**Navigating the Labyrinth: Exploring the Experiences of Roma Families with Child Protection Services**

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**Abstract**

This paper presents findings regarding the experiences of Roma families interacting with child protection services (CPS). Using a mixed-methods approach grounded in critical realism, the research team explored the complex dynamics that shape these interactions. The study adopts a critical stance on child welfare, moving beyond dominant individualistic and risk-averse narratives to emphasise the need for contextualizing child protection within a broader socio-economic and cultural landscape. Findings reveal that Roma families engaging with CPS must navigate a labyrinthine institutional environment rooted in Anglocentric values, often ill-equipped to support minoritised populations. These interactions, deeply entrenched in socio-economic disparities and cultural biases routinely place Roma families in adversarial positions with state agents. Rather than being isolated incidents, these systemic barriers exacerbate the already challenging circumstances faced by Roma families.

**Key Words:** Roma, child protection services (CPS), mixed-methods, critical realism, systemic barriers, minorities, Anglocentric values

**Introduction**

Within the United Kingdom's diverse and multicultural society, Roma families from Eastern Europe have been steadily increasing in presence since the 1990s. The 2021 UK Census recorded 103,020 self-identified Roma people in England and Wales (ONS, 2023), a figure that likely underrepresents the actual population due to widespread concerns about disclosing ethnicity amid fears of discrimination. Estimates based on data collected by local authorities (Brown et al., 2013) suggest that the Roma population may have been nearly 200,000 even a decade ago, before accounting for increased migration and natural population growth. This significant disparity between census data and local estimates raises concerns about the accuracy of official statistics.

This resilient but frequently marginalized migrant population (Lane et al., 2014; Allen et al., 2021; FRA, 2022) has been identified as likely to suffer financial exclusion, be employed in precarious roles (Nagy, 2018; Harrison et al., 2022), and live in poor-quality rented accommodation in England (Greenfields and Dagilyte, 2018; Parallel Lives Project, 2020). Recent research suggests that Roma families are over-represented in English child protection services (CPS), with Roma children at greater risk of becoming “looked after” (Allen and Hamnett, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2022). This over-representation may stem from a complex interplay of factors, including prejudice, systemic barriers, and a lack of cultural competence within the CPS (Laird and Tedam, 2019; Allen and Hamnett, 2022). The unique socio-economic challenges faced by Roma families, aggravated by inter-generational experiences of discrimination both in countries of origin and post-migration, further hinder their ability to engage effectively with CPS (FRA 2022; Allen and Riding, 2018). For families with irregular status, “statutory neglect” (Jolly, 2018), defined as the way in which restrictive state policies automatically deprive vulnerable families of essential support services, further exacerbates and increases their risk of social exclusion.

Despite the urgency of understanding the challenges faced by Roma families within CPS, empirical evidence remains limited and often inconclusive. This is largely due to inconsistent data collection across government departments and the use of the Gypsy Roma Travellers (GRT)[[1]](#footnote-1) category, which conflates distinct groups into broad classifications, thereby obscuring their unique needs and experiences (Greenfields, 2017). There is also a lack of comprehensive data on the Roma population residing in England. The diversity and constantly changing nature of Roma families’ experiences with child protection are typically obscured in the general discourse pertaining to minority communities’ encounters with public services. This absence of nuanced evidence in both academic and governmental sources poses a significant barrier to grasping the intricacies of Roma experiences within CPS, underscoring the critical need for more targeted research and improved data collection mechanisms. Addressing this knowledge gap is fundamental to crafting evidence-based policies and interventions that resonate with the realities of Roma families navigating the child protection landscape.

This paper presents findings on the experiences of Roma families interacting with CPS. Employing a co-produced mixed-methods approach grounded in critical realism (Houston and Swords, 2021), the research team examined the multifaceted dynamics shaping these interactions. The study moves beyond individualistic, risk-averse narratives, emphasizing the need to contextualize child protection within a broader socio-economic and cultural landscape (Parton, 2006; Featherstone et al., 2016). The findings indicate that Roma families in contact with CPS must navigate a labyrinthine institutional environment rooted in deeply ingrained Anglocentric values, which are often ill-equipped to support minoritized populations. These experiences, deeply entrenched in socio-economic disparities and cultural bias, render interactions with state agents adversarial. Rather than being isolated incidents, these experiences are systemic, disproportionately affecting the poorest Roma families and intensifying the challenges they face.

