



VOICES UNHEARD

A STUDY OF IRISH TRAVELLERS IN PRISON

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The Irish Chaplaincy in Britain (ICB)

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The Irish Chaplaincy in Britain, (ICB), is a leading, innovative charity that provides high quality services and support to excluded, vulnerable and isolated Irish emigrants in Britain.

The Irish Chaplaincy in Britain, (ICB), commissioned *Voices Unheard* in response to the needs of the Travelling community as identified by two of the Chaplaincy's projects. The Travellers' Project which works with the Travelling community in Britain has consistently highlighted the profound and systemic marginalisation of the Travelling community in Britain and has noted with grave concern the increasingly high levels of imprisonment amongst this community. The Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas, (ICPO), through its work across the prison estate, has recorded high levels of discrimination, distress, self-harm and isolation experienced by Irish Traveller prisoners as a result of prejudice and the community's cultural distinctiveness.

ICB was determined to address the issues faced by Irish Travellers in prison by establishing an accurate portrayal of their current situation through a methodologically robust research project. ICB sought, and gained financial support from The Allen Lane Foundation, Travellers Aid Trust and a donor who wished to remain anonymous, in order to implement the planned Travellers in Prison Research Project, (TPRP). On 29th July 2010, following an application to the National Research Committee of the National Offender Management Service, (NOMS), TPRP gained permission to conduct its proposed research nationally. The project began with quantitative research, based upon a survey of Irish Travellers across the prisons in England and Wales that was completed in October 2010. The next stage involved extended qualitative field research, including a series of interviews and focus groups with Irish Traveller prisoners across England and Wales. *Voices Unheard* is a presentation of the findings of the Travellers in Prison Research Project.

Staff kept saying he needed a shower when he was very clean, like they thought of him as someone who doesn't understand cleanliness because he used to live in a caravan because they don't know the truth about Traveller morals and life.
(Diversity Manager)



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Finally, thanks to the Irish Traveller prisoners who by speaking so sincerely have made this report their own. In so doing, Irish Travellers have begun to make their voices heard.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas, (ICPO), has provided advice and practical support to Irish prisoners for over 25 years in prisons across England and Wales. Throughout this period ICPO has highlighted the significant number of Irish Travellers in prison and the unequal hardships faced by this group. The Commission for Racial Equality, (CRE), in *Race Equality in Prisons*, (2003), echoed ICPO's concern:

Failure area: Access to goods, facilities or services... Prisoners with low literacy skills had difficulty adapting to prison life and accessing prison services. In the case of Irish Travellers, this is compounded by prejudice and discrimination, leading to high levels of self-harm. (Commission for Racial Equality, 2003, p.83)

The review of this CRE report, *Race Review 2008*, (2008), by the National Offender Management Service, (NOMS), found that serious problems remained regarding the treatment of Irish Travellers in prison:

Overall, the Review Team [conducting the inquiry] was concerned that, five years on from the CRE report, there was still a lack of recognition in the establishments visited of the issues facing White minority groups and therefore no strategy in place to tackle these. Particular concerns relating to Gypsy Traveller Roma prisoners included: difficulties accessing services, including offender behaviour programmes, as the literacy level required was too high, derogatory and racist name calling primarily by prisoners, and by some staff, in two of the prisons visited, lack of

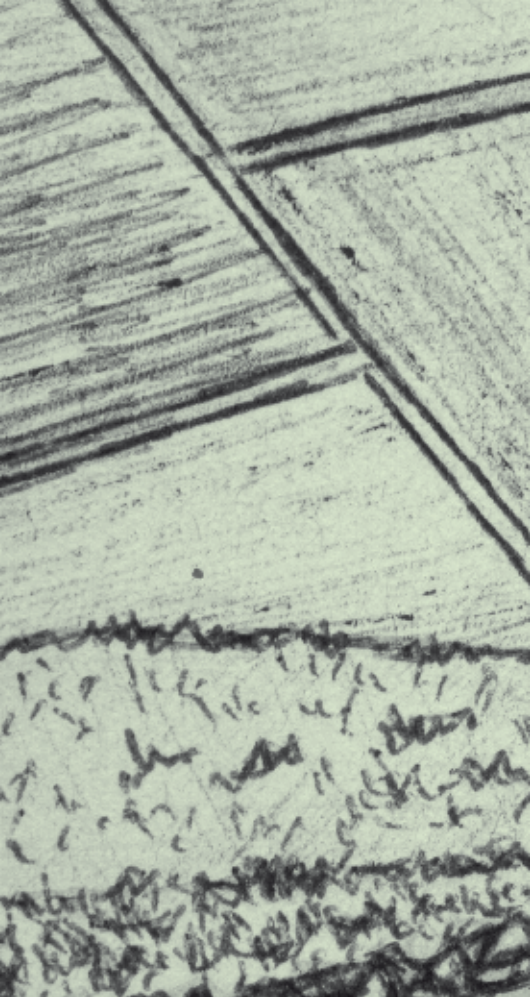
TPRP, working with limited resources and limited access to prisons, has in this report managed to take a 'snapshot' of Irish Travellers in prison. The research is not a complete picture of Irish Travellers in prison in England and Wales. It is, however, a first step in establishing the size of the Irish Traveller population in prison, their profile and the main issues which affect their progress on the journey of rehabilitation and resettlement. TPRP believes that this report and in particular its recommendations offer prisons, prison staff and Irish Travellers in prison, an opportunity to significantly improve the rehabilitation of a group, routinely (and inaccurately) characterised as 'hard to reach.'

