Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta an Atlantaigh

Atlantic Technological University

Barriers to Higher Education for the Roma Community In Ireland

2025 REPORT

PATH
Programme for Access to Higher Education

Contents

List of figures

Acronyms

CSO - Central Statistics Office

DEY - Department of Education and Youth

DEIS - Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School

DCEDIY - Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

DFHERIS - Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science

ECCE - Early Childhood Care and Education

ECRI - European Commission against Racism and Intolerance

EDI - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

EEM - Ethnic Equality Monitoring EU - European Union

ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages

FET – Further Education and Training

GDPR - General Data Protection Regulation

HEA - Higher Education Authority

HEAR - Higher Education Access Route

HEI – Higher Education Institution

HSE - Health Service Executive

ICESCR - International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

ICT - Information and Communications Technology

NAPAR - National Action Plan Against Racism

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

NDP - National Development Plan (NDP)

NTMABS - National Traveller Money Advice and Budgeting Service

NTRIS - National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PATH - Programme for Access to Higher Education

STAR - Supporting Traveller and Roma

SUSI - Student Universal Support Ireland

TRES - Traveller and Roma Education Strategy

WHO - World Health Organisation

The Author

Leonie McDonagh is a final year PhD student at ATU, undertaking ethnographic research with the Roma community in Ireland. Her work is grounded in participatory methodologies that are non-interrogative and community-led, ensuring that Roma voices are central to the research process. The project is driven by a strong commitment to social justice and aims to address historical silencing by creating space for meaningful input from marginalised groups.

Leonie holds a first-class honours degree in Sociology and Politics (2020), during which she conducted a dissertation on societal perceptions of unmarried motherhood in 20th-century Ireland, with a particular focus on the Tuam Mother and Baby Home. This early research reflects her longstanding interest in the intersections of marginalisation, memory, and institutional power. Her current research not only contributes to academic knowledge but also has practical implications for policy and advocacy. By working closely with Roma individuals and organisations, Leonie seeks to produce findings that are both ethically grounded and socially impactful.

Positionality statement

As the report was authored by a researcher who was simultaneously conducting ethnographic fieldwork with Roma communities across Ireland, it is possible that this concurrent engagement influenced aspects of the report's methodology, interpretation, and presentation. The dual role mayhave shaped the analytical lens through which findings were framed, reflecting the researcher'songoing immersion in the field.

Acknowledgements

This report was undertaken with the support of PATH 5 funding from the Higher Education Authority, which is gratefully acknowledged. The author also wishes to recognise the contributions of the ATU Traveller and Roma Advisory Board members, chaired by Mr. Rory McMorrow, whose insights and guidance were integral to the completion of this work.

Finally, sincere gratitude is offered to Roma community members, educators, and representatives from across the country for their immensely valuable contributions.

1. Purpose of report

In 2024, Atlantic Technological University (ATU) commissioned a report examining the barriers and challenges experienced by the Roma community in Ireland. The report was developed to inform the work of ATU's Traveller and Roma Advisory Group, established in 2023, by providing evidence-based insights into the educational needs of Roma individuals.

Its primary aim is to support the development and prioritisation of initiatives that will enhance Roma participation in higher education. This report is funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) under the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH)5. ATU secured funding under PATH 5 (2023-2025) to deliver a number of initiatives aimed at addressing educational needs of Traveller and Roma communities.

2. Introduction

Throughout history the Roma community has experienced and continue to experience severe social and economic disadvantage. Such disadvantages likely impact on their access to and performance within the education system. As education is the cornerstone of social inclusion, economic empowerment, and personal growth, it is necessary to highlight and ultimately address these obstacles.

Despite initiatives and regulations designed to advance educational equity, Roma people frequently encounter challenges that impede their academic advancement, such as discrimination, socioeconomic limitations, and language barriers. These challenges contribute to cycles of marginalisation and thus exclusion from larger civic engagement.

3. The Roma Community in Ireland

The Roma community is a distinct minority ethnic group. Census (2022) included Roma for the first time and as a result identified 16,059 Roma living in Ireland (DCEDIY, 2025).

This figure is likely underestimated due to factors such as overcrowded accommodation and people who may choose not to openly identify themselves. Roma are not a homogenous group. Among Roma in Ireland there is much diversity in terms of (but not limited to) subgroup, religion, nationality, legal status, language and socioeconomic status.

3.1 The living conditions of Roma in Ireland

To present the barriers Roma face in pursuit of education, it is important to first consider the living conditions of Roma in Ireland. Educational, socioeconomic and environmental justice are closely interwoven with the Social Determinants of Health. Therefore, topics relating to education must be addressed within a socio-economic and environmental context which supports social justice and human rights.

The Roma Needs Assessment (2018) revealed the high levels of poverty faced by Roma in Ireland. According to the research, 25% of children had gone to school hungry, 17.6% of respondents relied on begging for money to survive, and 14% of respondents had no income (Pavee Point, 2018). Additionally, 66.3% of respondents said they could not always keep their houses warm, and 49.5% said they do not always have enough food (Pavee Point, 2018). Furthermore, 6.6% of respondents said they were homeless (Pavee Point, 2018). Throughout the research, rat infestations in lodgings were also frequently discovered (Pavee Point, 2018). Comparable housing outcomes were reported by the Tipperary Roma Health and Accommodation Pilot Project (HSE, 2024).

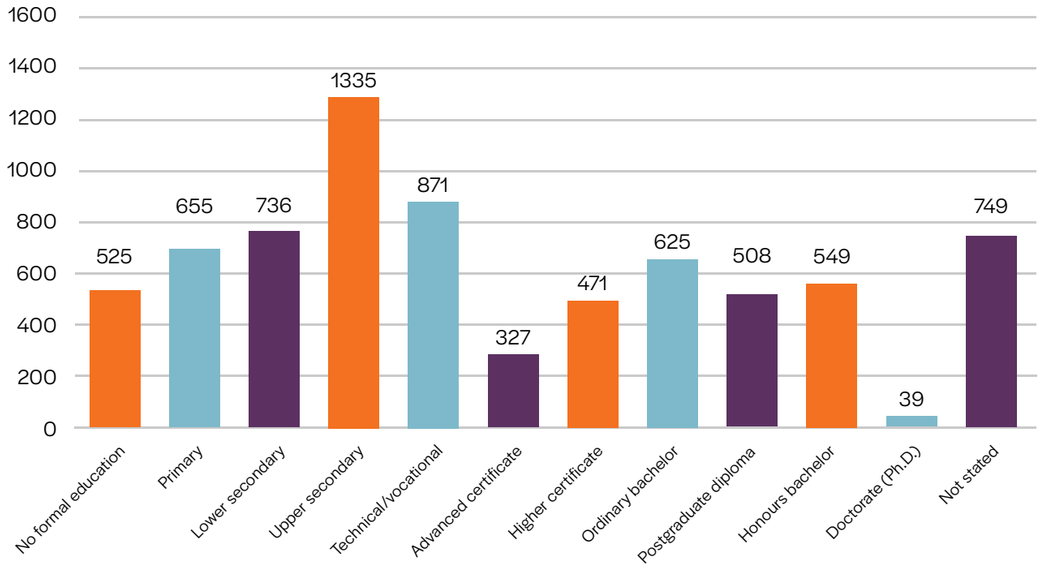
Inadequate living conditions were marked by frequent reports of mould and overcrowding in houses. In addition, regular misuse of tenancy rights, and landlords refusing to accept housing aid payments were among the high levels of discrimination identified. While Ireland has enacted legislative measures intended to protect Roma communities (as outlined in Section 5), research clearly indicates that these provisions remain insufficient. For instance, the Equal Status Acts 2000–2018 do not explicitly extend protection to Roma individuals, nor do they address discrimination based on socioeconomic status (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2024).

This gap is particularly concerning when considering the intersectional nature of Roma identities and the compounded experiences of marginalisation they may face. It is equally important to acknowledge the lives lived by many Roma prior to arrival in Ireland, with EU research showing that compared to 17% of non-Roma people in the EU, around 80% of Roma are in danger of poverty (National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, 2017).

Pavee Point (2018) argues that Roma families place a high value on education, with parents actively working to ensure their kids attend school. Research also shows that negative experiences of older generations naturally influence how they view their children's education. For example, concerns about the loss of cultural values and fears of bullying or discrimination are factors that contribute to absenteeism and early departure among Roma students (Fensham-Smith 2014 and Sime et al. 2017).

