

Statistical bulletin

Gypsies' and Travellers' lived experiences, education and employment, England and Wales: 2022

Qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of Gypsy and Traveller communities, relating to education and employment.

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1 . Other pages in this release

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2 . Main points

- Participants from Gypsy and Traveller communities described experiencing varying levels of education, with some never having been to school, and some having completed compulsory education and gaining college or university level qualifications.
- While some spoke of enjoying their education, others described having faced numerous challenges, including perceived discriminatory behaviour from other students and teachers.
- Participants appeared to value education and skills development, particularly for their children, which was linked to the importance placed on securing future employment.
- Experiences of perceived discrimination, inflexibility of the education system, and aspects of the curriculum that are seen as contradictory to Gypsy and Traveller values were cited as reasons for withdrawing children from mainstream education, with some being home-schooled instead.
- Community members who felt accepted by teachers and felt they were able to be open about their ethnicity described having had more positive experiences at school.
- Participants from Gypsy and Traveller communities discussed facing many barriers to accessing employment, including a lack of skills, education or formal qualifications, and perceived discrimination from employers, colleagues, and the settled community.
- Additionally, participants spoke of facing difficulties in re-skilling to adapt to non-traditional occupations, for example, because of technological advancements and the introduction of licensing requirements, such as for selling scrap metal, affecting jobs commonly done by Gypsies and Travellers.

3 . Valuing skills and learning

Participants from Gypsy and Traveller communities expressed a desire for their children to receive a good education and develop useful skills. These were seen as important for securing future employment and better prospects in life. Several participants discussed their determination to ensure their children had a better education than they had, particularly if they had limited opportunities to go to school, either through their parents' difficulties or disillusionment with the education system, or because of their nomadic lifestyle.

Some participants noted that Gypsy and Traveller children may have worked alongside their parents and acquired a wide range of life and practical skills early on in life as part of a traditional Gypsy and Traveller upbringing. Despite this, participants felt that young Gypsy and Traveller people are often unable to access the practical, vocational learning and college courses some would value most. The formal education system was seen to not reflect the diversity of learning needs and aspirations of some Gypsy and Traveller young people who may want to be self-employed and working in the roles traditionally undertaken by their parents and grandparents.

I do think that education would be very helpful for understanding the self-employment system...Real practical skills on doing the job that their parents did and their grandparents. And alongside that – then they have to teach you the ins and outs of running a business, teach them how to keep their books.

Community member, Focus Group 4

Some also felt that a lack of practical, vocational learning may inhibit young people from accessing further academic study, which would give them higher qualifications and opportunities in more skilled occupations.

...Give us a chance on different things, give us a chance at being doctor, give us a chance of being a nurse. There's people out there that want to be nurses, like not all of us want to do scrap or block paving or roofing or things.

Male, aged 50 to 60 years, roadside

Some participants described how they or their children had completed their schooling and gained qualifications and were very proud of these achievements.

I think my third daughter, she wants to get like a university degree [to] better herself...she's done very well in her GCSE's, extremely well. And she's going to go on to university.

Female, aged 40 to 50 years, bricks and mortar

However, multiple barriers were described which were said to result in children having negative schooling experiences or being withdrawn from formal educational provision by their parents. In some instances, they opted to home-school their children instead.

4 . Barriers to mainstream schooling

Flexibility and cultural sensitivity within the education system were recurrent themes raised by Gypsies and Travellers when asked about their experiences of education, both for themselves and their children. There were a variety of ways in which participants felt that the current educational system may not be well suited to the values and priorities of Gypsy and Traveller parents and children.

Examples of this included inflexibility around school attendance to accommodate travelling and a nomadic lifestyle, with the system said to not allow for continuity of education when travelling between places.

Some participants reported a lack of awareness and sensitivity in schools to Gypsy and Traveller culture. Although Gypsies and Travellers are traditionally nomadic and this remains an important aspect of their culture, participants described having difficulty getting authorised absences to take children out of school to travel. There were examples of this resulting in disagreements with schools, parents withdrawing their children from schools and opting to home educate instead, to retain greater flexibility for travelling.

