felt like, always calling my name and singling me out, saying get your stuff, get over here, all that stuff. It really winds me up in my head, it

gets to me. I feel like they were pushing me all the time to react and I have to try so hard not to react. So, I put in a DIRF. Next thing they were standing in front of me with the bit of paper saying it was all lies and basically ripped it up in front of me.”

HMPPS have made recent improvements to the DIRF system, but it is clear from the conversations that it will take a lot of time to build the trust, so young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller adults feel safe enough to challenge any discrimination.

Creating opportunities for positive engagement through group work and activities

Participants were asked if they wanted regular forums, meetings, events and what these should look like. Participants indicated that they did not require frequent meetings and would prefer to use their time to work, go to the gym or have some quiet time.

The majority simply wanted some space in a room every month to get together with their peers, have a chat and relax with a drink and a snack. Asking Reps for consensus would be the best way to find out what groups would like and if there are any forum activities people want specifically during their allotted Diversity and Inclusion meetings.

“More events with our traditional food would be great. Our family day last year was good.”

Participants were interested in sports and keeping fit, but access to a gym seemed to vary between prisons. Some had easy access, while others had long wait lists for inductions, meaning people were not able to use the gym until they had completed the official induction process.

Boxing was described as an activity with cultural significance, but even though participants mentioned they would like to do boxing in prison, it was recognised that contact sports were not permitted.

“The gym here is really good so we use that a lot and it also helps with our heads as well as physical stuff, makes you feel good.”

At three prisons, participants specifically mentioned HMPPS-employed staff who worked in the gym were hostile, making derogatory comments, being obstructive and making access to the gym difficult. This issue also came up in a separate interview with a young Romany Gypsy man:

“Gym staff are the most racist people I’ve ever met in my life. It puts me off going there, the way that guy talks to you, is so rude.”

“Most of the staff are really good except the Gym staff, one guy especially. He seems to treat us differently to the others. I got banned for a while when I missed my slot, when I was so ill, I couldn’t leave bed. I explained all this, but he didn’t believe me.”

With limited budgets for resources, it can be difficult for staff in Equalities to develop engaging themes or activities for forums. Involving third sector specialist organisations to work in prisons is a possible way to support the work of Equalities teams. The case study below is quote from the Equalities Manager at HMP/YOI Isis, speaking about the work FFT has been carrying out with young adults from Romany and Traveller communities at the prison this year.

Our work with Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT) has enabled us to deliver tailored sessions with young men at HMP Isis. In particular, the forum delivered with them highlighted both the strengths of the existing support available and areas where further learning and development could be undertaken by the wider Equalities team. FFT has enabled us to continue learning, developing and embracing constructive challenge.

Additionally, feedback following both recent FFT sessions (on young adults' experiences and RSPH training) was extremely positive. The sessions created a safe space, encouraged high levels of engagement, and provided a valuable opportunity to celebrate successes. For example, an increasing number of men are now being employed in key roles such as Red Band positions, Listeners, and Wing Cleaners, despite not meeting the usual educational requirements. Collaboration with FFT has enabled the prison to implement positive changes, improve outcomes for the men, and address gaps in staff knowledge and understanding.

Our next piece of work will be the delivery of bite-sized training sessions for staff on working with Romany and Traveller cohorts. This training will be informed by the resources developed by FFT.

Gender Specific Issues for young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller Women in the Female Estate

"We see staff give [other] women respect for their cultures, but we don't get that. We find it hard and it feels wrong to talk to male staff about women's things, in our culture we just don't do that, and it feels very wrong. But here, we get asked things by male staff that make us want to die inside, it's so disrespectful! But if you ask for a woman instead, they won't listen."

Some participants explained that gender-specific health subjects may traditionally be discussed within gender boundaries in Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities. They suggested that, in a prison setting, discussing certain subjects with staff of a different gender could therefore feel unfamiliar or embarrassing.

