Gypsies and Travellers in Housing: Challenges and Transitions

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Background/ research locations

- 158 surveys and two focus groups with G&T’s (103 housed) on accommodation and employment related issues (semi rural/small town Kent)
- 20 in depth interviews and 2 focus groups with housed young people, their families, social/local authority housing officers and community workers. (semi-rural Dorset)
- 20 questionnaires, two focus groups and qualitative interviews with housed G&Ts and housing officers (small city Kent)
- 20 questionnaires (research on-going) housed Irish Travellers (Inner London)
- Oral history project (ongoing) with elderly G&T’s on settlement and housed communities in mid 20th C (S. London)

- 68% of total living in social/council housing – social and spatial concentrations of poverty and disadvantage.

‘Any comparative sociology of the novel forms of urban poverty crystallizing in advanced societies at century’s turn must begin with the powerful stigma attached to residence in the bounded and segregated spaces, the ‘neighbourhoods of exile’ to which the populations marginalized or condemned to redundancy by the post-Fordist reorganization of the economy and the post-Keynesian reconstruction of the welfare state are increasingly consigned’ (Wacquant, L. (2008), *Urban Outcasts*, p. 169 italics in original).
Routes into Housing

• A lack of site vacancies was the most common reason (in all study areas) mentioned by just under half of those interviewed.
  ‘I’m not very happy here. We miss the site we don’t like houses. It’s too lonely, I feel closed in and it’s much more expensive with all the bills. We’d really like to live down on the site. We’ve been on the waiting list for 12 years now.’

• 10% entered after failing to get planning permission for a private site (higher degree of owner occupancy among this group)
  ‘I’ll tell you the difference between us and you. You can put in for planning permission. You haven’t gotta say who you are. We put in for it, we’ve gotta put in as a Gypsy. Then, you’ve gotta turn round and prove that you are a Gypsy. Now you tell me if that happens anywhere else’

• Approx one-quarter cited ‘family reasons’ (e.g live near or care for relatives)
  ‘[gone into] housing temporary to look after my grandad when my gran was poorly and then she died. There wasn’t any sites near to them with pitches but we managed to move to where we are and there are other Travellers near us.

• 13% to access health and education
  ‘I only went into the house for the school. I only went in so the kids could go to school. There’s nothing normal with my little boy being kicked to hell every day at school. There’s nothing normal about dog poo being put through my door’
Housing Transitions

• Practical issues – budgeting, financial aspects.
  ‘I couldn’t believe the bills – I was having hot baths twice a day and the kids were running the taps and it was all kushti but the price they charged for it when I got the bill in – I didn’t know what to do – we’d only had gas bottles afore that and changed them when they run low. I just ignored the bills until it all got too bad and I knew we had to do something’

• Literacy and form filling
  ‘Everything needs a form now everything’s form filling. So the form drops through the door and half the time they can’t read it so it goes straight in the bin.’

Dealing with bureaucracy, mistrust of officials and reluctance to engage (e.g Supporting People)
  ‘They don’t like Gypsies and they treat you like dirt. We’re rejected by some services because they don’t want anything to do with us - we need equal rights to be recognized as an ethnic minority and for other people to have more understanding like they do for the others.’
• Unfamiliar physical and spatial layout of housing - relative lack of natural light and smaller ratio of windows to wall space.

‘It’s just staring at the four walls that does my head in. It’s really terrible. I know in a trailer it’s smaller but you’ve got windows all around you and can see out in all directions who’s coming and what’s going on so it just feels bigger.

‘Can’t cope with the stairs I hate those stairs and the children were always falling up them and down them ‘cos they’d not been used to them before and then if they got bruised the school look at you funny.’

• Spatial differences and disorientation in use of internal and external space.

‘only using one room and a kitchen like - there’s too much space in a big house like they put us in and no real space outside either so it’s topsy turvy.’

‘but that is just our way. It don’t mean nothing and how can you say to [son] that he can’t see his cousins and his friends when they come off the site to call?’

• Contrast between the ‘natural’ nomadic life and the ‘synthetic’ nature of house dwelling with its negative impacts on health frequently commented on (esp older members.)

‘Travellers get ill when they first go in houses because the air and light are different it’s artificial not fresh air and daylight [so] a lot of breathing and lung problems start then. Central heating dries the air and is dangerous to the lungs and heart. Travellers are in housing now living in artificial atmospheres with chemicals and breathing it when they sleep. Living under electric light is bad for the eyes and causes headaches.’
Inter community relations

• 70% of entire sample experienced prejudice and hostility from neighbours (though variations: highest in East Kent, lowest in S and Inner London).

