

Most Gypsy and Traveler sites in Great Britain are located within 100 meters of major pollutants, shows research

May 8 2024, by Alice Bloch and Katharine Quarmby



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Gypsy and Traveler communities are among the [more socially excluded groups in the UK](#). There is a long history of government failures in

meeting these groups' housing needs.

The [shortage](#) of sites has resulted in a homelessness problem. Those who do secure pitches on council-managed sites often have to contend with living near potential hazards.

For our recent [study](#), we mapped local authority-managed Gypsy and Traveler sites in Great Britain. Of those sites, 39% were within 50 meters of one or more major pollutants and 54% were within 100 meters.

The effect on residents is significant. As one of our interviewees, Sarah (all names have been changed), put it:

"You can't breathe here. A lot of people have asthma. Lots of babies in the community have [poor health](#). A lot of them have skin rashes. Nobody ever lived past about 50 here. Whatever is coming out is killing people. Lots of people are dying of chest, COPD and cancer."

Worsening conditions

Between 2021 and 2022, we mapped 291 Gypsy and Traveler sites across Great Britain, noting their proximity to [environmental hazards](#). These included motorways, A-roads, railway lines, industrial estates and sewage works.

To do so, we used the Caravan Count 2020, which lists all authorized local authority managed sites in England and Wales and a freedom of information request to the Scottish government, which gave us the names and addresses of all the authorized public sites in Scotland.

The study included in-depth case studies, site visits and interviews with 13 site residents (including repeat interviews with five site residents on

two sites).

Local newspapers that reported on the highly contested historical and current planning processes were also analyzed. Freedom of information requests were sent to local authorities to obtain planning meeting documents and 11 interviews were conducted with representatives of local and national organizations that work with Gypsy and Traveler communities.

When new Gypsy and Traveler sites are proposed by [local authorities](#) near existing residential areas, objections come from three main groups: residents, local politicians and local media outlets.

These objections often result in new sites being pushed further to the margins of towns and cities, in places that other communities would not be expected to live.

As a result, sites are often in isolated areas, quite literally on the wrong side of the tracks. They are nestled in among the infrastructure that services the needs of the local settled communities, from major roads to recycling centers.

One of the sites we visited has been in use since the 1970s, despite the fact that, already then, it was located near a waste transfer station. The intervening five decades have only seen conditions on the site worsen.

A chicken slaughterhouse nearby now burns carcasses regularly. The household waste recycling center has expanded to allow for recycling and incineration of solid waste from commerce and industry.

Lorries and other vehicles now come in and out in large numbers, just meters away from some of the pitches. Residents experience constant noise and vibrations. Mary, who lives on the site, says the sound of the

skips being deposited from 5am every morning is like a bomb going off: "It drops so hard it shakes the chalet."

The air is always heavy with dust. Residents have to keep their windows closed—even in the summer—to keep out the flies. As Jane, who is the fourth generation of her family to live on the site, puts it: "We are living in an industrial area. It's the air quality, the sand, the dust, the recycling tip is just behind us. The noise is a big problem. There is an incinerator near the slaughterhouse and that's really bad. And the smell..."

Environmental racism

[According](#) to the World Health Organization, housing is one of the major factors determining health. The physical conditions of a home—including mold, asbestos, cold, damp and noise—are obvious risk factors. So too, are wider environmental factors, from overcrowding and isolation from services to the relative lack of access to green spaces.

The people we spoke with, including site residents and organizational representatives, highlight the harmful health effects of living on many Gypsy and Traveler sites. This chimes with the government's own [reports](#), which have found these sites to be unsafe.

Research on health inequalities in the UK bears this out. People from Gypsy and Irish Traveler backgrounds [report](#) the poorest health and a [life expectancy](#) of between ten and 25 years less than the general population. They also have [higher rates](#) of long-term illness and conditions that limit everyday life and activities.

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 has further constrained Gypsy and Traveler communities by criminalizing roadside stopping and forcing people on to transit sites. These are designed for short stays and are often in [even worse locations](#) than permanent sites.

This poses a plain threat to [traditional nomadic ways of life](#), from traveling in the summer months to fairs and attending religious gatherings.

Thousands of people rely on these local authority-managed sites, located dangerously near the kind of environmental pollutants that are [associated](#) with poor health and premature deaths. The term "environmental racism" is used to refer to how people from minority and low-income communities are [disproportionately subjected](#) to environmental harm.

Yvonne MacNamara is the chief executive of the non-profit advocacy organization, Traveler Movement. She highlights that the inequalities these communities face are systemic. Local authorities, she says, treat Traveler communities "like second-class citizens."

To one resident's mind, attitudes within local government to Gypsy and Traveler social housing are clearly discriminatory. As she put it: "They wouldn't expect anyone but a Traveler to live here."

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