

“We don’t rely on benefits”: challenging mainstream narratives towards Roma migrants’ in the UK

Philip Martin, Lisa Scullion and Philip Brown

Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU), School of Nursing, Midwifery, Social Work & Social Sciences, Allerton Building, University of Salford, Salford M6 6PU

Corresponding author. Email: p.martin5@salford.ac.uk

Abstract

The expansion of the European Union (EU) in 2004 and 2007 saw the accession of ten Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, a number of which contained large Roma populations. Like other CEE migrants, a number of Roma have exercised their rights to freedom of movement; however, the portrayal of Roma as ‘benefit tourists’ has become a common theme within media and political debate. Drawing on qualitative research with Roma in five locations in England and Scotland, we offer a counter to this narrative grounded in the voices of Roma themselves. More specifically, our analysis provides a more nuanced understanding of people’s motivations for migration, emphasising the primacy of opportunities to work, but also highlighting that claims for welfare are discussed within a narrative of contribution and entitlement rather than as a pull factor in the decision to migrate.

Keywords

Roma, migrants, employment, benefit tourism, narratives

Introduction

The expansion of the European Union (EU) in 2004 and 2007 brought ten Central and Eastern European (CEE) nations into what had primarily been a Western European bloc.¹ Several of these new Member States contained large Roma minorities, and members of this community were among those exercising their new found rights of freedom of movement, settling in many countries across the EU.

The portrayal of Roma populations as ‘benefit tourists’ has become common within popular media over the last decade, both in the UK and the wider EU, evident in headlines such as ‘*The Roma gipsy who sparked a crackdown on benefit tourism*’ (Daily Mail, 2014) and “*German economist denounces Roma ‘benefits tourism’*” (EurActiv, 2013). Indeed, the prominent use of the term ‘Roma’ in such contexts has been referred to as the ‘ethnicisation of the topic’ (Benedik, 2010: 160). However, such narratives need to be seen within a particular social and political context; more specifically, the increasing problematisation of immigration since 2000 (Blinder, 2015) coupled with increasingly Eurosceptic attitudes (Ormston and Curtice, 2015). ‘Benefit tourism’ is one of a number of themes which reoccur in British media reporting on migrants in general, along with competition for state resources, criminality, anti-social behaviour and, more recently, purported links to terrorism (Garner et al 2009; Gerard 2016).

As Allen and Blinder's (2013) analysis of UK newspaper stories demonstrates, accusations of 'benefit tourism' are not exclusively directed at any single migrant group. Based on the British Social Attitudes survey, Curtice (2016: 8) reported that reducing the ability of migrants from other EU countries to claim welfare benefits in Britain was the most popular reform respondents wished to see. However, despite this homogenisation of migrants, as Luhman suggests:

'One of the implications of the benefits tourism case is to show how a focus on the perceived problems of fraud and abuse can lead to the identification of certain groups of migrants as problematic.' (2015: 39).

Roma are especially vulnerable to such characterisation, as this group has been confronted with majority populations perceptions and media portrayal of criminality, 'work-shyness' and deceitfulness for many years all across the European continent (see for example McGarry, 2013). Furthermore, it is also clear that the content of popular narratives about migrant Roma and 'benefit tourism' is not a uniquely British phenomenon. Indeed, there are prevalent discourses on Roma and welfare, not only among established communities in Central and Eastern Europe, but in other locations which have experienced large scale migration of Roma (e.g. Italy, France, and Belgium) (see, for example, FRA 2009).

There is a general consensus that media narratives play an important role in shaping popular opinion towards migrants in general, and Roma in particular (Richardson 2010, 2014; Okely 2014; Kroon et al., 2016) and a number of researchers have attempted to counter these representations by presenting detailed statistical rebuttals (e.g. Finney and Simpson, 2009; Dustmann and Frattini, 2013; Pompova, 2015). While recognising the importance of these contributions to counter-narratives, surprisingly much research that challenges representations of Roma migrants has not included the voice of the community itself. The aim of this chapter is therefore to provide new and unique insights into the perspectives of Roma in relation to employment and welfare in the UK, drawing on qualitative research undertaken in five locations in England and Scotland during 2014 and 2015. Grounded in the narratives of Roma themselves, our analysis provides a more in-depth understanding of people's motivations for migration and experiences within the UK, but also where the welfare system features within their stories.

'Benefit tourism' and migrant Roma: exploring dominant narratives

It is evident that intra-EU migration has reinforced a range of pre-existing and widespread prejudices towards settled Roma communities – what has been referred to as 'delinquent subjectivities' (Parker and López Catalán, 2014). These stereotype Roma as inherently workshy, uneducated, socially backward, predisposed to criminality, and persistently reliant on 'handouts'. The prevalence of such attitudes among the general public have been amply documented at both the EU (FRA 2009; Brown, Dwyer and Scullion, 2013) and national levels (see Brown et al., 2015). Indeed, as Kroon et al. (2016: 15) demonstrate, these views are not restricted to one part of Europe. Using content analysis to examine 825 published articles which made reference in some way to Roma across five EU countries (the UK, Slovakia, the Netherlands, Germany and the Czech Republic), they concluded that

‘representations of Roma as threats to society were salient’. One indication of the pervasiveness of such views appears in the booklet “Debunking Myths & Revealing Truths about the Roma” (ENAR/ERIO, undated). This highlighted seven common stereotypes applied to Roma across the EU, including “The Roma are criminals”, “The Roma don’t want to work” as well as “All Roma from Eastern Europe come to Western Europe to beg”.

