

A research paper: Suicide Prevention in Gypsy and Traveller communities in England

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The suicide rate for members of the Traveller community is six times higher than the general population, yet Gypsy and Traveller communities are not recognised as a high-risk group, nor mentioned once in the Government's National Suicide Prevention Plan¹². We have assessed 79 local suicide prevention plans which represent 113 local areas to see whether the high suicide rate in Gypsy and Traveller communities has been identified and mitigated against on a local level, and found that:

- Only 5 out of 79 local authority suicide prevention plans mention Gypsy and Traveller communities.
- Only 2 out of 79 local authority suicide prevention plans listed any action to address the high suicide rate in their local Gypsy and Traveller communities.

Recommendations

- Gypsy and Traveller communities should be listed as a high risk group in the Cross-Government Suicide Prevention Plan, with actions identified to address this inequality.
- Local Suicide Prevention Plans in areas of the country with a Gypsy or Traveller population should routinely include actions to address this inequality.
- Part of the NHS England additional £25million investment for suicide prevention projects should be targeted at reducing suicide in Gypsy and Traveller communities
- The Department for Health and Social Care should ensure Gypsies and Travellers are included in their targeted work with occupational groups at high risk of suicide.
- Research should be undertaken to identify how Gypsy and Traveller community members experiencing bereavement could be better supported.
- Whole population approaches to prevent poor mental health should be accessible for people with low literacy, who are experiencing digital exclusion and those who are self-employed.

Introduction

In the largest research project of its kind, Parry et al found that members of Gypsy and Traveller communities are nearly three times more likely to be anxious than others, and just over twice as likely to be depressed, with women twice as likely as men to experience mental health problems³. Further to this, researchers who conducted the All Ireland Traveller Health Study found that the suicide rate for Traveller women is six times higher than women in the general population and is seven times higher for Traveller men than men in the general population⁴.

¹ https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/AITHS_SUMMARY.pdf

² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/772210/national-suicide-prevention-strategy-workplan.pdf

³ Parry, G. et al. University of Sheffield. 2004. The Health Status of Gypsies & Travellers in England- Report of Department of Health Inequalities in Health Research Initiative Project 121/7500-

⁴ https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/AITHS_SUMMARY.pdf

In the All Ireland Traveller Health Survey, researchers found suicide to be the cause of 11% of all deaths in the Irish Traveller community⁵. Further to this, research conducted by Walker in 2008 found that over 65% of Traveller suicides occur among those under 30 and that in 70% of instances it was the person's first attempt at suicide⁶.

Whilst Gypsy and Traveller ethnicity upon death has not historically been recorded, we welcomed news in early 2019 that the minimal dataset for coroners to collect post suicide will begin to incorporate Gypsy and Traveller ethnicity.

Methodology

The Government's National Suicide Prevention Strategy work plan states that every local area in England should have a local suicide prevention plan in place⁷. As upper tier local authorities are those with public health responsibilities, we conducted desktop research identifying and reviewing the suicide prevention plans of all upper tier local authorities in England available online.

We were able to identify 79 local authority suicide prevention plans which represent data from 113 out of 152 local authorities responsible for having a suicide prevention plan in place. We were unable to review the suicide plans for the remaining 39 local authorities because (1) their suicide prevention plan was not publicly available, (2) because they only had PowerPoint presentations with limited information, (3) their website contained a broken link or (d) the only relevant report they had available was a Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan which did not include specific information on suicide prevention. In addition, a small handful of local authorities only had draft versions of their Suicide Prevention Plans available – we have not included these in the data and none contain any reference to Gypsy, Roma or Traveller communities.

Findings

The National Suicide Prevention Strategy makes it clear that local authorities should tailor suicide prevention approaches to their local communities, however, when we assessed 79 Local Suicide Prevention Plans, we found that only five contained any mention of Gypsy and Traveller communities and only two identified any action to address suicide inequalities within their local Gypsy and Traveller population.

Of the five, the following information was covered:

- Surrey Suicide Prevention Plan⁸ included information on local population size of Gypsies and Travellers and data on increased suicide prevalence, but failed to outline any actions to mitigate against this.
- South Gloucestershire Suicide Prevention Strategy⁹ noted that their local Adult Mental Health Needs Assessment indicated Gypsies and Travellers were at higher risk of suicide but failed to outline any actions to mitigate against this.