The paper first explores the historical and socio-economic context of Roma families in England, using a critical framework to examine their interactions with CPS. We then detail our mixed-methods approach, including community discussions and legal analysis, to uncover systemic barriers and cultural misunderstandings. The findings highlight these challenges, and the discussion offers recommendations for more inclusive and culturally sensitive practices within CPS.

**Roma community in England: diversity and resilience**

The term "Roma" encompasses a multitude of distinct communities, each with unique languages, cultures, and traditions shaped by geographic, historical, and cultural influences. Despite this diversity, Roma groups across Europe share a heritage marked by violent persecution and marginalization. Post-migration, Roma families must navigate cultural adaptation, socioeconomic challenges, and institutional barriers influenced by both their origins and current circumstances. Understanding this diversity and shared history is crucial for comprehending the challenges Roma families face within CPS.

Roma families' experiences in England are significantly shaped by their socio-economic circumstances and citizenship status (Nagy, 2018). The 2021 English and Welsh census reveals severe disparities for Roma communities compared to other Eastern European migrant groups, which we posit are exacerbated by austerity-driven policies. These policies, linked to fiscal drag and the stringent two-child benefit cap (Latimer and Waters, 2024), have drastically reduced social benefits, increased unemployment, and reduced wages, leading to heightened poverty, particularly among racialized minorities (Runnymede, 2022). While precise data on household income and poverty rates for Roma families is challenging to obtain, a survey by FRA (2022) identifies these populations as exceptionally vulnerable across Europe, with 90% of Roma children at risk of poverty.

The increasingly restrictive UK policy environment has exacerbated the challenges faced by Roma families, particularly in their access to welfare benefits. This combination of stringent immigration controls and welfare requirements has placed Roma migrants in a position of heightened disadvantage, subjecting them to greater scrutiny and creating barriers to accessing essential services (Greenfields and Dagilyte, 2018). This environment fosters a system where frontline workers, often operating under confusing and shifting guidelines, may inadvertently enforce these exclusions, thereby using welfare access as a tool for migration control (Humphris, 2019). The compounded effect of these policies not only deepens the socio-economic hardship for Roma families but also leads to increased state surveillance and the systematic deprivation of support—what Jolly (2018) identifies as a form of 'statutory neglect.'

Despite these compounded challenges, Roma communities have demonstrated remarkable resilience through grassroots initiatives and mutual support networks (Roma Support Group, 2021). Yet, concerns persist regarding the disproportionate removal of Roma children from their families across Europe (Rorke, 2021; Allen, 2018). In England, this concern is evident in widespread perceptions at the grassroots level that Roma families frequently encounter negative interactions with CPS, often characterized by excessive intervention and reporting (Allen, 2015). Although data to fully substantiate these claims have been inconclusive, an analysis by Allen and Hamnett (2022) at least partially revealed that GRT groups are overrepresented in contacts with child welfare services in England.

**Normative foundations of English CPS**

Our study examines the experiences of Roma families engaged with child protection services from a critical realist perspective (Houston and Swords, 2021). We argue that cultural norms and socioeconomic factors significantly shape access to public services and opportunities available to minority families (Featherstone et al., 2016; Laird and Tedam, 2019; Singh, 2022). Understanding these factors is essential, particularly in the context of broader societal shifts that have influenced the very foundations of social work practice.

The evolution of neoliberal ideologies in the UK, particularly from the late 1970s onward, has profoundly reshaped the welfare state and, by extension, social work practice. Neoliberal thought, emphasising market-driven principles, personal responsibility, and minimal state intervention, has shifted the welfare state away from collective support systems toward policies that prioritise individual accountability (Jessop, 2016). This ideological shift transformed social work from a profession focused on community-based support and social justice to one increasingly centred on risk management and the regulation of individual behaviour (Featherstone et al., 2016).

Within CPS, this shift towards neoliberal principles has intensified the focus on parental responsibility, often at the expense of considering broader structural factors such as classism and racism. Social workers, operating within a framework that emphasises efficiency and risk aversion, are compelled to adopt a “deficit model” of parenting, particularly impacting collectivist communities such as the Roma. This model pathologises families by framing social problems as individual failings, while reinforcing discriminatory Romaphobic stereotypes that are deeply intertwined with structural discrimination (Breazu and McGarry, 2023). Consequently, interventions target parental behaviour, challenging not only individual practices but also cultural norms, through measures such as mandatory parenting programmes, supervision orders, or the removal of children when parents are seen as unable to mitigate perceived risks. Despite DHSC practice guidance advocating for strength-based approaches, this narrow focus on individual responsibility exacerbates disparities and ultimately erodes Roma families' engagement with public services.