With reference to the UK specifically, a number of researchers have explored media discourse towards Roma migrants (e.g. Clark and Campbell, 2000; Richardson and O’Neill, 2010; Tremlett, 2012), highlighting that as early as the 1990s negative associations of Roma and ‘benefit tourism’ were appearing. Since then, the concept has become central to mainstream media narratives about migrant Roma in the UK. Over the past decade, the majority of UK press articles relating to migrant Roma make explicit their ethnicity, their status as migrants, and their access to different forms of social welfare (potential or actual). For example, in an analysis of 89 national and local news stories which included reference to the Roma community of Sheffield, Richardson (2014) demonstrated that the word ‘benefits’ appeared on 81 separate occasions in six months, second in popularity only to the terms ‘migrants/immigrants’. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of the examples which discussed Roma and the benefit system were unfavourable towards the community.

In addition to print media, there are also notable examples of negative visual representations, such as television and advertising. One specific instance which unequivocally linked migrant Roma to ‘benefit tourism’ was the series ‘Gypsies on Benefits and Proud’, first screened on Channel 5 in 2014. The accompanying information described it as: “An insight into how easily gypsies can get their hands on benefits” (Channel 5, 2016). This achieved viewing figures of 1.87 million (BARB, 2016). In fact, the series had been foreshadowed in a storyline in Channel 4’s controversial series ‘Benefits Street’, which had featured a Roma family, although without specifically identifying them as such. However, demonstrating how different forms of media interact and reinforce each other, many national newspapers ran articles from the programme with headlines such as: “I know it’s easy to take benefits in England”; Gypsies who move to Britain reveal how they claim thousands of pounds every month as part of their bundle of benefits even though they do not work’ (Reilly, 2014).

Several authors have highlighted that the narratives concerning Roma and ‘benefit tourism’ are often qualitatively different from debates involving other communities, nationalities or ethnic groups because they perpetuate much older representations of Gypsies and Travellers (Clark and Campbell, 2000; Okely, 2014). In the UK, for example, the arrival of migrant Roma simply added new impetus to long standing prejudices, bearing a strong resemblance to historic prejudices towards indigenous Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities (Okely, 2014). As such, ‘benefit tourism’ could be regarded as ‘supercharging’ existing anti-Gypsy beliefs:

‘The Roma frame is particularly effective because it taps into and fleshes out a long history of both local and imported anti-Roma prejudices...in other words, they stepped right into home-grown narratives about Gypsies and Travellers’ (Fox, Morasanu and Szilassy, 2012: 688)

The reach of these stories go far beyond the daily readership, not least because the content is often replicated online, which then remains live for months, if not years. As Richardson highlighted (2014: 60), they also evolve as ‘below the line’ comments from readers pick up and amplify the themes raised in the stories. These are then often circulated on social media platforms and reach new audiences. The impact of such negative media attention has ‘resulted in the authorities frequently regarding arriving Roma as “fraudulent” when they approach the public authority for legitimate entitlements, including social welfare assistance’ (Cahn and Guild, 2010: 15).

However, this discourse is not just a feature of media debate; the discourse is also evident amongst some members of the political elite, with the expansion of the EU prompting an increased visibility of such allegations. Indeed, in 2013, the European Commission published a report investigating the uptake of the variety of social welfare and assistance schemes available in each Member State. Describing the rationale for the research, the authors explained that it had been commissioned because:

‘it is feared that the entitlement which EU law gives to non-active EU migrants to claim access to healthcare and special non-contributory benefits in cash can lead to ‘welfare tourism’ and threaten the sustainability of European welfare states’ (Juravle et al, 2013: 2)

While focusing on migration more broadly, the dense statistical analysis included one brief, but significant, reference to Roma and ‘benefit tourism’, citing a French source:

‘The EU enlargement process in 2004 and 2007 raised concerns among public opinion about possible waves of Roma people migrating to France and accessing benefits.’ (ibid: 113).

While the report concluded that there was little evidence to substantiate fears that ‘benefit tourism’ was a problem in the EU, this discourse remains a pervasive feature of debate in relation to Roma migration. Indeed, in 2013 Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta was moved to remark to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) that ‘benefit tourism’ was a ‘specific situation of the Roma community’ (BBC, 2013). Within the UK, in response to concerns around increasing migration more broadly, the Government introduced a series of new measures aimed at restricting access to benefits for European migrants. Within these measures was a clear discourse around ‘benefit tourism’, as demonstrated by the then Prime Minister David Cameron (2014): ‘Over the past 4 years we have clamped down on abuses, making sure the right people are coming for the right reason’.

