



Our Voice

**Educational toolkit for working with
Gypsy & Traveller Youth**



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What is this toolkit?

This toolkit is an educational resource created in collaboration with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people who were part of the Our Voice project led by GATE Herts, in partnership with Goldsmiths University of London and Southwark Traveller Action Group (STAG)

This toolkit covers topics and issues of concern brought forward by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller youth that affect them and which often go unrecognised and unaddressed. It shares learnings from storytelling-based sessions conducted with young people and presents artwork they created around identity, culture and experience.

The topics include:

- Discrimination and prejudice
- Social media and mental health
- Family, community and identity

This toolkit includes an example session plan and additional resources that can be used to support practice when working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people.

Who is it for?

This toolkit is intended to function as a resource for practitioners who connect with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller youth in any capacity - in schools, community organisations and youth work spaces as some examples.

It is, more broadly, a resource for anyone who is looking to understand and respond to the unique and critical needs of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people.

How was this toolkit created?

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller youth are regularly excluded from conversations about their own lives. Decisions are made and dialogues are had *about* them and not *with* them.

The aim of the Our Voice project was to reach out to Gypsy Roma and Traveller youth who, on the margins of society, rarely have a seat at the table from which to give a voice to their situations.

This project was delivered through a programme of interactive sessions and discussions, through which Gypsy and Traveller young people had the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings about their experiences in a safe and non-judgemental space.

The young people in these sessions collectively discussed issues that affect them, their families and wider communities.

On pages 12-14 we present a session plan that was developed for the Our Voice project. This can be used to enable facilitation of open conversation and

spaces of support for GRT youth in a variety of settings.

Why is it needed?

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people experience major challenges and significant barriers in their lives. These show up in many ways and have serious impacts on chances to succeed and thrive.

It is well-reported that Gypsy and Traveller groups in the UK experience some of the worst outcomes in a wide range of areas such as education, employment and health.¹

Discrimination against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities is pervasive and reflected across the spectrum of UK society: in law and policy; the media; in mainstream services such as education and healthcare, and in everyday interactions. The experience of marginalisation both creates and exacerbates the problems faced by young people today.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people; particularly youth, are largely excluded from opportunities of leadership and empowerment.

Engaging with this toolkit can support better outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller youth by hearing directly from young people about their experiences and ways of addressing the difficulties they face.

¹ Greenfields, M., & Rogers, C. (2020). *Hate: "As regular as rain"*. GATE Herts.

Our experiences, our voice ***GRT Youth Cultural Identity***

This section presents the key topics and issues that young people highlighted in the Our Voice project sessions.

Discrimination and prejudice

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller youth regularly experience discrimination and prejudice. Much of the prejudice towards Gypsies, Roma and Travellers is normalised to an extent that these experiences happen every day for many and come in a lot of different forms.

The young people on the Our Voice project shared many stories of being excluded from, refused service or followed by security in certain places, like shops and restaurants. They felt this was much more likely to happen to younger Gypsy and Traveller people than adults.

Bullying in education by peers and prejudice from teachers are also common experiences and were shared widely by the young people in session. This bullying included: being targeted with derogatory slurs and verbal abuse; physical assaults; exclusion and ostracization, and online harassment.

Wider prejudice included assumptions being made about background, family and identity that were often negative and left them feeling 'different' from others.

"They try and judge you before they know you and all that, but I think people should keep themselves to

themselves. If it's not them, it shouldn't bother them."

Some of the young people felt forced at times to hide their identity and while at school or out and about, to avoid discrimination.

"I think when you're talking to country people², you do try and change yourself in case they have something to say. You try and fit in with everyone, obviously you don't change the ways you dress or how you put yourself. But you try and change to fit in and you talk different."

Bullying and prejudice at school can have serious knock-on effects for marginalised people, particularly Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children. Early school-leaving and low attendance are consequences of bullying and prejudice and are very common for GRT young people, for example. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people are regularly underestimated or assumed to be uninterested in education due to cultural misconceptions. They can be separated into 'lower level' classes and offered little academic support and encouragement to achieve.

These examples of exclusion can lead to limited accessibility to further education

² Country people: non-Traveller people

and employment prospects - which in turn can contribute to financial instability, poverty and poor health rates. The young people in session all felt that they could and wanted to achieve more, but did not feel they had the opportunity available to them.

- 70% of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people reported experiencing discrimination in education.³
- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children experience the highest rates of school exclusion and lowest academic attainment in comparison to all other ethnic groups.

The young people in session felt that the prejudice they experienced had a lot to do with stereotypes passed around between people and perpetuated in the media.