Historical values underpinning the British welfare state continue to significantly shape children services. British society has long prioritised a hierarchical, Protestant, libertarian approach to social organisation, emphasising self-sufficiency as a moral virtue (Laird, 2008). Poverty and the resultant inability to support oneself and one’s family have commonly been viewed as personal failings, leading to the stigmatisation of those unable to fulfil such “citizenship” responsibilities. This perspective, with deep historical roots, posits that aiding the "undeserving poor" is not only wasteful but also harmful, as it undermines their independence and self-sufficiency (Why Philanthropy Matters, 2002). Such a philosophy has historically justified coercive practices, including the forcible removal of children from marginalised communities—such as Roma, Gypsy, Traveller, and Aboriginal populations—in misguided and violent attempts to assimilate them into “superior” Western norms (Firpo and Jacobs, 2018; Tammi, 2023).

This emphasis on fiscal and social stability, aligned with the norms of a particular classed and racialised strata of British society, overwhelmingly denies the existence of systemic barriers and inequalities that limit opportunities for racialised families facing multiple domains of social exclusion (Edney et al., 2023). The impacts of racism, exclusion from high-quality employment, and unequal educational opportunities further exacerbate the risk of deep and persistent poverty for Roma families, increasing their likelihood of contact with CPS. Poverty, often misconstrued as evidence of neglect, thus becomes a critical factor in these encounters.

Statistical evidence supports this theory, showing that children living in deprived areas are significantly more likely to be placed on a child protection plan or taken into state care (Hood et al., 2021). Featherstone et al. (2014) emphasize that, at the moment of contact with CPS, the experiences of vulnerable families attempting to parent in an unequal and racist society are not rigorously interrogated in social work responses. The relational context in which these families live is often dismissed in favour of prioritizing a child's autonomous needs over the broader circumstances of the struggling household. Indeed, Romani feminist scholars argue that unequal hierarchical encounters with state agents, actively generate epistemic violence, inflicting harm on racialised communities through the denial, distortion, or marginalisation of their knowledge (Kocze and Trehan 2021). The reduction in early intervention and support services resulting from the neoliberal drivers of austerity further escalates the likelihood of child removal (Webb, 2020).

Despite the progress in developing anti-oppressive and anti-racist practices within social work, critics argue that the field’s core values still align with white middle-class norms, perpetuating systemic inequalities that negatively impact minoritised women (Cornish, 2024). These adversarial power imbalances thus hinder equality of opportunity for Roma people in contact with CPS. Allen et al. (2021) describe this dynamic as “aversive racism”, where social workers who outwardly endorse egalitarian values may unconsciously harbour negative biases against Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities. This results in a paradox where state institutions, under the guise of a civilizing mission, enforce conformity to existing norms while denying the systemic racism and histories of oppression faced by Roma people (Fejzula and Fernandez, 2022). Consequently, the relationship between state institutions and Roma people remains one of control and deep mistrust.

Differing cultural family norms and practices are typically at the centre of misunderstandings between CPS and Roma families. Automatic prejudice and unconscious bias against Roma cultures are central to discriminatory attitudes within professional practice (Allen, 2016; Allen et al., 2021). Social work expectations of parenting, based on Western norms, often clash with Roma practices, where children may be cared for by community members or distant relatives, and expectations of parental supervision may differ due to work demands or cultural customs (Powell, 2016). There is variance between English state agents and many Roma parents in cultural expectations or understanding over when and how in-person parental monitoring and care is required. These practices, together with default presumptions of medical neglect arising from poverty are frequently perceived as non-compliance with ‘good enough’ parenting norms, leading to interventions by CPS (Greenfields et al., 2015). Children, therefore, become the conduit for state surveillance, with social workers and frontline professionals categorising Roma mothers as ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’ based on pervasive stereotypes about poor mothering practices (Humphris, 2019).

In the following section, we now present our empirical findings to illuminate the specific barriers faced by Roma families who encounter English CPS.

**Methodology**

To capture the multifaceted dynamics at play in the complex interaction between Roma communities and CPS, a mixed-methods approach to data collection was applied. In addition to a literature review that considered both British and European publications about Roma communities, likelihood of contact with CPS and existing UK-focused materials, the following activities were undertaken:

1. An online survey of social care and legal professionals to explore their experiences working with Roma families and the challenges they face with CPS.
2. Semi-structured interviews with social workers, legal professionals, and community experts to deepen insights from the survey on Roma families' experiences.
3. Discussion groups with Roma families who have interacted with CPS to explore their perspectives on the system.
4. A deep-dive analysis of reported care and criminal justice proceedings involving Roma families, accessed via the Lexis+ legal database.

