

working notes

*facts and analysis of social
and economic issues*

Unheard Voices: Irish Travellers and the Struggle for Social Justice

The Promise of Theology from
the Edgelands

Powerless: Energy Poverty in
Irish Traveller Communities

Where Is My Mind: Traveller
Accommodation and Mental Health

Irish Travellers and Prison: Discrimination,
Education, and Lateral Violence

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Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice

54–72 Gardiner Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 TX23

Phone: 01 855 6814

Email: info@jcfj.ie

Web: www.jcfj.ie

Editor: Martina Madden

Layout: Karl O’Sullivan, Pixelpress.ie

Artwork: Alamy, Wikimedia Commons, Martina Madden, Steven Horne

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Editorial

Martina Madden

This issue of Working Notes is dedicated to Travellers, who remain one of the most marginalised and vulnerable groups in Ireland. Prejudice against Travellers seems like the last acceptable form of bigotry, and excuses for it are rife. Despite the progress we have made in recent decades in how we perceive and treat members of minority groups, and our rightful abhorrence of racism, it is still acceptable in most company to refer to the ‘problems’ with this group and how it is really their own fault that we exclude them from our settled mainstream society. But if we would not say the same about the Maori in New Zealand or Aboriginal People in Australia – and few people would – then the incoherence of our claim is revealed. Because although we are not ‘colonisers’, we – members of the settled, mainstream society – are complicit in the ongoing oppression of Travellers by our refusal to accept, acknowledge and respect them as an ethnic group with a centuries old history, which is struggling to survive and thrive in a world that has changed beyond recognition.

Travellers are particularly affected by injustices involving the areas we advocate for in the JCFJ – housing and homelessness, prisons and penal policy, and environmental justice. They are overrepresented in Irish homelessness statistics and are present in emergency accommodation at a rate that is out of proportion to their percentage of the population. A similar disproportionately high number are in our prisons, but official figures—if they existed— would be an underestimate as Traveller men and women are reluctant to reveal their ethnic identity in places of detention as they fear it would put them at risk of further maltreatment. Travellers are often affected by energy poverty, due in part to living in substandard energy-inefficient accommodation, and by the rising cost of electricity, which makes having basic necessities like adequate heating unaffordable. These issues are discrete but interrelated and are connected by poverty, exclusion and discrimination.

In the first essay in this issue *The Promise of Theology from the Edgelands*, Dr Steven Horne, author of *Gypsies and Jesus* and a

member of the Romany community in the UK, talks to Kevin Hargaden about the incongruence of the claim to be a Christian while also discriminating against GRT [Gypsy, Roma, Traveller] people. The second essay, *Powerless: Energy Poverty in Irish Traveller Communities*, by Aoife Foley of MABS, and Dr Ehiaze Ehimen of Atlantic Technological University outlines the impact on Travellers of being unable to access essential energy services and products, resulting in bleak situations for people who sometimes have to go without light or heat for their homes. The third essay *Where Is My Mind: Traveller Accommodation and Mental Health* by Thomas McCann and Claire Hargaden of the Traveller Counselling Service reveals the mental distress and harm to Travellers that is caused or exacerbated by substandard accommodation. In the final essay *Irish Travellers and Prison: Discrimination, Education, and Lateral Violence*, two Traveller men tell Martina Madden about their experiences of imprisonment and illustrate the wider context of how discrimination by society and by the justice system affects everything in their lives.

Together these essays* paint a picture of the hardship of Travellers' lives. The 2015 fire in the 'temporary' halting site in Carrickmines in which 10 people died should have been a real turning point for our society. But at that crucial juncture where we should have finally realised that the way we treat Travellers matters, and acted upon this realisation, we did nothing. Our continued prejudice and exclusion has already cost many Travellers' lives, not only through fatal accidents but through deaths of despair as their bleak suicide statistics reveal. It will cost many more unless we commit to consigning our lingering, toxic racism against Travellers to history.

*** Three of the essays in this issue of Working Notes were produced in collaboration with members of the Irish Traveller community, and the fourth with a member of the Roma community in the UK. Our aim in the JCFJ is to not speak on behalf of Travellers but to be allies in their struggle for justice.**

The Promise of Theology from the Edgelands

Dr Kevin Hargaden & Dr Steven Horne

Dr Kevin Hargaden is the Director and Social Theologian of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice. He is the author of *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age* (2018) and co-author of *The Parish as Oasis* (2022).

Dr Steven Horne is the first Romany from the UK to be awarded a PhD in Theology (November 2020), and is a Licensed Lay Minister in the Church of England. He is the author of *Gypsies and Jesus: A Traveller Theology* (2022).

CENTURIES OF HATE

When was racism invented?

That might sound like an odd question, since we know that human communities are practically incapable of resisting prejudice, discriminatory bias, and the tendency to project all our troubles on to an identifiable hated group.¹

But racism is not a synonym for prejudice. It is a “diseased and disfigured social imagination” which constructs and justifies a hierarchy of humankind and then weaponises that to achieve some other aim.² The Greeks suffered from an appalling cultural superiority, despising and pitying those who lived outside their borders (“Barbarian” etymologically derives from βάρβαρος – all who could not speak Greek). But this linguistic and cultural prejudice was not coded by a complex arrangement of biological (and pseudo-biological) categories – ranging from skin-pigmentation to cranial shape – along with geography, language, religion and all the other elements that we can see functioning in *racism*.

In this view, racism is an alloy of our hatreds which only became possible for us to forge with the advances in Modernity. The discovery by Europeans of new lands, the invention by Europeans of new classification systems, the invention by Europeans of new weapons, all together created a context where European powers could commit to a view of the world where some people are the norm and others are not, and to explain that division not by myth or the partisan passions of tribalism, but by science.³ We fail to understand something important about the world we live in if we do not understand the world that they lived in: Their genocidal colonial projects were not (just) naked power grabs whereby they could enrich themselves and increase their power. It certainly wasn't straightforwardly motivated by the desire to save “the heathen” with the

1 See: René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), or, alternatively, Genesis 3.

2 Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 6.

3 “The convenient lumping and splitting of human groups into different divisions based on a combination of several traits will produce what are being called races. But those ‘races’ are created by the scientist, not nature.” ‘Scientific racism and the biological concept of race.’ Michael L. Blakely, ‘Scientific Racism and the Biological Concept of Race’, *Literature and Psychology* 45, no. 1/2 (1999): 29.

“

Rather than an outlandish people, what we find when we consider the history of racial hatred towards Travellers is an outlandish fiction.

good news of the Christian gospel. It was a civilisational project justified by cutting-edge science. The arc of history bent towards the racially superior. You may protest and lament that fact, and some people did,⁴ but it was understood to simply be the way of the world.

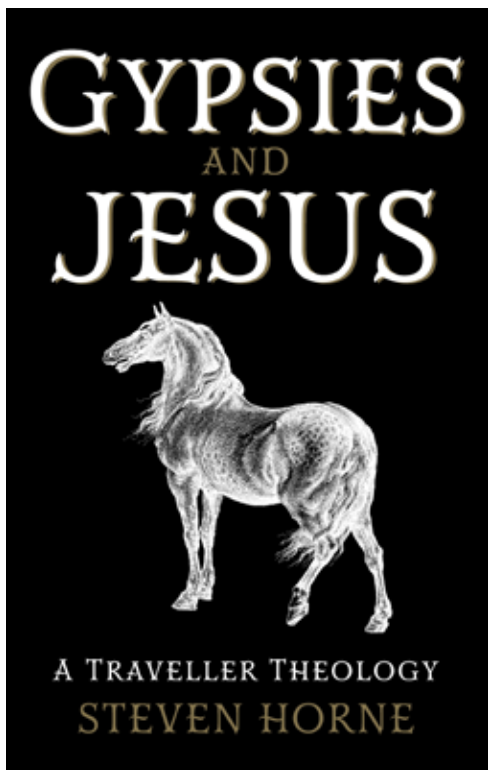
Interrogated historically, a good candidate for the beginning of racism might be the Egyptian Act, passed by Henry VIII in 1530. With this law, we find a people group identified, negative traits and nefarious intentions ascribed to them, and the authorisation to administer the State's power to marginalise them – quite literally. These “subtil, and crafty” people were not “Egyptians” but an “outlandish people” so described.⁵ Coming up on five hundred years later, these people are known as “gypsies” or “Roma” or “Travellers”. The names have changed, but their position in the racial hierarchy persists. That this racial imagination had to be invented and imposed is further displayed by the fact that though Irish Travellers are subject to the same social marginalisation, they have a different ethnic origin, arising from displacements within Irish populations that may have followed the genocidal violence of Cromwell's New Model Army, along with other traumatic events.⁶ Rather than an outlandish people, what we find when we consider the history of racial hatred towards Travellers is an outlandish fiction.

In this essay, we will consider the place of theology in the communities who have struggled under such racist prejudice for half a millennium and explore what wider academic discourse can learn by attending to Traveller theology.