This was an issue recognised by some local government participants.

Obviously with attendance, Gypsy Travellers like to travel as part of this sort of culture tradition. They could be traveling for work. It could be traveling for weddings, the family is sort of very close knit, so it could be if there's a death in the family, the whole family goes maybe four weeks to another part of the country to sort of come to mourn.

Local authority participant, Wales

Some participants cited positive examples from their childhoods where "green cards" were used as a system to enable Gypsy and Traveller children to attend schools in the areas where they were travelling. While they appreciated this attempt to provide continuity, difficulties were also experienced with the implementation of this system. For example, it was stated that historically children with green cards would often be grouped together in a class, regardless of age or previous educational attainment, leading to an environment not well adapted to the needs of learners.

We used to go to school when we could or if we used to get enough time in a camp or something we had a thing called like a green card, you could go to the local school like if you was there long enough....they'd always used to be all in the one class not for your ability or what you should be at your age, it was always like none of them knows how to read or write or do anything so we're just going to throw them all together in one class.

Female, aged 30 to 40 years, bricks and mortar

Community members also discussed their concerns around the perceived lack of reference to, and avoidance of, Gypsy and Traveller culture within lessons. This had in some cases led to a fear that sending their children to school could undermine their cultural identity. There was a strong desire for more teaching about their culture within schools.

Because there was never anything that ever interested you in the school because there was nothing of you in it, and none of your past even history itself. There was no Travellers mentioned, there were no Gypsies mentioned.... You learned a very restricted, very limited amount of knowledge that was only ever applied to certain sectors in today's society, and it never fitted all.

Female, aged 50 to 60 years, local authority site

I'm seriously debating can I educate them at home and have [a] full time job. I don't know. Cause I don't want to send them to school to have the Gypsy beaten out of them.

Community member, Focus Group 4

Participants also discussed concerns around their children participating in lessons that they deemed to be culturally inappropriate. Community members and government participants discussed how some Gypsy and Traveller parents felt their children were being taught about sex education at an inappropriately young age.

...my daughter in law, went in and said, look, we don't want them to learn about these kinds of things. They can learn things at an appropriate age. And because they didn't listen, they just pulled him out of school.

Female, aged 70 to 80 years, bricks and mortar

In some cases, parents discussed having pre-emptively withdrawn their children from school to avoid these lessons, while others said they had been unable to take them out of these lessons because they had not received advance notification.

Do you know about the girls... we pull them out at 10 because they're learning things that we wouldn't like to learn our children. Sex education they give them.

Community member, Focus Group 5

Despite some feeling these lessons are not in keeping with traditional Gypsy and Traveller values, they did not appear to universally pose a barrier to children continuing in mainstream education. Some noted that elements of these lessons provide benefit to the community, such as receiving information about vaccines.

I think I need to say that my views on PHSE are quite unique. And it's because I've seen the training. I've worked with people that provide training and I've worked through that and understand where they're coming from... So the conversation came out of [city], it helped with the HPV vaccine, it helped for the COVID vaccine because these mums will stand together in the playground, talking about issues

Community member, Focus Group 4

5 . School experiences

Some participants described having had negative experiences in their own childhood, such as bullying and ostracisation. This was linked to some being reluctant for their children to participate in mainstream education.

I never went to school until I was thirteen years old and that was the most horrendous time of my life. You know, for bullying and you had to fight, physically fight to survive... with kids pushing you in the playground.

Male, aged 80 to 90 years, bricks and mortar

Community members described experiences of bullying and perceived racism from other students as well as instances in which they or their children were felt to be unfairly punished for reacting to bullying, rather than the perpetrator. The management of these situations by schools were said to have sometimes resulted in young people being excluded from school, or parents choosing to withdraw their children from school.

Some participants believed that this situation has improved for the current generation of Gypsy and Traveller school children. Others spoke about their children having experienced similar or worse discriminatory behaviour than they had in the past and struggling to feel a sense of belonging as a result.