**Collaborating *with* communities**

Our study adopted a collaborative approach, focusing on working with the Roma community rather than conducting research on them, as has often been the traditional practice (Miranda et al., 2019). Co-production principles guided every aspect of the project's design, implementation, and dissemination. Central to our research was the recognition of participants' agency and the inclusion of groups often overlooked in research. Roma community members were actively involved in all stages, from design to data analysis and dissemination. While there is a growing focus on involving communities in research, this study represents the first significant attempt to do so within the context of the child protection system. This approach is our main contribution to the field, aiming to produce findings that are both relevant and actionable (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).

The collaborative approach was achieved through the facilitation of three discussion groups held in Rotherham, Sheffield, and Liverpool. These locations were selected based on established connections with a local organisation in Rotherham and Roma activists in Sheffield and Liverpool, all of whom have been involved in supporting Roma families facing child protection interventions. Roma community members served as co-facilitators for the discussion groups, which were conducted in both English and Romanes. A total of 26 Roma parents participated in these discussions, including 11 from Slovakia, 4 from the Czech Republic, 10 from Romania, and 1 from Portugal. All participants had previous interactions with children's services, with some involved in child protection proceedings, including cases where children were removed from their care.

The primary goal of the discussion groups was to explore the challenges Roma families face when engaging with children's services and to identify positive experiences and best practices. Discussion questions were shared in advance with Roma co-facilitators for review and refinement. Aware of the stigma surrounding this topic in the Roma community, facilitators anticipated participants' hesitancy and therefore invited only parents with direct experience of children's services in England. Significant effort was made to create a trusting and respectful environment. The groups were co-facilitated by Roma advocates fluent in Romanes, who had strong ties to local communities, and were held in familiar settings. Participants were compensated for their time, with clear communication provided that payment was not contingent on answering specific questions. The research focused on interviewing adults rather than children, to gain in-depth insights into the systemic challenges and socio-economic conditions affecting Roma families, while also addressing ethical concerns related to involving children in sensitive research.

The discussion groups took place in person between June and July 2023, with sessions lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The discussions were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. The transcripts were then collaboratively analysed with five Roma champions—four of whom were Roma individuals with experience of supporting Roma families facing child protection issues, and one non-Roma specialist with over twenty years of experience in this context. This collaborative process was crucial in ensuring that the data was interpreted accurately and without bias. It also provided space for Roma champions to contribute to shaping the report and policy recommendations.

Social care professionals and lawyers were recruited for an online survey through network outreach and snowball sampling, with initial participants selected based on their experience working with Roma families in child protection. Survey responses were anonymous unless participants chose to self-identify. For semi-structured interviews with social workers, lawyers, and Roma community experts, we invited survey respondents who indicated their willingness for follow-up, as well as individuals recommended to the team or known for relevant expertise. Participants were provided with study details, ethical approval information, and consent forms. Interviews, conducted online via Teams, lasted 50 to 80 minutes, were recorded, and fully transcribed.

**Data analysis**

The Lexis+ UK legal database was searched for child protection proceedings involving Roma, using the terms "Roma" and the geographical jurisdiction of "England and Wales," focusing on "Family" and "Public Law/Children" from 2013 to 2023. This search found 16 cases, which were then thematically analysed using NVivo software to identify trends, themes, and patterns for further exploration in the discussion groups and interviews. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the cases identified through Lexis+ may not fully represent the range of Roma child protection cases, as the database tends to prioritise cases based on legal significance or specific characteristics. This selection bias may influence the results, particularly with cross-jurisdictional cases in which the parent(s) requested transfer being more prominently featured.

The survey data were analysed descriptively and thematically, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework. Similarly, a thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative, semi-structured interviews with social workers and legal professionals. In the subsequent research phase, the separate datasets were integrated to identify shared and distinct themes, as well as comparisons and trends across reported legal cases and our findings. To enhance the depth and rigour of our analysis, we conducted a series of reflective workshops that brought together the research team and a broader expert group. Leveraging our established networks, we included legal experts, Romani scholars, and social workers to critically examine the study's findings and collaboratively develop evidence-based recommendations.

The findings presented below are the outcome of these reflective and collaborative processes.

