



Realities Checked:  
Interpreting Stories Of  
Crime In Gypsy And  
Traveller Communities

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ECONOMIC  
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RESEARCH  
COUNCIL



# Gypsies and Travellers' Experiences of Crime Victimisation and Policing

Image by Sara Basnett

# Findings from the Realities Checked Study

## KEY FINDINGS

### Gypsies and Travellers were:

- More likely to be a victim of all crime types in the last year than White, Black, Asian and Mixed ethnic groups (P.3)
- More often a victim of racially motivated hate crime in the last year than Black, Asian, Mixed and White groups (P.4)

### Gypsies and Travellers have:

- Often suffered racist abuse and violence from childhood through adulthood and they see their children and grandchildren similarly vulnerable to racist abuse and violence (PP.4-5)
- Often experienced arson or physical attacks on their living vehicles when roadside (PP.4-5)
- Extraordinary low levels of trust in the police that are lower than for Black and Mixed ethnic groups, and significantly lower than for Asian and White ethnic groups (P.5)
- Experienced a **profound sense of persecution and alienation from society**

## INTRODUCTION

Historical accounts show that since the arrival in England and Scotland of Romani Gypsies in the fifteenth century, and of Irish Travellers in the nineteenth century, they have been associated with criminal offending. Accusations of palmistry, 'trickery' and sorcery, and prosecution under vagrancy and beggary laws ensured that Gypsies and Travellers faced discriminatory and sometimes violent, state action well into the modern period (Ripton-Turner, 1887; but see Beier 1974, 1985; Mayall 1988; Taylor 2014). And, at least since the 1960s, the period covered in this **Realities Checked Study (RCS)**, archival and historical research shows Gypsies and Travellers have found it increasingly hard to find places to settle temporarily or permanently, with their mobilities constrained by legislation, regulation, and local policies. They have also faced public opposition to their presence, whether in encampments, on sites, or in housing (Sibley 1981; Clark and Greenfields 2006; Richardson 2006; Kabachnik 2010; Kabachnik and Ryder 2013; Abrams et al. 2018; James and Southern 2019).

### Why does any of this matter?

- Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers are ethnic groups protected by the Equality Act 2010 which means they should not be discriminated against because of their race or ethnic origin.
- Very little is known about Gypsies and Travellers' experiences as victims of crime.
- Little large-scale evidence exists on Gypsies and Travellers' perceptions about the criminal justice system.

**With this in mind**, the **RCS** was conducted to provide the first systematic and comprehensive study of the crime and criminal justice experiences of Gypsies and Travellers in England since the 1960s.

## OUR RESEARCH APPROACH

To capture Gypsies and Travellers' experiences in 2021/23 we conducted:

- A **crime survey** of 400 participants
- **Oral histories** with 40 **community members**
- **Interviews with 54 professionals** working with Gypsy and Traveller individuals and communities
- **Archival analysis** of the records of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government/Department for Environment and those of the Association of County Councils and the Association of District Councils 1960-1993
- **Oral histories** with 27 **serving prisoners**

Our study took place in:

- two **rural areas** (Devon and Cornwall and Norfolk) and
- two **sub/urban areas** (Leeds, London, Sussex, Surrey and Kent)

Our research team of eight included a Romany Gypsy man and a Showmen Traveller woman. Eight Gypsy and Traveller Community Researchers worked with the team to collect the data for our crime survey and multiple creative outputs from the research have been produced by Gypsy and Traveller creatives from our research sites.

The study has been generously supported by Friends Families Travellers, TravellerSpace and LeedsGATE.

### Who is included in the Realities Checked Study (RCS)?

- Romany Gypsies
- Irish Travellers
- English Gypsies/Travellers

And a small number of:

