

Research Briefing
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Gypsies and travellers: educational outcomes

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Introduction

This briefing looks at Gypsy and Traveller education. It focuses on England.

It is part of a series of related short briefings, which can be accessed via our [Commons Library website page on Gypsies and Travellers](#).

1 Who are Gypsies and Travellers?

The term ‘Gypsies and Travellers’ encompasses a range of ethnic and cultural groups, many of which practice nomadism (where people do not have a single fixed accommodation but move from place to place) and/or have a nomadic heritage. Some of the groups included in this label are Welsh Gypsies, Scottish Gypsy/Travellers and Irish Travellers.¹ For further information about Gypsies and Travellers, see the Library series on Gypsies and Travellers linked above.

A report by the House of Commons Women and Equalities Select Committee highlights that “while some find the term “Gypsy” to be offensive, many [...]

¹ Traveller Movement, [Gypsy Roma and Traveller History and Culture](#), undated [accessed 26 April 2024]; Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), [Inequalities experienced by Gypsy and Traveller communities: A review](#) (PDF), 2009

were proud to associate themselves with this term”. It is therefore also used in this briefing.²

The term ‘Roma’ is generally used by people of Roma origin who have come to the UK from Central and Eastern Europe more recently. Roma are regarded as a distinct group in the UK,³ although in current Department for Education statistics, the two categories used are: Gypsy/ Roma, and Travellers of Irish Heritage.

2 Educational attainment

2.1 Primary schooling

In England, primary pupils’ attainment and progress is measured by national tests and assessments at the end of the primary schooling phase (key stage two). These tests and assessments are often referred to as SATs.

In summer 2023, 60% of all pupils reached the expected standard in all of English reading, writing and mathematics. Of children identified as Gypsy/Roma, 18% met the expected standard. For those identified as Travellers of Irish Heritage, the figure was 21%.

As is common across a range of education indicators, girls outperformed boys. 19% of Gypsy/ Roma girls, and 22% of Traveller of Irish Heritage girls reached the expected standard compared to 16% of Gypsy/ Roma boys, and 19% of Traveller of Irish Heritage boys.⁴

2.2 Secondary education

In summer 2023, 31% of state-funded school pupils identified as Travellers of Irish Heritage attained GCSEs in English and maths at grade 4 or above – which the DfE describes as a ‘standard pass’. The figure for pupils identified

² Women and Equalities Committee, [Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities](#) (PDF), 5 April 2019, HC 360 2017-19

³ Women and Equalities Committee, [Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities](#) (PDF), 5 April 2019, HC 360 2017-19

⁴ Department for Education, [Academic year 2022/23: key stage two attainment](#), 30 January 2024, [custom table](#)

as Gypsy/ Roma was lower, at 16%. Nationally, 65% of state-funded school pupils attained these qualifications.⁵

The total number of pupils identified as Traveller of Irish heritage and Gypsy/ Roma at the end of the secondary phase, key stage four, is very small. In the summer 2023 DfE data, there were around 1,400 Gypsy/ Roma pupils and 190 Travellers of Irish Heritage at the end of key stage four, out of around 607,000 pupils overall.⁶

These figures may be undercounts, as they rely on parents and carers telling schools their ethnic backgrounds. Small numbers mean caution is needed when drawing conclusions about pupils' academic performance in any particular year, and about trends over time, as apparently large increases or decreases in attainment rates from year to year may just reflect natural variation between pupil cohorts.

School attendance

Children who are travelling with their families can be dual-registered (that is, on the roll of more than one school at the same time), may enrol at a school at their current location, or may be electively home-educated.

The Government is in the process of making reforms to school attendance rules. [Current Department for Education \(DfE\) non-statutory guidance on attendance](#) applies until 18 August 2024, when [revised guidance will come into force](#). The current guidance sets out the rules for recording school attendance and absence in respect of Gypsy and Traveller children:

232. Pupils from groups whose parent(s) do not travel for occupational purposes are expected to attend school as normal. They are subject to the same rules as other pupils in terms of the requirements to attend school regularly once registered at a school.

233. Where a pupil has no fixed abode because their parent(s) is engaged in a business or trade that requires them to travel, there is an expectation that the pupil attends at least 200 sessions per year. The pupil must attend school as regularly as the business permits and therefore, if the business or trade permits the pupil to attend for more than 200 sessions per year, they should do so.

