## Vulnerability & Policing Futures
Research Centre

# Lost in translation: raising awareness of Roma culture within policing

## Key points

- Awareness of Roma culture is limited amongst police officers, contributing to misconceptions around who Roma are and how they present themselves.

- Police officers need to develop the confidence to ask if someone is Roma, with Roma individuals being encouraged to respond "yes".

- Ethnicity recording practices need a distinctive 'Roma' option. This will allow Roma individuals to be seen and the risks associated with this community to be better understood.

# Summary

This project was funded by the ESRC Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre's Early Career Researcher Development Fund and was conducted by Dr Sarah Shorrock (University of Leeds) in collaboration with Connecting Roma and West Yorkshire Police.

The project aimed to provide Roma communities in Bradford with a voice and to explore what it means to be Roma, alongside capturing police perceptions of what being Roma means.

Creative workshops and semi-structured interviews were conducted with Roma individuals, alongside police officers engaging with an online survey and follow-up interviews.

Questions around who Roma are, the importance of accurately recording ethnicity, and educating Roma communities around the role of UK policing and legislation were themes to emerge during the data analysis.

# Background

Roma communities are becoming more established within the UK, with their presence adding an extra thread to the diverse tapestry of society. However, a lack of understanding around Roma culture reinforces historic experiences of discrimination and marginalisation, contributing to a 'them and us' narrative. Relations with police exemplify this.

Roma heritage can be traced back to the Indian subcontinent, with migration into Eastern and Central Europe occurring in the 13th and 14th centuries. The expansion of the European Union in the mid-1990s enabled Roma families to settle in the UK, with second and third generation Roma now being born and raised in the country. For Roma families, migrating to the UK was seen as a way of escaping the persecution experienced in European countries.

For many families, the UK offers a better standard of living, with parents wanting to access better education and work opportunities for themselves and their children. However, wider societal views of Roma, much of which is influenced by misconceived media narratives, have reaffirmed the 'otherness' of Roma, pushing them to the margins of society. This positioning has increased the likelihood of Roma families being exposed to risky situations, with limited knowledge of Roma culture and the challenges they face raising questions around how inclusive current policing practice is for this growing community.

This research project aimed to explore how understandings of Roma culture can get lost in translation and the impact this can have upon relationships between Roma communities, police and other safeguarding professionals.

To achieve this aim, these objectives were identified:

• To provide Roma communities in Bradford an opportunity to explore their identity in a creative way and reflect on how this identity influences engagement with police and safeguarding professionals.

• To explore Roma cultural awareness amongst officers in West Yorkshire Police and the extent to which such awareness has upon developing trust within Roma communities.

• Develop a Roma cultural awareness toolkit that can be embedded into training programmes.

# What we did

The research was conducted in two stages, with the voice and lived experience of Roma communities being placed at the centre of the research journey. To facilitate engagement, Connecting Roma provided translation services when needed.

### Stage 1 – 'This is me' workshops with Roma communities

The research team delivered seven creative workshops and focus groups with young people (aged 12 to 21) and adult (aged 22 to 70) Roma. These workshops explored Roma identity and perceptions of statutory services.

### Stage 2 – Truth or Myths? How are Roma perceived by police officers and staff?

The team distributed an online survey exploring perceptions of Roma culture and policing practices to officers working within the Bradford district. A total of 45 responses were collected, with seven officers participating in semi-structured interviews exploring responses in more depth.

Qualitative elements of the research were digitally recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. Survey data was analysed quantitatively, with descriptive statistics used to quantify responses.

Findings informed the development of a Roma cultural awareness animation and training toolkit.

# Key findings

**Knowledge of Roma culture is limited amongst police officers in Bradford, with recording practices restricting the ability for an individual to identify as being Roma.**

Language barriers and policing practices in European countries contribute to Roma being mistrustful of the police. Roma communities want to be treated fairly by the police and for officers to be more aware of Roma culture.