When the children started standing up for themselves...and they used to have fights over it and all the boys did, the school used to ban the Travellers, my children, from going to school. They used to be suspended for fighting. "What was he suspended for? Oh, we haven't got to the bottom of it yet. We think it's something about racism." Well, the other boy should be suspended then, shouldn't he? But no, your boy has caused the trouble because you should've learnt to walk away... Yeah, sometimes it's hard. Very hard to walk away.

Male, aged 40 to 50 years, local authority site

To combat feelings of being an outsider at school, participants discussed hiding their own or their child's ethnicity, to avoid potentially unfavourable treatment. This is explored in more detail in our [culture and identities bulletin](#).

I hid my bigger children's ethnicity so they can go to school.

Community member, Focus Group 5

Community members also discussed feeling that their Gypsy or Traveller heritage directly impacted how teachers perceived them and spoke of experiencing ostracisation and discrimination as a result. Historic examples were given of Gypsy and Traveller children having to undertake manual jobs around the school while other children were in lessons.

Participants felt that generalisations about Gypsies and Travellers and misunderstanding of their culture could influence differential treatment, including perceptions that children are not worth investing in as they lack academic capability or will leave school early to get married.

Just kind of segregated... like there was no point helping you because you're gonna get married at like 16 and that's it. You don't need an education, that's all you know. Yeah, they just assume that you're gonna get married and so you don't need to be educated

Female, aged 30 to 40 years, bricks and mortar

Some participants stated that their children had fared well at school and had gained qualifications at college level and above. Meanwhile, others saw a lack of progress in providing appropriate education for the community through generations, and believed schools had failed Gypsy and Traveller children, irrespective of their academic capabilities or aspirations.

I remember teachers sending me out into the playground to pick up sweet papers because they said I'd be useless at the particular lesson that was going on at the time, "you won't be no good at that, you go out and pick up the rubbish" and all the other kids looking out the window cheering.

Male, aged 80 to 90 years, bricks and mortar

One participant described having learnt to read in prison, having not learnt to do so at school earlier in life. Participants described how low expectations from teachers and lack of support in school can result in children lacking confidence in their own abilities and rising only to the low bar they believed had been set for them.

Some participants highlighted the perceived mental health impacts of negative school experiences on children from Gypsy and Traveller communities. They described how their children were extremely unhappy attending school, because of bullying or a sense of not fitting in.

She was in secondary until COVID and then she came home and while she was at home, I saw how much happier and different it was...I tried my hardest to put her through school, but after COVID I realised how miserable I was making her by making her go.

Female, aged 40 to 50 years, local authority site

Despite the challenges, some participants described faring well in school. This could be supported both in the home and school environments. At home, some described their parents encouraging learning from a young age and this preparation provided a sound foundation for later learning at school and independently.

I could read before I went to nursery, so my mum, I don't know how she did it. I wasn't the little Gypsy girl when I went to nursery. I was the little girl that could read and write. And I think that stood me in very good stead. And I always did incredibly well at school. I always enjoyed it.

Female, aged 30 to 40 years, bricks and mortar

Positive school experiences were also linked to supportive teachers with effective conflict management skills and acceptance of diversity and cultural differences. Feeling accepted was described as very important, and participants provided examples of how acceptance could be supported, such as setting up a "Gypsy club" to improve relationships between children and aid understanding of Gypsy and Traveller culture.

And I always say the one thing that my teachers taught me. You know, it was regardless of what they actually taught me academically, they taught me to love learning. They taught me to love finding things out and exploring. And that's what I continue to do.

Male, aged 30 to 40 years, bricks and mortar

6 . Home-schooling challenges

A lack of flexibility and cultural sensitivity was reportedly linked to the decisions of some parents to withdraw their children from schools and home educate instead. Challenges faced by those who choose to home educate were recognised both by community and local authority participants in relation to digital exclusion and the lack of a solid educational foundation for some parents to draw on when schooling their own children.

Obviously one challenge was digital access, so obviously there's always online learning going on, but if you didn't have an online device, generally the families would have a phone, but not laptops and iPads. How much can you do on a mobile phone and then if you've got multiple children, that's a challenge.