While the Government may not have focused specifically on Roma, it is suggested that this broader agenda ‘trickles down from the political elite to administrative bodies assessing welfare benefits claims’, impacting on Roma as a ‘particularly vulnerable’ group (Dagilyte and Greenfields, 2015: 476). In their exploratory study with Roma migrants in the UK and workers in both governmental agencies and organisations providing advice and guidance, Dagilyte and Greenfields indicated that access to benefits was not a primary driver for migration, suggesting very low levels of awareness of the UK’s welfare system. Furthermore,

they comment that, despite the plethora of media reports associating migrant Roma with ‘benefit tourism’, research on the extent and nature of benefit claims by the community remains ‘exceptionally limited’ (2015: 1). As such, the dominant narrative of Roma and ‘benefit tourism’ appears to prevail.

As a counter to this narrative, the remaining sections of this chapter will focus on analysis of substantive primary research carried out with migrant Roma. The data was collected as part of a participatory research and community development project called *Supporting Roma Voice*, which was co-designed and led by trained community researchers from the Roma communities. The research element of the project consisted of 19 focus groups with Roma in six locations across England and Scotland: Glasgow, Leicester, Oldham, Salford, Sheffield and London. These locations were chosen because earlier work (Brown, Scullion and Martin, 2013) suggested sizeable populations of migrant Roma living in these respective areas. A total of 159 Roma participated in the focus groups; 74 male and 85 female, with a spread of ages from 18 to 60 years of age. Collectively the participants represented six nationalities: Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Romania, Lithuania, Poland and Hungary. All focus groups were co-facilitated by Roma and delivered in the preferred language of participants. In recognition of the fact that some homogeneity within groups can increase the comfort of participants (Knodel, 1993), separate men’s and women’s groups were preferred, with the exception of a small number of mixed gender groups which were carried out pragmatically due to participants’ limited availability. All focus group discussions were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim and, where required, translated into English. To ensure that the research was ethically robust, it was formally reviewed by the Research Ethics Panel within the School of Nursing, Midwifery, Social Work and Social Sciences at the University of Salford, UK.

When conducting research with excluded populations, it can sometimes be the case that access to the most excluded individuals does not occur. Indeed, the very nature of their social exclusion and isolation can make people difficult to access. To overcome some of these issues and widen participation, recruitment was undertaken by Roma community advocates working in partnership with local voluntary sector organisations. However, the focus groups were routinely made up of individuals who were members of existing networks and could, therefore, be considered to be relatively privileged when compared to others within the wider diverse communities of migrant Roma resident in the UK. Nonetheless, the sample represents one of the largest of the qualitative research carried out with migrant Roma in the UK to date. As a result, a significant archive of information was obtained across a range of issues relevant to the wider integration experiences of Roma.

Given that the focus groups were part of the wider *Supporting Roma Voice* project, they were guided by the issues of relevance to that project. More specifically, the focus groups were convened to explore experiences of integration, covering key themes including motivations for migration; initial arrival and settlement experiences; specific experiences of employment, benefits, housing, education and health care in the UK; and future aspirations. The data was analysed according to these key themes to produce a full research report, using NVivo software to aid storage and retrieval of data. However, for our discussions here, we revisited the data to explore the discussions around motivations for migration, and employment and benefit experiences, in order to position these narratives within the wider literature and debates highlighted above focusing on ‘benefit tourism’ and migrant Roma populations.

The primacy of work

The ‘benefit tourism’ narrative places an emphasis on welfare systems as a pull factor. As such, exploring people’s push/pull factors in migration is vital. Across our sample, it was evident that endemic discrimination and racism was a fundamental reason for leaving countries of origin and coming to the UK. Reiterating findings from earlier studies which observed employment opportunities as a driver for Roma migration (e.g. Brown, Dwyer and Scullion 2013; Cherkezova and Tomova 2013), many participants referred to being persistently unemployed in their countries of origin, framed in terms of a constant battle to find work. Indeed, there was no sense that work had been actively avoided; conversely, many Roma spoke of trying to obtain work but being continuously denied access to the labour market, with the ‘visibility’ of their ethnicity being highlighted in many cases, as illustrated here:

My husband works here [the UK], but in Slovakia he was unable to work because they were racist and nobody would have employed him. They could not stand Roma men. (Sheffield, women’s focus group)

Here, at least you know that you can work, even if it's a factory job; it is a job and you can get paid. Back home, you don't even have the opportunity to have a job; especially if they hear or see that you are a Roma, you will not get a job. (Oldham, women’s focus group)

The denial of access to the labour market was linked by some participants to the high proportion of Roma receiving welfare benefits in some countries of origin. One participant for example, after stating that she had left Slovakia because of racism, compared the chances of Roma and non Roma at a job interview, suggesting that even if the former was better educated their prospects were slim. The consequence of this ostracism was that Roma were often forced to fall back on the limited state welfare available in order to survive:

‘That's why people [in Slovakia], why Roma people take the benefits...If we don't have a chance to go and show we can work. That's why.’ (Leicester, mixed focus group).