4 Lawrence A. Clayton and David M. Lantigua, *Bartolomé de Las Casas and the Defense of Amerindian Rights: A Brief History with Documents* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2020).

5 Henry VIII, ‘The Egyptians Act’, 22 Henry 8 c. 10 § (1530), <https://statutes.org.uk/site/the-statutes/sixteenth-century/1530-22-henry-8-c-10-the-egyptians-act/>.

6 Edmund Gilbert et al., ‘Genomic Insights into the Population Structure and History of the Irish Travellers’, *Scientific Reports* 7, no. 1 (16 February 2017): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1038/srep42187>.



Gypsies and Jesus book cover. Rights: Steven Horne

THEOLOGY FROM WITHIN THE HALTING SITE

Dr Steven Horne is the author of *Gypsies and Jesus*, a 2022 book which may turn out to be the first major work of theology informed by the Christian practices of Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers (GRT). He is a lay licensed minister in the Church of England, and leads a team that is renewing a church in Canterbury under the “Fresh Expression” stream – experimental approaches to mission that adapt to local cultures. A candidate for ordained ministry, he will, all going well, be ordained in 2024. Dr Horne is also a Romany gypsy.

Gypsies and Jesus opens with the intention of “taking back the pen” from “gorgers” (non-GRT people) and rewriting the social narrative that has been offered.⁷ It is a work that straddles History, Sociology, and Cultural Studies, while never losing either its open exploration of religious practices within GRT communities or its ability to offer constructive theological proposals. My colleague in the

⁷ Steven Horne, *Gypsies and Jesus: A Traveller Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2022), 14.

“

For Christians, the margins are where we find our centre. And for Horne, the camp – what in Ireland is commonly called the halting site – is almost an entire cosmos to itself.

Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, Peter McVerry SJ, has often remarked that if Irish Travellers had darker skin, Ireland would be known as one of the most racist societies on Earth. Reading *Gypsies and Jesus* I was repeatedly struck by my own vast ignorance of groups of people I call my neighbours. That settled people can settle for knowing so little about their neighbours is a clear sign that some form of racial oppression is at play. That ignorance of reality is required because our cherished stereotypes only survive in the darkness.

In an interview with me, Dr Horne explained that the Egyptian Act was not the only explicitly racist legislation that has been passed against GRT people. “It was 23 years after slavery was abolished in this country [the United Kingdom] that gypsies and travellers were finally recognised as free people,” he said. How can this not be more widely known? How can such outright oppression not be at the forefront of our thoughts when we consider anything to do with GRT communities? Drawing on language first developed by the ground-breaking professor of Romani Studies, Thomas Acton, Horne spoke of “forgettory” – the “structured and intentional ‘amnesia’ that allows Roma and Gypsy historical and religious narratives to be reversed, altered, or forgotten.”⁸ The social narrative we sustain about Travellers needs to be rewritten because in lieu of fact and detail, we have anecdote and generalisation.

Horne’s particular contribution to a new narrative is a theology written from the “edgelands”, that territory into which GRT people are pushed, “the place beyond the walls of common culture”.⁹ This location –

⁸ Horne, 38.

⁹ Horne, 66.



Steven Horne speaking at an event. Rights: Steven Horne

“physically, spiritually, mentally” – is of course fertile ground for theological thinking. It can never be forgotten that Jesus was pushed outside the city walls before he was crucified. He eternally identifies with “the least of these” (Matthew 25:31-46). For Christians, the margins are where we find our centre. And for Horne, the camp – what in Ireland is commonly called the halting site – is almost an entire cosmos to itself. Scholars have come to recognise that the creation narratives unfolded in Genesis 1-3 are accounts of YHWH building for Himself a verdant, ordered but bustling garden which he intends to share with his creatures.¹⁰ And as Horne articulates it, the camp reflects this ordering against chaos. A strict divide is established, not just as an understandable sociological response to the alienation inflicted on GRT peoples by gorgers, but to create a space clear of the pollution of settled peoples.¹¹ The common complaint that Travellers make a mess of a place is, in fact, a dire inversion of the reality. A defining characteristic of GRT culture is a preoccupation with cleanliness, articulated through the concept of *Mokkhadi*, meaning pollution. Preserving purity and preventing pollution is the

goal of *Mokkhadi*, “a methodical practice that is intended to maintain health (physical, mental, spiritual) and order (social, familial, religious).”¹²

The general ignorance about concepts like *Mokkhadi* connect us to the deeper historical forgettury of settled people. But it also illuminates the pernicious contemporary social narrative at play around GRT communities. How often have we heard of complaints of littering and pollution around halting sites or temporary dwelling places? Horne explains that this is invariably not a problem created by the Travellers, but by the settled people, oftentimes enabled by local government. “If you went on the camp itself, I’d put money on it that it would be absolutely immaculate” but the settled people know that they can likely dump their rubbish nearby and not be prosecuted. Local authorities “set Travellers up for failure,” by operating out of the ignorant prejudice that they are a nuisance to settled neighbours and then turn a blind eye while settled people become a nuisance to Travellers.¹³

10 Consider: John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

11 Horne, *Gypsies and Jesus: A Traveller Theology*, 127–54.

12 Horne, 76.

13 This phenomenon of under-provision can be clearly seen in the Irish context. For example, in north Dublin, at the Belcamp Cottages halting site. While there is pedestrian provision to the south of development, access on the northside, along the R139, is poorly provisioned and often effectively a mud path along a four-lane carriageway.



Travellers with a horse and jarvey. Rights: Steven Horne

“

If you went on the camp itself, I'd put money on it that it would be absolutely immaculate” but the settled people know that they can likely dump their rubbish nearby and not be prosecuted.

A TRAVELLER RACE THEOLOGY

Whether we understand it as its own movement or as a seam of Liberation Theology, one of the most significant theological movements of the last century has been Race Theology. Classically associated with the work of the American theologian, James Cone, whose *Black Theology and Black Power*¹⁴ and *A Black Theology of Liberation*¹⁵, first published in 1969 and 1970 respectively, cracked open an entirely new, critical conversation within the church and the academy. That conversation has broadened and deepened immeasurably in the decades since, but Horne's work may be understood as part of the next iteration of that dialogue.

Religion still plays a central role in the lives of GRT communities. One of the subtexts of *Gypsies and Jesus* is how this element of culture

is easily overlooked by the State or NGO activists; “a secularisation of gypsy practices which brings out a sort of desperate plea from Gypsy and Traveller groups worried about losing our culture.” Indeed, GRT communities are one of the groups in European culture who have arguably become more religious in recent decades, stemming in a large part from a deeply influential and long-lasting Pentecostal revival that emerged in France in the 1950s.¹⁶ Horne notes that the standard social narrative we share holds that “confidence and reassurance and empowerment within communities come from education – that's the typical social inclusion account. But for us, actually, it is happening through the church.” It is impossible to work with or for Traveller communities without working to understand the religious and spiritual aspect of their shared life.

Gypsies and Jesus is an excellent introduction to those practices and commitments, framing the religious life of GRT communities in terms not just of doctrines believed in but in priorities favoured, the significance of cultural and spiritual separation, the attention to the body and to the homeplace, and the complex interplay between Scripture, lived experience, and a strongly sacramental view of the world.¹⁷ But it also makes a striking set of theological claims that are of relevance to all Christians,

14 James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012).

15 James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

16 Horne, *Gypsies and Jesus: A Traveller Theology*, 229.

17 Horne, 151.



Horne explodes the idea of a “pure bloodline” on theological grounds. Granting that cultural distinctiveness is a good thing to be treasured, he argues convincingly that the idea of a biological basis for culture should be anathema.

regardless of whether they are gypsies or gorgers. Delving into another phenomenon that is not widely understood – the idea of racial purity *within* GRT culture – Horne explodes the idea of a “pure bloodline” on theological grounds. Granting that cultural distinctiveness is a good thing to be treasured, he argues convincingly that the idea of a biological basis for culture should be anathema. “At the point of human inception, we all share the same source. As such, dismantling ideas of racial purity and letting Christ reclaim them, is not something that weakens us – whoever ‘us’ is – but is something that transforms our Kingdom living into his Kingdom living.”¹⁸ When Horne argues later that “grace – *not blood*” is the foundation of any GRT community, he clears space for an account of GRT identity which is distinct, vibrant, and not racialised. Theology offers the intellectual tools to escape the captivity of the racial imagination that has been constructed around the lives lived by Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers for the last five centuries.

CONCLUSION: SEEKING DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

In the 1970s, James Cone shocked the church from its immoral slumber on racism by declaring that God is black.¹⁹ Horne reminds us that Christ is Traveller.²⁰ Theology that treks to the Edgelands and recognises the Nomadic motif that runs through the bible²¹ is a theology that can awaken to the vibrancy of faith practiced in the GRT communities. Attending to the relationship between Gypsies and Jesus is clearly an important endeavour for those within the church.