**Key findings**

**Impact of historical oppression and trauma**

The Roma people’s history in Europe is marked by enduring hostility and systematic attempts at cultural erasure, including forced sterilization, removal of children, police violence, and school segregation (Taylor, 2014). These historical injustices have fostered a profound fear of authority, influencing Roma communities' interactions with social services both in England and across Europe. As emphasised by participants, many Roma families deeply mistrust encounters with social care professionals, a sentiment rooted in personal and collective experiences.

Understanding collective histories and pre-migration biographies can help professionals overcome the fear that often characterises Roma parents' engagement with child protection services (CPS). However, research indicates that social workers rarely consider collective trauma or adopt a life course approach when undertaking assessments (Featherstone et al., 2014; Webb, 2022). Organisational policies tend to focus on individual-level assessments, leaving little room to consider the historical traumas shaping Roma families' current circumstances. Limited training on cultural specificities further hinders social workers' ability to grasp the complexities of Roma experiences (Brown & Bazemore, 2017), leading to biased judgments, miscommunication, and a lack of empathy that can exacerbate existing issues and result in child removals. The pressure on social workers to expedite cases due to overwhelming caseloads and inadequate support systems only worsens professional neglect of such critical narratives.

In our discussion groups, Roma families expressed these fears and a pervasive sense of powerlessness, even among those with no prior contact with social services. Roma mothers shared:

*“I feel unprotected, afraid. When somebody comes to us and tries to intervene in our family, we feel first that we are unprotected, we feel that they insist to try to do something bad in our family, even when we have good conditions, we feel that they don’t respect our rights, we feel that they don’t have empathy and they don’t want to help, they just want to take something from you as a parent, they don’t have a heart; they don’t have feelings.”*

*“If you do something - they say you need to do it differently. I feel “not free”. They never ask Mum and Dad - how do you feel? I feel scared, anxious because I don’t know how the social worker thinks. If something happens to children (for instance if they fall), the social workers always say - it's the parents’ fault.”*

*“We know that social services are not coming for something good and we know they come for a problem and as a mum, and knowing that other mums had their children removed from their care, of course I feel scared, of course it's something that you don’t know how to react to and what would be the best thing to do and how to respond best but it’s a big fear based on what we know other families have experienced.”*

**Socioeconomic realities**

The commonly held fear of social workers is intensified by the harsh socioeconomic realities many Roma migrants face, often originating in extreme poverty in their home countries - conditions typically beyond the experience of English social workers. Upon arriving in England, many Roma families are further disenfranchised by immigration policies, including "no recourse to public funds" (NRPF), which blocks access to vital welfare support. Trapped in poverty and without the safety net that others in society might rely on, Roma migrants are frequently left unable to meet the socio-economic standards expected in English society.

Social workers often overlook the severity of the economic conditions Roma families endure, largely resulting from time constraints, overwhelming caseloads, and the impact of neoliberal ideologies that place responsibility on individuals to improve their circumstances. This perspective leads to an unspoken but prevailing belief among many social workers that Roma parents should be able to improve their economic standing through effort alone. An approach that fails to critically examine broader policies and systemic barriers that hinder opportunities for adaptation or scope to enhance socio-economic status.

Understanding the impact of economic stress on Roma families is crucial for developing effective interventions, as such pressure directly contributes to heightened family tensions and increased risks of child neglect or maltreatment. Research has shown that financial difficulties are associated with challenges such as parental stress, substance abuse, and housing instability, all of which elevate the risk of child abuse and neglect (Sidebotham et al., 2016). Low-income families may struggle to afford childcare, access mental health services, or secure adequate housing, leaving them without the necessary support systems to maintain positive parenting practices (Shaw et al., 2020). Yet participants emphasised that the poverty experienced by Roma families is often inadequately assessed within child protection plans. This systemic blind spot risks conflating poverty with neglect, leading to poor decision-making in childcare proceedings.