In some countries of origin, work and welfare were interdependent, with social welfare payments contingent on participation in specific labour programmes (Brown et al., 2015). However, the payments were usually insufficient even to put food on the table. As such, it was the realistic prospect of finally securing work that had primarily prompted people’s migration to the UK and not the opportunity to swap one benefit system for another. Indeed, far from the widespread stereotype of indolence, the majority of research participants were currently working now that they were in the UK. In fact many commented that it had been relatively easy to secure work here:

I don't have any problems with finding a job here in the UK. It might not be my dream job, but it's much easier. (London, mixed focus group)

This was common experience; for example, in Glasgow, of the twelve men attending one group eight were working across a diversity of jobs including potato and chicken factories and restaurants. In Salford, nine of the twelve participants were in work, of which six held full time positions.

There were also numerous examples where individuals had jobs arranged for them prior to arrival. For instance, one participant in Glasgow stated that the reason he came to the city was because his friends were already there and had arranged two jobs for him. Likewise, a respondent in Leicester explained the process of 'chain migration', whereby one family member at a time was able to join the first arrivals:

So [the] first came [to] get a job, then help[ed] another one and then basically one after another. The whole family managed to come...so that's how the community grows. (Leicester mixed focus group)

However, while participants were positive about their ability to access the labour market in the UK, there were concerns about the precarity of the work, but also the conditions under which some were employed. For example, many talked about harsh and exploitative conditions, where long hours and tough physical labour were the norm:

They don't give us a break, only to work, work, work, work, work. (Leicester, mixed focus group)

Several respondents in Glasgow talked about working for very low pay often below the national minimum wage and without any formal contract. Indeed, it was evident that some were receiving far less for working than they could expect from the benefit system. It was also evident that many participants had been working constantly since arrival, and while acknowledging the negative aspects of the labour market, some participants felt that in the UK they were judged on their work ethic as opposed to their ethnicity. For example, one participant in Leicester explained that her husband had started off as a supervisor at a factory with a group of other Roma and collectively they had progressed to team leaders, supervisors and managers:

So that's a result because Roma they want to work and they work hard and the people here they recognise it, so that's why they have a better position after a while.

However, it is important to note that these discourses of hard work, but also exploitation, are not a unique to research on Roma migrants, with such debates observed in multiple studies of migrant workers, including other CEE migrants (see e.g. Scullion and Pemberton, 2010; Scott, Craig and Geddes, 2012; Lewis et al., 2013). Nonetheless, these examples are important on two fronts. Firstly, they challenge the notion that Roma are inherently unwilling to work. Secondly, they challenge the narrative that the UK benefit system is the primary reason for migration. Indeed, if that were the case we would have expected to see far less effort to find work and far fewer people in employment. Furthermore, given the length of time some participants had been employed, and the consequent contributions they would have made (if formally employed), many of the Roma we interviewed were entitled to

welfare support. Even among those unemployed at the time of the research, most had worked at some point during their time in the UK.

Where do benefits feature?

As highlighted previously, the ‘benefit tourism’ narrative places an emphasis on welfare as a pull factor in migration. As such, for those accused of ‘benefit tourism’, one would expect some pre-arrival knowledge of the benefits system and entitlements therein. However, amongst our research participants, levels of awareness of the benefits system on arrival appeared to be relatively poor, suggesting that prior understanding of any potential financial advantage was not a significant incentive for migration. None of our participants referred to receiving information on welfare entitlements *before* migration, unlike intelligence on employment opportunities, which was routinely mentioned, as highlighted above. This is consonant with the reality for many migrants who ‘contrary to the popular conception of ‘benefit tourists’ coming to the UK to take advantage [...] had very limited knowledge of the support available’ (Dwyer et al., 2016: 5). There was evidence in our research that this lack of awareness of entitlement could be detrimental to those who were in dire circumstances. For example, one research participant in London - a single woman with children - was currently homeless but had been ‘turned down’ for housing, and was unclear as to why this had happened or what to do to access support.