- Showmen Travellers
- New Travellers

# Victimisation, hate and discrimination

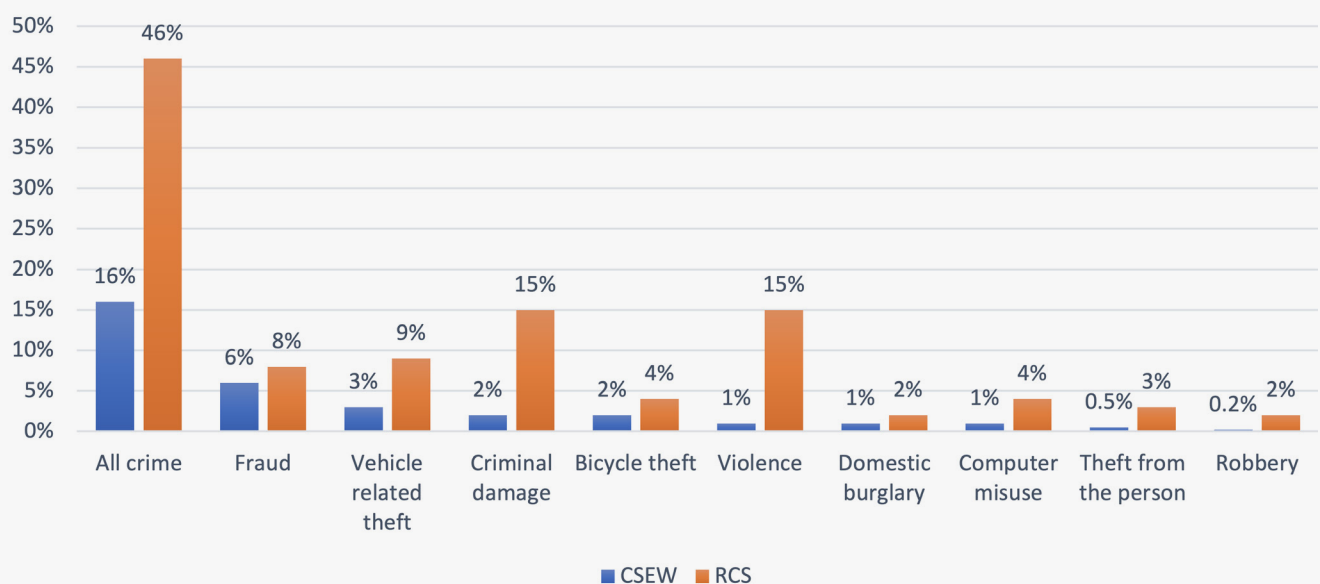
## VICTIMISATION

We have long known that crime affects the most vulnerable in our society and that much of it does not come to the attention of the police. The government conducts the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) every year asking people about whether they have been a victim of crime in the last 12 months. The survey is carried out with people who live in static housing and only includes a tiny number of Gypsies and Travellers - just 13 in 2022/3 (ONS 2023). Our crime survey in the RCS used questions similar to and drawn from the CSEW and captured the views of **400 Gypsies and Travellers across four areas of England including people living roadside, on sites, on private plots, and in bricks and mortar housing**. In this Policy Brief, we compare our RCS survey findings with the national CSEW 2019/20 - the last time crime victimisation was measured during a 12-month period without any pandemic lockdowns.

## How are Gypsies and Travellers affected by crime as victims?

Fortunately, crime is something that does not affect most people. We know from the national CSEW 2019/2020 that 19% of people said they had been a victim of crime in the previous 12 months (ONS 2020a). In the RCS crime survey, **46% of Gypsies and Travellers said they had been a victim of crime in the last 12 months**. This is more than double the rates of victimisation of other minority ethnic groups. This was the case for **20% of people who were of Mixed Ethnic or Multiple ethnicities, 15% who were Asian, 14% who were Black and 13% who were White (ONS 2020a)**. In Figure 1, it is clear that **Gypsies and Travellers were more victimised by ALL types of crime when compared with the general population**.

**Figure 1**  
**Likelihood of being a victim of crime in the last 12 months**



### Notes

1. This includes all crime, including where the respondent said the crime was racially motivated. CSEW Sources: ONS (2020a; 2023a).
2. Data weighted using Census 2021 estimates (ONS 2023b) for GYPSIES AND IRISH TRAVELLERS ONLY found total (All Crime) victimisation rates of 47% (N=164). Weighting was based on age, sex, dwelling type and qualifications.

## HATE CRIMES

Hate crimes that occur when an individual is targeted because of their race can also negatively affect other community members who share the same identity because as Iganski and Sweiry (2016: 98) note – ‘they realise that they could be next’. At risk of repeated victimisation, those vulnerable may avoid certain locations, be hypervigilant, increase their home and car security, and even move home (Sampson and Phillips 1992; Bowling 1999; Hall 2013; Chakraborti and Garland 2009; Iganski and Lagou 2015).

