



## **Evidence Brief: Mental and Health and Suicide in the Traveller Community**

### **Summary of the Research Related to the Mental Health and Suicide among Travellers**

- Dearth of research related to mental health and suicide in the Traveller community, both in Ireland and internationally
- Existing literature suggests that travellers experience poorer mental health and higher rates of suicide compared to the general population
- Traveller men have a 6.6 times higher suicide risk compared to settled men
- Alcohol and drug abuse are significant problems in the Traveller community. Alcohol is the main problem substance for Travellers however, there has been an increase in the numbers reporting opiates, benzodiazepines and cannabis as their main problem substance. Irish research indicates substance abuse among travellers in the West of Ireland, however, this is of a qualitative nature and while it echoes other findings it is difficult to draw generalisable conclusions from this work.
- Poly drug abuse appears to be a more common problem in the Traveller community than in the general population
- Uptake of support services in the Traveller community is low despite the reported high rates of mental health problems
- There is a strong stigma associated with mental health problems in the Traveller community, and this impacts negatively on help-seeking behaviour. There is evidence of home detoxification efforts, with supports only accessed as a last resort
- Cultural norms and fear of discrimination and embarrassment appear to prevent Travellers from accessing services
- The literature suggests that there is a lack of culturally appropriate engagement, and existing supports are thought to be inadequate and not thought to meet the specific needs of Traveller community
- There are indications for the feasibility to modify and implement mental health promotion programmes, e.g. Mind Yourself, among adolescent and young adult female travellers.

### **Mental Health**

*Mental Health is defined by the World Health Organisation as a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community<sup>1</sup>*

### **Irish Travellers**

*Irish Travellers are a small indigenous minority group that has been part of Irish society for centuries. They have a value system, language, customs and traditions, which make them an identifiable group both to themselves and to others. Their distinctive lifestyle and culture, based on a nomadic tradition sets them apart from the general population<sup>2</sup> The most recent Census report suggests that there are 29,573 Travellers in the Republic of Ireland, this amounts to 0.6% of the total population<sup>3</sup>*

### **Existing Initiatives**

National Traveller Suicide Awareness Project <http://www.travellersuicide.ie/>

- Founded in 2004 in response to high rate of suicide in the Traveller Community

- Funding provided by NOSP
- Aim is to create awareness among Traveller Community about suicide and support the development of responses locally and in doing so reduce the rate of suicide
- Uses community work approach
- No independent evaluation as yet.

### Relevant Literature

#### **Mental Health and Suicide in the Traveller Community(2013)<sup>4</sup>**

- High rate of mental health difficulties and suicide within the community with suicide being the cause of 11% of all Traveller deaths
- The suicide rate for Traveller women is 6 times higher than settled women and is 7 times higher for Traveller men
- Suicide is most common in young Traveller men aged 15-25
- Travellers face discrimination when they attend mental health services, and also face additional barriers, such as embarrassment around literacy difficulties and a lack of culturally appropriate engagement

<http://www.pavepoint.ie/document/mental-health-and-suicide-in-the-traveller-community/>

#### **Mental Health of Travellers<sup>5</sup>**

- Report on the mental health of travellers in *Northern Ireland*
- Report is based on findings from the All Ireland Traveller Health Study
- Living conditions, discrimination, identity, social capital, alcohol and drug abuse, and loss and bereavement are considered as factors associated with negative mental health
- Low uptake of support services despite high rates of mental health problems
- Strong stigma associated with mental health problems which impacts on travellers' help-seeking behaviour.
- Mental health services perceived as inadequate and not thought to meet the specific needs of travellers
- Increasing trend in Republic of Ireland. No data related to suicide in NI.

<http://www.mhfi.org/travellermentalhealth.pdf>

#### **Travellers Accessing Addiction Services in Ireland (2007-2010): Analysis of routine surveillance data (2013)<sup>6</sup>**

- Ethnic identifiers were recorded between 2007 and 2010 in a national epidemiological database on treated drug and alcohol misuse in Ireland (NDTRS)
- Between 2007-2010 68,748 cases were recorded for people seeking treatment, ethnicity was recorded for 68,329 (99.4%) and of these 1,098 (1.6%) identified themselves as travellers
- The total number of travellers seeking treatment increased by 163% from 162 cases in 2007 to 427 in 2010, although this is thought to be underestimated
- The majority of travellers seeking help were men (77.5%)
- Alcohol was the main problem for travellers (42.3%) and the general population (52.7%)
- The number of travellers seeking treatment for addiction of opiates increased significantly from 43 in 2007 to 168 in 2010, comprising 36% of traveller cases compared with 28.7% of the general population
- Significant increase in the number of travellers reporting benzodiazepines as their main problem of substance abuse (an increase, from 5 in 2007 to 17 in 2010) and cannabis (an increase, from 16 in 2007 to 48 in 2010). A similar, although less pronounced trend was observed in the general population (an increase, from 177 to 435 cases) and cannabis (an increase, from 1,065 to 2,326 cases)

