



## Gypsy Lifestyles and Criminal Activity

Criminal lifestyles adopted by some nomadic people commonly referred to as “Gypsies” have been the subject of police concern for decades. Some understanding of these groups is essential to law enforcement’s ability to curtail such criminal enterprises.

The term “Gypsy” has often been loosely used to identify persons or groups of a nomadic nature who routinely engage in a variety of scams, con games, and criminal activities. It should be stressed that not all members of the two major types of nomadic people discussed in this *Training Key*® engage in such criminal activity. The term Gypsy is used only to identify persons whose lifestyle fits a pattern described herein and does not include law-abiding members of the Romani Society or other related ethnic groups.

The term “Gypsy” is generally used to describe a culture that is thought to be of Northern Indian origin. Over a thousand years ago, these people migrated west due to pressure of Muslim invasions. Their migrations eventually took them to locations throughout the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and eventually America. The original immigrants to these areas were generally identifiable because of their distinctive dark skin and hair, and body build. While many still maintain these unique ethnic characteristics, particularly in Europe, many more have been assimilated into other cultures and are indistinguishable from other individuals in those societies.

“Gypsy” derives from the word Egyptian or ‘Gyptian’, which was considered the place of origin for these people by the first Europeans to encounter them. According to some authorities, it was not until the second half of the 18th century that European scholars began to realize that the Romani language used by these people (Roma) was of Indian origin. The assimilation of these people into European and other cultures has resulted in the adoption or incorporation of different languages and dialects, and has resulted in an ethnic minority that is fragmented into widely separated groups.

The Roma have been the subject of many localized and state-sponsored persecutions over the past millennium. Possibly the most significant single persecution was the attempted

annihilation of the Roma during World War II by the Nazis. Persecutions continue to this day, particularly in Eastern Europe. Negative sentiment toward Roma also exists in the United States as witnessed by the generally negative stereotype of the Gypsy in films and books. The Roma have been known by many names, to include Gypsy, Gipsies, Tsigani, Cigano, and others. But, the Roma generally have referred to themselves by their clan or tribal name or by the term “Rom” meaning “Man” or “People.” Associations of Roma have attempted to shed the negative stereotype associated with the term “Gypsy.” To that end, they have been successful in their proposal to the Council of Europe to use the term Roma or Rroma in its official documents when referring to this ethnic group.

But, like all ethnic groups and cultures, there are both good and bad. In the United States, the Roma or Gypsy population is also composed of both law-abiding and criminal elements. The following section of this document examines an element of this ethnic population that has a history of engaging in a variety of criminal enterprises across the country.

### The Irish Travelers

Some connect the existence of Gypsies in the United States to the immigration of the so-called “Irish Travelers” to this country during Ireland’s potato famine. It is known that elements of the Roma had been in the British Isles for at least 500 years previously and had established an extensive itinerant existence among the Anglo-Saxon population.

Most Travelers identify themselves as descendants of Irish Travelers. One of the common names of Murphy Village, located in North Augusta, South Carolina, is “Sherlock,” which is the name of a large Traveler class from the area around Killoggin County, Kerry, Ireland. They use a language called

Shelta, which is composed of Gaelic, English, and contrived words that were originally used in Ireland to prevent outsiders from following their conversations, particularly during a trade. Their livelihood in Ireland filled the void for stores and manufactured goods, which were once rare in Ireland. The Travelers were best known for tinsmithing and the fabrication of drinking cups, buckets, cooking pots, funnels and the like; thus their nickname of Irish Tinker or Tinkerers.

On their arrival in America, segments of the Travelers migrated from New York south along the eastern seaboard while engaging primarily in horse and mule trading.

While there are many smaller family units of Travelers scattered throughout the United States, there are larger clans that are more structured. Specific numbers are difficult to establish but it has been estimated that there are approximately 900 families totaling between 4,000 and 6,000 individuals who have been routinely involved in various scams since the early 1900s.