We found that children being left unsupervised at home, missing medical or dental appointments, irregular school attendance, appearing unkempt, and living in unclean households are typically flagged as signs of neglect. However, it is essential to recognize that these indicators may also stem from poverty rather than deliberate neglect, as Roma families have clarified:

*“Romanian Roma are very simple - they like to cook, to look after children, sometimes when you have a lot of children, you don’t have the best conditions. It’s impossible to have the best conditions, but we do our best (…) If they are asking us to provide the very best conditions, this is very bad for us because if we have 5-6 children, it is impossible (...) Social workers should have more empathy and understand each family’s circumstances."*

Social workers were sometimes reported to be reluctant to engage with welfare benefit support or help families navigate the complexities of the ever-changing immigration system. For families caught in the post-Brexit “hostile environment”, this reluctance can cause additional hardship. Among the 16 legal cases analysed, several parents explicitly identified difficulties in accessing welfare benefits and securing suitable accommodation. Additionally, many faced immigration-related obstacles, including imminent deportation, administrative removal, or failure to exercise treaty rights. These challenges, while not always reflected in judgments, significantly hindered families' access to crucial welfare benefits and support services, exacerbating their already precarious economic circumstances.

**Institutional biases and discrimination**

Our research confirmed that system-based complexities and cultural incongruities are compounded by deeply ingrained discriminatory attitudes within mainstream society (Greenfields and Dagilyte, 2018). These attitudes often manifest as negative stereotypes of Roma communities, including the perception that Roma are irresponsible parents. Such stereotypes can influence practitioners' expectations of families they work with (Allen and Hamnett, 2022). While not all social workers are biased, the pervasive nature of these societal stereotypes, coupled with insufficient attention to the broader systemic factors that generate poverty and exclusion, can normalise discriminatory treatment. These stereotypes have become so ingrained in societal discourse that they often go unnoticed, becoming accepted as common-sense treatment. As expressed by a social worker:

*“There's a whole ideology, government political agendas, that they are all thieves, and beggars, and no good (...) there's a lot of stuff in the media, I think it's an institutional thing. And I think some colleagues in the office would label “Roma”, and not want to work with them”.*

Roma parents confirm that discrimination negatively affected their interactions with social workers, insisting that they do not have the same rights as English families. On Roma grandmother shared a particularly troubling experience:

*“My granddaughter is 4 years old. She was eating, and she bit her finger. We tried to clean her wound, but the school looked at the injury and called the family. By the time we arrived, the school had already taken her to the hospital to examine her. The hospital examined her whole body, and the social worker came to my house, checking all the children, checking everything in the house—if the children were eating, if they had clothes, how we live. When the social worker saw that everything was OK, she closed the case. But the way this happened was traumatic and left a huge mark on us. The social worker said, 'You are a good family'—like we are some exception.”*

Cultural misunderstandings and economic disparities further complicate the potential for fostering and kinship care among Roma families when children cannot live at home. Roma families may hesitate to come forward as kinship carers due to concerns about meeting agency standards and potential investigations within their own families. As explained by one mother:

*“I was looking after my sister’s son, and later on, I had problems with social workers regarding my own children. Looking after my sister’s son triggered an investigation regarding my own children. Social workers started examining my house, pointing out what wasn't right. The social worker was even visiting the school, examining my child’s body, alleging that his eczema were bruises and asking to examine him in the hospital. I remember a lot of criticism by the social worker—to cut his hair, to feed him differently. I sometimes didn’t have time for my own children because the social worker was demanding so many things from me.”*

Additionally, most Roma children who were either temporarily or permanently removed from their birth families lost contact with the Roma language, customs, and traditions during their time in care. In one of the legal cases analysed, young children who were placed in foster care spent considerable time away from their parents due to court delays and consequently had to communicate with their birth mother through an interpreter. The judge reflected:

“*The placement is not a cultural match, and the children are therefore learning and understanding only English with their current carers. One of the most concerning consequences of this is that mother and daughters are unable to converse with each other during contact save through an interpreter. Whatever the circumstances which brought about the need for state intervention in the life of this family, and whatever the level of her engagement with the process since, it is almost unbearable trying to imagine the feelings of a mother unable to speak to her own small children in her own tongue*.”

Similarly, most social workers who participated in our survey felt that Roma children in care were not supported to retain their cultural identity, with one respondent emphasising the urgent need for more Roma foster families to improve the experiences of looked-after children from the communities.

**Navigating complex legal bureaucracies**

Critical scholars have long argued that the very design of the English CPS can be intimidating for vulnerable and racialized families (Laird and Tedam, 2019; Webb, 2022). The moral imperatives to be a “good” parent, coupled with byzantine bureaucratic procedures and jargon-driven legal requirements, can be daunting for any parent. However, the system is even more impenetrable for non-British families who might not have the necessary understanding of the prevailing norms and procedures or lack access to financial support (Jolly and Gupta, 2022). Discussions with Roma families confirm that this is indeed the case. As one Roma mother stated:

*“Being part of meetings when I didn't understand anything, multi-agency meetings were difficult. I was there, and everyone was talking about me, and I didn’t understand anything, and I felt invisible.”*

Within the web of obstacles uncovered by our research, low literacy and limited legal understanding, language barriers, and digital exclusion emerged as the main challenges confronting Roma families.

