

RESEARCH

FOR THE WORLD

Crime and punishment

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Gypsies and Travellers have been stereotyped as criminals for centuries, yet little is known about their experiences of crime and justice. **Coretta Phillips** is leading a research project which aims to change this.

Historical accounts show that since the arrival in England and Scotland of Romani Gypsies in the 15th century and of Irish Travellers a little later, they have been associated with criminal offending. Since then, Gypsies and Travellers have become entrenched in popular, media and political imaginations as criminal predators, bringing property crime, violence, fraud, tax evasion, and antisocial behaviour to settled communities.

Yet, despite five centuries of such categorisation, there is surprisingly no rigorous evidence to assess the validity of such claims, nor, as importantly, to assess Gypsies and Travellers' experiences of victimisation.

Our project aims to address this by providing the first systematic, comprehensive and historically grounded account of the experiences of Gypsies and Travellers in England, relating to crime and the criminal justice system since the 1960s.

We want to understand Gypsy and Travellers' perceptions and experiences of criminal victimisation, hate crimes, and offending over their lifetimes, the impact these have had on individuals and communities, and whether subjective perceptions of racism and discrimination against them play a part in offending behaviour.



Entrenched structural inequalities and exclusion, political and media bias, and institutional partiality mean it is more than likely that Gypsies and Travellers will have experienced discrimination. ”

Over-policed and under-protected?

As Gypsies and Travellers have been subject to some of the most egregious abuses by the state for centuries, it is more than possible that, like other minority ethnic groups, they consider themselves to be over-policed (as potential offenders) and under-protected (as potential victims).

Given the historical weight of endemic racism towards these communities, it is also important to consider whether contemporary lives are lived in light of the past as well as the impact “racialised world-views” might have on these communities.

“Racialised world-views” is a concept coined by sociologists and criminologists Burt, Simons and Gibbons to describe what occurs as young people learn that deferred gratification does not lead to rewards for “people like them”, that the world is often hostile, and that social rules are applied unequally in society. This can promote impulsivity, immediate gratification, hostile views of society, and disengagement from conventional norms, all of which can precede criminal offending.

Reaching the “hard to reach”

Racialised criminalisation of nomadic and settled Gypsy/Traveller lifestyles, alongside entrenched structural inequalities and exclusion, political and media bias and institutional partiality mean it is more than likely they will have experienced discrimination. As a result, many may be wary and distrustful and so not wish to self-identify or to engage with social researchers.

We have therefore given careful thought to how we engage with both communities and designed the research to ensure constructive engagement with these communities, as research participants rather than subjects.

Oral history interviews with community members, serving prisoners, and those on community sentences will provide historical, familial, individual and emotional context to Gypsies and Travellers’ victimisation and offending experiences.

Finally, we will conduct archival analysis of historical material, including council committee meeting minutes, county surveys of Gypsies and Travellers’ experiences of crime and policing, local petitions against official sites, and newspaper cuttings.



Through art, drama and poetry we hope to promote empathic reactions to these communities, which will help counter the sensationalist media reporting that we hope to challenge. ”

Improving the data

When it comes to crime, one reason there is so little data on Gypsies and Travellers is that they have not been adequately represented in the Crime Survey of England and Wales, which is a national household survey of crime.

In order to combat this, we will also develop a crime survey which will include measures of victimisation, self-report offending, and perceptions of discrimination and racism. This survey will offer an opportunity to estimate the risks of personal victimisation (eg, assault, hate crime) and household victimisation (eg, burglary, car theft, fraud) for Gypsies and Travellers.

Our survey will also estimate offending with questions on the use of alcohol/drugs, property crimes, fraud and violent offending, and will establish whether Gypsies and Travellers have a heightened risk of victimisation and offending compared with existing national estimates for all other ethnic groups.

Where does poetry fit in?

We not only want to understand more about Gypsy and Traveller experiences when it comes to crime, we also want our project to give context, voice and emotion to their experiences, as both victims and offenders, with the aim of promoting empathic reactions.

Art is one way to achieve this, and so we will also be working with Gypsy and Traveller creatives and with participants to produce fiction, performance poetry, drama, art and photography. Through this work we hope to promote empathic reactions to these communities, which will help counter the sensationalist media reporting that we hope to challenge.

Ultimately, we hope that our research will not only start to fill the huge gap in knowledge around the ways Gypsies and Travellers relate to, and experience, crime and the criminal justice system, but that it will also support those communities in the future.

At the broadest level, we aim to build confidence across Gypsy and Traveller populations that wider society, the state and statutory agencies understand the relationship between their wider life experiences and their experiences of crime and criminal justice. ■

Watch: *Realities Checked:
Interpreting stories of crime in
Gypsy and Traveller communities.*

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