The Travelers consist of several major subgroups:

- *The Southern Travelers.* Consists of about 360 families living between Edgefield and North Augusta, South Carolina. These are the least mobile of the groups. These individuals specialize in various scams, to include painting barns, houses, and fences, and installing cheap floor coverings, which will be discussed later in more detail.
- *The Northern Group.* Members of the Northern Group travel extensively, concentrating on the upper mid-west and northeast in the spring and in Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas during the winter. They specialize in travel trailer sales and in sealing and paving driveways and roofs with worthless materials.
- *The Mississippi Travelers.* The Mississippi Travelers are located primarily in mobile home parks near Memphis, Tennessee, and engage in a combination of consumer fraud, including RV sales, and painting and paving/sealing scams.
- *The Western Travelers.* Members of the Western Travelers are sometimes referred to as the "Greenhorn Carols" by the other Travelers. They are loosely coordinated from Fort Worth, Texas, by an individual who holds an RV sales license and who operates a form of clearinghouse for various scams. The rest of the Western Travelers operate in South Texas and Louisiana during the winter months and travel north through Oklahoma, Kansas, the Dakotas, Iowa, and Nebraska during the summer.
- *The Scottish Traveler Clan.* This clan is distributed widely across the United States but concentrates its activities in southwestern California, the western portions of the mid-west and in the northeast. Also known in the past to law enforcement agencies as the "Terrible Williamsons," the Scottish Travelers are believed to have their origins in Cincinnati, Ohio, where a small group settled in the early 19th Century. They return to that area at least once each year to reestablish family ties and to discuss the success of various money-making scams. The Williamson name is seldom used today and many carry identification with last names such as Mesker, Reid, McDonald, Wood, McMillian, Sweet, Parks, Cooper, Gregg, Keith, Johnston, Thompson, and Marshall. The Scottish Travelers have been extremely

successful in the deceptive sale of recreational vehicles that are poorly made or that do not meet safety and industry standards.

## Identifying Characteristics and Lifestyle

Unlike the European Roma or Gypsy, whose distinct coloring and body build often set them apart from the population at large, the Traveler fits well within the Anglo-Saxon culture found in all parts of American society. Wearing apparel is not distinctive except for special occasions. Travelers enjoy jewelry, and turquoise is particularly popular. Children generally attend public school and dress like their peers although there is a high dropout rate after the eighth and ninth grades.

Most Travelers are Catholic, and many exhibit religious artifacts although many prefer to worship within their own social group rather than through traditionally recognized churches.

Although the adult males do most of the work, women handle the money and conduct most of the financial affairs. In fact, women hold a strong position within the family and exert a high degree of influence in the everyday functions of family life.

The Travelers' social lifestyle is a closed one. They do not socialize with non-Travelers and discourage marriage outside the clan. Travelers sometimes employ African Americans to assist in various scam operations and to assist in labor, but while on the road they will not share living quarters and do not socialize once a scam has been completed. While the Travelers are aware of the European Gypsy, there is no hard evidence that they have ever worked together.

Travelers come together as a group about four times a year. At other times, they are typically traveling and engaging in consumer fraud or criminal activities. Most celebrate Easter and also return to their homes during the first few weeks of October because of the on-coming cold weather. This is generally the time in which marriage ceremonies are conducted. Gambling is a favorite activity and is vigorously pursued during these and other times when clans are together. When school is out in late spring or early summer, the father may return to his base of operations and pick up the rest of the family in order to travel together during the summer months.

Among the Irish Travelers, men are the primary workers. Occasionally, a wife may work with her husband and older sons, particularly where a scam requires their involvement. They generally travel in large groups of between 30 and 40 pickup trucks, some pulling campers or mobile homes, and spend between 40 and 70 percent of their time on the road. On the road, they may stay in family-oriented motels or in state parks or public campgrounds and trailer parks.

## Criminal Activity and Victim Profiles

While the Travelers may favor one particular area of the country, they are not restricted to that area. Their choice of geographic area is largely based on the amount of money that can be made as judged by past experience, the pressure of law enforcement in a given area or jurisdiction, and weather conditions, among other factors.

Unlike the Travelers who prefer to work in rural areas, the European Gypsy who is found in the United States generally prefers to work in urban areas. In these locations, they may maintain a semi-permanent base of operations. They are turf-

conscious to the degree that any other European Gypsy group that may come to work in the same area may have to gain permission from the local “Rom Baro” to do so and agree to provide a financial reimbursement to the local group.