18 Horne, 190.

19 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 58–86.

20 Horne, *Gypsies and Jesus: A Traveller Theology*, 89.

21 Consider the journey from Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) through to the great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language that gathers around the throne of the Lamb (Revelation 7:9).

But for those outside the church who seek to oppose the racism faced by GRT communities, this theological dimension is also essential. At one point, Dr Horne argues that to stop being called thieves, Travellers have to let settled people erase their culture.²² Given the choice between holding on to their way of life and being alienated or enjoying a grudging form of inclusion at the cost of assimilation is a definitional example of how a society can disregard a person’s dignity. While there have been important advances in the State’s stance towards Travellers,²³ and a welcome change in how the State talks about the Traveller community,²⁴ no one could suggest that Travellers are warmly welcomed by wider Irish society. The nature of racial prejudice means that an individual Traveller is always being judged. Seeing beyond the stereotypes and the generalisations is the first step to chipping away at this systemic oppression. The hesitance to consider religious culture as a topic of significance or interest is ideological. It should be seen and named as such. You cannot be an ally if you decide in advance what slices of your neighbour’s culture you will engage with.

Most significantly, Dr Horne’s work is of value to GRT communities themselves. In his own account of how he ended up becoming a theologian, he consistently found that no matter how widely he read on issues relating to Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers, “I didn’t see one part of myself in there.” The theological gap he has begun to fill is existentially important to individuals and communities. “The reasons why we keep our practices, the reasons why people keep themselves separate, the reasons why we have different ideas, the reason why we would endure suffering – none of them make sense if you take God out of the equation.”



In the 1970s, James Cone shocked the church from its immoral slumber on racism by declaring that God is black. Horne reminds us that Christ is Traveller.

22 Horne, *Gypsies and Jesus: A Traveller Theology*, 65.

23 For example, the granting of ethnic status in 2017.

24 Pavee Point Traveller’s Centre, ‘Assimilation Policies and Outcomes: Travellers’ Experience’ (Dublin: Pavee Point Traveller’s Centre, 2005), 54, <http://www.paveepoint.ie/tempsite3/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/AssimilationPolicies.pdf>.

Power Issues: Energy Poverty in Irish Traveller Communities

Dr Ehiازه Ehimen & Aoife Foley

Dr Ehiازه Ehimen is a Senior Research Fellow at Atlantic Technological University, Sligo with research experience in the renewable energy conversion, generation, supply and integration domains. He was lead investigator and author on the “Research on the Energy Efficiency of Mobile Homes for Irish Traveller Communities” report commissioned by the National Travellers MABS.

Aoife Foley is National Education Worker with National Traveller MABS with research experience in sociology and law. She undertook masters and PhD research in DIT and UCD. She has overseen a number of research projects, including “Research on the Energy Efficiency of Mobile Homes for Irish Traveller Communities” report commissioned by the National Travellers MABS.

ABSTRACT

Energy poverty is a critical issue affecting marginalised communities worldwide, and Irish Travellers are no exception. This report sheds light on the root causes of energy poverty in these communities, analyses the impact it has on their well-being, and proposes solutions to alleviate their energy hardship. By understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by the Traveller communities, we can work towards a more inclusive and sustainable energy future for all.

1. INTRODUCTION

Of all ethnic and demographic groups living in the State, Irish Travellers currently experience significant marginalisation resulting in less favourable opportunities to access and participate in education, healthcare, employment and even future energy transition goals. This has resulted in inadequate income and high unemployment levels, as well as financial exclusion which has in turn led to them dwelling in mostly energy inefficient accommodation. This all adds up to create a situation where energy poverty arises.¹ What energy poverty means is that people cannot afford adequate electricity or gas to light and heat their homes, or to use household appliances including washing machines. It is quantified in Ireland using an 'expenditure method,' where a household is considered to be energy poor if it spends more than 10% of their income on energy related costs². Irish Travellers face disproportionate hardships due to energy poverty, perpetuating a cycle of social and economic disadvantage. This piece aims to explore the underlying causes of energy poverty amongst Irish Travellers and the ensuing issues it creates, highlighting the urgent need for tailored policies and interventions.

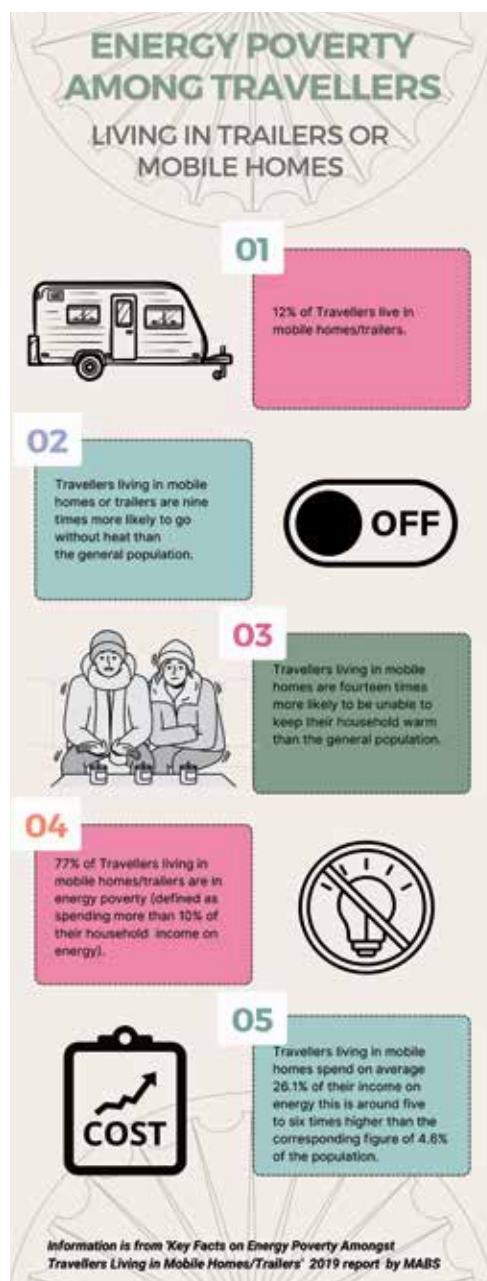


Figure 1: Infographic on Travellers and Energy Poverty

2. UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF ENERGY POVERTY AMONG TRAVELLERS

2.1 Socioeconomic Inequality: Travellers have historically faced discrimination and marginalisation, leading to limited access to education, employment, and housing opportunities. Their lower socioeconomic status often means they live in substandard accommodation with poor insulation and

1 'Irish Travellers – Socio-Economic Aspects and Housing' (Central Statistics Office of Ireland, 2021), <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8itseah/>; 'Key Facts on Energy Poverty Amongst Travellers Living in Mobile Homes/ Trailers' (Money Advice & Budgeting Service (MABS), 2019), https://www.ntmabs.org/publications/development/2019/nt-mabs-energyreport-factsheet_.pdf

2 D.S. Stamp and M. Kearns, 'Accommodating Ethnicity - Addressing Energy Poverty Among Travellers Living in Mobile Homes and Trailers: An Exploratory Study' (Money Advice & Budgeting Service (MABS), 2019), https://www.mabs.ie/downloads/reports_submissions/MABS_Energy_Poverty_Report_2019.pdf.

heating, contributing to higher energy consumption and costs.

“We have no money, we can’t socialise, we are treated badly everywhere we go, we are living in awful conditions, and no one wants to help us really.”³

“It’s not what people say at times, they are very careful. It’s a feeling that you get when you walk into a shop or a GP. It’s that look that you get that only Travellers would know. The conversation stops. The side looks at each other. Unless you have experienced it you wouldn’t know, but it happens everywhere I go.”⁴

Racist attitudes and stereotypes are at the heart of why Travellers find it so difficult to find employment and stay in employment and changing such attitudes will involve significant cultural shifts. [...], unfortunately, micro-aggressions in the form of workplace conversations that are hostile or negative about Travellers are a common and difficult experience for many. Changing this culture is crucial and will require action by employers and trade unions – for example line managers need to challenge unacceptable behaviour by other employees towards Travellers.”⁵

2.2 Inadequate Accommodation: Many Traveller families reside in overcrowded dwellings, substandard accommodation and caravans (mobile homes) without proper access to basic amenities like electricity and running water. The lack of energy-efficient housing options compounds the problem, leading to increased energy expenditure and difficulty in maintaining comfortable living conditions.