It was apparent that a number of those who had applied for benefits had to rely on the assistance of friends and family for information and for making their claims. As Paterson et al. (2011) indicate, accessing in or out of work benefits is extremely challenging for Roma and the conditions have since become much more restrictive for EU migrants more broadly, with suggestions that such restrictions may have disproportionately impacted on Roma (see Dagilyte and Greenfields, 2015). With the introduction of a three month moratorium on claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) in 2014, the prohibition on Housing Benefit for new income-based JSA claims, plus a halving of the maximum claim period and a requirement to ‘prove’ a ‘genuine prospects of work’ (Kennedy, 2015), it was hardly surprising that many recent arrivals stated that they didn’t receive any benefits. Only a small number of participants were claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) at the time of the research, but they were only able to do so because they had passed the ‘genuine prospect of work’ test. Indeed, the onerous ‘burden of proof’ to demonstrate eligibility was evident:

‘In order to have or keep my benefits, I almost, I have to spend a lot of time for administration and sending different documents.’ (Oldham men’s focus group)

Furthermore, those participants who indicated they were (or had been) claiming JSA all stated they had worked previously, often for considerable lengths of time, during which they would have contributed to the system via tax and national insurance. As such, they were demonstrating their ‘entitlement’ to make claims on the welfare system during a period of need. Indeed, this narrative of ‘entitlement’ features across a number of focus group discussions, and while our sample included a significant proportion of longer term residents who were making claims on the UK welfare system, it was evident that many of the benefits

that were being accessed were actually supplements to low paid employment (i.e. in work benefits), with ‘entitlement’ a feature of the discussions when talking about such claims:

Yes. I applied for it [Working Tax Credit] because I worked, so I requested those benefits that I'm entitled to. Because if you don't work you cannot have them. (Oldham men's focus group)

As such, it was evident within our sample that understandings of the welfare system appeared to develop over a period of time of living and working in the UK and interactions with the benefit system occurred when people had gained an understanding of their eligibility, e.g. through their length of time in the UK or their employment contributions. The main non-contributory welfare payment regularly mentioned across all focus groups was child benefit, supporting the findings of a recent study, which suggested that child benefit and tax credits were by far the most common benefits taken up by of CEE migrants more broadly (Pemberton, Phillimore and Robinson, 2014).

For those who had managed to navigate our complex welfare system, and subsequently access financial support, there was acknowledgment that such benefits were actually insufficient to rely upon as a sole source of income and that finding work was still essential:

That money doesn't cover everything so we still need a job. (Sheffield, men's focus group)

Waiting for [the] Job Centre every two weeks, there's nothing for you and £121.40 is nothing (Glasgow, men's focus group)

Interestingly, however, some participants highlighted opportunities beyond income that could arise from the benefit system. For example, one of the few opportunities to access free English language courses was through the courses provided for individuals claiming JSA and in Glasgow, Leicester and Sheffield, male respondents stated that they had improved their English language skills through this support. Significantly, such references were always made in the context of enhancing their job prospects, although it is also worth noting that attendance on such courses can be mandatory if poor English is regarded as an obstacle to work and sanctions applied for refusal (Dwyer et al., 2016).

For some of our participants, the benefit system featured due to experiences of ill health; whether that be their own or a family member. Indeed, there were many examples of people who had given up work to care for spouses or relatives. In these instances individuals or their family members were often in receipt of disability benefits or carer's allowance. However, as above, there was a recognition that such allowances were sometimes insufficient and participants talked about the need to secure employment to supplement this support. A Roma woman in Oldham, for example, commented that after organising her husband's care:

‘Then I prepare lunch and try to look for a job because our income doesn't cover our needs and the expenses.’ (Oldham, women's focus group)

Finally, there was little evidence in our research of a desire to remain on benefits in the longer term. A number of participants indicated that, although they had been claiming out of work benefits they had now stopped; some had secured work while others had simply decided to cease their claims, the following excerpt is indicative of such occasions:

I used to be on Employment Support Allowance, but I feel okay now here. I want to work now. I used to claim Disability Living Allowance, but I stopped everything and I want to go to work now, because I have a baby in my house. (Glasgow, men's focus group)

This statement is important, implying as it does that work was fundamental to supporting the family, but also that work is desirable in of itself, with work often seen as the gateway to achieving a sense of belonging. However, it was evident that some participants were aware of the wider discourse around Roma and 'benefit tourism'. Indeed, some felt that such narratives sometimes impacted on how they were treated, particularly by staff at employment agencies:

A few times they ask me if I'm Polish or a Roma from Poland. Why did they ask me that? They think that all of us came here and we're like on benefits so they make it as difficult for us as possible. (London, mixed focus group)

On the whole, however, many felt that the difficulties Roma faced in navigating the UK welfare system were no worse than any other migrant population who had to contend with language barriers and limited knowledge of their rights.

Conclusions

Within academic research on Roma, the subject of 'benefit tourism' has often been subsumed within general discussions of hate speech, discriminatory discourse or anti-Gypsyist prejudice. One problem with this approach is that it risks obscuring the particular contexts of employment and poverty within larger questions of ethnicity, human rights and citizenship. In addition, anti-Gypsy discourse has many overlapping faces which complement and re-inforce each other and change form according to the context. As such, a lack of examination with regard to the issue of 'benefit tourism' may impact on understandings in relation to other areas of discrimination. It also risks separating Roma from the wider 'migration debate', which includes many different types of migrants, from the EU and beyond, some of whom share similar motives for migration and experiences within host countries.