234. To help ensure continuity of education for pupils, when their parent(s) is travelling for occupational purposes, it is expected that the pupil should attend school elsewhere when their parent(s) is travelling and be dual registered at that school and their main school.⁷

⁵ Department for Education, [Academic year 2022/23. Key stage four performance](#), 1 February 2024, [custom table](#)

⁶ As above, [custom table](#)

⁷ Department for Education, [Working together to improve school attendance](#) (applies until 18 August 2024), May 2022, p60

The Cabinet Office's Race disparity audit notes:

4.10 Low educational attainment and progress is associated with poor attendance at school. The pupils most likely to be absent were Gypsy or Roma pupils, and those of an Irish Traveller background, with overall absence rates (that is, the percentage of all possible 'sessions' that were missed) of 13% and 18% respectively in 2016. This compares with 4.6% for White British pupils and 2.4% for Chinese pupils.⁸

While education is compulsory once a child attains compulsory school age, registering at a school is not. Under section 7 of the Education Act 1996 (as amended) parents are required to ensure that children of [compulsory school age](#) receive an efficient full-time education tailored to their aptitudes, abilities and any special needs they may have. As such, home education is legal and parents are not currently under any general requirement to notify the local authority that they intend to home educate. Local authorities are not under a statutory duty to routinely monitor the quality of home education, but they are required to identify children of compulsory school age who are not receiving a suitable education.

In April 2019, and following consultation, the DfE published revised guidance on elective home education – one version for [local authorities](#) and one for [parents](#). On Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, the guidance for local authorities says:

10.22 Local authorities should have an understanding of and be sensitive to the distinct ethos and needs of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. It is important that these families who are educating their children at home are treated in the same way as any other families in that position. Home education should not be regarded as less appropriate than in other communities. When a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller family with children of school age move into an area, they should be strongly encouraged to contact the local Traveller Education Support Service for advice if one is in place, or the authority's admissions team for help to access local educational settings if school places are desired. Further guidance can be obtained from the DfE's report: Improving the outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller's pupils. The Advisory Council for the Education of Romany and other Travellers is another source of information.⁹

The Government included proposals on introducing compulsory home education registers, as part of the Schools Bill in 2022, but the Bill did not progress. There is currently a Private Members' Bill before parliament, the [Children Not in School \(Registers, Support and Orders\) Bill 23-24](#) which would require local authorities in England to maintain registers of children of compulsory school age who are not educated full-time at schools. The Bill has government support. [Another Library briefing paper](#) provides background on the Bill and the previous legislation.

⁸ Cabinet Office, [Race Disparity Audit](#), updated March 2018, pp22-23

⁹ Department for Education, [Elective home education. Departmental guidance for local authorities](#), April 2019, pp38-9

A 2017 LKMco (now called Centre for Education and Youth) report, covered in section 2.6 below, identified a fear of bullying and racial discrimination as one of the main considerations of parents when deciding whether to send their children to school. The report cites evidence suggesting that 80% of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children had experienced bullying or being called racist names.¹⁰ A 2014 report by the British Association of Social Workers claims that nearly 90% of children and young people from a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller background have experienced racial abuse.¹¹

2.3 School admissions

Every local authority area is required to have a fair access protocol to help place children who need a school place outside the normal admissions round, and who have not been able to find a school place through the usual routes.

As the statutory [School admissions code](#) makes clear, children of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are one of the groups that must be covered by the protocols.¹² Some local authorities operate fair access panels, which meet to agree which school will offer a place to the child under the protocol.

Generally, infant classes in schools are limited to 30 pupils per school teacher – these are classes where the majority of children turn 5,6, or 7 during the school year. Children can be admitted in excess of this number in some circumstances, and are known as excepted children. Whilst there is no special category for Gypsy or Traveller children, children moving to the area in-year who cannot get a school place within reasonable distance can be considered excepted children.

2.4 School exclusion

Gypsy/ Roma and Traveller of Irish Heritage pupils consistently have the highest rates of permanent exclusion (expulsion) and fixed-term exclusion (suspension) of any ethnic groups. Rates are a better measure of exclusion trends than numbers of exclusions, as they account for changes in the number of pupils from particular groups, over time.