TPRP is confident that the modest proposals included in this report would benefit Irish Travellers in prison by enabling them to take control of their lives through suitable training and support. Crucially, society would, to an extent, be unburdened of the social and economic weight attendant on the widespread imprisonment of a marginalised group. Travellers with whom TPRP met almost unanimously spoke of the wastefulness of imprisonment, coupled with a sense of the inevitability of incarceration given their skill set which often excluded literacy. Irish Travellers in prison want, like society as a whole, to provide for their families and themselves and to live happy and constructive lives. It is, therefore, in the interests of both wider society and Irish Travellers to facilitate more effective strategies for the custody, rehabilitation and resettlement of this hitherto isolated section of the prison population.

One final observation – TPRP found that providing different approaches to the needs of Irish Travellers in prison is sometimes seen by prison governors and staff as showing preferential treatment for this group. Prisons and prison staff need to be reminded that providing equal opportunities may mean offering the same services in a flexible manner. The status quo means that a sizeable number of Irish Travellers pass through prison with little or no engagement with prison services – a costly mistake and a missed opportunity. The basic principle regarding the provision of services should not be one size fits all but rather what approach will succeed in achieving the successful rehabilitation of prisoners for their good and the good of society.

MY SON WAS 13 WHEN HE DIED...
THE GOVERNOR TOLD ME I COULDN'T GO
TO THE FUNERAL BECAUSE I CAME FROM
'THE TRAVELLING COMMUNITY' AND WOULD
ABSCOND. THE C OF E CHAPLAIN HEARD IT
AND COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. SHE WAS MORE
SHOCKED THAN ME.
I WAS MOVED [FROM THE PRISON] THE NEXT
DAY.

I HAD THOUGHT OF PUTTING NOTICES ABOUT THE SURVEY
ON THE WINGS, BUT ON REFLECTION DECIDED AGAINST, AS
A NUMBER OF THOSE I SPOKE TO PREFER NOT TO ADVERTISE
TOO WIDELY THAT THEY ARE TRAVELLERS.



2. IRISH TRAVELLERS

Irish Travellers are traditionally a nomadic people who originated in Ireland.⁷ While the majority of Irish Travellers live in Ireland there are Irish Traveller communities in a number of other countries including the United States and Germany. The largest Irish Traveller community outside of Ireland is based in the United Kingdom. There are no accurate figures for the population of Irish Travellers in the United Kingdom, however.⁸ While Irish Traveller communities, particularly in Britain, maintain strong links with Ireland, the classification ‘Irish Traveller’ is most accurately seen as an ethnic identifier rather than an identifier of nationality.

Irish Travellers possess a distinctive way of life, value system, culture and traditions. Their language is known as Shelta, of which there are two dialects, Gamin and Cant. Irish Travellers refer to themselves as ‘Pavees’ or ‘Minceir.’ The historical origins of Irish Travellers as a group remain unclear. Some historians argue that Irish Travellers are descended from the native Irish population, dispossessed as a result of social and political upheavals such as Oliver Cromwell’s military campaign in Ireland (1649–53) or the Great Famine in Ireland (1840s). Other analysts propose much earlier origins (McVeigh, 1997; Ó Riain, 2000). Ó

NOMS also has obligations under the Human Rights Act 1998. These are to uphold the individual rights of prisoners enumerated in the European Convention of Human Rights.¹⁹ Notably, these include respect for an individual's private and family life²⁰ and protection from discrimination in the enjoyment of the protected rights.²¹

NOMS recognises its equality obligations and their legal nature in its published guidance, 'Promoting Equality in Prisons and Probation: the NOMS Single Equality Scheme 2009-2012'. In addition to listing the specific duties contained in the Equality Act it states:

The governing principles to be adopted in meeting the general duty include the fact that promoting race equality is obligatory, and must be central to all functions, including planning, policy making, service delivery, regulation, inspection, enforcement and employment; that public authorities must meet the duty to promote equality of opportunity in all relevant functions; and that the weight given to race equality must be proportionate to its relevance to a particular function (e.g. those that affect the public most or different groups in different ways). (NOMS, 2009, p.32)

