

the police and groups affected by structural inequality

Issue 2 - Winter 2020

Structural inequality refers to forms of inequality which are products of systemic and structural arrangements¹. Caused by an imbalance of political and economic powers, structural inequalities can make it difficult for those impacted to fully access social, economic, justice, health and political institutions.

Experiences of inequality are specific to the individual; however, members of particular communities are more likely to experience its negative implications. Groups include, but are not limited to; the LGBTQI+ Community, Minority Ethnic Groups, Refugees and Asylum Seekers and people with disabilities.

Groups impacted by structural inequality often have a disproportionate rate of contact with the police, with some groups interacting with the police frequently, and others remaining hidden from local policing activity.

This spotlight briefing highlights a number of groups whose interaction with the police may be particularly shaped by their experiences of inequality, and promotes some of the promising work being undertaken nationally to address the potential barriers to police service faced by these groups. It should be noted that there is a small sample of safeguarding reviews related to the specific communities considered within this briefing, and whilst practice may have moved on within the forces represented, it is important that this learning is shared with other forces.

We have included examples of promising practice, but for more information or to share practice, please get in touch with the Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme on the email address provided on page 4. ■

Related NVAP Actions:

[Action 2.7.1](#)

Working with
communities

[Action 2.6.2](#)

Officer Norms

[Action 2.6.3](#)

Recruitment

Trans communities

Trans communities face disproportionate levels of stigma and discrimination, including the denial of opportunities based on their gender identity, exclusion from mainstream service provision and victimisation through hate crimes. Stonewall suggest that a quarter of trans people have faced issues of homelessness², and further research found that 84% of trans survey respondents reported having thought of taking their own lives³. The 2019 Brighton & Hove published [safeguarding adult review \(SAR\) related to Adult X](#) includes discussion of these themes, and shows how the impact of factors such as homelessness and mental health may combine to increase any vulnerability to serious violence and high harm. In this particular SAR the police had appropriately recognised the vulnerability of Adult X, and had made a referral to adult social care related to their self-harm. However, it appears that the police did not follow up or challenge partner agencies, despite neither adult social care nor the mental health team formally investigating X's circumstances. By following up referrals, the police can be better placed to ensure that satisfactory action is taken by partner agencies, and subsequently to challenge where responses are deemed not to be satisfactory.

The review highlights how Adult X's self-harm had been related to them having been subjected to verbal abuse concerning their gender identity. In 2018-19, the police recorded over 2,300 hate crime offences committed against trans people, a 37% increase on the previous year, and estimated to only represent one in five of the true number of offences of this kind². Often LGBTQI+ individuals can feel that their complaints are not taken seriously by the police, and trans victims may feel further stigmatised by police who may repeatedly mis-gender them or not take their experiences seriously⁴. NVAP action 2.7.1 encourages policing to improve reporting from groups which face structural inequality, and forces can use their work in this area to improve reporting of crimes from trans communities.

[Hate Crime Operational Guidance](#) highlights the importance of building trust with trans people by working closely with statutory and third-sector partners, linking practice to research about trans communities in the forces area and by relaying positive messages around outcomes of hate crime investigations. [Merseyside Police](#) have sought to address trans victims' reluctance to report crime by arranging interviews with members of the trans community regarding hate crime and highlighting the avenues of support available to those who are victimised. Video clips from the interviews were shared on social media, in conjunction with third-sector partner Mermaids UK, reaching tens of thousands of people. The force also has a dedicated [trans community advisory group](#), which provides a platform for trans voices and enables a two-way communication stream with the trans community. Through the trans community advisory group, Merseyside has delivered a presentation on how reporting through their dedicated social media desk could help negotiate barriers to reporting over the phone, where Merseyside were aware of a reluctance to report due to trans people being mis-gendered. The findings of Merseyside's work suggest that this method of reporting was preferred by trans people, and its availability may better support reporting from trans communities. ■

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities

Although we have used the term Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities here, it is important to begin this section of the briefing with an acknowledgment that this term encapsulates a range of ethnic backgrounds. Identities include English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish Gypsies, Irish Travellers, Roma, Show People and Boat People⁵. This list is not exhaustive, but is somewhat demonstrative of the diversity of ethnic backgrounds and cultures which are included within the below discussion. It would be useful for forces to research the communities within their force area in order to understand local contexts and support their work with GRT communities. Officers should also ask people from GRT backgrounds how they identify, in respect of the diversity of ethnic backgrounds highlighted here.