4. A profile of Roma inclusion in the Irish education system

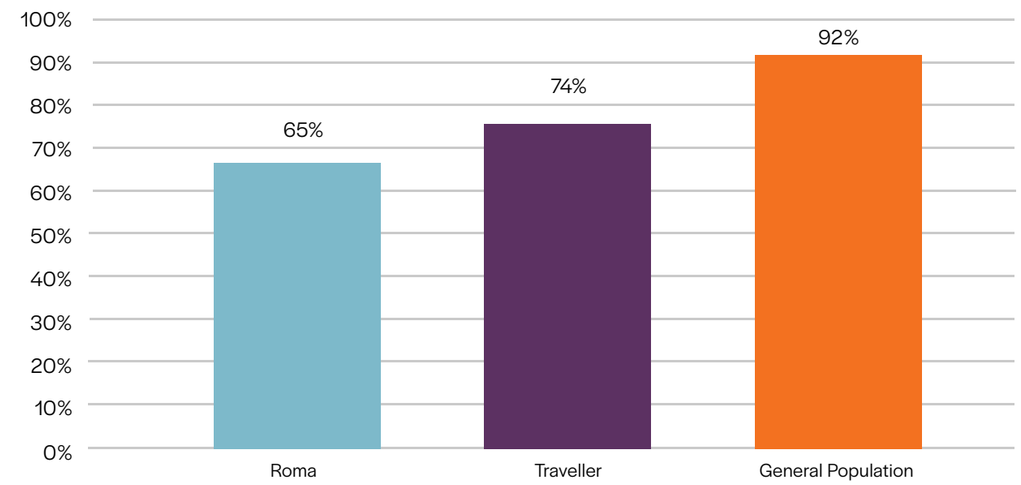
Figure 1 : Educational attainment levels of Roma aged 15 and older in Ireland



(Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), 2025, p. 29).

4.1 Early childhood

Figure 2 : Percentage of Roma beginning Junior Infants after attending a preschool/ECCE Programme in comparison with the Traveller and general population



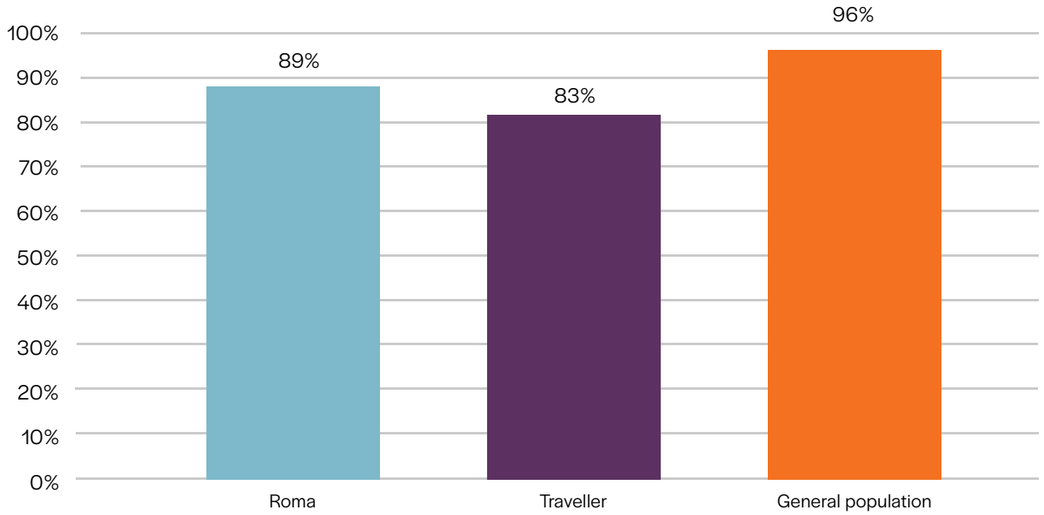
(Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2025, p. 26).

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2025) found that Roma children beginning junior infants were less likely than their peers to have previously attended an Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme or another pre-school setting. In 2022/2023, 65% of Roma children entered Junior Infants classes in primary school from the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme or another pre-school setting.

In comparison, approximately 74% of Traveller children entered Junior Infants from the same route. In terms of the general population of Ireland, 92.3% of children entered the primary school system from either the ECCE Programme or another pre-school setting.

4.2 Primary

Figure 3 : Transfer rates from primary to post-primary education comparing Roma, Traveller and general population



According to DCEDIY (2025), in 2022–2023, approximately 89% of Roma children transferred from primary to post-primary education which is higher than the average transfer rate for Travellers (83%) but lower than the average transfer rate for the general population at almost 96% for the same period.

4.3 Post primary

According to DCEDIY (2025), in 2022, 11.2% of the Roma community aged 15 and older completed upper post-primary education, making it the most prevalent educational level among this demographic. 4.43% of the Roma population in this age group in Ireland reported having no formal education.

4.4 Further and higher education

Third level is the highest level of education for the majority of Irelands general population (CSO, 2024). According to (CSO, 2022) 34% of the general population were recorded as educated to third level whereas this figure fell to 26% for the Roma population (Carron-Kee et al., 2024). This figure may in fact be understated as according to Prieto (2007 as cited in Kende et al., 2024) Roma individuals self-identify at a low rate in research that requests ethnic data. Prieto (2007 as cited in Kende et al., 2024) argues that the root causes of this occurrence are improper data collection methods and individuals fears of discrimination.

According to a report by A Report by the National FET Statistics, Data and Insights Unit in SOLAS 410 students of Roma ethnic background were enrolled in Further Education and Training (FET) at the time of their report (Walsh and Guerin, 2023). Of these 410 students, 57% were female and 71% were older than 25 (Walsh and Guerin, 2023). About 53.3% (216 learners) reported having only completed a lower post-primary, primary, or lower level of school prior to using the FET system (Walsh and Guerin, 2023). Enrolments were mostly concentrated in areas such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), with 70.8% of the broad field of study consisting of generic educational programs (Walsh and Guerin, 2023). Finally, engagement levels were found to be high with engagement was high, with 89% of the Roma enrolments resulting in a partial or full course completion during 2023 (Walsh and Guerin, 2023).

5. Political framework

Governmental policies and initiatives have attempted to address disparities that Travellers and Roma face in a number of ways. The following section outlines key national policies.

5.1 National Action Plan Against Racism (NAPAR)

The National Action Plan Against Racism (NAPAR), which was published in March 2023 and aligns with the EU anti-racism action plan 2020–2025, lays out a strategy for to address all forms of racial and ethnic prejudice. Over a five-year period, the NAPAR sets out five main goals for tackling racial and ethnic disparities of all types, including those experienced by Traveller and Roma communities, especially by attempting to better understand prejudice against these groups (DCEDIY, 2023).

5.2 National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) I and II

The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) aims to tackle exclusion and address the inequalities faced by Travellers and Roma in Ireland. It was preceded by the National Traveller and Roma Integration Strategy (2011). NTRIS I (2017-2021) aimed to change the focus of government policy regarding Travellers and Roma from “integration” to “inclusion” which respects their right to retain their cultural identity while also emphasising the need for assistance for full inclusion in Irish society. Assessments of NTRIS I cited problems with monitoring and implementation, a lack of deliverables and indicators to gauge the effectiveness of activities, and a lack of clarity on who held responsibility for carrying out the tasks outlined in the report were among the themes brought up in these assessments (Kavanagh et al., 2023). NTRIS II is operational from 2024 to 2028 and was published in July 2024. It followed on from extensive consultation with Traveller and Roma communities as well as other stakeholders. Concerns about NTRIS I, including those mentioned in the Centre for Effective Services report (Kavanagh et al, 2023), are intended to be addressed by in NTRIS II. There are nine themes with an associated action plan (two two-year plans) which details actions, deliverables and the responsible department, agency or NGO. The first action plan was launched in line with the strategy, to serve as a roadmap for its execution. The second two-year action plan will be informed by a mid-term evaluation. Additionally, NTRIS II recognises the importance of other National strategies, such as the National Action Plan Against Racism (2023) and the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (2024).

5.3 Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES)

In July 2024, the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (2024-2030) was also published. Stakeholders from all levels of the educational system, including early learning, primary, post-primary and higher education, and Traveller and Roma children were consulted[1] in the development of the strategy. TRES (2024-2030) provides a comprehensive implementation plan outlining activities, deadlines, accountable departments, and result indicators for the years 2024–2026. TRES attempts to address many of the concerns raised by critics of NTRIS I.

6. Methodology

6.1 A desk-based literature review

An initial desk-based literature review was carried out by first determining key search terms. These terms were then systematically searched for on academic databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar. Efforts were made to focus on recent Irish literature to ensure optimum relevance and specificity; however, due to a scarcity of sources, both older and European Union-based studies were also incorporated. This inclusive approach allowed for a more robust and comprehensive review, integrating both local and international perspectives. By doing so, the review not only addressed gaps in the existing literature but also strengthened the overall data quality and contextual understanding.

6.2 Qualitative semi-structured interviews

As semi-structured interviews allow for a more thorough examination of individual viewpoints and experiences while still preserving a flexible approach, they were opted for over other methods such as surveys or focus groups. According to Bryman (2012) surveys may risk pigeon holing responses. Bryman (2012) also references focus groups as potentially more time consuming to conduct and analyse than individual interviews.

As a fundamental technique in qualitative research, semi-structured interviews help record participants’ opinions, beliefs, and experiences. Guided by an interpretative framework, the information gathered is seen as context-bound subjective insights from the participants (Nathan, Newman, & Lancaster, 2019), rather than an inarguably factual truth about a circumstance or event. Although the exploratory nature of qualitative interviews allows for the acquisition of rich data that addresses problems about which little is currently known, the data obtained from these interviews might not be generalised (Nathan, Newman, & Lancaster, 2019). However, by utilising contextualisation and comparison with other research outcomes the qualitative data gathered contributes valuable knowledge. In accordance with the literature, questions were pre-planned with open-ended answers. However, by utilising contextualisation and comparison with other research outcomes the qualitative data gathered contributes valuable knowledge.

