

Diversity in older age – Gypsies and Travellers

Ethnic minorities – Older Gypsies and Travellers

Demographic overview

The ethnic minority populations of the United Kingdom are heterogeneous with widely different individual group characteristics. However, for England and Wales, the ethnic minority populations are, in general, much younger than the majority White British population with the notable exceptions of the White Irish and Black Caribbean ethnic groups.¹ [Table 1]

The smallest pre-identified ethnic minority group in the 2011 census was Gypsies / Irish Travellers with 57,680 individuals in England and Wales. [Table 2] This is thought to be an under-estimate, because of enumeration problems, with alternative estimates placing the number at between one hundred and three hundred thousand.^{2,3,4}

Table 1

Ethnic group	Median age
White Irish	53.4
White British	42.5
Black Caribbean	40.7
Indian	32.9
Other White	32.1
Other	31.7
Other Asian	31.6
Chinese	28.7
Black African	28.0
Arab	27.5
Gypsy / Irish Traveller	26.9
Pakistani	25.8
Bangladeshi	24.3
Other Black	23.7
Other Mixed	21.0
Mixed: White and Black Caribbean	18.3
Mixed: White and Asian	17.4
Mixed: White and Black African	16.6

Table 2

England and Wales, 2011, Ethnicity: Gypsy / Irish Traveller	
Ethnic group:	Gypsy / Irish Traveller
Population size	57,680
% of total population	0.10%
% Male	49.58%
% aged 50 and over	17.99%
% aged 65 and over	5.94%
% aged under 15	29.89%
Median age	26.9
Source: Lievesley (2013) <i>The ageing of the ethnic minority populations of England and Wales: findings from the 2011 census</i> , Centre for Policy on Ageing	

¹ Lievesley (2013) *The ageing of the ethnic minority populations of England and Wales: findings from the 2011 census*, Centre for Policy on Ageing

² Irish Traveller Movement in Britain (2013) *Gypsy and Traveller population in England and the 2011 Census*

Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers form two distinct groups of travelling people and, although there are some cultural similarities they rarely inter-mix or inter-marry.³

Roma are Romani-speaking travelling people from Eastern and Central Europe. In 2012 there were estimated to be 194,000 Roma in England and Wales with a further 3,000 in Scotland. The most common countries of origin for Roma are Romania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland followed by Hungary, Latvia and Lithuania. Roma from Bulgaria are few in number.⁴

Other groups of travelling people include Scottish Gypsies and Travellers, Welsh Travellers (Kale), New (Age) Travellers, Bargees, and Showmen and Circus People.³

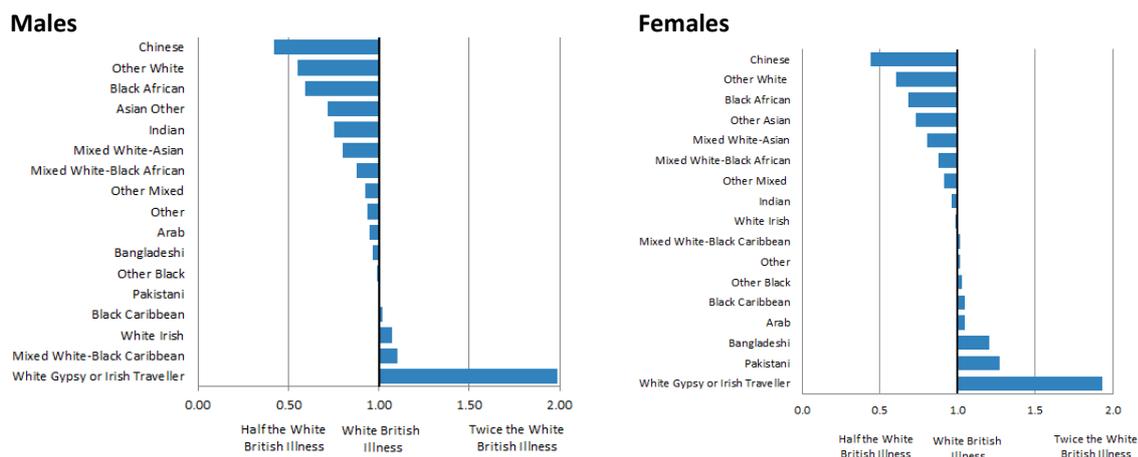
In the 2011 census, Gypsies / Irish Travellers were the smallest pre-identified ethnic minority group making up only one tenth of one percent of the total population of England and Wales. Relatively poor health and lower life expectancy means there are fewer than 3,500 individuals aged 65 and over and fewer than 250 aged 85 and over.

