

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Mental Health in Prisons

About the Traveller Movement

The Traveller Movement (TM) is a registered UK charity promoting inclusion and engagement with Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (GRT). The Traveller Movement seeks to empower and support Gypsies, Roma and Travellers to advocate for the full implementation of their human rights.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) ethnic groups

Gypsies, Roma and some Traveller ethnicities have been **recognised in law as being ethnic groups protected against discrimination** by the Equality Act 2010.

It is important to remember that similar to the acronym BAME, (used to refer to Black Asian and Minority Ethnic people), the acronym GRT refers to different ethnic groups and cultures¹. Within all three, there is an array of groups that identify as Roma, and further distinctions within Gypsy and Traveller identities. Ethnic identities from within GRT should be considered on an individual basis, as people within this defined category will have different experiences of discrimination based on their language, nationality and specific cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are included under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, that gives a **Public Sector Equality Duty**, to ensure a public authority must in the exercise of its functions:

- A) **eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation** and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- B) **advance equality of opportunity** between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- C) **foster good relations between persons** who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.²

¹ <https://travellermovement.org.uk/about/gypsy-roma-traveller-history-and-culture#differences>

² Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) Equality Act 2010

The Lammy review

The [2017 Lammy review](#) into the treatment and outcomes for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people in the Criminal Justice System, highlighted the disproportionality and experiences of imprisoned Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people. It also brought Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people into the broader discussions of the treatment and outcomes Black Minority and Ethnic experiences of prison and the Criminal Justice System.

Although none of the 35 recommendations were aimed at Gypsies, Roma or Travellers, it did highlight that these groups experience some of the worst outcomes in relation to the Criminal Justice System. It also sought to improve data gathering on ethnicity; ensure sentencing was more transparent; and to ensure criminal justice services are more representative of diverse communities.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Mental Health.

A previous Traveller Movement policy briefing [addressing mental health and suicide among Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in England](#) reported that 'Gypsies, Travellers and Roma were found to suffer poorer mental health than the rest of the population in Britain and they were also more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression.'

Based on the 2012 All Ireland Traveller Health Study (AITHS), Pavee Point report that Travellers experience **a 6.6 times higher suicide rate** when compared with non-Travellers, accounting for approximately **11% of all Traveller deaths**.³

When disaggregated by gender and age, this rate was:

- **7 times higher for Traveller men** and most common in young Traveller men aged 15-25; and
- **5 times higher for Traveller women** than in the general population.⁴

The Pavee Point report (*ibid*) outlined many causal factors for this. Including: poverty/indebtedness, racism/discrimination, addiction issues and bereavement related suicide. Travellers are also impacted by high child mortality that can fuel these problems, in the UK Travellers are 20% more likely to experience the death of a child.⁵

Further, Travellers experience bereavement differently than the wider population. Research by Rogers (2017)⁶ found the cultural norms and community practices of English Gypsies and

³ <https://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Handout-Mental-Health-A5-8pp.pdf>

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/SS00-Health-inequalities_FINAL.pdf cites Parry et al (2007) 'Health status of Gypsies and Travellers in England'. J Epidemiol Community Health. 2007 Mar; 61(3): 198–204

⁶ [A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the University's requirements for the Degree of Master of Philosophy/beyond Bereavement: is close kinship enough? \(guildhe.ac.uk\)](https://www.guildhe.ac.uk/documents/10180/103333/A+thesis+submitted+in+partial+fulfilment+of+the+University+s+requirements+for+the+Degree+of+Master+of+Philosophy+beyond+Bereavement+is+close+kinship+enough+?)

Irish Travellers toward bereavement often hinder grief responses due to the overriding need to protect family members by displaying stoicism. This sentiment regarding bereavement is also felt by young Traveller women⁷, as demonstrated in the following quotation:

We do expect a lot of ourselves; we have to cope with everything ... you almost haven't got time to grieve... If it's a member of your own family, your brother or sister, you can't show your feelings, you can't because you are afraid to hurt them; you have to keep a brave face on it (Plan International, 2019: 119).

When this is combined with poor experiences with health services⁸, due to factors such as: potential barriers registering with GPs, lack of trust in health services, experiences of discrimination and difficulties reading medication, the chances of Gypsies and Travellers requesting mental health support is unlikely.

Mental health needs among the prison population

A thematic review published in 2016, by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO), looked at the lessons learned from independent investigations into deaths in prisons where the prisoner had been identified as having mental health needs before their death. The report examined the circumstances of the deaths of 557 people who died in prison custody between 2012 and 2014.

Although the PPO report does not include ethnicity data, for the cases considered as part of the review, it does highlight the prevalence of mental ill health among the prison population and states:

Research indicates that a high proportion of the prison population has mental health needs. These needs range from mild forms of depression, which can be treated with appropriate medication and support, to serious and enduring conditions, such as psychotic illnesses and severe personality disorders, which can be much more difficult to manage.

