

**FXB Center**  
for Health & Human Rights  
at Harvard University

# **ROMANI REALITIES IN THE UNITED STATES: BREAKING THE SILENCE, CHALLENGING THE STEREOTYPES.**

A study from the François-Xavier Bagnoud  
Center for Health and Human Rights at  
Harvard University and Voice of Roma

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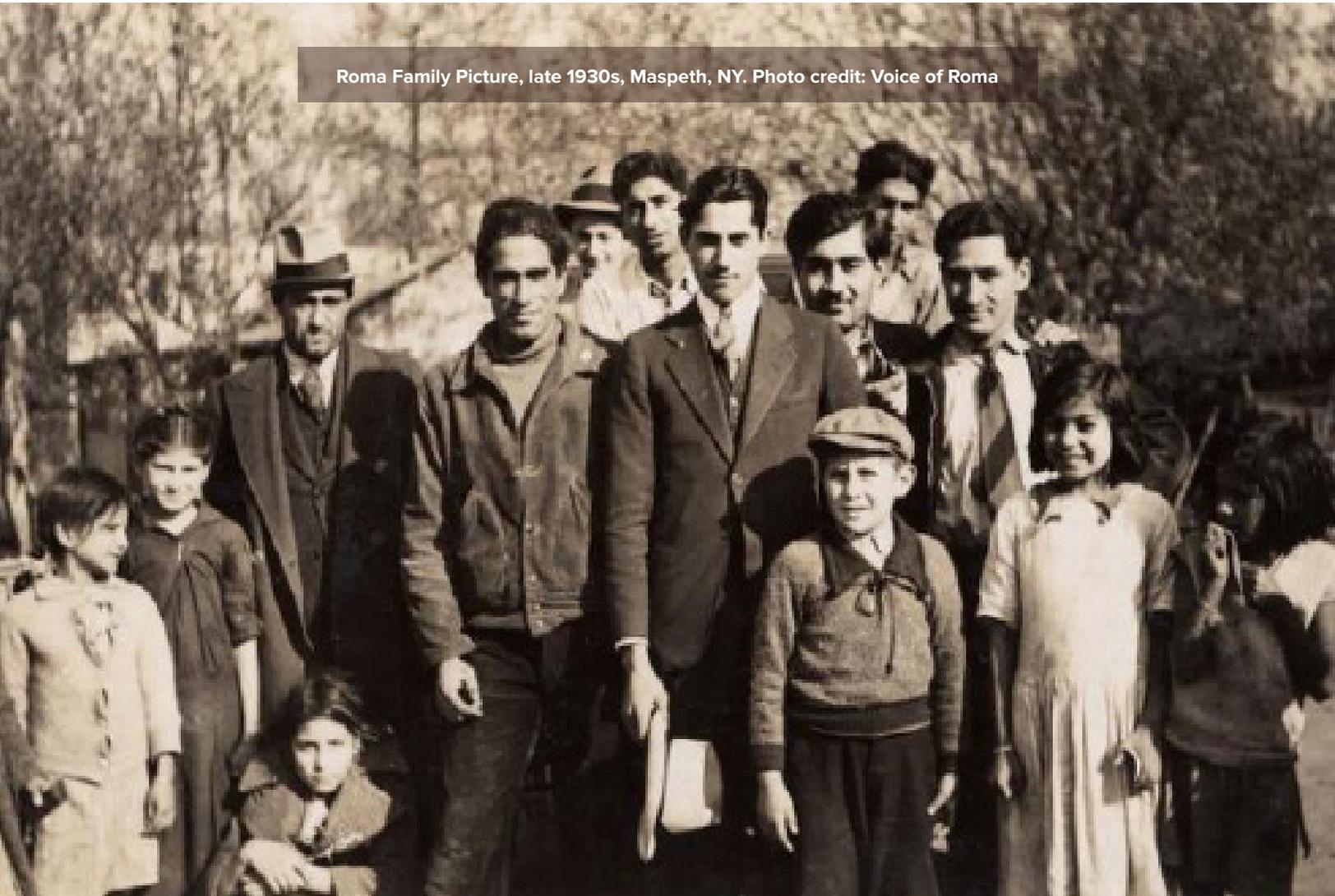
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Roma Family Picture, late 1930s, Maspeth, NY. Photo credit: Voice of Roma



## FOREWARD

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In 2012, the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University established the Roma program, under the leadership of Roma scholar and activist, Dr. Margareta Matache and Professor Jacqueline Bhabha. For eight years, this program has pioneered and developed a far-ranging study of Romani rights, including primary data collection, bringing attention to the ongoing racism against Romani people, most of whom live in Europe. With the emergence of authoritarian regimes, Roma safety has come under increasing threat across Europe. But the demonizing of Romani people, including children, has been a constant part of the ugly underside of European bigotry, directed not only at refugees fleeing persecution, war, and absent futures, but also at minority groups who have made Europe their home for over 1,000 years. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the durability of longstanding tropes of Roma as uncivilized, unclean, and sources of contagion. Outrages have occurred in several countries, including Brazil, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, and Ukraine.

Europe racialized groups – the Irish, the Jews, the Roma – long before the global trade in human beings began in Africa. Indeed, in Romania, Roma people were enslaved for 500 years. The FXB Center’s Roma program has made clear the parallels between anti-Black racism in the U.S. and anti-Roma racism in Europe and other parts of the world.

But what about the approximately 1 million or so Romani people in the U.S.? How do they experience their minority status here? It is just this question that this study sets out to answer. And the responses are worrying indeed. Nearly all respondents felt that most Americans know little or nothing about the Romani Americans, but nonetheless, by far the majority had experienced anti-Romani sentiments, citing prevailing stereotypes of Romani people as criminals, liars, and thieves. As a consequence, most respondents both valued and hid their Romani identity. Being Roma was widely observed to hurt chances at schooling, housing, and work.

These findings add yet more evidence of the pervasiveness of racism in the United States. We hope that the study will stimulate a greater interest in and understanding of this unique heritage and strengthen collective determination to defend American Romani people.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Romani diaspora today consists of approximately 15 million people dispersed across the globe. It has a rich and diverse history, with multiple local identities that defy a simple, uniform characterization. The same is true of the approximately 1 million Romani people who live in the United States, a largely invisible community which, when focused on, is often described by simplistic and racist stereotypes. Like European Roma, Romani Americans are heterogeneous: they speak different Romani dialects, have different religions, identities, and customs, and migrated to the US at different times and for different reasons. Thus, broad generalizations distort the rich history and diverse cultural identity of Romani Americans.

This research project, *Romani Realities in the United States: Breaking the Silence, Challenging the Stereotype* (Romani Realities in the US) was undertaken to improve the understanding of Romani Americans and generate an empirical base to challenge widely inaccurate characterizations relating to them.

The FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard and Voice of Roma collaborated on this research project. Its goal was to explore the social and economic conditions of Romani people in the U.S.A. The study collected data regarding: a) Romani people's access to housing, employment, health, and education; b) Romani people's experiences with discrimination and anti-Romani prejudice; and c) Romani identity and culture; d) respondents' perceptions of the challenges facing their communities in the U.S.

This study was carried out in three stages. First, we did a thorough literature review of the situation of Romani people in the United States (see Appendix Short Literature Review by Voice of Roma). The research team then conducted key informant interviews with Romani and non-Romani academics, community leaders, and other experts on Romani-related research and advocacy. The insights from these interviews helped formulate the survey questions used in the third phase of this study. The research team completed 363 questionnaires with Romani Americans, touching on socioeconomic conditions, stigma and discrimination, identity and culture.

To be included in this study, participants had to be over the age of 18 with Romani heritage – self-identified as Romani, American Roma, “Gypsy,” or any subgroup, such as Kalderash, Machvaya, Lovari, Churari, Boyash. Population statistics about the entire Romani population are lacking – so random sampling was not possible. Instead, Romani interviewees were identified using the snowball sampling method. This strategy yielded 363 interviewees.

While the *Romani Realities in the US* study is robust and pioneering, its findings are not generalizable to all Romani Americans. Rather, the study paves the way for further research into the policies that affect the lives of Romani Americans.

Amongst the key findings of the study:

## IDENTITY

We learned that while the Romani language today is spoken at home by fewer Romani Americans than in previous generations, a large portion of the Romani Americans we interviewed do know and practice other elements of Romani culture, heritage, and identity. Moreover, of the 223 interviewees who reported having children, the majority said they taught their children some aspects of Romani history, culture, and heritage.

The majority of the 363 Romani Americans we interviewed do not feel Americans value Romani people: only 13% agreed or strongly agreed that Americans are welcoming towards Romani Americans. Perhaps, not coincidentally, our quantitative findings suggest that many Romani Americans experience a fear of prejudice: more than three-quarters of the interviewees said that Americans discriminate against people of Romani heritage or that Americans treat Romani Americans differently from people in other minority groups. Seventy percent of the interviewees said they usually hide their Romani identity to avoid being stigmatized, stereotyped and/or discriminated against by non-Roma.

## ROMANI VERSUS GYPSY

We asked the participants about their choice between the terms “Gypsy” and “Romani.” While 8% strongly or somewhat preferred the term “Gypsy,” 39% strongly or somewhat preferred the term “Romani.” In addition, 15% stated that in communication with non-Roma, they strongly preferred the term “Romani.” And 5% said they preferred the term “Gypsy” in communication with other Roma people. And 33% had no preference between the terms. When asked

about the reasons for their choice of terms, 35% said that they consider “Gypsy” to be a racial slur.

## HEALTH

Not all Romani Americans involved in our study had health insurance at the time we conducted the interviews. Of the 70 % of interviewees who had health insurance, slightly under 40% used Medicare/Medicaid, and 20% purchased it. Only 13% received insurance through their employers.

More than 80% agree or strongly agree that generally, doctors treat them respectfully when they go to see them. However, more than 20% of the interviewees stated that they or other members of their family had had the experience of being treated unfairly or disrespectfully by a health professional on the basis of ethnicity or perceived identity.

## EDUCATION

There is a broad range of schooling levels among Romani Americans. Two-thirds of the interviewees attended daycare, nursery, or kindergarten; 8% finished 8th grade; 10% have a high school degree; 2% trade/technical/vocational training, 2% associate degree, 5% bachelor’s degree, 3% master’s degree, and 0.3% doctoral degree.

When asked if a teacher had ever treated them and/or anyone in their family unfairly or disrespectfully on the basis of ethnicity or perceived identity, 39% said yes. Women were more likely to report being treated unfairly in school compared to men (43% vs. 36%), but this difference was not statistically significant.

## EMPLOYMENT

The employment opportunities and choices among the participants are quite diverse. While a quarter of the participants are employed full-time, and 11% choose to work part-time, 20% are self-employed, and 5% own businesses. There were statistically significant differences in employment status by gender, with women more likely to be homemakers/caregivers and less likely to have a white-collar job compared to men. Among self-identified subgroups, Romanichel, Kalderash, and Machvaya were most likely to report experiencing discrimination related to employment.

When asked whether they and/or other family members had ever been treated unfairly or disrespectfully by an employer on the basis of ethnicity or perceived identity, 39% said yes.

## HOUSING

Almost three-quarters of Romani Americans interviewed in our study live in a house, apartment, or condominium, and 12% live in a mobile home. More than half own their house, or a member of their family does, and 37% rent the place where they live. Their residences vary in the number of bedrooms they have, but half have either three or four bedrooms.

Three out of 10 Romani Americans we interviewed experienced problems renting or buying a home. Almost half of those who experienced problems mentioned discrimination and racism as the issue. Respondents who identified as Romanichel or Kalderash reported particularly high rates of discrimination when trying to rent or buy a home.

Almost a quarter of our sample (24%) said that they and/or family members had been evicted from their homes. Some said they had difficulty paying rent. Others faced discrimination; as one told us, “they wouldn’t rent to Gypsies, they said.” One told us that a cousin “made the mistake of telling the landlord of the apartment what our background is, and that week he said we had to go because he did not rent to Gypsies.”

## DISCRIMINATION

The experience of discrimination affects a large portion of Romani Americans. Almost two-thirds of the interviewees agreed (37%) or strongly agreed (28%) that they have felt discriminated against because of their Romani heritage.

Women were also significantly more likely to hide their Romani identity. Also, close to 80% of the interviewees agree (38%) or strongly agree (40%) that Americans discriminate against people of Roma heritage. And a similar percentage agree (37%) or strongly agree (41%) that Americans treat Roma differently from other minority groups.

In general, 14% felt discriminated against in interactions with social services offices, and 57% felt discriminated against when being served in restaurants, stores, and other service encounters.

In measuring discrimination in the past 12 months (prior to the survey), we learned that 34% of the interviewees had felt discriminated against because of their Romani origins. And while 7% said they felt that discrimination on a daily basis, 32% said they experienced it a few times a year and another 32% said rarely. Only 11% of those we interviewed said they never experienced discrimination.

In measuring occurrences of everyday discrimination or stigmatization, we asked participants if they have ever been insulted or called names because they are Romani, and 68% said yes. These rates were even higher for respondents who identified as Kalderash (69%), Romanichel (79%), Machvaya (88%). Half of the participants told us that they had also been called other names that made them feel uncomfortable.

Media and television play a critical role in the negative responses that Romani Americans receive regarding their ethnic identity. A majority of the Romani people we interviewed agreed or strongly agreed that, in general, American television shows portray a negative image of Roma. More than 80% of them had similar opinions about the negative portrayals of Romani people in the American news media.

## POLICE

Racial profiling by the police is common: four out of 10 people interviewed said they had experienced it. Rates of racial profiling were higher for certain subgroups. Respondents who identified as Romanichel, Kalderash or Machvaya reported rates of racial profiling of 67%, 59%, and 50%, respectively. When they racially profile Romani people, police officers seem to look for cultural markers (e.g., certain kinds of trucks, certain names), according to participants.

Police task forces that specialize in “Gypsy crime” have been established across the country, even though their legality is questionable. As Petra Gelbart, one of the experts we interviewed, points out, not only do some police departments have “Gypsy task forces,” but there is no public

reaction or inquiry into the legality of this practice.

The levels of anti-Romani discrimination and stigmatization in the U.S. are alarming. The sheer scale of the evidence – across the country, and within different sectors, areas of life, and Romani groups– is surprising and deeply concerning.

At a time of profound disquiet over the depth of American structural racism, it is important to add this perspective about a relatively small and undocumented phenomenon. Our study illustrates the transatlantic migration of racist ideas and demonstrates yet again how skin color intersects with other attributes to generate intersectional cultural and racial prejudice.

## INTRODUCTION

The United States has long celebrated its deep and broad history of immigration, while hiding its parallel history of pervasive structural racism and xenophobia. Against the backdrop of a deeply racialized and flawed “American Dream,” dramatic disparities in the visibility and status of immigrant communities also persist.

One immigrant community with a long and complex history in the U.S. and very little public visibility, recognition, or voice are the Romani people.<sup>1</sup> The Romani people are descendants of North Indians who migrated from South Asia to Europe approximately 1,000 years ago. Unlike Europe, the American public is largely unaware of this minority group. Remarking on this difference, Ian Hancock, a leading authority on Romani people, points to European Romani “whose leaders, advocates, and scholars are involved in more advocacy and knowledge production.”<sup>2</sup> As a long overdue movement to address structural racism takes hold in the U.S., the importance of exploring the uncharted effects of discrimination increases. This study of the Romani people in the US is a contribution to that process.

The FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University (FXB Center) and Voice of Roma collaborated on a mixed-methods research

project about the Romani people in the U.S., “Romani Realities in the United States: Breaking the Silence, Challenging the Stereotype (Romani Realities in the United States).” Since 2012, the FXB Center has documented past and present anti-Roma racism and other challenges faced by the global Romani diaspora.<sup>3</sup> Since 1996, Voice of Roma has been working to increase awareness of the human rights issues faced by Romani Americans and to promote and preserve Romani culture, arts, and identity.

The Romani diaspora today consists of approximately 15 million people dispersed across the globe. It has a rich and diverse history and is characterized by fluid local identities that defy a simple, uniform characterization.<sup>4</sup> The same is true of the approximately 1 million Romani people who live in the United States, a largely invisible community often subject to simplistic and racist stereotypes. Like European Roma, Romani Americans are heterogeneous: they speak different dialects, have different religions, identities, and customs, and migrated to the U.S. at different times and for different reasons. As the younger generation loses familiarity with the Romani language, the U.S. Roma are at risk of increasingly losing their own language.<sup>5</sup>

The scarce literature on Romani people in the US emphasizes its invisibility.<sup>6</sup> To avoid stigma

1 In this study, we use both Romani and Roma as plural nouns or adjectives, following usage of our interviewees.

2 Ian Hancock, “ROMA [GYPSIES]” *Handbook of Texas Online*, June 15, 2010. <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/pxrfh>>

3 FXB Center for Health & Human Rights | Harvard University, “International Roma Day: The History of the FXB Center’s Roma Program,” webpage, April 8, 2020. <<https://fxb.harvard.edu/2020/04/07/international-roma-day2020/>>.

4 David Nemeth, *The Gypsy-American: An Ethnographic Study*. (The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002).

5 Melanie Sevchenko, “Roma: The Hidden Americans,” *France Al Jazeera | Al Jazeera*, June 6, 2011. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/04/20114145828641489.html>>.

6 Ian Hancock, “ROMA [GYPSIES]” *Handbook of Texas Online*, June 15, 2010. <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/pxrfh>>. See the Appendix for a review of the published literature>.

and leave behind a long history of oppression in Europe, so the dominant narrative goes, Romani Americans “learned to hide and blend in.” Because they share similar physical characteristics with other groups, it seemed easier to hide their ethnicity.<sup>7</sup> In this study, we deconstruct and probe this narrative.

In comparison to Europe, systematic documentation of the situation of Romani people in the U.S. is scarce and rarely authored by Romani people themselves.<sup>8</sup> The literature that exists is anecdotal and oftentimes lacks rigor or quantitative data, resulting in a critical information gap that has stymied public engagement and discussion on anti-Romani discrimination and stigma in the country.

In the main, early scholarship on (not by) Romani Americans explored the history and ethnography - kinship and traditional occupations - of Kalderash Roma and Romanichels, essentializing what it meant to be “Romani.” An exception is the rigorous scholarship of linguist Ian Hancock, which addressed issues of stereotype and discrimination directed at Romani people, some of which was encouraged by the ethnographic literature itself. Thomas Acton noted this contrast

in a 1988 report.<sup>9</sup> Hancock amply demonstrated in his publications how discrimination and prejudice against Romani people are perpetuated by popular culture, including through literature, cartoons, media, songs, and advertising. As we show below, a recurring stereotype focuses on Roma’s alleged collective criminality.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, more research with, by and about Romani Americans and about variations within Romani communities is needed. Without it, prejudice will continue to inform public narratives, policy, and implementation.<sup>11</sup>

Through the Romani Realities in the U.S. study, the FXB Center and Voice of Roma hope to remedy part of this research gap and confront biased information, inform policy and future research, and disseminate accurate representations of the perspective and experiences of Romani Americans.

## A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ROMANI MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

The history of the global Romani diaspora, including Romani people in the Americas, made this research project necessary. Across Europe,

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7 Kayla Webley, “Hounded in Europe, Roma in the U.S. Keep a Low Profile.” Time. Time Inc., October 13, 2010. <<http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2025316,00.html>>.

8 Martha Aladjem Bloomfield, *Romanies in Michigan. Discovering the Peoples of Michigan*. (Michigan State University Press, 2019).

9 Thomas Acton, *A Report on the Situation of Roma in the United States*. (1988). <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/collection/report-on-the-situation-of-roma-in-the-united-states-c1988/>.

10 Ian Hancock, *Danger! Educated Gypsy*. (Hatfield: The University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010).

Ian Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution*. (Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers, Inc., 1987).

Ian Hancock, “Gypsy Mafia, Romani Saints: The Racial Profiling of Romani Americans.” In *Danger! Educated Gypsy: Selected Essays by Ian Hancock*, 195–211. (Hatfield: The University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010).

Ian Hancock, “ROMA [GYPSIES]” *Handbook of Texas Online*, June 15, 2010

Ian Hancock “The Schooling of Romani Americans: An Overview,” in *Danger! Educated Gypsy*. (University of Hertfordshire Press 2010), 137-142

Ian Hancock *We Are The Romani People: Ame Sam e Rromane Džene*. (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire, 2002).

11 Margareta Matache, “Biased Elites, Unfit Policies: Reflections on the Lacunae of Roma Integration Strategies,” *European Review* 25, no. 4 (2017): 588–607.

Romani people experienced chattel enslavement, expulsion, or genocide.<sup>12</sup> During the Holocaust, 70 percent of the Romani population in Nazi-occupied Europe was exterminated.<sup>13</sup> Persistent racism in Europe following the Second World War has worsened in the past decades.

The first Romani people were reported to have arrived in the Americas on Christopher Columbus' third voyage in 1498, but "began to reach the Americas in any numbers in the sixteenth century, shipped here to work as slave labor in the plantations."<sup>14</sup> In the United States specifically, injustice and other factors, including social and economic struggles, "pushed the Roma<sup>15</sup>" from Europe in the country in several successive migrations. Ian Hancock argues that many Romani Americans are descendants of Romani slaves from Romania.<sup>16</sup> Hancock also points out the earliest record documenting trans-Atlantic expulsion of Romani people:

In 1661 'Commissions and Instructions' were issued anew to justices and constables,

by Act of Parliament, with view of arresting Gypsies...a great many Gypsies must have been deported to the British 'plantations in Virginia, Jamaica and Barbados during the second half of the seventeenth century. That they had there to undergo a temporary, if not 'perpetual' servitude, seems very likely.<sup>17</sup>

During colonial times, Romani Americans were racialized and viewed as criminals.<sup>18</sup>

Another early record of Romani immigration to the United States is of German Romani people relocating to the colonies - particularly in Pennsylvania - beginning in the 1750s and continuing through the 1830s.<sup>19</sup> These immigrants were known as "zigeuners"<sup>20</sup> in German but came to be referred to as "chi-keners" or "she-keners" by colonists; they were also referred to as "Black Dutch" or "Black Deutsch," and some of their descendants still identify as Romani. However, the term "Black Dutch" has also been used for other groups in the United States, so it is not exclusive to Romani people.<sup>21</sup> During that period

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12 Margareta Matache and Jacqueline Bhabha, "The Roma Case for Reparations," in Jacqueline Bhabha, Margareta Matache, Caroline Elkins, eds, *Time for Reparations*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming 2020).

13 Ian Hancock, *The Romani Genocide during the Holocaust: Resistance and Restitution*, in Jacqueline Bhabha, Margareta Matache, Caroline Elkins, eds, *Time for Reparations*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming 2020).

14 Ian Hancock, Patrin, *The Roma: Myth and Reality*, <http://www.oocities.org/~patrin/mythandreality.htm> ; Claire King, *Invisible No More. Romani Americans are challenging harmful assumptions about Gypsies*. (Teaching Tolerance, 1999) <<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-1999/invisible-no-more>>.

15 Suzuko Morikawa, "Dynamics, Intricacy, and Multiplicity of Romani Identity in the United States," in *Emerging Voices*, 109–25 (Rutgers University Press, 2008).

16 Ian Hancock. *The Pariah Syndrome. An account of Gypsy slavery and Persecution*. (Karoma Publishers, 1987).

17 David MacRitchie cited by Ian Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution*. (Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers, Inc., 1987) p. 92.

