

Introduction

Traveller and Roma communities in Ireland face persistent and systemic racism within the education system. This racism operates at multiple levels - structural, institutional, and interpersonal - shaping how children access, engage and experience education. Despite policy commitments to equality and inclusion, educational outcomes for these groups remain significantly lower than for the general population.

The latest Department of Education survey of retention found that, of the cohort of Travellers who entered post-primary education in 2016, only 31.4% sat the Leaving Certificate examination, compared with 91.7% of the total population,¹ and just 4.7% of Travellers completed their third-level education compared with almost half of the general population. Roma children also experience exclusion, with only 64.7% transitioning from the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme or other preschool setting into primary education, compared to 92.3% of children nationally.²

These disparities cannot be explained by socio-economic disadvantage alone. They are compounded by racism, manifested in lowered expectations from teachers, discriminatory practices in enrolment and retention, bullying and prejudice within schools, and structural barriers that link ethnic identity to “disadvantage” or “special educational needs.” Inevitably, racism undermines participation and erodes trust in education as a pathway to opportunity.

Terminology and Contradictions

The term *Gypsy* - commonly used in Britain - is not used in Ireland and is rarely used in Northern Ireland. Across Europe, Roma communities consider the term derogatory, particularly because of how it translates in several European languages. Its persistence epitomises a significant contradiction: while education policy aspires to inclusivity, the very categories used can reproduce stigma and misunderstanding.

In Ireland, another contradiction emerges: Roma are sometimes left out of the conversation, even though they face acute barriers. The national discourse often centres on Travellers. Conversely, in other European countries, Roma often dominate policy debate, while Travellers remain overlooked. Pavee Point has consistently advocated for *named inclusion* of both groups, reflected in its title and in Ireland’s National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy.³

¹ Department of Education (2023). Retention Rates of Pupils in Second-Level Schools: 2016 Entry Cohort.

² Department of Education (2024). Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024-2030. Pp. 12-13.

³ Department of Children, Disability and Equality (2024). National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028.

Early Childhood and Primary Education

Engagement with Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has grown but remains volatile. Between 2015/16 and 2018/19, Traveller enrolments in early learning centres rose by 37% (from 1,899 to 2,601), while Roma enrolments increased by 43% (from 475 to 681). However, by 2020/21, Traveller enrolments had fallen by 28.3% to 1,866, while Roma enrolments decreased 25.6%, to 507.⁴ These losses are greater than demographic change or the Covid 19 Pandemic alone can explain; rather, they reflect a decline in engagement with Early Years education, which will significantly impact the educational progress of affected children.

Transition points between different educational settings highlight the disparities between Traveller and Roma children and the wider population. The lower transition rates of Traveller and Roma pupils from preschool settings to primary school, 74% and 64.7% respectively compared to 92.3% of the general population, highlight barriers linked to poverty, housing insecurity, and discrimination.

Post-Primary Education

Post-primary education is where exclusion becomes most visible. Pre-covid, Traveller transfer rates from primary to secondary were 95-98% of that cohort, but by 2023/24 they had dropped to 82.7%. For Roma, the rate fell from 97.8% to 89.1%.

Retention is a major challenge. For the 2016 Traveller cohort entering post-primary education (650 students), 72% completed the Junior Cycle, and only 31.4% sat the Leaving Certificate examination, whereas 91.7% of the general population within that cohort completed the Leaving Cert.

Yet, there are signs of progress. Between 2016 and 2022, Traveller enrolments in Transition Year increased by 74% (from 114 to 198), while enrolments in the established Leaving Certificate grew by 36% (from 303 to 412). This suggests a gradual broadening of engagement with senior cycle education.⁵

.Further Education, Training, and Apprenticeships

Further Education and Training (FET) is a vital pathway. Participation has grown from 1,212 Traveller students enrolled on a FET course or apprenticeship in 2018 to 1,310 in 2022, while Roma enrolments have risen from 302 in 2018 to 332 in 2022.⁶ Completion rates are strong, but not reflected in the numbers of students who achieve formal certification. 86% of Traveller and Roma learners completed or partially completed their courses in 2022, but only 58% of Travellers and 47% of Roma achieved formal certification.

⁴ Central Statistics Office (2022). Age-bands, Census 2022, Table F5097. ELC/SAC enrolments: Pobal, Tables 4.3 and 4.6, in Annual Early Years.

⁵ Department of Education (2023). Table 11 (Travellers in post-primary, by programme).

⁶ SOLAS (2022). Annual Reports for the Traveller the Roma Communities, 2018/19—2022.

Participation in apprenticeships, with direct links to employment, remains underdeveloped but targeted initiatives such as the Traveller Apprenticeship Incentivisation Programme and bursaries for employers launched in 2023 mark important steps forward. However, these programmes must be paired with anti-racism training for providers and employers to tackle entrenched discrimination.

Higher Education

Traveller participation in higher education is extremely limited, but slowly improving. Census 2022 recorded 312 Travellers with a third-level qualification - up from 167 in 2016 and just 89 in 2011.⁷ Nevertheless, this represents only 4.7% of Travellers aged 15+, compared with 47.7% of the general population. In 2022, 36 new Traveller entrants were recorded in higher education.

Historical data illustrates the challenge: new Traveller entrants increased from 23 in 2011/12 to 52 in 2021/22, before falling back to 36 in 2022/23.⁸ Most are mature students, many of whom highlight barriers such as financial insecurity, limited access to IT, and concerns about employment prospects after graduation.