¹⁰ Derrington and Kendall, Gypsy Traveller students in secondary schools: Culture, identity and achievement, 2004, cited in LKMco, [The underrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in higher education](#), 8 July 2017

¹¹ Lane, P., and others/ Anglia Ruskin University, [Gypsy, Traveller and Roma: Experts by experience](#), October 2014, p30

¹² Department for Education, [School admissions code](#), September 2021, para 3.17, p34

The latest Department for Education exclusion data is for the spring term of the 2022/23 academic year, when:

- Nationally, the permanent exclusion rate across all ethnic groups was 0.04%; the suspension rate was 3.13%
- For Gypsy/ Roma pupils, the permanent exclusion rate was more than triple the national average rate at 0.14%. For Travellers of Irish Heritage, it was around five times higher than the national average, at 0.18%
- For Gypsy/ Roma pupils, the suspension rate was around four times higher than the national rate, at 11.43%. For Travellers of Irish Heritage it was around double the national rate, at 6.69%.¹³

The permanent exclusion rate is the number of permanent exclusions for pupils sharing a characteristic, divided by the total number of pupil enrolments sharing that pupil characteristic, expressed as a percentage. A permanent exclusion rate of 0.04% is equivalent to four permanent exclusions per 10,000 pupil enrolments.

The suspension rate is the number of suspensions for pupils sharing a characteristic, divided by the total number of pupil enrolments sharing that characteristic. Pupils can have multiple suspensions in any year. A suspension rate of 3% is equivalent to 300 suspensions per 10,000 pupil enrolments.

2.5

Funding educational services for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children

From 2011-12, many of the separate DfE grants made in support of school expenditure and local authorities' central functions were mainstreamed into a single Government grant, the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). This included the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant, the purpose of which was to support the participation and attainment of children from minority ethnic groups, including Gypsies and Travellers, as well as children with English as an additional language.

Currently, it is up to local authorities (in consultation with bodies called Schools Forums) to decide how to share out DSG funding between schools in their area, and to decide how much to retain for shared services or functions. Increasingly, local authorities are being required to move closer to the [national funding formula \(NFF\)](#) factors and values when setting local funding

¹³ Department for Education, [Spring term 2022/23. Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England](#), 18 April 2024, [custom table](#)

arrangements. Some local authority areas provide a traveller education service, but this is not a statutory requirement.

2.6 Higher education

Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) report (July 2022)

A [2022 report by Dr Laura Brassington for HEPI](#) looked at Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller attainment and participation in education across the lifecycle.¹⁴ This noted Gypsies, Roma and Travellers had the lowest rate of entry to higher education of any ethnic group. In England, in 2019/20, 6.9% of Gypsy and Roma young people, and 10.7% of Irish Traveller young people, entered HE by the age of 19.

Since the report's publication, new DfE data for 2021/22 has been released. In this year, 12.6% of Gypsy and Roma young people progressed to HE, compared to 9.0% of Travellers of Irish Heritage and 46.8% across all ethnic groups.¹⁵

Small absolute numbers of young people from these ethnic groups, coupled with traditionally low entry rates mean there can be more variability in rates from year to year than for those from other, larger ethnic groups. There is no clear evidence of any consistent increase over the last decade in the HE progression rate for Travellers of Irish Heritage, although for Gypsy/ Roma young people, rates have been higher in the last three years (since 2019/20) than in years prior.¹⁶

The HEPI report found:

- In 2020/21 there were 660 students from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds in higher education, whereas a more representative figure (given the ethnic make-up of the UK population) would be around 2,600 Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students.¹⁷

It suggests prejudice, discrimination and exclusion were some of the main causes of disrupted education pathways for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller young people.

The report recommended:

¹⁴ Higher Education Policy Institute, [Gypsies, Roma and Travellers: The ethnic minorities most excluded from UK education](#), 7 July 2022

¹⁵ Department for Education, [Widening participation in higher education](#), 13 July 2023, [custom table](#)

¹⁶ Department for Education, [Widening participation in higher education](#), 13 July 2023, [custom table](#)

¹⁷ Higher Education Policy Institute/ Dr Laura Brassington, [Gypsies, Roma and Travellers: The ethnic minorities most excluded from UK education](#), 7 July 2022, p9

- Gypsies, Roma, Travellers, Showmen and Boaters should be recognised as distinct categories in DfE, Ofsted and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data collections
- Institutions should monitor how many students and staff identify as belonging to these groups
- HE institutions' access and participation plans should explicitly recognise and name Gypsy, Roma, Traveller, Showmen and Boaters, and anti-racism training should address issues faced by these groups and promote cultural awareness
- HE institutions should participate in national days of remembrance and relevant annual history months

LKMco/ Centre for Education and Youth 2017 report

On 8 July 2017, LCMco, now the Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY) published a report commissioned by King's College London (KCL), [The underrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in higher education](#). This research considered barriers to educational attainment and progress from the early years onwards.¹⁸