“When you have no money, you have no choices. This means we are trapped in accommodation that is very bad for most Travellers. You have to know how that



Quote by a respondent to 2022 National Traveller MABS Questionnaire

feels, most people don’t, they think they know but they don’t.”⁶

“[Travellers are] still living in cold and damp conditions. At times children were left sleeping on damp mattresses because of water leaks and condensation. They may have to go out to a cold container to go the toilet in the middle of the night. Their outdoor play areas are either non-existent or could be infested with pests. They have to live in overcrowded conditions. And what’s most distressing is that they know it, they feel it, and they are anxious about it,”⁷

“I can’t afford to keep the place warm. The second the heater goes off it’s freezing, there’s no double glazing, no insulation. The children go to bed early with extra

3 ‘Nature, Extent and Impact of Suicide Among the Traveller Community in South County Dublin & Ballyfermot’ (South Dublin Travellers Report, 2023), <https://www.ctdg.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/South-Dublin-Traveller-Report.pdf>.

4 ‘Nature, Extent and Impact of Suicide Among the Traveller Community in South County Dublin & Ballyfermot’.

5 Bridget Quilligan, ‘Traveller Enterprise and Employment Programme’ (St Stephens Green Trust, 2021), <https://www.ssgt.ie/grant-programmes-traveller-enterprise-employment-policy/>.

6 ‘Nature, Extent and Impact of Suicide Among the Traveller Community in South County Dublin & Ballyfermot’.

7 Jack Power, ‘Traveller Children Sleeping on “Damp Mattresses” in Galway Sites’, *The Irish Times*, 23 November 2021, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/traveller-children-sleeping-on-damp-mattresses-in-galway-sites-1.4735816>.

blankets, it's the only way to keep them warm [...] I sit up with a candle rather than turn on the lights because I can't afford the electric.”⁸

2.3 Cultural Barriers: The cultural practices and historic lifestyle of the Travellers can create barriers to mainstream energy services. Lack of understanding of their unique needs may result in inappropriate policy solutions that fail to address their energy poverty effectively.

Policymakers and energy providers need to broaden their focus to include Traveller-specific accommodation. Travellers live in a variety of types of dwelling, but halting sites, for example, have different requirements to a semi-detached house.

This issue of cultural competence has been about for years. It should become a mandatory thing for services, they are doing a lot of damage out there. I know of those who won't attend a Traveller area in case they are attacked. How can they offer services if they believe the community is savage?”⁹

I am an Irish Traveller ... I grew up on a site and I have always been used to living in caravans with my family. I got married and I couldn't stay with my parents because there wasn't enough room to move another trailer. I went to the homeless (authorities), but we weren't in priority need so we ended up in a squat. (...) I am now living in a flat I am grateful for a roof over my head but I really don't want to live here. I feel like a fraud living in a flat because I feel I am going against my culture. It's just not me to be in a flat but I have no choice.¹⁰

8 Respondent to the National Traveller MABS Energy Questionnaire, March 2022.

9 'Nature, Extent and Impact of Suicide Among the Traveller Community in South County Dublin & Ballyfermot'.

10 'Challenging Perceptions, Changing Lives', London Gypsies and Travellers, *I Feel like a Fraud, Living in a Flat* (blog), accessed 11 August 2023, <https://www.londongypsiesandtravellers.org.uk/story/i-feel-like-a-fraud-living-in-a-flat/>.

3. IMPACT OF ENERGY POVERTY ON IRISH TRAVELLERS

3.1 Health and Safety Implications: A host of energy related health and safety concerns have been observed among Irish Travellers owing to energy poverty. A recent study reported that 66% of Travellers dwelling in mobile homes stated that they had safety concerns related to their homes electricity supply.¹¹ Other issues experienced included (i) poor air quality due to the use of unvented kerosene heaters, (ii) increased fire risk associated with the heavy reliance on candle use at night, (iii) a high risk of food contamination or poisoning because of intermittent refrigeration, and (iv) dampness and mould arising from inadequate heating systems.¹² Inadequate heating and cooling in Traveller households exacerbate respiratory illnesses and other health issues, particularly affecting children and the elderly. Mental health can also suffer due to the stress and anxiety caused by living in energy-deficient conditions.

3.2 Education and Employment: Energy poverty can hinder access to education, as children living in energy inefficient homes may face difficulties in concentrating and attending school regularly. Additionally, limited energy access impacts employment opportunities, further entrenching the cycle of poverty.

3.3 Environmental Consequences: As energy-poor households struggle to afford proper energy sources, they may resort to burning fossil fuels or using inefficient appliances, contributing to environmental degradation and climate change. With a high dependence on diesel generators and fuel heaters to meet their energy needs, some Irish Travellers are highly reliant on fossil fuels, with no clear path for them to be included in the Irish transition to low or no carbon futures.

Issues of poor energy accessibility, brought about by intermittent or no existing mainstream electrical supply further affect traveller communities. Examples of such implications include: a significant shortage in night-time electricity due to the inability

11 Stamp and Kearns, 'Accommodating Ethnicity - Addressing Energy Poverty Among Travellers Living in Mobile Homes and Trailers: An Exploratory Study'.

12 Stamp and Kearns.

to operate generators throughout the night resulting in insufficient energy for space heating and food refrigeration; the inadequate electricity supply necessitates the washing of clothes in laundrettes; and the increased anxiety and stress associated with the unreliable supply of electricity from generators.

3.4 Economic Consequences: These concerns are further exacerbated by financial burdens associated with the use of current energy generation systems, with most Travellers reported to be spending an average of over €120 per week on fuel and electricity.¹³ A major factor for this is the reliance on butane gas cylinders for heating and cooking, which is significantly more expensive on a €/kWh delivered basis than most energy sources. Continued reliance on fossil fuels such as gas cylinders will attract increasing cost as carbon tax is increased.

This significant financial implication has meant many Traveller families being unable to keep their dwellings warm (especially in winter periods) and opting to go without heat for extended periods. This has a significant impact on their health and especially on the health of vulnerable members of the community including children and elderly people.

4. INITIATIVES TO TACKLE ENERGY POVERTY IN TRAVELLER COMMUNITIES

4.1 Energy Efficiency Upgrades: Implementing energy efficiency measures such as insulation, draught-proofing, and low-energy appliances in the homes of Irish Travellers can significantly reduce energy costs and improve living conditions. These changes could enable Travellers to live in homes that are adequately heated and insulated with access to cooking facilities that are affordable and safe to utilise, which would have a positive impact on their health and wellbeing.

¹³ E. Ehimen et al., 'Research on the Energy Efficiency of Mobile Homes for Irish Traveller Communities' (National Traveller Money Advice and Budgeting Service (NTMABS), 2022), <https://www.ntmabs.org/all-publications/education/2022/379-research-on-the-energy-efficiency-of-mobile-homes-for-irish-traveller-communities>.

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This has a significant impact on their health and especially on the health of vulnerable members of the community including children and elderly people.

4.2 Community Engagement: Involving Travellers in the design and implementation of energy initiatives is crucial. Culturally sensitive programmes that address their unique needs and values will foster better participation and outcomes. The particular requirements of this group must come from Travellers themselves, as they are best informed about their own experiences and the particular energy needs of their homes.

4.3 Financial Assistance: Providing targeted financial supports, grants, and subsidies to energy-poor households can alleviate the burden of high energy costs and promote energy access. Funding could be made available for short-term purposes, including the payment of electricity bills and also for long-term investments like the retrofitting of homes to make them more energy efficient and therefore less costly to run.

4.4 Education and Awareness: Conducting awareness campaigns on energy conservation, sustainable practices, and energy-efficient technologies will empower Travellers to make informed choices and adopt energy-saving habits. Ensuring that these campaigns are delivered by members of the Traveller community or advocates for them would foster a sense of trust and promote the sharing of information among the community itself.

5. POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

5.1 Inclusive Energy Policy: The government should develop energy policies that consider the specific challenges faced by Travellers, ensuring they are not left behind in the



Halting Site on Cappagh Road, Finglas. Rights: JP, Wikimedia Commons

transition to cleaner and more affordable energy sources. This is more important now than ever, as we move towards a low-carbon society in our efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change.

5.2 Housing Reform: Addressing the housing crisis and providing culturally appropriate, energy-efficient accommodation options will significantly impact the energy poverty faced by Travellers. There is an urgent need for affordable, energy-efficient housing on a large scale to provide homes for everyone, especially people who are currently homeless, including the many Travellers who find themselves in emergency accommodation.

5.3 Equal Access to Services: Ensuring equitable access to energy services for all citizens, regardless of their background, is vital in reducing energy poverty. Travellers must have the information and the access to affordable energy sources, to enable them to be healthy and live lives of dignity. Excluding this group from the funding and services which everyone in the settled community has access to is a breach of their human rights and an injustice which must be rectified.

6. CONCLUSION

Energy poverty is a complex issue which affects the lives of Irish Travellers in a myriad of ways, from negatively affecting their health to impeding their ability to participate in society. This issue demands tailored solutions for the unique challenges faced by Irish Travellers. Staring with acknowledging the root causes and understanding the far-reaching implications of energy poverty, our policy-makers and energy providers can work towards building a more inclusive and sustainable energy future. Through collaborative efforts which include and empower Travellers, including community engagement, targeted policies, and investments in energy efficiency, we can work with Travellers to create a more equitable and thriving society in which everyone has adequate access to energy.