A comprehensive study of Irish Travellers in Ireland in 2008 set the life expectancy at birth at 61.7 years compared with 76.8 years for the general population of the Republic of Ireland.⁵ This may be in part explained by higher rates of infant mortality.

Partly because of the very small numbers, *“In the majority of the literature and research relating to Gypsies and Travellers, the voices of older people are not heard, and they become an invisible population within a marginalised community.”*⁶

Health

Figure 1: Age-standardised ratios of limiting long-term illness for ethnic minority groups compared with the White British population. (England and Wales, 2011 Census)



³ South West Alliance of Nomads (SWAN) *Gypsies & Travellers factsheet*, Dorset Equality Partnership

⁴ Brown, Scullion and Martin (2013) *Migrant Roma in the United Kingdom: population size and experiences of local authorities and partners*

⁵ Our Geels (2010) *All Ireland Traveller Health Study*

⁶ Cemlyn S, Greenfields M, Whitwell C and Matthews Z. (2009) *Inequalities experienced by Gypsy and Traveller communities: a review*, Equality and Human Rights Commission

Source: Bécares L (2013) *Which ethnic groups have the poorest health?*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

After controlling for age and sex, Gypsies and Irish Travellers have by far the poorest health, in terms of limiting long-term illness and health related quality of life of any ethnic group in the UK.⁷ [Figure 1] The most marked inequalities are self-reported anxiety and respiratory problems including asthma and bronchitis, and chest pain. A Gypsy or Traveller woman has a greater than 20% chance of seeing the death of her child through stillbirth or in early childhood, compared with less than 1% for the settled population.⁸ A 2004 survey identified health inequalities in the Traveller communities for a whole range of conditions but not including diabetes, stroke and cancer which were either comparable of less than in the general population.⁸ However, other studies, including analysis of Gypsy Traveller accommodation and associated needs assessments (GTANA), have identified a high risk of diabetes.⁹

Poor health and limited healthy life expectancy in the Gypsy and Irish Traveller community is exacerbated by having the highest rate of smoking of any ethnic group.¹⁰ For Gypsies and Irish Travellers, living in a house is associated with a poorer health state and higher levels of long term illness and anxiety, with those who travel rarely having the poorest health.⁸ It is not clear however which of these factors is the cause and which the effect.

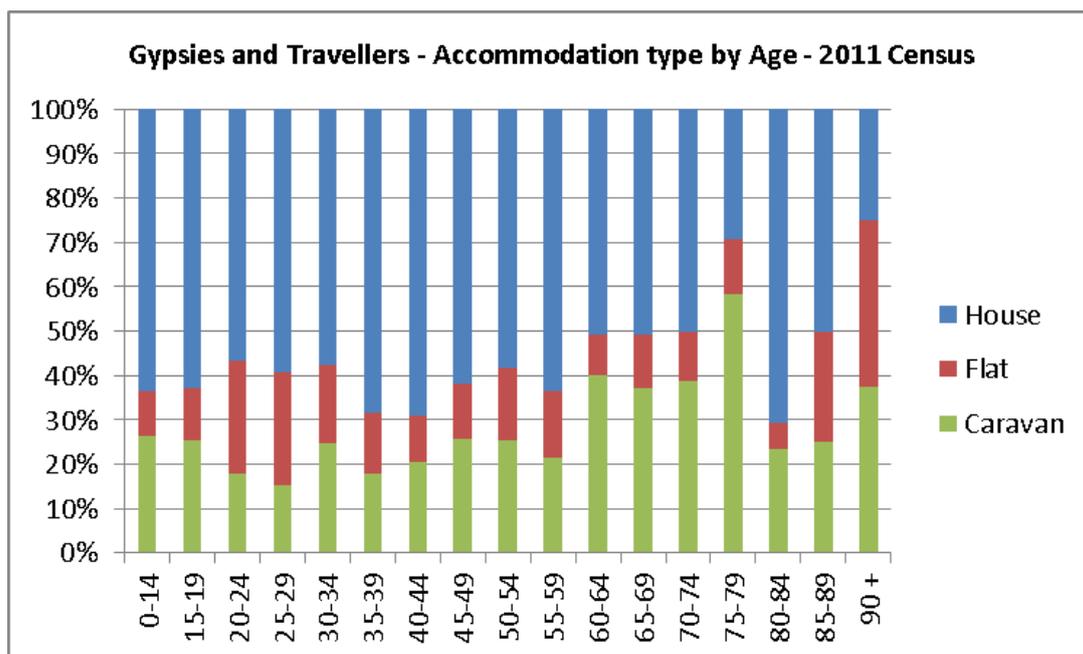


Figure 2 ONS, 2011 Census (England and Wales) - Microdata Individual Safeguarded Sample

