

POSITION PAPER ON

Travellers and Positive Ageing

April 2011





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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

About Pavee Point

Pavee Point is a voluntary, or non-governmental, organisation committed to the attainment of human rights for Irish Travellers. The group is comprised of Travellers and members of the majority population working together in partnership to address the needs of Travellers as a minority group experiencing exclusion and marginalisation.

The aim of Pavee Point is to contribute to improvement in the quality of life and living circumstances of Irish Travellers, through working for social justice, solidarity, socio-economic development and human rights. The work of Pavee Point is based on two key premises:

- Real improvement in Travellers' living circumstances and social situation requires the active involvement of Travellers themselves.
- Non-Travellers have a responsibility to address the various process which serve to exclude Travellers from participating as equals in society.

About Travellers

Travellers are an indigenous minority ethnic group, documented as being part of Irish society for centuries. Travellers have a long shared history and value system which make them a distinct group. They have their own language, customs and traditions. ¹

Definition of “Older Travellers”

For the general population, “older people” are generally classified as those over 65. However, given the fact that Travellers generally do not live as long as the rest of the population (as described in more detail below), this classification cannot usefully be applied to Travellers.

Travellers themselves have stated that Travellers over the age of 50 or 55 would be considered “older”; some even felt that being over 40 or 45 qualified as being “older”.² As well as the lower mortality rates, the fact that many Travellers are grandparents by the age of 40 contributes to the view that Travellers over 40 are “older Travellers”. For the purposes of the Auld Pavee Beoirs and Glokes project (described below), older Travellers were identified as any Traveller over 55 years of age.



1. http://www.paveepoint.ie/pav_culture_a.html

2. Pavee Point (2009) *Garda Síochána Strategy for the Older Person: Submission by Pavee Point Travellers' Centre*. In preparing this submission, Pavee Point sought the views of ten older Travellers in their sixties and seventies (eight women and two men), all living in Dublin.

ISSUES FACING OLDER TRAVELLERS

Through our work funded by the Family Support Agency on the Traveller family we have tried to develop our work with older Travellers and focus on their specific needs and concerns. This position paper is part of this work. We believe that local Family Resource Centres throughout Ireland are well placed to include the needs of older Travellers in their work and actions and we will be working to support them in doing so.

In 2008, Pavee Point, funded by the Age and Opportunity Pilot Grant scheme, carried out an exploratory research project exploring the groundwork for establishing a network for older Travellers in the Finglas and Blanchardstown area of Dublin. The project, entitled *Auld Pavee Beoirs and Glokes*³, *Emerging Voices of Older Travellers*, focused on listening to the voice of older Travellers, the experience and attitudes of local service providers and the development of a pilot network project.

Older Travellers who participated in the focus groups and interviews for the research identified the following issues:

- Older Travellers face discrimination and exclusion (including financial) from the wider Irish society, leading to exclusion from many services; and are experiencing a strong sense of alienation from the rest of the Traveller community, due to the dramatic changes that have occurred to Traveller culture over recent decades, most notably the demise of the nomadic aspect of Traveller life and a decline in the old Traveller economy. This has led to social isolation for many older Travellers.
- This has left older Travellers with the firm belief that when they die, Traveller culture will die too. They felt there were virtually no older Travellers left besides them.
- In times past, older Travellers commanded a lot of respect among the Traveller community. There is however, evidence of growing inter-generational conflict. Some older Travellers fear that they are no longer respected in their own communities and some have reported experiences of abuse. Such abuse can manifest itself both physically and verbally. Older Travellers have highlighted experiences of being subjected to insulting comments by younger Travellers about being 'thick and ignorant' as they have no formal education. Older Travellers have expressed finding such developments as shocking and very hard to cope with.
- The issue of long stay care is a more recent phenomenon for older Travellers. Increasingly older Travellers are going to nursing homes which would have being unheard of a few years ago. Unfortunately, staff are often ill equipped to cope with cultural differences among residents and lack formal training in cultural awareness / anti racism measures necessary to adequately and sensitively facilitate older Travellers.

3. Pavee Beoirs and Glokes means older Traveller Women and Men. Pavee Point (2008) *Auld Pavee Beoirs and Glokes, Emerging Voices of Older Travellers*.