18 Ann Ostendorf, "Contextualizing American Gypsies: Experiencing Criminality in the Colonial Chesapeake." (Maryland Historical Magazine, Spring/Summer 2018). "An Egyptian and noe Xtian Woman": Gypsy Identity and Race Law in Early America." *Journal of Gypsy Studies* 1 (2017): 5-15

19 Linda D. Griggs, Patrin, *The Wayfaring Stranger*, <<https://www.oocities.org/~patrin/melungeon.htm>>.

20 The German term "Zigeuner" ("Gypsy") it is a racial slur to refer to Roma and Sinti people; it carries historical weight not only for its etymological roots into the Greek term *athinganoi*, which means outcast, but also for its linkage with the Holocaust. The Nazis forced Roma and Sinti in extermination camps to wear a black triangle with a Z (from Zigeuner) inscribed.

21 Ian Hancock, Patrin, *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution*, <<https://www.oocities.org/~patrin/pariah-ch10.htm>>

in Germany, “Gypsy hunts” were a common and popular “sport.”<sup>22</sup> In the 1830s, in some regions of Germany, the authorities forcibly separated Romani children from their families and fostered them with non-Roma. Both of these forms of racist violence drove Roma emigration from Germany and their absorption into the American Romanichel community.<sup>23</sup>

Romanichel migration from England to the United States peaked around 1850, stimulated by strong demand for horse traders, as horses were needed in agriculture and urbanization.<sup>24</sup> Another wave of Romani immigration from Europe peaked between 1850 and 1862, with many of these communities settling in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.<sup>25</sup>

A large number of Romani people arrived in the United States during the wave of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (1880s-1924). They came from many European countries and belonged to different subgroups, often defined by their traditional occupations/crafts: coppersmiths and other metalworkers, animal trainers and show/circus people, horse traders, basket makers, or musicians. Most Roma in this wave of immigration were Kalderash, Machwaya, and Lovara. Within a decade or two of their arrival, some had migrated to the West Coast, seeking better economic conditions.

Many Vlach Romani immigrants to the United States took a circuitous route to the United States by traveling by ship first to South American countries, Mexico, or Canada and then later retrying entry or crossing the border. For instance, the Bimbulesti family left Russia for South America, Mexico, and then ultimately to the United States and settled in New York.<sup>26</sup> The immigration path of the Nicholas family, of Russian-Greek Romani descent, started in Brazil, then Panama and Mexico before arriving and settling in California.<sup>27</sup>

Some visibly identifiable Roma did not take a direct route to the United States due to legislation that forbid entry to “Gypsies.” Although many Vlach Roma have specific names for their subgroups, in the Americas, these identifiers were further divided when various groups were named for their routes of migration within the community. For example, “Argentines” were Serbian Roma who had immigrated through Spain and then Argentina before arriving in the United States. “Argentinos,” however, were Serbian Roma who had immigrated through Brazil, then to the U.S., then south to Argentina, and then back to the U.S. “Mexicans” were Russian and Serbian Roma who went back and forth between Mexico and the United States, especially during the years of the Great Depression for work purposes.<sup>28</sup>

Yet another wave of immigration emerged

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22 Nicholas Canny, *Europeans on the Move: Studies on European Migration, 1500-1800* (194). (Clarendon Press, 1994).

23 Linda D. Griggs, Patrin, *The Wayfaring Stranger*, <<https://www.oocities.org/~patrin/melungeon.htm>>.

24 Smithsonian Education, “‘Gypsies’ in the United States”. <<http://smithsonianeducation.org/migrations/gyp/gypstart.html>>.

25 Suzuko Morikawa, “Dynamics, Intricacy, and Multiplicity of Romani Identity in the United States,” In *Emerging Voices*, 109–25. (Rutgers University Press, 2008).

26 Rena C. Gropper, *Gypsies in the City* (21-26). (Darwin Press, 1987.)

27 David Nemeth, *The Gypsy American: An Ethnographic Study* (81-82). (Edwin Mellon Press, 2002).

28 Joseph Mitchell, *Up in the Old Hotel* (177, 188-191). (Vintage Books, 1993).

after the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>29</sup> Finally, the most recent wave of Roma immigration occurred after 2007, when Romania and Bulgaria joined the European Union. The demise of state socialism unleashed pent up racial hatred against Romani people, who experienced arson, violent attacks, and other forms of egregious persecution, driving the search for safety elsewhere. Today, the largest clusters of Romani people are in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Seattle, and Portland.<sup>30</sup>

Migration to the United States did not afford Romani exiles from Europe inclusion in their new country. Clear proof of this comes from the “Change in ‘Social Standing’” polls taken in 1964 and 1989 among American adults. These opinion surveys asked respondents to rate the “social standing” of ethnic groups in the country. On both occasions, Romani people were placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy.<sup>31</sup> These negative attitudes have persisted, reinforced by stereotypical media characterizations of Romani nomadism, exoticism, and mysticism. As one

scholar notes: “[m]ocking the Romani people’s nomadic life and fortune-telling traditions, the media depict the Romani people as unintelligent, dishonest, unclean and mentally deficient.”<sup>32</sup>

As a result, this study also focuses on anti-Roma biases and misrepresentations to better understand the impact and the ways in which Romani Americans experience how they are portrayed and viewed by American society.

It was not just cultural prejudice that informed and justified the exclusion of Romani people from mainstream American society. Legal provisions also ensured their marginalization. Some city and state statutes imposed disproportionate regulatory burdens on Romani people, requiring them to be in possession of a license as a precondition for legal residence.<sup>33</sup> Even today, law enforcement warns the public about “gypsy scams.”<sup>34</sup> Policing of Romani people in the United States continues to be discriminatory, and Romani people remain the only minority to have active police task forces that explicitly target their supposed crimes.<sup>35</sup> In collecting data for this study, we asked interviewees about discriminatory actions by law enforcement and

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29 Kayla Webley, “Hounded in Europe, Roma in the U.S. Keep a Low Profile.” Time. Time Inc., October 13, 2010. <<http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2025316,00.html>>.

30 Martha Aladjem Bloomfield, *Romanies in Michigan. Discovering the Peoples of Michigan*. (Michigan State University Press, 2019).

31 Tamar Lewin, Study Points to Increase In Tolerance of Ethnicity, The New York Times, January 8, 1992. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/08/us/study-points-to-increase-in-tolerance-of-ethnicity.html>>. See TimeMachine January 8, 1992, Section A, Page 12: <<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1992/01/08/issue.html>>.

And American Jewish Committee, What Do Americans Think About Jews?, 1991, <<https://www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/10286>>.

32 Suzuko Morikawa, “Dynamics, Intricacy, and Multiplicity of Romani Identity in the United States,” In *Emerging Voices*, 109–25. (Rutgers University Press, 2008).

33 Ian Hancock, “Gypsy Mafia, Romani Saints: The Racial Profiling of Romani Americans.” In *Danger! Educated Gypsy: Selected Essays* by Ian Hancock, 195–211. (Hatfield: The University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010).

34 Martha Aladjem Bloomfield, *Romanies in Michigan. Discovering the Peoples of Michigan* (Michigan State University Press, 2019).

35 Ian Hancock, “Gypsy Mafia, Romani Saints: The Racial Profiling of Romani Americans.” In *Danger! Educated Gypsy: Selected Essays* by Ian Hancock, 195–211. (Hatfield: The University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010).

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<[https://ohs.org/research-and-library/oregon-historical-quarterly/joel-palmer-award/upload/Silverman\\_Roma-in-Oregon\\_OHQ-Winter-2017\\_Final.pdf](https://ohs.org/research-and-library/oregon-historical-quarterly/joel-palmer-award/upload/Silverman_Roma-in-Oregon_OHQ-Winter-2017_Final.pdf)>.

other representatives of public institutions, including medical doctors and teachers.

Discriminatory practices by law enforcement and other state institutions likely deterred Romani families from entrusting their children to local schools, though no rigorous data on the point has been assembled. Historically, some laws have forbidden Romani people from staying in one place, thus barring regular school attendance.<sup>36</sup> Additional factors known to affect school attendance are stigma and the fear of interactions with the non-Romani people with racist attitudes towards Romani culture and traditions.<sup>37, 38, 39</sup> Some Romani Americans have considered schools oppressively assimilationist institutions, run by people descending from countries historically hostile to Romani culture and intent on ensuring that all children are “Americanized.”<sup>40</sup> Given such apprehensions, it is not surprising that some Romani communities have welcomed the idea of a Romani school. Sutherland reports on her experience of teaching in one such school in the town of Richmond, California.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Silverman reports several successful public school experimental classrooms for Roma in Portland, Oregon, in the 1970s and 1990s.<sup>42</sup> In this context, the Romani Realities in the U.S. study

aims to shed more light on the fears, realities, and hopes of Romani regarding education.

This study is designed to bring Romani voices into mainstream dialogue. To enable comparisons with the situation of European Romani people, survey topics were drawn from the Fundamental Rights Agency report, *The Situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States*.<sup>43</sup> In this study, we collected data regarding Romani demographics; Romani access to housing, employment, health, and education; Romani experience with discrimination and anti-Romani prejudice; and other social determinants impacting the well-being of the Romani populations in the United States; and aspects of Romani identities and culture. This study is addressed to multiple audiences: Romani people in the U.S. and across the world, policymakers, law enforcement, educators, health care professionals, the media, and non-Romani Americans.

While the Romani Realities in the U.S. study is robust and pioneering, it is not generalizable to all Romani Americans because it includes interviews with only 363 Romani Americans, identified through snowball methodology. We hope this study results in more extensive research about Romani people across the Americas.

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36 Ian Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution*. (Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers, Inc., 1987).

37 Ian Hancock, “ROMA [GYPSIES]” *Handbook of Texas Online*, June 15, 2010.

38 Anne Sutherland, *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans* (Waveland Press, 1975). The author was a teacher at the “Gypsy school” in the Roma neighborhood, in Richmond California. According her, Romani families received very well the idea of a Romani school.

39 Melanie Sevchenko, “Roma: The Hidden Americans.” France Al Jazeera | Al Jazeera, June 6, 2011. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/04/20114145828641489.html>>.

40 Ian Hancock, *Danger! Educated Gypsy*. (Hatfield: The University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010).

41 Anne Sutherland, *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans* (Waveland Press, 1975); *Roma: Modern American Gypsies (2016)*

42 Oregon Roma (Gypsies): A Hidden History. Oregon Historical Quarterly 118(4, 2017): 518-553.

<[https://ohs.org/research-and-library/oregon-historical-quarterly/joel-palmer-award/upload/Silverman\\_Roma-in-Oregon\\_OHQ-Winter-2017\\_Final.pdf](https://ohs.org/research-and-library/oregon-historical-quarterly/joel-palmer-award/upload/Silverman_Roma-in-Oregon_OHQ-Winter-2017_Final.pdf)>.

43 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey, Roma—Selected Findings*, (2016).

## OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

The goal of the Romani Realities in the U.S. study was to explore the social and economic conditions of Romani people in the United States. The study collected data regarding: a) Romani people's access to housing, employment, health, and education; b) Romani people's experiences with discrimination and anti-Romani prejudice; c) Romani identity and culture; and d) Romani people's challenges facing their communities in the U.S.

Romani people are scattered across the United States. Because census data and other large surveys do not collect adequate information on Roma, aggregate data are unavailable at the national, state, or local levels. This has been an obstacle to defining a sampling frame for this study. Locating members of the Romani population proved challenging because they are not clearly identified in available public information. Without aggregate numbers for the Romani population in the U.S., it was impossible to use random sampling methodologies.

Snowball sampling, which relies on social networks among the target group and is considered effective for studying unknown or hidden populations, was chosen instead. The method yields a substantial collection of data, though the findings are inherently non-generalizable.<sup>44</sup>

The Romani Realities in the U.S. study consisted of three research elements:

First, a comprehensive literature review relating

to contemporary Romani Americans (see Appendix: Voice of Roma Literature Review). This included scholarly journals and books as well as traditional print media. While not all sources can be considered empirically based (particularly given existing cultural and race prejudice), they add to the picture of the societal milieu that contemporary Romani Americans inhabit.

Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 American Romani and non-Romani activists, professionals, scholars, community leaders, and other key informants whose expertise on both domestic and international Romani history, realities, and culture could provide insight into the Romani experience in the United States. Questions included the geographic distribution of Romani people in the U.S., socioeconomic challenges they face, influences of American culture on the culture of Romani people living in the U.S., and the effect of and response to discriminatory practices against Romani people in the United States. These specialists also provided insight into challenges we as researchers could encounter in the third and final aspect of our study.

Third, Romani American field researchers contracted by Voice of Roma carried out more than 90% of the 363 collected questionnaires; other researchers carried out the remaining surveys. The majority of the field researchers were selected from a diverse group of Romani activists and researchers known to Voice of Roma. Other community members were added to the field research team as necessary to continue to identify additional respondents. In some cases,

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44 "Snowball sampling" USGS. <https://www.fort.usgs.gov/sites/landsat-imagery-unique-resource/snowball-sampling>

family and other obligations meant an initial team member could no longer conduct interviews. New team members also were added for this reason. These additional team members provided new connections to participants; thus, we were able to open new pathways for snowball sampling.

The survey questionnaire gathered demographic information and household makeup, socioeconomic indicators, access to health, housing, employment and education, culture and identity, and experience with prejudice within those four domains, as well as perceived prejudice against Romani people. The survey also asked open-ended questions about participants' experiences with discrimination, religious, community, and cultural practice and whether participants felt those practices faced challenges in American society.

Participants were located using a chain referral method known as snowball sampling. In this method, a trusted contact reached out to their social circle and referred willing participants to surveyors. The participants were surveyed and then asked to introduce other people who have a Romani heritage. In this way, subjects were accumulated until the required number is achieved or the social network is exhausted.<sup>45</sup> To minimize the snowball bias, in the selection of initial seed respondents, we did our best to rely on a large and diverse pool of people.

Voice of Roma and its community affiliates identified the majority of the initial seed

respondents. The research team identified the initial respondent sample through their networks. Additional participants were recruited from contacts of the seed respondents. But often, some Romani people wish to conceal their group identity for fear of discrimination, and thus, a recruitment strategy taking this into account was also put in place.<sup>46,47</sup> Voice of Roma approached a variety of local community leaders and churches to identify seed respondents. We asked them to provide information about a diverse pool of Romani people and Romani subgroups, as well as isolated members of communities.

No personal identifying details were collected, and all respondents were assigned a random ID number. Consent forms did not require the signature of participants. Once oral consent was obtained, the surveyor signed and dated the consent. Those who consented to be recorded for the open-ended questions had their recording erased after the responses had been transcribed. All respondents were awarded a \$25 Amazon gift card for their participation in the survey.

Data analysis was conducted using SAS 9.4 for Windows SAS Institute Inc, Cary, NC and StataCorp. 2019. Stata Statistical Software: Release 16. College Station, TX: StataCorp LLC.

More details about the methodology and the analysis are found in the Appendix – Details of the Methodology.

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45 Shaghaghi, Bhopal, and Sheikh, "Approaches to Recruiting 'Hard-To-Reach' Populations into Research," *Int. J. Social Research Methodology* Vol. 8, No. 1, February 2005: 47-60.

46 Shaghaghi, Bhopal, and Sheikh, "Approaches to Recruiting 'Hard-To-Reach' Populations into Research," *Int. J. Social Research Methodology* Vol. 8, No. 1, February 2005: 47-60.

47 Kath Browne, "Snowball Sampling," *Health Promotion Perspectives*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2011; P: 86-94

## BREAKDOWN OF ROMANI SUBGROUPS

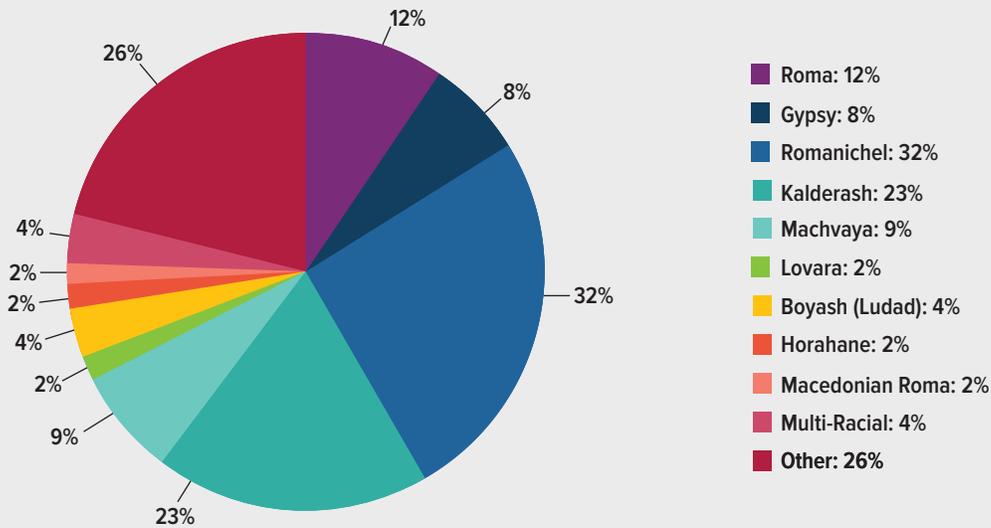


Figure 1. Breakdown of Roma Subgroups (multiple choices).

## FINDINGS

### DEMOGRAPHICS

In total, 363 respondents were surveyed. We interviewed a slightly higher number of women (55%) than men (44%); 1% were of other genders. The average age was 40 years, with a minimum age of 18 and a maximum age of 88.

Almost half of the interviewees were married, while 23% were single, 12% divorced or separated, 7% remarried, 6% widowed, and 2% in a domestic partnership; 3% had another relationship status.<sup>48</sup> Further, 61% of the interviewees stated that they had children, with a mean of 2.6 children per family.

The vast majority of the interviewees lived with other people (88%), while 11% live alone; a few did

not respond. On average, 4.2 people live in each household.

The household makeup (percentages are of among those who live with others, n=318) predominantly includes spouses and partners (53.1%), but also children (36.2%), parents-in-law (19.2%), extended family (12.9%), fiancés (4.4%), friends (2.8%), and others (20.4%).

While most of the interviewees had a birth certificate and social security documents, 22% stated that no one in their family has a marriage certificate.

The Romani Americans we interviewed live in neighborhoods where English is the language spoken most often. Only 1% live in neighborhoods where Romani is spoken most often.

Responding to a multiple-choice question, 80%

<sup>48</sup> Throughout the study, percentages may not always add up to exact 100% due to rounding.

of the Romani people we interviewed belong to one Romani group, and the rest belonged to more groups. More than half of the people we interviewed chose Romanichel (32%) or Kaldarash (23%) as their main subgroup. The rest belonged to a diverse set of Romani subgroups (Figure 1).

Of the people we interviewed, 88% identified their mother as Romani, and 89% stated the same for their father.

Only 11% identified themselves as first-generation Americans born to foreign parents, while 6% said their parents were the first generation; 30% said their grandparents were the first generation; information was missing for almost 2%. Of the 52% who answered “other,” more than two-thirds mentioned their great grandparents or great-great-grandparents.

Respondents to a multiple-choice question, most frequently (39%) cited the search for better economic opportunities as the reason

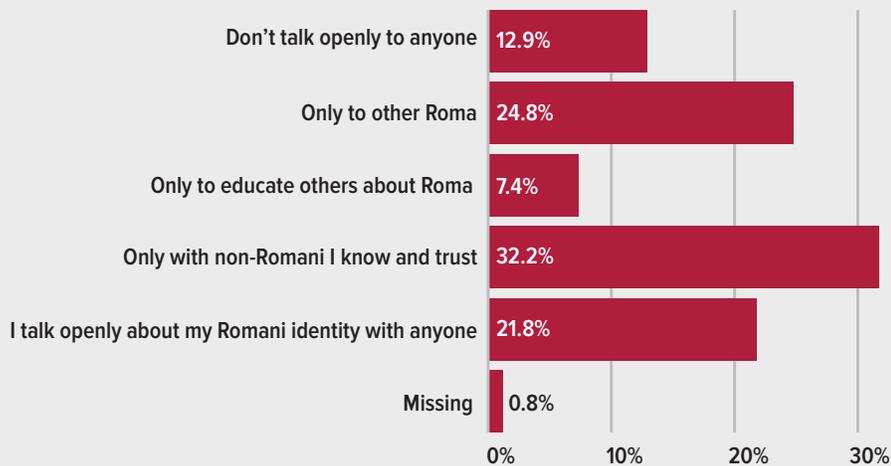
for immigrating to the United States. In addition, 13% said discrimination was the reason they or their family immigrated; and 10% listed family ties as the reason, while 3% listed higher education. Past state-sponsored injustices also led to immigration: 2% mentioned family being victims of enslavement and 6% the Holocaust. Other listed reasons include adoption, marriage, deportation, fleeing war, or the search for a better life.

Therefore, to best understand the findings of this study, we must consider the specificities of the interviewees, including their gender, language, membership in Romani groups, and immigration experiences.

## IDENTITY

The Romani Americans interviewed have a robust sense of their Romani identity, even though they tend to hide it from non-Romani people. For example, 78% stated that they think frequently

### REVEALING ROMANI IDENTITY



**Figure 2. Revealing Romani Identity (multiple-choice question)**

(34%) or very frequently (44%) about their Romani identity.

The Romani Americans we interviewed have a robust sense of their Romani identity, even though they tend to hide it from non-Romani people.

Many interviewees reported surrounding themselves with friends who are Roma: 61% said that either they have friends who are mostly Roma or that all their friends are Roma. Still, only 22% stated that they talk openly about their Romani identity with non-Romani people, while 32% would only talk about it with non-Romani people they know and trust.

When asked why they feel free to talk about their Romani identity, the 219 people who responded

chose from the following list of answers (multiple-choices): pride in their Romani heritage (42%), explanation of why they do or think certain things (37%), wanting to teach others about their Romani heritage (31%), and pride in some aspects of Romani heritage (13%). Nearly one-fifth (19%) cited other reasons. This illustrates that many Romani Americans relate strongly to the cultural aspects of their identity.

In contrast, 135 respondents said they do not feel free to talk about Romani identity for the following reasons: believing others would not understand (49%), fear of prejudice (42%), shame (7%), and considering themselves to be Americans (6%); 19% cited other reasons.

While 68% of the interviewees said English was the language spoken most often among family members, 14% use Romani, and 17% speak other languages. But even among those who

### REASONS FOR NOT TALKING FREELY ABOUT ROMANI IDENTITY

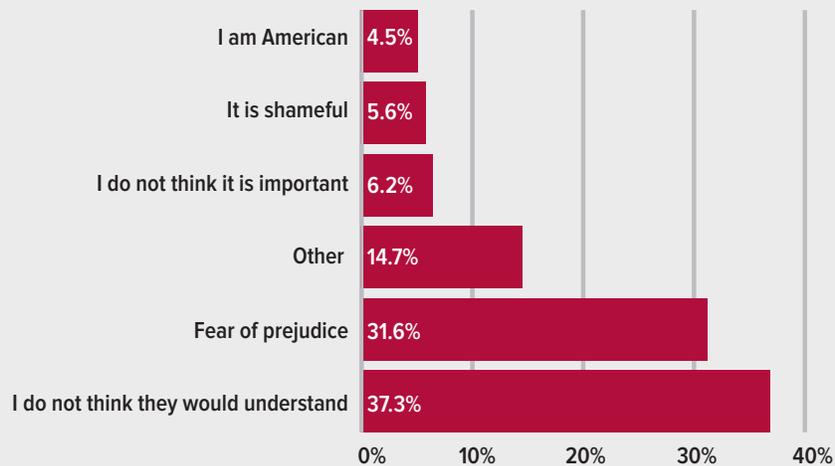


Figure 3: Reasons for Not Talking Freely About Romani Identity

mentioned other languages, almost half use English and Romani equally often. Some mentioned they speak a mixture of Romani and English, and the rest mentioned speaking a third language (mostly another European language). However, of those who speak Romani, 32% avoid doing so in front of non-Roma.