For several reasons, Travelers typically seek out the elderly as prime targets for scams. In particular, the elderly are more likely to have acquired some wealth and often own their own homes. Many elderly also tend to keep substantial sums of cash on hand. In addition, they often live alone, are easily intimidated and sometimes gullible, are less likely to file a complaint with the police, and often make poor witnesses. The elderly may also be physically and mentally debilitated and are typically in need of the types of home repairs and related “services” that generally form the basis for the Travelers’ scams. That having been said, it should be noted that a Traveler will not discriminate among victims if he thinks that a person will make a good target - a “gull” - for a particular scam.

The Travelers have developed and perfected many different types of scams over the generations. Their keen insight into human behavior and their gauge of human vulnerabilities enables them to be highly successful in the use of scams while also maintaining a safe distance from arrest and prosecution.

From the law enforcement perspective, much of Traveler operations border on consumer fraud, which often does not provide a firm foundation for action by police personnel. However, when consumer fraud is used as a means of conducting other criminal activity, as is often the case, law enforcement officers have sufficient basis for arrest. This is the case, for example, in scams that allow entry into a home (e.g., free “termite inspection”) in order to steal money or property.

The following types of fraud, scams, and criminal activity are characteristic of Traveler operations, although each may be modified or implemented differently to meet specific situations.

**Painting Scams.** Painting scams employ a cheap grade of paint that has been cut by kerosene, gasoline, or other thinning agents. The Traveler may also misrepresent the amount of paint that will be needed to complete the job. He may give an exaggerated estimate of the required paint needed or start the job based on an estimate of 10 gallons, for example, and later claim that it took 15 or 20 gallons. Should the victim balk at paying the inflated price, the Traveler may threaten to call an attorney or even the police. Another approach to this scam is to acquire empty paint cans of a high-quality brand of paint and fill them with the poor-quality paint mixture. The Traveler can then use these to substantiate the false claim that he is using only high-quality paint.

**Roof Repair.** The sealing and repairing of roofs on homes, outbuildings, mobile homes, and the like follows the same approach used in the painting scam. That is, the Traveler materially misrepresents the quality and quantity of work and uses improper or sub-par materials to conduct the repairs. Travelers use many approaches to gain permission to perform these repairs. In one approach, for example, a Traveler approached a victim saying that his grandfather had put the roof on the house many years ago and that it could use an inspection before bad weather came. After obtaining permission to conduct the inspection, the victim was informed that the roof needed repair adding that the roof could be sprayed with silicon and the job wouldn’t cost much. After the work was done, the elderly victim was informed that the cost would be \$1,000 for materials and \$500 for labor. When the victim began to write a

check she was told that she could get a 10 percent discount for using cash. The Travelers drove her to her bank where she withdrew the cash and paid the Travelers, who in turn left the area immediately. It was later discovered by investigators that the word “Mark” had been painted on the roof of the victim’s home, indicating that the owner was gullible and an easy mark for swindles.

**Driveway Repair.** There are many variations of the “driveway scam” but most depend on the interest of the victim in obtaining a quality job at a bargain cost. In most, but not all cases, the materials used by Travelers in asphalt paving consist primarily of re-conditioned motor oil combined with a minimum amount of asphalt. One variation of the scam works like this: Travelers approach a potential victim stating that they were doing a “parking lot job” and have a lot of asphalt left over. Their boss has told them to dump it, but they have enough left over to pave the victim’s driveway. They quote the victim a price that he/she agrees to. The Travelers apply the mix, collect the money, and leave. In some cases, the Traveler may ask for more money based on the claim that they had to use more materials or extra help. They may tell the victim that the asphalt will have to “set up” overnight before they can roll it, but need the money now for more materials and to pay the man who will roll the driveway. Needless to say, the Travelers never return and the worker never comes to roll the driveway which has nothing on it except several gallons of motor oil that will wash away during the next rain.

**Home Repairs and Services.** In one popular scam, a Traveler poses as a termite inspector and offers to provide the victim with a free inspection. Often, the Traveler will bring a piece of board into the basement or under the house that has been infected with termites and will use that as proof that the house needs treatment. If the homeowner agrees to the treatment, the Traveler will spray a useless substance around the home or bury unknown substances around the foundation. In other scenarios, Travelers may pose as electrical wiring inspectors and claim that repairs are required. In performing the “repairs,” they may spray old wire with black paint and claim that they have replaced old wire with new wire. In other cases, these or similar ruses will be used simply as a means of gaining entry into the victim’s home in order that jewelry or other valuables can be stolen, or in order to identify where they are located for a later theft. In these situations, Travelers work in tandem, one used to distract the victim while the other steals what can be found. Another favorite ploy is to offer senior citizen discounts on home repairs and once inside the house to use distractions that will allow for theft.