Poor health may be reflective of poor and inappropriate accommodation. In a 2016 study, individual Gypsies and Irish Travellers with the highest rates of self-reported bad, very bad or poor mental and

⁷ Bécares L (2013) *Which ethnic groups have the poorest health? Ethnic health inequalities 1991 to 2011*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

⁸ Parry, Van Cleemput et al (2004) *The Health Status of Gypsies & Travellers in England*

⁹ Greenfields M (2009) *Falling by the wayside*, Diabetes Update, Winter 2009

¹⁰ Aspinall and Mitton (2014) Smoking prevalence and the changing risk profiles in the UK ethnic and migrant minority populations: implications for stop smoking services, *Public Health* 128(3) 297-306

physical health lived predominantly on unauthorised tolerated and roadside sites, local authority sites and in housing.¹¹ Those at private sites with planning permission were most likely to report good or very good health.¹¹

In Ireland, the greatest causes of excess deaths among the Traveller community are heart disease and respiratory conditions, although external causes, including suicide, play a significant role.⁵

These health inequalities persist into older age with consequent implications for the need to access health service provision for older Gypsies and Irish Travellers. Access to health services for Gypsies and Travellers of all ages can be problematic with the itinerant lifestyle, together with a reluctance by some GPs to register Gypsies and Travellers, making registration with a GP more difficult. Lower levels of literacy, particular in older Gypsies and Travellers is also a barrier to service access as is a mistrust of officialdom.¹²

Housing

Analysis of Gypsy and Travellers Accommodation and Associated Needs Assessments (GTANAs) reveals that being older is a common reason given for ceasing to travel and moving into ‘bricks and mortar’.¹³ It might therefore be assumed that, in older age, Gypsies and Travellers would be less likely to live in a caravan and more likely to live in a house or flat. However, evidence from the 2011 Census for England and Wales seems to indicate that the opposite is true. From age 20 to 79, for Gypsies and Irish Travellers, the likelihood of living in a caravan generally increases with age. [Figure 2] This may however be a cohort effect, with older generations more committed to the travelling way of life, rather than changes taking place within the lifetime of an individual.

A shortage of suitable, well-appointed sites for Gypsies and travellers remains an issue.

“Accommodation shortages remain as the overarching threat to the social inclusion and wellbeing of Gypsies and Travellers, with some of the most acute support needs of older Gypsies and Travellers relating to shortages of or very poor quality provision.”¹³

Care, Family and Community

Family and community bonds are particularly strong in traveller communities. Even when living on a permanent site, older family members will continue to be cared for by family and take a full part in family and community life. However, for some older gypsies and travellers, the provision of caravan pitches based on individual need can mean that there are no relatives on the same site, making family based care more difficult⁶

In a 2016 study, 42% of Gypsies and Travellers were providing informal care for immediate household members or wider family, on site or in the immediate vicinity,¹¹ compared with the 11% identified in the 2011 census as providing over 50 hours per week of unpaid care.

¹¹ Greenfields M and Brindley M (2016) *Impact of insecure accommodation and the living environment on Gypsies’ and Travellers’ health*, The Traveller Movement

¹² Tilki M (2016) *Dementia among Gypsies and Travellers*, The Journal of Dementia Care 24(4) 12-14

¹³ Hodges N and Cemlyn S (2013) *The accommodation experiences of older gypsies and travellers: Personalisation of support and coalition policy*, Social Policy and Society 12(2) 205-219

For members of Traveller communities, as for other minority groups, there is a need for the availability of ‘culturally competent’ care, particularly at the end of life. For the Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities, rules around hygiene have a particular significance.¹⁴

Strong family bonds mean that loneliness and social exclusion are not a feature of old age in Gypsy culture.¹⁵ In the 2011 census, only 2% of Gypsy/Traveller households were made up solely of members aged 65 and over compared with 8% for the population of England and Wales as a whole.¹⁶

¹⁴ Lane P and Tribe R, (2010) *Towards an understanding of the cultural health needs of older gypsies*, Working with Older People 14(2) 23-30

¹⁵ Lane, Spencer and McReady (2012) *Perspectives on ageing in Gypsy families*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

¹⁶ Bradford S, ONS (2013) *2011 Census analysis: What does the 2011 Census tell us about the characteristics of Gypsy or Irish travellers in England and Wales?*

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