The experiences of exclusion from work in Central and Eastern Europe have played a role in shaping a range of pejorative stereotypes applied to Roma, including accusations of laziness, welfare dependency and inherent dishonesty (McGarry, 2013). But this exclusion is also fundamental to understanding why work is so important to Roma and our research suggests that the movement of Roma to the UK is primarily linked to a lack of work in countries of origin and the relative ease of finding employment in the UK. Informal family and community networks of information were vital in building awareness of employment opportunities, even prior to arrival.

However, as noted earlier, the primacy of work for Roma in the UK is not simply a British phenomenon and other studies across the EU have shown similar findings. For example, Cherkezova and Tomova (2013), with reference to Bulgarian Roma in Belgium, concluded that unemployment in their country of origin and the search for work was the primary motivation for migration. Similarly, Vlase and Preotesa (2012), who studied Roma in Italy and Spain, found ‘job searching’ was the main driver, within a context of improving overall quality of life. Indeed, many of these studies – ours included - highlight that while Roma could be described as ‘working poor’ in host countries, ‘even irregular remunerations exceed many times the ones they would receive in their native country, if they could find any job there’ (Cherkezova and Tomova, 2013: 155).

So, where do benefits feature? The ‘benefit tourism’ discourse would have us believe that access to the welfare system in the UK is the primary motivating factor in Roma migration. However, for many of our participants pre-arrival knowledge of the system appeared low, and for some, knowledge of the benefits system remained relatively poor, as low levels of literacy and limited English language skills made access problematic. This is not to suggest that benefit take-up rates were low within our sample and, indeed, many participants were in receipt of various forms of financial support; rather, our study suggests that benefits feature in people’s narratives once they are established in the UK, often within a discourse of ‘entitlement’ through contributions they have made while in employment. Furthermore, in many cases, the benefits that people were receiving were supplements to low wages rather than the sole source of financial income. In this sense, benefits were being accessed in much the same way as many British citizens in low-paid employment. For the few who were seeking to access out-of-work benefits such as JSA, it was apparent that – like other EU migrants – they now faced additional administrative barriers such as the three month initial exclusion, the habitual residence test, and the genuine prospect of work test, all of which restricted access and placed a greater ‘burden of proof’ on migrants in terms of demonstrating eligibility (Dwyer et al., 2016).

We of course need to acknowledge the potential ‘social desirability bias’ within our research. Indeed, as highlighted above, it was apparent that some of our participants were aware of this discourse in relation to Roma, and it is possible that participants - like those in most research – may have been apprehensive about the interviewer’s evaluation of them (Collins, Shattell and Thomas, 2005). However, such concerns were mitigated to a certain extent for two key reasons. Firstly, as a project co-led by Roma community members, participants were being interviewed by members of their own community, rather than members of the ‘host’ population. Such participatory approaches have long been advocated as a means of addressing the power relations between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’ and building trust in research (Maguire, 1987; Fals-Borda and Anishur Rahman, 1991), including research with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller populations (Greenfields and Home, 2006; Brown and Scullion, 2010). Secondly, as referred to previously, the focus groups explored a number of integration issues. As such, discussions around the benefit system formed part of a wider discussion around experiences of a range of services in the UK and were not the central focus of the research, which could have potentially elicited more apprehensive responses, given the dominance of the ‘benefit tourism’ narrative.

As highlighted earlier, the European Commission examination on social welfare in Member States found little evidence to substantiate fears that ‘benefit tourism’ was a significant issue

(Juravle et al, 2013). Nevertheless, across Europe, Roma remain consistently maligned as the worst offenders with regards to such activity. However, our findings provide a counter to this narrative, providing unique insights from Roma themselves which challenge such normative stereotypes. Indeed, the opportunity to work and the aspiration for a better future for the whole family were the driving force for migration, and this remains the central feature of people's lives in the UK. As such, there is a need to ensure that such counter narratives feature within media and political debates around migration more broadly, but Roma migration specifically, offering a balance to the 'hysterical' approach that appears to dominate reporting in relation to migrant and minority populations (Greenslade, 2005).