To get an understanding of the differences between generations, we asked the participants about the languages most often spoken among their parents. While 48% said English, 28% said Romani. As was true of the interviewees themselves, half of those who listed “other” as a language (23%) said their parents used English and Romani equally often, and the rest mentioned a mixture of Romani and English. The rest mentioned a third language (mostly a European language).

Experts are worried about the loss of the Romani language, especially among younger generations. For example, Petra Gelbart said,

I am teaching my youngest Romani sort of, out of—I do not know—partly desperation. I do not see anybody in his generation in the United States that he is likely ever to have a Romani conversation with, and that is pretty sad.... You have this almost complete drop off in the Macedonian Roma where the older generation speaks fluent Romani. Then the next generation, there is just nothing.<sup>49</sup>

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49 Expert interview with Petra Gelbart, 2019.

50 Expert interview with Melina Salifoski- Cakmak , May 10, 2019.

51 Expert interview with Steve Piskor, December 9, 2019.

Romani language seems to be spoken at home by fewer Romani Americans. Nevertheless, a large portion of the Romani Americans we interviewed know and practice other elements of Romani culture, heritage, and identity.

For example, when we asked how familiar they are with Romani music, 89% said they are familiar. This is broken down as: a little bit familiar (17%), somewhat familiar (11%), familiar (13%) or very familiar (50%) with Romani music; with Romani dances, 82% are familiar. This is broken down as: 12% a little bit, 10% somewhat familiar, 17% familiar, and 43% very familiar. And indeed, Romani music remains a powerful element that helps Romani Americans maintain and embrace their Roma culture: “at weddings and parties, music is really what brings us together,” said expert Melina Salifoski-Cakmak.<sup>50</sup> However, some Romani musicians had to adopt the style of their music to the demands of American audiences, a trend that expert Steve Piskor sees as making it harder to preserve Romani music.<sup>51</sup> And some interviewees in the study were also worried about the loss of Romani culture and music: “Our children are losing more of the culture and traditions as time goes on. There are also fewer musicians in our community, and that was a big part of our community and our lives for many years.”

Other musicians referenced these challenges. Expert Vadim Kolpakov, who has shared the stage with Madonna and other well-known American singers, thinks that, although Romani musicians have done their best to represent

### LANGUAGE MOST OFTEN SPOKEN AMONG FAMILY MEMBERS

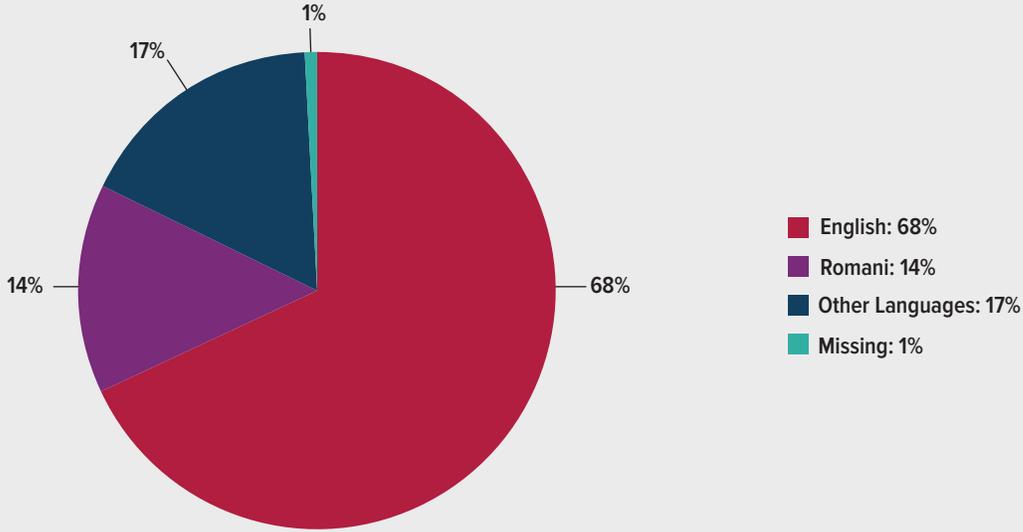


Figure 4: Language Spoken Among Family Members

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### LANGUAGE MOST OFTEN SPOKEN AMONG PARENTS

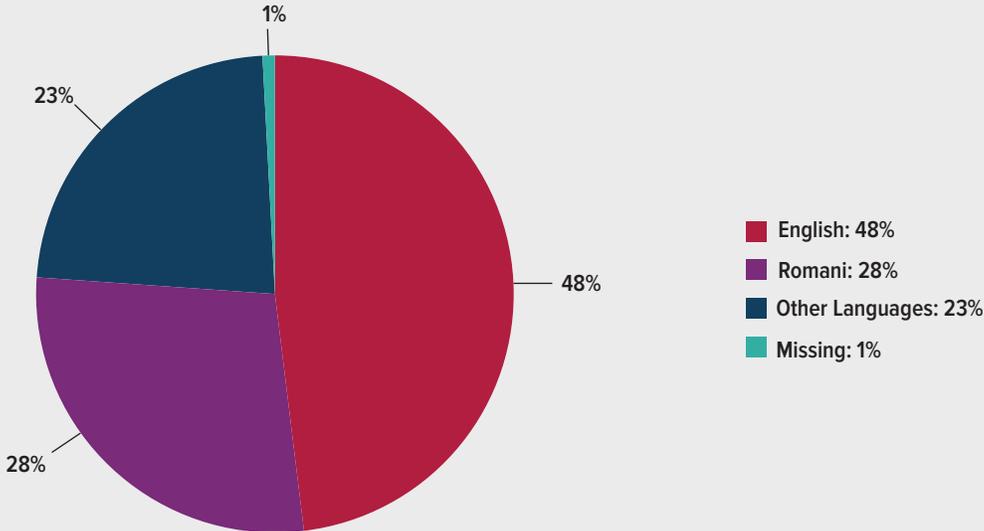


Figure 5: Language Spoken Most Often among Parents

Romani music in the United States, the music industry has not been fully open to embracing Romani excellence: “I wanted to represent the culture that I know from inside—the amazing Romani art and music. But the industry is not interested in getting Romani representation; it is still kind of hard for us to break through the wall.”<sup>52</sup>

When asked about familiarity with Romani life cycle celebrations, such as weddings and funerals, only 16% of the interviewees said they were not familiar at all. And 17% said they were not familiar with Romani holiday traditions, such as Easter.

Moreover, only 5% said they are not at all familiar with their personal family history and/or ancestry.

The interviewees’ families still follow several Romani traditions today. In a multiple-choice question, interviewees said they follow one or more of the following traditions: “rite of passage” events (85%), pomana<sup>53</sup> (15%), slava<sup>54</sup> (12%), Herdelezi/St. George’s Day (12%), and henna parties (5%).

Of the 223 interviewees who reported having children, the majority said they taught their children some elements of Romani history, culture, and heritage. When answering different questions regarding various aspects of Romani culture, 69% said they taught their children songs. When asked about Romani dances, 63% said they taught their children. Also, 88% taught

their children Romani cultural practices. At the same time, 81% stated they taught their children personal family history/ancestry. When asked about holiday traditions, 73% stated that they taught their children about them. When asked about folktales, 61% taught them to their children. And finally, 80% said they taught their children their Romani dialect.

Some of the experts, including Oksana Marafioti, see positive steps in the reemergence of Romani heritage pride. “There is a movement,” she says, “especially by younger Roma people.”

... maybe in the past, people hid, and it was often the case because people were fleeing persecution. They wanted to blend in. But I think now there are people who are becoming very aware of it. They are very proud of it. I have two kids, and they are both very proud of their heritage. They are trying to learn about it. They are trying to learn the language. It is there—that feeling of identity where you are an American, but you also acknowledge that a huge part of who you are—in terms of your roots... I keep hearing this about this movement towards authenticity among younger generations.”<sup>55</sup>

These findings reveal that a large percentage of Romani Americans we interviewed are invested in their heritage and family celebrations as a primary source of Romani identity.

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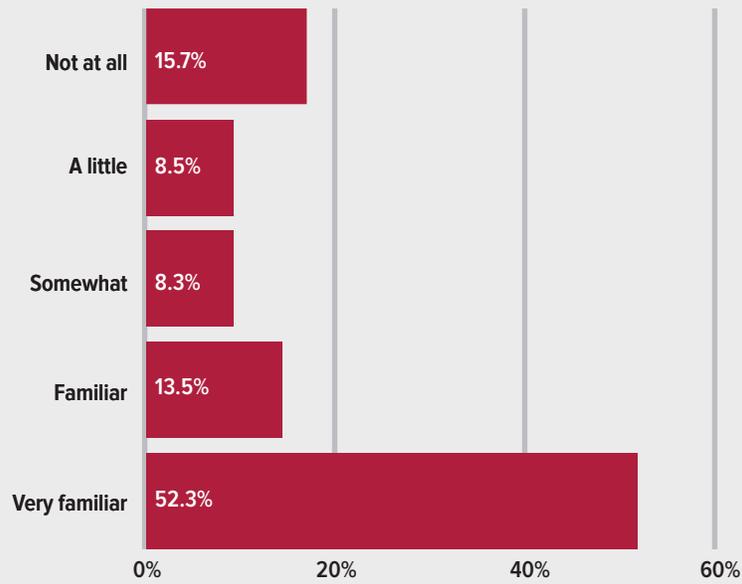
52 Expert interview, Vadim Kolpakov, November 20, 2019.

53 Memorial feast.

54 Saint’s Day celebration.

55 Expert interview with Oksana Marafioti, December 10, 2019.

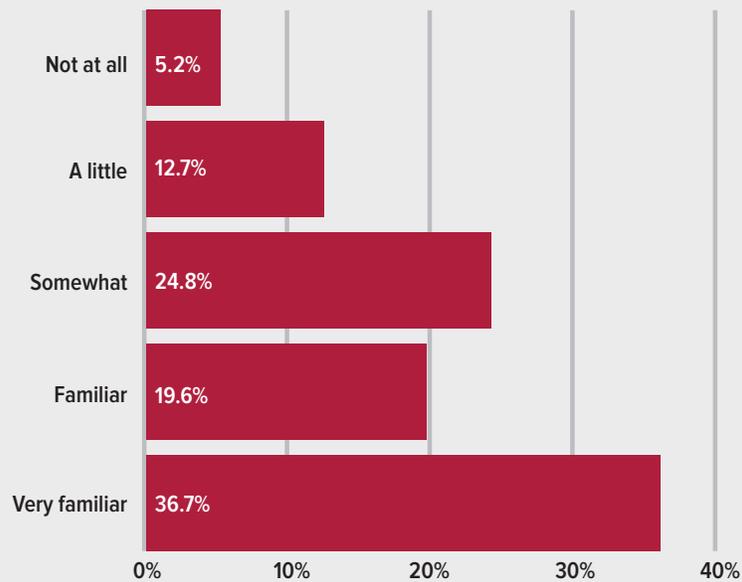
## FAMILIARITY WITH ROMANI LIFE CYCLE CELEBRATIONS



**Figure 6: Familiarity with Romani Life Cycle Celebrations**

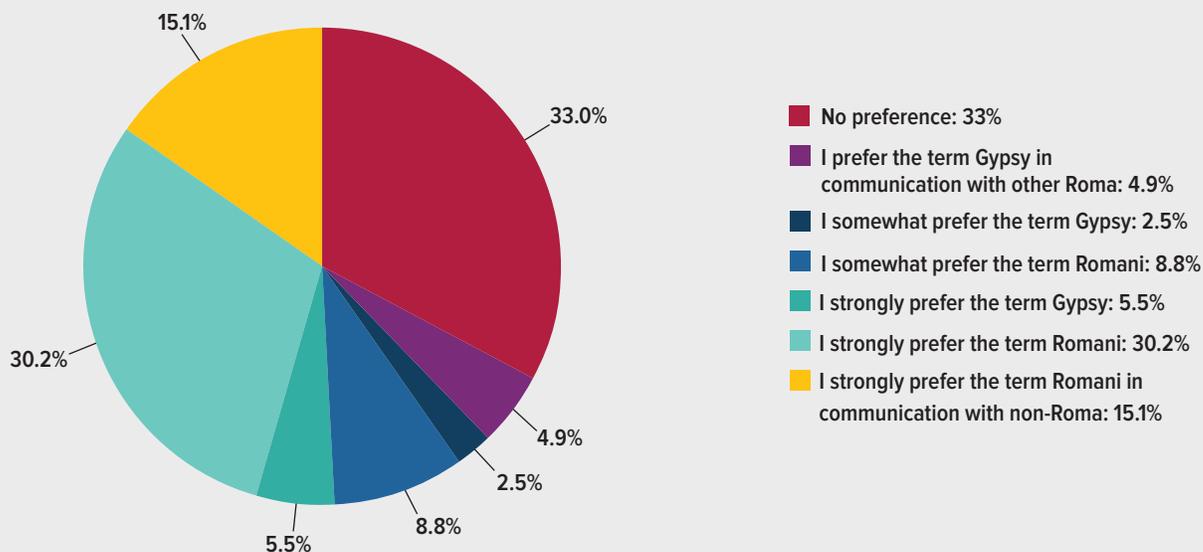
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## FAMILIARITY WITH PERSONAL FAMILY HISTORY



**Figure 7: Familiarity with Personal Family History**

## PREFERRED IDENTITY TERM



**Figure 8: Preferred Identity Term**

Given the controversies regarding terminology, we asked the participants about their feelings regarding the terms “Gypsy” and “Romani.” When asked which option best described how you felt about the terms “Gypsy” and “Romani,” 5.5% strongly preferred the term “Gypsy,” 30% strongly preferred the term “Romani.” The 5.5% who strongly preferred the term “Gypsy,” came most often from subgroups such as Kalderash, Roma, or other. Also, 33% stated they had no preference between the two terms.

When asked why they prefer one term over the other, 35% of the respondents said that they consider “Gypsy” to be a racial slur.

Experts also felt conflicted by words imposed on Romani people by outsiders, including the controversial word “Gypsy.” While some

Romani musicians use the term to promote their music, others have chosen not to. Expert Vadim Kolpakov experienced the financial disadvantages of not following the “commercial word,” especially because “when you say ‘Romani music’ people don’t know at all what it is.”<sup>56</sup> Other experts raised the need to understand the diversity of Romani groups and their choices in calling themselves by the name of their subgroup or by calling themselves Romani or Gypsies.<sup>57</sup>

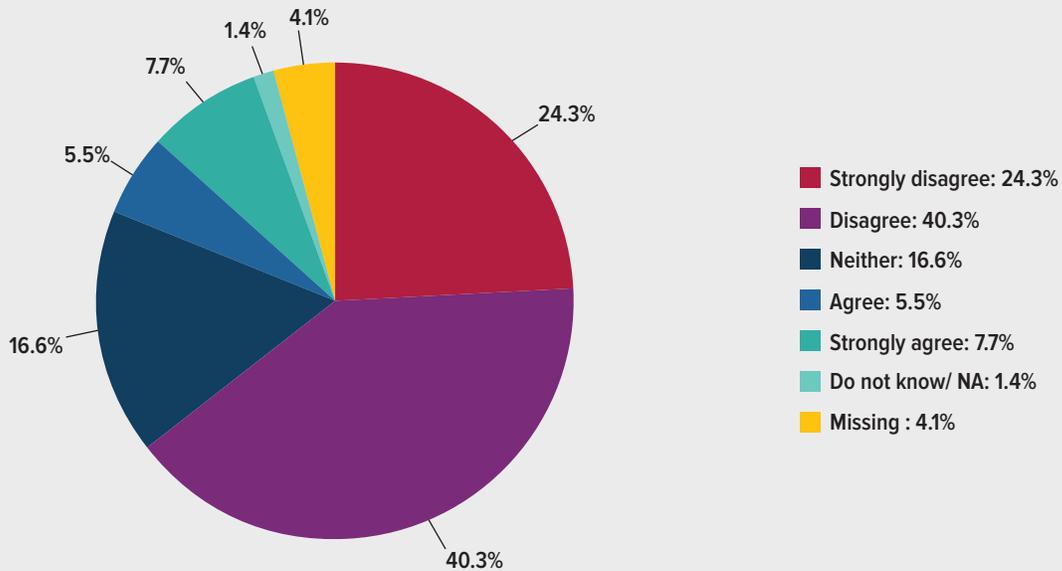
Experts also struggle with terms such as “fortune-telling.” As expert George Eli argued,

Fortune-telling is not a word in our vocabulary just like the word “Gypsy” is not in our vocabulary. Fortune-telling is the gadjo [non-Roma] word. We use the word “dabarimose”—“draba” means

<sup>56</sup> Expert interview, Vadim Kolpakov, November 20, 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Expert interview with Petra Gelbart, 2019.

## AGREE/DISAGREE: ARE AMERICANS WELCOMING TOWARD ROMA?



**Figure 9: Opinions on Welcoming Toward Roma**

medicine. It is spiritual medicine. That's what it is.

Understanding and probing the concept of a “hiding” one’s identity among Romani Americans was a key part of our study, especially given its multiple connections with prejudice and discrimination.

The majority of the 363 Romani Americans we interviewed do not feel non-Romani Americans value Romani people: only 13% agreed or strongly agreed that Americans are welcoming towards Roma.

As one participant put it: “Well, the public doesn’t really know about the Roma. They think ... we’re stupid! They don’t understand us and our culture.” Participants said that the words

non-Romani people in the United States most often use to describe a Romani person were “Gypsies,” “criminals,” “Romanians,” or “nomads.” And experts confirmed that Romani people are still seen as “criminals or potential criminals by police forces, by their neighbors, by community members, and in popular culture<sup>58</sup> or as “witches, fortune-tellers, sexy females, sex images.”<sup>59</sup>

Such circumstances might help explain how the idea of a hidden minority originated, even though Romani Americans interact with other Americans on a daily basis. And indeed, a vast majority, more than 90% of our interviewees, agreed that Americans do not understand what it means to be Roma: “the majority of Americans are not aware much of the time that this is a distinct ethnic

58 Expert interview with Ethel Brooks, May 23, 2019.

59 Expert interview with Melina Salifoski- Cakmak, May 10, 2019.

**70%**

said they usually hide their Romani identity to avoid being stigmatized, stereotyped and/or discriminated against by non-Roma

**78%**

said that Americans discriminate against people of Romani heritage or that Americans treat Romani people differently from people in other minority groups

**Figure 10: Discrimination against Roma**

group called ‘Gypsies’ or ‘Roma’.<sup>60</sup> However, when non-Roma consider Romani Americans as “a lifestyle” rather than a group of people, that belief can lead to ignorance and biases that damage the social, economic, and political rights of Romani people,<sup>61</sup> this phenomenon also points to risks involved for those who do identify themselves as Romani people.

Hiding one’s Romani origins may well be a cultural or social response to expected or experienced discrimination. Among other explanations are the history of injustice in their countries of origin and the decision to “pass” as members of other groups. Our quantitative findings that many Romani Americans experience a fear of prejudice: more than three-quarters of the interviewees said that Americans discriminate against people of

Romani heritage or that Americans treat Romani people differently from people in other minority groups. More than seventy percent of the interviewees said they usually hide their Romani identity to avoid being stigmatized, stereotyped and/or discriminated against by non-Roma.

Responding to the open-ended questions, many Romani Americans said they avoided talking about their ethnic identity, fearing the consequences. “We can’t tell nobody that we are Gypsies because we get discriminated,” one explained. Another said: “To go ahead and tell a stranger that I’m a Gypsy? I never did that because I was too afraid of what they’d think of me.” The experts we interviewed agreed that “a lot is hidden for survival purposes.”<sup>62</sup> And in a setting in which people think that Romani identity

60 Expert interview with Petra Gelbart, 2019.

61 Expert interview with Oskana Marifioti, December 10, 2019.

62 Expert interview with Amanda Schreiber, April 3, 2019.

is characterized by “criminality,” “Gypsiness,” and “nomadism,” this behavior is not surprising. “If you could pass as gadjo [non-Roma], you know it was a good thing; you know it from hearing grandparents talk.”<sup>63</sup>

Some interviewees said they hide their identity because they fear being the victim of actions informed by the “criminality” narrative imposed on Romani people. Such actions occur in everyday situations, for example, when something is missing: “If something goes missing at work or there is a problem that is not of our own doing, we are the ones who are going to be blamed because all that is in people’s minds is the stereotype.”<sup>64</sup> As expert Martha Bloomfield explained, in the United States today, as in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, simply calling a person Gypsy “is to brand [them] as a lawbreaker.”<sup>65</sup>

Because some Roma fled persecution in Europe, hiding their Romani roots was one way to feel safe and blend in, like refugees from other cultures have done when they came to the United States.<sup>66</sup> Some even changed their names to more European-sounding names to pass as non-Romani.<sup>67</sup>

Others have waited for their acquaintances to get to know them first, before admitting to being Romani. One interviewee explained:

The people I have admitted it to, like the people, the owners who I’ve worked for or the other people I worked with or after

they knew me for many years, they knew I was an honest, decent person. Then I told them I was a Gypsy, and it shocked them, but they never discriminated against me because they already knew who I was.

Some pointed out that being forced to hide their identity is one of the biggest problems facing Romani Americans:

Probably, one of the biggest challenges is that we are not able to really tell everybody you know that we are Gypsies, that we are Roma. Nobody really understands. They, like I said, they all think we’re thieves, and we’re, you know, travelers and fortune-tellers and you know, the things that they portray on TV are not how everybody is.

Others live this heavy burden of hiding their roots:

... not telling people who and what exactly we are. I think it goes back to being embarrassed of you know, telling them exactly what we are and I think especially here in the U.S., I think, a lot of people hide it more ... um.. because some people, you know, it’s kind of hard to pick us out, who we are because we live amongst all different type of ethnicities ... So, I think that’s something that a lot of people, here in the United States face that are Roma.

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63 Ibid.

64 Romani woman quoted by Martha Bloomfield in her expert interview, November 26, 2019.

65 Expert interview with Martha Bloomfield, November 26, 2019.

66 Expert interview with Oksana Marafioti, December 10, 2019.

67 Expert interview with Steve Piskor, December 9, 2019.

Some of the experts we interviewed emphasized the need for nuance, to unpack the idea of a so-called “hidden” nature of Romani Americans’ lives. Expert Ethel Brooks inquired about its “gypsyloist”<sup>68</sup> nature,<sup>69</sup> which indeed requires attention, given that most literature about Romani Americans has been written by non-Roma authors, who have often misrepresented and exoticized Romani people. Moreover, Brooks pointed at the diversity of Romani groups and the differences between Romani people, giving the example of Romani people who don’t have the option to blend in and hide, such as the “hyper visible” ones who interact with the public, including fortune-tellers and paving contractors and workers.

