

When Poverty Is Judged as Neglect: Why Roma Children Continue to Be Removed from Their Families



In this powerful Perspectives piece, Dr Joanna Kostka, Lecturer in Sociology and Social Work at Lancaster University and Director of Engagement at the Centre for Child and Family Justice Research, draws on her own research alongside national safeguarding reviews and child welfare studies to examine the overlooked realities facing Roma families within the child protection system. Dr Kostka challenges assumptions that parental neglect is the primary cause of intervention, highlighting instead how poverty, systemic marginalisation, and racialised blind spots drive disproportionate outcomes. This critical reflection calls for urgent, poverty-aware, and anti-discriminatory reforms to better protect all children.

April marks [International Roma Day](#), celebrating the resilience, culture, and contributions of Roma communities worldwide. Yet, for many Roma families in the UK, the struggle for justice and equality is far from over. In 2025, [Roma families](#) continue to be disproportionately drawn into the child protection system – not because of parental harm, but because of poverty, discrimination, and systemic oversight. As recent [government-commissioned safeguarding reviews](#) have highlighted, systemic issues of race and ethnicity are “largely absent” from Serious Case Reviews, meaning that racialised patterns of poverty and discrimination are overlooked in official narratives – underscoring the urgent need to recognise that Roma children are among those most invisibly harmed by current structures. Their experiences are a stark reminder that protecting children cannot be disentangled from tackling poverty, racism, and social injustice.

Who are the Roma—and why are Their Experiences Erased in Child Protection?

Roma are [Europe's largest and most persecuted ethnic minority](#). Following the collapse of Communism, many Roma migrated westward in search of security and opportunity, with significant numbers arriving in the UK after the 2004 and 2007 European Union expansions. While the [2021](#)

[Census](#) recorded around 103,100 people identifying as Roma in England and Wales, independent estimates suggest that the true Roma population in the UK [is between 200,000 and 300,000](#). While Roma, Gypsy, and Traveller communities have all historically suffered systemic discrimination and state violence, Roma migrants in the UK face distinct challenges related to newcomer status, including socio-economic exclusion and language barriers. Yet, official data frequently amalgamate these groups under the umbrella term “Gypsy, Roma, Traveller” (GRT), erasing critical differences in experiences, needs, and vulnerabilities. This aggregation not only obscures the specific inequalities faced by Roma families but exacerbates critical data gaps. [Research has consistently shown](#) that racialised minorities are often rendered invisible within child protection systems, with studies highlighting how ethnic disparities in intervention rates persist and are shaped by systemic biases. [Government-commissioned](#) safeguarding reviews have similarly highlighted how issues of race and ethnicity are systematically overlooked. This silence certainly extends to Roma children, who are rarely acknowledged, let alone understood within child protection frameworks.

The Numbers We Do Have Are Alarming

While UK-specific Roma data is limited, what exists paints a grim picture:

- 90% of Roma children in Europe are at [risk of poverty](#) – the highest among all ethnic groups.
- 25% of [Roma children in England and Wales](#) face severe deprivation, compared to just 2% nationally.
- [Thousands of referrals](#) to social services, and over 600 Roma children in care as of 2023, illustrate the system’s disproportionate intervention.

Poverty Is Not Neglect—Yet It’s Treated That Way

Research shows that children from the poorest areas are over [ten times more likely](#) to be placed into care than those from wealthier areas. Recent findings show that in the North of England, [the rate of children in care](#) is 93 per 10,000 – significantly higher than 62 per 10,000 in the rest of England.

While these regional disparities do not specifically map onto Roma populations, they highlight the broader reality that poverty sharply increases the likelihood of child welfare intervention. Given that Roma families are significantly overrepresented among low-income households across the UK, they are disproportionately exposed to these systemic risks. Compounding this, Roma families are often affected by No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) policies, which create extreme hardship. As [Gupta and colleagues argue](#), social workers are placed in impossible positions when they must assess parenting among families subjected to enforced destitution through immigration controls

Moreover, even when poverty alone cannot explain intervention, Roma families are exposed to additional scrutiny through the misinterpretation of their cultural practices.

Practices such as communal child-rearing or non-standard housing arrangements are often pathologized without understanding the cultural and socio-economic context. As one Roma mother reflected:

"We know that social services are not coming for something good. Even if we have good conditions, we feel that they don't respect our rights; they don't want to help, they just want to take something from you as a parent"

This lived experience captures the fear and distrust that too often characterises Roma families' interactions with child welfare agencies, turning what should be a relationship of support into one of surveillance.

Representation Is Not a Box to Tick—It's the Foundation of Change

Training alone will not correct the structural imbalances. Without representation within the system – both at practitioner and leadership levels – interventions risk continuing to be imposed on Roma families, rather than being shaped with them.

Community-led and participatory approaches are crucial. As research [demonstrates](#), Roma families report significantly better outcomes when support services are co-produced, culturally competent, and trust-based. Services must recognise Roma parents' agency rather than frame them solely through the deficit lens of risk and failure.

A Strategy That Names the Problem—and Centres Community

To reverse the harm, the UK must move beyond superficial gestures of inclusivity. It must:

- **Disaggregate data** to specifically track Roma children's involvement with child protection and welfare services;
- **Invest in Roma representation** across social work, family law, and community advocacy, including scholarships and leadership development;
- **Co-produce services** directly with Roma families, building on grassroots resilience rather than imposing top-down models of "support."

Community empowerment is not optional – it is essential if we are to dismantle the systemic barriers that currently funnel Roma children into the care system.

The Bottom Line

When poverty is labelled as neglect, when racialised families are rendered invisible in data, and when services prioritise control over collaboration, the child welfare system perpetuates harm rather than preventing it.

Roma families are not "hard to reach" – they are systematically overlooked. This is not an accident. It is a choice embedded in structural inequality – and it can, and must, be changed.

Protecting children means protecting families. It requires recognising poverty as a systemic injustice, not a parental failing. It demands seeing Roma families not as risks to be managed, but as partners in building a fairer, more just system for all.

Dr Joanna Kostka

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