***Low Literacy***

Low literacy levels among many Roma parents are often overlooked by social workers and legal experts, yet these critically impede meaningful interaction with bureaucratic systems based on formal communications. Access to crucial information, including legal rights and support services, is restricted, leaving parents feeling uninformed and powerless. Any form of participation in decision-making processes is compromised, further eroding parental confidence. Social workers and legal professionals reported that their colleagues rarely provide comprehensive explanations of the procedures or jargon inherent in child protection processes, leaving Roma parents grappling with a system they often find bewildering. As explained by Roma community expert,

*“I often see cases where the problem is that services feel they provide information, but the communication is such a big problem that even if they provide information, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the families will understand that information. You can’t deliver one session on something to people who are illiterate. You need to deliver several sessions, so people can memorise, can ask questions, and that sort of thing. You really need to adapt how you work with Roma families, and you can’t deliver standard type[s] of support.”*

***Language barriers and interpreting***

Language barriers emerged as a pervasive issue throughout this study. Roma parents confirmed that they struggled to understand social workers and legal professionals and could not follow processes or assess probable risks. Many parents involved in childcare proceedings were unable to express concerns, ask questions, or defend themselves in English. In turn, social workers sometimes misinterpreted interactions that deviated from expected Anglocentric and classed norms, mistakenly perceiving families as non-compliant or disengaged, leading to misjudgements of family motivations.

Inadequate interpreting services further hindered families from meaningful interaction with the authorities. While the primary language of most Roma families is Romanes, interpreters used in proceedings typically speak the second or third language of the families, e.g., Slovakian, Romanian, or Czech. Many interpreters were not from the Roma community, leading to frequent misunderstandings and assumptions, often at the expense of Roma families. As highlighted by a Roma community expert:

*“There could be an interpreter who has no prejudices, is trying to do a good job, but they may not understand that they are translating for somebody who is using this language as a second language, so they don’t understand the limitations. Obviously, that will create some miscommunication, but if people are kind of giving strange answers, it will be attributed to something else rather than to the fact that these people don’t understand. There will also be those who have prejudices, who won’t do anything to help the professionals, and they sometimes knowingly try to influence what’s happening by providing their own perspective on Roma, or their own interpretation of what they are hearing.”*

This failure to prioritise linguistic diversity and provide adequate support for non-English speaking families reflects systemic shortcomings within the CPS, as lack of adequate interpreters perpetuates disparities in access to justice, further marginalising Roma families and compromising the integrity of child welfare proceedings.

***Low legal capability and digital exclusion***

Low legal literacy (knowledge, confidence, skills) and digital exclusion were intertwined and particularly evident in reviewing online court proceedings. Legal professionals and social workers who participated in our survey identified lack of awareness and understanding of child protection processes as a significant challenge for Roma parents interacting with child protection services and courts. Similarly, discussion groups with Roma families revealed that most parents don’t understand the child protection process and were aware that this created a power imbalance between them and CPSs. Roma families frequently did not have the level of legal literacy to understand when they are subject to poor practice, or how to challenge it. One lawyer noted:

*“Child protection processes often appear to be an alien concept. Clients can also present as being confused by an incompatibility with experiences and standards in their country of origin. It can be difficult to put this in context, given my own lack of awareness of child protection procedures in Eastern Europe.”*

Most lawyers we consulted believed that the shift to online courts had negatively impacted their Roma clients’ ability to fully engage in court proceedings. This mainly pertained to digital exclusion, lack of IT skills, and the barriers raised by online communication. There is, accordingly, a real danger that Roma parents (and other groups that experience digital exclusion), face significant barriers to accessing justice as court systems continue to digitalise. Post-pandemic, increased levels of routine online communication have therefore raised barriers to good practice in social work and legal proceedings and exacerbated fear and disengagement among Roma parents.

Faced with these insurmountable barriers, many Roma families decided to transfer child protection cases to their country of origin. In 12 out of 16 reported cases reviewed, transfer requests were initiated either by the parents themselves or via legal representations from their embassies. Reasons cited for such requests included the prospect of more favourable outcomes abroad, access to family support networks in their home country, avoidance of non-consensual adoptions, a deeper understanding of Roma cultural norms, removal of language barriers, and concerns over the loss of Roma language and identity if a child was adopted or fostered in the UK.