Expert Oksana Marafioti also alluded to the diversity of Romani groups and families, suggesting that not all Romani Americans have used the tactic of hiding: “Within one heritage or nationality, you have people who are very proud of that, and they keep traditions, and those who really just live a life of an American.”<sup>70</sup> Expert Martha Bloomfield also gave examples of Romani Americans with a robust sense of pride; one Romani woman she interviewed said she felt excited after having visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., as “the whole world could see in writing that Gypsies do exist and they have their language, food, traditions. It is not a make-believe Disney movie.”<sup>71</sup>

In an environment that is so complex, diverse, and fluid, it is little wonder that many Romani people hide their identity in public but continue to practice it at home. Pressured by factors from the past and present, Romani Americans continue to strategize amongst themselves as they negotiate the “public-private split” regarding their identity. Roma also aim, as expert Ethel Brooks puts it, to protect their “communities and families from racism, from persecution, ... just protect them from ... the outside, but making sure that we don’t really talk about who we are or what we are outside of our communities.”<sup>72</sup>

## RELIGION

Religion plays a large role in the lives of many Romani Americans. Until the 1970s, Kalderash and Machwaya used Eastern Orthodox or Catholic churches for funerals but mostly adhered to their own syncretic belief system. In the 1970s, Evangelical Christianity began to spread among American Romani people (as well as in Europe), which remains a major force today.

Most of the people we interviewed identified as Christian (83%); another 6% said they were not religious, 2% were Muslims, and 1% Jewish. The rest reported Hindu and religions other than those included in the survey. The denominations of the Christians interviewed varied from Roman Catholic (27%) and Evangelical (23%) to Pentecostal, Orthodox, and Baptist.

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68 Defined by Ken Lee as “the construction of the exotic Other within Europe — Romanies are the Orientals. Within”, (in Ken Lee, *Orientalism and Gypsyloism*, 2000, *Social Analysis*, 44 (2): 129–156.).

69 Expert interview with Ethel Brooks, May 23, 2019.

70 Expert interview with Oksana Marafioti, December 10, 2019.

71 Expert interview with Martha Bloomfield, November 26, 2019.

72 Expert interview with Ethel Brooks, May 23, 2019.

During the past year, 39% of the interviewees said they had attended a Romani church, while 30% attended a different place of worship, and 21% had not attended church at all. Almost half of those who specified another place of worship attended a Catholic mass, while 12% attended another Christian place of worship, 5% an Orthodox place, and 4% a mosque.

When discussing the nexus between Romani culture and religion, some experts talked about a continuous negotiation between traditions and religion. Expert Petra Gelbart argued that the major groups—Kalderash and Machwaya—have experienced cultural change through faith. Thus, a question arises: does religion have the power to wipe out some Romani traditions and customs? For instance, Gelbart says fortune-telling is “an important aspect of American Romani culture... that is changing because some of the religious groups are saying ‘that doesn’t necessarily correspond to those certain identities of Christianity and being a Christian.’”<sup>73</sup> This is one reason fortune-telling has declined among Kalderash and Machwaya. Many Evangelical churches, as well as mosques, also actively discourage some Romani calendrical celebrations.

Some interviewees talked about the clash between traditions and religion. One said, “Modern Gypsy Christianity denies our spiritual practices a lot of the time. They do not remember where our ancestors came from.” Another said,

“I do psychic readings. And the Bible preaches against it. I think about that all the time.”

Some participants have implemented changes to accommodate their religion. For example,

When I was younger, I used to tell fortunes, and the Bible preaches against that, so I began to sell flowers for a living, and I did that for 30 years. I believe that the Bible preaches against fortune-telling, and that’s why I gave it up.

Some Kalderash and Romanichel communities are thriving due to the presence of charismatic pastors who use music and give passionate sermons. Some communities have separate Romani evangelical churches in places such as Portland, OR, Philadelphia, PA, Houston, TX, and several cities in the states of California, New Jersey, and Washington. Other Roma are negotiating identities and choosing between making their ethnic background or their religion be more visible and finding their place in one of the broader American evangelical churches. Some find the latter choice beneficial, as it might allow them inclusion and equality in the larger evangelical world.<sup>74</sup>

Many Macedonian Roma have embraced and revitalized Islam.<sup>75</sup> Expert Melina Salifoski-Cakmak spoke about rising levels of Muslim religiosity among Macedonian Roma; they continue “to embrace religious customs, fast, go to the mosque, and maintain a sense of

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73 Expert interview with Petra Gelbart, 2019.

74 Expert interview with Carol Silverman, September 3, 2020.

75 Ibid.

community in the mosque.”<sup>76</sup>

A majority of those who responded to these open-ended questions stated that they did not see a conflict between their traditions and religion. As one concluded,

I think our culture, Romani beliefs, and our Catholic religion all work together. We all love and fear God and teach our children to do the right things, to pray, to believe in God, to value and love family, and treat people in the world with respect.

## HEALTH

In the US, national statistics and disaggregated data measure extensive health disparities and inequities that affect racial and ethnic minorities; they can also potentially examine underlying conditions, root causes, and other factors in an intersectional framework. To measure disparities, the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) documents life expectancy, infant mortality, health insurance coverage, access to care, use of health care services, and other health indicators and risk factors.<sup>77</sup> However, the official data include only two ethnic categories, namely “Hispanic or Latino” and “Not Hispanic or Latino” and five racial categories, specifically American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black, or African American; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander; and white.<sup>78</sup>

No nationwide quantitative data or analysis are available on the health status and disparities of Romani individuals in the United States. Given the limitations of the snowball methodology we used, the data gathered in our project and summarized below cannot be compared to the data gathered about other racial and ethnic minorities. However, in this section, we offer explanations that can help explain the unique challenges facing this particular group of people.

Not all Romani Americans involved in our study had health insurance at the time we conducted the interviews. Of the 70% of interviewees who had health insurance, when asked where did they get their insurance from, just under 40% said they used Medicare/Medicaid, and 20% purchased it. Only 13% received insurance through their employer.

Some Romani Americans who fled their home countries and moved to the United States have had more difficulties finding a stable job in their field, a factor that impacts their access to health care. One expert gave this example: “The only job that my father could have would be to teach music by himself, like his own personal business, so he didn’t have health insurance.”<sup>79</sup>

More than half of the interviewees worry about health care costs, and one-third avoid seeing a doctor because of the expense.

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76 Expert interview with Melina Salifoski- Cakmak, May 10, 2019.

77 “NCHS Data on Racial and Ethnic Disparities.” NCHS. <[https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/factsheets/factsheet\\_disparities.htm#data](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/factsheets/factsheet_disparities.htm#data)>.

78 Egede, Leonard E. “Race, ethnicity, culture, and disparities in health care.” *Journal of general internal medicine* vol. 21,6 (2006): 667-9. doi:10.1111/j.1525-1497.2006.0512.x.

79 Expert interview with Victoria Rios, April 15, 2019.

## SOURCE OF HEALTH INSURANCE

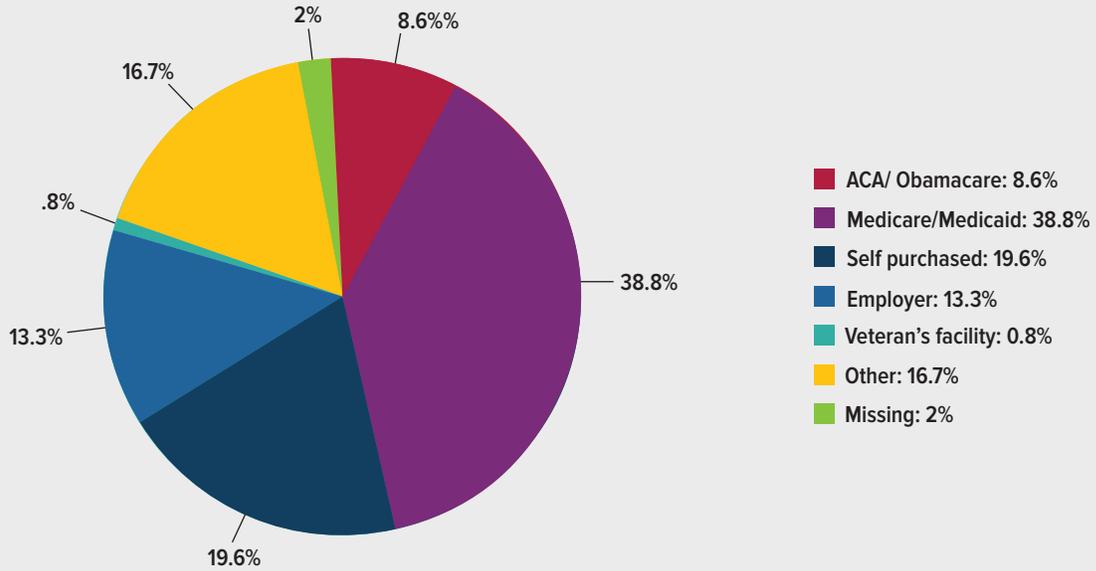


Figure 11: Source of Health Insurance

## OFTEN WORRY ABOUT THE COST OF HEALTHCARE?

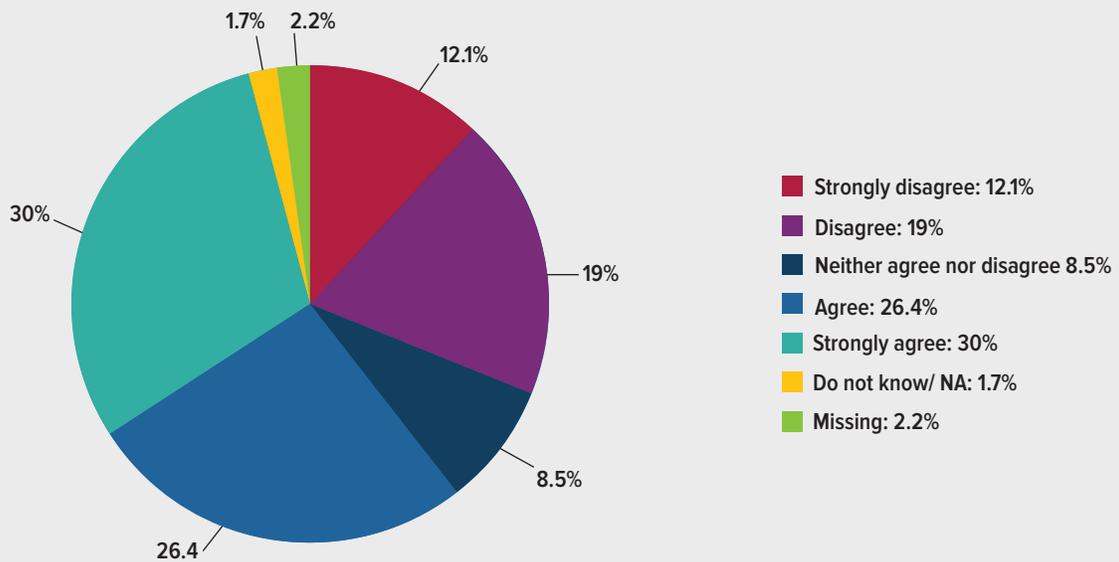
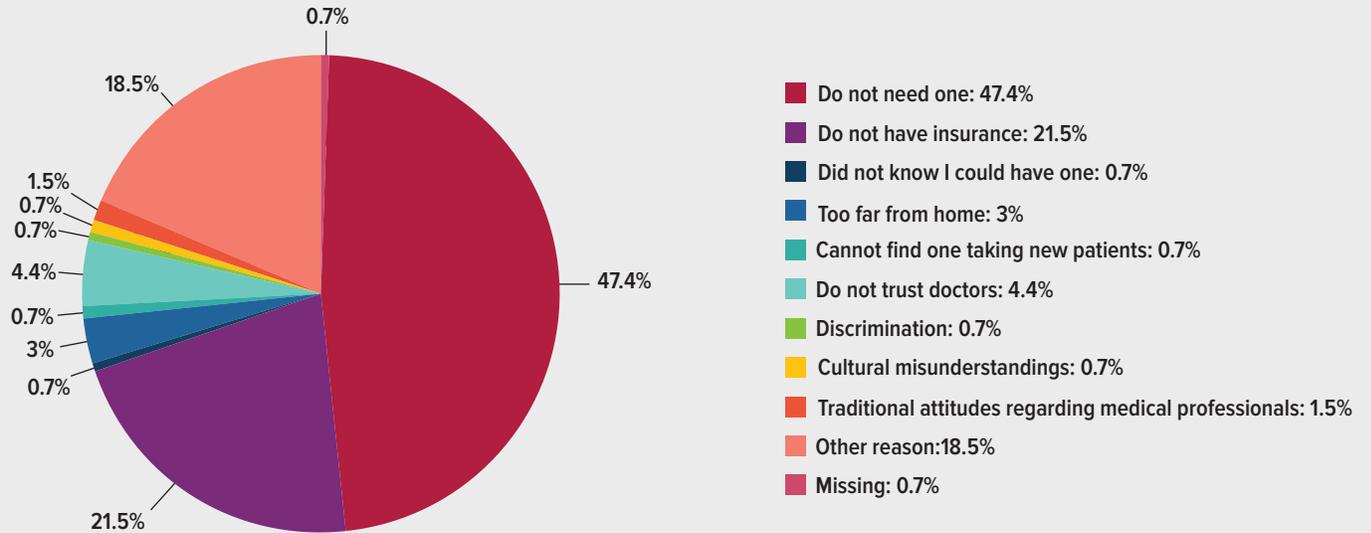


Figure 12: Concern Over Cost of Health Care

## REASON FOR NOT HAVING A PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIAN



**Figure 13: Reason for Not Having a Primary Care Physician**

More than 80% agree or strongly agree that generally, doctors treat them respectfully. And some experts agree. One pointed out that “it is a lot safer to be Romani in the U.S. than to be Black. I want to keep things in perspective in terms of physical safety. And talking about things like health care, it is so dangerous to be a Black birthing mother in an American hospital.”<sup>80</sup>

However, more than 20% of the interviewees stated that they or other members of their family had had the experience of being treated unfairly or disrespectfully by a health professional on the basis of ethnicity or perceived identity. An expert also told us that sometimes, Romani Americans still encounter barriers to health care, and “people don’t always want to treat Roma in local hospitals.”<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Expert interview with Petra Gelbart, 2019.

<sup>81</sup> Expert interview with Ethel Brooks, May 23, 2019.

Among those participants who were treated poorly by medical personnel, some were victims of the racist narrative of “Gypsy criminality:”

When my grandmother was in the hospital, the nurses in the waiting room said: ‘keep your hands where we can see them because we don’t want to have to nail everything down.’

Medical personnel sometimes use markers of Romani culture to tag the ethnicity of their patients and thus treat them poorly.

... the doctor knew we were down at the trailer park where all the Gypsies are, and when I went back the second time, he grabbed me by the collar and jerked me up off of the table because he was

irritated that we came back.

When my wife went to have our youngest daughter, the nurses and doctors were so hateful to us-- they knew what we were because of our jewelry and how we talk, and they made us feel very uncomfortable the entire experience.

Almost one-third of the interviewees do not have a primary care physician. Of those, almost half said they did not need one, while nearly a quarter of participants did not have one because of a lack of health insurance. And as an expert explained,

Medical care is a problem when you are not a salaried employee, and you don't have good insurance provided as part of your benefits package. So, there are a lot of Roma who are unemployed, who don't have medical insurance, so when they have medical needs, they're not sure what to do.<sup>82</sup>

Stereotypes also affect Romani Americans' experience of receiving medical services. One participant in the study told us that whenever they were asked about their origins, doctors would ask if they use homemade potions or could tell their future.

Almost 5% of the interviewees said they did not trust doctors. Some of the experiences family members shared might have impacted their views. For some who grew up in Europe, their mistrust might have been connected to their experiences there:

Well, in Europe, the doctors always thought that Gypsies are not educated and don't understand, and so the doctors didn't explain well to mothers what's wrong with their child and why, where, when they had to put the kids in the hospital. The nurses were always mean to Gypsies and did not give them the best treatment. And, the doctors didn't even want to talk to the parents about the conditions and stuff because they thought the Gypsies didn't understand, and the Gypsies didn't know anything.

This history of injustice and its impact on Romani mistrust was confirmed by an expert who "also had historical mistrust and feelings of shame when dealing with doctors coming from Spain."<sup>83</sup>

Asked if they had had a regular check-up within the last year, only 65% said yes. Women were significantly more likely to have had a check-up in the last year compared to men ( $p = 0.02$ ). In addition, when asked whether in the last year they had needed to see a doctor in unexpected circumstances (illness, injury, or other ailments), more than half said they had. And 90% of those who needed a doctor in unexpected circumstances did go and see one. Of the 10% who did not go to the doctor in unexpected circumstances, 70% did not have health insurance. Of those who did not seek care, more than half used home care, went to an emergency room or urgent care clinic, used alternative medicine, or refused to say.

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82 Expert interview with Jud Nirenberg, April 2, 2019.

83 Expert interview with Victoria Rios, April 15, 2019.

## SOURCE OF CARE IF DOCTOR NOT SELECTED

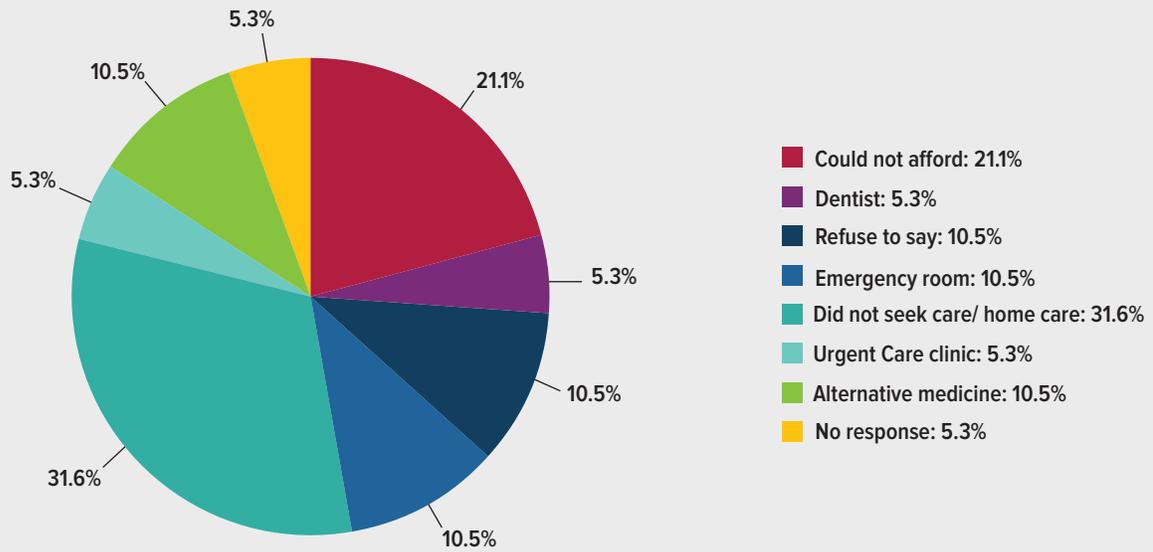


Figure 14: Source of Care (If Not Doctor)

## RESPONSE TO STATEMENT "OVERALL MY HEALTH IS GOOD"

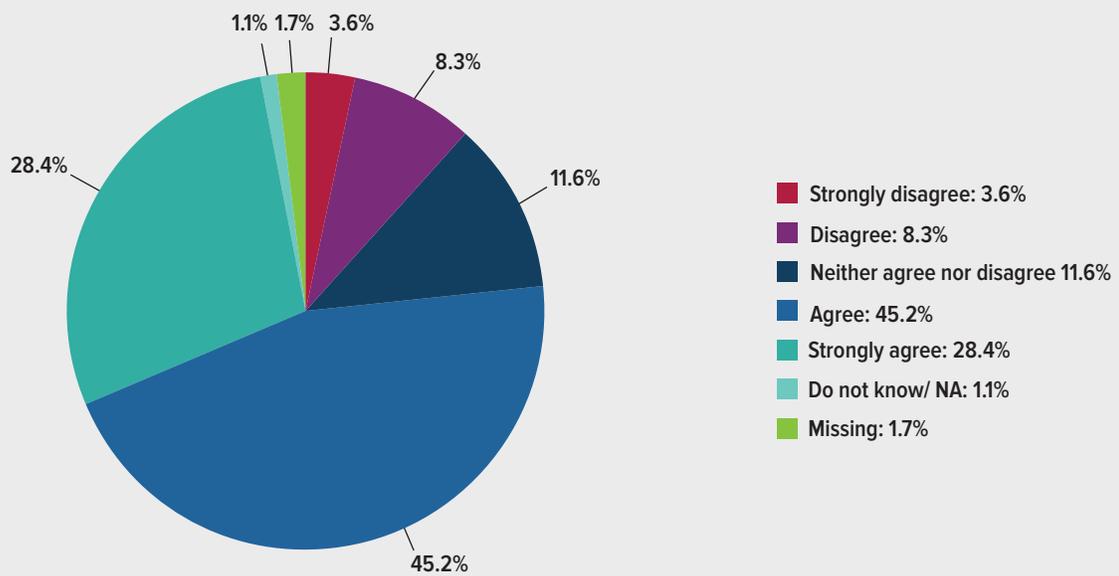


Figure 15: Response to Statement "Overall My Health is Good"

It is likely that many Roma who cannot purchase health insurance will resort to going to an emergency clinic or emergency room to seek treatment.<sup>84</sup>

About three-quarters of the Romani American participants seem to have generally good self-reported health status: 45% agreed, and 28% strongly agreed that overall, their health was good. However, almost one-third have family members who have to go to the hospital often.

## EDUCATION

For centuries, non-Roma policymakers, scholars, and societies across the world have portrayed formal education as something that Romani culture rejects. Such views have influenced policymaking throughout the history of public schooling and continue today.<sup>85</sup> To account for low levels of education among Romani people and communities, scholars and activists have invoked various explanatory frameworks, including cultural sociology, critical race theories, and educational justice. Some have argued that limited participation in formal education is a cultural matter. Others have explained it as a cultural (or social) response to racism, as a cultural or practical feature of nomadism, as a problem of the education system in which racism

is embedded, or a reflection of the denial of equal and just access to education.

Beliefs, values, fears, and internalization of oppression and rejection can be passed from one generation to another through both instruction and imitation. Some of the earliest accounts of Romani children being rejected from schools were documented in 1811 in London: “Trinity Cooper, a daughter of this Gypsy family, who was about thirteen years of age, applied to be instructed at the school; but, in consequence of the obloquy affixed to that description of persons, she was repeatedly refused.”<sup>86</sup>

School rejections occurred in a European context in which expulsions, killings, and anti-Roma laws were in effect since the earliest days of a Roma presence in Europe.<sup>87</sup> Educational institutions have rejected Roma since the beginning of public school systems and continuously thereafter. Clear anti-Roma education laws were promulgated in Europe during the Holocaust. For example, in Serbia in 1941, the government ordered that “Jews and Gypsies cannot attend University [colleges].”<sup>88</sup>

In the United States, expert Ethel Brooks, a renowned Romani American scholar, told us that her mother and her mother’s generation

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84 Expert interview with Kristin Day, March 8, 2019.