Mental ill-health is one of the most prevalent and challenging issues in prisons and is closely associated with the unsettlingly high rates of suicide and self-harm in custody. Contributing factors such as lower levels of literacy also impacts on ability to access prison or jobs, leading to greater time in cell or to feelings of isolation and more likely to be bored or unhappy compounding poor mental health (See MacGabhann and Irish Chaplaincy in Britain report, 2011⁹). This a key concern regarding the mental health of Traveller prisoners as research by Thames Valley Probation Service found that:

- 59% of Traveller offenders in that area had problems with numeracy, compared to 9% of other offenders according to OASys data.

⁷ <https://plan-uk.org/file/plan-uk-state-of-girls-rights-report-2020pdf/download?token=42bpRbf8>

⁸ https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/360/report-files/36009.htm#_idTextAnchor051

⁹ https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/15534/1/Voices_unheard.pdf

- 65% of Travellers problems with reading and writing compared to 14% of other offenders.
- only 12% of Traveller offenders possessed any such qualifications, compared to 57% that had some form of educational or professional qualification¹⁰

The growing mental ill health crisis in prisons

As a result of the global pandemic, since March 2020, prisons in England and Wales have been operating under a severely restricted regime.

The recently published [2019-2020 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales Annual Report](#), (HMIP report) has highlighted the enormous ramifications the pandemic has had for the wellbeing of prisoners. Among many other problems, most prisoners are spending 23 hours of the day in their cells, with limited time spent outside. This combined with limitations to, or the stopping of prison work, educational and employment programs, and the halt in face to face support from essential services, is impacting mental health enormously, as prisoners are left with little constructive support or activity.

The implications of these measures will have short-term and long-term impacts on mental health. Throughout the pandemic, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Prisons (HMIP) conducted a series of adapted Short Scrutiny Visits (SSV) in a number of prisons. In August 2020, HMIP published [an aggregate report of their short scrutiny visits](#), which states:

As our SSV program progressed, “our visits identified increasing levels of stress and frustration among many prisoners and evidence that prisoner well-being was being increasingly affected by the continuation of restrictions.”

But in prisons, there is now a real risk of psychological decline among prisoners, which needs to be addressed urgently, so that prisoners, children and detainees do not suffer long-term damage to their mental health and well-being, and prisons can fulfil their rehabilitative goals”.

Additionally, the Ministry of Justice Safety in Custody Statistics, England and Wales: [Deaths in Prison Custody to June 2020 Assaults and Self-harm to March 2020](#) showed that in the number of individuals self-harming increased by 5% in the 12 months to March 2020, to 13,180, and the number of self-harm incidents per individual increased by 7% from 4.6 to 4.9. These figures do not include the period when prisons were in complete lockdown for the Covid-19 pandemic, with the Chief Inspector of Prisons recently stating the impact of 23 hour lockdown is having a detrimental impact on prisoners' mental health¹¹. In the annual report, Clarke also said the impact of deteriorating mental health, as well as lack of access to rehabilitation programs and education, would be felt further down the line.

¹⁰ https://www.irishchaplaincy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Working_With_Gypsy_and_Traveller_Offenders_Final_15_7_14_x.pdf

¹¹ https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/10/HMI-Prisons_Annual-Report-and-Accounts-2019-20-WEB.pdf

The issues, regarding mental health, highlighted in the HMIP Annual and Short Visit aggregate report should be taken as an early warning that the need for appropriate mental health support for people in prison, has never been more important than it is now.

Many, including people detained in prison, would agree with these emergency measures to reduce the risk of contracting and spreading Covid-19 across the prison population. However, it cannot be ignored that the measures put in place have come at other costs. Looking forward, the long-term sustainability of the measures that prisons are currently taking needs to be questioned, as a return to a greater sense of normality for prisoners seems to be moving ever further away.

Gypsy Roma and Travellers' mental health in custody.

Gypsy, Roma and Travellers in prison experience mental ill-health at [disproportionately high rates](#), with a shocking disparity for Irish Travellers in particular. Key factors which exacerbate the poor mental health of Traveller prisoners are lack of access to services, disruption of community and family support, prejudice within the system, discrimination and loss of self-respect.¹²

Most recently, the [2019-2020 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales Annual Report](#), contained survey data regarding the Mental Health of Prisoners. This showed the extent GRT prisoners suffer with mental health problems when compared to the wider prison population.

- **64% of Travellers said they had Mental Health problems.**
- **45% of Travellers said they felt depressed**, compared to 35% of non-Traveller respondents.
- **22% of Travellers said they were feeling suicidal** when compared to 12% of non-Traveller respondents.
- 31% stated they have other mental health problems, compared to 23% of non-Travellers respondents.

These findings of poor mental health are linked to experiences of discrimination. Research from 2019 [The Experiences of Irish Travellers in Prison in England and Wales](#) states: "It has been said that Irish Travellers suffer from unequal hardship in prison and this has been linked with racism and discrimination from prison staff and other prisoners", supporting evidence from earlier studies (e.g. Irish Chaplaincy, 2011). [Research conducted into the mental health of Irish Travellers in Ireland](#) found that poor mental health is intrinsically linked to the experiences of discrimination Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people experience as "discriminatory attitudes can be harmful to a person's mental health".

