Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children in Child Welfare Services in England

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Abstract

Over the last five decades, there has been a growing concern that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are overrepresented in child welfare services (CWS) in Europe. However, statistical data used to substantiate this concern often conflates ethnicity and nationality limiting our full understanding of the reported situation. This article provides a more comprehensive illustration of overrepresentation, advancing the quantitative study of this topic in England. Using a *per capita* division by population method, data obtained from the Department of Education were tested for disparity ratios across four key indicators. The analyses found that the recorded number of 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' in CWS in England has been growing at a disproportionate rate since 2011–2012 to now demonstrate overrepresentation. The findings go beyond the concerns that have been raised to highlight a more specific need for remedial and restorative action. Implications are discussed for strategic responses to drive up data quality and further explore the details of the disparities that are found.

Keywords: child welfare services, freedom of information, Gypsy, Roma, Traveller

Introduction

There is considerable research evidence that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are overrepresented in child welfare services (CWS) in Europe when compared with the general population (Mayall, 1995; McVeigh, 1997;

Okely, 1997; Power, 2004; Powell, 2011). Whilst this research adds to a general concern about disproportional levels of deprivation, structural discrimination and institutional racism (Sardelić, 2017), limited data quality and the conflation of ethnicity and nationality in official CWS datasets means that the statistical evidence needed to substantiate these claims is not always accessible (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020).

According to the European Roma Rights Centre (2011), significant variability in the quality of data collection methods and CWS reporting systems means that any attempt to interrogate data on the number of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children involved in CWS in Europe can be difficult. Whilst data on the number of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children involved in some aspects of CWS has been common in England since 2009, this practice is rare in other countries (Rorke, 2021) making comparison over time and across Europe difficult (Allen and Riding, 2018).

Our aim in this article is to present a more comprehensive picture of the claims that have been made about overrepresentation by focussing specifically on statistical evidence available in England. We use a *per capita* division by population method, to present a preliminary analysis of data obtained from the Department of Education (DfE) via a Freedom of Information (FoI) request. Applying *per capita* metrics and disparity ratios (DRs), we show that there are a disproportionate number of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children involved in CWS in England when compared to 'All other' ethnic groups.

The unique contribution this study provides is the recommendation that different approaches are required to reduce the disparity that DfE data show. For 'Traveller or Irish Heritage' children, we argue that there needs to be an increased focus on reducing the number of referrals to CWS through the provision of Early Help. For 'Gypsy/Roma' children, we argue that there must be an increased focus on developing evidence-informed child protection practices. We conclude that the specific detail of these recommendations cannot be advanced until additional work is undertaken to develop data quality and provide a detailed theoretical explanation of the disparities that we identify.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in CWS

Since the 1970s, there has been a growing documented concern about the overrepresentation of Gypsy Roma and Traveller children in CWS in Europe. Qualitative evidence to support this claim has been reported in the former Czechoslovakia (Guy, 1975); Italy (Mayall, 1995); Austria, France and Germany (Liegeois, 1986); Norway and Switzerland (Meier, 2008); Ireland (O'Higgins, 1996); England (Cemlyn and Briskman, 2002); Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia (Butler and

Gheorghiu, 2010), Spain (Vrabiescu, 2017), Greece, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden (European Roma Rights Centre, 2011). Verifying these concerns with quantitative data has been problematic. With the exception of the DfE in England, a government department that has been collecting data on the number of Gypsy Roma and Traveller children in CWS since 2009 (Allen and Riding, 2018), there are minimal data to inform an agreed and accepted understanding of how many specific Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are involved in CWS elsewhere (Waldron, 2011).

According to Rorke (2021), the scarcity of statistical information across Europe is determined by various constitutional regulations and authorities that limit data collection according to ethnicity. While Brunnberg and Visser-Schuurman (2015) explain that the avoidance or conflation of ethnic identification serves to reduce discrimination, Allen and Riding (2018) propose that it also presents a barrier to understanding the extent to which Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are represented in CWS.