[1] *Consultation on the development of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/consultations/traveller-and-roma-education-strategy/*

In accordance with the literature, questions were pre-planned with open-ended answers. However, these questions were primarily used as conversational prompts, for when the conversation became sparse. Discussions were kept as open as possible and data collection sessions as inductive as possible.

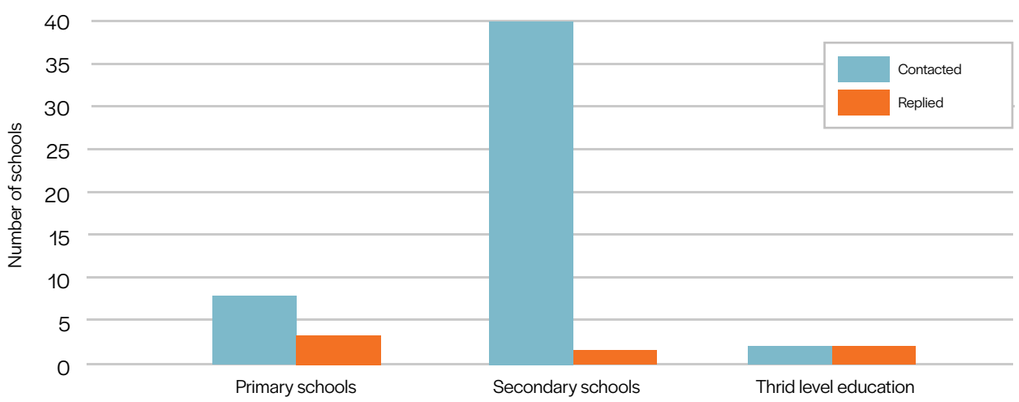
6.3 Sample selection

From the outset the plan was to include one representative from each of the following:

1. Primary School Representative
2. Post Primary School Representative
3. Third Level Representative
4. Community Representative

Purposive sampling was used to identify schools that would potentially have Roma pupils. Additionally, the Charter of Educate Together schools promise a guarantee of "equality of access and esteem to children irrespective of their social, cultural or religious background" (Educate Together, 2015). With this knowledge, Educate Together schools were contacted first.

Figure 4: The number of representatives contacted in each education level and associated responses.



6.4 Communication method

Email was the main form of outreach with phone calls and follow up text messages and networking also used in some instances. Participant F and G mentioned how reaching out to individuals through networking is particularly useful as it helps to ensure communication is not lost amongst the large volume of correspondence schools receive.

6.5 Primary schools

Seven primary schools were contacted and four responded. Three ultimately participated in the study while the other individual was unable to meet due to other commitments.

6.6 Post-primary schools

Thirty nine post-primary schools across Ireland were contacted and one representative replied and participated. Networking was also attempted via professionals who were familiar with individuals who worked in second level education. It was through this networking that the post-primary teacher who did participate, was identified.

6.7 Higher Edaucation

Two third level representatives were contacted and both participated. It is however important to note that the third level representatives contacted were not only familiar with the author of the report but were also from EDI and Access and Widening Participation functions and therefore social desirability bias could potentially have had an influence on this high success rate.

6.8 Community representatives

Two community representatives were contacted and participated, social desirability bias may have once again influenced this high success rate as both community representatives were familiar with the author and both were Roma community workers.

6.9 Participant Profiles

Eight interviews were conducted with the representative groups. Table 1.0 outlines the participant profiles.

Participant	Position
A	Primary school principal
B	Primary school teacher
C	Third level representative
D	A community development worker who is also a member of the Roma community
E	Third level representative
F	Primary school home school and community liaison representative
G	Post-primary school representative
H	A homework club co-ordinator who is also a member of the Roma community

6.10 Data analysis

6.10.1 Analysing the literature

A thematic framework was used to include key concepts and theories relevant to the study. Each source was systematically categorised based on its principal findings, which allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and emerging themes. Comparative analysis was then used to highlight areas of both commonality and divergence among the sources, while a critical appraisal of methodological rigour and data validity further refined the analysis. This structured analysis not only signified the strengths and limitations within the existing body of work but also facilitated the bridging of insights from recent Irish literature with broader EU-based perspectives.

6.10.2 Analysing the data collected

To analyse data collected, thematic analysis was used. This analysis in turn generated the themes which have guided the development of this report. Thematic analysis is a process used to unveil themes within a qualitative data set. It was an ideal method as it is a suitable approach for tackling manageably sized datasets in instances where participant viewpoints and experiences are central to the research question (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). Braun & Clarke (2006) suggest that it is a great starting point as 'it provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other kinds of analysis' (p.78). Thematic analysis includes both uncovering and interpreting the patterns and themes presented by the data set (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). The six steps taken to analyse the data collected for this report are detailed below and were directly inspired by the six-step process presented by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Step 1: Becoming acquainted with the study data
Step 2: Generate initial codes
Step 3: Generating initial themes
Step 4: Reviewing themes
Step 5: Defining and naming themes
Step 6: Producing the report

7. Findings and discussion

The following section will present the findings from both the literature reviewed and the qualitative interviews conducted. The conceptual foundations of the research are established by discussing the themes gathered from the literature. Insights from the interviews are also presented where appropriate. This section will be presented under the following themes:

a) General findings

- Ethnic equality monitoring
- Cultural competency
- Intersectionality and superdiversity
- Poverty
- Accommodation
- Health
- Language barriers

b) Education Specific Findings

-Educator diversity
-Discrimination and segregation in education
-Affordability - visible and less visible costs
-Costs specific to higher education

7.1 General findings

7.1.1 Ethnic equality monitoring

The Council of Europe's Convention ETS 108, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679, and the Data Protection Acts of 1988 and 2003 are important legislative considerations surrounding ethnic data collection (Rooney & Canavan, 2019). There are legitimate reasons for ethnic equality monitoring (EEM) across different services and sectors, however, challenges also exist. Challenges include limited experience, potential misuse, missing or incorrect information, costs, and distrust (Rooney & Canavan, 2019). Methods for gathering ethnic data may include surveys, censuses, administrative records, or qualitative approaches. Proponents contend that by recording ethnicity, schools and colleges might more rapidly detect linguistic or cultural challenges and customise resources like language support or cultural integration initiatives. Additionally, by identifying ethnicity-related trends in academic achievement, schools may be able to more effectively address structural injustices and provide focused interventions to enhance results for underperforming groups.

Ireland is one of the few EU countries which places a statutory duty of equality data collection on public bodies, creating an important context in which to analyse ethnic equality monitoring (Hannigan et al., 2020), recognising that without complete data, it is difficult to create and carry out effective policies to counteract racism and intolerance. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) suggested almost 30 years ago that Member State governments establish an equality monitoring system by gathering ethnic data (ECRI, 1996: 6) and in accordance with European laws and regulations on data-protection, where and when appropriate data may be collected which will aid in assessing and evaluating the experiences of groups who are especially vulnerable to discrimination (ECRI, 1996: 6).

One year prior to the ECRI recommendation, the Task Force Report of the Travelling Community (1995) suggested putting in place systems to find, gather, and evaluate information on Travellers' access to and results from a range of services, such as health, education, and training. The necessity for accurate and ethnic statistics to guide effective, well-targeted, and well-implemented policies to fight prejudice and promote social inclusion has continuously gained support from various organisations, such as Pavee Point (2015) and the National Traveller Money and Budgeting Service (NTMABS), (2014). In addition to providing justification for positive and affirmative action to guarantee that the unique needs of minority ethnic groups are met, the gathering and tracking of ethnic data may be utilised to eradicate discriminatory practices ECRI, 2006).

Participant A was able to identify how when working alongside the STAR (Supporting Traveller and Roma) project, STAR workers may reference how many families or children of interest attend the school. In these instances, the participant (who is the school principal) may have an idea as to which families or children the programme applies to, but ultimately there is no formal way to confirm this, as the school is not required to collect data on pupil ethnicity. In a similar vein, this participant also reported that extra resources like stationery kits set aside for Roma children, risk being under used or given to children who aren't from the Roma Community. Although educators may have a good idea who these resources are for, resources would be better assigned based on facts rather than assumptions.

It is, however, important to note that measuring ethnic identity has historically been a difficult subject and it is, therefore, critical that we think about how to gather information about ethnicity in an ethically responsible manner (Burton et al, 2010). Furthermore, the fact that many individuals may be reluctant to disclose their ethnicity and that data shouldn't be gathered without consent (Egenberger, 2007) presents some challenges. Egenberger (2007) makes the argument that to achieve substantial change with regard to Roma being discriminated against within the education system that policymakers need adequate information like accurate ethnic data. Russell et al., (2021) found some relevant concerns

regarding minority groups access to adequate housing. These metrics might be used to measure progress or point out stagnation in Ireland's attempts to provide adequate housing, provided that current data gaps are filled (Russell et al., 2021). It was found that a monitoring system can also assist in identifying populations that experience substandard housing in a variety of ways, exposing inequalities that need focused policy solutions (Russell et al., 2021). One drawback of such a system is that it does not address root causes. However, the results can be used as a starting point for more thorough investigation to better identify and solve the reasons behind substandard housing experienced by the Roma Community (Russell et al., 2021).

