



# Support After Suicide Partnership

## Understanding Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

### A Support Guide

June 2023





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## About this guide

This guide is for suicide bereavement services and members of the Support after Suicide Partnership (SASP) It is a first step in improving how we appropriately support people from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities who have been bereaved by suicide.

We are incredibly grateful to those community organisations who have allowed their research, knowledge and guidance to be shared in this document. We would strongly advise that you use the links at the end of this guide to explore the important issues raised further.

Once you have read the information in this guide, please do build links with the organisations we have listed, or with other local Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community organisations. Get to know your local communities and how best to work with them to provide culturally sensitive and appropriate support in your area.

We hope that you find this a useful introduction to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in the UK.



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## Introduction

In this country, there is limited evidence available on the mental health needs of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, or on the prevalence of suicide amongst these populations. Some evidence exists elsewhere. The [All Ireland Traveller Health Study](#) found that the suicide rate for Irish Traveller women is six times higher than the general population, and seven times higher for Irish Traveller men.

Organisations working with these communities, such as Friends, Families, Travellers (FFT) and GATE HERTS, anecdotally report a high incidence of suicide within Gypsy and Traveller communities in England.

There is no data on suicide among the Roma people in the UK. Some information might be available at country of origin level.

In an FFT study, it was found that only 4% of respondents who had been affected by suicide loss had been offered any kind of suicide bereavement support. They also found that out of 89 local suicide prevention plans representing 110 local areas, only 5 mention Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

Because information on mental health and suicide amongst these communities is not recorded within mainstream data, it is difficult to be more specific about prevalence and need. Working closely with local community organisations can help to provide an understanding of the local picture.

## Some facts about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities

The [2021 census](#) showed that 67,768 people in the UK identified as 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller'. The first official population of Roma heritage in the UK was recorded in 2021 at 100,981. The actual number of Gypsy, Traveller and Roma people is likely to be higher, with some estimates being 200,000 – 300,000 and above.



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The term Gypsy, Roma and Traveller has been used to describe a range of ethnic groups or people with nomadic ways of life who are not from a specific ethnicity. The term Traveller can also encompass groups that travel. This includes, but is not limited to, New Travellers, Boaters, Bargees and Showpeople.

While these communities are spoken of 'as one', Gypsies, Travellers and Roma people are distinct ethnic groups with their own belief structures, languages and customs.

Historically originating in northern India, Romany Gypsies have been in the UK for many generations. Romany Gypsies speak English and many also speak a Romani dialect to varying levels of fluency.

Irish Travellers originated in Ireland as a distinct and separate ethnic group from the general Irish population recorded since the 12th century. Irish Travellers speak English and some speak Gaelic/Irish. Many Irish Travellers also speak Gaelic derived Gammon or Cant.

Around 75% of Romany Gypsies and Travellers live in housing and 25% on Traveller sites in caravans or chalets. Of these, a small proportion live roadside or in public spaces.

The Roma in the UK are a migrant community, historically originating in Northern India and settling in Europe (including Romania, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Poland) before migrating to the UK more recently. Culturally, Roma individuals may belong to any of around 40 different groups/tribes.

The majority of Roma speak their European origin country's language(s). Many Roma also speak a Romani dialect (Romanes), as well as English to varying levels of fluency. The vast majority of Roma people live in housing, although there are disproportionate levels of homelessness and overcrowding.



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## Barriers to accessing services

Organisations such as FFT, GATE Herts and the Roma Support Group provide information on the barriers faced by their communities in accessing services, in particular healthcare services.

A qualitative report by the [Office of National Statistics \(ONS\)](#) in 2022 highlighted the lived experience of Gypsies and Travellers in accessing healthcare.

Many of these barriers will impact engagement and accessibility for suicide bereavement services. We have outlined some of these here, with links in Further Resources to more detailed reports by the ONS and voluntary sector organisations.

- **Having no fixed address**

Accessing, for example, a GP surgery without a fixed address is particularly challenging for those living roadside or on Gypsy and Traveller sites. Communicating by post is also difficult for that reason.

Many Roma people also cannot provide details of their address in shared accommodation where the rent includes bills, or where they don't have rental agreements.

There are ways to mitigate the challenge of no fixed address. There is the option to register with a GP using the surgery's postcode. Outreach should be mobile and flexible to adapt to the service user's needs.

- **Difference in language and literacy, including digital literacy**

The increasing use of online systems to book appointments and keep in touch can impact access to important services. A participant in the ONS research said:



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*“Gypsy people can’t read or write, do you know what I mean? So how are we meant to do like online stuff when we don’t know how to do it and then access all that.”*

Roma people have often received limited education in their countries of origin, and many have low literacy skills or do not understand medical terms even in Romanes or their country of origin language (for example, Polish, Romanian or Slovak). Many have trouble reading a formal letter or written material in English, and some struggle to understand dates and times, often missing appointments unless they are reminded.