Following a scoping review of the extant literature (Levac *et al.*, 2010), it is arguable that a fuller examination of overrepresentation is important for three reasons. First, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children experience multiple levels of deprivation and childhood adversity (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). If they are overrepresented in CWS because of disproportionate need, it is appropriate that Early Help services, which in Europe typically include early intervention, practical family support programmes or 'Child in Need' multi-agency plans, are developed to support families and prevent them from falling into crisis (Cemlyn, 2000a; Vanderbeck, 2005). Secondly, it is reported that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children experience multiple examples of structural discrimination (Cemlyn *et al.*, 2009; European Parliament, 2019). As child welfare inequalities across Europe are increasing (Bennett *et al.*, 2020), Gypsy, Roma and Traveller households are also at higher risk of deprivation (Burchardt *et al.*, 2018), raising concerns about socially just outcomes. If they are overrepresented in CWS because of structural factors, over which most families have little or no control, it is important that action is taken to dismantle the barriers that make the lives of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families harder (Sardelić, 2017).

Thirdly, it has been reported that CWS are institutionally racist, and child protection methods are used with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children as a tool for state violence (Mayall, 1995; McVeigh, 1997; Okely, 1997; Power, 2004; Powell, 2011). If children are overrepresented in CWS because of institutional racism, a programme of restorative justice and anti-racist practice should be developed so that families experience the economic, social and political power to make decisions in all areas of their lives without fear, discrimination or retaliation (Cemlyn and Briskman, 2002). Until further knowledge on the matter of representation is

advanced, we argue no meaningful progress will be made to understand the full implication of these key points or the remedial actions that may be required.

The current study attempts to contribute to the debate on overrepresentation by examining the number of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller in CWS. Specifically, we examine the research question *'Are Gypsy, Roma and Traveller overrepresented in CWS in England?'*

Methodology

The European Roma Rights Centre (2011) explains that identifying data on the number of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children involved in CWS is an empirical challenge. Consistent with their suggestion that European governments should monitor the welfare of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children more closely, O'Higgins (1996) and Rorke (2021) have developed experimental data collection tools to study their representation in CWS. As shown by both researchers, accessing reliable information about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in CWS can be difficult, particularly where government data do not exist or extend to include specific ethnic groups. In recognition of the challenges that O'Higgins (1996) and Rorke (2021) set out, we saw the potential of accessing data in England via an FoI request to the DfE.

Following the advice of Savage and Hyde (2014, p. 304), we believed that an FoI request provided us with a 'powerful tool' to access data that might not otherwise be available. According to Fowler *et al.* (2013) and Lucas and John-Archard (2021), an FoI request can generate much higher response rates than traditional survey methods, as authorities are legally obliged to respond to requests providing any requested information outside of certain exemptions.

After receiving ethical approval from Manchester Metropolitan University's Faculty of Health and Education, an FoI request was submitted to the DfE in February 2020, asking for information on four key indicators for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and all other ethnic groups involved in CWS. The indicators included the number of referrals to CWS, the number of Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs) held, the number of Child Protection Plans (CPPs) implemented, and the number of children living in state care. In May 2020, DfE responded and provided two databases that included statistical evidence against the indicators described.

Statistics included in the FoI return were ordered between 1 April and 31 March for the years 2011–2012 to 2017–2018, and presented according to three ethnic categories. These categories conflated the ethnic groups 'Gypsy' and 'Roma' to 'Gypsy/Roma' and identified Travellers as 'Travellers of Irish Heritage'. Each other ethnic group

was amalgamated to 'All other'. A significant amount of information had been redacted (the full knowledge of which was not disclosed), but the request did generate a small data sample for detailing the scale and nature of CWS involvement. To consider the research question, a point of comparison was needed to analyse the FoI data and give it meaning.

Analysis

Consistent with the advice of Oviedo *et al.* (2019), we sought to analyse DfE data by calculating a *per capita* metric. *Per capita* metrics can be performed as an exposure variable, as per Poisson regression models, which contains inferential statistics used to infer generalisations about the wider population from the sample (Chaudhry *et al.*, 2020). This approach is common in epidemiological research, where the research interest may be associated with either an increased or a decreased occurrence of disease or other specified health outcome (Berislav *et al.*, 2020).

Following a systematic review of methodological variations shown in research papers written on the theme of child maltreatment, Doyle and Aizer (2018) show that *per capita* metrics performed as an exposure variable can be unstable and less sensitive to outlier population sizes. Without multivariate regression models to account for specific cofounder variables, such as deprivation or family and environmental factors, they suggest that using an exposure variable to analyse small data samples, like those provided by DfE, can lead to unreliable results, misleading inferences or wrong conclusions. An initial assessment of the data precluded the use of an exposure variable. As an alternative, Doyle and Aizer (2018) explain that a *per capita* division by population can enable a more stable summary. This calculation of a *per capita* metric is provided by dividing the total statistical number for each key indicator by the population being analysed.