Some described seeing culturally sensitive treatment being provided to women from other communities while feeling their own gender traditions and needs were dismissed by staff as excuses to be awkward. Staff should be aware that young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller women may have specific gender traditions and preferences. Where requested, access to female staff should be facilitated, particularly when discussing sensitive subjects.

“There is a big issue here with staff at visit times and family days. Staff behave very differently towards our families than they do others. My husband comes to visit me and he really does look like a typical Gypsy guy, but the staff spend all the visit staring at us and at him and they always put me by the desk, so I get no privacy with him. It has got to the stage where he is really uncomfortable and hates coming in to see me so he says he might not visit again and of course I am really upset about this.”

Participants emphasised the importance of family connections and the additional distress that separation from partners, children and wider family networks can cause during custody. It was suggested that these impacts should be better recognised by the prison system. Recent developments in the way women are supported and sentenced, alongside the introduction of Women’s Centres, were viewed as positive steps towards providing alternatives to short custodial sentences and improving access to support.

Family days are often seen as highly valuable, and some participants explained that they had formed their own families during their late teens or early 20s. While organising *dedicated* family days may be difficult, staff should ensure that general family days are delivered in a way that is respectful, culturally sensitive and inclusive of young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller adults.

Probation and coming up to parole/release

“I am out next week but I have heard nothing. I have no idea what is going to happen when I get out that gate!”

A key theme emerging from the discussions was the stress and distress young adults experienced in relation to their Prison Offender Managers (POMs), parole

conditions and release arrangements. The main issue raised was a lack of communication, with participants reporting they had not heard from their POM for a number of weeks and were not aware of the arrangements for their release, despite their release date being close. This created significant anxiety among participants with one case causing a young man to react in a situation that put his release at risk.

Many participants described how probation staff's limited understanding of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller cultures and ways of life created additional barriers to securing parole and determining suitable release locations. Additionally, highly important cultural traditions were impacted by licence conditions, causing extra anxiety.

“The police have got an exclusion area down for me around [a specific] road, I get that, but they have now said when I am released in 5 weeks’ time that I am banned from the whole city! I can’t do that...my mum is buried there! I have to visit her grave. They don’t understand how crucial that is to me. If I don’t go, I will be in trouble with everyone, but if I do go I risk getting banged up again! I am getting so stressed out, I can’t sleep at night. I ask about changing the ban but no one tells me anything.”

“I don’t think probation workers understand our culture at all, it feels like a blockage and it feels like you can’t live life how you used to and what your culture is now. It’s like they have stopped our culture.”

Many participants feared that they would inadvertently jeopardise their licence conditions due to not fully understanding the language, terminology or definitions correctly. Anxiety about the abruptness of the release process was also expressed, with descriptions of how periods with limited communication and uncertainty could be followed suddenly by release, leaving little time to prepare.

“When you come up to release it all suddenly seems to happen so fast, like it’s last minute and no one has really communicated things with you so you don’t feel prepared and can’t take the sudden changes all in so there needs to be better communication and flexibility.”

Conclusion and a Call for Systemic Reform

In *Trapped in the Turnstile*, participants described how, for some young adults from Gypsy and Traveller communities, experiences of imprisonment had become part of what they considered to be 'normal life', highlighting the need to strengthen early intervention and alternatives to custody. Many of the women were serving short custodial sentences for minor crimes and described the impact of imprisonment on their young families, including increased distress and mistrust in the criminal justice system. They expressed a preference for community-based or alternative support over custody, with some suggesting that offending could reflect unmet needs than an intention to cause harm.

While recognising the changes taking place in relation to women's sentencing, early release arrangements and the Sentencing Act, it is important to consider whether the current system is effectively supporting young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller adults to move away from offending and re-offending. The research identified concerns about the potential criminalisation of individuals in situations involving racial conflict, as well as perceptions that Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people may receive less favourable treatment within the criminal justice system. These concerns require further investigation and should not be dismissed.