Despite these difficulties, the researchers draw attention to the older Travellers' ability to remain upbeat, positive or philosophical in the face of adversity and link this resilience to a will to preserve identity and tradition while adapting to changing circumstances.

Other issues that are well-documented in relation to Travellers, and which are likely to have an impact on older Travellers include:

- **Education:** Travellers experience poorer education outcomes than the majority population and although there have been some improvements in Traveller enrolment in schools and in continuing with education these are recent. Many older Travellers never experienced any formal education and therefore have problems reading and writing. This can impact on many areas of their lives including information on health (for example instructions on medication, public health campaigns and so forth), and interaction with government departments and agencies in relation to form-filling.
- **Accommodation:** According to the All Ireland Traveller Health Study, most Travellers now live in houses (73.3%), followed by trailer/mobile home or caravan (18.2%). 7.6% of Travellers did not have access to running water - 2,753 Traveller men women and children and significant numbers of families in group housing or sites reported lack of footpaths, public lighting, and fire hydrants.⁴ Overcrowding on halting sites, evictions, discrimination and harassment from locals and living on the roadside are all ongoing difficulties for Travellers.
- **Discrimination:** A recent report showed that high levels of prejudice and discrimination against Travellers exist. Based on a survey carried out in 2007/2008, it found that 39.6% of people surveyed would welcome a Traveller "as a member of the family" and at the other end of the scale, 18.2% of respondents would deny Irish citizenship to Travellers. The reasons why 60.1% of respondents would not welcome a Traveller into the family were because of their "way of life" at 63.7%, because it was "not socially acceptable" at 17.8% and for "national or cultural reasons" at 9.6%. 79.6% of those surveyed responded that they "would be reluctant to buy a house next door to a Traveller."⁵



4. Kelleher et al (2010) *Our Geels All Ireland Traveller Health Study*. University College Dublin, Department of Health and Children.
5. MacGréil, M. (2010) *Emancipation of the Travelling People*. National University of Ireland, Maynooth.



TRAVELLER POPULATION AND HEALTH

The Our Geels All Ireland Traveller Health Study, published in September 2010, was commissioned by the Department of Health and Children and carried out by researchers at University College Dublin in partnership with Pavee Point and Traveller organisations throughout Ireland.⁶ The first comprehensive census of the Traveller population found that there were 36,224 Travellers in the Republic of Ireland in 2008. The study found that the age distribution of Travellers showed an extremely young population, with very few Travellers reaching old age. The authors comment:

“ No matter what way one examines the mortality data, the picture painted is a bleak one for Travellers. Compared to the general population, Travellers experience considerably higher mortality at all ages in both males and females... At all ages and for all causes of death, Travellers experience a higher mortality than the general population. The problem is endemic and complex and will not be solved in the short term without considering the wider contextual issues. The picture we

6. Kelleher et al (2010) *Our Geels All Ireland Traveller Health Study*. University College Dublin, Department of Health and Children.

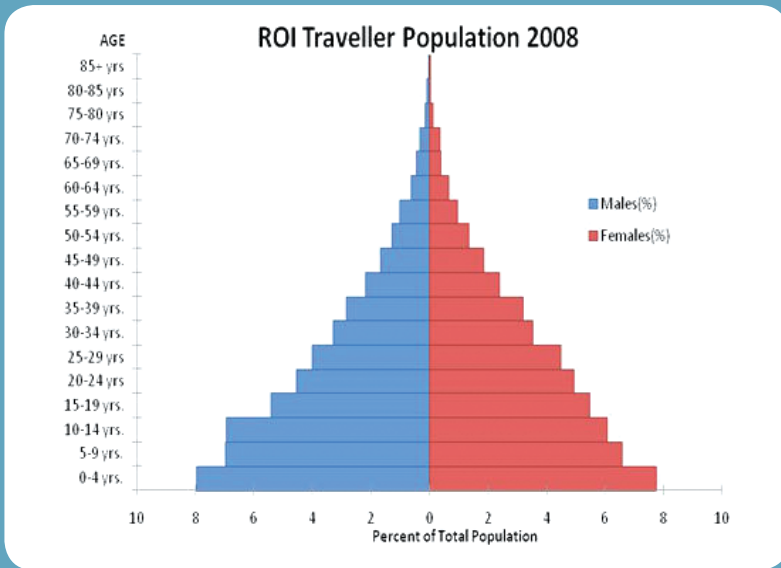
have painted points to the need for a holistic, integrated, long-term approach to improving the lives of Travellers and reducing their deaths, which involves the community at each stage of this development. The fact that an identifiable disadvantaged group in our society is living with the mortality experience of previous generations 50-70 years ago cannot be ignored. The fact that the mortality gap between Travellers and the general population has widened in the past 20 years shows that comprehensive approaches to address this situation are required and are indeed vital. ”