**Landscaping and Tree Pruning.** Another very simple yet effective scam deals with selling oak trees and tree pruning. In the former case, one or two Travelers offer to sell young oak trees that they propose to plant, fertilize, and water as part of the purchase price. Of course, after the trees have been planted, the Travelers never return and the trees invariably die. On closer inspection, the purchaser realizes that he has in fact purchased tree limbs that have been placed in potting soil and wrapped in burlap. In the tree-pruning scam, the Traveler may offer to prune the victim’s trees for a very modest price such as \$20. However, when the bill is presented, the victim discovers that the price represents each limb, not each tree.

**Tool Sales.** Travelers often engage in the sale of cheap tools purchased directly from the manufacturer. They triple the price and sell them door to door, along highways, and at

flea markets. In addition to tools, they also sell cheap lifters, hydraulic jacks, band saws, and drill presses obtained from third rate manufacturers. Cheap rug sales and scams are another lucrative enterprise. When attempting to sell these items, they explain to the victim that the rugs were purchased in volume and that they have some left over at a discount price. In fact, the rugs were purchased in bulk as imperfect from the cheapest manufacturer.

**Social Security/Health Scams.** These are very profitable for the Travelers as they deal primarily with their preferred type of victim, the elderly. There are many variations to this type of scam, but there are two types that continue to appear on incident reports. In one scenario, two well-dressed Travelers, posing as doctors working for the Social Security Administration, offer to give a free physical examination to the victim with the understanding that if the person passes the exam, his or her Social Security benefits will be increased. While the “doctor” is conducting the examination, the other Traveler goes through the house stealing what he can find. In a similar approach, the Travelers pose as health department workers offering a free EKG (heart exam) for an elderly victim. A phony machine is produced and the attachments are placed on the victim, who is told to lie still. During the so-called examination, one Traveler stays with the victim while the other takes whatever valuables can be found.

**Lightning Rods.** One can notice that the scams conducted by the Travelers are not sophisticated. The key to their success is the ability of the perpetrator to target persons who are gullible, unsophisticated, uneducated, and/or those who may suffer from mental or physical disabilities that create a vulnerability. In many cases, elderly persons in rural or suburban environments, particularly those living alone, may be most susceptible to these schemes. Many of these individuals are lonely and willing to entertain the notion that “a nice young man” is trying to earn a living and can provide them with a needed service at an excellent price. The lightning rod scam (and many others previously noted) is an example of the type of fraud that could only be perpetrated on a select group of individuals, yet it has proven to be very successful in spite of its seemingly unbelievable nature. The lightning rod scam, like others, also depends largely on the sales ability of the Traveler. In this particular case, a Traveler successfully sells lightning rods of little or no value to persons in rural areas. The next year, the Traveler returns to the same area and offers to “recharge” the rods for a modest fee.

**Recreational Vehicle Sales.** This particular scam has been one of the most lucrative for Travelers who have been involved. Marauder Traveler, Inc., and Traveline Enterprises, Inc., of Elkhart, Indiana, were at one time the main suppliers of cheaply and improperly constructed recreational vehicles for the Scottish Travelers and other Traveler groups. The Travelers purchase them directly from the manufacturer and after investing a modest amount of money to “dress them up,” sell them to unsuspecting consumers at exorbitant prices. These vehicles typically do not meet construction and industry standards and may be dangerous. It has been reported that in one year alone, total profits from the sale of these trailers was about \$50,000,000.

## Investigation of Gypsy Schemes

As noted earlier, many of the scams employed by Traveler groups border on illegality while others are patently illegal. In either regard, activities of these clans have a negative financial impact on victims, a large percentage of whom are least able to absorb or recover from a financial loss or the loss of property and cherished personal possessions. The elderly are particular targets for the Travelers and are among those on fixed incomes who can suffer devastating financial as well as emotional hardships through swindles, fraud, and outright theft. The problem is often compounded when individuals are paid to make vital home repairs that are not performed. The elderly are then in a position where they sustain a second financial setback when the repairs are properly performed.