85 Margareta Matache, Tanja Jovanovic, Simona Barbu, and Jacqueline Bhabha, “Roma in Higher Education: Access Denied,” in Jacqueline Bhabha, Wenona Giles and Faraaz Mahomed, eds, *A Better Future: The Role of Higher Education for Displaced and Marginalized People*. (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

86 John Hoyland, *A Historical Survey of the Gypsies; designed to develop The Origin of this Singular People, and to promote The Amelioration of their Condition*. (York: William Alexander, 1816), p.60

87 Ian Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome* (Patrin Web Journal, 1987), <<http://www.oocities.org/~patrin/pariah-contents.htm>>; Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon, *The Destiny of Europe’s Gypsies* (Basic Books INC, 1972).

88 Margareta Matache, Tanja Jovanovic, Simona Barbu, and Jacqueline Bhabha, “Roma in Higher Education: Access Denied,” in Jacqueline Bhabha, Wenona Giles and Faraaz Mahomed, eds, *A Better Future: The Role of Higher Education for Displaced and Marginalized People*. (Cambridge University Press, 2020) citing Pisarri, M., *The Suffering of the Roma in Serbia during the Holocaust*. (2014). Available online at [www.starosajmiste.info/userfiles/files/download/Pisarri\\_The\\_Suffering\\_of\\_the\\_Roma\\_in\\_Serbia\\_during\\_the\\_Holocaust.pdf](http://www.starosajmiste.info/userfiles/files/download/Pisarri_The_Suffering_of_the_Roma_in_Serbia_during_the_Holocaust.pdf).

were not allowed to go to school: "...not by her parents but by the larger community she had grown up in. They were thrown out because they were 'Gypsies.' So," she continued, "my mother never had access—that generation didn't have the kind of access to education that perhaps subsequent generations did."<sup>89</sup> Therefore, some Romani families, and communities, feared the institution of school as a repository for unceasing oppression and rejection. This background is crucial to contemporary understanding of educational disadvantage among Romani Americans.

There is a broad range of schooling levels among Romani Americans. While two-thirds of the interviewees attended daycare, nursery or kindergarten, 8% finished 8<sup>th</sup> grade, 10% have a high school degree; 2% completed trade/technical/vocational training, 2% earned an associate degree, 5% earned a bachelor's degree, 3% earned a master's degree, and 0.3% earned a doctoral degree.

A higher percentage started some level of education but did not complete it: 26% of respondents have some primary schooling but did not finish 8<sup>th</sup> grade, while 17% at least started 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but did not earn a diploma. Another 10% have some college credits, but no degree. And 5% completed no schooling.

There were no statistically significant differences between male and female respondents in the highest level of school completed, although women were more likely to report having their highest level as "8<sup>th</sup> grade" or "other" and less

likely to have a bachelor's, associate, or doctoral degree compared to men. Women were also more than 1.5 times likely to have no schooling (5.64%) compared to men (3.75%). One participant said, "it's important for the boys to go to school, but the girls have to learn how to be a wife and a mother and learn how to tell fortunes. And that takes up a lot of time." Another participant feared that schools are about "anything that's against God" and that they teach girls to be sexually active at a young age. Some saw school as introducing dangerous outsider ideas; they kept their sons and daughters in school but did their best to "keep them away from the American lifestyle." Below we explore this issue.

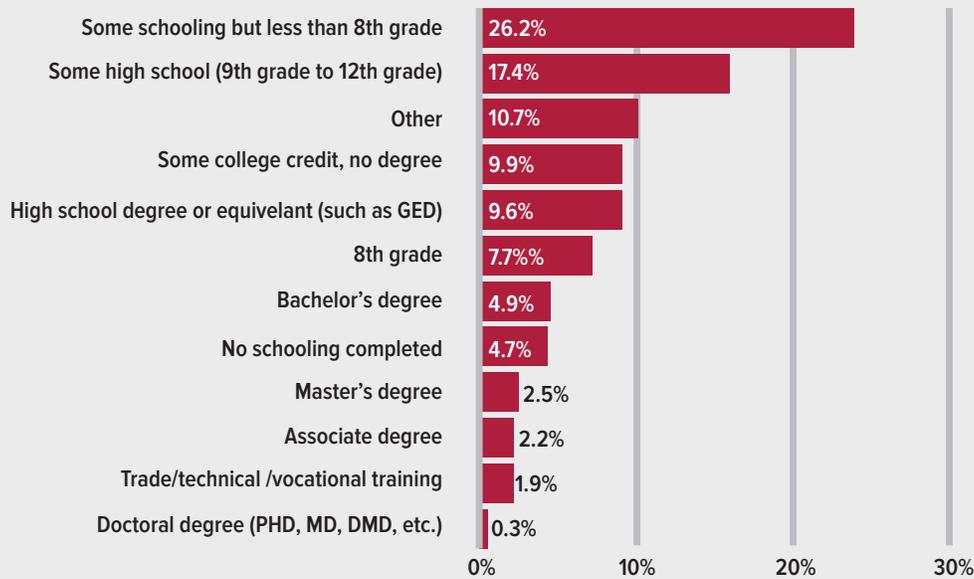
In addition, experts unpacked and challenged some of the myths regarding education, especially higher education. In discussing some Romani American approaches to education, expert George Eli mentioned the prevalence of a cultural response to oppression/racism: "A lot of Roma that I grew up with see themselves as inner-oppressed as if they do not believe the gadjo world wants anything to do with them." Eli also advanced the following economic argument:

Most of the Roma I grew up with do not seek higher education like university. Many people go to high school. For example, the M. family are all high school educated. Even the father. They did not seek college because it was not economically smart for them because they owned a chain of flower stores. They did not see any economic reason to go to

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89 Expert interview with Ethel Brooks, May 23, 2019.

## HIGHEST EDUCATION RECEIVED



**Figure 16: Highest Education Obtained**

university. They love what they do. They grew up in what they do. But, I believe if one of the kids said ‘Dad, I want to go to school to study law,’ and ‘he would be like ‘great!’ But ... they believe there is no economic reason to go to a higher school.<sup>90</sup>

Finally, Eli alluded to the lack of visible role models for Romani Americans, a point other experts made as well: “If nobody has done that, it’s scary for them. It is uncharted waters. They don’t know what might happen, so the safer thing is to let your kids go for a while and then pull them back at a certain age.”<sup>91</sup>

Expert Petra Gelbart discussed a similar question about the role of formal higher education; we

must be “careful not to just come from a position of ‘everybody should have as much formal education.’” Like Eli, Gelbart argues that higher education is not the ultimate measure:

When we talked about socioeconomic opportunities, if they are doing just fine and keeping everyone fed and comfortable and happy and—as we have seen, it is not like a huge amount of fun to be Roma in American school—I think we should absolutely create more opportunities for those Roma who want to be in school, but we shouldn’t assume that formal schooling is the be-all and end-all of a valid existence.<sup>92</sup>

When we asked Romani Americans if they had

<sup>90</sup> Expert Interview, George Eli, August 5, 2019.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Expert interview with Petra Gelbart, 2019.

ever been homeschooled, 20% said yes. Women were more likely to have been homeschooled compared to men, but this difference was not statistically significant. Experts talked about some more conservative Romanichel, Kalderash, and Machwaya families who continue to homeschool their children because they feel it is a more controlled environment, and their children can still get the skills that they need. But some experts thought that homeschooling is decreasing, and they see variations, as people who are less conservative will send their kids to school.<sup>93</sup> Other experts suggested that homeschooling is not sufficient “for Roma to progress, to make changes.” Instead, “Romani children should start in school—like public or private—and be in society, live in society.”<sup>94</sup>

Nevertheless, although the levels of education among Romani Americans are still low, they are higher than for previous generations. For instance, 17% of the interviewees said their mothers had completed no schooling, and 15% said that about their fathers. In addition, 15% of their mothers and 12% of their fathers have a high school diploma or more education; yet, of them, only 2% of the mothers had a bachelor’s degree, 3% had a master’s degree, and 0.3% held a doctoral degree, and only 3% of their fathers had a bachelor’s degree, 1% had a master’s degree, and 1% had a doctoral degree. Also, 3% of their grandmothers and 5% of their grandfathers had a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Moreover, like the interviewees themselves, many of the parents had completed some schooling

but not finished: 30% of mothers had less than an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education, 13% had some high school but no diploma, and 1% had some college credit, but no degree. For their fathers, the equivalent percentages for schooling begun but not completed were 35%, 13%, and 3%, respectively.

Two hundred twenty-three respondents reported having children. After filtering out children currently in school (25%), respondents reported that among their eldest children, 22% reported some schooling but less than 8<sup>th</sup> grade, 3% 8<sup>th</sup> grade, 18% some high school (9<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade but no diploma), 17% other, and 13% no schooling. In addition, 13% reported high school of equivalent, 4% associate degree, 5% bachelor’s degree, 3% Master’s degree, and 1% stated trade/technical/vocational training.

With respect to second eldest children, after filtering out current students (25%), the education breakdown was as follows: 31% reported some schooling but less than 8<sup>th</sup> grade, 10% high school degree or equivalent (such as GED), 4% 8<sup>th</sup> grade, 14% some high school (9<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade but no diploma), 15% no schooling completed, and 16% other. Also, 2% reported trade/technical/vocational training, 1% associate degree, 3% bachelor’s degree, and 2% some college credit, but no degree.

There were no statistically significant differences in the highest education obtained by gender, though women were far more likely to have children whose highest education was identified as “other.”

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93 Expert interviews with Kristin Day, March 8, 2019 and with Amanda Schreiber, April 3, 2019.

94 Expert interview, Vadim Kolpakov, November 20, 2019.

In relation to their current relatives, 10% of the interviewees said they had a brother with a bachelor's degree or higher, and 7% had a sister with a bachelor's degree or higher. Moreover, 13% stated that they had an uncle and 9% an aunt with a college degree.

And some of the experts, including Oksana Marafioti, were optimistic about the educational prospects of the future generations:

I see that movement towards a more educated community. I see that there are more people who are aware that it is not that we are not... Again, the younger generations are not waiting for somebody to give them permission, which was and sometimes still is a big part of many Roma communities. You are given permission by the elderly or by the community outside. But even in terms of socioeconomic opportunities, the newer generations are taking opportunities. They are paving the way. They are saying, 'I am going to do this and that,' and then they go out and get it and they do not question it. Where before there was a lot of clashing ... between tradition and more contemporary culture.<sup>95</sup>

Moreover, when interviewees who had children were asked if they thought that their children have better educational opportunities than they did, 65% agreed (30%) or strongly agreed (35%).

One interviewee emphasized that "it is necessary to make a living in this world. it is important, now, to go to college and make something of yourself."

However, that person also felt that "morals and safety have decreased in the schools. Out in the world, the children need to know values from the parents, because there are many bad influences in schools and out in the world today that we live in."

But only 13% believed or strongly believed that their children were not treated fairly by the teachers in school on the basis of ethnicity/identity.

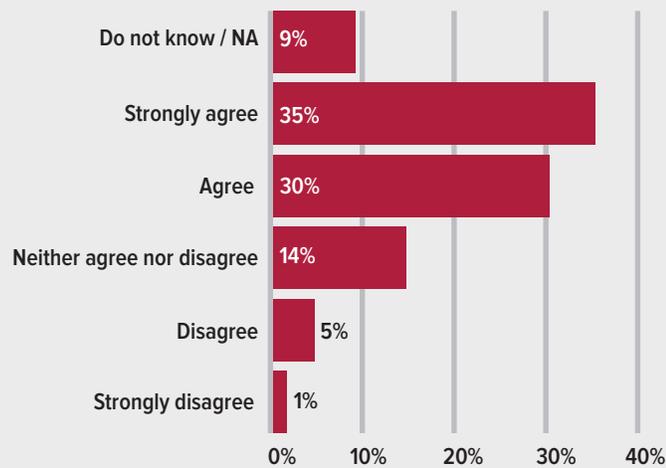
While only 7% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that "the schools in this neighborhood provide a good quality education," 34% agreed or strongly agreed that bullying was a problem in the schools in their neighborhood and 29% agreed or strongly agreed discrimination/racism was a problem in those schools.

Some interviewees shared fears or accounts of discrimination or bullying faced by their children because of their ethnic origins.

My daughter was bullied very badly in school for being a Gypsy. The kids would call her a baby stealer, a witch, a fortune-teller, all kinds of mean things. She would come home crying. Finally, I went to the school and told the principal and my daughter's teacher, but they were

95 Expert interview with Oksana Marafioti, December 10, 2019.

## AGREE/DISAGREE: MY CHILDREN HAVE BETTER EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES THAN I DID



**Figure 17: Generational Differences in Educational Opportunity**

less than willing to help. At one point, the teacher looked at me and said, ‘well, you are a Gypsy, right?’ Like that made it okay. Finally, I took her out. Now, none of my kids go to public schools.

Another interviewee told us that “I think we would be better off not to send them [children to school]. That’s all discrimination at schools.”

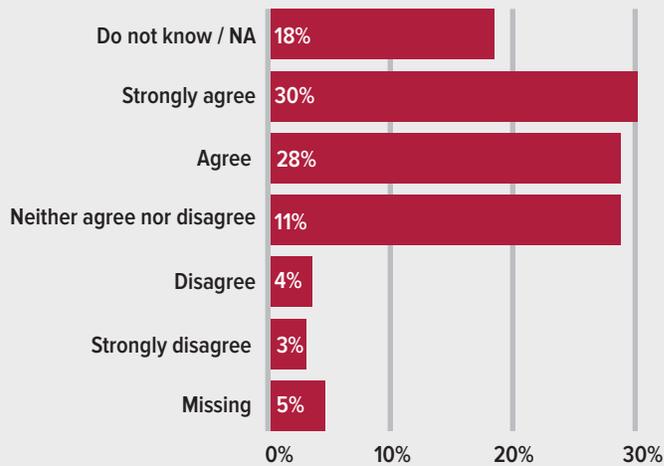
Some participants talked about fears, risks, lack of morals, and “bad influences” that schools pose to their children, including drugs, bullying, shootings, school expenses, or sex. Another concern was that “there are no morals; kids are having sex in the gym and smoking pot in the bathroom. They’re not learning anything valuable. They go to school for 18 years and get thrown into the real world with nothing but debt.” Another participant said that “the kids learn a lot of things they shouldn’t learn, like drugs and other things.” They also say they don’t like to take showers with the other students.

Other participants saw school as a place of alienation of their Roma-ness, indoctrination, and cultural misunderstandings.

I think that it’s not good for kids to be with strangers because they don’t know anything about them culturally, and it’s not good to be with those people more than with their own family or their own people. I think it [school] can become a place of indoctrination. I think that it can teach things that you don’t agree with, and you don’t know what your kid is taught for 8 hours a day. I think that school days are too long. I think that they’re learning too many unnecessary things. And I don’t think a lot of the time as being put to good use while they do teach him very valuable things that they need in life.

Other participants brought into discussion the

**AGREE/DISAGREE:  
SCHOOLS IN THIS NEIGHBORHOOD PROVIDE GOOD QUALITY EDUCATION**



**Figure 18: Agree/Disagree: Schools in This Neighborhood Provide Good Quality Education**

impact of the school on marriage perspectives. “Marriage is important at a young age, keep them from the corruption of the world,” one told us. Another felt school was important but “did not want to mix with American people. So maybe, as I said before, if there was an all Gypsy school, maybe that could help.”

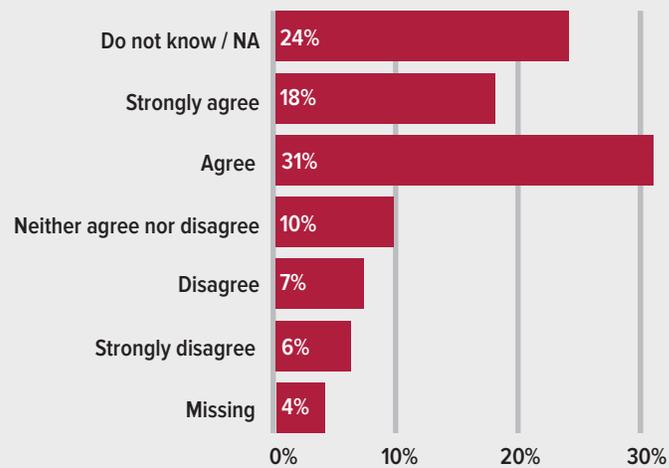
When asked if a teacher had ever treated them and/or anyone in their family unfairly or disrespectfully when they were in school on the basis of ethnicity or perceived identity, 39% said yes. Women were more likely to report being treated unfairly in school compared to men (43% vs. 36%), but this difference was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.24$ ).

When asked if a teacher had ever treated them and/or anyone in their family unfairly or disrespectfully when they were in school on the basis of ethnicity or perceived identity, 39% said yes.

As one concluded, “it’s hard when you look different.” Another noted that “the school environment is much worse now that the teachers can see ‘My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding.’ They think that our children are worthless scum,” that they are not worth educating or protecting at school.

My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding was a popular TV show (TLC channel, with several spinoff shows) advertised as an exposé of a “secret culture;” it emphasized fraudulent work, exoticism, violence, opulent wedding dresses, and over-sexualized young girls. And

**AGREE/DISAGREE:  
MY CHILD IS TREATED FAIRLY BY TEACHERS IN SCHOOL**



**Figure 19: Fair Treatment in Schools**

the show clearly impacted Romani Americans we interviewed. Other participants emphasized:

Yes, I had a niece that was treated badly in school. She was popular, but then, the show ‘My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding’ came out. They treated her really badly. They said to her horrible things ... repeating what was in the show. Everything was a lie. It got so bad that she quit going to school. My husband went up there and tried to talk to the school. And then, she tried to go back a little bit later, and it was still no better, and finally, they just had to take her out because she just sat and cried all the time because of the treatment that she was getting from the school.

...this new generation has all kinds of problems with school because Firecracker Productions and ‘My Big Fat

Gypsy Wedding’ portray our people as subhuman. Many more of our children, especially the girls, are dropping out of school because of the abuse. The children learn this from television, which teaches hatred of people on the fringes of society.

Participants shared anecdotes about hiding their identity, but by doing so, having to endure teachers’ stereotypes about Romani people in silence.

When I was in 7th grade, we were learning about the Holocaust, and so my teacher was teaching us a little bit about Gypsies and their culture. She had no idea that I was a Gypsy because we were always taught not to tell anyone. So when she told us about Gypsies, she said that Gypsy kids never go to school. And I remember just thinking how ridiculous it was that she was telling the Gypsy kid

that Gypsies don't go to school.

As mentioned earlier, hiding Romani origins was a helpful tactic to avoid discrimination for some Romani Americans.

*Well typically, I got along okay in school because we were taught at home not to tell the teachers or students we were Roma. If they asked us at school what nationality we were, we would try to tell them Dutch and English, said one interviewee.*

And some who didn't hide it, faced the consequences. "My art teacher treated my sisters and me differently after finding out we were Gypsies," one participant in the study confessed. Another interviewee said that her sister's children "were always treated more unfairly than the rest of the kids because they knew they were Gypsies." Another American Roma told us that "the teacher said I don't bathe and asked me to sit in the back of the class."

Some participants shared having been called racial slurs. "They called me Gypsy slurs, e.g. 'Did you steal any chicken recently?' - this sort of thing happened when the teacher was mad at me about something, especially in 7th and 8th grade," one interviewee told us.

It seems that when Romani families have lived for more than one generation in the same neighborhood, they found it harder to hide their

ethnicity and it was easier to be picked on: "Most of the people we went to school with in Dearborn and Delray, that our parents and grandparents grew up with, knew we were Gypsy."<sup>96</sup> And as expert Ethel Brooks underlined, it seems to be a reality at the local level:

I know that is [true], coming from my own family history, but it also comes from, for example, when I talk to K-12 teachers here in New Jersey and they are like 'oh wait, those kids in the back, those Roma kids who sit in the back of the room and are sort of othered because they don't really care about education?' There is some real inequality of access and real inequality of experience on all accounts.<sup>97</sup>

Skin color seems to trigger discrimination, too. "They were making remarks mostly about skin color," one interviewee shared. Another participant was treated unfairly because they "looked different from the other peers."

The experts we interviewed also shared experiences of discrimination or stigmatizing in American schools.

When I got to junior high school, some of the teachers that were there were the same teachers that were for my mother and some of my aunts and stuff like that... They knew we were Roma. I do not know if that was a good idea or a bad idea. I mean we—to me, it seems like they were—eyeing us more than anybody

96 Romani person quoted by Martha Bloomfield in her expert interview, November 26, 2019.

97 Expert interview with Ethel Brooks, May 23, 2019.

else. If we did not go to school that day, it was like: ‘why aren’t you in school?’ and so ... we were just treated differently than anybody else. I mean, it showed. [Some people] would actually comment on it saying: are they picking on you?<sup>98</sup>

In describing the impact of bullying and discrimination, one interviewee pointed out that “Something really needs to be done about that. It’s not fair, and it’s pushing people further away from education.”

Our study did not focus on the experiences of Romani Americans or Romani coming from abroad to study in American universities. Still, some of our own experiences in American college spaces also show that people there have very little awareness about Romani people. Some use racial slurs to describe Romani people. Others fail to include Romani experiences in classes where that experience is more than relevant, such as teaching about the Holocaust. Moreover, college recruiters have very little knowledge about the educational disparities Roma have faced historically, and thus, very little interest in embracing them in the diversity of their classroom.

Although the people around them in higher education know little about them, some Romani Americans have encountered “a lot of discrimination in education, in school, through my

life, personally.”<sup>99</sup> One said her worst experience was attending Berklee College of Music, where “dealing with being a Roma was terrible.”<sup>100</sup> As Jud Nirenberg concluded, “maybe, in the future, some schools would take proactive measures to have Roma on campuses, to think about us when they think about diversity.”<sup>101</sup>

Finally, in looking at the future, several experts felt that education should be the number one priority of the Roma. “Romani community and Roma people should get their kids into the highest level of education and try to keep the tradition like the language—such as language. It is time to be more progressive and more educated and have more opportunities for children,” said one expert.<sup>102</sup> And expert Sonya Jasaroska put it well:

We have to, number one, learn to let our children go to school and gain the knowledge to work the system. That is what we need for our own people, to wake up and find the importance of education. Now, they are scared to put people in school because of losing their culture.<sup>103</sup>

## EMPLOYMENT

Understanding both the challenges and the opportunities that Romani Americans face in employment—including underrepresentation in various fields, issues concerning diversity

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98 Expert Interview with Steve Piskor, December 9, 2019.

99 Expert interview with Victoria Rios, April 15, 2019.

100 Ibid.

101 Expert interview with Jud Nirenberg, April 2, 2019.

102 Expert interview, Vadim Kolpakov, November 20, 2019.

103 Expert interview with Sonya Jasaroska, May 10, 2019.

and inequity in the workplace, and their specific vulnerabilities as workers—would require extensive national data and broad self-identification. In the absence of such data, we looked at the realities reported by these 363 self-identified Romani Americans. These reflections reveal a great deal about their work experiences.

