

# Discrimination as standard

**Lucie Fremlova and Alan Anstead** of *Equality* examine the situation of Roma living in the UK

Roma are the largest ethnic minority group in Europe with an estimated population of 10 to 12 million people. Since their arrival in Europe from India some 700 years ago, Roma people have been politically, socially, culturally and economically marginalised by the dominant populations. Segregation of Roma still exists in many EU member states today; in fact Roma people are arguably the most vulnerable and oppressed ethnic group in Europe.

Many Roma from Eastern Europe, particularly from the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, came to the UK in the 1990s seeking asylum to escape widespread racial persecution and discrimination in their countries of origin. Since the enlargement of the EU in 2004 (when Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovenia and Slovakia joined) and 2007 (when Bulgaria and Romania joined), nationals coming from the new member states have been able to exercise their right to free movement. As a result, many more Roma have moved legally to the UK to find work, equal opportunities and a good education for their children; and to escape racism and discrimination, not least the increasing number of racially motivated attacks on members of their community.

## Where have the Roma settled?

The Roma have established significant communities throughout the UK, particularly in the north of England, the East Midlands, Kent and north and east London. There are also sizeable communities of Roma in Scotland (particularly in Glasgow), Wales (Cardiff) and Northern Ireland (Belfast). These Roma communities originate from the first asylum seekers, and new arrivals tend to settle where they have contacts and family members. Despite the economic recession

and the employment restrictions placed on all nationals from the new EU member states, the number of Roma migrating to the UK has steadily risen. Although it is not known how many Roma live in the UK, the best estimate is around 500,000. Many Roma adults, and most Roma young people in the UK were born here and view this country as their permanent residence.

For many Roma, their living conditions in other EU member states was so poor that a life in the UK, often with salaries below the minimum wage, selling the *Big Issue* or collecting scrap metal is considered by them to be a far better life. The majority of Roma arrive in the UK in search of equal opportunities, a society free of anti-Roma attitudes, and a better economic, social and political future for them and their children. The research findings of the 2009 study conducted by Lucie Fremlova and Heather Ureche shows that some of the most frequent push factors behind the recent movement of Roma to the UK are as follows:

that some of the most frequent push factors behind the recent movement of Roma to the UK are as follows:

- 58% of the respondents said that their primary motivation was work (i.e. the ability to engage within a labour market that does not discriminate against Roma);
- 22% of the respondents stated they had come to the UK in search of a better life for their children (in particular, the ability to be educated in mainstream schools as opposed to a system whereby many Roma children are placed in segregated schools for children with mental and physical disabilities);
- 15% of the respondents listed discrimination in the country of origin as the third most important factor;
- 97% of all the Roma respondents claimed that their life had improved since they moved to the UK.

## Situation in England

The research, which is available online at [www.runnymedetrust.org](http://www.runnymedetrust.org) found that many Roma in England work for low wages on temporary contracts organised by gangmasters and recruitment agencies. Their vulnerability is often exploited. Some agencies charge newly arrived Roma large sums for temporary work

### FACT BOX

- » Every year on 8 April is international Roma Day, held to celebrate Romani culture and to raise awareness of some of the issues facing Roma people.
- » Between 200,000 and 800,000 Roma Gypsies were killed under the Nazi regime in Germany during the second world war.
- » The greatest number live in Central Eastern Europe: Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the former Yugoslavia.
- » Rolling Stones guitarist Ronnie Wood's heritage is Romany Gypsy, according to a 2007 interview in the *Guardian*.
- » Every second Roma person was discriminated against in the past 12 months, according to a survey taken by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights in 2009.



**Young Roma boys chat in their school classroom in Gorton, Manchester**

Photo: Ciara Learning

placements, completing paper work, arranging registration cards and finding accommodation.

Many Roma live in sub-standard accommodation, shared with other families. Severe overcrowding often leads to poor health, and low school attendance and attainment by children, with substantial secondary school drop-out rates. The communities have very little support in some areas and they are often unable to access the services that do exist because of their lack of familiarity with the systems and processes in the UK. Romanian Roma in particular are often the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, living in the most overcrowded conditions, often with more than 15 people in one accommodation unit, and in the greatest poverty. Roma adults are also generally isolated, mixing only with other Roma people.

Employment barriers make social inclusion more difficult. Barriers to employment particularly affect Roma people from Romania and Bulgaria who are, in reality, barred from taking many types of jobs and so obliged to be self-employed or in short-term agricultural work. Such limited options make it much harder for Roma to work legally. There are also restrictions on new EU member state nationals' access to social benefits.

Many local authorities and organisations that provide services are unaware of the numbers, locations or needs of the Roma

residents in their areas. This lack of knowledge limits the ability of these authorities to provide adequate and suitable services for Roma communities.

### **Some good practice, particularly in education**

Research has found that where local authorities have used the Pupil Level Annual School Census to count their number of Roma students, services have been formatted to better reflect the needs of the Roma communities. The Traveller Education Support Service and the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service have been major forces in fostering the social inclusion of Roma, as well as models of good practice. These services are often the first contact, and sometimes the only contact, that Roma have with any officials or service providers.

In the vast majority of cases, the invaluable work done by education officers and schools with Roma pupils and their families has served as a 'springboard' for other agencies to try and reach out to these communities.

Some enlightened local authorities employ Roma as outreach staff to engage Roma families on their children's education, family health and other service provision. But many of these jobs are likely to be cut in 2011 under the Comprehensive Spending Review measures. ●