_The gorgers cannot take criticism of their kids and if you complain it’ll end up in a fight whereas Travellers, they will take advice and sort their kids out when they play up ‘cos we all know each other so ‘I’ll tell your father’ normally does it._

• Social segregation based on stereotypical images attributed to Gypsies/Travellers and by Gypsies/Travellers to their neighbours.

_They think we’re dirty gippos and we think they’re dirty gorgers and the difference with us and them is that they we’re clean but they really are filthy so we don’t mix_ (male, Kent)

• But clear distinctions between ‘locals’ and ‘others’/ ‘outsiders’ (e.g commuters moving to home counties, gentrifiers etc).

_The travellers were here a long time before they moved the blacks in after the war. Then the yuppies started coming and now the black folk are being pushed out... this was a good area but its changed for the worst since the property developers and professionals started moving in_ (South London)

'I live with mostly Travellers up the same road as me but I live with gorgers as well. I get on quite well with them actually. 'Cos I've been brought up with them I've known them all my life. Most of them live up my road anyway’ (Kent)

‘You've got Londoners moving in and all our locals all the original old locals that we grew up with, me dad grew up with, me aunties and everyone else their children have never had that chance to grow up [together]. All they've grown up with is these Londoners coming in and everyone else from up-country and the cities saying how bad we are. How do they know? They've never lived with us.’ (Kent)
Recreating Community

• Kent, Dorset ‘Gypsy’ estates containing over 50% Gypsy/Travellers residents. Result of housing allocation processes and housing transfers.

• *They put us in substandard housing because that’s what they think we are – substandard people*

• *As much as people try to separate Gypsies in housing in this area, they’re wheeling and dealing to be in houses near their own families, so then you end up around this area with estates full of travellers, and people don’t understand why they want to be together. But it is that family network.*

• *If they come into housing off a site or the roadside they’ve generally lived a very communal type existence and to be put into a house where everybody lives their own lives behind closed doors is a very difficult adjustment to make, hence they tend to bunch together in particular estates and live in the same manner that they’re used to’* (Housing Officer).

• *Through the mutual exchange system they are very mobile within housing and don’t stay put for long, they’re moving around and using houses like wagons the lifestyle doesn’t stop just because they’re in housing* (Housing Officer)

• Moves in the past five years (103 housed G&T households mid Kent)
  None 28%
  Once 18%
  Twice 22%
  Three 18%
  Four 5%
  Five 5%
  Six + 4%
Young People and the Future

• Commentators historical continuity – impending extinction of G&T’s
  ‘...the Gypsy identity to which these young people cling is no longer the same as that of their elders...(we may be) witnessing the last flickering of the Gypsies centuries old resistance to assimilation.

• Neglect dynamic nature of identity in the face of external changes; the decline of nomadism and convergence with working class youth regardless of ethnicity.

• *It will never disappear, because my kids, all these little kids, and their kids there’ll still be Gypsy generations even 20 years down the line. When mine grow up they’ll say ‘my mum was a Gypsy’*
  (female, Dorset)

• *There are loads of Travellers round here and loads of wannabe Gypsies as well. They’re the worst they make it bad for the rest of us. When you tell the gavvers [police] they ain’t Gypsies they say it’s hard to tell these days’*
  (S. London, male)

• Focus groups with young G&T’s stressed that nomadism/ caravan dwelling were not essential to ethnic identity. Emphasis on ethnic origins, identification with cultural norms, rituals (horse fairs, weddings, working practices) and family descent.

• *I hate it when people say ‘I was a Gypsy’ [or] ‘my nan was a Gypsy’ [or] ‘I am a Gypsy because I live in a trailer*

• *‘What bugs me is that just because we live in a house and don’t go travelling that you’re not Travellers. It doesn’t mean that at all, you’re still Gypsies even though you don’t go travelling.*
• New Labour – GTANA’s would identify the need for sites and feed into Regional Strategies.
• Coalition scrapping of regional plans for new sites, restrict and penalise unauthorised encampments and developments and ‘localism’
• *we will radically reform the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live, based on the principles set out in the Conservative Party publication Open Source Planning*” (Cabinet Office, 2010, 11).

• Local opposition – rise of planning refusals and evictions pushing more onto the road or into housing. Wider implications for BME groups – how localised decision making can encompass diversity at the local level.
• Parven (2011) growing polarisation between political engagement between manual and non-manual and between affluent and deprived areas. Localism may
  ‘merely replace one form of tyranny with another, by giving engaged, articulate, advantaged members of local communities the power to dominate and marginalise disengaged, disaffected disadvantaged members of that same local community’