### How are Gypsies and Travellers affected by hate crime?

Our archival analysis for the RCS, as well as that collected in our oral histories, demonstrates that **the experience of hate crime is not a new phenomenon**. For example, material from the West Midlands (1965-1970) shows that Gypsies and Travellers suffered vigilante attacks from householders, which included caravan burnings, which on occasion resulted in the death of children. This historical context is important for understanding Gypsies and Travellers’ individual and family experiences in the present.

*“ He stuck a cloth into a vodka bottle, lit it, and threw at me. I was 10.”  
(Dukes, Romany Gypsy, 30s)*

It is already well-documented that hate crime against Gypsies and Travellers occurs across a spectrum - from micro-aggressions to racist abuse to serious violence (James 2020; James and Simmonds 2013; Traveller Movement 2018; Greenfields and Rogers 2020; ONS 2022). Recent survey research has also revealed how pervasive hate crime is in the lives of Gypsies and Travellers. Ellingworth et al. (2023) found that **62% of Gypsies and Travellers had been victims of racist insults, property damage and physical attacks before the pandemic**.

It is unsurprising then, that in the RCS oral histories, **most people had stories about either themselves or family members being racially abused or harassed**. Sometimes this would involve racist slurs being used at school by children or their parents, sometimes they would be abused in social venues like pubs. For others, racist abuse was targeted at their homes, often by neighbours, as in the case of Dukes (mentioned above), and as recognised by Becky, a professional, working with Gypsy and Traveller communities. The RCS survey also found **44% of respondents said they were worried about being subject to a physical attack because they are a Gypsy or Traveller**.

*“ You get the social media, the locals...  
‘Let’s go down and push their caravans over the cliff and let’s drag them off’ “  
(Becky, Housing Officer)*

The negative impact of hate crime on victims can be severe – affecting confidence, self-esteem, and mental health, more generally (Iganski and Lagou 2015), as Stefan explained.

*“ I have experienced a lot of poor mental health in my life, experienced a lot of low self-esteem, terrible anxiety where I couldn’t leave the house without feeling like people’s gonna, you know, feel like ‘Oh there he is, one of them [Gypsies]’ “  
(Stefan, English Gypsy Traveller, 30s)*

Table 1 provides an estimate of how prevalent racially motivated hate crime is against Gypsies and Travellers compared with other minority ethnic groups. In the national CSEW, **0.2% of people surveyed had been subject to a racially motivated hate crime** (ONS 2020). For **Gypsies and Travellers in the RCS, 11% of people surveyed said they had been a victim of a racially motivated hate crime in the last 12 months**. This is more than 10 times the victimisation rate of Asian and Black people.

**Table 1**  
**Percentage of adults aged 16 and over who were victims of racially motivated hate crime**

	Realities Checked		CSEW			
	Gypsies and Travellers	Asian	Black	Mixed	White	All
All crime	11% (N=56)	1%	0.9%	0.3%	0.1%	0.2%

**Notes**

1. Sources: ONS (2020b; 2023a).

2. Data weighted using Census 2021 estimates (ONS 2023b) for GYPSIES AND IRISH TRAVELLERS ONLY found total (All Crime) racially motivated victimisation rates of 12% (N=42). Weighting was based on age, sex, dwelling type and qualifications.

# Perceptions of the criminal justice system

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE POLICE

Gypsies and Travellers' views about the police can only be understood by acknowledging their families' histories and interactions with the police over a longer timeframe (James 2014; Greenfields 2006; ONS 2022).

“ *A Gypsy can't tell truth... that's what police think.*

*(Valentine, Gypsy, 20s)*

The criminalisation of Gypsies and Travellers' nomadism for decades (further augmented by the Police Crime Sentencing and Courts Act 2022), has meant that they often come into conflictual contact with the police. Our archival research from the RCS clearly shows the use of aggressive policing tactics and violent evictions paid for by local councils. From our oral histories in the RCS, some recalled being terrified when police officers entered their childhood home and used force against family members. The oral history data also showed these experiences were often transmitted through family memory to younger generations. For some Gypsies and Travellers, like Gary, their hostile view towards the police was because of what they considered to be heavy-handed policing of traditional Gypsy and Traveller livelihood and leisure activities.

