



Article

# “It’s not because they’re Gypsy”: Practitioners perspectives of Gypsies, Travellers and Crime and Justice

Criminology &amp; Criminal Justice

1–18

© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/17488958241300231

[journals.sagepub.com/home/crj](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/crj)**Raegan Booth** 

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

**Kirsty Koral****Kitty Lymperopoulou** 

University of Plymouth, UK

## Abstract

In dominant public, political and media narratives of Gypsy and Traveller communities, they have often been associated with criminality, deviance, violence, idleness and reluctance to assimilate into settled society. A discourse of othering predicated on negative stereotypes further affect their marginalisation and social exclusion. This empirical article critically examines reflections on, and responses to, these dominant narratives among practitioners who have engaged with Gypsy and Travellers operationally and strategically, in relation to crime and criminal justice. We find evidence of compliance with dominant narratives which include perceptions that deny and minimise experiences of victimisation and racism, while also suggesting a predisposition to criminality and violence among Gypsy and Travellers.

## Keywords

Crime and justice, Discourse, Gypsy and Travellers

---

## Corresponding author:

Raegan Booth, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: [R.M.Booth@lse.ac.uk](mailto:R.M.Booth@lse.ac.uk)

## **Introduction**

Historically, Gypsy Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities have faced marginalisation, discrimination and persecution, and have been subject to efforts to disperse, assimilate, control or eradicate them in many parts of the world, including Europe (Breazu and McGarry, 2024; Clark and Taylor, 2014). GRT people have been racialised as an inferior group (Kóczé and Rövid, 2017) and experience more severe inequalities than any other ethnic group across a range of areas, including education, health, employment, criminal justice and hate crime (Cemlyn et al., 2009; Equality Human Rights Commission (EHRC), 2015). According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights GRT is the largest ethnic minority in Europe with an estimated population of 10–12 million and comprises diverse communities with different histories, languages, cultural practices and traditions. In the United Kingdom, there are around a quarter of a million Gypsy and Travellers (GTs; Brown et al., 2013) which include Romany Gypsies, Irish, Welsh and Scottish Travellers as well as more recent Roma migrants who settled in Britain from mainland Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s (James, 2020). GTs maintain a cultural affiliation with nomadism centred on freedom and autonomy with varied living arrangements ranging from caravans, mobile homes to permanent housing (James, 2020). Public and political disquiet with nomadism both historically and in contemporary times, has led to the racialisation, criminalisation and othering of GTs based on deep-seated prejudices, myths and stereotypes which underline their cultural difference from mainstream society (Clark and Taylor, 2014; James, 2020).

Media discourses have perpetuated negative stereotypes about GTs, portraying them as criminal, dirty, lazy, outlaws and deviant (Kabachnik, 2010). These negative discourses have contributed to the ‘demonisation in the social construction of the public imagining’ of GTs and their treatment by the rest of society (Richardson, 2014: 52). Through a process of othering, heightened by political rhetoric, these negative discourses manifest into actions of social control and the implementation of legislative changes on public order and planning law disguised as measures taken to protect the public from GTs which have led to their criminalisation (Richardson, 2006).

While previous research has helpfully documented prevalence of these narratives, less is known about how these are understood and operationalised in policymaking and service delivery. In this article, we use insights gained from interviews with practitioners working with GTs operationally and strategically in relation to crime and criminal justice to understand their perceptions and responses to dominant discourses about GTs. The article begins by introducing dominant discourses about GTs discussing the role of media and the state in processes of criminalisation. The subsequent section introduces the theoretical context and methods used in the study before discussing how practitioners perceive and respond to dominant narratives about GTs. In conclusion, the article discusses the contribution of this study to our understanding of the ways in which GTs are perceived and treated by practitioners in relation to crime and justice and the impact these discourses have on GTs.

## **Media and political discourses and the criminalisation of Gypsies and Travellers**

For decades, GTs have been subject to inaccurate, biased and sensationalised media coverage, which regularly portrays them as beggars, thieves and ‘folk devils’ (Cohen, 1972)

who are work-shy and remain locked in some primitive past, while feared as menacing invaders (Okely, 2014; Richardson and O'Neill, 2012). Media portrayals of GTs regularly problematise their nomadism and way of life by associating GT sites with criminality and anti-social behaviour, including mess, theft, noise and disruption (Clark and Taylor, 2014; Kabachnik, 2010; Richardson, 2006). Dominant public and media discourses frequently feature GT communities as outsiders and a threat to the norm, a group not conforming to laws and the language used in the media perpetuates their stigmatisation, marginalisation and discrimination (Rowe and Goodman, 2014).

The media have played a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes through imbalanced news stories exaggerating particular events involving GTs, and the impact of these events on local communities, often creating public outcry (Baillie, 2019; Powell, 2007). The run-up to Britain's 2005 general election, for example, saw extreme levels of anti-Gypsy and Traveller narratives in the media. UK tabloid newspaper, *The Sun* (2005), ran a 'Stamp on the Camps' media campaign in March 2005, lobbying to reverse human rights laws that allowed the 'illegal camp madness' and positioned GTs as 'people who don't pay taxes, give nothing to society and yet expect to be treated as untouchables'. Several other British newspapers, including *the Daily Mail and Daily Express*, joined the campaign and continued to denounce and demonise GT encampments, and the development of GT sites throughout the political campaigning. The dominant narrative about unauthorised encampments excluded GTs' struggles to locate and secure legal sites or legitimate stopping places, exaggerating the impact of GT culture and lifestyle on local communities and reinforcing the negative perceptions and stereotypes associated with the GT population (Richardson and O'Neill, 2012).

GT sites and encampments and the perceived problems associated with their presence have become a recurring feature in public discourse, spanning from parliamentary debates to local meetings and media outlets vociferously opposing their presence (Clark and Taylor, 2014). This negative sentiment is often rooted in suspicions surrounding their nomadic lifestyle and perceived detachment from fixed local geographies (Kabachnik, 2010).

