

**The effects of discrimination and poverty on education and accommodation– an exploratory study of Traveller children in Ireland, 2011**

**A literature review of existing resources investigating the topic of poverty and children.  
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Children remain to be one of the most vulnerable groups in Ireland and are dependant, in many ways, on the state for protection. Within the *Children Act 2001*, it states that a 'child' means a person under the age of 18 years. While the recent recession in Ireland has impacted enormously on many families, businesses and individuals, the direct effects of the economic downturn on children warrants further attention. Children have often been indirectly penalised when policy makers are developing strategies for financial recovery. Examples of this can be seen from the budget cuts to child benefit in the 2011 budget, the abolishment of the early childcare supplement and the cuts to many social welfare payments such as the lone parents allowance. (Department of Finance).

While these cuts effect nearly every child living in Ireland, approximately 24% of Traveller children are living in one parent family households (State of the Nations Children, 2010, Pg 19). As these cuts are directly to state supports for children and their families, these cuts will have a major impact on the lives of nearly a quarter of Traveller children in Ireland as both child benefit and lone parents is cut. Additionally, direct cuts to Traveller children's supports in education is evident in the withdrawal of the visiting Teacher for Travellers, the phasing out the Traveller training centres and also the removal of the Resource Teachers for many young Travellers (Pavee Point, 2011). While the government says these cuts are essential due to the recession, it must be questioned as to whether these cuts to targeted Traveller supports will have a detrimental effect to the lives of many Traveller children living in Ireland. Moreover, many local authorities and their failure to implement local Traveller Action plans is another example of where Traveller children's lives are impinged on due to the failure of the state. According to the Pavee Point, the 1995 Task Force report on Travellers recommended that approximately 3,100 unit of Traveller specific accommodation was required by the year 2000 to adequately house Traveller families. To date, though, only 251 units have been built (Pavee Point, no date).

The Equality Tribunal states that discrimination 'occurs if a person is treated less than favourably than another person is, has been, or would be treated under any of the nine grounds' (Equality Tribunal, no date). These nine grounds for discrimination include, amongst eight others, membership of the Traveller community. The Traveller Community in

Ireland is an identifiable group of people with their own shared history, culture, language and values. They are an 'indigenous minority who, historical sources confirm, have been part of Irish society for centuries' (Irish Traveller Movement, no date). While Travellers themselves have no 'standard theory to their origins', the common bond to their ancestry is the fact that Travellers were nomadic for most part of the year (Hayes, M., 2006, Pg 11). According to a recent Irish study, there are over 36,000 Travellers living in Ireland, which represents approximately 1% of the whole Irish population (Pavee Point, no date). Of this 36,000, 42% are under the age of 15, which is nearly double the majority population figure of 21% (Pavee Point, no date). Travellers also remain to be one of the most discriminated groups in Irish society, in areas such as education, accommodation, health, wealth and access to employment. According to Pavee Point, Traveller children are a 'minority within a minority [...], they suffer all the ill effects of inadequate provision that the Traveller community as a whole experiences' (Pavee Point, no date). Based on research to date, this statement may represent a proportion of Traveller children who are exposed to discrimination from an early age.

When measuring poverty, the Government's National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (2007) outlines the concept of 'at risk of poverty' as 'identifying particular groups which may have difficulty keeping pace with living standards generally' (Pg. 25). This measure, however, does not measure poverty but highlights 'the proportion of people below a certain income threshold' (National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 Pg. 25). Figures, though, can vary when comparing the income levels of families with other countries or when using thresholds set by organisations such as the United Nations (National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 Pg. 25). This type of poverty is also referred to as relative poverty or income poverty (Combat Poverty Agency, no date). This explanation differs somewhat to the concept of 'consistent poverty'. Consistent poverty is measured by identifying 'the proportion of people, from those with an income below a certain threshold, (less than 60% of median income), who are deprived of one or more goods or services considered essential for a basic standard of living' (National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 Pg. 24). According to the Combat Poverty Agency, consistent poverty is a combination of both relative poverty and relative deprivation (Combat Poverty Agency, no date). What this suggests is that consistent poverty occurs when a person or family's income are under the

threshold set out (at risk of poverty) and they cannot afford basic necessities that many take for granted such as a heavy winter coat, the inability to financially maintain a warm home or buy new clothes (Combat Poverty Agency, no date).