The first challenge when trying to conduct the *per capita* division by population method emerged when we discovered significant variability in census data. Estimates of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller population in England range from 58,000 to 300,000 people (Brown *et al.*, 2013) with no consistent disaggregation according to ethnicity or age. The latest figures provided by the Office for National Statistics (2020a) do not present accessible information to clarify population sizes by ethnicity either. The second challenge was that DfE conflates the ethnic groups 'Gypsy' and 'Roma' and refers to Travellers as 'Travellers of Irish Heritage'. To produce a *per capita* metric through division by population, we had to identify a census that provided official population data and categorised ethnicity in the same way. The most suitable census to meet these conditions was the Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics database (Office for National Statistics, 2020b).

Summarising data collected from nursery, pre-school and school enrolment records, the Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics database shows that between 2011–2012 and 2017–2018, the years that correspond to the data provided via the FoI request, there were on average 8,845,417 children aged between 2 and 18 registered with state-funded education providers in England. Between the same years, the database shows that there were 27,731 'Gypsy/Roma' children and 6,434 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' children registered with state-funded education providers. In the absence of any other dataset, we believe that the Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics report provided the only suitable point of comparison that could enable us to identify a *per capita* metric by dividing the total statistical numbers provided via the FoI request by an officially recognised population size.

Once the *per capita* metric had been calculated, it was important to understand what the data were indicating. Following the example from Maguire-Jack *et al.* (2015), the *per capita* metric was used to calculate a DR. Consistent with the methodologies that Mildred *et al.* (2005) advanced in health research, the DR was calculated by dividing the *per capita* metric for each ethnic group by the 'best rate' for each of the four key indicators. The number was rounded to two decimal places and used to determine how much more likely a particular event is to occur in an ethnic group compared to another ethnic group.

In this report, the *per capita* metric served as the reference group for the DR calculation, and the 'best rate' was the lowest descriptive *per capita* metric rate out of the three ethnic groups. A DR >1 means that a high proportion of children from that ethic group experience intervention relative to the reference (best rate) group, whereas a DR <1 indicates a lower proportion of children from that group experience intervention relative to the reference group. A DR of 1.5 means that there is a 50 per cent higher proportion of incidence in the population of the group than there is in the reference group. A DR of 0.5 means that there is only half as large a proportion of incidence in the group as there is in the reference group.

Results

In the following sections, the total number, the *per capita* metric and the DR for the four key indicators are presented. Whilst these indicators are only a small representation of many possible interventions, and do not illustrate the full scope of ethnic disparities, they do provide a broad perspective on the overrepresentation of 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' in CWS in England.

Referrals to child welfare agencies

Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government, 2018) encourages anyone who has concerns about a child's welfare to make a referral to a local authority child and family service. For some children, the referral represents the starting point of their involvement with CWS.

According to DfE, there were 18,240 referrals to CWS for 'Gypsy/Roma' children and 7,760 referrals to CWS for 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' children between 2011–2012 and 2017–2018. Between the same years, 3,834,110 referrals were submitted to CWS for 'All other' ethnic groups. Table 1 illustrates the data, the *per capita* metric and the DR.

Table 1 shows that in each year, the ratio of referrals *per capita* for 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' has been higher than the ratio of referrals *per capita* for 'All other' ethnic groups. Between 2011–2012 and 2017–2018, the average referral DR for 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' compared to 'All other' ethnic groups is 1.5 and 2.74, respectively. This means that 'Gypsy/Roma' were 1.5 times more likely to be referred to CWS than children from 'All other' ethnic groups. 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' were 2.74 times more likely to be referred to CWS than children from 'All other' ethnic groups.

With the increasing number of referrals each year, the DR in 2017–2018 for 'Gypsy/Roma' children and 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' children increased to 1.81 and 3.33, respectively. In 2017–2018, data provided by DfE suggest that one 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' child in every five and one 'Gypsy/Roma' child in every ten were referred to CWS. Compared to the number of initial referrals for 'All other' ethic groups, which suggest that around one child in every fifteen were referred to CWS in 2017–2018, an indication of disproportionality emerges. As shown in Hood *et al.* (2016, p. 926) illustration of a 'filter-and-funnel' process, understanding the volume of referrals is critical because they indicate disproportionate numbers of children that could be 'screened in' to the CWS.

