



**FRIENDS,  
FAMILIES &  
TRAVELLERS**

September 2023

# **Research Summary: Experiences of Suicide in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities**

## About us

Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT) is a leading national charity that works to end racism and discrimination against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and to protect the right to pursue a nomadic way of life. We support individuals and families with the issues that matter most to them, at the same time as working to transform systems and institutions to address the root causes of inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people.

Every year, we support over 1,300 families with issues ranging from health to homelessness, education to financial inclusion and discrimination to employment. Over half of our staff team, volunteers and trustee board are from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

## Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to all those who responded to our survey and shared their experiences with us. The input and insights of FFT's Mental Health Officer, Jonathan Jones, are also greatly appreciated. Report compiled by Rosie Hollinshead, Health Policy and Projects Officer.

## Help for suicidal thoughts

If you are having thoughts about suicide, it is important to tell someone so that you can get support. Help is available right now if you need it.

You can call the Samaritans 24/7 on 116 123. One Call Away is a Gypsy and Traveller-specific mental health support service, and you can reach them on 07748997617.

You do not have to struggle with difficult feelings alone. [Find out more.](#)

## Introduction

There is limited published evidence available on the prevalence of death by suicide within Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in England. This is partly due to the exclusion of these communities from many mainstream datasets, such as the NHS Data Dictionary<sup>1</sup>. Where evidence does exist, it conveys a picture of significant unmet need<sup>2</sup>.

An [All Ireland study](#) found that suicide prevalence is six times higher for Irish Traveller women than women in the general population, and seven times higher for Traveller men<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, in the largest study of its kind, Parry et al found that Gypsy and Traveller communities are nearly three times more likely to be anxious than others, and just over twice as likely to be depressed<sup>4</sup>. While there is no data available on death by suicide within Roma communities in the UK, [Roma Support Group](#) reports high rates of anxiety and depression in Roma communities, as well as poor access to mental health services<sup>5</sup>.

As outlined by FFT's previous report, [Tackling Suicide Inequalities in Gypsy and Traveller Communities](#), Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are widely recognised to be more likely than the general population to face a variety of social risk factors for poor mental health and high suicide incidence. These include poverty, unemployment or low job security, lower educational attainment, insecure or lack of culturally pertinent accommodation, and extreme stress<sup>6</sup>. Higher rates of unpaid

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<sup>1</sup> Friends, Families & Travellers (2022) [Tackling Suicide Inequalities in Gypsy and Traveller Communities](#). pp.19-20 (Why are Gypsy and Traveller communities under-represented in datasets?)

<sup>2</sup> McKey, S., Quirke, B., Fitzpatrick, P., Kelleher, C., & Malone, K. (2022). [A rapid review of Irish Traveller mental health and suicide: A psychosocial and anthropological perspective](#). *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 39(2), 223-233. doi:10.1017/ipm.2020.108

<sup>3</sup> All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team (2010). *Our Geels: Summary of Findings*. Department of Health and Children: Dublin (<https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/18859/d5237d611916463189ecc1f9ea83279d.pdf#page=null>)

<sup>4</sup> Parry G, Van Cleemput P, Peters J, Walters S, Thomas K, Cooper C. (2007). [Health status of Gypsies and Travellers in England](#). *J Epidemiol Community Health*. 2007 Mar;61(3):198-204. doi: 10.1136/jech.2006.045997.

<sup>5</sup> Roma Support Group (2021). [Roma Mental Health Advocacy Project \(2015-21\) Self-Evaluation Report](#). P.5

<sup>6</sup> Greenfields, M. & Rogers, C (2020). [Hate: "As regular as rain" A pilot research project into the psychological effects of hate crime on Gypsy, Traveller and Roma \(GTR\) communities](#)

care<sup>7</sup> responsibilities and exclusion from whole-population approaches to suicide prevention<sup>8</sup> are also key factors.

At FFT, our casework indicates a disproportionately high prevalence of suicide among the communities we work with. Reflecting this, community members, activists and Gypsy and Traveller voluntary sector organisations alike, all anecdotally report higher incidence of suicide within Gypsy and Traveller communities in England<sup>9</sup>.

Suicide prevention and understanding experiences of suicide among the communities we support is a key area of FFT's work. The following report summarises responses to a survey released by FFT, which sought to gain insights from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people about their experiences relating to suicide.