Simultaneously, state interventions in the form of public order and planning law reforms in Britain have consistently served to criminalise GTs. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 introduced public order law changes, which occurred in the context of plural policing, the threat of eviction and a general lack of site provision. Due to a lack of legal stopping spaces, GTs have increasingly been forced to stay in places considered illegitimate, subjecting them to eviction practices and fostering negative perceptions of GTs among settled communities (James, 2020). More recently, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act 2022 has augmented public order legislation, expanding the criminalisation of trespass giving police the power to arrest, imprison and seize the homes of GTs. These policies criminalise GT culture and positions GT and their nomadic lifestyle as deviant, further othering this community from settled society (Burgum et al., 2022).

The rhetoric used by British politicians in political discourse serves to exaggerate the impact of unauthorised encampments on settled communities (Richardson, 2006). In 2019, when discussing new police powers to criminalise unauthorised encampments former Home Secretary Priti Patel stated, 'unauthorised encampments can cause misery to

those who live nearby' and that 'the public want their communities protected and for the police to crack down on trespassers' (Gov.UK, 2019). This disproportionate attention on GT encampments, sustained by a one-sided media representation and fuelled by public and political disdain of GT lifestyle informs the negative discourse surrounding GT communities, labelling them as deviant, criminal and refusing to assimilate into normative society (Burgum et al., 2022). This kind of sentiment towards what is characterised as a 'crime' is driven by a state that desires to be perceived as being tough on crime (Gilling, 2019).

These narratives about GTs play a pivotal role in the reproduction of anti-Gypsyism and racism, intricately interwoven into the fabric of society, controlling and influencing the treatment of GT by local communities and public agencies (Richardson, 2006). GTs face persistent hostility and hate crimes ranging from verbal abuse and stone-throwing to property damage and physical assaults (James, 2011, 2020). They also experience disproportionate contact with enforcement and the Criminal Justice System (CJS), racial bias, harsher treatment by CJS officials and excessive force employed by police (Casey, 2023; Drummond, 2022; James, 2007; Kabachnik, 2010; Traveller Movement, 2018). While GTs are over-policed as 'offenders' as a result of their criminalisation within public order legislation, GTs are under-policed as victims, and despite the persistent discrimination and hate crimes they experience, they are not recognised as 'deserving' victims (James, 2020). Public suspicion and mistrust from police towards GTs ultimately lead to a lack of victim reporting for a fear of not being believed or police not acting in favour of GTs who report incidents (Greenfields and Rogers, 2020; Thompson and Woodger, 2020).

Previous research has examined the representation of GT in media and political discourses (Richardson and O'Neill, 2012; Richardson, 2006, 2014) yet there is little understanding of how GTs are understood, imagined and responded to both legislatively and operationally. To address this gap, this article presents empirical findings from qualitative interviews that examine practitioners' perspectives and responses to dominant discourses about GT providing valuable insights about the ways they are treated by public agencies in relation to crime and justice.

## **Theoretical context and methods**

The construction of discourses of criminality and deviance in relation to GTs is routed in processes of othering and stigmatisation that underly their broader racialisation (Rowe and Goodman, 2014). Othering constitutes a process of categorisation in which identities are created through hierarchical distinctions established by a dominant group which assigns subordinate characteristics to other groups positioning them as inferior through negative representations and stereotypes (Strani and Szczepaniak-Kozak, 2018). Seen as a process of attaching moral codes of inferiority to difference, othering can be used as a critical discursive tool for understanding discrimination and exclusion against individuals and/or groups based on their belonging to marginalised populations (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012: 300). When GTs are 'othered' this perceived outsider status leads to their stigmatisation (Powell, 2007).

The process of stigmatisation according to Link and Phelan (2001) has individual, social and structural dimensions which include distinguishing and labelling differences, associating these differences with negative attributes and stereotypes, creating cognitive separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and leading to discrimination and loss of status. Link and Phelan (2001) stress how stigma operates within power structures explaining that ‘when people are labelled, set apart and linked to undesirable characteristics, a rationale is constructed for devaluing, rejecting, and excluding them’ (p.371).

Elias’ work on established-outsider relations also emphasises the role of power in racialisation dynamics, showing how GT groups like are stigmatised as outsiders by established communities (Elias and Scotson, 1994) who attribute negative traits of a minority to the entire outsider group which leads to all GTs being viewed as deviant, lazy, criminal, uncivilised and inferior (Powell, 2007). Thus, GT communities are othered and stigmatised not only due to their outsider status but also through racialised constructions of inferiority, further perpetuating their marginalisation within society. The literature on discursive practices of othering highlights strategies such as denying prejudice and discrimination, positive self and negative other-presentation, and discursive deracialisation (Strani and Szczepaniak-Kozak, 2018). Van Dijk’s (2000a) work on ideologies, racism and discourse shows how strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, used by people expressing racist views are used to justify their legitimate use. A central argument in Van Dijk’s (2000a) work is that discourses are influenced by ideologies frequently expressed in terms of group self-schema using a selection of group-relevant, self-serving socio-cultural values which have a polarising structure between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and a group-defining categories such as membership criteria, typical actions, goals, norms, values and resources and group positions.

We draw on these theoretical perspectives to examine practitioners’ perspectives and responses to dominant narratives about GTs, to understand how they are understood and imagined by public agencies in relation to crime and justice.