In 1990, the Irish Government signed the UNCRC: the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which publicly highlighted their commitment to promoting, protecting and fulfilling the rights of children in Ireland (Children's Rights Alliance, no date). Under this convention, it outlines, amongst many others, a 'child's right to life and the needs that are most basic to existence, such as nutrition, shelter, an adequate living standard, and access to medical services' (Children's Rights Alliances, no date). While this commitment to the protection of children in Ireland was welcomed, there are many children who are still living in poverty and coupled with this, face direct discrimination to their most basic of needs. According to the 2009 CSO Survey on Income and Living Standards (SILC), children, between the ages of 0-17, were at risk of poverty at a rate of 18.6%, while 8.7% of children were living in consistent poverty, up from 6.3% which was recorded in 2008 (SILC, 2009). While these statistics are very telling, children from the Traveller Community have been identified as one of the groups most at risk from different levels of poverty (Focus Ireland, no date).

Due to the ongoing issues that Travellers in general experience in their day-to-day living, children unfortunately experience the knock on effects of these problems. For example, according to the recent All Ireland Traveller Health Study, Traveller women are living 11 years less than settled women, with Traveller men living 15 years less than settled men. For Traveller infants, the infant mortality rate is 3.5 times the rate that is for settled infants (Pavee Point, no date). Ireland is undergoing extreme financial crisis at present, with thousands of families affected by job losses and trying to survive on social welfare. While these families are very much at the fore front of job creation policies, it is people and communities who are long term unemployed or long term social welfare recipients who will find it even more difficult to manage in the changing climate. At present, the unemployment rate for Travellers stands at approximately 74.9% which is in huge contrast to the recorded national level of 8.4% (Pavee Point, no date). Children who are exposed to and living the realities of poverty are also often excluded from accessing leisure activities, the latest technology or toys. According to the Combat poverty Agency, children who live in

a low income household or experience ongoing poverty gives rise to three possible potential risks of exclusion. These are: 'exclusion from everyday social activities and experiences of other children, early school leaving or unfulfilled potential or exposure to drug use, joyriding or early lone motherhood' (Combat Poverty Agency, no date). Even the most basic item of access to a playground is one of the most missed amenities for children who experience poverty. Research has shown that a child's well being and their life choices are heavily influenced due their exposure to poverty (Dolan, P & Devaney, C. 2007, Pg 71).

Many children from the Traveller community face discrimination daily due to their cultural identity. Basic needs such as education and accommodation are directly affected because of decisions made by local authorities or Government. According to the Pavee Point, the 1995 Task Force report on Travellers recommended that approximately 3,100 unit of Traveller specific accommodation was required by the year 2000 to adequately house Traveller families. To date, though, only 251 units have been built, with an emphasis on housing Travellers in 'settled' accommodation such as council housing estates and private rented (Pavee Point, no date). This emphasis on integration as opposed to diversity has forced many Travellers with young children to leave their homes and return to the illegal encampments or trailers in the back of family homes. While there are many official Traveller specific sites nation wide that are maintained to a good standard, there remain many unofficial Traveller sites that have no access to running water or electricity. It has been estimated that around 7% of Travellers are living on these types of sites (AITHS, 2010, Pg 12). At present, the Irish Government do not recognise Travellers as being 'ethnically different from the majority of Irish People' (Coates, D., Kane, F. & Treadwell Shine, K. 2008, Pg 10), therefore leading to the conclusion that specific accommodation need not be provided, with an emphasis on assimilation in to the wider settled community (Coates, D., Kane, F. & Treadwell Shine, K. 2008, Pg 10). This approach goes against the enshrinement into law the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 which outlines a local authorities requirement to provide 'culturally appropriate accommodation' to members of the Traveller Community ([Irish Traveller Movement, no date](#)).

Policy in relation to Traveller accommodation in Ireland is very much a top down approach and many Traveller children can be the victims of sub standard accommodation and the

implications that go with it. A report into the living standards of a halting site in Galway published in 2009 highlighted clearly the link between poor living standards and health problems. The report outlined that the lack of critical facilities such as a safe play area for children, proper sanitation and access to electricity mains were associated with many of the health issues that residents discussed in the report (Travellers' Health Matters, 2009, Pg 5). Additionally, the Irish Traveller Movement have highlighted that 'studies have shown that there is a critical link between improved accommodation for Travellers and better uptake of education, health and employment services' (Irish Traveller Movement, no date). By forcing many families and young children into sub standard accommodation, local authorities are putting a barrier between Traveller children and their full access to education and so on. Additionally, it has also been argued that the 1963 Report of the Commission on Itinerancy, which sought to solve the 'problem' of itinerancy, has made it difficult for Travellers to acquire appropriate accommodation as their way of life was not seen as something that needed to be accepted, only something that needed to be solved (Coates, D., Kane, F. & Treadwell Shine, K. 2008, Pg 78).