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<sup>7</sup> Office for National Statistics (2017) [Suicide by occupation, England: 2011 to 2015](#); Office for National Statistics (2014). [2011 Census analysis: What does the 2011 Census tell us about the characteristics of Gypsy or Irish travellers in England and Wales?](#)

<sup>8</sup> Friends, Families & Travellers (2020) [A research paper: Suicide Prevention in Gypsy and Traveller communities in England](#)

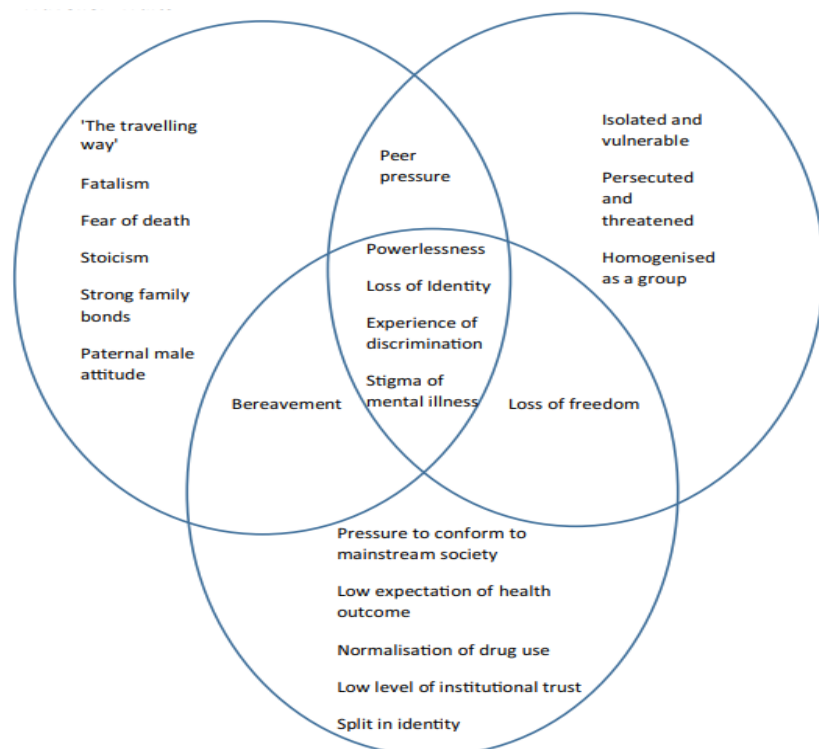
<sup>9</sup> Friends, Families & Travellers (2022) [Tackling Suicide Inequalities in Gypsy and Traveller Communities](#)

## Research findings

In 2022, FFT released a call for evidence from members of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities who had experienced the death by suicide of a friend or loved-one. 32 survey responses were received from individuals who self-identified as Romany Gypsy (16), Irish Traveller (7), New Traveller (7), Scottish Gypsy/Traveller (1) and Travelling Showperson (1). These responses offered an intimate insight into the impact of suicide on the lives of individuals, families, and entire communities.

While the data gathered constitutes a relatively small sample size, the responses paint a familiar overall picture of individuals and families navigating experiences of discrimination (both structural and interpersonal), stigma, exclusion, and a lack of support from public services, particularly in terms of mental health. Many of these issues are highlighted in existing FFT briefings and reports, including those addressing [suicide inequalities \(2022\)](#), [economic and financial exclusion \(2023\)](#), [race hate and prejudice \(2023\)](#) and [health inequalities \(2022\)](#). The below Venn diagram (Figure 1) presents 21 themes drawn from 12 studies, offering an insight into the 'life struggle' which is common to minority ethnic communities. Some of these themes are present within the survey responses explored below.

*Figure 1. McKey, S., Quirke, B., Fitzpatrick, P., Kelleher, C., & Malone, K. (2022). [A rapid review of Irish Traveller mental health and suicide: A psychosocial and anthropological perspective.](#) Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine. p.229*



Key themes which emerged across different survey responses include:

- **Theme 1:** The profound impact of a death by suicide on friends, family and wider community;
  - Multiple deaths by suicide within families and/or immediate communities.
- **Theme 2:** Discrimination and bullying;
  - Homophobia.
- **Theme 3:** Lack of support from mental health and other public services.
- **Theme 4:** Stigma around mental health and suicide, as well as deep hesitation to speak out or seek help.
- **Theme 5:** Criminalisation and loss of traditional ways of life, as well as pressure to assimilate.
- **Theme 6:** Economic and financial exclusion, including issues around unemployment, accommodation and financial difficulty.