Initial child protection conferences

Once a referral has been submitted to CWS, statutory guidance (HM Government, 2018) suggests that two outcomes might typically occur. First, the referral is closed, thus ending CWS involvement. Secondly, the referral is progressed on the basis that the child is assessed as being 'In Need' or 'at risk of significant harm' as determined by relevant legislation. DfE did not provide data on the number of 'Gypsy/Roma' or 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' classed as being 'In Need' in the FoI return, but did provide data on the number of children who were classed as being 'at risk of significant harm', indicated by the number of children who were moved on from a referral to an ICPC (see Table 2).

Table 1 Number of referrals to CWS 2011–2012 and 2017–2018

Referrals	2011–2012	2012–2013	2013–2014	2014–2015	2015–2016	2016–2017	2017–2018	Total	Total average
'Gypsy/Roma'	1,760	1,730	2,250	2,520	2,840	3,000	3,380	18240	2,606
Per capita metric	0.063	0.062	0.081	0.09	0.1	0.1	0.12	–	0.093
DR	1.08	1.08	1.26	1.42	1.61	1.53	1.81	–	1.5
'Travellers of Irish Heritage'	700	740	1040	1140	1,280	1,350	1,410	7,760	1,109
Per capita metric	0.10	0.12	0.16	0.18	0.2	0.2	0.22	–	0.17
DR	1.72	2.1	2.5	2.85	3.22	3.07	3.33	–	2.74
'All other' ethnic groups	509,460	504,090	565,620	555,330	547,330	571,000	581,280	3,834,110	547,730
Per capita metric[a]	0.058[a]	0.057[a]	0.064[a]	0.063[a]	0.062[a]	0.065[a]	0.066[a]	–	0.062[a]
DR	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

[a]The best group rate for each year was used as the DR reference point.

Table 2 Number of ICPC 2011–2012 and 2017–2018

ICPC	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	Total	Total Average
'Gypsy/Roma'	140	200	280	320	400	410	510	2260	323
Per capita metric	0.005[a]	0.007	0.01	0.012	0.014	0.015	0.018	–	0.011
DR	–	1.0	1.42	1.5	1.75	1.88	2.0	–	1.57
'Travellers of Irish Heritage'	90	80	130	160	150	170	180	960	137
Per capita representation	0.014	0.012	0.02	0.025	0.023	0.026	0.028	–	0.021
DR	2.33	1.71	2.86	3.12	2.88	3.25	3.11	–	3.0
'All other' ethnic groups	54,580	58,420	64,510	70,390	72,090	75,890	78,490	474,370	67,767
Per capita representation[a]	0.006	0.007[a]	0.007[a]	0.008[a]	0.008[a]	0.008[a]	0.009[a]	–	0.007[a]
DR	1.2	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

[a]The best group rate for each year was used as the DR reference point.

Comparing the total statistical numbers presented in Tables 1 and 2, it is possible to see that the number of ICPCs is considerably lower than the number of referrals to CWS across all three groups. Between 2011–2012 and 2017–2018, 12.3 per cent of all referrals to CWS for 'Gypsy/Roma' children ($n = 2,260$) and 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' ($n = 690$) progressed to an ICPC. Compared to the 12.3 per cent of referrals ($n = 474,370$) for 'All other' ethnic groups. These statistics suggest that there may be parity in the approach used to screen and assess risk, problematising the extent to which institutional racism in CWS might explain disparity in Gypsy Roma and Traveller populations (Mayall, 1995; McVeigh, 1997; Okely, 1997; Power, 2004; Powell, 2011). If the data existed, it would be important to control for factors linked to racism, including exposure to poverty that can drive CWS involvement (Webb *et al.*, 2021) and adjust rates for poverty to consider whether disparity in cases 'screened in' may emerge.

For 2011–2012, there is no evidence that 'Gypsy/Roma' children were overrepresented in CWS at ICPC. DfE data show that 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' and children from 'All other' ethnic groups were 2.33 and 1.2 times, respectively, more likely to be involved in an ICPC than 'Gypsy/Roma' children in that year. A continual increase in the numbers meant that by 2017–2018, 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' were on average 1.57 and 3.0 times, respectively, more likely to be involved in an ICPC than children from 'All other' ethnic groups.