People may need advocates to support with explaining concepts, vocabulary and content of letters. There is no Romanes interpreting services available, so wherever possible, bi-lingual Roma advocates should be used to help with interpretation and explaining. Professionals should check with their service users (and the interpreter) what they understood from the information provided.

Communication with communities should put the audience’s needs front and centre. Different methods will be needed, such as WhatsApp voicenotes instead of texts, video instead of words, and culturally appropriate imagery. Word of mouth is also an effective way of distributing public health messages.

- **Fear and mistrust**

The ONS research found that fear of police presence appeared to undermine trust, feelings of safety and engagement with health services. This could impact how referrals into suicide bereavement service are made.

Participants also described concerns around the potential for negative social judgements and the involvement of social services, with fears of children being taken into care as a result.



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Building relationships with local representatives as a link to communities, as well as using word of mouth and personal referrals, may help to mitigate this mistrust of outside services. FFT, in their [Tackling Suicide Inequalities in Gypsy and Traveller Communities](#) report (2022), say that organisations providing specialist bereavement support should work with Gypsy and Traveller organisations to ensure they are accessible and reaching communities.

Suicide bereavement services acting as a single point of contact can be very beneficial here. Offering to take the lead with other statutory services may be helpful and to navigate systems on the person's behalf to avoid them needing to deal with many interfaces.

- **Immigration status**

For the Roma community, there may also be issues with immigration status. Most Roma are citizens of an EU country, and the requirement to prove they are entitled to healthcare has changed after Brexit. EU citizens living in the UK who do not have settled or pre-settled status under [the EU Settlement Scheme](#), and have not yet applied for status under the scheme, will no longer be entitled to free secondary healthcare until they make a valid application.

- **Mental health stigma**

In their [Roma Health Guide](#), the Roma Support Group say that talking about mental health is a greater taboo than any other health issue, although attitudes are changing among younger people. The belief that mental health problems are genetic and run in the family is common, and so they are rarely discussed for fear of damaging the family's reputation or children's future chances of finding a marriage partner. The community language Romanes lacks the vocabulary to describe common mental health problems like depression, anxiety attacks or a range of different emotions.

The same stigma exists in Gypsy and traveller communities. A history of discrimination also affects attitudes to health professionals: some parents worry that if they seek help with mental health problems they will be institutionalised or seen as unfit parents. There are fears that disclosing mental ill-health such as postpartum depression to professionals may cause social services to intervene and take children away.





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- **Discrimination and racism**

Research by GATE Herts in 2020, [Hate: 'As regular as rain'](#), found that hate crime against Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities is described as almost a daily occurrence, 'as regular as rain', as one respondent stated. When asked how commonly Gypsy, Traveller and Roma people experience hate speech or hate crime, 78% of the survey respondents said that incidents of hate speech/crime happen very often.

This included discrimination from and within education and health services, racial bullying and victimisation within school, online racial hatred, and incitement of racial hatred within the media. The research also found that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are the number one target of online hate speech in the UK, accounting for 15% of racist or discriminatory slurs overall.

FFT has published a briefing on [Race hate and prejudice faced by Gypsies and Travellers in England](#).

## Focus: death and bereavement in GRT communities

(Adapted from [Cemeteries and Burial Culture and Traditions for people from the Traveller communities](#). Report compiled by Gemma Challenger; Friends, Families, Travellers)

Irish Travellers and Romany Gypsies share some similarities with regard to traditions and superstitions around death and bereavement, however there are also many differences.

Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers will hold a wake the night before the funeral Romany Gypsies will generally bring the deceased home the night before the funeral whereas it is customary for the deceased from the Irish Traveller community to stay in the funeral parlour the night before the funeral.



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For Romany Gypsies, on the day of the burial, the body of the deceased is taken to the cemetery to be buried. On the way they will pass certain landmarks that mean something to that person, stopping at each location to allow the deceased time to connect with those places before finally arriving at their final resting place.

Travellers may go hundreds of miles to bury their loved ones. Irish Travellers are often taken 'back home' to Ireland. Within the Irish community the family graves are blessed by the priest on a yearly basis.

For Irish Travellers, the casket will be open the night before the funeral and the family often hold a 'wake' where family and friends come for food and drinks. The following morning the ceremony will take place in the church. The person's life story is told (either by priest or family member), and some Irish songs are played.

After church, the hearse is taken to the deceased's favourite places which can take up to three hours. The funeral party may go to the deceased's favourite pub, stables or home where songs are played. Following this, the deceased is taken to the cemetery for the burial where the priest blesses the grave.