The article draws from qualitative interviews conducted with criminal justice practitioners and related practitioners working in the Southeast (Surrey and Sussex), South West (Devon and Cornwall), North of England (Leeds and Manchester) and East Anglia (Norfolk). The interviews were conducted between October 2022 and June 2023. Using a quota sample, designed to represent multiple agencies across our research sites, semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners working in policy and practice fields to examine perceptions and experiences of working with GTs and how these perceptions influence organisational engagement and service provision for GT communities. While Roma are recognised as an ethnic minority in the United Kingdom, they were not the focus of this study as they comprised more recent migrant groups perceived as ‘settled people’ that have been racialised and stigmatised through populist and nativist media and political discourses related to fears of immigration (Breazu and McGarry, 2024; James, 2022). This article draws on a sample consisting of 17 females and 12 males; ages ranged from 30s to 60s. In terms of self-identified ethnicity, the interviewees comprised white (25), black (1), mixed race (1) and white mixed Romany Gypsy (2). Professional roles included services in police, probation, youth justice services, local state (planning, social and children’s services, health, education) and GT community-based organisations. Participants were recruited by email invitation. Interviews were

conducted either in person, through Zoom or Microsoft Teams and lasted anywhere from 40 minutes to 2 hours. The researchers also kept field notes throughout the data collection and analysis to reflexively assess subjectivity and bias in the data collection and analysis stages, and these were reviewed at regular project meetings.

A thematic analysis was used to identify themes from the data with an inductive coding process (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Brief notes (codes) were recorded next to segments within the data that appeared interesting and relevant in relation to the aims of the research. Codes sharing distinctive concepts were reviewed and refined into themes. Both semantic and latent approaches to the data analysis were utilised, providing both descriptive and interpretive accounts of the data. Although discourse analysis is not used explicitly as a method, Van and Dijk's (2000a, 2000b) work which links discourse, society and cognition and how ideologies are embedded and transmitted through language and shared beliefs, provides interesting insights that can be applied to this study. By focusing on practitioners' language and the way they discuss GTs, we aim to uncover the views and shared beliefs about GTs and how these perspectives align with dominant discourses.

## **Gypsy and Travellers and crime and justice: Practitioner's perspectives**

Three main themes were identified during analysis, 'culture and criminality' reviewing perceptions held that GT are inherently criminal, 'GT victim denial' which explores the discrediting of GTs experiences of victimisation, and 'community safety' which examines the belief that GTs pose a threat to the community and the negative perceptions of and responses to GTs that persist in communities.

### *Culture and criminality*

There have been persistent accounts condemning GTs as inherently criminal in media and politics in the United Kingdom, associating the GT community with violent and deviant behaviour (Burgum et al., 2022). Research analysing UK discussion forums concerning GTs found some individuals employ a strategy of constructing criminality as a key characteristic of GT culture to express their negative opinions and comments on GTs, essentially arguing that being a criminal is a fundamental feature of GT identity (Rowe and Goodman, 2014). Some practitioners in our study perpetuated stereotypes through distinguishing 'cultural differences' and associating these differences negatively. A Trading Standards officer made the following claim when discussing illegitimate GT traders:

So, I think it's part of their culture, that particular splinter group, it's a cultural thing. Because I think they believe old people don't need their money, so go take it off them, cause they're gonna be dead soon anyway. (Trading Standards officer)

This assumption appears to be influenced by the practitioners' direct encounters with a specific concentrated group of GTs involved in rogue trading such as 'doorstep fraud' (Phillips, 2017). Yet this assumption is then generalised as a culturally exclusive belief attributed to GTs, suggesting a collective endorsement that it is morally acceptable to steal from the elderly. Labelling GTs 'cultural differences' through a lens of

unlawfulness adheres to the stereotypes of GTs being inherently criminal, leading to their stigmatisation and discrimination (Link and Phelan, 2001). By framing criminality as an intrinsic aspect of GT culture, this criticism of cultural processes pivots away from an explicit focus on racial identity, justifies the stereotyping and presents these comments as non-racist – a characteristic of discursive deracialisation (see Strani and Szczepaniak-Kozak, 2018), whereby race is deliberately avoided or removed from potentially racially motivated points. The consequence of this misrepresentation and broad generalisation ultimately perpetuates a prejudiced ideology that falsely paints GTs as inherently predisposed to criminality.

We also saw practitioners suggesting that the experience of growing up in a GT family is ultimately preparing youths for a lifestyle of criminality. The normalisation of violence was seen as a main driver for explaining criminality in GT culture, as demonstrated in the following quote from an equalities officer in probation attempting to ‘understand how they got there’ in reference to their criminal justice involvement:

sometimes violence is something they might see quite often as they’re growing up. Then they obviously don’t look at it as harshly as I might. It’s just trying to understand where that came from. Why did you do that? Sometimes it’s because they haven’t had an education. They haven’t got a career, and their only career is to work with their dad and that’s what their dad does. Their dad offends. They then end up offending, which can be the same for other cultures, I guess. I think more so with them because they don’t necessarily have that standard go to school, get your GCSE, they won’t go off and get their own job. (Equalities Officer, Probation)

A clear ‘us’ and ‘them’ distinction (Link and Phelan, 2001) emerges from this account. There is a stark contrast between the practitioner’s positive self-presentation of viewing violence as unpleasant or undesirable, against the negative other-presentation portrayal of ‘them’ – the GT community – as subscribing to a purportedly accepted and normalised view of violence (Van Dijk, 2000b). Attributing criminality and lack of education through culture overlooks and undermines the real challenges and stark socio-economic inequalities that GTs face as a marginalised group (Cemlyn et al., 2009; Clark and Taylor, 2014). Creating this cognitive separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ results in a perceived freedom to stigmatise GTs, describing them as uneducated and violent, likely to end up as a criminal. The consequence of such stigmatisation is that it leads to harmful stereotypes of GTs such as criminality being a characteristic of GT culture, causing further social rejection.

