

Briefing on Gypsy Roma Traveller Children

The Children's Society has a national network of projects delivering specialist services for children who are disadvantaged in their daily lives. We support children in trouble with the law, young runaways at risk on the street, disabled children who face social exclusion and young refugees rebuilding their lives in the UK. We work with children who are often forgotten or whose needs are ignored, such as traveller children or children affected by parental substance misuse.

Background

Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT) people whether they are nomadic or live in settled accommodation are among the most discriminated against groups of people. The EU Commissioner for Human Rights has argued that "Gypsies would appear to be the last ethnic minority in respect of which openly racist views can still be acceptably expressed," and this kind of discrimination makes GRT children especially vulnerable to having their rights compromised.

The Children's Society is one of the few charities to have worked extensively with different groups of children from these communities, including Gypsy, Roma, Irish and New Age Travellers. Through our innovative projects, we work to ensure that Traveller and Gypsy children are treated as children first and foremost, and that they have access to education, healthcare, and other services.

Health

Many travelling communities suffer from a lack of access to healthcare provision. They are five times more likely to develop health problems than the settled population, and have a life expectancy that is lower by 10 years. Without roots in the local community, or an address to give at GPs' surgeries, GRT families must often forgo preventative treatments and are forced to use emergency healthcare such as A&E when health concerns become more urgent.

A clear indicator of the discrepancy between GRT communities and the rest of the population is in prenatal care. One in every five GRT mothers will experience the loss of a child compared to one in every hundred in the settled community, and GRT children are between 1.5 and 2 times more likely to die in their first year of life than children in the settled community. Poor registration rates and inconsistent medical records are just two things that need to be improved for these groups.

Higher infection rates have also been reported. This is probably linked to poor sanitation, lack of water, and other site conditions. Many studies have shown that Travellers often live in extremely unhealthy conditions while at the same time using health services much less often than the rest of the population.

Education

"We can't even get a library ticket." (Traveller Boy)

GRT children are five times more likely to be excluded from school than other children, three times more likely than White British children to have Special Educational Needs and have the lowest educational attainment of all groups of children. The education of GRT children is often disrupted by a lack of understanding within the schools they attend as well as a lack of support for their specific needs.

In 2003 around 12,000 GRT children were not registered at a school. When they are registered, they face difficulties with transport (as traveller sites are seldom prioritised by the local authority) and with a curriculum that is not always supported by the community elders, who have traditionally placed more emphasis on practical and vocational training. Their education can be further disrupted by forced evictions from travelling sites.

In addition to these barriers, many GRT children face isolation and marginalisation in their school environments, and struggle to develop relationships. One young girl reported that she would have to

stop going to school when her older brother left, as he was the only person there who would talk to her.

Accommodation

"We just gets in and goes...gets in our trailer and goes." (Traveller Boy)

For reasons beyond their control, the living arrangements of GRT children can be turbulent and unpredictable. There are not enough safe sites for GRT families to settle at and around one quarter of caravans are currently pitched on unauthorised sites. Many local authorities have fallen far short of their statutory duty of identifying new authorised sites. Those sites that are there are unsuitable for children. Many of them have been in unsuitable locations close to big roads, with few facilities, no play space for children and inadequate management. Ofsted noted in 2001 that sites currently provided are usually *'...located some distance from schools and/or on marginalised land which represents major environmental and health dangers to the resident'*

In addition, the unregulated bailiffs who are hired by local authorities to enforce or evict families often scare the children with their heavy-handedness. The difficulty in obtaining planning permission for new authorised sites, and the possibility of resentment from the local community has resulted in a situation where many GRT communities are forced to live on cramped, ill-fitted sites or risk frequent evictions. Many of children and young people who we consulted said that one of the main things they found difficult about their lives was *'being moved on all the time'*.

Our Practice

The **New Londoners** Project works with GRT children between the ages of 7 and 14 in East London. It recently involved young Roma travellers in a photography campaign to help them raise awareness of their history and culture. Its Home-School Liaison Project provides registering, translation, mentoring and transition services to Roma children in schools. Its Roma Health Project provides much the same services in the area of healthcare, as well as facilitating workshops on nutrition, mental health, sexual health and more.

The Children's Participation Project (CPP) in Wessex works to raise awareness of and promote participation amongst traveller children in the rural areas of South West England. Through much of 2010, CPP Wessex involved young travellers in a project on the history of New Age Travelling, touring an exhibition of photography and lectures.

Recommendations

- More culturally sensitive services that are consistent across the local authority boundaries should be developed for GRT families.
- Access to education should be improved for GRT children through better cultural awareness training for teachers, anti-bullying strategies focussing on GRT children and innovative use of information and communication technologies.
- Access to health care for GRT families should improve through better cultural awareness training for medical professionals, more 'walk in' or visiting mobile services and educating children and young people from these communities about healthy lifestyles.
- Local authorities should provide more sites for nomadic GRT families and evictions of families should never happen without the proper consideration given to the welfare of children.
- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people should be supported to learn about and value their cultural heritage and to contribute to the development of emerging culture.