Research by College Connect (2025) demonstrates that many Roma may be apprehensive about sharing their identity.

> *"And so, I really did hide my ethnicity throughout post-primary school. And it felt as if I was alone in this world, I always knew there was something wrong that there was some type of injustice but, I couldn't really pinpoint what it was."*
>
> *(College Connect, 2025, p. 63).*

> *"Throughout my educational journey, I hid my identity. Yeah. And who I am as a person mainly because it's a defence mechanism to have equal treatment."*
>
> *(College Connect, 2025, p. 17).*

College Connect participants also noted that it should not be necessary for pupils to "prove" their ethnic background. They emphasised that pupils must be properly informed about the purpose of this data collection and that ethnicity should be self-declared.

A threat to EEM is that many institutions may view collecting ethnic data as an administrative process rather than to support the advancement of equitable systems, meaning EEM does not always live up to its ideal as a means for tracking inequality (Aspinall & Anionwu, 2002). On a related note, Participant C, a HEI representative who took part in data collection, pointed out how perhaps the risks of collecting ethnic data primarily come down to the way it's carried out. This participant argued that perhaps those who are submitting their data may not be adequately informed on why the data is collected and how it will be used as well as the overall benefits of the process. It is, therefore, reasonable to say it is crucial that anyone collecting or working with ethnic data should have cultural competency training and an understanding of legitimate and ethical confines of data collection. Such a development could potentially improve the ways in which data collected via current methods (such as the HEA Equal Access Survey carried out in higher education) is interpreted and utilised.

Furthermore, participant E made an observation relating to how minority ethnic groups may be disproportionately burdened with supplying information concerning their personal data as well as incidents of injustice. On the other hand, organisations in the public sector are rarely compelled to reveal or consider their own actions, which means that important information about how services interact with Roma is not routinely recorded. This disparity throws an excessive amount of responsibility on marginalised communities like Roma, and particularly the small number of individuals who access higher education to advance systemic changes.

7.1.2 Cultural competency

Acquiring knowledge about the specific norms, behaviours, and practices that exist within a given cultural group is the primary principle of cultural competency (Garran and Rozas, 2013). Participant D, a Roma man, highlighted the importance of enhancing cultural competency among professionals. The participant spent some time discussing the value of having Roma cultural competency training delivered by Roma individuals. Such an approach would ensure educators develop a deeper understanding of Roma culture, challenges and perspectives. It would also contribute to the development of mutual trust, engagement, and ultimately positive change. Participant C also spoke about how although biases are inevitable, we need to ensure professionals are developing skills which encourage them to both acknowledge and challenge their own pre-conceived biases.

In the context of educational credentials, research indicates that in the European Union, and particularly in France, negative attitudes to Roma decrease with higher levels of educational attainment (Loveland and Popescu, 2016; Mayer et al., 2019). With such training, it may be possible to have much more culturally aware educators. Although, it is equally important to acknowledge that research shows how people often overstate their support for immigrants in order to make themselves appear more socially desirable (Creighton et al., 2022 and Laurence et al., 2024).

The importance of cultural competency training was voiced by all participants in the study. A survey taken place under the 2023–2025 Yellow Flag Programme cycle, found that the majority (81%) of school employees who participated had never undertaken intercultural or anti-racism training in an educational setting (Activelink, 2025). Participant G (like all participants) stressed the importance of cultural competency training. However, they also stated their belief that the children in their school would also benefit from much more cultural education.

Mandatory cultural competency training for Ireland's educational workforce would be a worthwhile step towards increasing equitable opportunities and experiences within our educational system. Delivered directly by the communities themselves, such training would have the opportunity to not only enhance cultural competency among educators, but it could also help empower marginalized groups and challenge stereotypes. As our education provision continues to grow diversely, such training would reinstate our education systems commitment to equitable outcomes and ensure educators are aware of the intersectionality and superdiversity present amongst the communities they teach.

7.1.3 Intersectionality and superdiversity

Intersectionality, first introduced by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, places emphasis on the 'multidimensional' importance of marginalized individuals' lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989: 139). Roma are not a homogenous group, and their identities are shaped by intersecting elements such as subgroups, religions, and socioeconomic status. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that Roma also experience barriers relating to other elements of their identity such as socioeconomic status, sexuality, gender, and ability.

For example, intersectionality is likely to play a role in shaping the educational experiences of Roma girls, as some of these girls may face additional pressures in comparison to their male peers. As Participant H noted, cultural expectations place greater responsibility on girls to help with household chores and lean into traditional gender roles, where women have the majority of household responsibilities. Education systems may more successfully remove the particular obstacles experienced by Roma females, Roma people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups in the community by implementing intersectional, customised approaches responding to individual needs. This guarantees that no one is left behind and paves the road for every Roma person to realise their greatest potential.

[2] *Equal Access Survey – an optional survey conducted with Full-time, Year 1, New Entrants to Higher Education. Therefore the data is limited only to this cohort of students, leaving out a large proportion of other students.*

Similar to intersectionality, "superdiversity" coined by Vertovec (2022) is a term used to explain the complex levels of social variety that are arising from current global migration trends. Superdiversity encompasses a wide range of characteristics, including legal status, gender, age, education, and economic origins, and extends beyond conventional classifications like nationality or race. These factors interact to create intricate social configurations that go against conventional beliefs of diversity and require new approaches in social science study and public policy. While addressing the needs of the Roma community in Ireland through an intersectional/superdiversity lens, it is evident that their socioeconomic position places them at a greater risk of poverty.

7.1.4 Poverty

Pavee Point Roma Needs Assessment (2018) found that up to 20% of those surveyed were living in poverty with families surviving without food, gas, electricity and water. Almost half of respondents said they did not always have adequate food and fuel (Pavee Point, 2018). As a result, both respondents and statutory service providers expressed serious concerns about child welfare with cases of malnutrition among young Roma children being reported by service providers (Pavee Point, 2018). Poverty was also a concern for the participants in this study, two of whom referenced adequate living conditions as crucial for educational success. Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) provides a framework which can be used to visually interpret how poverty can directly impact a Roma child's chance of successful schooling. Children in poverty often struggle at the lower levels of the hierarchy, which prevents them from reaching higher levels where confidence and self-actualisation may be obtained. Poverty amongst Roma in Ireland has an impact on the affordability of schooling, which will be discussed later in section 10.3. Poverty has a noteworthy impact on accommodation too.

7.1.5 Accommodation

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) the conditions under which people are born, grow, live, work, and age are known as Social Determinants of Health (SDH). These conditions are shaped by the allocation of resources, power, and money at the state, local, regional, and global levels (WHO, 2008). As the SDH show, housing is a fundamental element of quality of life. Adequate housing provides safety, shelter, security and a basis for participation in society. As Hohmann notes:

> *Safe and secure housing shields us from the elements and provides refuge from external physical threats. It gives us a material base from which to build a livelihood and take part in the life of the community and the State. But housing also provides a space in which our psychological needs can be met.*
>
> *(Hohmann, 2013, p.4).*

It is vital to include housing and the quality of individuals' homes when considering educational needs. Whether a house is of an acceptable standard or not, directly impacts people's lives with issues such as damp or cold, negatively impacting upon individuals' physical and mental health (Fisk et al., 2007 and WHO, 2018). It is also likely that the recent introduction of carbon taxes affect poor quality housing more than others.

Pavee Point Roma Needs Assessment (2018) identified Roma experiencing discrimination in housing access, extremely overcrowded living conditions, subpar housing, lack of tenure security, homelessness, and restricted access to social housing and rent supplements. Living in such conditions would not only directly affect one's educational experience, but such arrangements also pose a major risk to the welfare of children.

Amongst the most deprived of respondents in the Roma Needs Assessment (2018) many lacked access to cooking facilities and 1 in 4 respondents referenced children going to school hungry, as summarised below.

Unmet needs	Percentage of respondents
No kitchen	12.4%
No refrigerator	13.5%
No cooktop	9.6%
Children had gone to school hungry	25%

Similar to Roma, Travellers living conditions also often depict environmental deprivation. A study has shown that 77% of Travellers living in mobile homes were in energy poverty, 9 times more likely to go without heat than the overall population, and 14 times more likely to be unable to keep their household warm than the general population, according to a 2019 National Traveller MABS study (NTMABS, 2019). Additionally, as Roma populations have often migrated to Ireland, these individuals are less likely to have established social support networks for finding support with accommodation, such as advice or financial assistance (McGinnity et al. 2022).

Roma Community children's homes are overcrowded, which results in a lack of essential study and leisure facilities, according to the Roma Needs Assessment (Pavee Point, 2018). Numerous studies provide evidence of correlations between academic performance and living conditions. Duque Rivera (2024) highlights the critical need for practical strategies to address Dublin's housing scarcity by showing that student housing is essential to both academic achievement and mental health, and as such, should be prioritised by the Irish government. Furthermore, Laurence et. al (2023) using the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study's data on children born in 2007–2008 demonstrates that children who live in substandard housing and in less orderly neighbourhoods have worse health and developmental results than their peers by the age of nine. Another study, from France by Goux and Maurin (2005), found that the more people living in a room in the house, the higher the chance of a child in that home being held back a year at school. The majority of interviewees referenced the current Irish housing crisis and the exasperated experience of the already marginalised Roma community who are now additionally navigating this wider crisis. Integral to considerations regarding living conditions, is the influence on occupant's health.