In the year 2017–2018, 'Gypsy/Roma' were 2.0 times more likely to be considered at an ICPC than children from 'All other' ethnic groups. In the same year, 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' were 3.11 times more likely to be considered at an ICPC children from 'All other' ethnic groups.

Table 3 Number of CPP 2011–2012 and 2017–2018

CPP	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	Total	Total Average
'Gypsy/Roma'	240	280	360	460	600	710	730	3,380	483
Per capita representation	0.009	0.01	0.012	0.016	0.022	0.026	0.026	–	0.017
DR	–	1.1	1.09	1.33	1.69	2.0	2.0	–	1.42
'Travellers of Irish Heritage'	150	130	170	200	210	220	250	1,330	190
Per capita representation	0.023	0.021	0.026	0.031	0.033	0.034	0.039	–	0.029
DR	2.3	1.99	2.36	2.58	2.53	2.61	3.0	–	2.42
'All other' ethnic groups	92,550	92,910	101,710	108,940	111,770	115,210	118,480	741,570	105,938
Per capita representation	0.010[a]	0.011[a]	0.011[a]	0.012[a]	0.013[a]	0.013[a]	0.013[a]	–	0.012
DR	1.1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

[a]The best group rate for each year was used as the DR reference point.

Child protection plans

Once a child's circumstances and safety has been considered at an ICPC, child welfare professionals work together with families to decide whether a CPP is needed. The CPP is a formal statutory arrangement that informs the actions of all involved in protecting the welfare of the child. The CPP is usually implemented where there are concerns that the child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm (HM Government, 2018). Table 3 illustrates number, *per capita* metric and DR for CPPs implemented with 'Gypsy/Roma' children, 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' children and children from 'All other' ethnic groups between 2011–2012 and 2017–2018.

In 2011–2012, there is no evidence that 'Gypsy/Roma' children were overrepresented in CPP. DfE data show that 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' and children from 'All other' ethnic groups were 2.3 and 1.1 times, respectively, more likely to be involved in an ICPC than 'Gypsy/Roma' children during this time. Between 2012–2013 and 2017–2018, the DR for 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' increases. In 2017–2018, 'Gypsy/Roma' children were 2.0 times more likely to be made subject to a CPP than children from 'All other' other ethnic groups. In the same year, 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' were 3.0 times more likely to be made subject to a CPP than children from 'All other' ethnic groups.

Number of children living in state care

In Table 4, the number of 'Gypsy/Roma' children, the number of 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' children and the number of 'All other' ethnic

Table 4 Number of children living in state care 2011–2012 and 2017–2018

Living in state care	2011–2012	2012–2013	2013–2014	2014–2015	2015–2016	2016–2017	2017–2018
'Gypsy/Roma'	210	230	260	390	410	490	520
Per capita representation	0.008	0.008	0.009	0.014	0.015	0.018	0.019
DR	1.0	1.0	1.12	1.75	1.87	2.0	2.11
'Travellers of Irish Heritage'	70	70	80	140	130	140	150
Per capita representation	0.011	0.011	0.012	0.021	0.02	0.022	0.023
DR	1.37	1.37	1.5	2.62	2.5	2.44	2.55
'All other'	68,070	68,810	69,470	70,400	72,590	76,420	75,370
Per capita representation	0.008[a]	0.008[a]	0.008[a]	0.008[a]	0.008[a]	0.009[a]	0.009[a]
DR	1.0	1.0	–	–	–	–	–

[a]The best group rate for each year was used as the DR reference point.

groups living in state care is presented. Although numerically low, compared to the total population, the number of 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' children living in state care increases at a disproportionate rate over time. Between the years shown, the total number of 'All other' children living in state care has increased by 10.7 per cent. The number of Gypsy/Roma living in state care increased by 147.6 per cent, and the number of 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' living in state care increased by 114.2 per cent.

The *per capita* metric and DR shown in Table 4 suggest that between 2011–2012 and 2012–2013, the DR for 'Gypsy/Roma' was 1, indicating no disproportionality compared to children from 'All other' ethnic groups. From 2013 to 2014, these numbers begin to increase. In 2017–2018, 'Gypsy/Roma' children were 2.11 times more likely to live in state care than children from 'All other' ethnic groups. In the same year, 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' children were 2.55 times more likely to live in state care than children from 'All other' ethnic groups. As the total number of 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' children living in state care increases at a disproportionate rate, so does the DR.