Practitioners also positioned GTs outside of society, for example, a Senior Probation Officer recognised that there is ‘not a great deal of investment by society in them and so equally not a great deal of investment by them in society’. This social and cognitive distancing and exclusion may serve to justify and reinforce prejudicial views towards GT communities. This practitioner also discussed working with GT populations in probation:

A lot of the work that we do to try and convince people of the value of not offending, not having an impact on other people, not being responsible for causing harm to other people, doesn’t work, generally speaking, or it does work with some GRT, but generally speaking, that is a far less effective approach. If you’re trying to say to people, trying and convince them that they don’t want to cause harm to others, frankly, that isn’t something that they are valuing. (Senior Probation Officer)



The assertion that GTs do not prioritise the value of not causing harm to others carries a dehumanising implication (Tileagă, 2007), effectively painting GTs as uncivilised. This criticism of their values, or perceived lack thereof, presents an example of ‘abnormalisation’ (Verkuyten, 2001), whereby GTs are portrayed as problematic as they deviate from normal expectations of behaviour that conform to socially accepted standards of decency and morality. The broad and generalised view that GTs are predisposed to criminality, influenced by a culture of violence and limited education, and that ‘they’ lack socially accepted values, is constructed in opposition to the behaviour and values attributed to ‘us’, the ‘respectable’ settled society (Powell, 2007). Criminality being presented as an inherent feature of GT culture pushes a cognitive separation, resulting in a perceived justification of discrimination which perpetuates the negative stereotypes that have long surrounded this community. It is crucial to note that while many practitioners acknowledged the socio-economic disadvantages experienced by GTs, as well as the broader social stigma and stereotypes and the impacts they have, there was often a lack of recognition of their own negative perceptions and how they manifest or influence their treatment or service provision for GT communities.

### *Gypsy and Traveller victim denial*

Previous research has shown that police engage with GTs primarily through enforcement rather than community policing initiatives (James, 2007), indicating a focus on GT communities as potential perpetrators, rather than victims of crime. There maintains a lack of acknowledgement or evidence of GT’s experiences of crime as victims, both in media representations and research. This reluctance to recognise GT’s victimisation and tendency to focus on and use language to emphasise GT’s labels as problematic offenders, was evident in some of our interviews. Interviewees who worked in GT charities, third-sector organisations and community-facing advocating roles acknowledged that GTs experience hate crimes, but highlighted the issue of under-reporting (see also, Home Office, 2016). Qualitative literature evidence that GTs are hate victimised (James, 2022), yet some practitioners stated they were not aware of victimisation towards GTs. A GT Service Manager mentioned he ‘very rarely’ encountered incidents of hate crime and that ‘it’s not really been reported’. Similarly, a Councillor suggested, ‘it doesn’t seem to be a huge issue’ seemingly playing down the extent of victimisation experienced by GTs. There was also some reflection on the difficulty of investigating such offences, as a housing specialist service manager noted,

They do [report hate crimes] but it’s evidence though isn’t it. So, they’ll say to the police like three men come on site and they did this and did that, but there’s no evidence and they’ve got no way of identifying these people and if it happened. It’s really difficult because if you’ve got a high-profile problematic group that are big and are committing crimes left, right and centre, you know, eating in restaurants and running out, that community tension is going to get higher, and we do get one of those groups every year. So, I don’t know if you saw the media this year, but we had a group in town that-like police got drafted down from the county and they seized all their vehicles and arrested them all. (Housing specialist services manager)



There is a clear divergence from the question about crimes directed at GTs, instead giving a justification for their supposed victimisation, blaming GTs for causing community tension. The language used suggests cognitive biases held by the practitioner who informs how they speak of GTs; rather than answering the question and discussing their experiences of victimisation, the practitioner relies on ideologies embedded in their cognitive framework which reflects the discourse of GTs being offenders and not victims (Van Dijk, 2000a). This justification conflates ethnicity with offending behaviour, essentially attributing the role of offender to individuals based on their ethnicity rather than their offending behaviour. This approach not only delegitimises the genuine experiences of crime by GTs but also suggests a tendency to automatically categorise GTs within the framework of offenders rather than victims. Similar to other ethnic minorities, in particular, black and black mixed-race men, GTs are seen as the ‘ideal offender’ rather than the ‘ideal victim’ (Christie, 1986; Long, 2021) whereby their legitimacy or worthiness of victim status is questioned, flipping their position from victim to suspect, meaning they are generally not recognised as potential victims. The perceived legitimacy or worthiness of ‘ideal victim’ status is based on demographic and socio-economic factors and attributes such as respectability and blamelessness (Christie, 1986). The process of ‘othering’ the GT community distances them from the ‘ideal victim’ status, and by blending ethnicity with offending behaviour, this instead, presents GT as the ‘ideal offender’.

Evidence shows that GT populations are more likely to experience racial hostility and less likely to report it when compared with other ethnic minority groups (Thompson and Woodger, 2020). Some practitioners acknowledged the issue of hate crimes directed at GTs; some held the view that hate crime towards GTs is ‘acceptable almost in society’ (GT Local Authority Team Manager), while others confessed to being unaware of any instances of GT hate crime victimisation. A GT Site Manager claimed, ‘it could be happening, but there’s no way to monitor it because the Travellers won’t report it to the police’. He then offered an explanation on why GTs do not report their experiences of hate crime to police:

They don’t want to work with the police and they don’t want police intrusion. I don’t mean this disrespectfully, but they don’t want police visiting the site for something innocent that might have happened because there are Travellers that are doing things that they shouldn’t be doing. (GT Site Manager)

The practitioner utilises a semantic move – a discursive strategy employed when discussing racially sensitive topics (Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000) – whereby he frames his opinion as non-offensive (‘I don’t mean this disrespectfully’) to distance himself from accusations of racism, before voicing his belief that GTs do not report crimes because they themselves are engaging in criminal behaviour. Yet, according to a discrimination survey with GTs, under-reporting is fuelled by a lack of action by police and the courts (Traveller Movement, 2016). The practitioner minimises GT’s experiences of hate crime, calling it ‘innocent’ which serves to avoid complete denial but rather normalise or downplay the significance of hate crimes directed at GTs and reposition them as offenders. This echoes existing research measuring prejudice in Britain where less importance was attached to

GTs' experiences of discrimination compared with other protected characteristics (Abrams et al., 2018). In a 2018 national survey of prejudice in Britain, 44% of people expressed openly negative feelings towards GTs, twice the percentage of those expressing negative views towards Muslims who are disproportionately targeted as victims of hate crime (Abrams et al., 2018).