For example, very few Gypsies and Travellers live nomadically and the majority in the UK live in houses. Housed, on and off-site living and travelling people are regularly placed all in the same category and assigned the same false beliefs and narratives about their culture.

'People do look at you in a certain way. They think it is when you leave sites and you leave rubbish, there's only some Travellers that do that.'

The young people present at the Our Voice sessions who did live on site

³ Anti-Bullying Alliance; Friends, Families and Travellers. (2020). *Bullied, Not Believed and Blamed*. Anti-Bullying Alliance.

frequently came up against judgements of their culture, family and lifestyle which are built on negative and incorrect stereotypes. They often felt under pressure to respond to these judgements and defend themselves, which left them feeling tired and stressed. It was also understood that anyone who 'stood up for them' against bullying would be shamed for it - creating for the young people a sense of dejection and being placed in a 'no win' situation.

"I used to talk English at school, talk in an English accent. It's just easier for people to understand and you didn't have to explain all the time, every day. I don't do it now, too tiring, I haven't got the time or energy for it anymore."

Police profiling, aggression and hostility were also raised as major issues. It was common to be stopped by the police. Or have the police called when the young people were in public, either with a couple or a group of friends. One young person shared that the police were called at a cinema after she and her friends walked in and the staff decided to immediately eject them from the property.

- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people are over-represented in youth justice statistics. Biased and discriminatory policing is considered to be a major factor contributing to these high rates.

- Gypsy and Traveller young people are much more likely to be stopped and searched by police. ⁴

One group discussed frustration at prejudiced planning policy and how it enables the police to act aggressively and unfairly towards Gypsies and Travellers, particularly those who live on site.

For example, planning law designates authorised sites as having a singular postcode. This means that if the police were on site to search one pitch, they could search every pitch and trailer on the site without reason.

One young woman shared a personal experience of the impact of this policy in action:

"There was a raid at our site and they had grenades, you know the smoke grenades? And they chucked them through people's windows and they had a gun to my head. They had a gun to my head. At the time I was only fifteen. They didn't have permission to search my trailer, they searched my trailer and they didn't even have a raid for us. It was for the people next door, it was

for the next pitch, next plot."

Marginalised young people are in need of tailored and sensitive provision that recognises the serious impact of prejudice on their lives. Experiences such as the one above can be traumatic and appropriate provision is necessary to support young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing.

'Minority stress':

- 'Minority stress' is a model that looks at elevated levels of stress amongst stigmatised and marginalised groups of people.
- It partly helps us understand health disparities among minoritised groups such as: Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people, and LGBTQ+ people.
- It has been shown that chronic exposure to discrimination affects health, both through everyday experiences of prejudice and exclusion from adequate healthcare.
- Heart problems, high blood pressure; and mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety are more common for people experiencing minority stress.

was confused, why is everyone looking at me? Why am I so different to my classmates?"

⁴ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law/policing/stop-and-search/latest>

The young people in session shared that they found courage and confidence in knowing that the prejudice they had experienced is not their fault and not in any way a true representation of who they are.

Their connections with their family, friends and others in their community helped them with this and to feel pride in themselves and their identities.

One young person had this to say about prejudice from non-GRT people:

"I think they need to open their eyes more and not paint everyone with the same brush. They've only had a bad experience with someone like that. So, again, they're painting everyone with the same brush. If that's what they want to think, then they are very single-minded, so let them do them. Because I know what's good and what's bad."

Social media and mental health

The negative influences of social media and peer pressure were raised as key problems by the young people on the project. Cyberbullying was considered by the groups to be a major and dangerous contributor to high rates of mental health issues amongst Gypsy and Traveller youth.

- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups experience disproportionately poor mental health and higher rates of suicide and attempted suicide compared to the general population.
- Experiencing hate crimes and exclusion from mainstream healthcare including mental health provision are believed to contribute highly to suicide amongst Gypsy, Roma and Traveller youth.
- 90% of community support workers reported that clients who had lost their lives to suicide or attempted suicide had previously experienced a hate incident.
- 87% of hate incidents targeted at Gypsy and Traveller individuals happened through social media.

"All these lies on social media. It's not right. People are dying over losing their reputation. Your life changes completely when something comes out



about you. All Travelling girls have is their name."

Family and community bereavement weigh heavily on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people. In sessions, the young people spoke of people they knew who had tragically lost their lives to, or had attempted, suicide. The young people felt that the prevalence of bullying and hatred on social media had contributed to these losses.