Some key findings from the All Ireland Traveller Health Study of relevance to this paper are as follows:

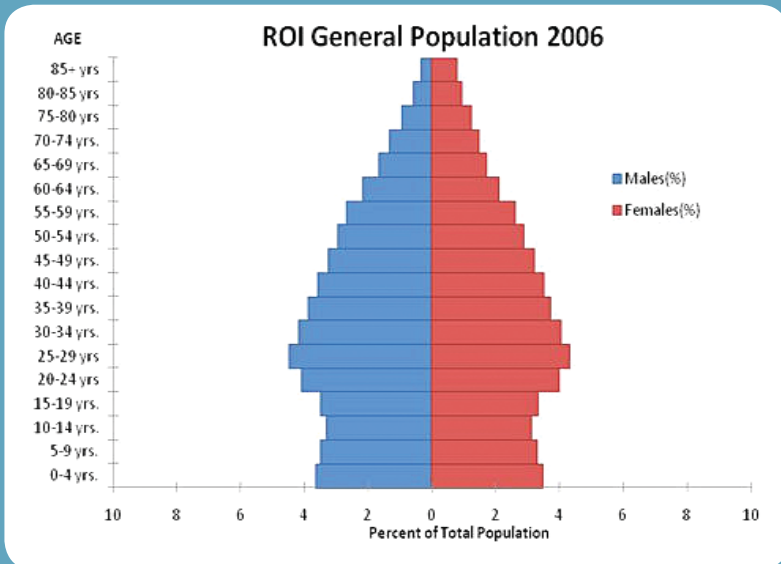
- Traveller mortality is 3.5 times higher than the general population. Traveller males have 3.7 times the mortality of males in the general population; for females the mortality is 3.1 times higher.
- Traveller males can expect on average to die **15 years** before their counterparts in the general population, and females can expect to die **11 years** earlier.
- The life expectancies of the Traveller community in the first decade of the 21st century mirror those observed in the general population of the late 1940's for males and of the early 1960's for females.
- For Travellers as a whole the gap has widened. This however is in the context of major health improvements in the general population in both sexes. For males, the gap in mortality has widened between Travellers and the general population; while for the women the gap has remained nearly the same.



Population Pyramids



Kelleher et al (2010) *Our Geels All Ireland Traveller Health Study*. University College Dublin, Department of Health and Children.



Central Statistics Office, Census 2006

The population pyramids above show the age profile of both the Traveller population and the general population. Travellers have a very distinctive population profile which is very similar to that in developing countries and among other indigenous ethnic groups such as the Aboriginal community in Australia.⁷ This pyramid denotes a high birth rate and a young population. As Travellers get older, the population pyramid becomes narrower at the top as a consequence of high mortality rates at a younger age. Put simply, few Travellers live into what would be considered "old age" in the general population.

As the table below from the All Ireland Traveller Health Study shows, **only 3% of Travellers are 65 years or over** compared to 13% of the general population who are over 65 years of age. 13% of Travellers are in the 40-64 year old age bracket, compared with 30% of the general population.