References

- Allen, W. and Blinder, S. (2013), '*Migration in the News: Portrayals of Immigrants, Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Refugees in National British Newspapers, 2010 to 2012*' Migration Observatory report, COMPAS, University of Oxford.
- BBC (2013) 'Romanian PM: Benefit tourism is 'Roma problem',' *BBC*, 19 March 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-21842317>
- Benedik, S., (2010) 'Define the migrant, imagine the menace: Remarks on narratives of recent Romani migrations to Graz', in Konrad, H., & Benedik, S., (eds.) *Mapping Contemporary History II*, Böhlau Verlag Ges.m.b.H. und Co.KG, Wien · Köln · Weimar, pp.159-176.
- Blinder, S. (2015) *UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern*, Migration Observatory Briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford.
- Broadcasters Audience Research Board (BARB) *Viewing data for weekly top 30 programmes 2014*, online at: <http://www.barb.co.uk/viewing-data/weekly-top-30/> [accessed September 2016]
- Brown P, Dwyer, P. and Scullion, L. (2013) *The Limits of Inclusion? Exploring the views of Roma and non Roma in six European Union Member States*, Salford: University of Salford: Salford, UK.
- Brown, P., Scullion, L. and Martin, P. (2013) *Migrant Roma in the UK: population size and experiences of local authorities and partners*. Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit, University of Salford.
- Brown, P., Dwyer, P., Martin, P., Scullion, L. and Turley, H. (2015) *Rights, responsibilities and redress? Research on policy and practices for Roma inclusion in ten Member States*. Salford: University of Salford.
- Brown, P. and Scullion, L. (2010) "Doing research' with Gypsy-Travellers in England: reflections on experience and practice', *Community Development Journal*, 45(2): 169-185.
- Cahn, C. and Guild, E. (2010), *Recent Migration of Roma in Europe*, 2nd edition. OSCE / Council of Europe.

Cameron, D. (2014) *New measures to tighten up the immigration system*, Press release from the Prime Minister's Office, online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-measures-to-tighten-up-the-immigration-system>

Channel 5 (2016) 'Gypsies on Benefits and Proud', <http://www.channel5.com/show/gypsies-on-benefits-proud>

Cherkezova, S. and Tomova, I. (2013). *An option of last resort? Migration of Roma and Non-Roma from CEE Countries*. Bratislava: UNDP.

Clark, C. and Campbell, E. (2000) 'Gypsy Invasion': A critical analysis of newspaper reaction to Czech and Slovak Romani asylum-seekers in Britain, *Romani Studies* 10 (1)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3828/rs.2000.2>

Collins, M., Shattell, M. and Thomas, S. P. (2005) 'Problematic Interviewee Behaviors in Qualitative Research', *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 27(2): 188-199.

Curtice, J. (2016) *How deeply does Britain's Euroscepticism run?*, London: NatCen Social Research.

Dagilyte, E. and Greenfields, M. (2015) 'United Kingdom welfare benefit reforms in 2013-2014: Roma between the pillory, the precipice and the slippery slope', *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 37 (4): 476-495. DOI:10.1080/09649069.2015.1121954

The Daily Mail (2014), 'The Roma gipsy who sparked a crackdown on benefit tourism: Elisabeta Dano, 25, tracked down to German city after finding herself at centre of landmark welfare case' *The Daily Mail*, 15th November 2014, online at:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2835442/The-Roma-gipsy-sparked-crackdown-benefit-tourism-Elisabeta-Dano-25-tracked-German-city-finding-centre-landmark-welfare-case.html#ixzz4KPUbCVRq> [Accessed September 16 2016]

Dustmann, C., and Frattini, T., (2013), *The Fiscal Effects of Immigration to the UK*, CReAM Discussion Paper 22-13, London: Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration

Dwyer, P. Jones, K., Scullion, L. and Stewart B. R. (2016) *First Wave Findings: Migrants and Conditionality*, First Wave Findings from Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change, York: University of York.

European Network Against Racism and European Roma Information Office (ENAR/ERIO) (undated), *Debunking Myths & Revealing Truths about the Roma*.

EurActiv (2013) 'German economist denounces Roma 'benefits tourism' ', *EurActiv*, 6th May 2013, <http://www.euractiv.com/section/social-europe-jobs/news/german-economist-denounces-roma-benefits-tourism/>

Finney, N., and Simpson, L., (2009) *Sleepwalking to Segregation'? Challenging myths about race and migration*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2009) *EU-MIDIS European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey - Data in Focus Report 1: The Roma*, online at: <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2009/eu-midis-data-focus-report-1-roma>

Fals-Borda, O. and Anishur Rahman, M. (1991) *Action and Knowledge Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action Research*, The Apex Press, New York.

Fox, J., Morasanu, L. and Szilassy, E. (2012), 'The Racialization of the New European Migration to the UK', *Sociology* 46 (4): 680–695. DOI: 10.1177/0038038511425558

Garner, S., Cowles, J., Lung B., and Stott, M. (2009) *Sources of resentment, and perceptions of ethnic minorities among poor white people in England*, Report compiled for the National Community Forum, Department for Communities and Local Government.

Gerard, L. (2016) 'The Press and immigration: reporting the news or fanning the flames of hatred?' *Sub-scribe*, 3rd September 2016. <http://www.sub-scribe.co.uk/2016/09/the-press-and-immigration-reporting.html> Accessed 20th September 2016

Greenfields, M. and Home, R. (2006) Assessing Gypsies' and Travellers' needs: partnership working and 'The Cambridgeshire Project', *Romani Studies*, 16 (2): 105–131.

Greenslade, R. (2005) *Seeking Scapegoats: The coverage of asylum in the UK press*, Asylum and Migration Working Paper 5, London: Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR).