- Opiates were the most commonly reported problem substance by traveller women, alcohol was more commonly reported by women from the general population
- Polysubstance was higher in the traveller population (53.2%) compared with the general population (42.1%)
- Some travellers not attending for treatment because of cultural factors, reluctance to bring shame on family and/or fear of discrimination by support service  
<http://0-web.a.ebscohost.com.library.ucc.ie/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=7e4563c5-cc0d-47b6-a479-ddf05b50aff1%40sessionmgr4005&hid=4104>

#### **Suicide Amongst Members of the Travelling Community (2011)<sup>7</sup>**

- Qualitative exploration of the social factors attributed to suicide
- Semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in service provision for the Traveller Community in Ireland
- Cultural change, a poor relationship with the health service, social exclusion, lack of educational opportunity, substance abuse were attributed to suicide in the Traveller Community  
<http://www.ucc.ie/en/appsoc/researchconference/conf/cstj/cstjournalvolume32011/gillianoshea/GillianOShea.pdf>

#### **Alcohol Use and the Traveller Community in the West of Ireland (2010)<sup>8</sup>**

- Exploratory study of Travellers and alcohol use based on the perspectives of travellers and key service providers in the West of Ireland
- Alcohol identified as primary substance of choice
- Service providers referred to the prevalence of polysubstance
- Alcohol use was attributed to cultural dissipation, marginalisation and experience of discrimination, depression, illiteracy and poverty
- Difficulty engaging with support services was thought to compromise efforts to address the problem and attempts to detox at home were common  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1465-3362.2009.00085.x/abstract;jsessionid=855AD113DA2C166024F9351A40B127E9.f04t03>

#### **All Ireland Traveller Health Study (2010)<sup>2</sup>**

- Travellers reported poorer mental health than other populations
- Travellers reporting experiencing discrimination and frequently cited this in relation to getting on a sports team (64.9%), obtaining insurance or loan (60.7%), accessing health services (60.4%) and at work (47.2%)
- Travellers reported more frequent experience of stressful life events such as loss and bereavement compared with other populations
- Strong stigma attached to mental health problems
- Mental health services perceived as inadequate and not thought to meet the specific needs of travellers
- Low uptake of support services despite high rates of mental health problems.
- Cultural shift required to encourage help-seeking behaviour for mental health problems, service providers must be aware of attitudes and beliefs that may prevent travellers from seeking help
- Increasing suicide rate in the traveller community
- Traveller men were found to have a 6.6 times higher suicide risk compared to settled men
- Risk factors for suicide similar to general population; alcohol/drug abuse, family history of suicide, psychiatric illness, and previous suicide attempts  
[https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/AITHS\\_SUMMARY.pdf](https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/AITHS_SUMMARY.pdf)

### **Substance misuse in the Traveller community: A Regional Needs Assessment (2009)<sup>9</sup>**

- Needs assessment related to substance misuse and the provision of related services
  - Study involved literature review, interviews with service providers, focus groups with members of the traveller community as well as a consultation process with service agencies
  - An increase in problematic drug and alcohol use among travellers in recent years was observed
  - Non-medical/home detoxification was common, support services only contacted as a last resort.
  - Lack of awareness among travellers of available supports, embarrassment and confidentiality worries prevented travellers from seeking help
  - Existing intervention/prevention programmes were thought to be inappropriate for travellers as they were not based on their beliefs or values
  - Targeted policies and interventions are recommended
- [http://www.drugs.ie/resourcesfiles/research/2009/WRDTF\\_Traveller\\_needs\\_assessment.pdf](http://www.drugs.ie/resourcesfiles/research/2009/WRDTF_Traveller_needs_assessment.pdf)

### **Crossing Boundaries. Identifying and meeting the mental health needs of Gypsies and Travellers (2006)<sup>10</sup>**

- UK based mixed-methods study to explore the mental health needs of gypsies and travellers in Sheffield
  - Survey of health status (n=60) found that higher proportions of gypsies and travellers suffered from anxiety and depression than the general population
  - Interviews with members of the Gypsy and Traveller community in Sheffield found that “feeling-down” was associated with socio-economic stressors such as finance, physical environment, employment and grief
- <http://informahealthcare.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09638230600700888?src=recsys>

### **Irish Travellers and Forensic Mental Health (2002)<sup>11</sup>**

- Study aimed to determine whether Irish Travellers’ are over represented amongst transfers from prison to psychiatric hospital
- Irish travellers admitted to the National Forensic Psychiatry service were identified from a case register over 3 years 1997-1999
- Study found an over-representation of travellers in the forensic psychiatry admissions
- Irish travellers accounted for 3.4% of forensic psychiatry admissions compared to 0.38% of the general adult population
- Travellers transferred from prison had more learning disability and less severe mental illness than other groups

### **The Health of the Roma People: A review of the published literature (2000)<sup>12</sup>**

- Little overall reference to mental health within the paper
  - Review of published literature found few papers related to mental health (n=6)
  - Excess of suicide and attempted suicide in the Roma Community compared with the general population
- <http://jech.bmj.com/content/54/11/864.long>

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2<sup>nd</sup> July 2015

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