Discussion

By using *per capita* statistics to present DfE data, a DR has been determined to indicate how much more likely 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' children experience child welfare intervention compared with children from 'All other' ethnic groups. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to use a *per capita* division by population method and DR to illustrate the representation of 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' in CWS across four key indicators.

In terms of the research question, the DR provided support for the documented concern that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are

Table 5 Highest DR for 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' in CWS in five key indicators 2017–2018

Indicator	DR for 'Gypsy/Roma' compared to 'All other' ethnic groups	DR 'Traveller for Irish Heritage' compared to 'All other' ethnic groups
Referral	1.81	3.33
ICPC	2.0	3.11
CPP	2.0	3.0
State Care	2.11	2.55

overrepresented in CWS in England compared with 'All other' ethnic groups. Whilst some researchers have used the term 'overrepresentation' to suggest that there is unequal treatment of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups in CWS in Europe (Rorke, 2021), we are not able to conclude that this term applies equally to the data that are presented by DfE. It is not possible to explain whether the cause of the DR is due to deprivation, family disengagement, structural discrimination, institutional racism or any other factor. The data only highlight the existence of disproportionate levels of intervention in the four key indicators, with the highest DR in 2017–2018 (see Table 5).

Table 5 shows that the DR for 'Gypsy/Roma' and 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' is different for each key indicator. Whilst the majority of CWS literature refers to the need to develop models practice for the homogenised 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller' community (Allen and Riding, 2018), this finding shows, for the first time, the need for a more specific approach to safeguard each group of children.

Implications for 'Travellers of Irish heritage'

By analysing the data provided by the DfE via the FoI request to the 'Schools Pupils and their Characteristics' database (Office for National Statistics, 2020a), the *per capita* metric shows that one 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' child in every five was referred to CWS in 2018. Being 1.52 times more likely to be referred to CWS than 'Gypsy/Roma' children, and 3.33 times more likely to be referred to CWS than children from 'All other' ethnic groups, 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' were approximately 3.0 times more likely than 'All other' children to experience an ICPC and a CPP. They were also 2.55 times more likely to enter state care. If data presented here were to support the hypothesis that CWS professionals interpret observations differently for 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' children (Mayall, 1995; McVeigh, 1997; Okely, 1997; Power, 2004; Powell, 2011), we might have expected to see the DR across the four key indicators increase from the point of referral. Instead, the DR reduces. Based on this observation, we believe that if the number of referrals to CWS was to

decrease, the representation of 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' in CWS and state care may also decrease.

Any recommendation to support a reduction in the number of referrals to CWS must reflect the need for specific examples of Early Help. In other words, support can be offered to children and families before their situation escalates to reach the threshold for CWS involvement. However, it must be noted that Early Help for Traveller children in the UK has been a source of concern since the 1980s (Butler, 1983).

Reflecting on the views of Traveller children who have experienced CWS intervention, Allen and Adams (2013) explain that Early Help services in England have moved very far from sensitive and proactive community engagement. As CWS intervention is often the primary mode of engagement with Traveller families Cemlyn and Briskman (2002), Allen and Riding (2018) show that they experience fewer opportunities to engage in or accept Early Help services compared to other ethnic groups. An early monograph also explained how low levels of Early Help for Travellers suggested a universal conspiracy to ignore them (Butler, 1983).

Other studies have highlighted how fear and shame, associated with historical community experiences, including uncertainty and hesitation on the part of Early Help services, can perpetuate problematic relationships (Cemlyn, 2000a; Cemlyn and Briskman, 2002) hindering any meaningful engagement (Loveland and Popescu, 2016). According to Cemlyn (2000b), the lack of Early Help has increased a crisis response in CWS and created a lack of community engagement or preventive work, thus alienating families who then report mistrust, and fear of statutory services (Allen and Riding, 2018). Whilst some studies have identified positive developments in the form of occasional specialist teams or individual social workers (Cemlyn *et al.*, 2009), and local initiatives (Cemlyn, 2000b; Morran, 2001), research does not fully reflect the recent impact that austerity and neo-liberal policies have had on preventive CWS (Karagkounis, 2021).