Sentencing and rehabilitation approaches should take account of an individual's circumstances, including relevant experiences of trauma, disadvantage and previous behaviour, alongside the offence itself. Where appropriate, this should include consideration of community-based support and interventions that address the underlying factors associated with offending.

The recent publication of a study examining prisoners' perceptions of safety across the prison estate identified more pronounced disparities between ethnic groups. The study analysed surveys completed by prisoners serving custodial sentences up to 2020. It was particularly notable that 27.9% of prisoners who took part and identified as 'Gypsy/Roma/Traveller' reported feeling consistently unsafe. This compares to White prisoners who reported the lowest rate of current feelings of unsafety at 16.9%.

Research for *Trapped in the Turnstile* found that some young adults from these communities described imprisonment as having become part of what they

considered to be 'normal life'. Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of understanding the cumulative impact of imprisonment, particularly for individuals who may already have experienced discrimination, trauma or repeated contact with the criminal justice system. Prison services should consider how these experiences affect feelings of safety, mental health, trust and engagement with support.

The introduction of neurodiversity workers across the prison estate appears to be having a positive impact and were reported to provided effective support to young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller adults whilst helping to develop trusting relationships. Where specialist staff were available to support young adults with education, training and employment, participants described positive changes to their lives in prison, alongside the development of skills to support their resettlement.

In a recent workshop with Barrow Cadbury a question was raised, "How can we talk about rehabilitating people who have never been habilitated?" The discussion highlighted how young adults from marginalised or minority ethnic communities may enter the criminal justice system having received limited support from mainstream services, limited opportunities to develop positive relationships with the police, or insufficient understanding of their rights and responsibilities. These disadvantages may be exacerbated when individuals enter the criminal justice system.

To be effective, the system should place greater emphasis on support, rehabilitation and prevention, alongside proportionate accountability, to help reduce the risk of reoffending. Staff training should therefore extend beyond security-focused responsibilities to include communication, cultural understanding, trauma-informed practice and the identification of unmet needs.

Humiliation can have a significant impact on young people's lives. Experiences of shame and cumulative humiliation may provoke defensive or emotional reactions, which can contribute to behaviours that increase the risk of criminalisation. For young adults from Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities, culture and identity may be particularly important. Where individuals have grown up experiencing hostility or discrimination from wider society, being incarcerated by the same institutions may compound existing experiences of trauma, exclusion and mistrust.

Systemic change begins with understanding and full inclusion. Addressing systemic racism and ensuring equal treatment in practice requires more than policies and procedures. It requires appropriate staff training, meaningful accountability and a re-examination of the purpose and function of imprisonment. Such changes are essential to creating a system that supports young adults towards positive and sustainable futures, rather than perpetuating a 'turnstile' of repeated custodial sentences and separation from families, communities and natural support networks.

Guidance and Resources

The Resources for Criminal Justice including good practice and case studies relevant to working with young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller cohorts within prisons can be accessed [here](#). These recommendations are relevant to all staff, regardless of role, rank or length of service. It is important that everyone working across HMPPS prisons is familiar with the latest policies and guidance and applies them in a culturally inclusive way.

The resources will also be useful for third sector support organisations working broadly in the prison sector, who may engage with Romany and Irish Traveller cohorts.

The examples of good practice and current work are from a number of prisons that have shown to improve engagement and support for young adults from Romany and Irish Traveller cohorts.

There is also a downloadable leaflet of the guidance, with some hard copies being available upon request via developmentteam@gypsy-traveller.org.

Guidance for the probation service and police is due to be published in October 2027.

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. www.gypsy-traveller.org

Tel +44 (0)1273 234 777 | **Email** fft@gypsy-traveller.org | **LinkedIn** [FFT](#)

FB [@FriendsFamiliesandTravellers](#) | **BSKY** [@fft.bsky.social](#)