Where Is My Mind: Traveller Accommodation and Mental Health

Thomas McCann & Claire Hargaden

Thomas McCann is the Founder and
Managing Director of the Traveller
Counselling Service

Claire Hargaden is the Operations
Manager of the Traveller Counselling
Service



An Irish Traveller in Dublin watches neighbouring children play from her trailer window. Rights: Photobymack, Wikimedia Commons

We are all aware, to greater and lesser degrees, that to have a safe place to lay one's head at night is a cornerstone of wellbeing. It is not everything – but without it, everything else becomes immeasurably difficult. But just 33% of Travellers who access supports within the Advocacy service of the Traveller Counsellor Service can identify themselves as appropriately accommodated. Given that Travellers are a Nomadic people, understanding how this has come about it something we all should strive to understand.

TRAVELLER COUNSELLOR SERVICE

At the Traveller Counselling Service, a grass-roots organisation run by and for the Traveller community, and supported by members of the majority settled community, we work hard to maintain our ethos of providing a culturally sensitive and appropriate service to our clients, specifically in the areas of counselling, community development, advocacy and training. We operate through a culturally sensitive lens, taking the norms and values of Traveller culture into account when a client walks through our doors. To neglect to do so,

even unconsciously, is to collude with a wider culture that refuses to recognise and respect Traveller culture and way of life and reinforces the racism, exclusion and marginalisation that Travellers have been subjected to by the majority community. Correspondingly, it neglects to see Travellers as equals and full human persons capable of the complete spectrum of human experience.

Part of our holistic practice includes the use of appropriate language. We are not referring to *Cant* or *Gammon* (the Traveller language, sometimes known amongst linguists as *Shelta*), but to choosing language that seeks to include rather than to other, which brings us to our first point. To refer to “housing” for Travellers can create a sense of exclusion or confusion amongst some, and so we prefer to use the term “accommodation” as it encompasses more culturally appropriate ways of living and acknowledges nomadism, which has been a central pillar of Traveller culture and identity for centuries. This is more than just the bricks-and-mortar understanding of accommodation. It is culturally inclusive and helps us to avoid a purely sedentist approach to the term. It refers to a place to live, and rest, and perhaps even flourish.

Travellers in Ireland still live under the paternal legacy of the Irish government's "Report of the Commission on Itinerancy,"¹ published in 1963, of which the terms of reference are as follows:

1. *to enquire into the problem arising from the presence in the country of itinerants in considerable numbers;*
2. *to examine the economic, educational, health and social problems inherent in their way of life;*
3. *to consider what steps might be taken—*
 - (a) *to provide opportunities for a better way of life for itinerants,*
 - (b) *to promote their absorption into the general community,*
 - (c) *pending such absorption, to reduce to a minimum the disadvantages to themselves and to the community resulting from their itinerant habits and*
 - (d) *to improve the position generally; and*
4. *to make recommendations.*

The power dynamic at work in such stated intentions, with its inability to consider the Traveller community as *worthy in its own right*, or when offered the right conditions, inherently self-regulating is deeply galling. But on page 47 of the report, we read the following finding on Traveller mental health in 1960s Ireland:

25. In regard to mental health, replies by those in charge of local authority mental hospitals to requests for statistics of the numbers of itinerants who have received treatment and for general observations on the mental health of itinerants have indicated that the number of persons who could be classed as itinerants who are or have been patients in mental hospitals is relatively small. It would appear that the incidence of mental ill-health amongst the itinerant population is not as high as in the settled population.

How things have changed! A few generations on, the State's commitment to the so-called "absorption" project referenced above means that to be a Traveller in Ireland is now

synonymous with suffering mental health difficulties. The catastrophic effect of this mental health epidemic can be seen in the horrifying suicide rate in the community; 82% of Travellers are estimated to have suffered the loss of a loved one to suicide. Despite the best efforts of ourselves, and our many esteemed colleagues within the National Traveller Mental Health Network, to stem the devastating, and apparently lethal, impact of long-term racism, social exclusion and discrimination, the mental health crisis in the Traveller community is getting even worse.

THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY IN 21ST CENTURY IRELAND

In 2010 the government published the All Ireland Traveller Health Study², carried out by the School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Population Science at University College Dublin. This comprehensive study, which approached every identifiable Traveller family on the island as a potential respondent, took three years to complete and the summary of its findings was in stark contrast to the situation in 1963.

The key health issues for Travellers identified in the report during the consultation process were as follows:

- *Environment and poor living conditions.*
- *Issues related to equality of access to, participation in, and outcome of service provision.*
- *Right of Travellers to appropriate access to services based on culture and way of life.*
- *Lifestyle issues.*
- *Lack of culturally appropriate provision.*
- *Lack of data on Traveller health and health needs.*
- *Lack of recognition of Traveller culture and identity.*
- *Individual and institutional level racism.*
- *Social exclusion.*³

In 1987 a Traveller man's life expectancy at birth was just 61.7 years, significantly less than the 71.6 years of his counterpart in the general

1 'Report of the Commission on Itinerancy' (Oireachtas Library Digital Collections, August 1963), <https://opac.oireachtas.ie/AWDData/Library3/Library2/DL013441.pdf>.

2 'All Ireland Traveller Health Study: Our Geels' (School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Population Science, University College Dublin, 2010), <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/18859/d5237d611916463189ecc1f9ea83279d.pdf#page=null>.

3 Ibid, p. 8

population. By the time of this study in 2008 the average life expectancy of a Traveller man had remained static at 61.7 years, while his settled neighbour's life expectancy had improved by over five years, rising to 76.8; widening the existing gap to over 15 years.⁴ Traveller women fare slightly better but still lag behind their counterparts in the settled population, shockingly, by over a decade.

Crucially, the suicide rate in male Travellers was found to be 6.6 times higher than in the general population. This is a shocking statistic, but to the Traveller community, it is anything but a number in a nationwide report. It is multiple empty spaces at family gatherings, the broken-hearted despair of mothers, fathers, children, friends and adult siblings., It is the desperate fear that clutches at the hearts of the community when they watch their loved ones sink into spirals of depression from which many, with nowhere to live, nowhere to employ them and seemingly nothing to look forward to, cannot seem to emerge.

A government whose leadership encourages withdrawing funds from the “bank of Mam and Dad”, embraces a NIMBY attitude when it comes to the establishment of serviced halting sites, and a “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” philosophy does little to bring about the transformation in attitudes that is required in order for Travellers to feel that they are a valid and welcome part of Irish society. Traveller organisations have been raising the alarm continuously on these figures since 2008 and of course, in the cases of many activists, for many years prior, and although commitments are undertaken over and over to address the issues, the outcomes – the excessive numbers of deaths due to despair – remain the same.

TRAVELLER ACCOMMODATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

While it is impossible to exactly measure the impact of the lack of accommodation for Travellers, we know for sure that it is a significant factor which contributes to this dire reality. A lack of adequate and appropriate

housing is now, after all, a nationwide concern that affects far more people than just those in the Traveller community. Article after article in national media now highlights the nurses, teachers and middle-class professionals who are experiencing homelessness. Successive government's failure to build social housing decade after decade has finally come home to roost. Homelessness is a devastating experience for anyone which affects a person's mental and physical health and inhibits their ability to be fully part of society. For someone who is already part of a marginalised group, these effects are amplified. Travellers are over-represented in the homelessness statistics, and many people from the community who are not technically homeless – e.g. in a family hub or shelter – are part of the hidden homeless, living in overcrowded or temporary accommodation provided by family or friends. In addition, Traveller families who are living in emergency homelessness accommodation tend to remain there for longer than others, due to a stated lack of suitable accommodation and because of a lack of will by local authorities to find homes for them. We know of at least one family that has been in emergency accommodation for more than four years. The impact on the mental health of adults in this and similar situations must be compounded by the effects of homelessness on their children.

The Traveller community is often asked what is meant by “appropriate accommodation”. This question is easy to answer in the mainstream: we all know that “homeless hubs”, hostels and hotels are not appropriate accommodation for any human beings who wish to cook and eat communally, who wish to feel safe from predators and undue threat, who wish to steer clear of temptations to addiction, who want a little outdoor space, and the simple luxury of privacy for individuals and families. Yet what is “appropriate” for Travellers still is deemed mysterious – caravans? Barrel topped wagons? Perhaps – for some! But for most it simply means having their needs and the needs of their extended families in their particular circumstances heard and taken into account. Many Travellers now opt for houses and apartments as their preferred dwelling places, with fewer choosing the Nomadic lifestyle of their roots. This is due to several factors,

4 Ibid, p. 94



Senator Eileen Flynn and protesters demand Government action on the Traveller community's mental health crisis, May 2022. Rights: Niall Carson, Alamy

not least the anti-trespass legislation which criminalises nomadism. Given the appalling and overcrowded conditions of so many sites – coupled with the hostility of landowners, local authorities and the Gardaí to Travellers – is this really surprising? This should not be mistaken for a desire to be settled – far from it. It is simply the natural human desire for warmth, safety, affordability, accessibility and better conditions.

