



GRANT MAKERS FACT SHEET ON GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS

This document has been produced by the Travellers Aid Trust as a basic information sheet for grant makers supporting Gypsies and Travellers in the UK. For more information, please feel free to contact the Trust.

How many Gypsies & Travellers are there in the UK?

Gypsies and Travellers are not currently included in the National Census as a distinct group and so there is no accurate data as to exactly how many live in the UK today. Estimates place the total number at 200,000 in housing and 100,000 on sites and on the roadside. According to government figures, 25% of the Traveller population in the UK is technically homeless (i.e., they have no authorized place to live).

Who are 'Gypsies and Travellers'?

Like many other ethnic minority communities, the Gypsy and Traveller community is very diverse and complex and cannot easily be defined in simplistic terms. To complicate matters further, there are two legal definitions of 'Gypsy', these being: (1) Gypsies as a recognized ethnic minority group under the Race Relations Act and (2) under planning law which classifies 'Gypsies and Travellers' as people with a culture of nomadism or of living in caravans and all other persons of nomadic habit of life whatever their race or origin (including those who have had to settle due to health or education and show people or circus people).

The definitions given here cover all the groups that can fall within either legal definition and are intended to provide an informal and general understanding of some of the terms used to define this diverse community. They do not necessarily reflect the views of specific Gypsy or Traveller groups.

'Traditional' Travellers are those members of the Traveller community that have been living on the road for centuries and have distinct languages and customs of their own. All 'traditional' Travellers are now recognized as distinct ethnic minorities under law. These communities are English or Welsh 'Romany' Gypsies, Irish Travellers and Scottish Gypsy Travellers.

Gypsies arrived in the UK over 500 years ago and are believed to have originated from Rajasthan in India. This link was discovered by linguistics who realized that the Romany language had its roots in Rajasthani dialects. Many Gypsies call themselves English, Welsh or Scottish Gypsies and some prefer to use more general terms such as 'Romany' or 'Traveller' to define themselves.

European Roma (European Romany speaking groups) are descended from the same people as British Romany Gypsies and have moved to the UK more recently from Central and Eastern Europe, many as refugees/asylum seekers fleeing persecution. They are recognized as an ethnic minority in the same category as Gypsies and also speak Romany. They are, however, distinct from the UK's Gypsy community and there is limited interaction between the two.

Irish Travellers are first recorded as arriving in Britain in the 1850's, although it is believed that their origins date to the 5th century. Unlike Gypsies, they are of Celtic descent and speak Cant/Gammon. Irish Travellers often refer to themselves as 'Pavee' or 'Minceir'. Although there is a large established Irish Traveller community living permanently in the UK, some travel from or back to Ireland for part of the year.



Scottish Gypsy Travellers, who were only recognized as an ethnic minority community in 2008, are believed to go back to the 12th century and are made up of a range of different groups. They may refer to themselves as Scottish Travellers, Scottish Gypsies or as Nawkens or Nachins. Like Irish Travellers, many also speak Cant.

There are two other broad categories of Traveller, neither of which is recognized as an ethnic minority. Both groups, however, fall within the statutory definition of 'Gypsy' under planning law, as do traditional Travellers. The fact that traditional Travellers fall under two different statutory definitions has historically caused widespread confusion and some resentment within the community.

'New' Travellers originated out of the Peace Convoy of the 60s and although again very diverse, this community was primarily driven by those wishing to live an alternative travelling lifestyle for ideological reasons but also included young people leaving care, ex-MOD or those taking to the road for some other personal reason. 'New' Travellers have been around as a distinct group since the 1970s and so some are now second or third generation Travellers. Members of this community tend to call themselves simply Travellers and may find the term 'New Age' or 'New' offensive.

Occupational Travellers include Showman or fairground and circus people who have a long history of travelling for a living. This group also includes Bargees or boat dwellers living primarily on narrow boats.

Traveller 'Norms'

- **Nomadism, whether past or present**
- **Self-reliance, self-employment and independence**
- **Shared culture and strong oral traditions**
- **Strict rituals around birth, death and cleanliness**
- **The importance of children, family and the extended family**
- **Annual and seasonal social gatherings, fairs or festivals**



FAST FACTS

- Travellers have been an integral part of our society for over 500 years, working as agricultural labourers, horse traders, craftsmen, musicians, in the scrap trade and as soldiers.
- Half a million Gypsies were murdered during the Holocaust by the Nazis.
- Two Victoria Crosses were awarded to Gypsies during the I & II World Wars for bravery.
- Charlie Chaplain, Mother Theresa, Eric Cantor, Bob Hoskins, Michael Cane, David Essex and Elvis Presley all came from Gypsy backgrounds.
- In 2008 alone, 3 MBEs were awarded to Gypsies and Traveller women for services to the community.
- The Traveller Law Reform Coalition was awarded the Liberty Human Rights Award in 2004
- English & Welsh Gypsies, Irish Travellers and Scottish Gypsy Travellers are all recognized as distinct ethnic minority groups in the UK.
- A Mori poll carried out in 2004 revealed that 1 in 3 respondents admitted personal prejudice against Gypsies and Travellers
- In 2007, the government defined Travellers as 'the most excluded ethnic minorities in this country'.
- Infant mortality rates are reported to be 3 times higher amongst Travellers than in the settled community and Traveller mothers are 20 times more likely to experience the death of a child
- A recent Equalities and Human Rights Commission report estimated that between 61% and 81% of Gypsy or Traveller women "had experienced direct domestic abuse".
- Research by the Children's Society reported that 63% of young Travellers have been bullied or attacked
- Life expectancy in Traveller women is estimated to be 15yr less than the average nationwide.
- According to OFSTED, Traveller children remain the most 'at risk' within the educational system.
- 25% of the Traveller community in the UK are technically 'homeless'

For details on the sources and publications from which much of the above statistical information was taken, please refer to our Resources and Reference Sheet.