7.1.6 Health

Pavee Point Roma Needs Assessment (2018) shows there is a significant need for improvements in this area, with 38.9% of respondents not having a General Practitioner (GP). Communities who are marginalised are at an increased risk of health complications. This is an unfortunate reality for the Roma community who often struggle to access healthcare as evidenced by McFadden et al's (2018) study spanning 32 European countries, which found that Roma people all over Europe struggle immensely with exercising their entitlement to healthcare. The study found that this was due to a variety of obstacles linked to other factors that contribute to marginalisation, such as low literacy and experiences of prejudice.

Students who are in poor physical health may find it challenging to meet academic expectations due to frequent absences from school, less energy, and diminished attention. Learning can be further hampered by mental health issues as they impair social relationships, emotional control, and cognitive performance. Additionally, students may also be

impacted if parents or other carers have health issues. Children in these circumstances may be less able to concentrate on their studies as they may be likely to have increased responsibilities such as caregiving or domestic tasks. Participant H referenced Roma girls being more likely to have the responsibility of caregiving tasks meaning Roma girls who have family members with health issues, may suffer disproportionately in this regard. Educational achievements are likely to remain unequal and perpetuate cycles of disadvantage if these interrelated health and social issues are not addressed. These issues of access are further exacerbated by language barriers.

7.1.7 Language barriers

Language barriers were one of the primary issues identified by Roma parents who participated in a consultation around the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (Department of Education, 2025). Both data collection and literature (Lesovitch 2005) have referenced Roma children interpreting for their parents. Many Roma parents don't speak English, but their children can, as they get more comfortable with it through schooling. As a result, these children have the added burden of often having to help their parents deal with schools, doctors, and other government agencies. Such a responsibility is likely to place pressure on these children and perhaps as a result affect school attendance. Furthermore, depending on children for interpretation could lead to misunderstandings, particularly when dealing with complex legal or medical issues.

However, Roma children themselves need linguistic support at school too. As detailed by a report on consultations carried out with young people by the Department of Education (2025) in relation to the development of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy.

> *"I think having a translator in the school in case you are not able to learn like having one translator for the school that would be very helpful for the school and the students"*
>
> *(Young person nominated by a Roma organisation).*

Data collection showed that English support was available in most schools, as required and was focused on supporting student development, subject to the resources being available. Interpretation support for Roma parents however (who may speak languages like Romanian, Polish, Hungarian, or Bulgarian) was not available from these schools. Participant H, who often interprets as part of his community development role, referenced quite often needing to support parents and students in this regard. The TRES implementation plan pillar two details the importance of promoting language and literacy support access, expanding on STAR-piloted projects, and carrying out activities in accordance with the Literacy, Numeracy, and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024–2030 (Pavee Point, 2024) which needs to address literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs of children and adults from the Roma Community. Two College Connect (2025) participants also stressed the necessity of English language support prior to university admission.

7.2 Education specific findings

7.2.1 Educator diversity

Over 20 years ago, the issue of educator diversity was raised through work published by the Equality Authority which called for the recruitment of teachers from much more diverse backgrounds.

> *"A number of groups across the nine grounds (referring to the nine groups protected by the equal status acts) do not participate equally in delivering education or are invisible. Colleges and faculties of education and teacher education should be proactive in encouraging people with disabilities, Black and minority ethnic people (including Travellers), both genders and lesbian, gay and bisexual people into the teaching profession in Ireland".*
>
> *(Lodge and Lynch, 2004, p. 109).*

Two interviewees touched on the topic of educator diversity. According to research by Heinz and Keane (2018), the majority of teachers in Ireland come from affluent families with teachers from minority ethnic origins under-represented. Furthermore, within teacher training courses 100% of respondents said English or Irish was their first language, and 99% identified as white Irish settled individuals (Heinz and Keane, 2018). Data collection and literature both jointly argue that the majority of teachers in Ireland come from the majority population which from the perspective of this report, would be a position of privilege. Participant G spoke about the importance of Roma children having role models, which as we can see by the research by Heinz and Keane (2018) is not evidenced by diversity among the teacher profession.

The over-representation of particular socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups in the teaching profession is another example of this privilege. As a result, educational institutions may not always fully comprehend or represent the lived realities of marginalised populations, which might result in biases in curriculum development, classroom dynamics, and disciplinary procedures. Under-represented groups encounter structural obstacles to entrance, such as a lack of funding or support. Intentional and deliberate efforts are required to diversify our teaching workforce and provide under-represented groups with equitable opportunities to both access teacher education and succeed in the profession. HEA PATH 1 has greatly supported increased access to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes for students from under-represented groups, including pupils with disabilities, members of the Irish Traveller and Roma communities, and those from socioeconomically challenged backgrounds (O'Shea, 2025). TRES (2024-2026) also supports the importance of ensuring Travellers and Roma are represented in the Irish teaching workforce (DCEDIY and DFHERIS, 2024). Aligned to objectives set out in the NAP and TRES, the ATU Traveller and Roma Framework which was finalised in April 2025 sets out actions specifically aimed at increasing the number of Traveller and Roma community members who participate in teacher education and other school-based positions like Special Needs Assistants.

It is evident from the data collected, and literature reviewed that there remains room for much improvement in the provision of a teaching workforce to adequately represent our population as a whole.

7.2.2 Discrimination and segregation

Institutional racism includes the development of rules and regulations which require compliance or adherence that is often difficult or impossible for those from minority communities to fulfil. For example, to insist that all children have uniforms in perfect condition when minority groups often do not have the resources to make this happen, is institutional discrimination. Roma children have been infamously segregated in schools across Europe (O'Nions, 2012) throughout time and evidence suggests that such practices may still exist. The European Commission has referred Slovakia to the European Court of Justice, for insufficiently tackling the issue of Roma segregation in Slovakian schools (European Commission, 2023). This means it is worth noting that these practices of segregation could still be having a lasting impact on Roma children who have moved here and joined the Irish education system.

It is important that integration does not come at the cost of minority inclusion. Students become even more divided as a result of the lack of Roma language, history, and culture in European school curricula, which further deviates from European ideals of acceptance, understanding, and respect for diversity (Jakupov, 2022). Not only is educational segregation immoral and discriminatory, but it also directly leads to poorer educational outcomes (Messing, 2017). In a similar vein, research by College Connect (2025) found that one Roma student had a good experience of education until they were identified as Roma, which was when things changed:

> *"I was treated quite fairly up until I came out as Roma towards sixth year. And then there was a low expectation from the teachers of me, that I might marry young and all that."*
>
> *(College Connect, 2025)*

Participant D (a Roma parent) explained during data collection how his daughters experience at school is immensely clouded by the fact that she feels 'singled out for every little thing' by her school administration. He further referenced this resulting in his daughter often being punished for breaching minor rules which her non-Roma peers also breach, but without consequence.

Participant F had witnessed the development of great relationships between the school and the Roma community through a variety of initiatives, such as coffee mornings. Similarly, participant H (Roma homework club co-ordinator) referenced how the development of these relationships has ultimately led to increased support systems. This in turn has increased attendance rates as well as interest and participation. Through these interactions participant F was able to identify much fear amongst Roma parents, which needed to be addressed. For example, many parents believed that their children could be placed in state care very easily for attendance related issues. In line with this, any reference made to TUSLA often resulted in unprecedented panic among these families. Participant F noted that these fears may not always be due to adverse interactions with TUSLA but at times possibly due to potential misinterpretations of the functions of the agency.

A consultation carried out by Quinlan (2021) showed that Roma parents placed great value on education and showed a great desire for their children to attend school. Participants mentioned how many Roma parents greatly value education but simultaneously stories relating to parents' segregation at school may impact how they themselves and their children perceive education. Emphasising that these kinds of encounters can cause children to believe that the educational system is biased against them, which not only exacerbates their mistrust but may also stifle engagement and ultimately hinder educational progression, which McGinley (2023) refers to as intergenerational trauma. Participant H told how during a visit to ATU one young Roma child exclaimed with relief 'I thought college would be really scary'. This one small comment not only shows how many Roma children may feel overwhelmed by the educational system, but it also depicts just how one campus visit greatly contributed to mitigating these fears.

Participants noted intergenerational trauma as an important issue during the research carried out by College Connect (2025) and emphasised how these generational impacts influence their lives and academic paths. One person revealed:

> *"My mom knew exactly what I was talking about, because there was an exact conversation she had with her grandmother. So that generation of trauma is very much quite there".*
>
> *(College Connect, 2025, p. 63)*

A recent report on consultations carried out with young people by the Department of Education (2025) in relation to the development of a Traveller and Roma Education Strategy also gathered invaluable insights on educational experiences. Some of these insights gathered from young Roma persons are detailed below.