These experiences of discrimination, coupled with preexisting inequalities (poor mental health, lower levels of literacy) must be a point of concern as the pandemic progresses. Existing mental health problems will likely only become accentuated, and ongoing isolation

¹²Irish Chaplaincy, *Voices Unheard: A Story of Irish Travellers in Prison*, (2011)
https://www.irishchaplaincy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Voices-Unheard-June-2011_SMALL.pdf

measures will likely impact Travellers extensively and perhaps disproportionately compared with some other prisoner groups.

Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) and GRT people

ACCT is the care planning process for prisoners identified as being at risk of suicide or self-harm. [The Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork \(ACCT\) process in prison: findings from qualitative research](#) (2019) includes specific concerns raised by prisoners and staff regarding the function of the ACCT program, including:

- A perceived lack of confidentiality, as it is clear who is in the ACCT program.
- A lack of consistency of staff, creating a barrier to building meaningful relationships.
- Overall mixed concerns for the quality of relationships made with staff.
- Staff observed not having enough time to conduct their duties.

These outlined problems are particularly relevant to Traveller prisoners. Due to their disproportionate rates of mental health problems in custody, we recommend that ACCT professionals are briefed on the specific barriers Travellers face. For example, staff should understand that experiences of discrimination throughout the system can exacerbate mutual mistrust and poor relations between staff and Gypsy and Traveller patients.¹³

Building trust is an enormous part of creating a beneficial and productive relationship with Traveller prisoners, which makes the lack of consistency in ACCT meetings concerning. More time spent in building positive and consistent relationships with professionals would be beneficial to improving interaction and engagement with GRT prisoners. Furthermore, a higher proportion of GRT prisoners, especially women, do not feel safe in prison¹⁴. Making the ACCT process more discreet is therefore crucial to avoid accentuating feelings of insecurity.

Mental Health and separation from Family.

In most cases, family contact is important for the well-being of prisoners. Many Travellers consider family to be of the highest importance and therefore, separation is often a particularly difficult aspect of imprisonment.

Additionally, Traveller prisoners are more likely to be parents when compared other prisoners. The 2020 [HMIP](#) report stated that:

- **66% of Traveller respondents had children under the age 18**, compared to 47% of Non-Travellers.
- 7% of Traveller prisoners were arranging care for dependents compared to 3% of non-Travellers.

¹³ Patrice Van Cleemput quoted in Cemlyn et al, 2009, p.53 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qgrnt>

¹⁴ <https://www.justiceinspectortates.gov.uk/prisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2014/04/gypsies-romany-travellers-findings.pdf>

- 41% of Travellers were still contacting family, compared to 29% of Non-Traveller respondents.

Both men and women will suffer with the pain of separation from their families. However, a recent study by [Clinks](#) found that women in prison are more likely to be primary carers for children, causing a disproportionately negative impact to women's mental health and their responses to prison regimes, discipline and interventions.

The changes to visitations and family contact are of key concern for many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller prisoners. The restrictions to family visitations due to Covid-19 are likely to have a negative impact to their mental health. The 2019-2020 HMIP report highlighted that delays in the national roll-out of video-calling, had added to prisoners' frustrations and anxieties. In line with this, The Traveller Movement recommends that video-calling needs to be rolled out as soon as possible to help combat these outlined issues. Although seen with the wider population, many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families face digital exclusion and struggle with computer literacy at disproportionate rates. Therefore, there also **needs to be support given when setting up video-calling** for families.

Our proposed way ahead

Improving data collection for GRT people in the CJS

There is a longstanding unresolved issue regarding the lack of reliable data about the overall numbers of GRT people and about their specific experiences in prison¹⁵. Whereas there is some data regarding experiences of Gypsy/Irish Travellers in prisons and the issues of mental ill health, this is not the case for people from Roma backgrounds, for whom, the data does not exist. The 2021 Census data will include Roma as a self-identification category for the first time, which is positive, but significant work needs to be done to ensure engagement and trust in self-reporting of ethnicity, across the Criminal Justice System.

We consider that these issues strengthen our repeated calls to improve data collection for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people, across the CJS. Without comprehensive data collection the needs of these groups will largely remain unmet, leaving them at increased risk of prolonged mental ill health, in a system that should also be focusing on rehabilitation as well as punishment.

About the Traveller Movement

The Traveller Movement is a leading national charity committed to the fulfilment of human rights for ethnic minority Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller (GRT) people. This is achieved by a proactive community advocacy strategy, capacity building and acting as a bridge between the GRT sector, service providers and policy makers. Visit: <https://travellermovement.org.uk/>

¹⁵ See The Lammy Review:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/643001/lammy-review-final-report.pdf