“ *My dad would always go out pheasant shooting or rabbit shooting... his car registration must got took... Next morning they was that laying over the bonnet with machine guns... laser dots on him and the police helicopter up... it's just a catapult he was using.*

*(Gary, Gypsy, 20s)*

For others such as Caf, it was because even though they were victims of crime, the police seemed only able to see them as potential offenders. Their complaints related to the police not responding appropriately and sensitively to their victimisation. On occasion, Gypsies and Travellers came into contact with the police after they had retaliated when they had faced racist abuse,

harassment or violence, and police officers were unwilling to hear about their victimisation.

These kinds of negative experiences explained why the RCS survey found that:

- **40% said that they did not trust the police very much and a further 39% said that they did not trust them at all;**
- **29% tended to agree or very strongly agreed that the police in their local area would treat them with respect if they contacted them for any reason. This is three times fewer than in the general population** where 87% believed that they would be treated with respect (ONS 2020); and
- **39% said they had been unfairly stopped, questioned, physically threatened or abused by the police** and for 82% this was due to their ancestry, race or physical appearance.

It is, of course, true that some other minority ethnic groups hold hostile views towards the police (ONS 2020), but the extent of this appears to be much greater for Gypsies and Travellers.

The absence of legitimacy in the policing of Gypsy and Traveller individuals and communities has very serious implications – policing relies on consent so that members of the public will co-operate and assist police officers in their efforts to respond to, and reduce, crime (Tyler 2003). That **86% of those surveyed also agreed that the criminal justice system as a whole discriminates against particular groups or individuals** is a worrying indictment. Responding to this lack of legitimacy should be a matter of priority as Drummond (2022) has noted in relation to his research with the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Police Association. This found extensive experiences of racism shown towards Gypsy, Roma and Traveller police officers. It is of significant and urgent concern that trust and confidence in the police is extremely low among Gypsy and Traveller populations.

“ *I must have been stabbed... And the police automatically said, 'Well if we hear that you've gone to give revenge... we're gonna come hard on you.'* ”

*(Caf, Irish Traveller, 30s)*

# Recommendations

Policy makers and service providers need to recognise that:

## 1.

**Gypsies and Travellers are more vulnerable to (non-racially motivated) victimisation than other ethnic groups**

- Concerted efforts by community safety teams should be made to reduce victimisation in these communities.
- Victim Support and related services need to be attuned to the specific needs of these communities including in contact and outreach activities.

## 2.

**Most Gypsies and Travellers will have faced racist abuse, harassment, and violence in their lives that will rarely have been reported to statutory agencies**

- A public information campaign that reminds potential offenders of the impact of hate crime on Gypsies and Travellers and the penalties of offending might have an important communicative function.
- Third party reporting mechanisms need to be enhanced to instil greater confidence in the reporting of hate crime to the police.
- Restorative justice-inspired principles could build trust between Gypsies and Travellers and settled communities in response to local flashpoints.
- It is incumbent on the police and social housing providers to ensure that they consider carefully circumstances where Gypsies and Travellers allege racist provocation as an explanation for their retaliatory actions.

## 3.

**Gypsies and Travellers' trust in the police service is so worryingly low that the police have little legitimacy among these communities**

- The police service needs to engage in urgent reparative work with Gypsies and Travellers to build trust. At the heart of improving legitimacy must be an acknowledgement that first and foremost, Gypsies and Travellers are chronically vulnerable to victimisation and hate crimes. Gypsy and Traveller Liaison Officers should be in place in all force areas to assist with this reparative work.
- It will also be valuable to consider whether Independent Scrutiny Groups led by Gypsy and Traveller community members could be established to monitor police actions including stop and search and any site operations.

## Useful website links

- [Click here for our Online Multimedia Exhibition](#) of short films, spoken word poetry, photography, music, and a graphic novel designed by Gypsy and Traveller (and other) creatives to capture all our research findings.
- For more information about the research project and the research team – see [realities-checked.org](http://realities-checked.org)

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