Table: Age distribution of Traveller and General Populations

Age Group	General Population 2006	Travellers 2008	Travellers 1987
0-4 years	7%	16%	19%
5-14 years	14%	26%	33%
15-24 years	14%	21%	22%
25-39 years	22%	21%	14%
40-64 years	30%	13%	10%
65 years +	13%	3%	2%



7. Australian Indigenous Health InfoNet, 2009

NATIONAL POLICY ON POSITIVE AGEING

The Programme for Government 2007 – 2012 committed to a National Strategy for Older People, a “New National Positive Ageing Strategy”, to include:

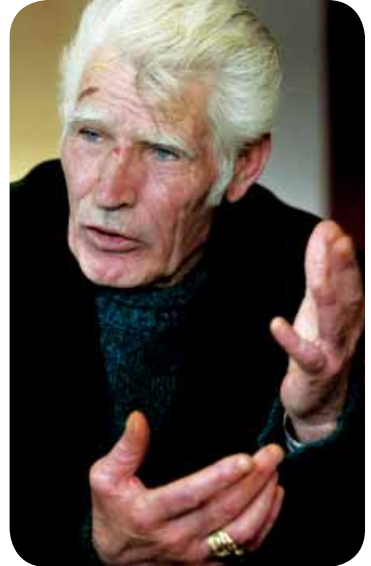
- The development of operational plans by Government Departments clearly setting out objectives relating to older people.
- Joined up thinking on initiatives serving older people.
- Ongoing mechanisms to monitor progress and identify challenges.
- Liaise with recognised voluntary groups in the area.
- Give consideration to the appointment of an Ombudsman for Older People.
- Designate a Minister of State for Older People who will be a member of the cabinet committee on social inclusion.

Although consultations have taken place, this strategy has not been developed to date and groups have called on the incoming government to deliver on this strategy.⁸

In the new Programme for Government for National Recovery 2011-2016⁹ there are commitments to:

- Complete and implement the National Positive Ageing Strategy so that older people are recognised, supported and enabled to live independent full lives.
- Local Authorities will be required to establish Older People councils, where members of the community can raise local concerns or issues of importance.
- We will support older people in living in their own homes and communities for as long as they wish and will facilitate this by ensuring that the eligibility criteria for the home help and the Home Care Package Scheme are applied consistently.

Pavee Point welcome these commitments and will work towards ensuring they are inclusive of Travellers and meet their specific needs.



8. <http://www.rte.ie/news/2011/0209/politics1.html>

9. Government for National Recovery 2011-2016

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. National policies and strategies on older people, in particular the National Positive Ageing Strategy, should explicitly take account of the needs of older Travellers. The process of taking account of Travellers' needs can be supported by Traveller proofing of any existing or proposed policies in relation to older people. Pavee Point has developed a Traveller proofing toolkit and can support organisations in using the toolkit. Key elements of the proofing process include consultation, data collection, training and needs and impact
2. Any definition of "older people" for the purposes of strategies, policies and services needs to take account of the unique age profile of Travellers, in particular low life expectancies and include "older Travellers" whose age group may be different from that of the majority population. (Only 3% of Travellers are 65 years or over compared to 13% of the general population who are over 65 years of age.)
3. Organisations representing older people and Traveller representative organisations should work together to ensure older Travellers are included in the work of mainstream organisations representing older people.
4. Traveller organisations should be resourced to to establish local projects and networks for older Travellers which could provide a space for older Travellers to preserve and develop social and cultural links, provide a valuable link to more isolated members of the community and facilitate an intergenerational discussion within the community. These projects and networks could also provide knowledge and assistance to service providers on how to further links with older Travellers and the Traveller Community.¹⁰



10. Based on the findings from Pavee Point's research with older people. Pavee Point (2008) *Auld Pavee Beoirs and Glokes, Emerging Voices of Older Travellers*.



“ I’ve done my life travelling and a happier time I never had. It was the greatest in the world. You had everything - comfort, life and pleasure and something to always do. You could get up in the morning in the tent and hear the blackbird and thrush in the trees whistling.

The young people will be ashamed of being a Traveller in the future however no matter what you put on them - if it was silk you’d still know them. It’s hard to burn the wildness out of a wild bird’s nose - you’ll tame them for a while but they’ll fly away again.

My travelling days are all over and when I die I’ll be in with the most respectable in Ireland and I’ll lie with them and we’ll all be the same. Yet people don’t want to live beside each other in good health - I can’t understand it ”

Paddy McDonnell (RIP), Dunsink, Finglas.
Extract from Pavee Pictures.



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Pavee Point
Travellers' Centre



Family Support Agency