"A lot of it happens on Instagram now. A lot of fake pages, like shame pages. And they can zoom into someone's body now and say a lot of cruel things. There's a lot of suicide going on over that and it'll have to stop. It's not fair and it's not right. A lot of people killing themselves over it. And on TikTok, all the shame pages."

Shame or fake pages are social media feeds made by an individual pretending to be someone else. Pictures and videos are uploaded to these that are intended to shame, humiliate and discredit the reputation of the victim. Sometimes, the creators of these pages will send nasty or offensive comments and messages to other people under the assumed name of the victim. Or they will generate untrue and unkind rumours about the victim. The young people shared that this is

widespread issue and these pages are very often produced by non-GRT individuals to spread hate and to represent Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people in a negative light.

Several of the young women at the project felt that their experiences on social media had affected their self-esteem, particularly around their appearances. This can lead to struggles with eating disorders, depression and anxiety.

Often, a suggestion is that young people who are experiencing online bullying should remove themselves from the platform on which it is occurring. Either by deleting their profile or the app from their phones. This, however, does not fully account for the presence of social media in young people's lives today.

As much bullying as young people may receive, they may also receive friendly, kind and complimentary comments and messages. It is a way for young people to find connection and build and maintain friendships. It may be a space through which young people who struggle to find commonality with people directly in their lives can get support and acceptance. This can be particularly true for young LGBTQ+ people.

The young people at the project sessions stressed that social media is prominent and important in their lives and that online bullying and hate speech should be tackled at the source by platforms and moderators, so that they can continue to safely engage with it.

Offline, education for non-GRT adults and young people on the impact of cyberbullying and spreading hate online is key - as is creating spaces of support that

help young people to build their self-esteem and confidence to reject negative ideas about who they are.

"I think I stop myself. There was a point where I stopped doing what I loved to do because I was worried about what other people thought of me. I had a lot of opportunities and I would've got a lot of records for this one thing. But obviously I took notice to what people were saying to me. Like, boxing is for boys and all that. But I thought 'whatever,' I want to do what I want to do because I love it."

Family, Community and Identity

The young people talked on the importance of family and community in their lives. They shared that their connections to their family and friends helped them in many ways to feel pride in their culture and identity. They also spoke to the support they found in family that helped them when they are up against prejudice in society.

The young people stressed that is necessary to consider the perspectives and concerns of family members when engaging with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller youth. Family members may be worried

about their young person's safety and struggle to trust that they will be supported appropriately. It is important to communicate with the young person to understand what will work best for them in their specific family situation.

Young people often challenge generational ideas as society evolves and may be finding their own interpretations of culture and traditions that reflect their personal needs and aspirations.

Many of the young women present at the Our Voice sessions expressed an equal understanding and conflict with gender expectations and norms within their personal family and community circles.

One young person said this about her perspective on culture and change for each generation:

"I think there should be changes, obviously you have to learn them right from wrong and about what's going on in the world now. How things change, what people does, and what you have to look out for and all the good things. I think you have to wait until the time comes, I think everything happens for a reason."

Strong ties and connections with family, community, identity and culture can be incredibly empowering for young people. They can generate resistance to external shaming and hatred by encouraging self-

love and acceptance. This can have positive outcomes for mental health and



wellbeing.

"I think Travellers do things differently. But there's other ways, other cultures that do things differently. It's not just us. Everyone has their own way of doing things. That's why I think some people are very small-minded, because they think there's only one way."

Celebrating and encouraging pride in identity is very important. It can support young people to reject negative and prejudicial views of them, be confident in their abilities and feel assured that they are not alone in their struggles. It can help them to feel connected to their community and see that they are part of a larger vision which can help to strengthen their resiliency to challenges; build self-confidence; and help them to develop as

leaders and inspiring role models for others.

The Our Voice sessions we held with young people provided an opportunity for experiencing the above. We asked the young people present to share how they were feeling after the sessions and they had the following to say:

I was happy hearing about others being proud.

I feel a lot more confident that I am not alone.

I felt safe and happy to talk.

I felt proud of other people.

I like talking about being a proud Traveller.

Empowered.



Session plan:

Youth Project: Our Voice

Aims:

Improving the lives of young people from the GRT community by identifying and addressing any issues they have through groupwork and activity. Also, to encourage young people to speak amongst themselves away from the youth group about their issues.

Outcomes:

Young members of the GRT community will feel empowered by talking about issues based on their ethnicity that affect them negatively. They will also gain some understanding of the prejudices against them in the wider community and learn to use these negativities for self-learning and self-empowerment, this will lead to increased confidence especially when away from their communities.