While some practitioners adopted this minimising approach to GT victimisation, one practitioner, a Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) outright denied GT's experiences of discrimination:

They said I'm Gypsy so that's why they don't want me in the shop. It's a case of no, they don't want you in the shop because you've not got control of your children and they're feral, you know, it's not because they're Gypsy. It's just because there's lack of boundaries. (PCSO)

Describing GT children as 'feral' alongside repudiating their discriminatory experiences demonstrates how language is used to dehumanise (Billig, 2001; Tileagă, 2007) and problematise GTs to justify their prejudicial treatment. The negative language used by the PCSO may be influenced by underlying ideologies embedded in their cognitive framework which reflect broader societal views. These shared beliefs and attitudes influence how practitioners perceive and speak about GTs, perpetuating negative ideologies and reinforcing societal biases. The interviewee highlights the disparity between what they consider appropriate 'control' and 'boundaries' and the perceived lack of such boundaries within the GT community, while simultaneously devaluing and dismissing the GT's experiences of victimisation. This process of stigmatisation (Link and Phelan, 2001) and the perpetuation of stereotypes that depict GTs as troublemakers or criminals can lead to a profound lack of empathy and ultimately discrimination and social rejection. Such negative portrayals disconnect 'us' emotionally from the experiences and hardships faced by GTs ('them'), resulting in their status as victims being overlooked or dismissed and an overall loss of status.

These accounts demonstrate resistance from some practitioners to acknowledge GT's experiences of victimisation. This reluctance could stem from an underestimation of the frequency and severity of discrimination or victimisation targeting this group, fuelled by a lack of reliable data on GT's experiences of crime victimisation (James et al., 2019). Alternatively, it could reflect a tendency to downplay the significance of their victimisation experiences, perceiving them as harmless or insignificant, causing GTs and their experiences to be overlooked (Abrams et al., 2018). It is likely that rather than acknowledging GTs as victims of crime, some practitioners defer to underlying negative ideologies, pre-existing, prejudiced and biased views, further exacerbating the issue.

### *Community safety*

Much of the discourse surrounding GTs centres on their risk to settled community safety. 'Community safety' is defined not only as a response to crime but also to the insecurity related to crime (Gilling, 2001). Research shows that the response and level of insecurity felt may not be directly linked to the risk of crime but to perceived risk and media representations of crime (Gilling, 2001). Interviewees stated that many reports from the

settled community often related to the perception of GT's breaking the sedentary biased rules of acceptable use of space and place rather than actually committing crime:

a lot of it was about fear of crime and then the lower level anti-social behaviour associated with, you know, people living, you know, behind four walls, but more in the open air and the noise that generated. (Senior Local Authority Officer for policing and crime)

This is another example of an 'us' and 'them' distinction (Link and Phelan, 2001), where the stigmatisation of GTs has led to discrimination in the form of exclusion. This can manifest in depersonalisation, rejection and stereotyping by the local community (Rogers and Pilgrim, 2010). Interestingly, practitioners stated that their actions towards, or support for, the GT community are often determined by the expectations of the local settled community. One retired police officer noted, 'If you want to be elected, you cannot be sympathetic to Gypsies because nobody [. . .] no static member of the community wants that support'. Other police officers stated that what is perceived as them being tough on the GT community is often their responding to calls of concern from the local settled community who 'complained about fires', 'lack of toileting facilities', 'dogs barking' and 'nicking the lead off the roof'.

Moreover, this fear of increased crime was sometimes recognised by practitioners as unfounded. One police officer observed that reports of criminal activity in relation to GTs were often inflated or exaggerated. In addition, a former senior police officer stated that he found no evidence that crime increases after the arrival of an unauthorised encampment into an area. Nevertheless, concerns about GT's disproportionate involvement in crime were recognised by many to be the main rationale for public opposition.

Some practitioners portrayed a paradoxical effect, whereby they expressed views that were sympathetic to settled groups' hostile views of GTs, yet they tended to be more positive about GTs they interacted with professionally or personally. Those exhibiting anti-GT sentiment tended to select positive social representations of their in-group (settled community), and negative ones about the (GT) out-group:

I suppose that can be quite disturbing for some people because then they leave a mess and they might be quite noisy, and they'll often have – the children might not go to school, perhaps . . . I don't know how I'd feel about that and then it's the unknown, isn't it? If you don't know what they're capable of or what they're going to do, and you've got this set view in your head, it can sometimes make people automatically think, oh, I know that they don't necessarily commit those types of crimes. They don't really break into people's houses and stuff like that. They are quite respectful, actually. The people that I've worked with, they are all respectful especially. I don't know if it's from probation but even in the village actually, there is a good morning. They are nice. (Probation Equalities Officer)