> *"To have Roma and Romanian teachers in the schools so they can help the students" (in response to being asked what would help them at school).*
>
> *(Department of Education, 2025 p.46)*

> *"The teachers, they blame you for everything just because you are Roma".*
>
> *(Department of Education, 2025 p.46)*

> *"There was a Roma person in my class and anytime we spoke in Roma and I was helping him with the subject we would get sent to the principal and we got suspended".*
>
> *(Department of Education, 2025 p.35)*

> *"School was very hard for me because I got discriminated against by the teacher and principal...He (principal) also wouldn't let me out on break because he said I would be going out to shops robbing and doing bad things".*
>
> *(Department of Education, 2025 p.35)*

> *"During Covid my mask broke and I went to get one and I got detention from the principal and another person came in with no mask and the principal just gave him a mask and got no detention".*
>
> *(Department of Education, 2025 p.35)*

It is not just members of the Roma community who question their place within the educational system. Krause (1989) states that for over a century Roma have experienced "persecution through education". In a similar vein, Taylor (2014, p. 147) refers to educational policies as potentially a "wider package of tools aimed at repressing their (Roma) distinctive culture". This report is intended to act as an advocate for initiatives aimed at the social and educational inclusion of Roma for equitable outcomes. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that academics and Roma people alike may be sceptical of the Irish educational systems ability to provide inclusion.

7.2.3 Affordability and the Cost of Education

While reviewing data relating to the cost of schooling in Ireland it became clear that the idea of free education raises a significant discussion about what qualifies as "free". Even though Ireland offers substantial educational assistance, including a uniform grant, a free books program, and theoretically free public education, the definition of "free" is complex and may require further investigation.

Ireland's public education system is referred to as free. Tuition fees are not charged in publicly-funded primary or post-primary schools, which is consistent with the state's goal of providing universal access to education (Children's Rights Alliance, 2019). The aforementioned schemes can and will lessen the financial burden that families bear. However, the concept of "free" becomes more complex when families may be burdened with hidden expenditures. The following section details the visible and less visible costs of education as follows:

Visible Costs	Less Visible Costs
Books and Technology	Voluntary Contribution
Uniforms	Supports available to more privileged children
Transportation	

7.2.3.1 Visible and less visible costs of education

Visible costs have been categorised as those that parents not only know to expect, but they also know when to expect them as well as the approximate cost. This is of particular importance for Roma parents. Irish parents from the general population may see something like a school tour or a voluntary contribution as a visible cost but this knowledge comes from a position of privilege. For Roma parents, especially those who may be experiencing the system for the first time, books/technology, uniforms and transport have been identified as the most visible costs.

a.) Books and technology

Another strong influence identified by literature and backed up by data collection is many families' inability to pay for essential books and uniforms (Pavee Point, 2018). The Irish Government's Free Primary Schoolbooks Scheme

(Department of Education 2024a) is a praiseworthy effort that aims to provide equal access to necessary learning resources for primary school pupils while also lessening the financial strain on families. Additionally, the scheme has been extended as of 2024, meaning Junior Cycle students enrolled in approved post-primary institutions under the free education program are now eligible to receive free schoolbooks also (Department of Education, 2024b). This initiative has effectively reduced some of the financial strains on parents by providing free textbooks and workbooks, creating a more equitable learning atmosphere. Though the plan is a positive start, technological advances are impacting its effectiveness. Digital workbooks, interactive lessons, and educational applications are taking the place of printed materials in many schools as tablets and e-learning platforms become the norm for teaching. Families are thus sometimes required to buy tablets and pay for related expenses like internet connection and software subscriptions, which are not covered by the Government's present measures. Barnardos (2024) found that digital costs incurred by parents on average ranged from €51 for primary school and €168 for post-primary school, with 50% of parents spending €300 on digital costs for children entering first year (Barnardos, 2024).

> *'Even though the books are free this year, we still have to pay €1,200 for a child starting secondary because of the laptop cost. This means we cannot afford a holiday this year. This impacts on the whole family's mental health.'*
>
> *(Secondary school parent)*

> *'Digital devices are a fortune. €700 for the school laptop. €900 if I pay in instalments.'*
>
> *(Secondary school parent)*

> *'Help pay for iPad which cost me €950.'*
>
> *(Secondary school parent)*

The Barnardos report (2024) found discrepancies across schools with some requiring nothing be spent on technology and others having to spend over €1,000. In a similar vein, Refurbed, an online marketplace for refurbished electronics, undertook a nationwide poll of more than 500 Irish parents. Results showed that 70% of Irish parents felt compelled to buy technology for their children's education and 88% were concerned about the rising costs of technology (Bank of Ireland, 2024).

The move towards online education calls into question the efficacy of the Free Primary Schoolbooks Scheme. As it stands the scheme does not entirely meet the technical demands of modern education, even while it satisfies the pressing need for physical textbooks. Accounts suggest that the added cost of buying digital devices at times outweighs the financial assistance the scheme offers parents. Furthermore, relying just on printed books may not be enough to satisfy the learning needs of children in schools where technology is a fundamental part of the curriculum. Fortunately, steps are being taken to mitigate this digital gap. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2021–2030 includes an investment of approximately €200 million, which will support the Digital Strategy for Schools 2027, which builds on the progress made under the previous NDP.

This investment will provide funding continuity after the initial €210 million is distributed to schools to support the previous strategy. The Digital Strategy has allocated two ICT (information and communications technology) grant funding allotments to schools as part of the NDP pledge. As schools were deemed to be in the greatest position to determine the needs of their own student body and to provide for those needs in the most effective manner, schools receive this financial aid directly. Participant A referenced how the challenge of fair distribution of funding like this has at times logistical issues in terms of how individuals from the Roma Community who may benefit from this funding most, are identified in a dignified and respectful manner.

All teachers who participated fortunately referenced the children having access to school laptops which did not need to be provided by parents. Uniforms, however, were required in all but one of the schools (of educators who participated).

b.) Uniforms

In an effort to lessen the financial strain on families, the Irish Government offers financial assistance for school uniforms through the Back-to-School Clothing and Footwear Allowance. Though helpful, this aid may be failing to adequately address the needs of lower-income and minority families. According to reports, many families continue to find it difficult to cover the related expenses. Perhaps the lack of an equitable approach may place minority households at a disadvantage, as they may have additional financial difficulties. This disparity draws attention to a problem with equality of opportunity in the existing system as some families are likely forced to put other necessities before school uniforms, which may have an impact on the children of these households with regards to their school readiness. Research carried out by Barnardos (2024) identified some of the costs parents incur at the beginning of each year, with uniforms being one of the most significant costs.

The Department of Education and Skills (2017) suggested that schools decrease uniform expenses by allowing generic instead of branded goods, including uniforms, and by choosing to use iron or sew-on crests for school uniforms. According to the below responses to the Barnardos (2024) study, too many schools continue to overlook this suggestion.

> *"They induced [Sic] a tracksuit last year, that just adds to cost, also the pants and skirt has to be bought from a certain shop, or it can't be worn".*
>
> *(Post-primary school parent)*

> *"Standardise uniform so alternatives can be bought from normal clothing retailers and have the option to sew the school crest onto jumpers. Most expensive cost is the tracksuit as there is no alternative choice".*
>
> *(Primary school parent)*

> *"The school has recently added a branded tracksuit and last year a branded jersey/tshirt that is compulsory this is putting an extra 120-150 on to uniform cost. This should not be the case. Then after paying all that money, they can only ware [Sic] the tracksuit-tshirt one day a week when they have pe. It's despicable behaviour on the school's side. The uniform already coats [Sic] a fortune not to mention the plain black shoes".*
>
> *(Post-primary school parent)*

Ultimately, 73% of primary school parents and 80% of secondary school parents responded yes when asked if their school could do more to reduce the cost of their child's uniform (Barnardos, 2024). It is important to note that these responses show that parents, in general, are often struggling with back-to-school costs. Therefore, disadvantaged populations are likely suffering to an even greater extent.

Primary school representatives detailed school uniform banks where past pupil uniforms could be recycled free of charge for others in need. Such initiative's reduce pressure on parents, but they also demonstrate a commendable commitment to sustainability. All representatives stressed the popularity of these banks, suggesting they provide support.

c.) Transportation

A Roma parent spoken to by the researcher (for a concurrently written study on Roma in Ireland) expressed his determination that his children receive an adequate education, yet also referenced the logistical difficulty incurred in relation to transportation to and from school. This parent detailed having to take two bus routes with their children in order to bring them to school, this is despite there being a national School Transport Scheme in place. Children who reside 3.2 km or more from their local primary school can get transportation through the School Transport Scheme, which is funded by the Department of Education. According to Budget 2025, school transport costs for the 2025–2026 academic year will stay at €50 for primary students, €75 for post-primary students and €125 for a family ticket (Parliamentary Budget Office, 2025).