Historically, some waves of Romani immigrants arrived in the United States during times of high need for a willing workforce. According to expert Steve Piskor, some Slovak-Hungarian Romani came around 1900, “when Andrew Carnegie was posting full-page ads in European newspapers saying ‘Come to America, I have work for you.’” He continued, “and there were millions of people coming who worked in steel mills...and along with them, groups of maybe 50-100 [Romani] families that were moving all together all at once. And, by being together, it was harder for anybody to do something against them.”<sup>104</sup>

And many of them moved up on the ladder. One of the experts shared the “American dream” story of her father, a Romani man who arrived in New York in the 1970s with \$50 in his pocket, stayed with a relative for six weeks, then found them an apartment and a job. After two years, they were able to buy a house.<sup>105</sup> Others did not succeed as much economically: “In my extended family, there has been, in some sense, some economic success and improvement, but not in the way

that the mainstream gadje would understand.”

<sup>106</sup> Thus, the picture of economic advancement varied greatly from one family or community to another.

Today, the employment opportunities and choices made by study participants are quite diverse.

While a quarter of the participants are employed full-time, and 11% work part-time by choice, 20% are self-employed, and 5% own businesses.

There were statistically significant differences in employment status by gender, with women more likely to be homemakers/caregivers and less likely to have a white-collar job compared to men. Among self-identified subgroups, Romanichel, Kalderash, and Machvaya were most likely to report experiencing employment discrimination.

Of the 236 people who reported being employed in one form or another, some are in car sales or car repair, while others work in other sales roles, along with home health care, clerical work, and cleaning. But the vast majority engage in a wide range of work types. Experts reported that Romani Americans of Macedonian origin are working in factories and are electricians, accountants, salespeople, teachers, and cleaning people.<sup>107</sup> Others described the Romani in Michigan they interacted with as having day jobs, being musicians, playing jazz with parents and grandparents, and working in hotels.<sup>108</sup> Others are college professors, professional musicians,

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104 Expert interview with Steve Piskor, December 9, 2019.

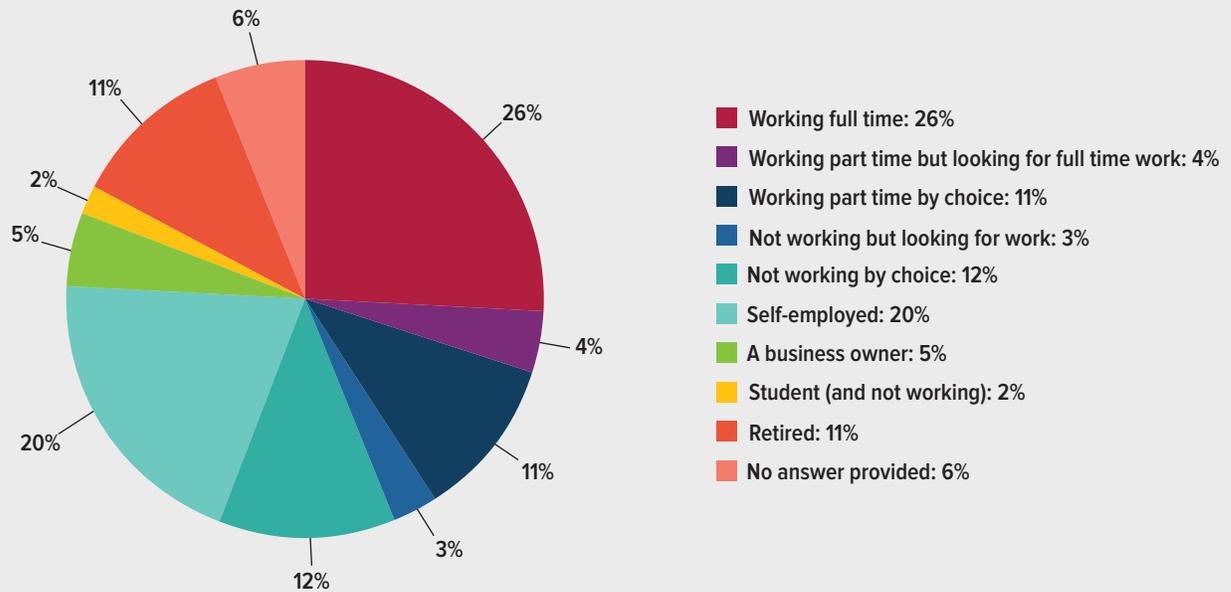
105 Expert interview with Sonya Jasaroska, May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

106 Expert interview with Ethel Brooks, May 23, 2019.

107 Expert interview with Carol Silverman, September 3, 2020.

108 Expert interview with Martha Bloomfield, November 26, 2019.

## EMPLOYMENT STATUS



**Figure 20: Employment Status**

doctors, and lawyers.<sup>109</sup> Still, other experts know Romani Americans who have earned degrees and are nurses, municipal employees, teachers, work in daycare, or as doormen.<sup>110</sup>

But a range of factors can have an impact on people’s decisions, opportunities, and choices in employment. The fact that few Romani Americans have degrees in higher education affects the job opportunities of the group as a whole. As one interviewee said,

It is harder to find good work opportunities now with our educational background because college degrees were not needed years ago to find decent jobs or to play music and make a

good living. Now it is more important to get college degrees to be able to survive and make it out in the world.

In other cases, people, especially immigrants, were self-employed or ran small businesses not out of choice, but rather because they had no other opportunity due to discrimination: “The only job that he could have would be to teach music by himself, like as his own personal business,” said Victoria Rios, speaking about her father, an acclaimed Flamenco musician from Spain.<sup>111</sup>

Both participants and experts expressed concerns about the present-day work challenges faced by members of some Romani subgroups involved in traditional crafts or trades.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Expert interview with Oskana Marifioti, December 10, 2019.

<sup>110</sup> Expert interview with Melina Salifoski-Cakmak, May 10, 2019.

<sup>111</sup> Expert interview with Victoria Rios, April 15, 2019.

<sup>112</sup> Expert interview with Amanda Schreiber, April 3, 2019.

Indeed, a key factor to consider is the impact that industrialization has on keeping alive the traditional crafts or trades practiced by some Romani groups and passed on from one generation to another.

For instance, as experts describe, the Kalderash Roma used to work in metal crafts, doing re-tinning and copper work in restaurants and homes before stainless steel became commonplace. They had established business circuits up and down the East Coast. Over the years, Kalderash Roma adjusted and adapted their skills to changing industries and economic circumstances. They stopped doing copper tinning but moved into repairing cars, applying their metalwork skills to a new profession. Nowadays, car repair is bureaucratized and requires insurance forms and computer skills, making it hard for many Kalderash to continue. But some are still in car sales. For example, quite a number of prominent men in the Kalderash community in Portland, Oregon, and in Seattle, sell cars and recreational vehicles. Others have turned to other kinds of sales-related work, including real estate.<sup>113</sup>

Expert George Eli talked about failing lines of business, including contracting, car sales, and fortune-telling, which are “being challenged by the internet today.” Those in car sales would usually drive around looking for cars they could buy from private owners and bring them home to sell from their yards. Now, salespeople can only make a profit from this work if they use the

internet and various online applications. Likewise, contractors are forced to use apps; they cannot succeed financially if they continue “the old ways of economics.” According to Eli, many Romani people recognized the situation and shifted to using the apps to continue their work. Some have also become Uber drivers, especially young Romani.<sup>114</sup>

Fortune-telling or “spiritual therapy,” as Eli calls it, has also been transformed in the United States into spiritual advising. However, for Romani people, the problem with fortune-telling is that more non-Roma have also moved into that niche. It is not that Americans are not interested in the kind of reading and advising and spiritual analysis that fortune-tellers provide; it is simply that Roma face too much competition. As mentioned in the Religion section, another reason why some Romani Americans have stopped fortune-telling is evangelism, which sees it as a sin.<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, as Eli explains, some Romani fortune-tellers are now using online apps: “Technology is dominating and moving into our livelihood, and they are forcing us into joining them. There is no other way.”

This idea of constantly having to adjust and adapt one’s skills and trades to current economic niches repeatedly arose in our conversations with both experts and participants. For instance, some Romanichels, who were traditionally horse traders, became fortune-tellers when they came to New York and other places. Today, Romanichels, and other groups, have

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113 Expert interview with Carol Silverman, September 3, 2020.

114 Expert Interview, George Eli, August 5, 2019.

115 Expert interview with Carol Silverman, September 3, 2020.

shifted again to roofing, paving, and lightning rod businesses. But still, other Romani people, like the Bashaldé, who live in the north-central part of the United States, were at first playing Hungarian-Slovak folk music, but now play in jazz ensembles, because that is more lucrative—and attracts an audience. Experts argue that they are fortunate, as they were able to continue within their traditional job niche.<sup>116</sup>

Thus, individuals and communities have responded to these challenges by learning new skills and using the internet and apps. Others are taking vocational courses. Expert Jud Nirenberg told us,

I talked to some very traditional Roma here, who said that they're taking IT classes and ..., you know, they're done with cars. They want to... do IT. They want to do programming, and if it works for them, that'll be a job for ... their other sons and, you know, they believe it's going to be the new family business."<sup>117</sup>

Other Romani people have moved entirely outside of their traditional occupations.<sup>118</sup>

Expert Vadim Kolpakov explains the changes he foresees:

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is time to adjust to a different world. It is time to be more progressive and more educated and to seek more opportunities for Romani

children. Get involved in some other industries, including technologies. Romani people are smart people. They just need to go in the right direction of education and progress with the technologies. They can be programmers or developers or software developers or traditional jobs, like lawyers or doctors or anything like that.<sup>119</sup>

Furthermore, of those we interviewed, 44 people (12%) stated that they were not working by choice because they were either homemakers, were taking care of children or an ill family member, or they themselves had health problems.

Gendered decisions are still being made in some families, and often the decision is that women stay at home to raise their children.<sup>120</sup> Women were significantly more likely to report not working or being retired compared to men ( $p = <0.01$ ).

The responses regarding financial stability were also very diverse. While almost half of the interviewees agreed (33%) or strongly agreed (13%) that they were financially stable, another one-third of the sample disagreed (14%) or strongly disagreed (18%) with that statement. Among those who responded that they strongly disagreed, the breakdown was (52/47 women) and somewhat disagreed (61/39 women). This difference, however, was not statistically significant.

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116 Expert interview with Kristin Day, March 8, 2019.

117 Expert interview with Jud Nirenberg, April 2, 2019.

118 Expert interview with Kristin Day, March 8, 2019.

119 Expert interview, Vadim Kolpakov, November 20, 2019.

120 Expert interview with Melina Salifoski-Cakmak, May 10, 2019.

Financial instability can be related to industrialization, as traditional Romani trades are no longer required on the market, as mentioned above. At the same time, among more recent waves of immigrants, some are still struggling to improve their financial situation, as their parents were poor in their country of origin or had no access to education, which affected their children's educational and economic opportunities in the United States.<sup>121</sup> "The towns they came from, the cities they came from, the villages they came from: they were really very poor. It was just unbelievably poor," said expert Steve Piskor, talking about his Hungarian-Slovak Romani family.<sup>122</sup>

Another question was whether they and/or other family members had ever been treated unfairly or disrespectfully by an employer on the basis of ethnicity or perceived identity; 39% said yes. Data on unfair and/or disrespectful treatment was roughly equal by gender.

Participants and experts alike shared anecdotes about Romani Americans experiencing racial slurs at work, but not responding out of fear of losing their job. "I have a cousin; his boss constantly calls him 'big Gypsy.' It's not acceptable... but he doesn't want to lose his job," one said. Consequently, some hide their Romani roots in the work environment. Some, especially in the older generation, never revealed to their co-workers that they were Romani.<sup>123</sup>

Anti-Romani stereotypes also affect real estate transactions and other areas of business life.<sup>124</sup>

In Texas, some Roma who work in construction, own a business, and work with contractors who request bids from them, said they would be afraid to disclose their Romani roots unless they are friends or had already established a working relationship.<sup>125</sup>

## HOUSING

The portrayal of Romani people on American television, by Hollywood, and in other media, often includes images of itinerancy, wandering, and tents. Though these images reflect important elements of some Romani groups' history, the majority of Romani people globally now live settled lives, including in North America. Several factors have contributed to that change, including policies of forced assimilation, international migration, industrialization, individual preferences, and loss of specific trades that required movement. In the United States, specifically, as expert Petra Gelbart points out, various state laws simply did not allow "Gypsies": "That certainly affected anybody who was trying to have any sort of semi-itinerant existence, or may have possibly created more itinerant existences than there would have been if they were allowed to settle."<sup>126</sup> These negative images still affect Romani Americans who live in mobile homes.

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121 Expert interview with Victoria Rios, April 15, 2019.

122 Expert interview with Steve Piskor, December 9, 2019.

123 Expert interview with Carol Silverman, September 3, 2020.

124 Expert interview with Nidhi Trehan, September 6, 2020.

125 Ibid.

126 Expert interview with Petra Gelbart, 2019.

In the United States, specifically, as Petra Gelbart points out, various state laws simply did not allow “Gypsies.”

More than three-quarters of Romani Americans interviewed in our study live in a house, apartment, or condominium, and 12% live in a mobile home. More than half own their house, or a member of their family does, and 37% rent the place where they live. Their residences vary in the number of bedrooms they have, but half have either three- or four-bedroom homes.

Three out of 10 of the Romani we interviewed experienced problems renting or buying a home. Almost half of those who experienced problems cited discrimination and racism as the issue. Respondents who identified as Romanichel or Kalderash reported particularly high rates of discrimination when trying to rent or buy a home.

Some of the experts shared their own experiences with discrimination in housing:

Here in my state, ... a property manager said to me, ... (they owned a park, a trailer park, a really nice one), and they said flat out we don't rent to Gypsies, there's no way, we won't rent to them, absolutely not. Straight to my face. That has happened a lot of times! Too many times to count, actually. .... The last time, ... was last year.<sup>127</sup>

Almost a quarter of our sample (24%) said that they and/or family members had been evicted

from their homes. In the open-ended survey questions, some said they had difficulty paying rent. Others were discriminated against; as one told us, “they wouldn't rent to Gypsies, they said.” One told us that a cousin “made the mistake of telling the landlord of the apartment what our background is, and that week he said we had to go because he did not rent to Gypsies.”

Several interviewees who lived in or owned mobile homes also shared experiences of discrimination. For example,

My niece and her husband were staying at an RV park, and once the camp owner found out they were Gypsies, they raised their rent higher and higher until they finally couldn't afford it, and they were evicted. Meanwhile, nobody else's rent got raised, only theirs.

Another said that their family had been evicted from numerous trailer parks:

Sometimes they won't let you park based on they can see your painting equipment or your paving equipment, and they know you're Romani, so they won't even let you park there overnight... keep moving.

The high number of Romani Americans who experienced eviction or racial discrimination in renting or buying a house is alarming. And the rules regarding trailer parks also need to be reassessed to prevent anti-Romani discrimination and protect Roma Americans who live in mobile homes.

<sup>127</sup> Expert interview with Amanda Schreiber, April 3, 2019.

## EXPERIENCE PROBLEMS WHEN GOING TO RENT OR BUY A HOME?

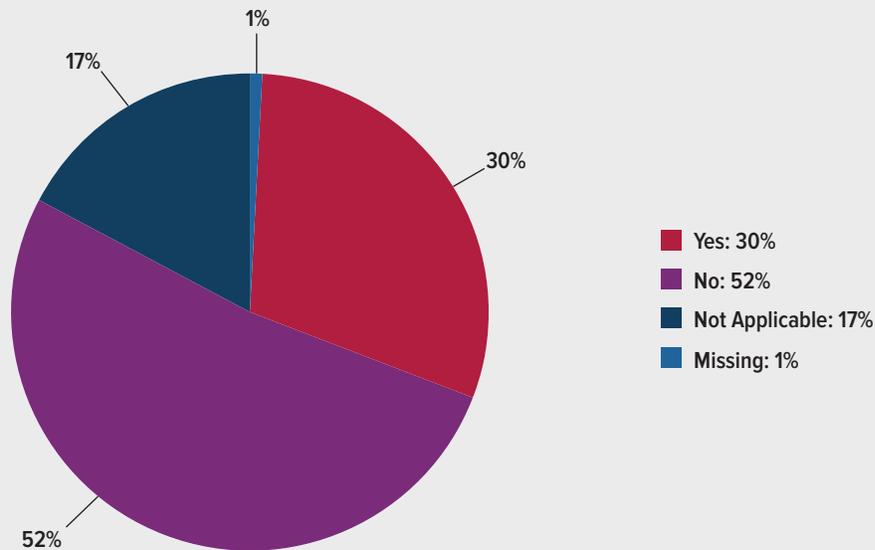


Figure 21: Issues with Renting or Buying a Home

### PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ROMANI PEOPLE IN THE UNITED STATES

When we designed this research project, we were cognizant of the results of the Change in Social Standing polls of 1964 and 1989, in which American adults rated Romani Americans as having the lowest “social standing.”<sup>128</sup> In fact, they rated Romani people, along with Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, lower than an invented ethnic group, the “Wisians.”<sup>129</sup> We were also aware of the news reports and academic literature pointing out anti-Roma sentiments and actions. Still, we did not expect that our respondents would report experiencing such high levels of prejudice and discrimination. Nor did we expect Romani Americans to trust us to share so many

anecdotes describing discriminatory attitudes and sentiments against them. The research revealed the extent to which Romani realities in the United States are, far too frequently, harsh realities.

In measuring perceived prejudice and discrimination, we dedicated a specific section in the questionnaire to several types of questions. First, using a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 meant strongly disagree, and 5 meant strongly agree), we asked participants if they agreed or disagreed with several given statements. We then asked questions about how regularly they experienced prejudice and discrimination, and yes/no questions regarding experiences with discrimination. Throughout the questionnaire, we added open-ended questions (which we audio-recorded) regarding experiences with prejudice

128 Tamar Lewin, Study Points to Increase In Tolerance of Ethnicity, The New York Times, January 8, 1992. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/08/us/study-points-to-increase-in-tolerance-of-ethnicity.html>. See TimesMachine January 8, 1992, Section A, Page 12: <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1992/01/08/issue.html>.

129 Ibid.

and discrimination in various fields, from health to education and racial profiling. Finally, we added sections in the survey that measured access to education, health, employment, housing, and interactions with the police, as well as specific questions regarding prejudice and discrimination in each specific area.

To measure discrimination, we focused on general experiences of discrimination and experiences in the 12 months before the survey. Our decision was informed, among other factors, by an intent to draw comparisons with anti-Roma discrimination in Europe. Therefore, we used some scales and topics concerning discrimination drawn from the Fundamental Rights Agency report, *The Situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States*.<sup>130</sup>

Unfortunately, our study does not encompass measurements of what Professor David Williams identifies as everyday discrimination<sup>131</sup> or what Professor Michèle Lamont et al. focus on under the rubric of stigmatization.<sup>132</sup> Our focus was not on measuring incidents where racial discrimination manifests itself through lack of respect or poorer services in public places, or on those times when Romani people felt they were treated with indifference, over-scrutinized, misunderstood, feared, underestimated, overlooked, or shunned. We did include a few questions regarding unfair, insulting, and disrespectful treatment, alluding to the work of Williams and Lamont, but more research is

needed to measure everyday discrimination and stigmatization against Romani Americans.

The experience of discrimination in general encounters affects a large portion of Romani Americans. Almost two-thirds of the interviewees agreed (37%) or strongly agreed (28%) that, in general, they have felt discriminated against because of their Romani heritage. There were minor differences in experiences of discrimination in general encounters by gender and identity subgroup, but they were not statistically significant (likely due to the low sample size in subgroup analyses). Women were statistically more likely to hide their Romani identity. Also, close to 80% of the interviewees agree (38%) or strongly agree (40%) that Americans discriminate against people of Roma heritage. And a similar percentage agree (37%) or strongly agree (41%) that Americans treat Roma differently from other minority groups.

The experience of discrimination in general encounters affects a large portion of Romani Americans. Almost two-thirds of the interviewees agreed (37%) or strongly agreed (28%) that, in general, they have felt discriminated against because of their Romani heritage.

130 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey, Roma—Selected Findings*. (2016).

131 David R. Williams, *Measuring Discrimination Resource*. (2016) <[https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/davidrwilliams/files/measuring\\_discrimination\\_resource\\_june\\_2016.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/davidrwilliams/files/measuring_discrimination_resource_june_2016.pdf)>

132 Michèle Lamont, Graziella Moraes Silva, Jessica S. Wellburn, Joshua Guetzkow, Nissim Mizrahi, Hanna Herzog, and Elisa Reis, *Getting respect: responding to stigma and discrimination in the United States, Brazil, and Israel*. (Princeton University Press, 2017).

In general, 14% felt discriminated against in interactions with social services offices, and 57% felt discriminated against when being served in restaurants, stores, and other service encounters.

One participant stated that “discrimination is the biggest challenge [of Romani Americans] ..., but it’s not mentioned by any news media ...we aren’t even recognized as a people. We are less than bugs to Americans. No one fights for us.” Another said that “discrimination is a problem from the past, discrimination and persecution. I think it’s a problem now, and if we don’t get awareness out there, that it’s a problem.” Another confirmed this: “We get discrimination, even though a lot of us didn’t know our family.”

The experts and the interviewees who responded to the open-ended questions shared incidents and anecdotes regarding anti-Roma discrimination, in which the perpetrators vary. “I know a family and cousins who had experience with the [Ku Klux Klan] over in the South,” said one expert.<sup>133</sup> Another agreed that discrimination might be more prominent in the South.<sup>134</sup> Many categories of non-Romani people committed discriminatory acts, and here the experts argued that “unrestricted, unfettered discrimination” starts when people understand that the Romani people they interact with are members of the community they referred to as “Gypsies.”<sup>135</sup>

Although the history of anti-Romani discrimination is not the focus of this study, the experts did allude to it. For example, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

the music publication Billboard included advertisements for performers in circuses, burlesque shows, and fairs, along with information about the music industry, including records, radio, and the jukebox. The ads would include the line, “no Gypsies, no drunks or scam artists.”<sup>136</sup> They also gave the example of Romani people being denied entrance to parks in Escanaba, Michigan in the 1930s: “Tourists are allowed in the camp. No Gypsies or peddlers,” one announcement read. The history of Romani Americans and their experience with different manifestations of racism by institutions and the public requires far more attention, along with more scholarships to shed light on the history of anti-Romani discrimination in the U.S.

**In measuring discrimination in the 12 months prior to the survey,** we learned that 34% of the interviewees had felt discriminated against because of their Romani origins. Also, while 7% said they felt that discrimination on a daily basis, 32% said they experienced it a few times a year, and another 32% said rarely. Only 11% of those we interviewed said they never experienced discrimination. Most experts interviewed also described recent instances of discrimination in education, jobs, public spaces, and in police behavior; we cover these issues in other sections of the study.

**In measuring occurrences of everyday discrimination or stigmatization,** we asked participants if they have ever been insulted or

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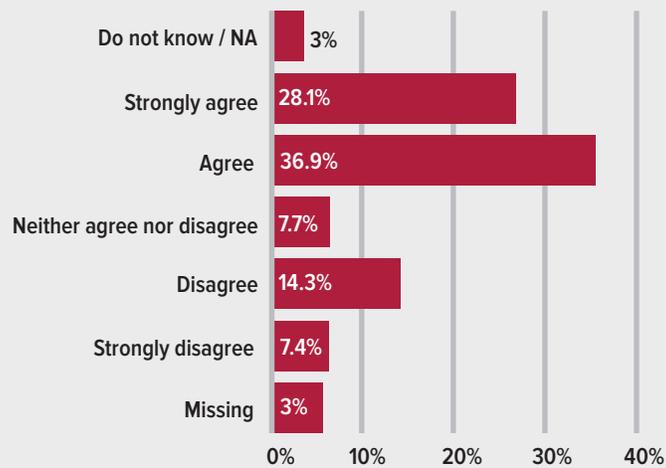
133 Expert interview with Amanda Schreiber, April 3, 2019.