Juravle, C., Weber, T., Canetta E, Fries Tersch, E., and Kadunc, M. (2013) *A fact finding analysis on the impact on the Member States' social security systems of the entitlements of non-active intra-EU migrants to special non-contributory cash benefits and healthcare granted on the basis of residence*, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion via DG Justice Framework Contract, online at:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=1980&furtherNews=yes>

Kennedy, S. (2015) *Measures to limit migrants' access to benefits*, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper Number 06889, 17 June 2015

Knodel, J. (1993) 'The design and analysis of focus groups: a practical guide', in Morgan, D. L. (ed) *Successful focus groups, advancing the state of the art*, London: Sage.

Kroon, A., Kluknavská, A. Vliegthart, R. and Boomgaarden, H. (2016) 'Victims or perpetrators? Explaining media framing of Roma across Europe', *European Journal of Communication* 31 (4) 1-18.

Lewis, H., Dwyer, P., Hodkinson and Waite, L. (2013) *Precarious Lives: Experiences of forced labour among refugees and asylum seekers in England*, Leeds: University of Leeds.

Luhman, M. (2015) *Benefit Tourism and Migration Policy in the U.K.: The Construction of Policy Narratives*. Research Paper prepared for EUSA Conference March 5-7, 2015, Boston, MA. Johns Hopkins University.

- Maguire, P. (1987) *Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach*, Center for International Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts
- McGarry, A. (2013) 'Romaphobia: the last acceptable form of racism', *Open Democracy*, 13 November 2013, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/aidan-mcgarry/romaphobia-last-acceptable-form-of-racism>
- Okely, J. (2014) 'Recycled Misrepresentations: Gypsies, Travellers or Roma treated as objects, rarely subjects', *People, Place and Policy*, 8 (1): 65-85.
- Ormston, R. and Curtice, J. (eds.) (2015) *British Social Attitudes: the 32nd Report*, London: NatCen Social Research 2015.
- Parker, O. and López Catalán, O. (2014) 'Free Movement for Whom, Where, When? Roma EU Citizens in France and Spain', *International Political Sociology*, 8 (4): 379 – 395.
- Paterson L., Simpson L., Barrie L., Perinova, J., (2011) *Unequal and Unlawful Treatment - Barriers faced by the Roma Community in Govanhill when accessing welfare benefits and the implications of section 149 of the Equality Act 2010*. Oxfam Law into Practice Project / Govanhill Law Centre Report.
- Pemberton, S., Phillimore, J. Robinson, D. (2014) *Causes and experiences of poverty among economic migrants in the UK*, IRIS Working Paper Series, NO. 4/2014.
- Pompova, I., (2015), *European migrants: burden or benefit for the British economy? The depiction of EU migrants in the UK and its consequences*. Migrants & Society 814F8, University of Nottingham Student Conference, online at: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/hrlc/documents/student-conference-2015/izabela-pompova-paper.pdf>
- Reilly, J. (2014) "I know it's easy to take benefits in England": Gypsies who move to Britain reveal how they claim thousands of pounds every month as part of their bundle of benefits even though they do not work', *Daily Mail Online*, published 3rd April 2014 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2595815/I-know-s-easy-benefits-England-Gypsies-Britain-reveal-claim-thousands-pounds-month-bundle-benefits-not-workxxx.html>
- Richardson, J. and O'Neill, R. (2010) 'Stamp on the camps: the social construction of Gypsies and Travellers in media and political debate, in Richardson J., and Ryder A., (eds.) *Gypsies and Travellers: Empowerment and Inclusion in British Society*. Bristol: Policy Press, pp.169–186.
- Richardson, J. (2014), Roma in the News: an examination of media and political discourse and what needs to change, *People, Place and Policy*, 8 (1): 51-64.
- Richardson, J. (2010) 'Discourse dissonance: an examination of media, political and public discourse and its impact on policy implementation for Roma, Gypsies and Travellers at a

local level', *Romani mobilities in Europe: Multidisciplinary perspectives* Conference Proceedings, 14-15 January 2010, University of Oxford, pp. 166-197.

Scott, S., Craig, G. and Geddes, A. (2012) *Experiences of Forced Labour in the UK Food Industry*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Scullion, L. and Pemberton S., (2010) *Exploring migrant workers motivations for migration and their perceived contributions to the UK: A case study of Liverpool*, Salford: University of Salford.

Tremlett, A. (2012) "Here are the Gypsies!' The importance of self-representations and how to question prominent images of Gypsy minorities', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36 (11): 1-20. DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2012.669487

Vlase, I. and Preotesa, A. M. (2012) 'Roma Migrants from Bulgaria and Romania: Migration Patterns and Integration in Italy and Spain', in D. Tarnovschi (ed) *Roma from Romania, Bulgaria, Italy and Spain between Social inclusion and Migration: Comparative Study*, Bucharest: Soros Foundation Romania, pp. 65–87.

¹ The ten were colloquially known as the A8 (Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and the A2 (Bulgaria and Romania).