So many sites are tucked away at the edges of towns, in many cases with no paths, and no access to public transport. Emergency services, postal workers and other service providers struggle to access and deliver basic services to these destinations. Waste disposal is a constant battle for residents with refuse companies declining to attend. Even running water – the very basis of all life – can be lacking, and heating bills generated by plug-in electrical heaters rack up to completely unmanageable levels, literally leaving families in the dark and the cold. Given that finding a social housing placement on a site can and does happen far more quickly than waiting for a house or apartment (our Advocacy service reports that this can be realised within a year or two, versus the potential wait of, in some cases, up to 15 years, for a standard house) really does beg the question as to why sites cannot be appropriately serviced, and quickly, especially given that since the

year 2000, €69 million allotted for Traveller accommodation has gone unspent. In 2019, just €8.6 million of the €13 million allocated was spent, while in 2018 and 2017 almost 50% of the financial allocations nationally were left unspent. According to the Irish Times, in 2018, 10 local authorities did not spend anything at all⁵. This speaks for itself.

There is no will to provide appropriate accommodation to Travellers – anywhere. There is money. There is need. But there is no political desire – reflecting perhaps the views of many in the mainstream population – and it is difficult to look these numbers in face and not call it racism. It is even more difficult to look into the faces of Traveller children and not worry desperately about the difficulties that they will face once they move outside the safety of their immediate and extended family.

In 2020 the Department of the Environment and Local Government published their temporary halting site set-up manifesto in *Guidelines for Accommodating Transient Traveller Families*.⁶ In Section 2.12 we read:

5 Kitty Holland, 'Only a Third of Traveller Housing Budget Spent', *The Irish Times*, 22 August 2022, <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/housing-planning/2022/08/22/only-a-third-of-traveller-housing-budget-spent/#:~:text=Since%202000%2C%20E2%82%AC69%20million,authorities%20did%20not%20spend%20anything.>

6 'Guidelines for Accommodating Transient Traveller Families' (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 2020), <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/100744/7ec93c4d-a90d-4d2d-8bb1-63b8c3c861b9.pdf#page=null>.

Basic services and facilities could include:

- a water supply (piped or a tank);
- portable toilet and washing facilities (shower and/or wash-hand basin);
- waste collection service;
- hard surface for caravans.

In some cases it may be practicable to connect the portable toilets to an existing sewerage scheme and to provide public lighting and electric supply to families.⁷

Basic services and facilities “could” include. *Could* include. Not ought to include, or will include, but could. The idea that in a developed country replete with resources basic sanitation can be viewed as an optional extra for a certain cohort of society is quite incomprehensible.

Many Travellers continue to live on sites such as the ones described above, motivated by a deep cultural yearning for proximity to kin, and for some it is preferable than to be placed in a house, in a hostile housing estate, many miles from anyone who knows them, cares for them or will support them. The family, including respect for the older generations and the celebration of marriage and children, is at the heart of Traveller culture. The importance of these values cannot be overstated, and in a context where Travellers find themselves excluded from mainstream services that the settled community take for granted, the safety of the family unit becomes ever more important.

To remove an ethnic minority member from their home community if it is not what they desire is sure to fail. These choices, then, are not really choices at all. And yet we know from all other areas of life, that a stable home is the foundation upon which almost all kinds of flourishing is permitted to take root, and so Travellers, who fare worse than their settled counterpart in almost every metric that can be conceived, are always on the back foot. The pull to assimilate therefore is strong, with young people feeling undue pressure to alter accents and dress to “pass off” as settled and avoid the derision and exclusion that can follow their true identity, and the internalised shame



These concrete blocks are example of the hostile architecture used to deter Travellers from parking their trailers on the roadside. Rights: Martina Madden

that engulfs them as a result of the name-calling and social separation that becomes familiar and commonplace from the earliest days of primary school, far from liberating them, pulls them into crisis, and round, and round, and round we go.

It is easy to get lost in the maze of bureaucratic obstacles that may face a Traveller family seeking appropriate accommodation. Imagine with us a synthesis of a problem that we have encountered in the Advocacy service of the TCS. A family is living in extremely overcrowded conditions, with poor sanitation and intermittent power, on a temporary halting site. The children are removed from the family home by the State due to the poor living conditions and the risk to the children’s health. The parents immediately apply for appropriate accommodation of any kind that can safely accommodate their children. However, the housing authority will only assess the housing needs of the parents – the two adults. As the children do not live with them, the parents cannot make a housing application that takes into account the accommodation needs of their children. To whom can this family turn for help?

7 Ibid p. 9

In October 2018, the Irish Traveller Movement (ITM), who work tirelessly to achieve their vision of “*An Ireland where Travellers are proud of their identity and with their ethnicity recognised, can achieve their fullest potential to play an active role in Irish society*” published their Submission to the Development of the Traveller Accommodation Programme 2019-2024.⁸ In it, they state that “Travellers are 11 times more likely to become homeless and 50 times more likely to be discriminated against by landlords. There are 5 times the number of families sharing facilities since legislation to effect – accounting for 4,460 people in overcrowded halting sites and in standard housing.”⁹ To be born a Traveller in this country, it seems, is to be born to risks of the gravest kind. How can change be realised? The ITM makes a series of important recommendations to address the accommodation needs of Travellers, which include the following:

- The Repeal of Section 24 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2002 which prohibits nomadism and such represents a legal barrier to enactment of Travellers freely expressing their culture and way of life;
- The establishment of an independent Traveller accommodation agency;
- the development of a network of transient halting sites in each local authority area for short stays;
- a refurbishment programme that will prioritise some of the worst sites and group housing schemes in the country;
- and the end of quota clauses in Traveller Accommodation Programmes¹⁰.

These proposals represent concrete recommendations that address the very real, felt material needs of Traveller people who are suffering today. We know that the resources exist to achieve this. What we do not yet know is what can be done to change the hearts and minds of those who harbour hate and resentment towards a community that is dying in droves from the social illnesses of exclusion and discrimination.

The Traveller community is the last cohort that it seems it may be acceptable to hate. But the Traveller community is not one thing. It comprises a diverse people with its own valuable traditions, norms, and ways of being. We in the Traveller Counselling Service, and our friends and allies across the country, will continue to work to bring healing, empowerment and positive mental health to our Traveller brothers and sisters. True, there are costs to this work – both fiscal and social – but we simply cannot afford the alternative.

⁸ ‘Submission to the Development of the Traveller Accommodation Programme’ (Irish Traveller Movement, October 2018), <https://itmtrav.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Irish-Traveller-Movement-Submission-to-the-Development-of-the-Traveller-Accommodation-Programme-2019-2024.pdf>.

⁹ Ibid p. 3

¹⁰ Ibid pp. 6-8

Irish Travellers and Prison: Discrimination, Education, and Lateral Violence

Martina Madden

Martina Madden is Communications and
Social Policy Advocate of the Jesuit Centre
for Faith and Justice.

INTRODUCTION

Irish Travellers are underrepresented in all of the categories we associate with status and success in our society. They are barely visible in positions of power, (despite the appointment of Eileen Flynn, an Irish Traveller, to the Seanad in 2020¹) and their education rates are dismally low, with the majority of Traveller men having just received primary-level schooling.²

One area where they are overrepresented is in our prisons. Travellers comprise less than 0.7 per cent of the population of the Republic of Ireland but make up 10 per cent of the general prison population and 15 per cent of the female prisoner population.³ We, as a society, should be deeply concerned about these figures, and about the contributory factors involved.

The framing of Travellers as disruptive criminals, in our media and in our collective consciousness provides us with an excuse to justify their exclusion from society and the discrimination they endure. It scapegoats a vulnerable group who are trying to survive in a system where the odds are stacked against them and blames the entirety of that cohort for the actions of a few. When we examine the historical and existing barriers to full participation in society that exist for Travellers and the injustice of their exclusion, it is our mainstream, settled, majority population that emerges as culpable of wrongdoing, which is resulting in grievous harms being inflicted on the lives of members of the Traveller community.

A COMMUNITY COMING UNDONE

Travellers are loose threads in the fabric of Irish society. They exist at the edges rather than being interwoven into the whole. This is often excused by settled people as being their choice, and even their fault. We have all heard about, and read about in the media, Travellers' propensity to crime and disruption. But what

1 'Eileen Flynn' (Oireachtas, 29 June 2020), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/members/member/Eileen-Flynn.S.2020-06-29/>.

2 'Census of Population 2016 – Profile 8 Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion' (Central Statistics Office of Ireland, 2016), <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8itseah/>.