134 Expert interview with Melina Salifoski- Cakmak, May 10, 2019.

135 Expert interview with Victoria Rios, April 15, 2019.

136 Expert interview with Martha Bloomfield, November 26, 2019.

## AGREE/DISAGREE: I FEEL DISCRIMINATED AGAINST BECAUSE OF MY ROMANI HERITAGE



**Figure 22: Discrimination Because of Romani Heritage**

called names because they are Romani, and 68% said yes. These rates were particularly high for respondents who identified as Kalderash (69%), Romanichel (79%), Machvaya (88%). Half of the participants told us that they had also been called other names that made them feel uncomfortable. When asked to give examples, they listed 108 slurs, including: “sweet-potato N\*g\*\*r,” “dirty gypsy,” “chicken thieves, where’s your crystal ball, where’s your wagon,” “dirty blooded, half breed,” “gypsy scum vagabond,” “gypsy, tsigan,” “gypsy trash,” “monkey, dirty gypsy, fat gypsy, f\*\*king gypsy, chicken stealers, ‘the gypsies are here; hide your kids;’ or “thief.” Hide your wallet. Dirty gypsy con artists.” In the open-ended questions, among other answers, one participant said that “people think we are liars or thieves or bad people, and this makes everything hard for us.”

Some of the experts we interviewed also shared experiences regarding when and how they were insulted: “Look at this Black cow,” someone attending a Bulgarian Romani concert said to one of the experts. Another described a time when a group of Romani people were overlooked in interactions with Hungarian Americans: “when the Gypsies played, they loved them. But if they met them on the street, they would walk by them.”<sup>137</sup>

Some experts talked about being exposed to slurs and prejudice in conversations with acquaintances or college classmates. One, who self-identified as Roma in college, was told by a classmate that “Gypsies steal babies.”<sup>138</sup> They also talked about how the slur “Gypsy” was used for all sorts of purposes: “people going by the name Gypsy, people naming their dog Gypsy,

<sup>137</sup> Expert interview with Steve Piskor, December 9, 2019.

<sup>138</sup> Expert interview with Victoria Rios, April 15, 2019.

people telling me that they are also a Gypsy because of a whole list of offensive stereotypes that have nothing to do with Gypsies.”<sup>139</sup>

Some of the female experts also talked about Romani women being objectified and described as exotic, sexy, and sexual.<sup>140</sup> Some American men would ask, “are you going to put a spell on me, like a Gypsy woman?”<sup>141</sup>

Some participants and experts also alluded to everyday discrimination and prejudice based on skin color. As outsiders can often find it hard to identify a person’s Romani identity, they will discriminate solely based on the person’s dark complexion: “they just do it because you are dark complexion. You are not white,” one told us.

Thus, when it comes to measuring discrimination, prejudice, and stigmatization, it indeed seems that “all of the markers of discrimination and structural racism are there,”<sup>142</sup> and they manifest in contextualized, particular, localized, gender-specific ways.

Media and television play a critical role in the negative responses that Romani Americans receive regarding their ethnic identity. Only 3% agree or strongly agree that, in general, television shows in the U.S. portray a positive image of Roma.

A majority of the Romani people we interviewed agreed or strongly agreed that American television shows generally portray a negative image of Roma. More than 80% of them had

similar opinions about the negative portrayals of Romani people in the American news media.

Moreover, only 7% agree (6%) or strongly agree (1%) that U.S. news media generally portrays an objective or unbiased image of Roma.

Romani Americans involved in the study felt that their stories were told inaccurately by others: “the biggest challenge that the Romani people have is that hostile forces are telling our story.”

Some participants talked about television shows that misrepresented Roma:

There were a couple of shows on TV that I’d seen that were so horrifying, and it was all regarding Gypsies. Um, the first show ... I don’t remember if it was Grey’s Anatomy or a different medical show, but the patient was Gypsy, and although they wanted to treat him, a whole host of Gypsies showed up and refused treatment for him, and they started doing this thing with, with singing and with chanting, and it was as if they were performing witchcraft. There’s not one Gypsy that I know that has ever been sick and refused treatment from a doctor. So, that was so, so horrifying and untrue, and they just labeled us as if we were witches!

Many participants were upset at and felt misrepresented by biased portrayals of Romani people. “Why don’t they interview the normal

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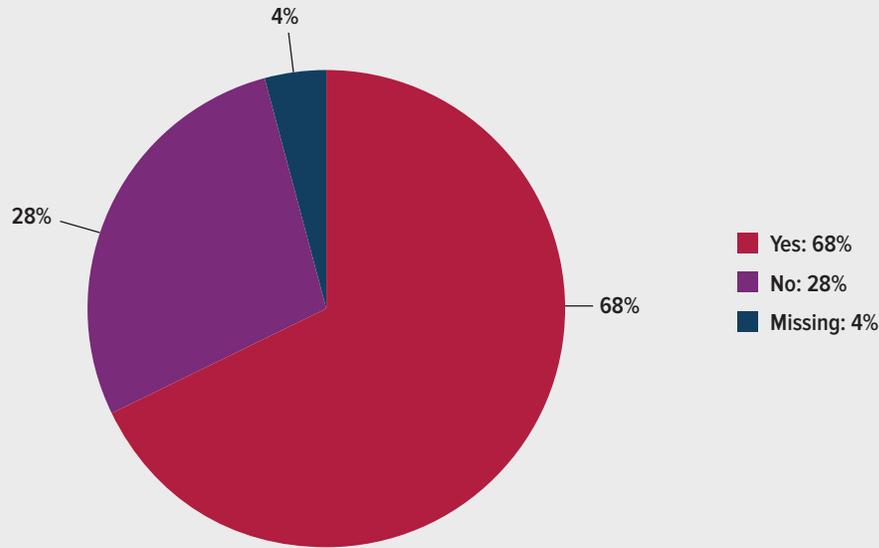
139 Ibid.

140 Expert interview with Kristin Day, March 8, 2019.

141 Expert interview with Victoria Rios, April 15, 2019.

142 Expert interview with Ethel Brooks, May 23, 2019.

## EVER BEEN INSULTED OR CALLED NAMES BECAUSE YOU ARE A ROMA?



**Figure 23: Experiencing Insults Due to Romani Identity**

Gypsies who are out there who are just workers and just ordinary people,” one asked.

The experts also confirmed the interviewees’ views regarding the role of media and television in misrepresenting Romani people. As expert Petra Gelbart noted, Romani people are often portrayed by the media as criminals, nomads, or oversexualized women.<sup>143</sup> Or, as expert George Eli explained, Romani people are also misrepresented as vagabonds and mystics: “mystical creatures in the form of vampires or fortune-tellers and vagabonds and nomadic beggars or criminals in the form of contractors, thieves or pickpockets.”<sup>144</sup> Terms such as “Gypsy cabs” and “Gypsy cops” portray Romani people as “nomadic,” “shifty,” and “unreliable.”

Moreover, non-Romani people misunderstand

Romani traditions and are not curious to understand them—and they sensationalize Romani-related stories. These practices lead to even more mischaracterizations and prejudice, which create frustrations and lead Romani community members to mistrust the media. One expert told us about a funeral in his family, which brought together many Roma, including violinists playing music to mourn the death. The media portrayed it as the death of “the king of the Gypsies,” although no one had used that phrase. They apparently made the assumption, based on the music, the number of people, and their own biases regarding “Gypsy kings.”<sup>145</sup>

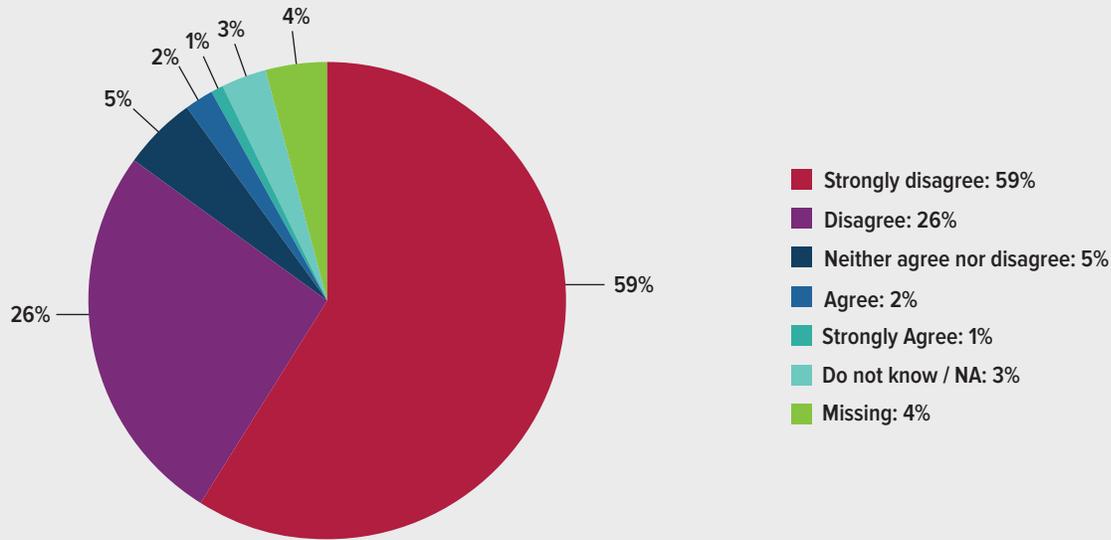
Nevertheless, interviewees who talked about Romani traditions confirmed that “if you go to one of our funerals, it’s like no other because

<sup>143</sup> Expert interview with Petra Gelbart, 2019.

<sup>144</sup> Expert Interview, George Eli, August 5, 2019.

<sup>145</sup> Expert interview with Steve Piskor, December 9, 2019.

**AGREE/DISAGREE:  
GENERAL TELEVISION PORTRAYS A POSITIVE IMAGE OF ROMA**



**Figure 24: Perceptions of Roma in General Television**

there is a live orchestra playing at the casket.” And, as another interviewee explained, funerals are an opportunity for Roma to meet and mourn: “usually the funeral is a big deal; it’s a big, good send-away.” We found that 85% of the people we interviewed, and their families, still practice traditional “rite of passage” events.

Similar to the interviewees who talk about the negative impact of *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* on education, experts also noted that the misrepresentations and inaccurate portrayals of Romani people have gotten worse because of popular television shows, such as *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*. They say that such shows portray Romani people in a dishonest way: “Such representations don’t have anything to do with the realities in which Roma live and who they

are.”<sup>146</sup> Some could argue that the producers did not know any better. However, they had in fact, met with Romani people, including expert Oksana Marafioti, who suggested including real Romani Americans in the show. But the producer explained that they were “looking for people who play violins and wear traditional dresses and more traditional kinds of scenarios.”<sup>147</sup> A similar conversation took place at Harvard University during the 2019 Roma conference between Romani scholars and the producer of the television series *Arranged*; the producer explained that he was interested in portraying arranged Romani marriages; scholars, on the other hand, argued that these marriages might not be representative of all Roma.

Experts also point to Netflix, which “seems to

<sup>146</sup> Expert interview, Vadim Kolpakov, November 20, 2019.

<sup>147</sup> Expert interview with Oksana Marifioti, December 10, 2019.

have a knack for pushing the right buttons when it comes to the word ‘Gypsy.’”<sup>148</sup> Expert Melina Salifoski-Cakmak told us about five Netflix shows that use the word “Gypsy” to talk about criminality, including a show in which Zooey Deschanel says this line: “I am not a Gypsy; I am not here to steal your food.” She also talked about Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt, where a character made a connection between “Gypsies” and stealing children.<sup>149</sup>

Some of the experts we interviewed also argued that the depiction of Romani people in many genres of art has hardly changed. The idea that all Romani people wear big skirts, bandanas in their hair, big hoop earrings, and a lot of gold is still very much present in popular movies, from *The Sinner* to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. That same narrative is spread through romance novels with “Gypsy” characters and in popular music from the 1920s up to today.<sup>150</sup>

In response to some of these actions and misrepresentations, Romani people, particularly a few activists and scholars, seem to have spoken up. According to Brooks, activists have been protesting against *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*. They have also opposed racist and exotic media depictions, “Gypsy” music festivals, and police task forces. Some also spoke of the power and the potential in mobilizing and motivating Romani

gatherings, such as Roma-related conferences.<sup>151</sup>

Despite this frustration about misrepresentation, the larger Romani community has not spoken out, for fear of retaliation,<sup>152</sup> making Romani protests very rare in the U.S., according to experts.<sup>153</sup> Respondents expressed that “there’s nothing we can do about that, so it just doesn’t matter.”<sup>154</sup>

## POLICE

The full history of police abuse, harassment, and discrimination against Romani Americans has yet to be told. As we consider present-day mistreatment of Roma by the police, we must review the historical context.

Although looking back is not our purpose here, we want to offer examples that might help readers better understand the situation. Expert Ian Hancock reports that since 1975, when an issue of *The Police Chief* claimed “strict laws and the enforcement of them will deter Gypsies from inhabiting your community..” Gypsy Divisions and Gypsy Task Forces have been established in different parts of the U.S.<sup>155</sup> Also, according to expert Jud Nirenberg, officials in a few states chased out Romani Americans in the 1970s: “When nomadic Roma arrived seasonally, the state police would tell them that it was illegal for them to live there and would send them away.” Nirenberg also mentioned a group of

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148 Expert interview with Melina Salifoski- Cakmak , May 10, 2019.

149 Ibid.

150 Expert interview with Kristin Day, March 8, 2019.

151 Expert interview with Victoria Rios, April 15, 2019.

152 Expert interview with Ethel Brooks, May 23, 2019.

153 Expert interview with Kristin Day, March 8, 2019.

154 Expert interview with Victoria Rios, April 15, 2019.

155 Ian Hancock, *Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution*. (Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers, Inc., 1987).

retired police detectives who were being paid by different states to teach police around the country how to spot Roma and how to understand their “criminal culture.” He added,

Theoretically, that organization still exists, but I think that as the result of some of us contacting different state police and complaining about it, now there’s an awareness that you probably shouldn’t hire these people with public money.<sup>156</sup>

Today, racial profiling by the police is still common: four out of 10 people we interviewed said they had experienced it. Rates of racial profiling were higher for certain subgroups. Respondents who identified as Romanichel, Kalderash, or Machvaya reported rates of racial profiling of 67%, 59%, and 50%, respectively, a finding that is statistically significant. One Romanichel told us, “I was racially profiled by the police: just pulled over and told we were a bunch of Gypsies, and then they checked me out for a while and let me go.” Another Romani American said he was traveling with his children to visit his sister in another state when the Memphis Police pulled him over: “A number of factors caused them to identify me as Roma. They asked to search my vehicle.” Other Romani Americans experienced being “always pulled over for no reason, and they always ask what my race is.”

Some participants in the study, and some experts, mentioned that particular Romani names seem to raise a red flag for police officers and lead to mistreatment. For example, one told us,

I got pulled over, and the officer joked it was a random selection. Once he saw my name on my license, he pulled me out of my truck with no warning and had me pinned on the ground in handcuffs faster than you can blink.

According to respondents, when police racially profile Romani people, police officers seem to look for cultural markers, such as certain types of trucks:

My husband is constantly getting abused by the law; every chance they get to pull him over, they take it. Because Gypsy trucks are so recognizable, they pull him over for no reason, run his name, find out he’s not a criminal, then hassle him longer and finally let him go.

Other Romani Americans confirmed this type of racial profiling:

At least once every six months, I get randomly pulled over, get my name run, and get hassled by the police, just because they saw my truck, they saw my equipment, and they knew what I am. I just try to be as polite as I can and be done with it.

Other Romani Americans said that police had mistakenly racially profiled them as belonging to other minority groups; thereby, they were exposed to police abuse: “[We were not racially profiled] for being Roma, but the police thought my fiancé was Arabic and gave him a hard time because of that.” In addition, they are racially

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<sup>156</sup> Expert interview with Jud Nirenberg, April 2, 2019.

profiled based on skin color: “When I was with the darker cousins, there were many times we got pulled over in the trucks for no reason.”

As one said: “They just know, and we can get singled out. Some states are better than others, but they know our trucks and the way we look.”

Experts also called for attention to the ways that Romani Americans are racially profiled, a serious but “hidden human rights problem”<sup>157</sup> in the United States:

Participants reported being racially profiled in stores. One participant shared this story:

When I was 18 years old, I worked at Walmart in Marble Falls, Texas. I worked there for a few years, and every year I had to sit in on a meeting where they would tell everybody about the Gypsies that would come in: what they look like, what they dress like, all the jewelry that they wore, how they would bring their kids in and try to create some kind of diversion while they would steal things.... Sometimes when I go into public places, I notice that employees are watching me, and they follow me around, thinking I’m going to take something. I have never stolen anything, and I’ve never been arrested.

Moreover, when asked if they and/or other family members had ever been treated unfairly or disrespectfully by a law enforcement officer on

the basis of ethnicity or perceived identity, half of the participants stated that they had. Participant Amanda Schreiber told us, “When there was a crime in the neighborhood we were living in, our door was always the one the cops went to first. When something was stolen, it was always us. It was... you know... just normal things like that.”<sup>158</sup> In addition, the experts talked about the experiences of Romani people they worked with, and how they felt targeted by the police:

Speaking to some of my Romanichel friends here in Austin—whenever there is a big Roma get together or social event, there is a general stereotype amongst the local police that ‘oh the Gypsies are getting together. They are going to cause trouble.’”<sup>159</sup>

Some Romani Americans told us that the police arrested them without reason: “My brother works in construction and he got arrested a few times just because he was Gypsy. They always have to let him go because there is no crime. But it happens often.”

Another said,

Growing up in New York, it was a common thing to be arrested and harassed by the police. If it was not my brother, it was my father. A couple of times they arrested my mother for fortune-telling. One time, my mother

157 Expert interview with Nidhi Trehan, September 6, 2020.

158 Expert interview with Amanda Schreiber, April 3, 2019.

159 Expert interview with Nidhi Trehan, September 6, 2020.

was arrested and they knew she was not the fortune-teller they were looking for, but they arrested her anyway because they felt that the real fortune-teller who committed a crime would show up. So yes, it would happen frequently.

Such experiences create a great deal of trauma and distrust:

My grandfather was out doing a job working on someone's septic tank, and for no reason, he got arrested just strictly because "the law" knew who he was and that he was a Gypsy. My grandpa came back from jail so traumatized that he didn't speak for one year.

Some have been harassed by the police:

I was working with my older brother in a town near where we live, and we were called up to do a paving job, and we did it. When we got done, the police pulled us over, confiscated all our equipment, and took us to the police station. They had to finally release us because we got a lawyer, and they turned the equipment loose and gave it back, but they said that if we came back and worked in that town, whatever we did was going to be wrong no matter how good we did it.

Another shared that "Most of my family members have some kind of experience with the police. It's always unpleasant, and they're always harassing." Others said police threatened that "they were going to bring out a bus and load all us Gypsies up and take us to the jailhouse."

Another shared that "Most of my family members have some kind of experience with the police. It's always unpleasant and they're always harassing."

According to expert Ethel Brooks, police task forces that specialized in "Gypsy crime" seem to have been "established across the country,"<sup>160</sup> even though their legality is questionable:

Law enforcement officers that focus on the people they call 'Gypsies' or Gypsy crime are in violation of the constitutional protection afforded Romani Americans or 'Gypsies' who are shielded as a group from this kind of discrimination under the terms of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.<sup>161</sup>

However, as expert Petra Gelbart points out, not only do some police departments have "Gypsy task forces," but there is no public reaction or inquiry into its legality.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, expert Martha Bloomfield gave an example from Michigan, where in 1985, a police task force had a meeting in Dearborn. "They had maybe 90 people there, police officers to deal with this

160 Expert interview with Ethel Brooks, May 23, 2019.

161 Ian Hancock cited by Martha Bloomfield in her expert interview, November 26, 2019.

162 Expert interview with Petra Gelbart, 2019.

‘problem,’” she said. She added, “It is illegal to have these things based on people’s ethnicity as you know... in the United States today, as in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England, simply being a Gypsy is to brand a person as a lawbreaker.”<sup>163</sup> Other experts talked about police task forces in other parts of the U.S.

The very existence of a “Gypsy task force” is discriminatory, and so is the fact that law enforcement profiles “Gypsy crime” and creates law enforcement units for specific ethnic groups. “It’s like, if you’re part of this ethnic group, you must be a criminal, I mean that’s really old, stereotypical, like Nazi-era thinking. However, that exists still. A law enforcement agency that does ‘Gypsy crime’, they were supposed to have a seminar in Washington, I think it was like three or four years ago,”<sup>164</sup> one expert told us. Other experts talked about police task forces in many parts of the U.S. Experts Ian Hancock and Carol Silverman have written about the proliferation of the “criminality” stereotype and the police training courses in “gypsy criminality.”<sup>165</sup> Also, other experts called and left messages with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) regarding the racial profiling nature of seminars and asked for support, but did not receive a response from the ACLU.<sup>166</sup>

Although our survey did not include specific questions regarding criminal justice, some did tell

us that they encountered discrimination in that field, too: “My aunt was held in prison without the opportunity for bail because the judge said that she was Gypsy and she could flee,” said one interviewee. Another Romani American told us that a judge said that he was going to make his father an example to other “Gypsies” by giving him seven years of probation for stealing a car jack, although the man who reported it missing had brought the jack to court and showed that he had it—that it was not stolen.

Based on our findings, racial profiling and cultural and racial prejudice against Romani people seem to be widespread in American law enforcement institutions.

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163 Expert interview with Martha Bloomfield, November 26, 2019.

164 Expert interview with Kristin Day, March 8, 2019.

165 Ian Hancock, “Gypsy Mafia, Romani Saints: The Racial Profiling of Romani Americans.” In *Danger! Educated Gypsy: Selected Essays* by Ian Hancock, 195–211. (Hatfield: The University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010).

Carol Silverman, “Oregon Roma (Gypsies): A Hidden History,” in *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 118. (4, 2017): 518-553.

[https://ohs.org/research-and-library/oregon-historical-quarterly/joel-palmer-award/upload/Silverman\\_Roma-in-Oregon\\_OHQ-Winter-2017\\_Final.pdf](https://ohs.org/research-and-library/oregon-historical-quarterly/joel-palmer-award/upload/Silverman_Roma-in-Oregon_OHQ-Winter-2017_Final.pdf)

166 Expert interview with Kristin Day, March 8, 2019.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

When we developed this research proposal, our working hypothesis was that Romani Americans would be less exposed to discrimination and stigmatization than European Roma, suggesting a more inclusive society. We based our hypothesis on the “hidden” nature of the Romani American identity – the fact that many members of the community “pass” as other ethnicities – and the relatively insignificant size of the U.S.-based Romani population. We also factored in the country’s long history as a nation of immigrants and its proportionately greater racial and cultural diversity by comparison with most European countries. We were also aware that the targets of structural racism in the U.S. are primarily Black, Indigenous, and Latino residents.