**Roma who? Police understanding of Roma:**
Officers had often heard of 'Roma' but were unsure of their history, culture or how they differed from Gypsy and Traveller communities. There was a consensus that Roma families tend to have limited financial resources, increasing the risk of being exposed to vulnerable situations. Recording practices do not support the ability to record 'Roma' as a distinct ethnicity, rather default options of Eastern European or 'Other' are selected.

**Are you Roma? Officer engagement with Roma:**
Asking an individual if they are Roma was not common amongst officers, with lack of cultural awareness contributing to this. Rather, identification of ethnicity tended to be based upon language spoken, visual cues and postcode areas. Historical experiences of policing in Europe have contributed to mistrust, making it harder for UK police to demonstrate their responsibility to protect all communities equally. Language barriers also complicate interactions, with official translation services tending not to have Romani speaking professionals.

**This is Roma: Cultural awareness training:** Specific cultural awareness training is not offered to police officers, so they must learn through experience. This lack of training impacts engagement with the Roma community, especially in identifying individuals as Roma and knowing how to adapt interactions. To improve this, training should be developed in partnership with Roma people and delivered in person.

**This is me: What it means to be Roma:** Roma individuals are proud of their identity, with family, music and dance key parts of their culture. Families move to the UK seeking a better life, with experiences of marginalisation being worse in mainland Europe. However, in non-Roma spaces, individuals hide their identity as means of trying to fit in and not draw unwanted attention to themselves. Communities distinguish themselves from GRT labels, wanting society to recognise them as a distinct ethnicity and culture who want fair access to educational and work opportunities.

**Do they see us? Roma perceptions of professionals:**
Lived experiences have made Roma mistrustful of professionals, with communities fearing that engagement with statutory agencies will result in children being taken away. Policing in European countries influences expectations of British police, with individuals not fully aware of the principles that underpin UK policing and criminal justice processes. Adults are aware that language is a barrier but believe professionals could do more to facilitate translation, rather than rely upon young Roma as a means of communication. Roma want professionals to treat them fairly and to be educated around Roma culture by Roma people.

# Next steps

The marginalised positioning of Roma communities within Bradford and a lack of cultural awareness amongst police officers reinforces 'them and us' attitudes. Alongside the development of a Roma cultural awareness toolkit, the research highlighted numerous recommendations, with next steps focused on embedding these into everyday safeguarding practices.

## 1. Embed Roma cultural training into safeguarding practice

For trusting relationships to develop with Roma communities, professionals need to be educated around what being Roma means and how practices and policies can become more inclusive of Roma communities.

## 2. 'Roma' identified as a distinct ethnicity

Roma individuals are proud of their identity but need the opportunity to identify as such. By moving away from 'Gypsy, Roma or Traveller' or 'Other' categories, organisations can demonstrate their awareness of Roma being a distinct ethnicity, as well as improve their recording practices to better inform service provision.

## 3. Employ Roma specific translators

English is not a first language for many Roma adults, with variations of Romani being used. Due to dialectical variations, relying upon professional translators to communicate in a national language can contribute to misunderstandings. Using children or young people as translators is also problematic. Organisations need to have access to specific Roma translators who can navigate complex language barriers.

## 4. Utilise the expertise present in Roma communities

Cultural curiosity is welcomed by Roma, with communities wanting professionals to be educated by those with lived experience of being Roma. Roma-led organisations are being established in communities, with the aim of facilitating interactions between Roma, professionals and the public. To develop trusting relationships with Roma, links between Roma-led organisations and professionals need to strengthen.

## 5. Educate Roma around UK policing and safeguarding

Spaces for Roma communities to learn about the role and responsibility of statutory agencies in the UK need to be created. Roma need to be reassured that statutory services are not there to discriminate, but support them to remain safe and thrive as individuals.

# For further information

**Scan the QR code to read more about the project.**

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