The [Traveller Movement](#)⁶ highlight a relationship between the police and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities which is 'affected by distrust and suspicion'. Policing approaches which have been perceived to be focused on criminality rather than potential vulnerability have contributed to a lack of trust in the state from GRT communities, with some distrust also evident from the police's perspective. In the [Tackling Inequalities Faced by GRT Communities Report](#), the GRT Police Association highlighted how policing is 'linking Gypsy and Traveller ethnicity with problems in a way that we do not do with any other ethnic group'⁵.

Learning from serious case reviews (SCRs) has supported this suggestion. For example, a 2014 Hertfordshire [SCR concerning a child from a Traveller background](#) highlighted the difficulties professionals faced when dealing with the family in question; particularly surrounding understandings or preconceptions of the culture and values within GRT communities. The reviewer comments that these were informed by 'stereotypical views of how Travellers behaved'. Similarly, [another 2014 SCR](#), this time from Southampton, highlighted how safeguarding responses to the family in question had been characterised by their ethnic background. The reviewer suggests that agency responses to the family tolerated a level of neglect 'because these children were Travellers'. In this case the level of neglect would have meant immediate referral for a Section 17 'Child in Need' assessment, at the very least, in most Safeguarding Partnerships' thresholds of harm guidance. The police did not submit any safeguarding referrals in relation to this, despite later reflecting that it had been a concern. The review also found that residents of the site had been reporting concerns about the neglect of the children to housing officials rather than directly with police or children's social care (CSC). This suggests a need for police to strengthen trust within the community for ease of reporting and safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults. These children were not given the same level of safeguarding that a child from a non-GRT background might have received, the reviewer suggests.

The findings of this SCR suggest that approaches informed by preconceptions and stereotypes may further impact the trust that GRT communities hold in the police and leave many communities disengaged from policing activities. The reviewer suggests that planned visits to sites or encampments may support the police in better engaging with residents, and could potentially improve trust. Forces should also work collaboratively with partners such as CSC to ensure that efforts to support communities are sensitive and compassionate.

To improve levels of reporting from GRT communities, [College of Policing Hate Crime Operational Guidance](#) also suggests implementing activities to ensure communities are aware of what constitutes hate crime and how it can be reported, and working with representative organisations and Traveller Education Services to increase awareness of issues affecting GRT communities. [Friends, Families and Travellers](#) provide a service directory where local services can be found.

Following the murder of a 15-year-old Irish Traveller boy named Johnny Delaney, [Cheshire Constabulary](#) have shown a commitment to working with GRT communities to improve relations between the two. Key to improving relations and trust in the police, were the attempts by the force to develop an understanding of those within its communities through engagement and the demonstration of a commitment to serving the communities without prejudice or condescension. [Cheshire Constabulary](#) were also involved in the establishment of the [Gypsy/Roma/Traveller Police Association \(GRTPA\)](#). The GRTPA, which importantly demonstrates the representation of GRT communities within the police, are aiming to unite and support officers and staff who are from a GRT background. The stated objectives of the GRTPA include seeking to develop a training package for all police forces across the UK, and to support candidates from GRT backgrounds to join the police. ■

Further information can be found on the [Knowledge Hub](#), under our group:

[The Vulnerability and Violent Crime Programme](#)

Refugees and asylum seekers

Refugees and asylum seekers often leave their home country because it is unsafe for them to continue living there due to situations such as violence, war, extreme poverty, persecution or natural disasters⁷. In many instances, it is the actions of the state which have forced refugees and asylum seekers to seek re-location, and many may face traumatic experiences in transit countries on their journey to the UK. This means that for many, perceptions of the police and wider enforcement agencies have been built on previous negative experience and interaction. [The 2017 serious case review relating to 'YT'](#) highlights the importance of the police appreciating the previous experiences of an individual arriving in the UK, with the individual in question becoming agitated whilst held in police custody, as police sought to verify their age.

Previous negative experiences of police and state activity, and any other traumatic experience, can understandably lead to a fear and distrust of authority figures. A consequence of this distrust of authority, coupled with experiences of structural inequality (such as restricted access to public funds and language barriers) and the disruption faced by a refugee or asylum seeker, is a potential disconnect between them, police work and other social activity. One way that police can address this is to work with refugee communities in their area to improve any issues of mistrust, informing them of their rights and responsibilities in the UK and providing communities with links into the force to improve the ease of access to force activity.