These themes are explored in more detail below, with direct quotes from survey responses.

## Theme 1: Impact on friends, family and wider community

Many of the survey responses referenced the far-reaching impact of death by suicide within Gypsy and Traveller communities. Within such close-knit communities, “[suicide] leaves a trail of misery & mental health problems in its wake”. One respondent described the wide impact of a death by suicide: “it has affected the Irish Traveller community [...] people are heartbroken”. Another explained that the death of their loved-one by suicide “traumatised and devastated us all”.

Respondents also mentioned multiple or linked deaths by suicide within families or immediate communities. Bereavement was cited as a factor contributing to instances of suicide by several respondents.

This is particularly concerning as it can be difficult for local authorities and support services to quickly identify and address potential suicide clusters, since individuals who are very closely connected socially may be based across regional or national borders without clear links that can be identified by external parties. This can be a barrier to providing support for family and friends following a bereavement.

## Theme 2: Discrimination and bullying

Several respondents cited bullying and discrimination as factors which may have led to a death by suicide. The types of discrimination discussed were received from public services and institutions, including police and health and care services, as well as individuals. For example, one survey response recounted that, following the death by suicide of a loved one, “the message from police and authorities was loud and clear, we lived in a caravan, we didn't fit the boxes and therefore didn't matter”. One respondent linked higher rates of suicide with these experiences: “when you live in a society which stigmatises you at every opportunity, this is the natural result”.

### Homophobia

One response pointed to the experiences of individuals and communities living at the intersection of racial discrimination and homophobia. Homophobia from within Gypsy and Traveller communities was noted as a major problem, as the respondent called

for more openness and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals: **“there are so many Travellers and Gypsies who are gay and can’t come out... it’s not our culture. But it’s destroying our youth. [...] It needs to be addressed...”**.

### **Theme 3: Lack of support, from mental health and other public services**

A lack of support from or access to public services, particularly mental health services, was a consistent theme across several responses. One respondent noted that their loved-one who attempted suicide experienced severe delays in receiving mental health diagnoses: **“we have been ignored by numerous services in his childhood [...]. It was often put down to “disruptive Gypsy kid” [instead of] investigating his issues”**. Some responses referenced interactions with particular services, including social services, the prison system and police, as a contributing factor to a death by suicide: **“family court and social services are not engaging with the community in a way that will support them”**.

23 out of 32 respondents told us that, as partners, friends or family members of a person who died by suicide, they had never been offered any support for their bereavement.

### **Theme 4: Stigma around mental illness and suicide**

Stigma and shame around mental ill-health within Gypsy and Traveller communities was repeatedly referenced as a barrier to individuals seeking help and support, with several responses describing a death by suicide as **“unexpected”** or a **“shock”**, since the individual had not expressed to others that they were struggling with their mental health. One respondent stated that **“as a community, Travellers need to normalise mental health”**.

Stigma around mental illness and discomfort around seeking support were framed as particularly acute for men, who were described as experiencing **“the feeling of not being able to say anything as Traveller men are ‘strong’ 24/7”**.



One response also highlighted stigma and shame around mental illness as a key issue for young people in Gypsy and Traveller communities: **“we make our young think there’s something wrong with them. There’s nothing wrong with them, they are just needing a little help. There is no shame in that, none at all. The stigma needs to go - too many of our young are dying. My beautiful boy has gone because he was too ashamed to seek help”**.

## **Theme 5: Criminalisation and loss of traditional ways of life**

Several survey responses pointed to the loss of traditional ways of life and pressure to assimilate as a factor in mental ill health among members of Gypsy and Traveller communities. One respondent mentioned that their relative who died by suicide was in the first generation of their family to live in bricks-and-mortar housing, rather than a caravan, referencing **“lots of systemic issues dripping through generations”**.