Anti-Roma racism in Europe remains structural, overt, and distinct. It continues to be evident in the segregation of Romani children in special schools, in persistent and targeted anti-Roma police violence, in residential ghettoization, and in policy measures and actions that exclude or isolate Roma. It also manifests in less overt ways, including through profound and widespread disrespect towards Romani people in everyday encounters, through devastating underestimation of Romani ability and entitlement from pre-kindergarten through adulthood, through harmful neglect, of Romani citizens’ needs, through indifference to Romani suffering, through widespread social acceptance of discriminatory service provision and social protection mechanisms. European anti-Roma racism also persists in the production and reproduction of knowledge and institutional culture, be it in the

content of school curricula, the subject matter of public monuments and celebrations, the choices that inform memorialization of past tragedies or access to leadership positions in the public sphere.

The numerical and historical presence of Romani Americans is vastly different. But has this, and the much-celebrated American self-image as a nation of immigrants, led to a situation that confirms our original, relatively optimistic hypothesis about Romani American inclusion? Our findings, based on our small sample study of 363 Romani Americans, do not confirm our initial hypothesis; rather, they strongly contradict it. The extent to which anti-Roma discrimination pervades education, employment, housing, and, most of all, policing, is staggering. In measuring discrimination in the 12 months prior to our survey, we learned that one-third of Romani Americans interviewed had felt discriminated against because of their Romani origins.

By comparison, a Fundamental Rights Agency survey conducted in 2016 in nine EU countries found that one-quarter of Roma felt discriminated against based on their Roma background in the 12 months before the survey.

The extent to which anti-Roma discrimination pervades education, employment, housing, and most of all, policing, is staggering. In measuring discrimination in the 12 months prior to our survey, we learned that one-third of Romani Americans interviewed

had felt discriminated against because of their Romani origins.

Several factors might explain the differing responses provided by Romani people living on the two continents: methodological differences, a consciousness of stigma, and national awareness of discrimination and racism.<sup>167</sup> Nevertheless, we conclude, based on our small scale and preliminary data that, cultural and racial prejudice against Romani people in the United States does inform, justify, and legitimize discriminatory actions, neglect, disrespect, and an “assault on worth”<sup>168</sup> against members of this ethnic group.

Nevertheless, we conclude, based on our small scale and preliminary data that, cultural and racial prejudice against Romani people in the United States does inform, justify, and legitimize discriminatory actions, neglect, disrespect, and an “assault on worth” against members of this ethnic group.

In a 2020 National Public Radio interview, the Chief of the Houston Police Department talked about the practice of re-assigning police officers whose employment had been terminated with

cause as “gypsy cops.”<sup>169</sup> U.S. officials, popular culture, and private citizens persist in using the noun “gypsy” and the verb “to gyp” to describe criminality. Indeed, the association between “gypsy” and criminality” is so deeply ingrained in American society that more than two-thirds of Romani Americans interviewed for this study said that they usually hide their Romani identity to avoid being stigmatized, stereotyped and/or discriminated against.

Media and television play a critical role in the negative portrayal of Romani people. According to two-thirds of the Romani people interviewed, American television shows portray Romani people in a deeply derogatory way - as criminals, nomads, or witches, stripped of their identity as a people. In much of American television and media, Romani people are portrayed through a one-dimensional stereotype characterized by a certain, broadly despised lifestyle.

As noted earlier, this study is limited by its sample size and its dependence on snowball sampling. Nevertheless, as the demographics and other sections point out, the respondents were diverse in terms of age, gender, education, social and financial status, and Romani groups. In other words, the study captures diversity within the Romani community rather than portraying a single population segment. At the same time, however, the respondents were mostly self-identified Romani Americans. Completely assimilated and

167 In the FXB Center’s work in Serbia, the team learned that “[d]iscrimination is such a commonplace feature of Roma life that young Roma accept it as “normal.” See: Jacqueline Bhabha, Margareta Matache, Miriam Chernoff, Arlan Fuller, Susan Lloyd McGarry, Natasa Simić, Jelena Vranješević, Milan Stančić, Boris Spasić, Milena Mihajlović *One in One Hundred: Drivers of Success and Resilience among College-Educated Romani Adolescents in Serbia*, Harvard FXB Center and Center for Interactive Pedagogy, (2018), p. 15

168 Michèle Lamont et al, *Getting respect: responding to stigma and discrimination in the United States, Brazil, and Israel*, (Princeton University Press, 2016).

169 NPR, Chief of the Houston Police Department Comments On Policing Reforms, June 11, 2020. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/11/875311228/chief-of-the-houston-police-department-comments-on-policing-reforms>

hidden Romani Americans may have different experiences. But the fact that self-identified Romani Americans have been exposed to persistent and wide-ranging discrimination and stigmatization, across the country, in different sectors, areas of life, and Romani groups remains irrefutable and alarming.

At a time of profound disquiet over the depth of American structural racism, it is important for us to add this perspective on a relatively small and undocumented group. Not only does this perspective complement the broader picture, but it also confirms yet again the virulent transatlantic migration of racist ideas and the ways in which skin color and racial prejudice intersect with cultural prejudice and other attributes to generate intersectional discrimination and produce profound harm in people's lives.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been successful without the support and dedication of many individuals and organizations. First and foremost, we would like to thank Romani Americans who trusted us with this project and generously contributed their time to participate in interviews.

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We would like to thank the members of the Romani community who provided important advice and set up opportunities for us to speak directly to various communities about the project: Sonya Jasaroska, Todd Joles, Jenna Marks, Melina Salifoski-Cakmak, and Mario Williams. We are grateful to the experts who were interviewed for this project: Martha Bloomfield, Ethel Brooks, Melina Salifoski-Cakmak, Kristin Day, George Eli, Petra Gelbart, Sonya Jasaroska, Vadim Kolpakov, Oksana Marafioti, Jud Nirenberg, Steve Piskor, Victoria Rios, Amanda Schreiber Carol Silverman, and Nidhi Trehan.

Many non-Romani allies assisted with this project and we would like to thank Martha Aladjem Bloomfield, Nidhi Trehan, Gabriel Kreindler, and everyone who supported this initiative.

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## APPENDICES:

### DETAILS OF THE METHODOLOGY

Romani Realities in the U.S. is a multifaceted study of the current climate in which persons of Romani heritage live today. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health approved this study on February 8, 2019.

Desk research, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires constitute the sources of our research findings.

The FXB Center conducted a thorough literature review of the situation of Roma in the U.S., with a focus on history, culture and identity, demographics, the experience of stigma and discrimination, and social and economic status. For the purpose of the project, we mapped the topics covered in the literature by analyzing different sources, including available books, journal articles, interviews in newspapers, magazines, and blogs concerning the situation of Roma in the US.

The FXB and Voice of Roma researchers conducted 15 expert interviews with Romani academics, community leaders, and other key informants involved in Roma-related research and/or advocacy and based in the United States. The goal of the interviews was to understand various views and perspectives about the challenges and opportunities faced by the Roma in the U.S. and the existing research on or with Romani Americans.

Voice of Roma conducted most of the 363 interviews based on the questionnaire that

addressed the American Romani population's social, economic, and cultural situation, Romani culture and identity, and its exposure to prejudice and discrimination.

The process of developing the questionnaires was participatory and lengthy. The FXB Center team prepared a set of draft questions, which were discussed and finalized in collaboration with Voice of Roma. We identified common societal hurdles faced by Romani people from previous studies and incorporated them into a questionnaire consisting of 132 items divided among seven broad themes: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Employment, Housing, Interactions With Police, Prejudice and Discrimination and finally, a series of open-ended questions on Acculturation.

Before data collection, the questionnaire was piloted. A small-scale pilot (10 individuals) was conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of the survey tool. The pilot respondents were selected from elders, respected community leaders, krisitoriya (in the Vlach communities), and trustworthy pastors with a large following; one aim in targeting these individuals was to build trust among community members to participate in the study. The final version of the questionnaire incorporated the changes resulting from the pilot. The FXB Center and Voice of Roma team reviewed the questionnaire and checked it for clarity and cultural appropriateness.

The questionnaire was entered into the Qualtrics<sup>SM</sup> survey tool and uploaded onto tablet computers. Qualtrics does not allow data transfer to a third-party. Qualtrics is password protected and involves complex controls. The data was stored in password-protected documents on

password-protected computers. Only the Harvard research team had access to the Qualtrics data. There is no plan or intent for future open access or release of data.

Open-ended questions requiring detailed answers were recorded using the Easy Voice Recorder™ application available on the Android™ operating system for later transcription. Both the Qualtrics™ application and Easy Voice Recorder allowed remote uploads to central data repositories from which analytical staff could ensure data quality.

Persons of Romani heritage are extremely rarely involved in research projects as researchers. But our the survey was administered predominantly by a team of Romani researchers contracted by the Voice of Roma to participants both remotely and in-person, depending on the participants' desired level of privacy and practical feasibility. The field researchers were instructed in human subjects principles, including how to present the study, participant rights, and how to request informed consent.

#### Field Team and Successes/Challenges

Initially, our field team consisted of five members, with several other field researchers added in later during the data collection process. Due to illness and personal circumstances, two field researchers had to be replaced. The Romani members of the field team were members of large communities that they could easily access for interviews; they also come from the largest subgroups of Roma in the U.S., which we hoped would result in securing interviews from a broad cross-section of Romani Americans. The group affiliations of the field team were: Romanichel

(four field researchers), Kalderash/Machwaya (two field researchers), Hungarian/Slovak/Bashalde (one field researcher), Boyash/Ludad (one field researcher). We involved two non-Romani field researchers who have worked for several decades with Romani communities in the U.S. and Europe and a Harvard field researcher.

Throughout the data collection process, we had some challenges. We had to adjust the number of field researchers to ensure interview quotas were met. We had to restructure the research team to include people who had more time to commit to the work. Nevertheless, Voice of Roma supported and encouraged field researchers in the recruitment process and in dealing with refusals/declines for an interview (e.g., some field team members seemed to take rejection for an interview personally). Through close monitoring of actual and estimated field researchers for interviews and what we needed to complete, we were able to readjust and hit close to our target at 363 questionnaires.

No identifying information was collected in this study, and participants were free to skip questions as desired. The interviewees willing to take part in the quantitative research were assigned a code. The code was written on the questionnaire rather than a direct identifier, such as last names and/or addresses. Hence, the data on the Qualtrix dataset was codified and did not contain participants' identifiers either.

Consent forms did not require the signature of participants. Consent forms were read to participants and, upon obtaining verbal consent, the surveyor signed and dated the form. Those who additionally consented to be recorded for the open-ended questions had their recording

erased once their response had been transcribed. The median time to complete the survey was 36 minutes.

We used SAS 9.4 for Windows (SAS Institute Inc, Cary, NC) and (StataCorp. 2019. Stata Statistical Software: Release 16. College Station, TX: StataCorp LLC.) to conduct the data analysis. Frequencies and means were determined using the proc freq and proc means procedures. We categorized responses and assigned numerical codes to each category. Proportions were measured as the proportion of the total population surveyed or the proportion of those having a particular life event (e.g. marriage, children). Other variables, specifically those relating to personal experiences, such as interactions with authorities or specific racial epithets or insults, were simply described using chisq and Fishers’s exact tests.

In total, 363 respondents were surveyed over nine months. The study population skewed females by 10%, with men accounting for 44% and women 54% of participants. Four participants declined to provide their biological sex. None self-identified as other genders. The mean age of all participants was around 40, with a minimum age of 18 and a maximum age of 88.

The study population was garnered from several different geographic locations throughout the United States and among a variety of Romani sub-populations introducing a moderate ability for wider generalization to the target population. However, we refrain from claiming that the findings describe the whole population of Roma in the U.S.

More than a quarter of the respondents (90 people) self-identified as belonging to “other” Romani groups, as follows: 36 Hungarian Slovak Roma, 22 East Slovak Romani, 4 Hungarian Roma, 2 Polska Roma, and one from other sub-groups - Bashalde, Bondege, East Slovak Gypsy, English Rumney, Gitano, Hungerezo, Kale, Lautari/Ursari, Manouche, Olah, Petsano, Romani, Romungre, Ruska Roma, Carpathian Romani, Russorya, Scotch, Scotch and Irish, Serv, Servo, Sinti /Anglo Romanichel, Ursari.

Romani Group	Percentage
Romanichel	32%
Other	26%
Kalderash	23%
Roma	12%
Machvaya	9%
Gypsy	8%
Boyash (Ludad)	4%
Multi-Racial	4%
Lovara	2%
Horahane	2%
Macedonian Roma	2%
Churari	0%

*Table 1: Breakdown of the Romani groups the participants belonged to.*

Our methodology suffers from several limitations. Firstly, since our sampling method was based on social networks, it can be biased. This affects the generalizability and possibly the representativeness of the study population. Persons who refer one another often have similar experiences, and those more isolated (i.e., live outside a wide social network) are

missed.<sup>170,171</sup> To adjust and correct for this type of snowball bias, we included many indirect sources (families, churches, leaders, academics, artists, etc.) to develop the “seeds.” Throughout the study, each survey respondent was asked during the interview to refer other potential respondents who are American Roma, Romani, Romanichels, “Gypsies,” or related sub-groups. The initial respondent were asked to obtain initial permission from each potential respondent to share their contact information (e.g., phone numbers or a full address, in situations where we need to go to a physical location in person) with the study team for the purpose of contacting them to describe the study and request their participation. In cases where the physical location of the potential respondent could be described easily (e.g., the same street), initial permission from the potential respondent was not sought, and the study team approached the potential respondent at their address directly. However, interviewers also reported people who refused to participate. Without any data on those who refused, it is difficult to determine if non-responders differ significantly from those who participated.

Finally, this cross-sectional study is not representative of the general experience of being

Romani or having Romani heritage in the U.S. Socio-ethnic identity is far from a homogenous experience in the history of the United States and whether our snapshot captures it accurately is unknown.

We encourage replication of the study.

## SHORT LITERATURE REVIEW BY VOICE OF ROMA

Among early scholarly works by non-Roma authors about American Romani people are Matt and Sheila Salo’s articles and books, many of which were published by the North American Chapter of the Gypsy Lore Society. The Salos researched the history, migrations, and ritual practices of some Romanichal and Kalderash communities in the United States.<sup>172</sup> Changes in American Kalderash occupations and culture in the U.S. in the midcentury are also detailed in their work. In 1994, Sheila Salo and William Lockwood published an annotated bibliography of works on North American Roma.<sup>173</sup>

Rena Gropper’s scholarly work adopts an anthropological approach to Kalderash life. Her book *Gypsies in the City* (1975) chronicles her ethnographic fieldwork on occupations, family life, celebrations, and kinship among Kalderash

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170 Shaghaghi, Bhopal, and Sheikh, “Approaches to Recruiting ‘Hard-To-Reach’ Populations into Research,” *Int. J. Social Research Methodology* Vol. 8, No. 1, February 2005: 47-60.

171 Kath Browne, “Snowball Sampling,” *Health Promotion Perspectives*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2011; P: 86-94

172 Matt Salo, *The American Kalderas: Gypsies in the New World*. (Gypsy Lore Society, North American Chapter, Publication no. 1, 1981). “Kalderas Economic Organization” in *The American Kalderas: Gypsies in the New World*, ed. Matt Salo. (Gypsy Lore Society North American Chapter, Publications, Number 1, 1981), 71-97. “Gypsy Niche in North America: Some Ecological Perspectives on the Exploitation of Social Environments,” in *The Other Nomads*, A. Rao, ed., (Köln: Böhlau 1987). “Romnichels, Roaders and Travelers on the Great Plains,” in *Ethnic Identities in Dynamic Perspective*, C. Pronai and S Salo, eds., (Budapest: Gondolat, 2003). Matt and Sheila Salo. “Romnichel Economic and Social Organization in Urban New England, 1850-1930,” *Urban Anthropology* 11(3-4): 273-313. (1982). Matt and Sheila Salo “Gypsy Immigration to the United States” in *Papers of the 6th and 7th Annual Meetings*, (New York: Gypsy Lore Society, 1986).

173 William Lockwood and Sheila Salo. 1994. *Gypsies and Travelers in North America: An Annotated Bibliography*. (Publication, No. 6, Gypsy Lore Society).

families in New York.<sup>174</sup> Anne Sutherland and Carol Miller published a series of books and articles on the other large Vlach Romani population in the United States - the Machwaya. Sutherland's *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans* presents her ethnographic research on kinship, economics, and culture in the Machwaya community in California, while her book *Roma: Modern American Gypsies* details changes in this community over the last few decades, including legal cases.<sup>175</sup> Miller's *Lola's Luck: My Life Among the CA Gypsies* and *The Church of Cheese: Gypsy Ritual in the American Heyday* include field research and autobiographical reflections; these books discuss personal relationships, power dynamics, ritual, and symbolic pollution taboos, as well as relationships to changing practices/restrictions negotiated between genders in a Machwaya community in California.<sup>176</sup> Oksana Marifioti's *American Gypsy* memoir tells the story of her emigration from Russia to California.<sup>177</sup>

David Nemeth's *The Gypsy-American* is an ethnographic study of occupational survival strategies and adaptations in a Romani

American community, as well as the challenges that studying Romani communities present to traditional ethnographers.<sup>178</sup> Carol Silverman published several articles in the 1970s-1990s about gender relationships, fortune-telling, ritual, and identity issues among several Kalderash and Machwaya communities. More recently, she documented the history and current situation of Oregon Roma, including discrimination.<sup>179</sup>

Other authors have published books that have been critiqued for essentializing Romani people, giving negative labels to the Romani subjects, and/or a lack of academically rigorous and thorough analysis. For instance, Marlene Sway problematically labels Romani Americans as a "pariah group."<sup>180</sup> Melanie Covert's *American Roma: A Modern Investigation of Lived Experiences and Media Portrayals* deals with media misrepresentation of Roma but is mired in anecdotes from many unidentified subgroups.<sup>181</sup>

Also, popular literature, and even some other scholarly literature, has often perpetuated stereotypical characterizations of "Gypsies,"

174 Rena Gropper, *Gypsies in the City: Culture Patterns and Survival*. (Darwin Press, 1975).

See also Rena Gropper and Carol Miller, "Exploring New Worlds in American Romani Studies: Social and Cultural Attitudes among the American Macviaia". (Romani Studies 11, series 5, number 2, 2001), 81-110.

175 Anne Sutherland, *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans*. (Waveland Press, 1975).

Anne Sutherland, *Roma: Modern American Gypsies*. (Long Grove IL: Waveland Press, 2017).

176 Carol Miller - *Lola's Luck: My Life Among the CA Gypsies*. (Boston: Gemma, 2009); *The Church of Cheese: Gypsy Ritual in the American Heyday*. (Boston: Gemma, 2010)

177 Oksana Marafioti. *American Gypsy: A Memoir*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2012).

178 David Nemeth. *The Gypsy-American: An ethnographic Study*. (Edwin Mellon 2002).

179 Carol Silverman. "Negotiating 'Gypsiness': Strategy in Context," *Journal of American Folklore*, 101 (401, 1988), 261-275. "Everyday Drama: Impression Management Of Urban Gypsies," *Urban Anthropology* 11 (3/4, 1982), 379. "Pollution and Power: Gypsy Women in America," in *The American Kalderash: Gypsies in the New World*, ed. M. Salo (Centenary College, New Jersey: Gypsy Lore Society 1981), 55-70. "Rev. Sister Navajo: Reader and Adviser: Deciphering Gypsy Fortune Telling Handbills," *New York Folklore* 6 (1981), 29-43.

Oregon Roma (Gypsies): A Hidden History. *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 118(4, 2017): 518-553.

[https://ohs.org/research-and-library/oregon-historical-quarterly/joel-palmer-award/upload/Silverman\\_Roma-in-Oregon\\_OHQ-Winter-2017\\_Final.pdf](https://ohs.org/research-and-library/oregon-historical-quarterly/joel-palmer-award/upload/Silverman_Roma-in-Oregon_OHQ-Winter-2017_Final.pdf)

180 Marlene Sway, *Familiar Strangers: Gypsy Life in America*. (University of Illinois, 1988).

181 Melanie Covert.. *American Roma: A Modern Investigation of Lived Experiences and Media Portrayals*. (Lexington, 2018).

trivializing and essentializing the nature of the people as a whole, and ignoring the variety and complexity of Romani communities across the world. Isabel Fonseca's widely read book, *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey*, while rich in anecdote, also contains dramatically sweeping, racist, and unsubstantiated generalizations including the following: "Gypsies lie, they lie a lot- more often and more inventively than other people."<sup>182</sup>

## ABOUT THE FRANÇOIS-XAVIER BAGNOUD CENTER FOR HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University (the FXB Center) is an interdisciplinary center that conducts rigorous investigation of the most serious threats to health and wellbeing globally. We work closely with scholars, students, the international policy community, and civil society to engage in ongoing strategic efforts to promote equity and dignity for those oppressed by grave poverty and stigma around the world.

The FXB Center's Roma Program was established in 2012 with the goal of advancing research, pedagogy, and advocacy with and for Romani people. The Center has a particular focus on the realization of children's and youth rights and has incorporated the rights and participation of Romani children and adolescents as part of its research agenda.

Our research, which forms the basis of our advocacy for the centralizing of Roma rights in policymaking and research, can be broken down

into several main areas:

- Explore the barriers and opportunities of Romani people, particularly children and adolescents, to benefit from equal rights, dignity, and respect
- Produce knowledge and advocacy opportunities for reparations for past and present state-sponsored injustice against Romani people
- Contribute research regarding Romani people in the Americas
- Contribute to the consolidation of the field of Critical Romani Studies

In our work with the Roma, we actively create connections to other communities of scholarship, whether it be those focused on dialogue about reparations for collective injustice; those implementing particular methodologies such as participatory action research; those exploring themes such as hate speech, stigma, or diasporas; those delving deeply important fields, such as minority studies; those bringing wider perspectives such as intersectionality; or those devoted to artistic expression in celebration and sorrow.

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<sup>182</sup> Isabel Fonseca. *Bury me Standing: The Gypsies and their Journey*. (Random House, 1995), p. 18.

## ABOUT VOICE OF ROMA

Voice of Roma (VOR) was founded and incorporated as a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization in 1999 in the state of California. Today, VOR is the only national non-profit representing Romani Americans. The mission of Voice of Roma is to promote and present Romani cultural arts and traditions in a way that counters both romanticized and negative “Gypsy” stereotypes. We also support scholarship for and about Romani people by both Romani and non-Romani scholar-allies, and in so doing, to contribute to the preservation of Romani identity and culture. VOR also works to heighten awareness of human rights issues faced by Roma in today’s world, and to strengthen the Romani voice both nationally and internationally. Our mission is accomplished through organizing and implementing cultural arts programs, engaging in educational programming/ outreach, as well as supporting economic development and charitable projects for and about Roma.

The task of VOR is unique and crucial. Roma have been voiceless for centuries. A history of oppression, slavery, discrimination, ethnic cleansing and genocide informs the Roma’s living culture, and anti-Roma prejudice persists. Against this background, a worldwide movement is working to increase recognition for Romani cultural arts and traditions, building a sense of ethnic pride, history and strength among the Roma. Voice of Roma is at the forefront of this movement, providing a voice for Roma within the United States and beyond.

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