Local authority participant, Wales

Community and local authority participants suggested that providing learning materials and practical support would be helpful in supporting parents in their efforts to home school children. Meanwhile, unannounced visits to monitor home schooling were viewed by community participants as less constructive and less welcome.

You have to be registered as home-schooling and inspected. So as a Council, we need to be making those checks. ...If it's a help package, as in, here are some materials that might help you home-school your children. That's a different conversation to 'are you registered?'

Local authority participant, England

I would get surprise visits from the home education, you know, and they will come unannounced. And they would always say there wasn't enough work done even though I was literally following the rules.

Community member, Focus Group 4

7 . Barriers to employment

Participants acknowledged that literacy issues and low educational attainment among Gypsies and Travellers could significantly reduce their employment options and limit their opportunities. Some participants said they preferred occupations for which vocational rather than academic qualifications and skills may be required. These included woodwork, landscaping and gardening, tarmacking driveways, and delivery work. Some described learning the skills for these roles through practical experience working alongside family members.

They are doing driving and delivery work... most of us all have licences, and you don't need qualifications to get into it. So it's a natural fit for a lot of people.

Male, aged 30 to 40 years, local authority site

Community member participants noted additional barriers to employment, including perceived negative employer attitudes and preconceived ideas about Gypsies and Travellers. This made some people feel that they had to hide their identity to gain or retain a job.

There's... Travellers out there that want a regular job, but you don't get the chance to get that opportunity to have one. If you could give... Travellers like an opportunity to do something different, to try something else so if one wants to work in a bakery or wanted to be a mechanic or want to be in the Houses of Parliament but that would never happen.... Cause they don't think...we are brainy enough to do it.

Male, aged 50 to 60 years, roadside

Participants also described what they perceived as discriminatory behaviour in their workplaces, including job loss once an employer found out their ethnicity.

I got the sack because my neighbours kept complaining about my work motor parked outside my house. They made that many complaints into where I worked, they even told the people I worked for that I was a Traveller... They [employer] said to me you know ...[name] this job is not for you, this work doesn't work for you, does it? I said what do you mean it don't work for me? I like my job... I was there every morning an hour early, every morning. I was there on time, I helped out in the warehouse before I was meant to start.

Male, aged 40 to 50 years, bricks and mortar

Other community members described positive experiences, where they had found rewarding employment working with Gypsy and Traveller communities or within other sectors. These positive experiences centred around being granted the same opportunities as others without having to hide their identity. Some participants also highlighted examples where employers had been culturally sensitive, for example by allowing increased flexibility for travelling when required.

And I ended up with a job in [city], which I enjoyed, it was working with our own people, Travelling people and that. And it was like helping them, it was it was making people aware of who we are. And what we need

Female, aged 70 to 80 years, bricks and mortar

For many community members, self-employment was reported to be a preference over working for an employer. This was both through a desire to be self-sufficient and because of the perceived discrimination experienced from employers and colleagues in workplaces.

A lot of Travellers have a lot of pride that they work for themselves, that they don't work for the man. You kind of do. Even if you think I'm doing my own bit of tree topping.

Male, aged 30 to 40 years, local authority site

However, people also noted that it can be difficult to find business as a self-employed Gypsy or Traveller because of negative public perceptions.

I'd like to be accepted and... without hassle like, trying to get a bit of work, d'you know what I mean? Like, if I was a non-Traveller and I had a company it'd be easier to get work. Due to the fact that I'm a Traveller with a company, it's very hard.

Male, aged 20 to 30 years, local authority site

8 . Changes over time

Community members discussed how technological advances in farming and the introduction of licences for selling scrap metal had forced people to adapt to new occupations. As a result, some no longer felt they could continue working in jobs they had done all their lives. At the same time, these changes were linked both to a supposed need for improved education and skills amongst participants, as well as to changed approaches to travelling. In the past, families were said to travel year-round to find work in farming or scrap whereas travelling is now reportedly linked more to cultural and social activities than work.