Refugees and asylum seekers are disproportionately impacted by the risk of trafficking⁸, and further learning related to this point can be found in the 2018 [SCR related to Child C](#) in Shropshire, which highlighted the need for practitioners to consider the possibility of refugees or asylum seekers having been trafficked into the UK. The findings of the review point to the importance of maintaining professional curiosity when working with refugees and asylum seekers in order to recognise those who have been trafficked. Further to this, the review suggests that 'the first 24-48 hours are an essential period for gathering information from young people who have potentially been trafficked to safeguard their welfare should they go missing or be abducted'. The Children's Society have also produced a best practice guide related to speaking to a migrant young person in the first 72 hours they come into local authority care, which can be accessed [here](#).

An example of promising practice related to supporting refugee and asylum seeker communities can be found in [Cheshire Constabulary](#), where the police were heavily involved with supporting Syrian families upon their arrival to the area. This support included visits to the families to introduce themselves, communicating with the families through interpreters or mobile phone software. Officers have since maintained ongoing visits, and two of the adult Syrian Refugees have been invited by Cheshire to sit on a Community Cohesion Panel. Members of the police were also able to attend a conference delivered by the Local Authority, aimed at increasing the understanding of the families culture and communities, to inform any ongoing contact with them. Such activity with Refugee families can work towards improving their perceptions of policing and authority, and can positively impact their re-settlement within their new communities.

In order to improve reporting experiences in particular, The Children's Society recommend the use of official interpreters when communicating with refugees and asylum seekers who are seeking the support of the police, as communicating through relatives or other community members may leave them uncomfortable disclosing any crimes or issues that have affected them. ■

Useful Reading:

[LGBT in Britain: Hate Crime and Discrimination](#)

[LGBT in Britain: Trans Report](#)

[LGBT+ mental health factsheet](#)

[Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities](#)

[Gypsy and Traveller Myth Buster](#)

[Gypsy, Roma and Traveller history month](#)

[10 facts about refugees and asylum seekers](#)

[Refugees Welcome? The Experience of New Refugees in the UK](#)

[A long-term commitment: integration of resettled refugees in the UK](#)

[College of Policing Hate Crime Operational Guidance](#)

Key questions for consideration...

- Has your force assessed the needs of communities in its area and prioritised actions to make sure that policing services are provided fairly to all?
- Does your force have a policy in place for working with groups impacted by structural inequality?
- Is there relevant training available for staff, both operational and strategic?
- Does your force work with communities to build and maintain better relationships?
- Are groups impacted by structural inequality represented within your force, or at an advisory level?
- Does your force engage with agencies working with groups impacted by structural inequality?
- Has your force worked to implement systems which make accessing police support easier for groups impacted by structural inequality?

References:

1. Rahman, K. (2018) Constructing and Contesting Structural Inequality, *Critical Analysis of Law*, 5 (1), pp. 99-126.
2. Stonewall (2017) *LGBT in Britain: Hate Crime and Discrimination*. Available at: <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/lgbt-britain-hate-crime-and-discrimination>
3. Rethink Mental Illness (2017) *LGBT+ mental health*. Available at: <https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/wellbeing-physical-health/lgbtplus-mental-health/>.
4. Stonewall (2018) *LGBT in Britain: Trans report*. Available at: https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/lgbt_in_britain_-_trans_report_final.pdf.
5. House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2019) *Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities*. London: House of Commons.
6. The Traveller Movement (2018) 'Policing by consent: Understanding and improving relations between Gypsies, Roma, Irish Travellers and the police'. Available at: https://www.travellermovement.org.uk/phocadownload/userupload/criminal-justice/TTM-Policing-by-consent_web.pdf.
7. Amnesty International (n.d) *Refugees, Asylum-Seekers and Migrants*. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/>.
8. Wilson, A. (2011) Trafficking Risks for Refugees. *Third Annual Interdisciplinary Conference on Human Trafficking*. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=humtraffconf3>.

Upcoming VKPP Publications:

Learning from Safeguarding Adult Reviews, a second briefing (Winter 2020/21)

Learning from Serious Case Reviews, a fourth briefing (Spring 2021)

Issue 3 Spotlight Briefing (Spring 2021)