The main objective is for the young people to increase their life chances especially when it comes to education, job prospects and overall happiness and wellbeing.

Outputs:

Groupwork sessions that consist of introductions, two quick icebreakers separated by discussion led by the young people. There will be an activity element in the form of art produced by the youth which are designed around what the young people have said and showed an interest in during the groupwork session.

Session Plan

Introductions starting with facilitators

Aim – *Learn names and getting people interested in engaging with one another. This also helps the group members identify with the facilitators which means they are more likely to engage in the session in a meaningful way.*

Duration 2-3 minutes

Name – Age – Location – Ethnicity – something you like about yourselves and something you dislike

Icebreaker 1

Aim- *helping people feel more comfortable within the group by doing something together.*

Duration 5-6 minutes

Have you Ever:

1. Prior to the workshop the facilitator prepared a list of questions which can only be answered with yes or no. These questions should begin with "Have you ever...?"

For example:

1. Have you ever been to America?
2. Have you ever been horse riding?
3. Have you ever done bungee jumping?

The facilitator to read out the questions or statements one by one. For each statement, the participants stand up if they could answer the statement with yes.

Group facilitator talk

1-2 min

Aim- Helping the participants understand why we are there and what we aim to achieve

Explanation of the reason for the session, the aims and hopeful outcomes. Also, the importance of young people from minorities getting the chance to speak up.

Expectations

Aim- Understanding what equality means to the participants, and how changes can be made to help them to feel more included in wider society

2-3 minutes

Ask the group what equality means to them and how this looks from their perspective. Follow up questions:

1. What would you change to make you feel more included?
2. What could you do, as a young person, to help improve the quality of someone else's life?

Snacks

Aim- provide a short break from engaging formally and allow time for participants to speak off topic amongst one another

5-8 minutes

Hopes and dreams

Aim- Trying to understand the aspirations and ambitions of the youth

Ask if you had no physical, financial or other obstacles, what skill would you like to have? Follow up question:

1. Have you ever set a long-term goal for yourself to work toward?
2. What was this experience like?
(Using examples, improving in sports, music, hobby/activity, academics)

Identity

Aim- *To make a preliminary evaluation of whether the young person has been negatively affected by the ripple effects of hate crime, i.e., stereotyped depictions on television or films, thoughtless headlines in print or online that reinforce negative stereotypes.*

Ask the young people: Do you act differently in certain circumstances?

Follow on question

1. Do you act different in school than you do at home?
2. Do you act differently at home than you do with your friends?

Social pressure

Aim- *To understand the social pressure the participants feel is applied to them*

Ask the young people if they feel pressure to be someone they're not

Follow on questions

1. Can you explain why you feel that? And what that feels like to you?
2. How do you deal with pressure and stress?

Activity

Aim- *To get an understanding of what is important to the participants, and what they have gained by attending this session*

Ask the young people to paint, draw or write on a canvas, what they felt was important to them.

Follow on suggestion:

1. To paint, draw or write what they felt they had gained from the group work in this session

Quantitative and qualitative evaluation

Aim- *seek to determine what worked and what didn't work in the session, and how it can be adapted so that young people remain engaged and benefit from future sessions.*

Ask if they feel they have benefitted in any way from attending the session and what they would like to see included next time.

Close of session

Aim- *to end the session on a positive and friendly note and to ensure the participants know that their attendance is appreciated, and they have achieved a positive step in taking control of their future.*

Thank everyone for attending and congratulate them all on participating and taking a step towards their own and one another's empowerment.



Conclusion

Many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people have experienced discrimination and exclusion in education; however, this has not dulled their aspirations and ambitions.

Throughout the project it became apparent that the young people took a keen interest in world affairs and were able to hold well-reasoned debates amongst themselves some expressing differing views.

It is essential to continue engaging young Gypsy/Travellers in a range of ways and we have found that the use of art and design is a good medium for self-expression of their identity and culture.

These sessions were held post lockdown and although we acknowledge that this is a factor the youth expressed joy at coming together in a safe space where they could be open and honest about their identity and be able to use their own languages without fear of judgement.

Additional resources

[The Children's Society](#)

[Shaftesbury Young People](#)

[Child Law Advice](#)

[Gypsy Traveller League](#)

[Travellers Times](#)

[GATE Herts](#)

[Rom Belong](#)

[Report Racism GRT](#)

[STAG](#)

[One Call Away](#)

We would like to acknowledge the youth who took part and spoke so frankly about their experiences of their everyday lives, this toolkit could not have been produced without you and we are extremely grateful for your input.

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