3 Conor Gallager, 'Travellers Significantly Over-Represented in Irish Prisons, UN Committee Told', *The Irish Times*, accessed 13 May 2023, <https://www.irishtimes.com/crime-law/2022/07/05/travellers-significantly-over-represented-in-irish-prisons-un-committee-told/>.

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Travellers are loose threads in the fabric of Irish society. They exist at the edges rather than being interwoven into the whole. This is often excused by settled people as being their choice, and even their fault.

we don't hear about is Travellers' struggles to exist and find their place in a society that was designed for a settled lifestyle. We also don't hear much about the loss of their unique culture and heritage, including traditional modes of making a living.

The unpalatable fact, which many of us in mainstream society struggle to accept, is that Travellers are the victims of grave systemic injustices, and the effects of these prevail. Decades of institutional discrimination, and social exclusion, have resulted in disproportionately high rates of poverty, unemployment, homelessness and ill health (both physical and mental), as well as low levels of educational achievement. The experience of Irish Travellers starkly contrasts with the broader narrative of Irish prosperity and social progression since Independence in 1922, and they remain one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged groups in Ireland. The impact of this on their lives is stark: suicide rates among this community are six times higher than in the general population and their life expectancy remains much lower.⁴

NARRATIVES OF TWO TRAVELLER MEN

For this essay I spoke to two Traveller men in their 40s, Patrick and William, both of whom were sent to prison in their twenties. They both have overcome significant challenges and today have rewarding careers in the social care sector, where they provide guidance and support to young Traveller men. Their personal narratives help to illuminate the level of injustice this group faces, how high the barriers to inclusion in our society are, and the impossibility – as a member of a

4 'Travellers and Suicide: Facts and Figures' (Pavee Point, 2010), <https://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Suicide-Facts-Figures-A0.pdf>.



Examples of tinsmithing at the 2023 Traveller & Roma Cultural Celebration, DCU. Rights: Smirkybec, Wikimedia Commons

marginalised group – of breaching them, without adequate and sustained assistance. The overrepresentation of Travellers in our prison and crime statistics indicate an issue that is broader and more complex than it is represented by our media and by the establishment. It reveals the personal and societal impact of poverty and exclusion and the inherent injustice in our policing⁵ and penal system,⁶ as well as a community that is visibly in need of understanding and support.

ETHNIC IDENTITY, DISCRIMINATION AND LOSS OF LIFESTYLE

Irish Travellers were formally recognised as a distinct ethnic group by the State in March 2017.⁷ This was the result of years of campaigning for their unique cultural identity to

be acknowledged and was welcomed by Traveller advocacy groups. It was an event that had huge symbolic importance, but it did little to reverse the harms that had been done before.

The Irish State’s discrimination against Travellers is longstanding. The Commission on Itinerancy Report 1963, identified “the problem arising from the presence in the country of itinerants” [as Travellers were then called]. It not only failed to acknowledge Traveller ethnicity and nomadism but threatened to assimilate and absorb them into wider society as the “final solution” to everyone’s problems. This inherently racist and misguided strategy failed on many counts but it provided a precedent that “established policy relating to Travellers for the next twenty years”. This included criminalising their nomadic way of life (by outlawing the ability to park their trailers on agricultural land), and began a process of legitimising hostility and discrimination against Travellers from the settled community.⁸

Travellers have for centuries supported themselves through their traditional occupations of tin smithing, seasonal

5 Conor Gallager, ‘Gardaí Have Negative View of Travellers, Survey Finds’, *The Irish Times*, 20 August 2023, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/gardaí-have-negative-view-of-travellers-survey-finds-1.4334274>.

6 Michelle Hennessy, ‘Blind Justice: How Prison Is Leaving Travellers Isolated and Traumatized’, *The Journal*, 31 October 2022, <https://www.thejournal.ie/blind-justice-prison-5890179-Oct2022/#:~:text=Once%20in%20prison%2C%20Travellers%20have,because%20of%20who%20she%20was>.

7 Marie O’Halloran and Michael O’Regan, ‘Travellers Formally Recognised as an Ethnic Minority’, *The Irish Times*, 1 March 2017, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/oireachtas/travellers-formally-recognised-as-an-ethnic-minority-1.2994309>.

8 <https://itmtrav.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ITM-Review-of-the-1963-Commission-on-Itinerancy.pdf>

agricultural work, and horse trading. But the rapid modernisation and urbanisation of Ireland, with its shift towards a service-based, high-tech economy has made many of these occupations obsolete. The need for a formal education to access opportunities in this modern system has been a challenge for Travellers, whose rates of literacy and educational attainment are low, in part due to a peripatetic lifestyle and their experience of prejudice and bullying in the school system. Entrenched social prejudice towards them effectively excludes Travellers from obtaining any job in the mainstream workforce, leaving them disproportionately affected by unemployment, poverty, mental health issues and homelessness.

CASE STUDY 1: PATRICK

Patrick is a 40-year-old Traveller man who was born in Ireland but lived with his family in England until his mid-teens, when he left school. He showed promise as a boxer, making it to the all-Ireland finals twice, at age 17 and 18. Unfortunately he did not win the title at either match. A loss at this level was hard on his self-esteem, which was already shaky. Leaving school early had left him with no qualifications. This, and the blatant discrimination he experienced from employers who did not want a Traveller working for them, made finding a job impossible. After a row with his mother, Patrick moved to a halting site where he began to hang out with other young men who were also unemployed, bored and disillusioned by the discrimination they endured and the social inequality they witnessed. He began to take drugs and to get involved in crime. The breakup of his marriage which resulted in his wife and children moving to England exacerbated his drug use and depression. In and out of prison, he was at a loss to find a way to move forward and change his life. Thanks to his own determination, and to organisations that provided him with the mental health and addiction supports as well as secure housing, he is now about to complete a BA in Community Youth Work and is hoping that his story will be an inspiration for other young Travellers who are struggling.⁹

9 Martina Madden, Interview with Patrick*, In-person, 14 October 2022.

CASE STUDY 2: WILLIAM

William is a Traveller in his late 30s. His family moved between Ireland and the UK for most of his childhood and he continued to move between both places in early adulthood. He left school at 11 without being able to read or write, only much later being diagnosed as dyslexic. He began to earn money by washing car windows at traffic lights and moved onto trading from stalls on the street, but was in trouble with the police for minor offences. In his late teens he got pulled into a long-standing family feud which escalated over a period of years into serious violence, which resulted in him being imprisoned for 14 years. While imprisoned, he learned to read and write. In addition to his determination to learn, William also volunteered for the Samaritans, providing a listening ear to other prisoners. He also became involved in the Red Cross and got a job in the mess kitchen as a chef. William is grateful to the teachers in Mountjoy for their encouragement and support. Since leaving prison he has found employment providing support for younger Travellers, something that he could not have done without an education.¹⁰

EDUCATION AND TRAVELLERS

Higher education is a prerequisite for almost every job these days. Applicants are expected to have a Leaving Certificate at least, and increasingly to have a degree, even if its subject matter does not relate to the job itself. This is challenging for the Traveller population, who often leave school early. This can be because the family is moving but often it is because of bullying and exclusion within the school system. The bullying can come from teachers, or from other students. Both men I spoke to for this essay had their own experiences with this.

William recounted his experience of not being supported at school:

“Well, I never really got in to school. I was, was always getting suspended. Like I was dyslexic. So I spent most of my time in Mr Golden’s office looking at a wall [laughs] for obviously disrupting class and things

10 Martina Madden, Interview with William*, In-person, 21 October 2022.

like that. Which I did because I didn't know what I was doing. I hadn't got a clue and I couldn't read and write. And then you had kids... kind of... you had a bit of racism and [in England] it wasn't as bad as here, but there was still some."¹¹

Patrick agreed that racism against Travellers was not as bad in English schools as in Ireland; his schooling ended when the family moved back to Ireland in his early teens. He explained that one often overlooked reason why Traveller children leave school early is that their parents are afraid that they are being treated as badly as they were during their own schooldays.