Two respondents referenced the criminalisation of nomadic ways of life, particularly the [Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022](#), as a contributing factor to a death by suicide or mental ill health. One response reads: **“Gypsies and Travellers suffer more than most due to being outcasts. Our way of life is becoming (even more) criminalised, which is likely to further impact mental health in the Travelling communities”**.

Another respondent explained that **“the new legislation [Public Order Act] they are pushing through is very concerning and negatively affecting me as I now face criminalisation, or losing everything again just for parking in the wrong place. [...] I created stability for myself [following the death by suicide of a loved-one], but this new law takes all that away which is detrimental to my mental health and a factor in managing my own suicidal thoughts”**.

## **Theme 6: Economic and financial exclusion**

Several survey responses referenced issues around unemployment, problems with housing and accommodation, or financial difficulties as contributing factors to a

death by suicide. **“Risk of eviction”**, **“problems with authorities, work issues”**, **“money worry”**, **“poverty”** and **“homelessness”** were among the issues listed.

These accounts illustrate the lived realities of economic and financial exclusion experienced by Gypsy and Traveller communities, as outlined in FFT’s [2023 Briefing](#).

## Conclusion

The first-hand accounts included in this report offer direct insight into the lived experiences of communities which are typically excluded from mainstream datasets. Amplifying these accounts is crucial, not only to dispelling stigma around suicide and mental ill-health, but also to humanising figures and statistics which can feel so far removed from lived realities.

However, these accounts must do more than raise awareness – they must also prompt action. Existing research by FFT offers more detailed guidance and good practice examples around [tackling the key issues and barriers Gypsy and Traveller people experience in relation to suicide prevention](#). Key examples drawn from this report are outlined below:

### Understanding your local Gypsy, Roma and Traveller population and their needs

- Look beyond the data and ensure Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are routinely included as high-risk groups in your local suicide prevention planning: Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are often excluded from mainstream datasets, but a lack of local data does not indicate a lack of need.
- **Conduct your own data collection and analysis:** Refer to FFT's [Tackling Suicide Inequalities](#) report for the best available datasets by local area.
- **Invest in and link with local VCSE organisations, services and community groups:** Organisations with strong links to local communities will be best placed to support you to understand local need and ensure Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people's voices are present in your multi-agency suicide prevention group.
- **Consider commissioning or providing relevant professionals with inclusive services training.** Contact [FFT](#) and/or [Roma Support Group](#) for more information on training offered.

### Tackling key issues and barriers experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in relation to suicide prevention

- **Take a multi-agency approach to tackling the wider determinants of poor mental health:** consider how partners across your suicide prevention group can tackle the key determinants of suicide for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers.

- **Consider key social risk and intersectional factors such as self-employment, and unpaid care responsibilities:** Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities may be missed by whole-population approaches to suicide prevention, so link in with voluntary sector partners and community groups to reach people at particularly high risk.
- **Ensure that whole-population approaches to prevent poor mental health are accessible:** consider how messaging can be accessible for people with low literacy or experiencing digital exclusion, and those who are self-employed.
- **Work with local commissioners, PCNs and GP representatives to ensure that nomadic patients are never wrongfully refused registration in primary care:** Local PCNs can assess how successfully they are engaging with Gypsies, Roma, Travellers and other [inclusion health groups](#).
- **ICS, local authority, and criminal justice partners should work together to ensure approaches to evictions of roadside camps consider the mental health needs of individuals:** Consider how you can ensure that nomadic patients are not evicted whilst awaiting secondary mental health care, or how to ensure patients do not lose their place on a waiting list while travelling.
- **Ensure that no service provision and support is “digital by default” and that information is available in accessible formats for those with low or no literacy and experiencing digital exclusion:** this includes working with local PCNs, commissioners and secondary mental healthcare services to ensure that IAPT services are accessible.
- **Research should be undertaken** to identify how Gypsy and Traveller community members, experiencing bereavement, could be better supported.
- **Voluntary sector organisations providing specialist bereavement support should work with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller VCSE organisations** to ensure they are accessible and reaching communities.

## References

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**Roma Support Group (2021).** [Roma Mental Health Advocacy Project \(2015-21\) Self-Evaluation Report](#)

## 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.

[www.gypsy-traveller.org](http://www.gypsy-traveller.org) | Telephone +44 (0)1273 234 777 | Email [fft@gypsy-traveller.org](mailto:fft@gypsy-traveller.org)

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