The report cites data on school-level attainment and progress suggesting much lower rates of attainment for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils than the national average, but emphasises that the figures should be treated with caution "as the characteristics and circumstances of individuals who are willing and able to ascribe their Gypsy, Roma or Traveller identity may not be representative of this population as a whole".¹⁹

In higher education (HE), the research reports that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups are significantly underrepresented, but again, concerns about coverage of the data make it "difficult to accurately determine the extent of this [...]."²⁰

The report identified a range of barriers to educational achievement at school level:

- Cultural barriers including: mobility; language and system knowledge; norms, aspirations and expectations; and cultural identity
- Material barriers including: poverty; inadequate housing and homelessness; and access to healthcare and special educational needs support

¹⁸ LKMco, [The underrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in higher education](#), 8 July 2017

¹⁹ LKMco, [The underrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in higher education](#), 8 July 2017, p5

²⁰ As above

- Prejudice and discrimination including: discriminatory attitudes and media prejudice; schools' response to discrimination; self-exclusion from mainstream education as a result of discrimination; and discrimination in HE.²¹

At HE level, the researchers identified additional barriers:

- A lack of policy attention and supportive initiatives
- Issues of identity and inclusion
- The relevance of HE curricula to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture
- Pupils' perceptions of HE
- Financial issues and attitudes to debt.²²

2.7

Government action to support education of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people

In July 2021, the Government [announced a £1 million fund](#) to support educational attainment, school attendance, and employment opportunities for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people. Five areas were selected as the focus for this funding: Bradford, Central Bedfordshire, Essex, Hillingdon and Surrey. The programme was due to reach 150 schools, and focused on:

- reducing drop-out rates by engaging families with pre-school children and those transitioning from primary to secondary school,
- targeting young people not in education, employment or training,
- fostering better cooperation between councils, schools and families and
- tutoring for catch-up lessons to support pupils whose education has been disrupted by the pandemic.²³

In response to a [PQ on 29 June 2023](#), Baroness Barran said the Government had no plans to commission an independent evaluation of the scheme, but

²¹ LKMco, [The underrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in higher education](#), 8 July 2017, p5

²² As above

²³ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Department for Education press release, ['£1 million education programme for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children announced'](#), 22 July 2021

expected local authorities to carry out their own assessments, and share findings with other areas.²⁴

2.8

House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee inquiry report – recommendations on education

Section 5 of the Committee's 2019 [inquiry report](#) focused on participation in education, and outcomes, for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups.²⁵ It describes the educational barriers faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children as severe, and argues that addressing poor educational outcomes is vital in tackling other inequalities.

The Committee urged the Government, Ofsted and local authorities to make it their first priority to ensure that no child was denied their legal entitlement to an education. Further, it recommended that the DfE should carry out an audit of all local authorities to ensure they were complying with their legal duties in respect of children who were potentially missing education; there should also be more oversight by local authorities of home educated children.

Other recommendations included that:

- The DfE should consider piloting a pupil passport scheme, to ensure that when children travel, their educational records stay with them
- Ofsted should ensure they are inspecting schools for stereotyping and racism by staff and pupils
- The Government should increase the capacity of organisations that provide role models to schools, in respect of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers

The [Government response to the report](#) was published in July 2019.²⁶

²⁴ [HL PQ8520 \[on Education: Travellers\], 29 June 2023](#)

²⁵ House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, [Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities](#), HC 360 2017-19, 20 March 2019

²⁶ House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, [Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities: Government and Ofsted response to the Ninth Special Report of Session 2017-2019](#), HC 2411, 9 July 2019

2.9

Education resources

Friends, families and travellers

[Friends, Families and Travellers](#) is an organisation working to tackle racism and discrimination against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people, and to protect rights to pursue a nomadic life.

It publishes several documents and resources for teachers and schools, including:

- [Resources for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month](#) in June each year
- [An animation co-created with the London School of Economics](#) on data exclusion and the visibility of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in national statistics
- [A comic](#) on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people's experiences of education

The Traveller Movement

[The Traveller Movement](#) is a charity working to tackle Romani (Gypsy), Roma & Irish Traveller inequality, exclusion and discrimination. It has a wide range of reports and guidance on school, further and higher education, hosted on [its education microsite](#). Examples include:

- A [Good Practice Guide for Improving Outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children in Education](#)
- A report on [Gypsy, Roma and Traveller experiences in secondary education](#) (published in 2021)
- A [report on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller access to further education](#), (published in 2021)

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