Here, the practitioner describes a phenomenon (the arrival of GT) as a situation that could be 'quite disturbing' for the settled community. The practitioner displays a positive ideological self-image when highlighting the negative consequences for the settled community that they align with, stating that they 'don't know what they're capable of'. The practitioner differentiates between the 'in-group' settled community and the 'out-group' GT community; problematises and talks negatively about GTs with stereotypes such as

being messy and noisy; describes wanting to keep the GT out of the local area and differentiates between ‘the local communities’ space and ‘GT’ space. The practitioner clearly states the perceived problems caused by the presence of GTs, but at no point mentions, or recognises, the problems experienced by the GT communities. The language used aligns with Van Dijk’s (2000a) theories of racist ideological self-schema which states that ideologies are expressed using a selection of group-relevant, self-serving socio-cultural values which have a polarising structure between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Anti-GT discourse can be seen as a form of racist ideology that legitimises discriminatory policies and practices targeted at GT (Walach, 2020). However, Van Dijk (2000a) recognises that the definition of a self-schema as racist could be problematic as many people will not self-identify as racist or recognise their actions as being racist. In addition, it is too straightforward to imply that discrimination such as this can be entirely reduced to the racialisation of GT communities. It is a well-recognised finding that racism is often about ambivalence rather than binaries (Phillips, 2023). Examples of this from our research include multiple practitioners stating that they changed or were advised to change their work-based safety protocols when visiting GT homes. This included home visits routinely being conducted in pairs and using police escorts when visiting sites, a practice usually only conducted in a situation of known risk (Ministry of Justice, 2022). This type of behaviour further exacerbates the misrepresentation of the GT community and has the potential to increase GT resistance to professional engagement and accessing services.

Very few practitioners within our research were provided training to work with GT communities or aware of any targeted strategies within their organisations aimed at engaging with GT communities. Despite several interviewees having long-term experience working with GTs, there appeared a lack of cultural competence among practitioners working in mainstream services. While the desire of some practitioners to improve their cultural competence to work with GTs was evident, there were several accounts which suggested limited understanding of their history, diversity and cultural practices. For example, practitioners questioned whether those living in ‘bricks and mortar’ housing should be considered part of the GT community, misinterpreted GT communication styles which often include using gestures and talking in a loud tone as aggressiveness and lacked awareness of gender norms which prevented effective engagement.

Some practitioners appreciated the cultural differences that arise from a nomadic lifestyle and the socio-economic-political drivers behind the inequalities faced by GT communities. They also understood the reasons for any reluctance to assimilate into settled society and engage with authority. They recognised that this was often the result of historical mistreatment through the vilification and criminalisation of GT cultures and lifestyles (Clark and Taylor, 2014). Below is an example of a practitioner exhibiting anti-racist narrative:

Because of that prevalence of poverty amongst GRT groups. Not only that but also, of course, not having the same access to services that might avoid getting into either poverty or crime in the first place. Access to education, access to health, access to social services, all of that. I think that’s why they tend to be of much prevalence, but also as well, I’d say they are more policed therefore they’re more likely to be caught if they do something. (Senior Probation Officer)

Here, the practitioner shows a balanced attitude towards GTs which recognises the impact of socio-economic inequality and lack of government assistance on the community. This practitioner also mentions the over-policing/hyper-surveillance of the GT community, supported by previous research of GTs reporting unwarranted stop and searches, hyper-surveillance of their sites and regular visits by police for no reason (James, 2007).

Some practitioners recognised that such practices together with unchallenged racist discourse within the media and politics were an indication of systemic ideology and policy based on racist premises (Eliav-Feldon et al., 2009). A Senior Local Authority officer for policing and crime stated that

there's a perception from policing that some families, some communities, need more policing than others but that's not at the heart of policing, that's at the heart of the institutional racism isn't it? (Senior Local Authority officer for policing and crime)

However, one retired senior police officer questioned whether discriminatory actions by the police stemmed from racism or were more accurately a feature of class bias:

I don't think that's racism, I think that's more about what they call police property which is the police assume that all Gypsies are criminal and therefore they belong to the police, you know, like any criminal community, they should be surveyed, looked at and controlled. (Retired senior police officer)

This contradicts the experiences of GTs with the police (James, 2007) and widespread reports that police officers use racist language and stereotypes regarding GTs (Casey, 2023; Drummond, 2022). The creation of the 'Gypsy Roma Traveller Police Association' (GRTPA) in 2014 marked a significant step in improving GRT representation in the police. Despite this, criminal justice practitioners of GT heritage in our research described discriminatory work environments where they felt the need to work twice as hard or hide their ethnicity for fear of negative professional consequences. Two practitioners described being victims of racist discourse from colleagues with comments such as 'Shut up and get back in your caravan'. If an organisational environment allows for the stigmatisation of GT employees, the consequences of this practice can result in status loss and discrimination (Link and Phelan, 2001). Multiple practitioners mentioned that racism against the GT community is still the last acceptable form of casual racism. These findings are supported by wider examples of institutional racism against GT communities within the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales (Lammy, 2017; The Traveller Movement, 2018).

## Conclusion

This article has focused on practitioner's perspectives of GTs in the context of crime and justice and how they align with broader societal views. It delves into the prevailing discourse surrounding this community and reveals practitioners' compliance with dominant narratives and stereotypes of GTs and criminality. We go on to discuss how these perspectives may influence practitioners' service provision for GT communities and the impact this has on GTs.

Our research draws attention to the ways negative stereotypes are embedded in individual behaviours and practices among practitioners working with GT communities and how negative perceptions manifest and reproduce within practitioner's spaces, transmitted through language and shared beliefs about GTs. We found evidence of othering and compliance with dominant narratives about GT criminality which included perceptions that GTs have a predisposition to lawlessness and criminality inherent in their upbringing and culture where violence and anti-social behaviour is normalised. These perceptions appear to influence and legitimise practices such as home visits routinely being conducted in pairs and using police escorts as well as police using excessive force when visiting GT sites (Drummond, 2022).

Practitioners working in policing and crime were attuned to public concerns about the threat of GTs to community safety but reported that these prevailing views seemingly arise from a fear of crime rather than direct experiences of crime. This research found that some practitioners rejected dominant discourses about GTs, recognised the impact of socio-economic inequality faced by GT communities and understood that generational vilification can lead to a reluctance to assimilate with settled society and engage with authority. However, many practitioners exhibited a lack of awareness concerning the victimisation and discrimination of GTs; some even denied that such victimisation occurs, contradicting prior research findings (James, 2020). Practitioners were found to underestimate the frequency of victimisation, downplay its severity or defer to pre-existing prejudiced views regarding GTs. We found evidence that stereotypes of GTs rooted in media and political discourse influence negative ideologies shared by practitioners and shape their perspectives, opinions and treatment of GT communities. The experiences of practitioners with GT heritage reveals they have been subjected to racism and discrimination by other practitioners, with some choosing not to self-identify for fear of discrimination.

