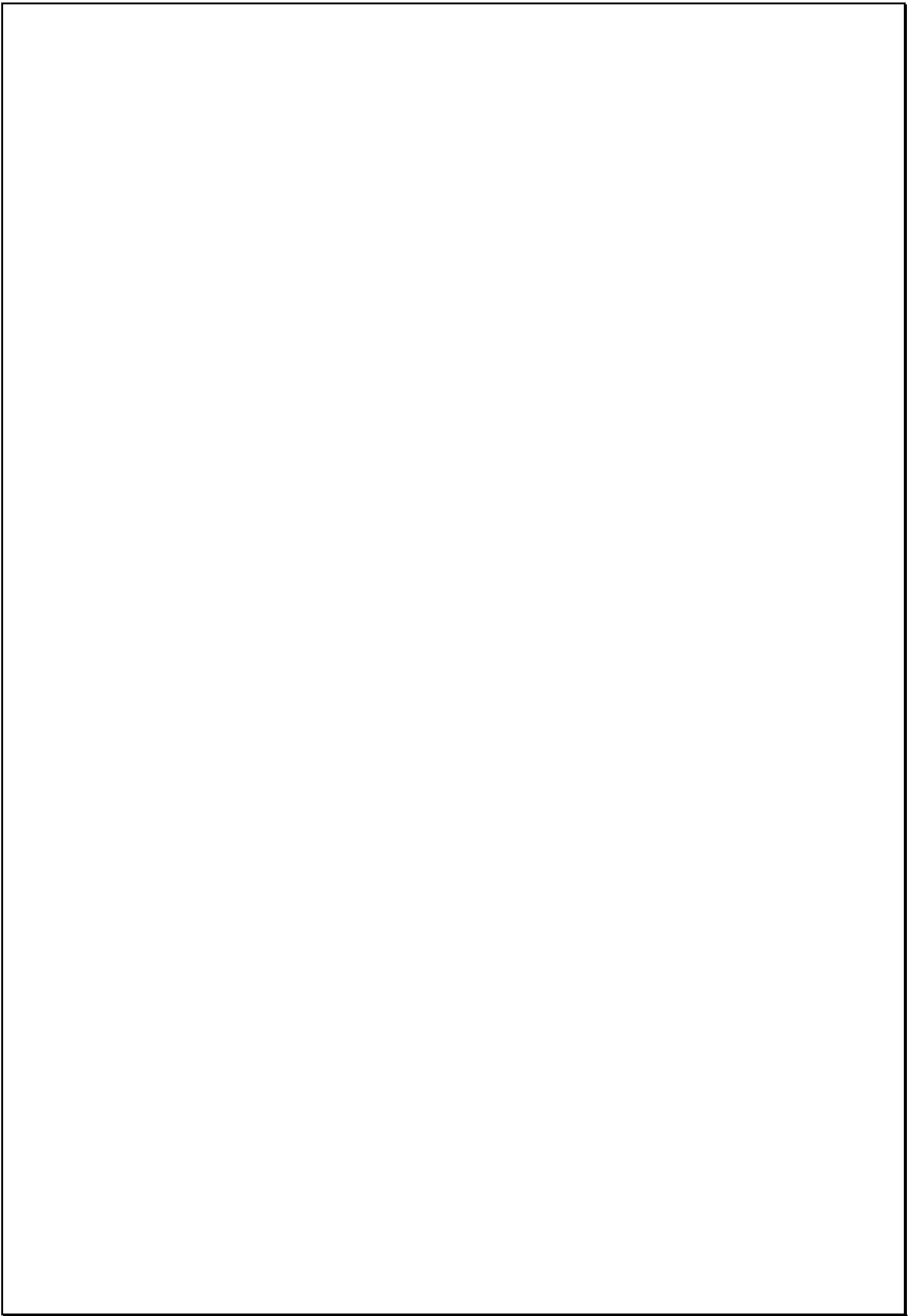


# **Gypsy and Traveller Prisoners: A Good Practice Guide**

Conn Mac Gabhann and Joe Cottrell-Boyce



**Produced by the ICB Traveller Equality Project**  
50-52 Camden Square, London, NW1 9XB  
Tel: 02074825525  
[travellers@irishchaplaincy.org.uk](mailto:travellers@irishchaplaincy.org.uk)





## Introduction

A 2014 HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) report estimated that 5% of the prison population in England and Wales is made up of Gypsies and Travellers.

The National Offender Management Service has made concerted efforts to engage with the Traveller prison population in recent years. In 2011 the code 'W3 - Gypsy or Irish Traveller' was added to the P-Nomis monitoring system for the first time. Many prisons now hold Traveller groups, appoint Traveller reps and hold Traveller history month events in an effort to promote inclusion.