Data collected often referenced many children not attending the primary school closest to their home. Reasons for this mostly surrounded the limited availability of school places. This limited availability meant that Roma families who recently arrived in Ireland, had very little chance of receiving a place in their local primary school when other local children had been on waiting lists well in advance of their start dates. Additionally, some schools will also have procedures where siblings of current or past pupils are offered places first. Which is another instance where Roma families who may have recently arrived to Ireland, will be less likely to receive a place in their local school. As a result, many Roma parents are not eligible for the School Transport Scheme, despite often having to attend schools which are quite a significant distance from home. To increase the number of children who have access to buses by 2030, a review by the Department of Education (2024c) of the School Transport Scheme has suggested modifications to its administration. It suggests that if there are already bus lines or if there is sufficient demand for a new route (at least 10 students), the "nearest school" condition will be removed. The review also suggests lowering the distance that students must travel to be eligible for the scheme. Such recommendations would provide many Roma children with increased access to reduced cost bus routes. Participant H referenced that although many Roma he works with live within walking distance of the school, that transport is still often cited as an issue particularly in poor weather conditions. Living in a country where adverse weather conditions are a common occurrence, this novel issue may be worth further consideration in order to maximise attendance as children starting a school day walking in the rain, may negatively influence their experience of education.

7.2.3.2 Less visible costs

It could be argued that actively excluding children who fail to pay voluntary contributions, or excluding children from school tours, visits to university campuses and similar activities due to monetary costs is institutional racism.

a.) Voluntary contribution

Barnardos (2024) study of back-to-school expenses found that at the beginning of the school year, 78% of parents with children in primary school and 80% of parents with children in secondary school said that their schools asked for a voluntary contribution (Barnardos, 2024). On average, schools requested €98 from parents of primary students and €124 from parents of secondary school students. Parents' contributions ranged widely; some schools asked for as little as €20, while others sought more than €300 (Barnardos, 2024). The majority of the time, schools ask parents to make this voluntary contribution to help pay for the school's operating expenses, but there is little information available on how the money is used (Barnardos, 2024). Sixty-four percent of parents reported that they did not feel that it was voluntary (Barnardos, 2024). As a respondent of the 2024 Barnardos study reports below.

> *"The school doesn't ask for a voluntary fee, it demands a fee be paid or the child will not receive resources".*
>
> *(Secondary school parent)*

Increasingly it would seem that voluntary contributions are rarely experienced as voluntary/optional. Saint Vincent De Paul (2023) carried out research on the voluntary contributions present in post-primary schools. Parents who answered the survey stated that these contributions are not usually conveyed as optional, that they cause a great deal of stress for many families, and that a lot of the respondents sacrificed other priorities to make the voluntary contribution that the school requested. Low-income households and disadvantaged groups like Roma are disproportionately burdened by unregulated contribution methods. Financially stressed parents could feel pressured to go beyond their means simply to make sure their child doesn't feel excluded or left out. For example, Barnardos (2024) found that more than one in five secondary school parents are already taking out loans to meet back to school costs. As affluent families are not subject to the same pressure, this stress may heighten achievement disparities. Additionally, one may argue that the state is essentially privatising parts of education by permitting schools to rely on apparently voluntary contributions, undermining the idea of equal access. Work by Ball and Youdell (2008) shows how these moves towards privatisation in education systems are often inconspicuous. The idea that public schools should not cause financial disparities among pupils would be strengthened by regulation and investment, with Ireland coming in last place out of 34 countries with regards to the level of GDP invested in education (OECD, 2024).

In a more positive light, only one teacher spoken to came from a school which had voluntary contributions. Participant F (from a primary school with a relatively low voluntary contribution rate of 30 euro) voiced her conscious effort to ensure parents do experience this payment as entirely optional. She actively ensures children do not miss out as a result of these contributions, stating 'I honestly could not tell you which parents have or have not paid it'. Participant G (a post-primary school teacher from a non DEIS school) explained how their school does not ask for contributions despite sometimes needing an extra pot of funds for student needs. She explained that in order to have this extra pot of funds, they hold fundraisers like musicals. Further stating, this pot was at times useful if the cost of transportation to something like a school trip was unfeasible for a family.

Despite the aforementioned issues with the transparency of voluntary contributions, it is equally important to acknowledge that school finances are subject to audits and are legally compliant. Many schools use such contributions to support students who are experiencing hardships and do so discretely to maintain the family's dignity. Should the government's responsibility to fund education adequately be upheld, such contributions would likely not be needed. Practices like voluntary contributions which affect some groups more than others are discriminatory. Further research on systems to mitigate discriminatory practices associated with payments like these would be useful, as would the requirement for publication of information on how voluntary contributions are spent.

b.) Supports available to more privileged children

School tours, university open days, extracurricular activities, discrimination and ability to access work experience opportunities and cost of participating equally in transition year are just some examples of opportunities which are much less accessible for disadvantaged children, like Roma. Children whose families cannot afford these costs, may be actively excluded. Secondary school pupils often avail of after-school tutoring or grinds in preparation for exams which comes at a cost and as a result can increase the socioeconomic divide. These expenses demonstrate that, although our education may be free in theory, there may be significant costs associated with it in reality.

The fundamental tenet of free education is called into question when families are forced to decide between paying for extracurricular activities and possibly suffering academic setbacks, with secondary school parents paying an average of €912 per year for grinds according to Zurich (2024). It is increasingly important to acknowledge that free or equitable education may at times encompass more than just having access to classrooms and books. Access to extra learning support, mental health services, and extracurricular activities are resources which are frequently more accessible to individuals of higher socioeconomic status which results in disadvantaged students being placed at a further disadvantage. The isolation and exclusion that comes with this lack of access to resources would likely impact negatively upon educational attainment.

Educational equity is threatened by this discrepancy. Therefore, the discussion over free education should continue to develop even though Ireland's Free Education Scheme and Post-primary Schoolbooks Scheme, uniform grant, and tuition-free education are positive developments. To address current disparities, a more comprehensive and inclusive definition that takes into account all related expenses and educational requirements would be useful. The notion of "free" education is, at best, just partially true and, at worst, an illusion, unless these hidden financial responsibilities are lessened.

7.2.4 Costs specific to higher education

With higher education in mind, SUSI significantly contributes to the cost of going to college but does not always adequately cover all costs. Even for those eligible for SUSI, costs such as accommodation, living expenses and books/ technology and childcare are still often incurred. A very welcome addition is therefore the new Student Accommodation Assistance (2025) which aims to help third-level students from Roma and Traveller backgrounds, as well as those who are Care Experienced, with the cost of housing when they live independently. Reducing the expense of housing as a deterrent to pursuing higher education is the goal of Student Accommodation Assistance. Although the assistance is an incredibly worthwhile development, it is worth acknowledging that funding at present is confirmed annually and students are therefore not guaranteed to receive this assistance for the full duration of study. Scholarships and the Student Assistance Fund are other significant forms of support available to third level students. Although, it must be acknowledged that many funds receive more applicants than can be facilitated. Additionally, applying for these scholarships or bursaries is an onerous task and one which can be difficult to navigate particularly where there is a lack of parental knowledge of the system or jargon and accessing the necessary documentation such as parental income is difficult. The HEA has found that the student assistance fund can make a significant impact on third level retention levels but likely has a less significant impact on breaching the barrier to entering third level education (HEA, 2017). Students were not significantly aware of the funds impact at the point of CAO application (HEA, 2017).

College Connect (2025) found that although Roma participants referenced SUSI and the 1916 Bursary as being essential help, the complexity of the current system makes it difficult for many to navigate. Such difficulties are also likely to be combined with "inappropriate guidance interventions, limited access to support services, reinforced low self- esteem, and restricted career and educational progression" for marginalised groups (Elftorf and Hearne, 2014, 79). Furthermore, participant E stressed the limited number of 1916 Bursaries coinciding with the increasing number of applicants each year.

Many systems, including Ireland's, aim for but have not yet fully actualised the idea of "free" education. Achieving fully equal education may require acknowledging and resolving the many hidden expenses. Therefore, it may be beneficial for policymakers to consider if our educational system is truly accessible without costs being incurred. It is important to consider the vulnerability of many Roma parents experiencing these expenses, many do not even have access to adequate healthcare, let alone access to help with complex digital systems.

8. Recommendations

While obstacles like substandard housing, restricted access to healthcare, transportation issues, and the growing price of educational supplies (such as books, uniforms, and digital tools) can impact students from a variety of backgrounds, especially those with low incomes, their effects are particularly severe for Roma communities. These difficulties lead to enhanced educational exclusion when paired with long-standing discrimination, stereotypes, and a lack of cultural competency and diversity among educators. While children who are socioeconomically disadvantaged face financial difficulties and inadequate resources, Roma students frequently must deal with these same issues with the addition of institutionalised anti-Roma prejudice. When combined, these interrelated problems show how Roma face more severe and deeply ingrained structural hurdles, necessitating sustained responses based on ongoing, community based (and where possible, led) research.

8.1 General recommendations

8.1.1 Ethnic equality monitoring

Develop and encourage Ethnic Equality Monitoring practices

a) Use Central Statistics Office identifiers to ensure consistency throughout all instances of ethnic equality monitoring.

b) Prioritise openness, informed permission, and strong safeguards for reducing the risks connected with gathering ethnic data.

c) Provide examples from real-life situations to demonstrate the effect of the data and clearly explain why it is necessary, highlighting its role in reducing injustices and promoting constructive change.

d) Involve local leaders and utilise culturally aware outreach in a range of languages to enhance inclusion and trust.

e) Ensure all individuals involved in the collection and analysis of data have received cultural competency training and systems are screened for cultural ambiguity/nuances.