To justifiably attempt to reduce the number of referrals through Early Help, more information is needed on the reasons why a referral is submitted to CWS including listed concerns. However, as Lucas and John-Archard (2021) explain, there is no statutory obligation for CWS to provide statistical returns to the DfE, and no common protocol for recording the work that they do. For this reason, information on the specific type of Early Help that 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' might require is not easily accessible. Although some 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' children are known to experience multiple examples of deprivation (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020), it is not possible to recommend a particular focus for Early Help based on the key indicators that have been discussed here. Neither is it possible to advance a theoretical explanation of the investment that may be needed to

develop the skills of Early Help professionals seeking to safeguard Traveller children through universal services. Until we can explain why one 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' child in every five was referred to CWS in 2017–2018, we can only use the data to highlight disparity and the need for additional research.

Implications for 'Gypsy/Roma'

In contrast to 'Traveller of Irish Heritage' children, the DR for 'Gypsy/Roma' children increases from the point of referral. DfE data show that in 2017–2018, 'Gypsy/Roma' children were 1.81 times more likely to be referred to CWS, 2.0 times more likely to attend an ICPC, 2.0 times more likely to attend a CPP and 2.11 times more likely to live in state care compared to children from 'Any other' ethnic group. The rise in DR across these four indicators shows that whilst there may be fewer referrals for 'Gypsy/Roma' compared to 'Traveller of Irish Heritage', the involvement of CWS is likely to increase at a disproportionate rate. Although a reduction in referrals might reduce the DR in other areas, we believe, based on the data, that additional work is needed to (better) understand how to manage risk and safeguard 'Gypsy/Roma' children so that CWS intervention reduces after the point of referral.

Before we can advance recommendations for best practice, work must be undertaken to minimise the limitations of the current categorisation systems. Despite the positive move to include Gypsy and Roma children in data gathering exercises, the format for doing so falls short of what is required. The term used for their ethnic compartmentalisation, 'Gypsy/Roma', is problematic and discounts additional dimensions to identity, such as ethnicity, language, habitual resident status, experiences of state agencies and protected cultural characteristics such as nomadism. The conflation of two ethic groups also means that we are not able to explain how the DR applies specifically to Gypsy or Roma communities. We do not know, for instance, if the DR affects one ethnic group more than the other. Considering the CWS' universal commitment to anti-racist practice (Threlfall, 2021), the continued merging of two separate ethnic groups, Gypsy and Roma, can no longer be considered good enough.

Limitations

Presenting these findings and subsequent discussion, we realise that there are concerns about the DfE datasets that we have used. Both are

seen to present an underestimate of actual figures (Brown *et al.*, 2013). We also recognise that the Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics database (Office for National Statistics, 2020b) might exclude children aged 0–2 years. As such, its use as a proxy measure of population poses specific challenges to the tenets of reliability and validity (Mulcahy *et al.*, 2017). We also recognise that methodological limitations associated with undercounting apply equally to both datasets, suggesting that the total statistical numbers and DR may be higher than those presented above.

The limitations notwithstanding, DfE assumes that the datasets presented in this study provide enough evidence to give a good picture of the inequalities that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families face (UK Parliament, 2019). As such, the British government refers to both databases when making informed decisions about expenditure, policy change and service development (Comarty, 2019). If these datasets are being used to inform CWS policy planning decisions in government, there is no good reason, that we are aware of, why they should not be used to inform a more comprehensive picture of overrepresentation in child welfare interventions in England.

We recognise that there are no measures of statistical significance in this study, so it may not be clear if the results could have been due to chance. It is important to note that the data included covers all DfE data on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller populations. Therefore, this is a finite sample, and we believe that tests of statistical significance to generalise to a larger population are not necessary, because the data used include the entire population.

Conclusion

In this study, we analysed evidence provided by the DfE and show that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups are overrepresented in CWS in England. Consistent with Hood *et al.* (2016, p. 926) 'filter-and-funnel' model, disproportionality emerges in the number of referrals that are made to CWS and continues through to the overrepresentation Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in state care. Reflecting on the data, we highlight the need for Early Help services to engage 'Travellers of Irish Heritage' and prevent families from falling into crisis. We also call for an increased focus on developing effective child protection practices with 'Gypsy/Roma' children, as part of wider anti-racist strategies. Before specific examples of family support and child protection practice can be advanced, we highlight the urgent need to minimise the limitation of the current categorisation systems used within government datasets to enable a more theoretical explanation of the disparities that we expose.

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