



HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention  
**Grant Scheme for Collaborative Research Projects**

# Closing the gap: Exploring the co-variates of suicidality among Irish Travellers Project

**AUTHORS:**

Anne Doherty, Mark McGovern, Roisin McManus,  
Kezanne Tong and John O'Brien.

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Connecting for Life



## CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Suicide is a serious problem in the Traveller community: a National Office for Suicide Prevention report found a suicide rate among Travellers of 11%: 6 times higher in women and 7 times higher in men compared with their counterparts in the general population (National Office for Suicide Prevention, 2014). The same report found 59.4% of Traveller men and 62.7% of Traveller women reported that their mental health has not been good for one or more days in the last 30 (National Office for Suicide Prevention, 2014). Despite the high rates of suicide in the Traveller community, there is a paucity of clinical research into the mental health of Travellers.

The All Ireland Traveller Health Study (AITHS) reported in detail on the health status of Travellers across the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (Abdalla, 2010). It suggested that the high suicide rate among Travellers may be related to factors such as frequent mental distress, and poor mental health (McGorrian et al., 2013). It explored the experience of mental distress, but did not screen for or diagnose any mental disorders (Abdalla et al., 2013, Abdalla, 2010).

The related areas of self-harm (SH), suicidal ideation (SI) and emergency psychiatric care in the Traveller community have not been examined to date, despite the evidence that SH is risk factor for suicide (Carroll et al., 2014, Bostwick et al., 2016). Tanner reported Travellers presented with more severe presentations of self-harm, and were disproportionately highly represented among the people attending hospital following self-harm or with suicidal ideation (Tanner & Doherty, 2021).

## AIM/OBJECTIVE(S)

### The aims of this research are:

- (i) To improve the scientific knowledge of the mental health of Irish Travellers - addressing the gap in the scientific literature.
- (ii) To develop understanding of how Travellers experience mental disorders and how this relates to suicidality.
- (iii) To understand the covariates of suicidality in an Irish Traveller population.

### Objectives:

- (i) To conduct a qualitative assessment of Travellers who have experienced self-harm and suicidal thoughts exploring the personal experience of distress, adversity and illness.
- (ii) To explore the feasibility of conducting a quantitative study to achieve the following:
  - a. To establish the incidence of mental disorders in an Irish Traveller population by assessing the rates of diagnosed mental disorder
  - b. To establish examine rates of common symptoms such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and behaviour, utilising validated tools

## METHODOLOGY

This is a cross-sectional study comprising of semi-structured interviews of members of the Travelling community who have experienced thoughts of suicide or self-harm within the last year. This study includes two workstreams: for both, information was gathered on participants' sociodemographic and clinical factors. Participants in the quantitative workstream were assessed using validated questionnaires looking at symptoms of Suicidality, Anxiety, Depression, Personality factors and addiction. Within the qualitative work stream, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants examining themes of suicidality, discrimination, stigmatization and experiences in seeking treatment for mental health.

There were significant challenges with recruitment, despite being culturally embedded with close links with Traveller organisation and having a member of the Traveller Community as a co-investigator. Advice was taken on recruitment, and another Traveller participated in the recruitment video which was circulated via the organisations on social media.

Despite being involved in the planning of the research, one organisation became nervous that the study might make people suicidal. This belief persisted despite reassurances that this was unlikely to happen, and in the event it did, the researchers conducting the study were experienced psychiatrists, all of whom had years of experience in treating acutely suicidal people in emergency departments.

The analysis of incident reports covered almost six hundred incidents over a three-year period (2018-2020). Direct research with frontline staff involved a total of 30 staff over the course of the project, including a main exercise through a series of 5 in-depth focus groups with staff from across a range of frontline services and shifts (15 staff in total).

## RESULTS

### Quantitative findings (n=6)

- High rates of self-harm
- All participants had a psychiatric diagnosis
- Population highly symptomatic on measures of depression and anxiety (60% screened positive for anxiety symptoms, 60% screened positive for depressive symptoms, 100% scored positive for high risk of suicidal behaviour)
- Low rates of engagement with mental health services

### Quantitative findings (N=5)

- **Discrimination, racism and stigma** were identified by Travellers as key factors affecting the mental health of the Traveller Community
- All participants had a close relationship with someone who had died by **suicide**, and felt the rate may be higher than that reported
- There is **some stigma within the community** towards people with mental health difficulties and some minority groups
- **Identity** is a key issue for Travellers
- Certain **legislative changes** (especially the Miscellaneous Act) were identified as contributing to changing the Traveller way of life and having a negative impact on mental health
- With regard to health care professionals, **lack of understanding of Traveller culture** and use of medical jargon were identified as barriers to engagement in health care
- There was a sense that **services were not available**
- **Depression, trauma and self-harm** were identified as the principal manifestations of poor mental health
- Participants were **positively inclined towards psychotherapy**, but many had negative views towards psychotropic **medication**
- Participants reported that cultural gender rules were problematic for certain groups especially women

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Overall Recommendations

- There is an urgent need for more research into the covariates of self-harm and suicide in the Irish Traveller population. In order for this to be successful it needs to be fully embedded into the Traveller community, and will need significant investment in order to reach the population properly and to be trusted.
- There is a need for innovative approaches to recruitment to research.
- There is an urgent need for culturally informed services to provide crisis responses to this population
- There is a need for an ethnic identifier at point of care to ensure accurate data on the healthcare needs of minority populations who have low levels of trust in the state (and who are reluctant to participate in research). The Traveller organisations such as Pavee Point and Exchange house are keen to progress this, and have had significant success in the work of the CSO in including this in the Census. However it will require training of frontline staff to ask the questions with the appropriate explanations and rationale.

### Recommendations for policy makers

- There is an urgent need for culturally informed services to provide crisis responses to this population
- There is a need for an ethnic identifier at point of care to ensure accurate data on the healthcare needs of minority populations who have low levels of trust in the state (and who are reluctant to participate in research). Further detail as above.

### Recommendations for services

- There is an urgent need for culturally informed services to provide crisis responses to this population
- There is a need for an ethnic identifier at point of care to ensure accurate data on the healthcare needs of minority populations who have low levels of trust in the state (and who are reluctant to participate in research)

### Recommendations for front-line practitioners

- There is an urgent need for front-line practitioners to receive training on culturally factors relevant to the Irish Traveller population and their health needs
- It is important to avoid medial jargon when interacting with patients, especially those with lower access to education

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**CONTACT DETAILS**

Anne.doherty@ucd.ie









**HSE Oifig Náisiúnta um Fhéinmharú a Chosc**  
Ospidéal Stewart, Baile Phámar, Baile Átha Cliath 20

**HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention**  
Stewarts Hospital, Palmerstown, Dublin 20

Tel: 01 7785112

Email: [info@nosp.ie](mailto:info@nosp.ie)

Twitter: [@NOSPireland](https://twitter.com/NOSPireland)

[www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie)