Suicide Among Travellers

Nora Corcoran, who is an Irish Traveller and a #Travellerhomesnow campaign coordinator with the Galway Traveller Movement, writes about the mental health crisis facing Travellers.

Travellers, an Irish indigenous community, have been documented to be around as early as 360 years ago. They have their own language, called 'cant', which is mixed with English dialect.

It is well documented that Travellers and poor health are linked with different factors: lack of appropriate accommodation and forced assimilation by laws put in place since the beginning of the Irish state, which have all but eradicated Irish Traveller nomadic culture.

According to Pavee Point (2013), when the All Ireland Traveller Study (AITHS) was launched in 2010 it showed that health issues in the Traveller community were far more troubling than for settled people. There is a high rate of mental health illness and suicide within the community, with suicide 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.
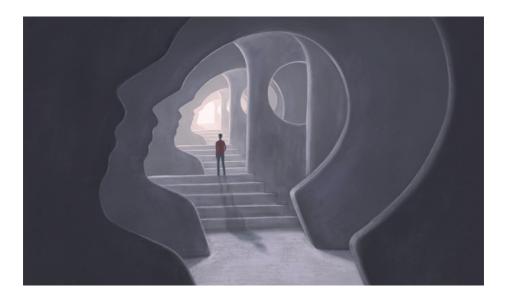
56% of Travellers said that poor physical and mental health restricted their normal daily activities compared to 24% of the GMS population. Travellers face a lot of discrimination when they attend mental health service providers and also face additional barriers, such as embarrassment around literacy difficulties and a lack of culturally appropriate engagement.

The uptake of mainstream services by the Traveller community is historically low due to the lack of cultural awareness in service providers. This lack of cultural awareness often leaves Travellers feeling disillusioned and misunderstood. Shame and fear of both judgement and exposure are further inhibitors to service engagement within the community.

The social determinants of health (SDH) (World Health Organization 2022) are the non-medical factors that influence health outcomes. They are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life. These forces and systems include economic policies and systems, development agendas, social norms, social policies and political systems.

The SDH have an important influence on health inequities – the unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries. In countries at all levels of income, health and illness follow a social gradient: the lower the socioeconomic position, the worse the health. Poor living conditions for many Travellers affects not only their physical and mental

health but also educational outcomes and employment prospects.

A survey complied by the National Traveller Data Steering Group (2017) with non-Travellers in Ireland determined how over 90% of Travellers agree that mental health problems are common among the community. The discomfort with discussing mental health issues is common across age groups. Irish Travellers face discrimination and racism on a daily basis. The survey showed shocking statistics of how:

• 55% wouldn't have Travellers as community members,
• 35% avoid Travellers,
• 75% wouldn't have a Traveller as a co-worker,
• 78% wouldn't have a Traveller as a neighbour,
• 83% wouldn't employ a Traveller,
• 91% wouldn't have a Traveller as a family member,
• 85% wouldn't have a Traveller as a friend.

Findings (McKey et al. 2020) from the AITHS study (Department of Health, 2010) show high levels of mental ill-health, and frequent mental distress has shown to be associated with key life events including experience of discrimination and bereavement (McGorrian et al, 2013).

A report commissioned by the Economic, Social and Research Institute, (ESRI) documented how Travellers were 22 times more likely to experience discrimination (Mcginnity & Watson, 2017). From a lived experience, low self-esteem and social anxiety are also contributors to bad mental health issues.

In conclusion, maintaining mental health can be a challenge for all members of Irish society, particularly in times of such economic hardship, but when this is combined with the experience of racism, exclusion and discrimination that the Traveller community has experienced, the challenge is greater.