

# Addressing Racial Family Injustice Through Improved Data Practices: The Urgent Need to Improve the Visibility of Romani Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller Children in England's Child Welfare System

## Abstract

Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller children remain significantly overrepresented in England's child welfare system. This perspective paper extends the work of Allen and Hamnett (2022) by analysing publicly available data from the Department for Education (DfE) between 2010 and 2024 to assess disproportionality in the number of children looked after by the state. Using disparity ratios, our analysis reveals that both 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' children continue to enter care at more than twice the rate of children from all other ethnic groups. We argue that this overrepresentation reflects not only differential patterns of need but also deeper systemic racism, cultural misunderstanding, and the conflation of distinct ethnic categories in data reporting. The inconsistent classification of ethnicity by the DfE and other government departments obscures the lived experiences of these communities and undermines efforts to develop proportionate and equitable child welfare responses. Our findings point to an urgent need for reform in how ethnicity data is collected and used in child welfare.

**Keywords:** Child welfare services, child looked after, Gypsy, Roma, Traveller

## Introduction

Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller children continue to be markedly overrepresented in England's children's social care system. According to Allen and Hamnett (2022) and Ahmed et al. (2022), these children are approximately four times more likely to come into contact with child welfare services than children from all other ethnic groups. This stark disparity reflects not only individual or familial need but also entrenched structural inequalities and longstanding patterns of racial and cultural marginalisation (Allen et al., 2024).

Crucially, current scholarship shows that this overrepresentation cannot be fully understood through conventional assessments of need or risk alone (see Kostka et al., 2024). It must be examined within a broader context, one that considers how ethnicity, identity, and cultural belonging are constructed, interpreted, and operationalised in child welfare policy and practice. Despite a recent scoping review highlighting systemic racial inequalities in child welfare (Allen et al., 2024), the specific experiences of Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller children remain difficult to trace. This is largely due to the inconsistent and inadequate way in which these communities are represented in official datasets (Allen and Hamnett, 2022 and Ahmed, 2024).

While frequently grouped in policy discourse and administrative records, these communities are not homogeneous. Romani (British) Gypsies and Irish Travellers have longstanding historical roots in Britain, whereas many Roma families are more recent migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (Allen and Riding, 2018). **Romani (British) Gypsies, Roma and Irish Traveller people differ significantly in migration histories, legal status, socioeconomic conditions, and interactions with state institutions, yet these distinctions are often conflated or overlooked in official classifications (Kostka et al., 2024). Although Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller children are significantly overrepresented in England's children's social care system, efforts to understand and address this disproportionality have also been consistently undermined by systemic flaws in how ethnicity is recorded, reported, and analysed (Allen and Hamnett, 2022).**

To explore whether this situation has changed in recent years, this perspective paper builds on the current research to assess disproportionality in the number of children looked after by the state. Our analysis is grounded in the conviction that any meaningful effort to understand and address disproportionality in child welfare must begin with the consistent, transparent, and disaggregated collection of ethnicity data.

## Methodology

This project was initially undertaken to replicate and extend the methodology developed by Allen and Hamnett (2022). Their original research analysed four datasets from the Department for Education (DfE), covering the years 2011/12 to 2017/18, which were obtained through a Freedom of Information request. For this paper, a similar request for the same data series extending to 2024/25 was refused by the DfE on the grounds of confidentiality.

As a result, this paper draws on a publicly available dataset from the DfE's official statistics publication, Children looked after in England including adoptions (DfE, 2024). This dataset reports the number of children looked after (CLA, those living in state care) on 31 March each year from 2010/11 to 2024/25, making it suitable for further analysis. **Whereas the datasets used by Allen and Hamnett (2022) distinguished between referrals to child welfare agencies, initial child protection conferences, child protection plans, and number of children living in state care, however, the dataset used here only covers children looked after.**

To assess the per capita representation of Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller children in the CLA dataset, we followed the approach set out by Allen and Hamnett (2022). **We used pupil headcounts from the Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics dataset (DfE, 2025) as a proxy for population. To calculate per capita representation, we divided the number of CLA in each ethnic group by the corresponding pupil headcount.** We used the DfE's ethnic categories of 'Gypsy/Roma', 'Traveller of Irish Heritage', and 'All other'.