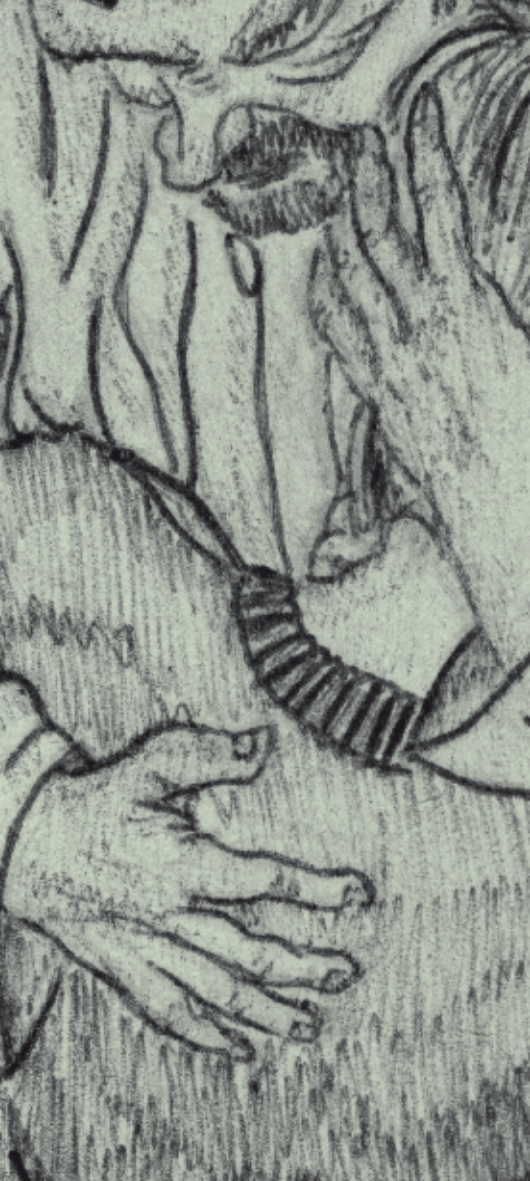
Despite this acknowledgment and the fact that the Glossary includes a 'Gypsy Roma Traveller' acronym, the substantive text of the document makes no reference to Irish Travellers or indeed Gypsy Roma Travellers generally. While race appears as a prominent issue, the focus is entirely on meeting requirements as to other Black and Minority Ethnic, (BME), prisoners. As such, the specific needs of Irish Travellers, independent and different to those of the general BME community, have remained outside the scope of official attention. This is the case, notwithstanding the fact that NOMS is under a legal obligation to ensure their equality of opportunities and treatment.

SOMETHING SERIOUSLY HAS TO BE DONE ABOUT IT. ACTION IN MY MIND SPEAKS LOUDER THAN WORDS AND IF THERE'S NOTHING DONE ABOUT IT...IT WILL CONTINUE AND CONTINUE TO GET WORSE. THEY THINK THE TRAVELLING COMMUNITY AND THE TRAVELLING PRISONERS ARE REJECTS FROM SOCIETY AND THAT PEOPLE DON'T REALLY GIVE A DAMN ABOUT THEM, WHAT HAPPENS TO THEM RIGHT OR WRONG. IT'S VERY EASY FOR ANYONE TO WRITE STUFF BUT UNLESS THERE'S ACTION TO BACK THIS UP IT'S JUST WASTING TIME AND WASTING MONEY...

¹⁹ Human Rights Act 1998, s.6

²⁰ European Convention on Human Rights, Art.8

²¹ European Convention on Human Rights, Art.14



FOR A
TRAVELLER,
HIS
MOUTH
IS HIS
PEN.

comment form enabled prison staff to anonymously contribute their views, experiences and expertise on issues affecting Irish Travellers in prison. The prison officials' comment form included four substantive questions/comment areas: 1) What (if any) particular difficulties face Irish Travellers in prison?; 2) How can these difficulties be addressed?; 3) What initiatives are there for Irish Traveller prisoners?; and a General Comments section. Out of 138 prisons contacted, 69 returned a comment form.

Out of 453 identified Irish Traveller prisoners, 296 TPRP survey forms were submitted. Not all survey forms returned provided answers to all survey questions. For each calculation made in this report, the corresponding size of the particular data set is provided beneath each table of figures.

3.2 Qualitative Data

Following the completion of the TPRP survey, the project embarked on a series of focus groups and interviews with Traveller prisoners in order to explore in depth the issues raised by the survey data. This phase of the research, beginning in November 2010 and finishing in February 2011, engaged the participation of 57 Irish Traveller prisoners, in seven prisons. The prisons involved were located in Wales, the North West, the North East, the Midlands, the South East and London. Participants included category A, B, C and D offenders. One female prison was visited. One private prison was visited. A Young Offenders Institution (YOI) was not included as the distinctive and complex issues involved in matters of youth offending were beyond the scope of the project.