Despite these concerning findings regarding the shortcomings of English child protection infrastructure, this element of our research did uncover some exemplary practices by family court judges as well as remarkable levels of resilience and agency within Roma communities.

**Empowering through community**

Critical Roma scholars and activists are adamant that State interventions directed at Roma people must prioritise community input, recognise Roma expertise, and support agency in decision-making processes (Fejzula & Fernandez, 2022). Despite top-down approaches dominating CPS there is a growing push for stronger community involvement, with a focus on amplifying the voices of individuals with lived experience. Such advocates are calling for reforms that prioritise preventive approaches, community-based social work, and genuine anti-oppressive practices (Jones et al., 2020).

Our research evidenced that community support is vital to improving Roma families’ interaction with child protection services. Social care practitioners emphasised that establishing trust on both an individual and community-wide level, either directly or through intermediaries, is crucial for fostering positive engagement with Roma families. As a Roma advocate pointed out:

*“The key factor is building up trust and relationships. One local authority identified an issue of sexual exploitation in an area of town, so they ran youth groups in the evening at the community centre. Youth workers, police, charities, and schools worked together and engaged with Roma to promote the group, and social workers visited in turns. The multi-agency work helped educate children, explain the risks of adults they met on the street, prevent exploitation, and safeguard the children.”*

Community support plays a crucial role in legal empowerment too, whereby Roma families not only learn how to navigate legal procedures but also how to defend their rights and safeguard their children. Bringing families and social care practitioners together has proved invaluable in enabling the exchange of insights about expectations, prevailing norms, and ways to resist inequitable treatment. Such models leverage the strengths and practices inherent in Roma culture, including oral narrative sharing and reliance on family support networks. We found that families who had access to community support felt more empowered and demonstrated a greater awareness of their rights, including the right to challenge or request a change of an interpreter or social worker. As one parent explained:

*“I didn’t have any issues with social workers because I learned from others [who were involved with social services]. For example, for children to go to school, have good attendance, for children not to make problems in the public, not stay outside too late, etc. In this country you must be more careful, stricter. In our country, you can do certain things; in this country, you can’t because it's against the law.”*

Many Roma parents confirmed that working with culturally competent and supportive social workers proved extremely helpful, such as learning from them about healthy diets, parenting skills, and the availability of support for children with disabilities. Numerous examples provided within discussion group sessions with Roma parents challenged the notion that Roma are a “hard to reach” group, although concern remains that such examples are seen as exceptions, suggesting that good practice is not institutionalised.

**Conclusions**

Our research confirms that English CPS are based on individualistic approaches that typically fail to support minoritized populations, perpetuating mistrust, fear, and disempowerment. Socio-economic disparities, institutional bias, and discrimination create barriers for Roma parents engaging with CPS. Addressing these issues requires a shift towards anti-oppressive, community-based approaches that empower Roma communities and prioritize preventive measures.

This work significantly contributes to the literature on child protection by offering rich empirical evidence. The mixed-methods approach, combining legal analysis with qualitative insights, triangulates and nuances issues. This methodology bridges the gap between policy considerations and everyday experiences, ensuring practice-grounded recommendations. By highlighting the complexities and systemic barriers, our research advocates for child protection policies that consider the socio-economic and cultural realities of marginalized communities. Despite the robust mixed-methods approach, this study's findings are constrained by the limited availability of comprehensive data on Roma child protection cases and the relatively small sample size, which may impact the generalizability of the results.

Nevertheless, our research revealed promising practices and profound resilience within Roma communities, with support initiatives empowering families, building trust, and facilitating meaningful engagement with CPS. These findings contribute to the broader understanding about how marginalized communities negotiate their rights and seek to overcome systemic challenges. Recognizing and utilizing Roma knowledge, expertise, and agency are crucial for implementing effective, sector-wide reforms. Ultimately, embracing these insights can lead to transformative and equitable child protection practices.

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1. While GRT categorisation proves valuable in recognising commonalities among these groups, such as historical marginalisation and socio-economic challenges, it also obscures the differences within communities. The term encompasses diverse ethnicities, cultural practices, and historical backgrounds, leading to potential oversights in policy formulation and service provision (Allen and Hamnett, 2022). The Department for Education’s administrative statistics capture data on these populations using a combined “Gypsy/Roma” category and a separate option for “Travellers of Irish Heritage. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)