Failure to challenge the prevailing negative narrative not only perpetuates the portrayal of GTs as criminals but also calls into question their status as victims. There is a lack of national data on GTs' experiences of crime victimisation (James et al., 2019). GTs are typically excluded from household surveys because of their mobility, distrust of official surveyors or because they choose not to self-disclose their ethnicity for fear of racism and discrimination, and as a result their experiences are hidden from public view. The perpetuation of these prejudiced views by practitioners which in part can be attributed to a lack of cultural competence evidenced by the research exacerbates the challenges faced by GTs, as their experiences of discrimination and victimisation, are overlooked and invalidated. In the absence of cultural competence training, practitioners may rely on stereotypes leading to culturally insensitive biases and inappropriate services, exacerbating the inequalities faced by the GT community. The provision of targeted strategies and training can assist in improving confidence in engaging with GT communities and can decrease levels of enforcement and over-policing (Traveller Movement, 2018).

Further research is needed to examine GT's experiences of crime as victims, including hate crimes, in order to challenge the popular representation of GTs as offenders rather than victims (Long, 2021). In addition, research is needed to explore why some practitioners resist or support dominant discourses. This article contributes to the broader discourse on social justice, with the aim of informing policymakers, practitioners and researchers on the potential implications that policies, interventions and practices influenced by dominant discourses have on practitioners' service provision for GT communities.



## Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Coretta Phillips (London School of Economics and Political Science), Zoë James (University of Plymouth), and Becky Taylor (University of East Anglia) for their invaluable insights, comments, and support throughout this research. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments on the earlier versions of this article.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by ESRC [grant number ES/S015280/1].

## ORCID iD

Raegan Booth  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6070-580X>

Kitty Lymperopoulou  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0796-5027>

## References

- Abrams D, Swift H and Houston D (2018) Developing a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination in Britain. *Report, Equality and Human Rights Commission, UK*, October.
- Baillie M (2019) Skewed news: A macro-analysis of Gypsy, Roma and traveler coverage in the UK press. *Journal of Media Ethics* 34(4): 228–237.
- Billig M (2001) Humour and hatred: The racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan. *Discourse & Society* 12(3): 267–289.
- Bonilla-Silva E and Forman TA (2000) ‘I am not a racist but . . .’: Mapping white college students’ racial ideology in the USA. *Discourse & Society* 11(1): 50–85.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2022) *Thematic Analysis a Practical Guide*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Breazu P and McGarry A (2024) Romaphobia in the UK right-wing press: Racist and populist discourse during the Brexit referendum. *Social Semiotics* 34(4): 593–614.
- Brown P, Scullion L and Martin P (2013) Migrant Roma in the United Kingdom: Population size and experiences of local authorities and partners: Final Report. *Report*, University of Salford, October. Available at: [https://salford-repository.worktribe.com/preview/1502682/Migrant\\_Roma\\_in\\_the\\_UK\\_final\\_report\\_October\\_2013.pdf](https://salford-repository.worktribe.com/preview/1502682/Migrant_Roma_in_the_UK_final_report_October_2013.pdf)
- Burgum SH, Jones R and Powell R (2022) Manufacturing mandates: Property, race and the criminalisation of trespass in England and Wales. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 40(6): 1219–1236.
- Casey L (2023) Baroness Casey review: Final report into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan police service. *Report*, Metropolitan Police, March. Available at: <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/3524327/untitled/4324980/>
- Cemlyn S, Greenfields M, Burnett S, et al. (2009) Inequalities experienced by Gypsy and Traveller communities: A review. *Report*, Equality and Human Rights Commission, January. Available at: [https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research\\_report\\_12inequalities\\_experienced\\_by\\_gypsy\\_and\\_traveller\\_communities\\_a\\_review.pdf](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research_report_12inequalities_experienced_by_gypsy_and_traveller_communities_a_review.pdf)
- Christie N (1986) The ideal victim. In: Fattah EA (ed.) *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.17–30.