*"Their mothers probably know what's going on in the schools and they know that they're not getting cared for. They probably remember back when they were going to school, the mothers, and thinking what it was like for them ... And they're thinking ... my daughter's better off out of there now. Maybe ... she's getting bullied in the class, so maybe we're better off taking her out."*¹²

Unfortunately, those mothers are probably right. In Irish schools, shunning Travellers is not something that is consigned to the past. William said of his 15-year-old daughter:

*"My daughter's friends in the school are all foreign. The foreign girls have no problem talking to her ... but the Irish girls mostly don't talk to her. So, she doesn't make much of an effort herself. She'll admit that's because she just has that fear. She expects it. You know what I mean?"*¹³

The phenomenon of early school-leaving affects the treatment of Travellers while they are in school. Patrick said: *"The teachers don't really give a hundred percent to Travellers because they assume that Travellers are going to leave school early, because that's the history of Travellers ... So the teachers don't really put a lot of attention into them."*¹⁴

This is an injustice for every Traveller child, but it is particularly hard on the ones who need

additional supports, as William did. Children who struggle in to learn foundational skills of reading and writing in primary education, are at a huge disadvantage in secondary school. William reports that in his work as he hears of many Traveller children who are "completely lost". This is an experience that resonates with him as it is what he went through himself as a dyslexic child.¹⁵

EMPLOYMENT AND TRAVELLERS

The lack of qualifications or higher education among Travellers is an obvious disadvantage in the job market. But they also face discrimination when seeking employment, which is unrelated to their education levels. Patrick recalls going for several jobs in his youth, only to be rebuffed when he arrived at the interview. He said *"You could tell by them when you'd walk in. You'd know. You're a Traveller... you're not getting a job. [And you would be] right about it. So when you're going through that for a while, you just, you know... [give up], and then you're just at home."*¹⁶

Patrick reflected on how the lack of a job or anything meaningful to do affected his confidence and left him at a loose end and made it extremely difficult to keep his drinking and drug-taking under control. He said: *"[E]ven when you'd want to stop taking, when you'd want to stop drinking and when you'd take a break, there'd be absolutely nothing else to do. There was no work. There's no other options. I mean, I could be bored. You'd be bored ... Because there's not... there was nothing to do, you know?"*¹⁷

This lack of direction, as well as a sense of hopelessness about his own options led him down a path of joining in with others from the site he lived on in petty theft and burglary. *"There doesn't seem to be any kind of... nothing going forward for you. No development in your life. You're looking at fellows coming in the odd time driving a really nice car, a really nice van. And you want to get that van, you know, and you say, how am I going to, get money? How am I going to survive? Like how am I going to improve*

11 Madden.

12 Madden, Interview with Patrick*.

13 Madden, Interview with William*.

14 Madden, Interview with Patrick*.

15 Madden, Interview with William*.

16 Madden, Interview with Patrick*.

17 Madden.

my life? You know? So a few of my cousins broke off, going off robbing and that, and they were coming back sometimes with some money and they driving nice cars and... So I just decided, I wouldn't mind a bit of that as well, you know?"¹⁸

It shouldn't come as a shock that when we as a society treat people as if they don't matter and consign them to lives of poverty and exclusion, they sometimes react by taking something from us. If the game is rigged anyway, there's little to gain by playing by the rules. But despite the initial rewards, Patrick's new direction didn't end well for him and he ended up in and out of prison.

His addictions spiralled out of control too when, a few years later, his marriage broke up and his wife left Ireland for the UK, taking their children with her. He said: "I'd follow her back and forth a few times, but it wasn't working out. And I, I kept coming back on my own and then when I come back I'm really depressed, you know. And then I started taking prescription tablets and I ended up getting strung out on them."¹⁹

As someone who couldn't read or write, it was difficult for William to find a regular job, but he tried to earn a living using his wits. He washed car windows at traffic lights and was a street trader. He recalls police discrimination against Travellers and how he – like other Travellers – was singled out by the police/Gardaí for checks on his vehicle, to be fingerprinted (illegally) and to be questioned about his actions while just going about his day.

His work with Traveller youth has shown him that it is still very difficult for a Traveller to find a job in Ireland today:

"What I'm hearing back from these groups I'm working with discrimination is the biggest thing. A little bit less for the young group in Dublin seemingly, compared to everyone else. But in the smaller towns [they] can't get jobs... all jobs they're getting is cleaning jobs or if they're hiding their identity. And then when they're hiding it, they hear all this negative stuff about Travellers. Especially if they're working in public, like say public

18 Madden.

19 Madden.

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It shouldn't come as a shock that when we as a society treat people as if they don't matter and consign them to lives of poverty and exclusion, they sometimes react by taking something from us. If the game is rigged anyway, there's little to gain by playing by the rules.

service shops or things like that. So they might not realise they're Traveller, but if they've a kind of distinctive Traveller name... they're in a bit more trouble."²⁰

LATERAL VIOLENCE AND TRAVELLERS

The sociological concept of lateral violence refers to acts of aggression, harassment, or harm inflicted by members of a marginalised or oppressed group on each other, rather than on their oppressors. It has been observed and studied in various contexts, including among indigenous communities including the Aboriginal people of Australia, as well as other racial and ethnic minorities and in certain socioeconomic groups.²¹

Lateral violence, in the context of Irish Travellers, can be viewed as a manifestation of the trauma experienced as a result of losing their traditional identity and way of life, as well as their alienation from mainstream society. The frustration, anger, and despair that arise from being oppressed are redirected towards peers or individuals within their own community, rather than towards the larger systems or structures of power that are the sources of oppression, e.g. the government, the education system, the Gardaí and the criminal justice system.

William said of the lateral violence theory: "I think it's very relevant to Travellers. So like the group who's kind of marginalised and isolated from the rest of society and then I think obviously they internalised that anger and that kind of feud with each other."²²

20 Madden, Interview with William*.

21 Theoni Whyman et al., 'Lateral Violence in Indigenous Peoples', *Australian Psychologist* 56, no. 1 (2021): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2021.1893595>.

22 Madden, Interview with William*.



Mountjoy Prison, Dublin. Rights: HNS, Wikimedia Commons

He also demonstrated how the laws which made nomadism illegal as well as the futility of depending on the Gardaí for justice contribute to the problem: *“I think as well since Travellers are not allowed to move around the way they used to. So if you were on the receiving end of something, you could move away and you could, that’s a good place. Try and escape and now you can’t... Because Guards don’t do nothing. Guards will tear you out of your car for having no insurance, no license or that. But if your house is smashed up or your car smashed up or some of your family’s being caught up, what did you do? They’re more interested. What did you do to escalate? What did you do? Didn’t happen for nothing. So if you’re a victim of crime, they want to know what you’ve done to provoke that aside. That’s more their concern.”*²³

The intransigence of the Gardaí as well as a lack of faith in fair treatment by the wider justice system make it feel inevitable that Travellers will be forced to take matters into their own hands, despite a reluctance to do so. William said: *“... sometimes people in in families, it just might be totally against their nature to be get involved in violence or be involved in that type of thing. But they can’t get away from it because they feel like they’ve nowhere to turn. Do you know what I mean?”* He added that it can be a

*“no win” situation where a refusal to be involved in defending your own family can leave you isolated and vulnerable.*²⁴

It should be noted that violence in the Traveller community is an issue that receives a disproportionate amount of media attention, and is not typical of the vast majority of Travellers. William was clear that although the circumstances surrounding him in his youth were not great, he takes responsibility for his actions. What we are exploring here are the reasons why it occurs. Addressing the systemic oppression that Travellers experience, as well as improving access to education, health supports, and the restoration of their cultural identity and pride would help to provide the community with the tools needed to foster unity.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN AND AFTER PRISON – HOUSING AND EDUCATION

Both Patrick and William have been through a lot, not least by enduring imprisonment, but their stories are ones with happy endings. They are both employed in meaningful jobs, helping to create a better future for younger Travellers and are living stable fulfilling lives.

23 Madden.

24 Madden.

But their success is not just due to their own determination and hard work. It is also because of the supports they received along the way – supports that they should have had access to in the first place.

During William's time in prison, he finally got the educational support he needed. It's hard to disagree with his statement: "It's sad I had to go to prison to get an education." Had he been given the help he needed in school, his life might have turned out differently. Patrick also found stability and treatment for addiction after his time in prison, when housing with supports was provided by an NGO, giving him the foundation he needed to rebuild his life. What would his story have been had he been helped to find rewarding employment, somewhere safe to live and mental health supports when he was a teenager?

Of course, no amount of support and guidance can help Travellers to overcome the brutality of living with the stigma and discrimination that is still endemic in Ireland. It is the systems, institutions and society that needs to change, not the groups which are enduring harms because of them. Travellers can and do campaign for these changes but it is the mainstream, settled majority which must take action to implement them.

CONCLUSION

In scapegoating Irish Travellers for problems which are the effect of decades of exclusion and oppression, we harm ourselves as a society as well as continuing to harm them. The exclusion of this indigenous minority also deprives us of the richness that their unique culture and history can contribute to our collective Irish heritage. The Traveller community provides us with a mirror reflecting back to us what is happening in wider society. The problems of exclusion, inequality and injustice apply to us all, but they are most acute at the margins, where our policymakers and our society has kept Travellers. We must stop blaming the mirror – the Irish Traveller community – for what it shows and start facing the realities we've been too willing to ignore.

By embracing diversity, demanding fairness in allocation of resources and tackling the inherent racism against Travellers that we are still far too willing to participate in or turn a blind eye to, we can create an actual inclusive society where everyone can thrive.

**For reasons of privacy William and Patrick have asked that their surnames be omitted.*

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54-72 Gardiner Street Upper, Dublin 1

Phone: 083 806 8026
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