Local law enforcement agencies are in the best position to protect the interests of local citizens who may be easy prey for these types of predators. As a start, investigators and patrol officers should be familiar with local ordinances and state laws that may facilitate an arrest where justified.

Police personnel should coordinate their efforts with local consumer protection agencies and follow up on reports of swindles and con games that fit the general profile of those discussed in this *Training Key*®. It should be remembered that Travelers often return to a particular location on a cyclical basis, either every year or every other year and sometimes during the same month on a yearly basis. Awareness of these cyclical patterns can provide agencies with the opportunity to target specific groups or individuals.

Similarly, police agencies are well advised to disseminate, to the degree possible, information on fraudulent activities and provide warnings where possible to community groups. Neighborhood watch programs and other community policing points of contact should be provided with profiles of potential criminal activity involving Travelers. In particular, senior citizen need to be informed of Traveler operations through police/sheriffs coordination groups and other means as these individuals are particular targets of Traveler fraud schemes.

Interviews conducted with victims or would-be victims can provide officers with information necessary to help determine the involvement of Travelers, both individually or collectively. For example, most activities of these groups are perpetrated by men and may include adolescents or teenage boys. Travelers generally use late model pick-up trucks, although this depends upon the type of scam being conducted. For example, Fords and Chevrolet pick-up trucks seem to be preferred for outdoor repair and maintenance scams. Luxury passenger cars may be used when employing scams such as the social security con. Out-of-state license plates are sometimes evident where Travelers are involved.

Individuals or groups fitting these general descriptions may also be found during periods of nomadic activity at bases of operations involving family-oriented motels such as Holiday Inns, Ramada, or Quality Inns. Groups of 10 to 15 Travelers who are conducting scams or other offenses in a general area may leave these locations early each morning and return late each evening, and may stay at such locations longer than would normally be the case for visitors or tourists.

Travelers acquire many sets of identification reflecting the different states in which they operate. Many will have more than one driver’s license. While out-of-state license plates may be encountered, it is not atypical for Travelers to steal and

use plates from comparable vehicles within the state that they are operating. Consequently, all types of identification should be cross-checked with vehicle identification numbers (VIN) and vehicle registration.

Coordination with adjoining jurisdictions may also find that the same or similar types of frauds and swindles are being perpetrated by these individuals on a regional basis.

The use of peculiar language or unidentifiable slang may also be suggestive of Travelers. Common terms used by these individuals include the following:

- Numps: Money of any denomination.
- Shayjo: Police officer.
- Gully: African American.
- Neja: Persons who can be easily swindled, particularly country people. A derogatory term.
- Yolkin: Stealing

## **Acknowledgement**

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## questions

The following questions are based on material in this *Training Key*®. Select the best answers.

1. Which of the following statements is false?
  - (a) *Gypsies are generally thought to be of Indian origin.*
  - (b) *The Roma have been the subject of many local- and state-sponsored persecutions.*
  - (c) *Romania is the homeland of the Roma.*
  - (d) *Rom means “man” or “people.”*
2. Which of the following statements is false?
  - (a) *Some connect the existence of the Gypsies in the United States to the immigration of the Irish Travelers.*
  - (b) *The Irish Travelers use a language called Shelta.*
  - (c) *The Irish Traveler can be recognized by distinctive dark complexion and hair.*
  - (d) *Travelers typically seek out the elderly as victims for their scams.*
3. Which of the following statements is false?
  - (a) *The paving scam is a common activity of the Traveler.*
  - (b) *Travelers typically have multiple forms of identification.*
  - (c) *In Gypsy society, the men take charge of the money while the women and children perform most of the swindles and scams.*
  - (d) *Travelers often come back to the same area year after year.*

## answers

1. (c) Romania is not the homeland of the Roma people.
2. (c) The Irish Traveler is typically indistinguishable from white Anglo-Saxons.
3. (c) In Gypsy society, the men and young male adolescents conduct the scams while the women the charge of the money.

## have you read ... ?

“Carnival Fraud Investigations,” *Training Keys*® #473 and #474, International Association of Chiefs of Police, Alexandria, VA.

These *Training Keys*® provide a good overview of other types of scams and swindles used in another environment.

