

Selected Recommendations

- a.) Irish Travellers are a distinct ethnic group who are explicitly afforded the protection of the 1976 Race Relations Act and the 2000 Race Relations (Amendment) Act. All public authorities should positively recognise this and ensure that Race Equality Schemes include Irish Travellers in appropriate ways which enable them to meet the requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000.
- b.) Service providers and public authorities should include Irish Travellers in their ethnic monitoring systems, analyse the resulting data and take corrective action where the data indicates lack of take up or unmet need. Irish Travellers should be included in routine or annual reporting on services and supports to ethnic groups.
- c.) Nomadism is not the sole criterion of ethnic status for Irish Travellers. Irish Travellers living on permanent sites and housing are entitled to term themselves Irish Travellers, to access support mechanisms targeted at Irish Travellers as appropriate, and to accrue the social and cultural benefits of the ethnic and cultural background.
- d.) Accommodation is a key issue for all Irish Travellers, settled and nomadic. Accommodation needs to be appropriate, taking into account extended family structures and reasonable preferences for facilitating extended family structures, nomadism and business practices.
- e.) Planning authorities, which are bound by the positive duties of the 2000 Race Relations (Amendment) Act, should examine the refusal of permissions for Irish Travellers to develop their own sites and should also positively engage with both Irish Travellers and settled communities in developing appropriate strategies for applications for sites.
- f.) Agencies and authorities working with Irish Travellers should recognise the literacy problems of this group, instituting positive mechanisms to facilitate communication and understanding.
- g.) A method for ensuring that Irish Travellers' health records can be tracked and transferred when families move should be researched, developed and implemented. Such a system would benefit other nomadic groups.
- h.) Traveller Education Services should be maintained and properly resourced, particularly in areas with large settled or nomadic Irish Traveller populations.
- i.) Police Forces' diversity policies on Gypsies and Travellers need to be positively fed in to policies on public order. Police diversity units and Traveller Liaison Officers need to have power and authority to effect positive change and engagement with Irish Travellers.

Room To Roam

England's Irish Travellers

Summary of Research and Selected Recommendations

The research was funded by a Community Fund award to Action Group for Irish Youth (AGIY). AGIY acted in a consortium with BIAS Irish Travellers' Project and West London Travellers' Project. Manchester Irish Community Care replaced the West London Traveller Project in the consortium after the research had formally begun. The research project was based at St Mary's College, the final consortium member, and was led by Dr Colm Power.

This Summary of Research was produced by Action Group for Irish Youth (AGIY). Copies of the full report *Room to Roam: England's Irish Travellers*, by Dr Colm Power, can be obtained from AGIY, at the address below or downloaded from the AGIY website at www.irish.org.uk

Action Group for Irish Youth, LVSC, 356 Holloway Rd., London N7 6PA.
Telephone: 020 7700 8137
Website: www.irish.org.uk

Irish Travellers are an indigenous minority in Ireland, north and south, who have a long history both of emigration to Britain, and of moving between Britain and Ireland. The research project, Room to Roam: England's Irish Traveller undertaken over a period of three years, was designed to develop new information and research about the experiences of Irish Travellers in England in their relationships with health, welfare, criminal justice and educational agencies. It builds on the small body of research available which has already indicated the social exclusion of Irish Travellers from British society.

Many of the issues and problems facing Irish Travellers in Britain resonate with the experiences of Gypsies. However, it is important to recognise that Irish Travellers are a distinct ethnic group with their own history, culture and social mores.

The research was qualitative in design and based in three geographic locations: two London boroughs and Manchester. These were chosen because of identifiable numbers of Irish Travellers and access to Irish Travellers via Irish agencies. The focus on England in the research reflects migration and settlement patterns of Irish Travellers. Full details of the methods and approaches used in the research are set out in the appendices to the full report. This summary is confined to providing, firstly, an overview of the findings of the research and, secondly, selected recommendations arising out of those findings.

Principle Findings from the research

1. Over-arching issues

- a.) In general, the research found that there was a lack of recognition of the specificity of the position, culture and experiences of Irish Travellers. This lack of recognition inhibits the ability of statutory and non-statutory agencies to develop appropriate support and outreach for Irish Travellers.
- b.) The research found that the high levels of prejudice and discrimination experienced by Irish Travellers has led, in some instances, to strategies of avoidance of disclosure and/or discussion of ethnic and cultural backgrounds by Irish Travellers. These strategies, compounded by prejudice and lack of recognition of Irish Travellers' cultural backgrounds, can lead to Irish Travellers not seeking services and support when needed.

2. Accommodation

- a.) Accommodation is the single most pressing issue facing Irish Travellers. The lack of appropriate accommodation strategies for Irish Travellers, and especially nomadic Irish Travellers, has marginalized and criminalized them. Until meaningful housing and/or planning strategies and policies to address the accommodation issue for nomadic groups are executed, Irish Travellers will remain marginalized. The research documents how the failure of local authorities and other housing agencies to provide secure and appropriate accommodation for Irish Travellers has impacted negatively on the economic, social and cultural aspects of Irish Travellers' lives.
- b.) Evidence from the research indicates that site managers are not provided with adequate support and training to facilitate them in understanding Irish Traveller culture and mores. Intolerance and even racism towards Irish Travellers was uncovered by the research.