⁵ https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/AITHS_SUMMARY.pdf

⁶ <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/nosp/research/suicidetravellercommunity.pdf>

⁷ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/772210/national-suicide-prevention-strategy-workplan.pdf

⁸ <https://mycouncil.surreycc.gov.uk/documents/s55064/Surrey%20Suicide%20Prevention%20Strategy%202019-2021%20-%20Final.pdf>

⁹ https://www.southglos.gov.uk/documents/v1-South-Gloucestershire-Suicide-Prevention-Strategy_07_09_15.pdf

- Richmond-upon-Thames Framework for Prevention¹⁰ outlined research statistics on the health inequalities faced by Gypsies and Travellers, as well as some of the causes of these, but failed to outline any actions to mitigate against suicide inequalities.
- Brighton & Hove Suicide Prevention Strategy¹¹ noted that in 2017 it had funded Friends Families and Travellers to tackle suicide inequalities in local Gypsy and Traveller communities through organising groups, developing a WRAP model, developing a mental health 'first aid tool box' and more.
- The Joint Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Suicide Prevention Strategy¹² noted Gypsies and Travellers were groups at higher risk of suicide, and advised that an annual audit of local suicides would enhance this knowledge. Focus would then be placed on resources to help implement this strategy, for those with the greatest need. The plan also stated commitment to providing Suicide Prevention training to the nurse team for Gypsies and Travellers, and to home school liaison officers who frequently work with Gypsies and Travellers.

Notably, a number of areas where there are large populations of Gypsy and Traveller communities contained no mention of this in their suicide prevention plans¹³. For example, Essex, Hampshire and Kent did not mention this in their prevention planning.

Why are there high rates of suicide within Gypsy and Traveller communities?

There are a number of key issues which place Gypsy and Traveller communities at high risk of poor mental health. Firstly, members of Gypsy and Traveller communities are at higher risk of developing mental health issues, due to experiences of chronic exclusion across the wider social determinants of health. If you consider [Public Health England's Suicide Prevention Profile Indicator List](#), you can see that Gypsy and Traveller communities have the poorest outcomes across a large number of indicators which may put them at higher risk of poor mental health.

In addition, according to the 2011 Census, Gypsies and Travellers had the highest proportion of elementary and skilled trade workers across all ethnic groups in England and Wales and were more likely to be carers¹⁴. Research released in 2017 found that men working in elementary occupations had a 44% higher risk of suicide, men working in skilled trades had a 35% higher risk of suicide and carers had a risk of suicide that was almost twice the national average¹⁵.

¹⁰ https://www.richmond.gov.uk/media/1386/framework_for_prevention_2015-18.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/sites/brighton-hove.gov.uk/files/Suicide%20Prevention%20Action%20Plan%202017-18%20mid-year%20update%20%28PDF419KB%29.pdf>

¹² <https://cambridgeshireinsight.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Joint-Cambridgeshire-and-Peterborough-Suicide-Prevention-Strategy-2014-2017.pdf>

¹³ Data collected as part of the Census 2011 provides an indicator of population size of Gypsies and Travellers by local authority, however, this is widely recognised as a significant undercount: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/ks201uk>

¹⁴

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/whatdoesthe2011censustellusaboutthecharacteristicsofgypsyoririshtravellersinenglandandwales/2014-01-21#economic-activity>

¹⁵

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/suicidebyoccupation/england2011to2015>

Secondly, despite the fact that Gypsy and Traveller communities are at high risk of poor mental health, members of Gypsy and Traveller communities are often missed out by whole population approaches to prevent poor mental health. For example, campaigns may not include representatives many Gypsies and Travellers identify with, guidance may be inaccessible for people within Gypsy and Traveller communities who have low literacy, target audiences may be in schools or universities which Gypsies and Travellers may be far more likely to be excluded from or not attending (e.g. many of the actions outlined in the Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision Green Paper¹⁶), or prevention activities may take place in workplace settings where Gypsy and Traveller people are less likely to be present in due to self-employment or unemployment (e.g. 'Reducing the risk of suicide: a preventative guide for employers'¹⁷).

Lastly, members of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities may be less willing or able to access support when mental health issues do occur. This can be a result of deeply entrenched stigma, lack of trust in services or lack of culturally appropriate services, and communication difficulties between health workers and Gypsy and Traveller communities. Issues around accessing primary care or lack of awareness of services available may mean that those who would like help and support, may find themselves unable to access it.

Recommendations

- Gypsy and Traveller communities should be listed as a high risk group in the Cross-Government Suicide Prevention Plan, with actions identified to address this inequality.
- Local Suicide Prevention Plans in areas of the country with a Gypsy and Traveller population should routinely include actions to address this inequality.
- Part of the NHS England additional £25million investment for suicide prevention in projects should be targeted at reducing suicide in Gypsy and Traveller communities
- The Department for Health and Social Care should ensure Gypsies and Travellers are included in their targeted work with occupational groups at high risk of suicide.
- Research should be undertaken to identify how Gypsy and Traveller community members, experiencing bereavement, could be better supported.
- Whole population approaches to prevent poor mental health should be accessible for people with low literacy, who are experiencing digital exclusion and those who are self-employed.

Conclusion

This research clearly highlights that Gypsy and Traveller communities are invisible in the Cross-Government Suicide Prevention Plan, and are largely ignored within Local Suicide Prevention Plans. It is essential that urgent action is taken to address suicide inequalities in Gypsy and Traveller communities in England.

¹⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/728892/government-response-to-consultation-on-transforming-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health.pdf

¹⁷ <https://www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/suicide-prevention-toolkit/>

About us

Friends, Families and Travellers is a leading national charity that works on behalf of all Gypsies, Roma and Travellers regardless of ethnicity, culture or background.

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