Possessions such as clothes, bedding and the vehicle or trailer, if they passed away in it, are traditionally burnt. This is done as a sign of respect to the person, so the possessions go with them to the afterlife and to aid the spirit to leave this world for the next.

The height of headstones and colours used are extremely important for the Traveller community. The size symbolises the love and respect they had for their loved ones. The larger the headstone the greater the respect and love the family feel they can portray. Due to changes in regulations many Travellers are now forced to have smaller headstones. This can cause great distress for the community, leading to shame that they 'didn't do enough' for their loved one.

Memorabilia and objects that the deceased collected and enjoyed are kept by the grave side this keeps that person's memory alive and connects the deceased with the living. Gates are commonly found at Travellers graves which symbolises and allows the spirit to pass through the gates of heaven. Regulations preventing memorabilia and specific cultural requirements for the grave can cause significant distress and interfere with the grieving process.



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As Roma are originally from other countries, many will have funerals in countries of origin. There is a lack of knowledge around procedures for transporting the dead person to the country of origin. Because of high repatriation costs, people sometimes rely on donations from the community to pay for these services.

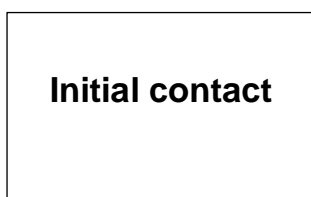


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## How your service may need to adapt

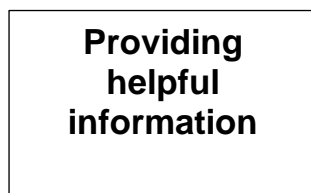
We've taken the recommended service user journey from the [NSPA guide to delivering suicide bereavement support](#), and suggested some ways in which you may need to adapt your way of working.

This is just a start though. The best way to engage with Gypsy, Roma, Traveller communities in your area will be to connect with local community organisations who have the expertise and trust of those communities.



It is important to remember that there can be mistrust in communities when there is police involvement, so that initial point of referral may be impacted. Outreach to local community organisations is key here, to open up more opportunities for referral into your service.

You can find out more about organisations in your area [here](#)



It is likely that much of your available information is in written formats, such as Help is At Hand. Consider how you could make your material more accessible. For example, you could make an audio clip of simple information about how to access support and what to expect from the coronial process.

Think too about how to use illustration and imagery (e.g. culturally pertinent imagery such as a wheel) in place of text-heavy materials, which will be more accessible to those with English as a second, or third, language.



Voluntary organisations who we spoke to have recommended that first contact is made via their local branches, or by trusted people in the community.

Ensure that face to face meetings are in a place where everyone feels comfortable, and accompanied by community representatives if the bereaved person would prefer.

It is best to avoid mail and written communication to set up appointments and meetings, so you could use voicenotes in WhatsApp instead.



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## Supporting the bereaved person



Given the challenges people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities face in accessing healthcare and services, the bereaved person may need additional support to navigate this. Many also do not understand the practical logistics to be managed after a death.

Working hand in hand with your community contact will be key to understanding what that support should look like. We know that suicide bereavement support services are experts in providing bespoke support tailored to the needs of the person, so with understanding of the community and partnership with the right organisations, you will be well placed to break down some of those barriers.

## Keeping in touch

Voluntary organisations have told us that when a person dies, everyone on site is affected. Your wider support may need to go beyond immediate family and friends to reach more people. Again, this will be best done through community partnership.

In summary, like many underserved groups, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are not 'hard to reach', but need partnership, cultural understanding and adaptability from your service.

## Recommendations at a glance

- Right now, reach out to your nearest community organisation to make contact and talk about their local suicide bereavement needs.
- Open up more referral pathways that do not rely on police, GPs or coroners.
- Think about your materials. Translation services are expensive, but creating illustrations and audio can be a good start.
- Use our links to useful resources and national organisations to continue to build your knowledge, including participating in their bespoke training.



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## Further resources

### **Roma Support Group**

info@romasupportgroup.org.uk

<https://www.romasupportgroup.org.uk/>

[Improving Roma health: a guide for health and care professionals](#)

[Roma Mental Health Advocacy Project \(2015-21\) Self-Evaluation Report](#)

[Roma Mental Health Advocacy Project Evaluation Report April 2012](#)

### **Friends, Families and Travellers**

[fft@gypsy-traveller.org](mailto:fft@gypsy-traveller.org)

<https://www.gypsy-traveller.org>

Policy and publications: <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/policy-publications/>

Training: <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/training-packages/>

### **GATE Herts**

<https://gateherts.org.uk>

### **Southwark Travellers Action Group**

<https://www.southwarktravellersaction.org.uk>