Pavee Point recognises the Irish Government's commitment to including, recognising and valuing all sectors in society, and welcomes its ongoing investment in targeted initiatives for Travellers and Roma. The current Higher Education Authority (HEA) National Access Plan envisages that 0.32% of new enrolments in higher education will be Travellers by 2028. (Targets cannot be set for Roma until the required baseline data are available.)⁹

Conclusion: Racism and Structural Barriers

While there are some encouraging signs of progress, in all educational settings, racism remains the most significant obstacle to Traveller and Roma participation. Traveller identity is often linked to "disadvantage" or "special needs," reinforcing deficit narratives rather than affirming equal dignity. For Roma, inconsistent recognition in policy means their needs are sometimes overlooked altogether. In practice, racism manifests in reduced expectations from teachers, bullying by peers, and exclusion from apprenticeships or workplaces. Even when educational attainment improves, employment exclusion persists, undermining the perceived value of education.

⁷ Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science & Higher Education Authority (2022). National Access Plan 2022–2028.

⁸ Higher Education Authority (2020). Race Equality in the Higher Education Sector.

⁹ Higher Education Authority (2020). Race Equality in the Higher Education Sector.

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SOLAS Annual FET in Numbers; This is FET: Reports on participation and outcomes for the Traveller Community and for the Roma Community, 2018/2019—2022, prepared by the Data Analytics Unit in SOLAS. Authors: Amelia Dulee-Kinsolving and Selen Guerin.

While Traveller and Roma communities face challenges at structural, institutional, and interpersonal levels, there is growing momentum and commitment to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. With targeted policies, inclusive practices, and community engagement, educational outcomes are continuing to improve. Examples of these positive steps include:

- The Department of Education has developed the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) 2024-2030¹, which is part of the wider National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS). The strategy sets out actions to enhance the educational experiences of children, young people, and adults from Traveller and Roma communities, improving education access, retention and outcomes across the entire education system - from Early Years through to higher education and lifelong learning.
- The Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Department for Further and Higher Education Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) developed the National Access Plan (NAP) A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028² includes dedicated funding to make Higher Education more inclusive and diverse, with a range of supports to increase access and participation, with Traveller and Roma communities specifically listed as priority groups.
- The Department of Child, Disability and Equality (DCDE) developed a new funding model, Equal Start³ in 2024, which consists of a set of universal and targeted measures to support access and participation in early learning and care (ELC) and school-aged childcare (SAC) for children and their families who experience disadvantage.

In Ireland, community partnership has played a crucial role in advancing education strategies for Traveller and Roma communities. The active involvement of Traveller organisations has been central to this progress. For instance, Pavee Point participated in delivering consultations with Traveller and Roma communities, which directly informed the development of the actions within the TRES.

Participation rates for Traveller and Roma children are calculated once children start school. This is the percentage of new entrants in mainstream schools who started Junior Infants having come from childcare setting / pre-primary education / early start programme / junior school associated with the school⁴.

Indicator	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Participation rate of Traveller children in early learning and care	77.3%	81.4%	73.5%	74.5%	77.1%
Participation rate of Roma children in early learning and care	68.3%	65.6%	61.0%	64.5%	65.1%

Uptake rates are lower among Traveller and Roma children but there is positive increase, and rates are recovering post-covid. The First 5 strategy commits to increase the uptake rates to the

¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/consultations/traveller-and-roma-education-strategy/>

² <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/national-access-plan-2022-2028.pdf>

³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/equal-start/>

⁴ Departments of Education and Youth, and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (June 2025)

ECCE programme or an equivalent pre-primary programme by Traveller and Roma children and bring it closer to this national average by 2028.

For retention rates among Traveller and Roma students,

The data shows that the percentage of Traveller students in the 2016 cohort who progressed to third year is 90.5%, with the number of Travellers continuing to sit the Junior Cycle examination having increased by 10% over the last six years to 72% since the 2011 cohort. The number of Travellers sitting the Leaving Certificate has increased by 9% over the last six years but remains low at 31.4% compared to 91.7% of the total cohort⁵. For the first time, Roma students were included in the 2017 cohort retention rate, marking a positive development. Data indicates that 92.7% of this cohort completed the three-year Junior Cycle, with 86.8% sitting the Junior Certificate examination. However, this figure dropped to 58.9% for those who sat the Leaving Certificate examination.

Traveller student participation in Higher Education is slowly recovering post-covid. More broadly, enrolment figures have increased from 23 in 2011/12 to 40 in 2023/24. As of now, Roma data is unavailable. Mature traveller students are overrepresented in Higher Education, but it is inaccurate to say that it is mostly mature students.

‘Schools where all or most pupils are Roma’ as demonstrated in Figure 15 (p.35) is not a feature in the Irish education system. Inclusion is the driving policy of all education providers. If Traveller and Roma students are overrepresented in any one school, it is a reflection of social factors (i.e. accommodation influences).

Educational mediators is not a concept used in Ireland. Similar work is carried out by community link workers in Ireland who connect local communities with services and support, often focusing on social inclusion, integration, and specific needs like education for Traveller and Roma children.

Progress is being made across educational settings toward greater inclusion of Traveller and Roma communities. However, there are ongoing issues and the gap in educational outcomes continue. Raising expectations, setting targets, fostering inclusive school environments, and creating stronger pathways to Higher Education and employment, are positive steps but there remains a need to ensure that actions within key strategies are fully implemented so positive commitments lead to real change.

⁵ <https://oide.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Traveller-and-Roma-Education-Strategy-2024-2030.pdf>