Traveller education is another area that has been at the forefront of many Traveller support groups' campaigns over the last year. According to the former NCCRI, 'some schools still refuse to accept Travellers using the pretext of being full or unsuitable' (NCCRI, no date). Whether this is still happening is an issue that is a hard one to measure. The 2011 Budget brought about many cuts to the provision of educational support to Traveller children. The withdrawal of the Visiting Teacher for Travellers and the phasing out of Senior Traveller Training Centres (many of which would have Travellers under the age of 18 undertaking courses) are two of the direct hits that the Traveller Community have taken. On a wider scale, the withdrawal of Resource Teachers will also have an impact on the support that many young children receive during formal education (Pavee Point, no date). For a community that already faces direct discrimination in many other aspects of their lives, now Traveller children are faced with increased struggles through education. According to recent studies, 'approximately 6 out of 10 Traveller children (58.9%) lived in families where the mother had no formal education or primary education' (State of the Nations Children, 2010, Pg 22). Therefore, if a young child cannot receive the educational support that they need in the home due to this issue, many young children's education will now suffer,

possible leading to early school leaving or non transition to secondary or third level. According to the 2006 Census statistics, 63.2% of Traveller children left school under the age of 15 in stark contrast to 13.3% of the wider settled community (CSO, 2007). It has been noted by advocates in this area that Traveller children do not see the benefits in staying in education due the 'discrimination in trying to obtain employment' once they leave school (All Ireland Traveller Health Study, Pg 13). In a recent statement by Barnardo's, it states: 'The cuts to Traveller-specific services is a short-sighted saving that will cement intergenerational cycles of disadvantage in the Traveller community' (The Wheel online, 2011).

The National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2007-2016 has committed itself to ensuring, amongst others, that 'every child [...] grow up in a family with access to sufficient resources, supports and services...' (Pg. 30). Within this report, it identifies Traveller children as having 'specific vulnerabilities' in relation to education and it states that recommendations made in the Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education strategy will be implemented by 2011 (Pg 35). However, as mentioned above, cuts to supports for Traveller children will continue to have negative effects on the lives of many children. In the Survey of Traveller Education Provision conducted in 2005, it highlighted a recommendation from various principals which called for 'increased levels of financial and staffing support for schools with larger numbers of Traveller pupils' (Pg 74). This survey also highlighted the importance of parents in the lives of their children and the support that needs to come from home in order for a child to achieve their full potential. However, the survey also acknowledged that this support from parents may not be available, 'especially if their own literacy skills were poor and they could not offer any assistance' (Pg 50). The issue of literacy among older Travellers (over 18 years of age) also remains to be a critical issue for many, even though our education system has improved rapidly over the last number of years.

To further this study, the link between poverty and discrimination needs to be researched further. UNICEF states that 'children living in poverty face deprivations of many of their rights: survival, health and nutrition, education, participation, and protection from harm, exploitation and discrimination' (Minujin, A. et al. 2005, Pg. 8). The issue of discrimination because of cultural background is one that cannot be ignored. Young Travellers in this

country who are living in poverty experience not only discrimination due to their financial circumstances, but also discrimination due to their ethnicity. Access to education and accommodation are two social issues that remain to be addressed by the new government. Recent comments by the Minister for Education Ruairí Quinn, though, echo back to the original 1963 Report of the Commission on Itinerancy when he stated : 'In a sense, the first step for the Traveller community in maximising educational opportunities for their children is to become settled' (Dail Debate, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2011). The new programme for government 2011-2016 states that the new government will 'improve co-ordination and integration to delivery of services to the Traveller community [...] particularly in area of Traveller education through the DEIS programme' (Programme for Government, 2011, Pg 42). This commitment to Traveller education appears vague and could also be argued as a contradiction to the cuts that have been now implemented to Traveller education supports. The 2005 Department of Education and Science survey on the provision of education to Travellers concluded that 'the scale of low achievement in literacy and numeracy among pupils at primary level gives cause for serious concern. Many Traveller pupils are transferring to post-primary schools with extremely poor skills in literacy and numeracy' (Pgs 35-36). Furthermore, the links that exist between access to culturally appropriate accommodation and Travellers lives cannot be ignored. The Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, which criminalised trespass on public and private land, further highlighted the lack of awareness and understanding on the governments part of the nomadic nature of Traveller culture (Hayes, M. 2006, Pg. 265).

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