3. Health and Social Welfare

- a.) Many Irish Travellers involved in this research live in insecure and unhealthy conditions, usually because of a lack of alternative and appropriate accommodation options. The health consequences of the stresses of frequent moves, lack of appropriate halting sites and sites which are often in environmentally poor locations have not been appropriately measured or monitored but there is evidence, including from this research, to suggest that the health of Irish Travellers, adult and children, has suffered as a consequence.
- b.) Registration with a GP and access to other health services can be problematic for Irish Travellers in Britain. This can be in part due to illiteracy amongst Irish Travellers; however, there is evidence from the research to indicate that when illiteracy is known to be an issue, professionals fail to address this with sensitivity and or appropriate support mechanisms. The research also found that Irish Travellers are reluctant to access GPs even when they have a permanent address. Reasons for this include receptionists and administration staff acting as gate-keepers to the service and even overtly exhibiting racist attitudes towards Irish Travellers and practices claiming that their lists are closed, particularly when large or extended Irish Traveller families try to register together.

- c.) The research found that social service departments (SSDs) in the research sites are failing to recognise the ethnicity of Irish Travellers in appropriate ways. Inappropriate recognition of Irish Traveller culture had led to some young, vulnerable Irish Travellers not receiving the care and support to which they were entitled.

4. Education and Training

- a.) Irish Travellers view the education system, and particularly second level schooling, as a site for assimilation and as not providing the skills and knowledge which they valued as appropriate for young Irish Travellers making the transition to adulthood in their own community. The research found that Irish Travellers in the school system are often negatively stereotyped as inattentive and slow learners, experience racist bullying because of their ethnic background and are often blamed when they retaliate.
- b.) This is not to say that Irish Traveller children are not sometimes challenging but rather that the education system has failed to positively address Irish Travellers and their cultural background in ways which will positively, rather than negatively, enhance their experiences of schooling. This was contrasted by research respondents with the education system's efforts to positively engage with other ethnic groups. One Irish Traveller mother summed up the experience of Irish Travellers in English schools:

Traveller kids get brainwashed into being English. It's hard to remain a Traveller in England because of cultural outside pressure. Asians et cetera are not made to feel like they are living some silly existence [like] Traveller kids are.

- c.) Irish Traveller children experience both direct and indirect racism in schools. Good practice examples, provided by local authority funded Traveller Education Services, were often undermined by the negative practices of schools. The reasons for this include: ignorance about and fear of Irish Travellers; concerns about Irish Traveller children pulling down schools' league table positions; fatalistic views which revolve around assumptions that Irish Travellers do not value education and that a nomadic way of life necessarily means that children will not be long enough in an educational establishment to merit input and effort on the part of teaching staff.

5. Criminal Justice System (Police Forces, Prison and Probation)

- a.) Lack of appropriate accommodation has often led Irish Travellers into confrontation with local authorities and police forces. These confrontations often compound negative perceptions of Irish Travellers who are blamed for their accommodation problems.
- b.) The research found evidence, from both Irish Traveller and police respondents, of police officers actively using racist attitudes towards Irish Travellers to inform policing decisions. This includes police forces ordinarily treating familial gatherings and events such as funerals and weddings as public order threats rather than a response to actual events or incidents.
- c.) However, the research also found that some police forces were reluctant to use the powers of the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, partly because its draconian powers could lead to a further deterioration in relations with nomadic groups. While police forces in the three research sites in London and Manchester had developed policies and strategies in response to both the Macpherson report and the 2000 Race Relations (Amendment) Act, these were often insufficient to impact on policing on the ground and Irish Travellers' experiences of it. Some forces have introduced Traveller Liaison Officers (TLO) but the research found evidence that often these officers lacked the authority and power to address problems and racism more widely within their forces. The research also found examples of TLOs who actively held anti-Traveller attitudes and beliefs.
- d.) The research found evidence of negative stereotyping and racism towards Irish Travellers in both the prisons and probation system and a lack of recognition of the specificity of Irish Traveller ethnicity and culture. There was a strong sense of injustice at the way the prison system treated them amongst the Irish Traveller men included in this strand of the research. The failure of prison staff to deal with Irish Travellers appropriately and to recognise literacy problems strongly contributed to this. In particular, the research found that there is reason to be concerned about the highly negative attitudes and behaviours of some prison staff towards Irish Travellers in prison. Irish Traveller men in prison were often isolated from family, especially if families were nomadic, as literacy problems mitigated against communication and facilitation of visits.
- e.) The research also highlighted the reluctance of general resettlement agencies to deal with Irish Travellers, who are often referred on to Irish community agencies which then refer them back to general agencies. This vicious cycle of referrals leaves Irish Travellers leaving prison without recourse to appropriate support. Probation services in the research areas had made some positive steps towards recognition of specific Irish Traveller identity but this was piecemeal and patchy.