



## Who are 'Gypsies and Travellers'?

The terms Gypsies, Travellers and Roma can be confusing for practitioners. If we want to provide genuinely person centred care it is vital that we understand these terms and apply them correctly. At the same time, it is important that we also recognise that there can be significant cultural and practical differences between individuals within defined groups and whilst having regard for correct group identities, we also endeavour to treat people as individuals. A person's ethnic identity can only be used as a rough guide as to what their culture or traditions might be and we must ensure good listening so that people are able to share information without fear of being stereotyped.

So here is a guide to correct use of the relevant terms within UK society. Four of the words below describe ethnic groups as defined by UK law, whilst others are recognised groups without ethnic minority status.

Gypsies, or more correctly, **Romany Gypsies** – Whilst the origins of Gypsy people are still open to some debate it is generally agreed that there is a group or groups of people who left India over a thousand years ago and dispersed across the globe. Along the way they were defined (usually by others) as being 'Egyptian' and this has become shortened to Gypsy. Gypsy people began occurring in UK records in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and have settled here ever since. Romany is the word that Gypsy people in England and Wales apply to themselves hence the term 'Romany Gypsy'. This term is not used to describe more recent incomers to the UK from Central and Eastern Europe, generally described as Roma (see below). It's important that the difference between these terms is understood and that the words 'Romany' and 'Roma' are not used interchangeably. The word 'Romanian' is also sometimes confused with Romany or Roma. Romanian describes people whose nationality is Romanian (ie from Romania). Romany Gypsies are recognised as an ethnic minority group in UK Law (Race Relations Act (amended) 2000 and Equalities Act 2010)

**Scottish Gypsy Travellers** – Travelling people in Scotland, whilst sharing much in common with other Travelling groups have recently been recognised as a separate ethnic group in Scotland. The origins of Scottish Gypsy Travellers may be linked to Romany Gypsies *and* Irish Travellers as well as having some distinct routes of their own<sup>1</sup>.

**Irish Travellers** – Irish Travellers, whilst having much in common in terms of lifestyle and to some extent shared history with Romany Gypsy and Scottish Gypsy Traveller people, have a different ethnic route and do not come originally from India. The best evidence available suggests that Irish Travellers (or Pavee as they refer to themselves) have been a distinct ethnic group within Irish Society, possibly for millennium. Whilst the numbers of people living as Travellers in Ireland may have swelled during the so called 'potato famine', it is clear that this distinct group existed long before this time. Irish Travellers are recognised as a distinct group in UK law as above.

**Roma** – the word Roma is used as a catch-all term for European 'Gypsies'. It is acceptable usage in the UK although it might be useful to know that in fact there are several distinct groups of people including Roma, Manouche, and Sinti, of Central and Eastern Europe and the Jeniche people of



Switzerland and Germany. During the past 50 years increasing numbers of Roma people, particularly from Eastern Europe, have migrated to the UK. Indeed in some cities there are now more European Roma people than there are Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers. Whilst having some aspects of culture in common with Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers it is important to note that a differing political context across Europe, (including the rise and fall of communist states), have led to significant differences in lifestyle and outlook.

**Showmen** – Families with a tradition of living and working in travelling fairs are usually described as Showmen. This group has not campaigned to be recognised as an ethnic group, preferring to be regarded as a trade group – many are members of the ‘Showmen’s Guild’. Showmen are recognised in UK law, particularly planning law. **Circus People** can be regarded as similar to Showmen although the trades are often different.

**Bargees** – Bargees are people who live on the canals in the UK. Some Bargee families can trace their families back many generations, some families are linked to other Travelling groups such as Romany Gypsies and some are less ethnically connected having taken to the canals in more recent decades.

**New Travellers** – This term is used to describe people who live a travelling lifestyle but whom are not ethnically defined as Gypsies, Scottish Gypsy Travellers or Irish Travellers. The lifestyle choice may have routes as far back as the end of the Second World War but is more commonly connected to the rise of festival culture since the 1960s. Some New Traveller families have lived a travelling lifestyle for several generations and no longer regard themselves as part of the ‘settled’ population.

NB Where groups are ethnically defined it is correct to apply capital letters as one would, for example, to American or Armenian etc. However it is considered polite to use a capital letter for other groups which regard themselves as distinct. Not using capital letters as appropriate is considered offensive.

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<sup>i</sup> See Way of the Wanders, Smith J, Berlinn Ltd, 2012