The TPRP focus groups and interviews were semi-structured in format. TPRP had identified a range of subject areas through the quantitative data provided by the survey and used this to identify discussion points. Initially, discussion focussed on education, health, family contact and cultural awareness. TPRP's inquiry developed by responding to the issues identified as important by the Traveller participants. TPRP focus groups and interviews achieved significant depth of insight by facilitating Irish Traveller prisoners' discussions on the matters that they identified as affecting them most seriously. As a result of this process, in which the Traveller participants led, the breadth and depth of the discussions expanded to include: accommodation, mental health, parole, Home Detention Curfew, (HDC), recall, reasons for offending and discrimination.

3.3 Literature

When compiling a report on a subject which is under-reported, one of the challenges is using what little material has been published on the subject in a judicious manner. This is the case when dealing with issues affecting Irish Travellers in Britain. TPRP have had to deal with two different forms of this problem, namely: 1) literature which



AT RECEPTION [INTO PRISON], I SAID I'M A TRAVELLER. THE MAN SAID 'SO YOU'RE IRISH? THEN YOU ARE W2 [WHITE IRISH]'.

I LIVE ON A CAMP [UNOFFICIAL SITE]. I'M DOWN AS NFA [NO FIXED ABODE] AND I DON'T WANT TO GO TO A HOSTEL SO STRAIGHT AWAY I'M RECALLED.

AN OFFICER TOLD ME, 'I MUST HAVE WASHED YOUR APP [APPLICATION FOR A COURSE] IN THE WASHING MACHINE; IT WAS IN MY TROUSERS.'

IF YOU PUT A TRAILER AS AN ADDRESS YOU'LL NEVER GET A TAG [HOME DETENTION CURFEW].

4. DEMOGRAPHICS

4.1.6 Ages: Irish Traveller Prisoners in Comparison with the Overall Prisoner Population

	Ministry of Justice (85,429)		Irish Travellers (281)	
	#	%	#	%
Adults	73,678	86.3	146	51.9
Young adults	10,114	11.8	130	46.3
15-17 year olds	1,637	1.9	5	1.8

Table 3: 281 Respondents

4.1.7 Accommodation Prior to Imprisonment

	#	%
House	126	44.8
Authorised Site	84	29.9
Flat	30	10.7
Unauthorised Site	20	7.1
Other	13	4.6
No Fixed Abode	8	2.9

Table 4: 281 Respondents

TPRP found that most Irish Travellers in prison normally (i.e. prior to imprisonment) live in a house or a flat, 55.5%. This finding mirrors the situation nationally with most Travellers now believed to live in housing. In many cases, settlement in housing is due to an inadequate supply of Traveller sites rather than preference and indeed, often results in isolation, loss of family support and psychological distress, (Greenfields, 2009, p.1-p.2).

TPRP’s findings on the percentage of housed Irish Travellers emphasises that Irish Traveller ethnicity is not dependent on the type of accommodation in which a Traveller normally resides. Prison staff in a number of prisons suggested that certain prisoners should



ONE OFFICER
WOULDN'T LET
ME HAVE THE
WEIGHTS IN
THE GYM. HE
SAID I'D STEAL
THEM TO SELL
FOR SCRAP,
WHEN I'M
LOCKED AWAY
IN HERE!

instances of racist name-calling. On one of TPRP's visits for a focus group, a prison officer informed TPRP that fellow officers had used the term 'pikies' while assembling participants. Traveller prisoners often felt that such name-calling was unremarkable because of its frequency. They did however feel that if they were

I’VE HEARD A LOT OF OFFICERS SAY ‘PIKEY’... BUT THERE ARE A LOT OF GOOD OFFICERS TOO.

LET’S BE HONEST, WE [IRISH TRAVELLERS] HAVEN’T ALWAYS HELPED OURSELVES BUT WHEN YOU GROW UP AND ALWAYS HEAR YOU’RE NOTHING... WELL IT HAS AN EFFECT.

PEOPLE ARE RACIST TO TRAVELLERS BUT ALL ETHNICITIES GET RACISM.

WE’RE THE VERY LAST RUNG ON THE LADDER, THE LOWEST. YOU CAN SEE IT IN THEIR EYES. THE WAY THEY TREAT YOU – WE NEVER GET THE BENEFIT OF DOUBT.

A NUMBER OF RIRFS [RACIST INCIDENT REPORTING FORMS] HAVE BEEN ISSUED BUT IT’S JUST THE SAME OLD FACES.

(Diversity Manager)

6. OFFENCES AND SENTENCING

6.1 Findings