- Clark C and Taylor B (2014) Is nomadism the problem? The social construction of gypsies and travellers as perpetrators of 'anti-social' behaviour in Britain. In: Pickard S (ed.) *Anti-social Behaviour in Britain: Victorian and Contemporary Perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.166–178.
- Cohen S (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. London: MacGibbon and Kee.
- Drummond A (2022) Peripheral inclusion? Gypsy Roma traveller police association officers speak out. *Romani Studies* 32(1): 105–127.
- Elias N and Scotson J L (1994) *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems. Theory, Culture & Society*. 2nd ed, London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Eliav-Feldon M, Isaac B and Ziegler J (2009) *The Origin of Racism in the West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Equality Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (2015) *Is Britain Fairer? Report*, Equality and Human Rights Commission, June. Available at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/is-britain-fairer-accessible.pdf>
- Gilling D (2001) Community safety and social policy. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 9(4): 381–400.
- Gilling D (2019) Thinking about crime prevention. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 13(3): 263–270.
- Gov.UK (2019) Government consults on new police powers to criminalise unauthorised encampments. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-consults-on-new-police-powers-to-criminalise-unauthorised-encampments#:~:text=The%20government%20will%20launch%20a,making%20it%20a%20criminal%20offence> (accessed 16 February 2024).
- Greenfields M and Rogers C (2020) Hate: 'as regular as rain' a pilot research project into the psychological effects of hate crime on Gypsy, Traveller and Roma (GTR) communities. *Buckinghamshire New University Repository*. Available at: <https://bnu.repository.guildhe.ac.uk/id/eprint/18142/> (accessed 15 September 2024).
- Home Office (2016) Action against hate. *Report*, Home Office, July. Available at: <https://www.actionagainsthate.org/>
- James Z (2007) Policing marginal spaces: Controlling Gypsies and Travellers. *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 7(4): 367–389.
- James Z (2011) Gypsies and Travellers in the countryside: Managing a risky population. In: Yarwood R and Mawby RI (eds) *Rural Policing and Policing the Rural: Constable Countryside?* Farnham: Ashgate, pp.137–146.
- James Z (2020) Gypsies' and travellers' lived experience of harm: A critical hate studies perspective. *Theoretical Criminology* 24(3): 502–520.
- James Z (2022) Roma, gypsies and travellers as a community of difference: Challenging inclusivity as an anti-racist approach. *Critical Romani Studies* 4(2): 142–162.
- James Z, Phillips C and Taylor B (2019) Gypsy and traveller experiences of crime and justice: A neglected minority in criminology. *British Society of Criminology Newsletter* 84(2): 14–21.
- Krumer-Nevo M and Sidi M. (2012) Writing Against Othering. *Qualitative Inquiry* 18(4): 299–309.
- Kabachnik P (2010) Place invaders: Constructing the nomadic threat in England. *Geographical Review* 100(1): 90–108.
- Kóczé A and Rövid M (2017) Roma and the politics of double discourse in contemporary Europe. *Identities* 24(6): 684–700.
- Lammy D (2017) The Lammy review: An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals in the criminal justice system. *Report*,

- GOV.UK, September. Available at: <https://yjlc.uk/resources/legal-updates/lammy-review-2017-published>
- Link BG and Phelan JC (2001) Conceptualizing stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology* 27(1): 363–385.
- Long LJ (2021) The ideal victim: A critical race theory (CRT) approach. *International Review of Victimology* 27(3): 344–362.
- Ministry of Justice (2022) Home visits policy framework. *Report*, Ministry of Justice, November. Available at: <https://yjlc.uk/resources/legal-updates/lammy-review-2017-published>
- Okely J (2014) Recycled (mis)representations: Gypsies, travellers or roma treated as objects, rarely subjects. *People, Place, and Policy* 8(1): 65–85.
- Phillips C (2017) The trouble with culture: A speculative account of the role of gypsy/traveller cultures in ‘doorstep fraud’. *Theoretical Criminology* 23(3): 333–354.
- Phillips C (2023) The pains of racism and economic adversity in young Londoners’ lives: Sketching the contours. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49(3): 734–751.
- Powell R (2007) Civilising offensives and ambivalence: The case of British Gypsies. *People, Place and Policy Online* 1(3): 112–123.
- Richardson J (2006) Talking about Gypsies: The notion of discourse as control. *Housing Studies* 21(1): 77–96.
- Richardson J (2014) Roma in the news: An examination of media and political discourse and what needs to change. *People, Place and Policy* 8(1): 51–64.
- Richardson J and O’Neill R (2012) ‘Stamp on the Camps’: The social construction of gypsies and travellers in media and political debate. In: Richardson J and Ryder A (eds) *Gypsies and Travellers: Empowerment and Inclusion in British Society*. Bristol: Policy Press, pp.169–186.
- Rogers A and Pilgrim D (2010) *A Sociology Of Mental Health And Illness*. 4th edn. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Rowe L and Goodman S (2014) ‘A stinking filthy race of people inbred with criminality’ A discourse analysis of prejudicial talk about Gypsies in discussion forums. *Romani Studies* 24(1): 25–42.
- Strani K and Szczepaniak-Kozak A (2018) Strategies of othering through discursive practices: Examples from the UK and Poland. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 14(1): 163–179.
- The Sun (2005) To stop flood of Gypsies stamp on the camps. *The Sun*, 9 March, p. 5.
- Thompson N and Woodger D (2020) ‘I hope the river floods’: Online hate speech towards gypsy, roma and traveller communities. *British Journal of Community Justice* 16(1): 41–63.
- Tileagă C (2007) Ideologies of moral exclusion: A critical discursive reframing of depersonalization, delegitimization and dehumanization. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 46(4): 717–737.
- Traveller Movement (2016) Written evidence by the Traveller Movement to the Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into hate crime and its violent consequences. *Report*, Traveller Movement, September. <https://wp-main.travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Hate-Crime-and-its-Violence-Consequences-Home-Affairs-Committee.pdf>
- Traveller Movement (2018) Policing by consent: Understanding and improving relations between gypsies, roma, travellers and the police. *Report*, Traveller Movement, June. Available at: <https://wp-main.travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Policing-by-Consent-Report-long.pdf>
- Van Dijk T (2000a) Ideologies, racism, discourse: Debates on immigration and ethnic issues. In: ter Wal J and Verkuyten M (eds) *Comparative Perspectives on Racism*. London: Routledge, pp.91–115.
- Van Dijk T (2000b) New(s) Racism: A discourse analytical approach. In: Cottle S (ed.) *Ethnic Minorities and the Media*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, pp.211–226.
- Verkuyten M (2001), ‘Abnormalization’ of ethnic minorities in conversation. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 40: 257–278.

**Author biographies**

**Raegan Booth** was a Research Assistant in the Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics while conducting this research. Her research interests include criminology and the intersection of ethnicity and crime, with a particular focus on the experiences of Gypsies and Travellers.

**Kirsty Koral** was a Research Assistant at the School of Society and Culture at the University of Plymouth while conducting this research. She has been working and researching in the Domestic Abuse & Sexual Violence sector, and her research interests lie in the fields of Crime & Criminal Justice.

**Kitty Lymeropoulou** is a Senior Research Fellow at the School of Society and Culture at the University of Plymouth. Her research examines issues relating to ethnicity, inequality, crime and justice.