There is still much work to be done however, with the HM Inspectorate of Prisons' report, 'People in Prison: Gypsies, Romany and Travellers' (March, 2014) concluding that:

*'The number of Gypsy, Romany and Traveller prisoners continues to be underestimated within the custodial estate. Furthermore the distinct needs of this group are often not recognised and go unsupported.'*

The Traveller Equality Project has been working with Travellers in prison for several years. We visit prisons around the country, help establish Traveller Groups, provide diversity training, produce a quarterly newsletter and contribute to the monthly 'Open Roads' Traveller hour on National Prison Radio.

We have produced this guide to answer some of the most common questions asked of us by prison staff, and to help prisons better meet the needs of this group and as a result reduce reoffending.



## Traveller Groups in Prison

Traveller Groups are an excellent forum for prisons to resolve issues, improve communication and reduce conflict with Traveller prisoners.



### Key Points

- Traveller Groups are effective when the meetings have a direction and focus rather than just being social gatherings. Traveller prisoners should be **involved** in deciding on an agenda of issues they think need to be addressed. Once groups are up and running, it may be useful to have a 'theme' for each meeting; perhaps inviting staff from different departments to come along so that the Traveller prisoners get a sense that they are being listened to by the prison.
- Traveller Groups provide an excellent forum for specialist staff to gain an **understanding** of the needs of Traveller prisoners and overcome barriers to engagement. This is especially relevant for education staff, given the extremely high rates of illiteracy in the Traveller community. Groups provide a 'safe space' for staff to talk to Traveller prisoners and 'sell' the benefits of engaging with education.
- It is very easy for Group meetings to become solely an opportunity for complaining, which can become de-motivating. To avoid this, meetings should be structured and solution focused, with a set number of issues discussed at each meeting. These issues should be followed up by staff, making enquiries with appropriate colleagues in the prison. Giving feedback on matters raised at the next meeting will help prisoners see that groups are constructive and worthwhile.
- Traveller groups should be kept varied and interesting. This could involve showing films or documentaries relevant to Traveller culture (available free of charge from the Traveller Equality Project), or inviting outside speakers to address the group.



- Meetings should be inclusive of different Traveller backgrounds – Romany Gypsies, Welsh Kale, Scottish and Irish Travellers – and avoid being slanted towards one culture. Free resources are available from the Traveller Equality Project, celebrating different Traveller cultures.
- Having something to work towards can help keep up the momentum. Many prisons now hold Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month events in June. Events might include traditional singing, storytelling and performances, or even traditional food. Celebrating Traveller culture in prison helps break down barriers and misconceptions and can be educational for non-Traveller prisoners.
- Traveller Groups are effective when they are held on a regular basis and are part of the wider equality framework within the establishment as this shows that the prison values the role of these forums.



## Traveller Representatives

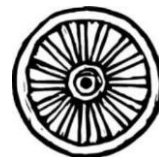
Many prisons now appoint dedicated Traveller Diversity Representatives. Traveller Representatives can speak up on behalf of other Traveller prisoners in diversity forums, and can help promote communication and understanding between the prison and Traveller prisoners.

Because of their trusted position, Traveller Representatives can help identify support needs of new Traveller prisoners in reception, and encourage other Traveller prisoners to identify themselves as 'W3 – Gypsy or Irish Traveller' on P-Nomis.



### Key Points

- Many Travellers are wary about opening up to people outside their community. Traveller Representatives are therefore most effective when the **Representative is a member of either the Irish Traveller or Gypsy Community.**
- Traveller Representatives are effective when a candidate can be found who has the necessary privileges to be **allowed access to Traveller prisoners on reception and on other wings.**
- Prisons that allow Traveller Representatives to meet prisoners on Reception have reported **increased declaration rates for 'W3 – Gypsy or Irish Traveller'**, allowing the prisons to better identify the needs of this prisoner group.
- Traveller Representatives are most effective if the **role includes organising a regular Traveller Group Meeting.** Group Meetings give a regular platform for Travellers to give direction to the Representative.
- Traveller Representatives should have a regular opportunity to **represent the issues facing the community** to prison management, Diversity and other prison departments.



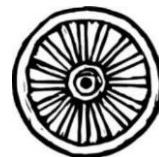
## Ethnic Monitoring

The ethnic monitoring of 'W3 Irish Traveller / Gypsy' was introduced to the P-NOMIS system in 2011.

Effective monitoring of Traveller prisoners is essential for the prison service to gain a proper understanding of the specific needs of this group.