**We then compared these groups using disparity ratios (DR), which are calculated by dividing each group's per capita figure by that of the lowest group.**

## Findings

Allen and Hamnett (2022: 3904) found that, using data up to 2017/18, 'the recorded number of 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' in CWS in England has been growing at a disproportionate rate since 2011/12 to now demonstrate overrepresentation'. By extending this analysis with data up to 2023/24, we confirm their conclusion. Between 2010/11 and 2012/13, the rate of 'Gypsy/Roma' CLA per pupil was lower than the corresponding rate for all other ethnic groups. However, beginning in 2013/14, the rate for 'Gypsy/Roma' CLA per pupil begins to increase steadily, while the rate for all other ethnic groups remains relatively stable (see Table 1).

### INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

As shown, the rate of growth in 'Gypsy/Roma' CLA per pupil has risen steadily since 2013/14. By 2023/24, children identified as 'Gypsy/Roma' were more than twice (DR = 2.09) as likely to be in state care compared to children from all other ethnic groups. A similar pattern is observed for children identified as 'Traveller of Irish Heritage'. In 2010, their rate of CLA per pupil was comparable to the rate for all other groups. Over time, this rate also increases at a disproportionate pace. By 2023/24, 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' children were almost three times (DR = 2.73) as likely to enter state care as children from all other ethnic backgrounds. The persistence of these disparities raises serious questions. Understanding

what drives these trends, and why Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller children continue to be so disproportionately represented in the care system, remains an urgent priority for future research.

## Discussion

The findings presented here confirm a sustained pattern of racial family injustice affecting Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller children in England's child welfare system. As our data confirms a sustained and disproportionate rise in the number of children from these communities entering state care, it becomes increasingly important to understand the drivers behind this trend and the broader implications for policy and practice. Explaining overrepresentation is a complex task.

On one hand, Allen et al. (2024) argue that the increasing presence of Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller children in CLA statistics reflects the impact of aversive racism and antigypsyism embedded in child welfare policy, practice, and systems of governance. The authors use these concepts to theorise the structural and cultural hostility faced by these communities, suggesting that overrepresentation is not simply a response to need, but a reflection of discrimination in policy and practice. On the other hand, Ahmed et al. (2022) propose that this disproportionality stems from differentiated profiles of assessed need and risk. Their findings indicate that 'Gypsy/Roma' children are more likely to be affected by neglect and extra-familial threats such as sexual exploitation, trafficking, and gang involvement, while 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' children are disproportionately exposed to domestic violence and abuse.

Taken together, these perspectives raise urgent questions about the child welfare system. Whilst the findings of Allen et al. (2024) and Ahmed et al. (2022) could be used to inform the development of anti-racist approaches to professional practice and the funding of preventative services for Irish Traveller children, families and communities, they do not advance an equal understanding of what support is needed for Romani (British) Gypsy or Roma children, families and communities. As Allen and Hamnett (2022) highlight, combining Romani (British) Gypsy and Roma children under a single 'Gypsy/Roma' category contributes to analytical confusion, limiting the ability to distinguish between their respective rates of referral, need, and outcomes. According to Allen and Riding (2018), conflating ethnicity in this way inhibits efforts to design appropriate and proportionate responses tailored to the distinct needs of each group. Using ethnicity as a crude proxy for risk not only distorts the evidence base but also entrenches what Allen and Hamnett (2022) describe as racial family (in) justice, a system in which communities are judged according to stereotypical assumptions rather than clear evidence of harm.

We believe that addressing these challenges requires more accurate, consistent, and meaningful data. Yet current data practices fall short. Inconsistencies and a lack of disaggregation limit insights into different groups' unique circumstances. For instance, the Office for National Statistics separates 'Roma' but combines 'Gypsy' and 'Irish Traveller', while the DfE recognises 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' but merges 'Gypsy/Roma'. Even within the DfE, reporting is inconsistent: some datasets treat categories separately, others collapse them into broader groups such as 'White Other' or omit them entirely. The recent national review, *It's Silent: Race, Racism and Safeguarding Children* (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025), fails to mention Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, or Irish Traveller children at all, further underscoring their invisibility in national safeguarding discourse.

