

# Travellers and Suicide: Facts and Figures

Travellers are a minority ethnic group, indigenous to the island of Ireland. Travellers maintain a shared history, language, traditions and culture.<sup>1</sup> Travellers are recognised as one of the most marginalised groups in Irish society as they experience structural and systematic discrimination, state neglect and active prejudice.<sup>2</sup> This has a direct impact on Traveller health and in particular, Traveller mental health. According to 'Our Geels' – The All-Ireland Traveller Health Study (AITHS) (2010)<sup>3</sup>:

- 56% of Travellers reported that poor physical and mental health restricted normal daily activities; this was compared to 24% of the General Medical Services (GMS) population.  
*"We have our young people isolated in apartments, who are suffering from depression and they need help badly."*  
(Mental Health, Focus Group AITHS)
- 62.7% of Traveller women disclosed that their mental health was not good enough for one or more days in the last 30 days; this was compared to 19.9% of GMS female cardholders.  
*As a young person because you are emotionally embarrassed it's not all your identity but it's just when people are turning you down different types of things and are ashamed to be with you, you kind of feel embarrassed and you just kind of say to yourself, why are they ashamed of me? I am a person the same as everyone else, I have equal rights [...] The way that changes things is the way that people treat you down different and I just don't understand why. There is a lot of common suicides going on in Traveller community."*  
(Young People (girls) – Focus Group AITHS)
- 59.4% of Traveller men believed that their mental health was not good for one or more days in the last 30 days; this was compared to 21.8% of GMS male cardholders.  
*"We have serious mental problems and we are not dealing with it, and for starters I have often got, Jesus, serious depression in my house, I must say and I have had to go for a walk, women do the same thing. I am not depressed all the time, but I go for a walk."* (Mental Health, Focus Group AITHS)
- 39% of Travellers surveyed in prison had mental health problems for which they were being treated and 81% were currently taking prescription medication.

1. Dublin Travellers Education & Development Group (1992) *Irish Travellers: New Analysis and New Initiatives*. Dublin: Pavee Point Publications.  
2. Houses of the Oireachtas, Seanad Éireann, Seanad Public Consultation Committee (2014) *Report of Ireland's Compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights with Observations and Recommendations to the United Nations Human Rights Committee and to the Irish Government*. Dublin: Stationery Office.  
3. All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team (AITHS Team) (2010) *All Ireland Traveller Health Study: Summary of Findings*. Dublin: School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Population Science, University College Dublin.



## Social determinants of Traveller mental health

Poor mental health and common mental disorders are largely shaped and determined by social, economic and physical environments.<sup>4</sup> This was reflected in AITHS, as Traveller poor mental health was reportedly shaped by interacting forces including:

- Discrimination
- Social exclusion
- Long term illness
- Drug misuse
- Inadequate accommodation
- Low self esteem
- Lower education level
- Recent bereavement
- Low levels of trust with service providers

## Suicide

Travellers are identified as a 'high-risk' group for suicide as suicide is 6 times higher for Travellers than the general population.<sup>5</sup> This figure is reflective of confirmed suicide cases by the General Register Office (GRO) and does not take into account external causes of death such as alcohol or drug overdose, which accounted for almost 50% of all Traveller male external causes of death. Other findings include:

- The Traveller suicide rate is 6 times higher when compared to the general population and accounts for approximately 11% of all Traveller deaths.  
*"if you experience racism, if you are relegated to a thing rather than a person and you find yourself with no work and you are completely excluded, marginalised from society, I think that has an effect. (Men 2, Focus Group AITHS)*
- Suicide for Traveller men is 7 times higher and most common in young Traveller men aged 15-25.  
*"We are all liars at this table, and I will tell you why. An awful lot of the men are hanging themselves, taking over doses, buying the rope the whole lot." (Men 2 – Focus Group AITHS)*
- Suicide for Traveller women is 5 times higher than the general population.  
*We had one night to go out and do things like go to the pictures, go out at the weekends like. If you have a person who is really, really badly depressed and nothing to do and nowhere to go they're thinking in their head what is it I am living for then. Isn't that the kind of suicidal statement within the Traveller community. There is lots of suicides' (Young People [girls] Focus Group AITHS).*

## Barriers to mental health services

Mental health services lack comprehensive data on Traveller service users, as service providers do not collect information on ethnic or cultural background. This results in significant gaps in knowledge on the access, participation and outcomes to mental health and suicide prevention services for Travellers. While data from AITHS confirmed that mental health services were available to Travellers, services were often perceived as inadequate. Findings from AITHS indicate various institutional, cultural, social and structural barriers that restrict Travellers from accessing and engaging with mental health services. These include:

- Discrimination and racism
- Lack of trust with healthcare providers (41% Travellers had complete trust in health professionals compared to 83% of general population)
- Lack of culturally appropriate service provision
- Lack of engagement from service providers with Travellers and Traveller organisations
- Social and cultural stigma attached to engaging with mental health services

Mental health service providers confirmed that anti-Traveller discrimination and racism were evident within the services, often resulting in substandard treatment of Traveller service users:

*"It does exist [...] there is that sentiment that Travellers are less deserving, hence give them substandard services."*  
(SSI: Service Provider)  
*"Racism is one of the factors, but won't be said officially as they (institution) will be in trouble."*  
(SSI: Service Provider)

All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team (AITHS Team) (2010) *All Ireland Traveller Health Study: Technical Report 3*. Dublin: School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Population Science, University College Dublin.

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## Traveller and Roma Rights are Human Rights