So all of a sudden we went from going around in wagons you know fixing bits of tin whatever or helping people with their cars. All of a sudden, it was like brickwork, God knows what...I think that's when everything went sideways really because Travellers had to learn to do the jobs that country people do. They had no choice and everything that guided our culture, you may as well say for 1000 years, was thrown out the window. So, all of a sudden everybody had to adapt.

Male, aged 30 to 40 years, local authority site

Some described the challenges of finding alternative employment and a sense that legislation, such as the requirement for licences to collect scrap metal, disproportionately affects Gypsy and Traveller people (see our [Gypsies' and Travellers' lived experiences, justice, England and Wales: 2022](#) bulletin).

What I've noticed is them, especially working kind of laws that's been brought in, and you feel like they've come through government, sort of pinpoint Gypsies and Travellers, you know, different laws... scrap licences and things like that. I mean, it's sort of you feel like over the years, there's been a lot of changes, but not for the good of Gypsies and Travellers.

Female, aged 70 to 80 years, bricks and mortar

Some community members also spoke fondly of travelling for work in the past.

We often travelled between England and Wales, visiting family and friends and of course, for work opportunities. My father worked on scrap metal.

Male, aged 40 to 50 years, bricks and mortar

Regardless of the type of employment community members undertook, participants repeatedly discussed a sense of pride in working hard, and having a strong work ethic was seen as important. This is linked to the importance of kinship within Gypsy and Traveller communities, and the need to be able to provide for your family.

From when I could stand up, I've been working...because I was babysitting my sister and I was having to do all the stuff in the trailer, the cleaning the cooking, looking after the yard. That's basically all I understand is working.

Male, aged 50 to 60 years, bricks and mortar

9 . Towards solutions

Recognising the specific needs of Gypsies and Travellers was highlighted as essential to improving their educational outcomes and employment prospects. Participants highlighted a need for more positive engagement between Gypsies and Travellers and education providers to increase understanding, cultural sensitivity, and a sense of acceptance.

Specific suggestions made by community participants to enable and encourage greater participation of Gypsy and Traveller children in mainstream education included:

- consistently granting absences for cultural reasons including travelling (and not only for the purposes of work)
- inclusion of Gypsy and Traveller culture within the syllabus
- enabling parents to opt out of classes they deem culturally inappropriate for their children

Participants also felt that it would help young Gypsies and Travellers to enter the labour market more successfully if they were able to access more practical learning and qualifications, for example via apprenticeships at a younger age, particularly for those who may be more interested in preparing for work than further education.

I personally would love to see occupational qualifications available from around 14, you'd get a lot more kids if you had an option like to the Prince's Trust what we're doing now, to try and keep an educational momentum.

Community member, Focus Group 4

For those choosing to home school their children, the provision of constructive, practical support with learning materials was suggested as more helpful than monitoring whether parents were providing tuition at home.

Central government participants also described promising practices in working with Gypsy and Traveller communities in educational settings. These included improving cultural competency in schools to encourage greater awareness, understanding, and empathy.

It's helping both sides to understand each other...So some of the things that we're doing with the education...is raising awareness about GRT communities within schools so that schools understand their culture and heritage and history so that they can better integrate...the children in schools. It's only where you understand why someone does something the way they do, you then understand and have empathy and be able to then share that with other children and be able to develop this cohesive society. So that's another thing that we're doing through that, so that's how we could probably do it better.

Central government participant, England

10 . Glossary

Bricks and mortar

This term is used commonly by Gypsies and Travellers when talking about homes which are permanent structures, such as houses or flats.

Participants

In this bulletin, "community members" and "participants" refers to people currently living in England and Wales, aged 16 years and over, identifying as Gypsy or Traveller, who took part in this research. Where quotes have been used from local or central government participants, this is explicitly stated. We aim to portray the views of participants and to reflect their words as closely as possible. Some quotes have been edited for language and grammar to improve accessibility, without changing the content or meaning.

11 . Methodology

More information about the background and rationale, approach to sampling and recruitment, design of the material and approach to analysis can be found in our accompanying [methodology article](#).

12 . Cite this statistical bulletin

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