8.1.2 Cultural competency

Mandate cultural competency training for Ireland's educational workforce

a) Ensure those with lived experience are involved in the delivery of cultural competency training e.g those from the Roma Community.

b) Ensure training takes an intersectional stance to acknowledge the superdiversity present amongst Roma.

8.1.3 Intersectionality and superdiversity

Ensure policies respect the intersectionality and superdiversity amongst communities they are aimed at

a) Ensure policies aimed at groups like Roma, become increasingly inclusive of intersecting identities. Roma women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those with disabilities who often face complex layers of discrimination, must not be overlooked by generalised interventions.

8.1.4 Poverty

Increase access to welfare and community empowerment

a) Since poverty is a structural and cyclical problem linked to economic policies, social obstacles, and institutional imbalances, it is difficult to address directly.

b) While structural economic reforms are necessary to address poverty itself, addressing its impact with increased or better access to social protection would help with things like food security and home heating. This would pave the way for long-term progress ultimately, aiding educational affordability.

c) Providing individuals with these supports will alleviate short-term stress but will not break the poverty cycle. More funding invested into community development projects is required in order to empower people to break cycles, create systemic change and achieve economic justice for all.

8.1.5 Accommodation

Implement a rights-based approach to housing

a) According to a 2020 Commission-commissioned study, 82% of Irish citizens believe that housing is a fundamental human right. Despite this Pavee Point (2018) found that 6.6% of Roma identified as homeless.

b) Individuals' rights to adequate housing are recognised in international human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the European Social Charter. The ICESCR also depicts the crucial elements of housing which should be considered; access, affordability, security, cultural adequacy, habitability, and location/environment (Russell et al., 2021).

c) Although the national housing crisis in Ireland affects all groups, Roma are vulnerable to suffering disproportionately.

d) Increase access to study groups and homework clubs that are conducted on school grounds outside regular school

hours. This would be beneficial in alleviating stress for those who lack study facilities at home.

8.1.6 Health

Implement services for those whose personal or family health infringes upon their educational experience

a) Provide qualified personnel to serve as a liaison between learners, educators, and medical professionals.

b) Ensure that students have access to and awareness of a dedicated point of contact to turn to when they need wellbeing support or academic accommodations.

8.1.7 Language barriers

Improve access to interpretation and translation supports

a) Ensure schools are equipped to communicate effectively with parents.

b) Provide additional language and literacy support to children from Roma community from early childhood, through primary and into post-primary.

c) Provide accessible English language and literacy classes for parents.

8.2 Education specific recommendations

8.2.1 Educator diversity

Actively address the lack of diversity in the teaching profession

a) Create focused outreach initiatives to draw in educators from a range of socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds.

b) Increase Initial Teacher Education programme accessibility by lowering structural and financial obstacles.

8.2.2 Discrimination and segregation

Discrimination and segregation

a) Ensure school policies against discrimination are not only present but consistently enforced including students' abilities to fully participate in school (e.g. availability of learning and language supports, participation in extra-curricular activities, work experience, etc)

b) Following on from the work of the Department of Education (2025), engage with children from Roma community directly to understand Roma children's school experiences in their own words.

c) Provide curricula that are inclusive of all cultures and that showcase the history and contributions of minority communities, as well as the diversity of Irish society.

d) Encourage initiatives that recognise the need of community engagement for academic success and actively engage these families and communities in school life. This could involve collaborations with community organisations, cultural events, and intergenerational learning programmes.

e) Increased cultural awareness would be a valuable addition to many school curricula. As voiced by participant G, who referenced how her post-primary school students would benefit from such an addition.

8.2.3 Affordability and the cost of education

The cost of education was the most significant finding, with visible and less visible costs taking a toll.

a) Books and technology

Consider extending the Free Books Scheme to permanently fund digital learning resources to increase its efficacy

i. Parental accounts of digital costs suggest that ICT investment in schools needs to be implemented at a more accelerated pace. Address the costs associated with digital learning such as investments in shared digital resources inside schools or perhaps tablet subsidies.

ii. With such ICT funding it may be of initial importance that special attention is given to schools in underprivileged locations or with a larger proportion of marginalised children (such as members of the Roma population or other under-represented groups).

b) Uniforms

Ensure uniforms are accessible

i. Consider expanding the back-to-school clothing and footwear grant amount or eligibility criteria as suggested by Barnardos (2024).

ii. mplement the aforementioned uniform circular issued in 2017 by The Department of Education.

iii. Explore other means of uniform provision such as a collaboration with educational institutions to offer uniform vouchers or reduced-priced shopping choices through schools.

iv. Implement rules that prevent schools from punishing or excluding students like Roma who may not have the resources to comply with uniform guidelines.

c) Transportation

Improve transportation options as per the aforementioned review carried out by The Department of Education (2024c)

i. Evaluate the "nearest school" condition, particularly if there are already bus routes or if there is sufficient demand for a new route.

ii. Reduce the distance that students must travel to be eligible for the school transport scheme.

iii. Increase the timetable of buses which would ensure more children with limited home study conditions could opt for homework clubs.

d) Voluntary contribution

Regulate voluntary contributions and ensure schools do not need to rely on them

i. Examine the adequacy of public funding for schools to negate the necessity for “voluntary” contributions.

ii. As mentioned, contributions are variable and ambiguous. Schools should provide greater clarity on how voluntary contributions are used.

iii. Implement non-discriminatory rules that prevent schools from punishing or excluding students from events or resources in the event that contributions are not received.

iv. Encourage school uniform banks where spare or past uniforms can be donated to those in need.

e) Supports available to more privileged children

Implement a holistic approach to school costs

i. Develop school policies and practices which actively support full participation by Roma community in education which address the

- cost of less visible activities within schools and the resultant active exclusion

- need for a holistic approach to school costs.

- exclusion of disadvantaged children from days out, university tours, activities, counselling and extra tutoring.

8.3 Higher education recommendations

8.3.1 Further research

Carry out further research on equitable education at primary, post-primary and tertiary levels

a) Further research is required on equitable education outcomes for members of the Roma community across all education sectors including early childhood, primary, post-primary, FET and higher education.

b) Further research is also required on how voluntary contributions may impact upon the potential for equitable education

c) Further research into how the educational progression of the Roma community into tertiary level may be better supported

8.3.2 Increase awareness

Embed awareness of Roma community across higher education campuses

a) Build on successful campus engagement activities and make campuses more open, approachable and familiar for those with limited third level familiarity.

b) Provide increased information to prospective students from marginalised communities on specific supports available to them in higher education.

8.3.3 Educator Diversity

Create targeted measures to increase representationa

a) Implement recruitment and progression strategies aimed at increasing the diversity of academic and support staff.

b) Introduce mentorship pathways, scholarships, and leadership development programmes for individuals from Roma communities.

8.3.4 Traveller and Roma accommodation

Ringfence Student Accommodation for Traveller and Roma Students

a) Establish ringfenced on-campus or campus-approved accommodation allocations specifically for Traveller and Roma students to mitigate discrimination in accommodation provision.

b) Provide a dedicated accommodation liaison role to support students who face discrimination in the provision of accommodation outside of the ring-fenced allocations.

8.3.5 Funding

Increase Financial Supports and Create Dedicated Funding Streams

a) Introduce funding specifically for Traveller and Roma students, decreasing the demand of overstretched schemes such as the 1916 Bursary.

b) Allocate a specific Student Assistance Fund (SAF) budget to accompany supports, ensuring targeted assistance.

c) Implement wraparound supports to complement increased funding, including disability services, academic writing support, mentorship, and wellbeing resources.

9. Conclusion

The Roma community, comprising at least 16,059 people in Ireland (DCEDIY, 2025), represents a significant part of Irish society. Despite this, as noted above, Roma continue to experience lower rates of educational progression than the general population. National initiatives such as NAPAR, NTRIS, TRES and PATH are positive steps forward; however, as with all marginalised communities, sustained, equitable approaches—and regular reporting such as this—are essential to ensuring continued progress.

Ensuring equitable access to education for Roma in Ireland is a complex, multifaceted challenge. While data collected for this report indicates a clear willingness among Roma to engage in education at all levels, significant barriers persist.

These barriers range from broad structural issues, such as socioeconomic determinants of health, to national-level challenges like the housing crisis, and to more specific barriers, including intergenerational trauma (McGinley, 2023). The most significant obstacles identified include inadequate accommodation and transportation, financial pressures, and language barriers. Societal factors—such as discrimination, segregation, and a lack of teacher diversity and cultural competency—further undermine full inclusion.

Data also shows that education providers across sectors, from primary to higher education, are actively engaging with parents, liaising with Roma community organisations, and seeking to enhance supports for Roma learners. However, language barriers continue to limit the impact of these efforts. Respondents also highlighted the importance of children having role models from within their own community, raising important considerations for improving diversity within the Irish teaching workforce.

Future educational initiatives must fully recognise the systemic injustices experienced by Roma communities and adopt an intersectional approach that reflects the superdiversity within Roma populations. Only then can Ireland move toward a genuinely inclusive and equitable education system.

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