For Allen et al. (2024), accurate data reporting is essential. They explain how a decade of austerity-driven funding cuts has significantly reduced the capacity of local authorities to

invest in community engagement, early intervention, and culturally appropriate services. As funding for specialist services has been reduced, Allen and Riding (2018) explain that practitioners are often left navigating complex cases without the time, training, or resources to engage meaningfully and equitably with diverse Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller communities. For this reason, our findings highlight an urgent need to strengthen the collection, recording, and reporting of ethnicity data. For policymakers, reliable and disaggregated data are vital to designing and funding services that respond effectively to the different needs of Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller children, families, and communities. For children and families themselves, accurate recognition and understanding of their ethnicity affirms identity, fosters trust, and ensures that services are culturally appropriate and fair (Allen et al. 2025). Without comprehensive and nuanced data, Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller families fear that child welfare services will continue to treat them as a homogeneous group and fail to meet their needs in equitable and proportionate ways (Kostka et al. 2024).

From a racial family (in)justice perspective, the failure to collect meaningful ethnicity data also represents a systemic breach of rights. Inadequate classification obscures discrimination, distorts the evidence base and weakens the accountability of child welfare institutions. Without urgent reform, we remain concerned that the child welfare system could be reproducing the very inequalities it purports to challenge, denying these children the equitable, culturally informed services to which they are entitled.

### **Limitations**

The conclusions drawn in this paper are constrained by significant limitations in the availability and quality of relevant data. While the findings reinforce concerns previously raised by Allen and Hamnett (2022: 3904), the analysis presented here is based on aggregated categories and incomplete records, which restricts the depth and precision of interpretation. As such, the findings should be viewed as indicative rather than definitive.

Allen and Hamnett (2022:3905) were able to assess whether the disparity ratios for Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller children increase or decrease from the point of referral. Since we were only able to access data on children looked after and not on referrals or other stages of CWS involvement, we could not replicate this part of the research.

The aggregation issues discussed above also constitute a limitation of this paper. We were unable to address potential differences between Romani (British) Gypsy and Roma groups. Due to the differences in ethnicity aggregation between the Office for National Statistics and the DfE, we also had to use pupil headcounts as a proxy for population. This is problematic as Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller children may be more likely to be home educated than other groups (Marsh and Morgan, 2025), so the number of pupils in school may disproportionately underrepresent the population in these groups.

### **Conclusion**

This paper confirms that Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller children remain disproportionately represented in England's state care system. This overrepresentation is not new, and it continues to intensify, yet remains insufficiently understood due to the persistent inadequacy of ethnicity data.

As we have shown, current classification practices, particularly the conflation of distinct ethnic groups, obscure the specific experiences of each community and limit the development of appropriate policy responses. Without significant improvements in how ethnicity is recorded, categorised, and reported, child welfare services will remain poorly

equipped to meet the needs of these children and families. Importantly, these data challenges are not isolated technical issues but reflect deeper systemic dynamics: a lack of political will to recognise difference meaningfully, and a broader failure to address the structural conditions that shape child welfare involvement. What is required is not only better data, but a shift in approach, one that moves away from reductive framings of risk and towards a more contextual understanding of family life. This includes acknowledging the historical and contemporary marginalisation of Romani (British) Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller communities and ensuring that responses are proportionate, culturally informed, and grounded in rights-based principles. In the absence of such reform, the child welfare system risks continuing to reproduce the very inequalities it is tasked with challenging. Achieving racial family justice demands both clearer evidence and the political commitment to act on it.

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### **Disclosure statement**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare

### **Biographical note**

Dr Dan Allen is a social work practitioner and academic with over 20 years of dedicated experience consistently focused on advancing social work and child protection practices with Romani and Traveller communities.

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