### Key Points

- Many Gypsies and Travellers are reluctant to officially declare their ethnic background because of **past experiences of discrimination**. In prison, this reluctance is even greater because of the risk of name-calling or bullying.
- Prisons should routinely ask incoming prisoners at Reception whether they are from a Gypsy or Irish Traveller background. This process is helped by permitting the **Traveller Rep to visit reception on induction**.
- Traveller prisoners should be encouraged to identify themselves as 'W3: Irish Traveller / Gypsy' ethnic category on the P-NOMIS system. It should be **explained** that the reason the prison service wants to identify Traveller prisoners is so that it can better meet the needs of this group.
- Officers should **'sell' the benefits** of declaring ethnicity. For example explaining that the prison will be better able to provide support such as regular Traveller Group meetings, access to Traveller magazines or an annual Gypsy Romany Traveller Event.
- Prisons should ensure that Traveller prisoners are able to **change their ethnic category** during their sentence by informing the appropriate diversity or personal officer.



## Mental Health

Travellers are more likely to suffer from poor mental health compared with other groups in society. Suicide rates amongst Traveller men are far higher than in the general population. In prison, such trends are likely to be made worse unless suitable mental health safeguards are in place.

A 2014 report by the HM Inspectorate of Prisons found that:

*'27% of Gypsy, Romany and Traveller prisoners reported feeling depressed or suicidal on arrival (compared with 15% of other prisoners). However, they were less likely to report receiving information about what support was available for this (35% compared with 44% on non-Gypsy, Romany and Traveller prisoners).'*

### Key Points

- Many Travellers find it difficult to discuss personal issues with non-Travellers. It is therefore important to have support in place for Travellers to discuss such issues; for instance through access to a **Listener or a Traveller Rep.**
- Traveller Groups provide an opportunity to normalise the discussion of mental health. Meetings which encourage discussions about worries and problems help to dispel feelings of isolation. Inviting speakers from outside prison who understand mental health issues as they affect Travellers and using resources such as DVDs produced by Traveller organisations can create a **safe environment for discussing mental well-being.**
- Travellers often have very strong relationships with their families, including their extended family. As such they may be very troubled by an incident which has occurred outside prison such as the death or illness of a relative. Prisons should be mindful of this and pay attention to the mental wellbeing of Traveller prisoners following such an event.
- Funerals, weddings and baptisms are focal points in the lives of many Travellers. Therefore, the inability to attend such events while in prison is a severe hardship and can lead to an **extreme emotional response.**





## Education and Training

Many Gypsies and Travellers in prison have had limited formal education and there are very high levels of illiteracy within the community. This can make it difficult for Travellers to access training and jobs in prison, as they fail to meet minimum literacy requirements.

A 2014 a HM Prison Inspectorate report found that:

*'Lower proportions of Gypsy, Romany and Traveller prisoners currently had a prison job, were engaged in vocational or skills training, or were involved in education than non-Gypsy, Romany and Traveller prisoners.'*



### Key Points

- Many Travellers want to gain education and training in prison, but may be **wary of engaging** due to negative experiences of schooling. Education departments should proactively engage Traveller prisoners, via Traveller Groups and Traveller Reps.
- Education departments should consider **feasible adaptations** to make education and training more accessible to those with low literacy. This might include embedded learning on vocational and offender behaviour courses, mentoring or buddy schemes. Allowing Travellers to improve their literacy and numeracy in conjunction with accredited courses can help reduce reoffending.
- The **Shannon Trust Reading Plan** (formerly Toe-by-Toe) has been shown to be particularly effective with Traveller learners. The one-to-one nature of learning on the plan is attractive to Travellers who have had bad experiences of classroom learning. Prisons should promote the Shannon Trust Reading Plan to Traveller prisoners via Traveller Groups and Reps.



## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Why should prisons ensure equal opportunities for Gypsies and Irish Travellers?**

As groups of people with distinctive ethnic origins, Gypsies and Irish Travellers fall under the definition of sharing a 'protected characteristic' of race under the Equality Act 2010. The principle of equality of opportunity in the Equality Act mean that prisons can, must and most importantly, SHOULD adapt the way things are done to improve access for groups such as Travellers.

### **Are Travellers that don't travel still Travellers?**

Travellers are an ethnic group with a shared heritage. Just one part of that shared heritage is the custom of nomadism – moving on for work and pleasure from place to place. Nowadays it is very difficult to live a nomadic life or even to live on an authorised site or halting site because of various laws and prejudice. BUT living in a flat or house or wherever, a Traveller still remains a Traveller because that is his or her heritage and ethnic origin.

### **Why do you use a capital letter for 'Gypsies' and 'Travellers'?**

Gypsies and Travellers are groups of people – an ethnic group – and so for the names of things we always use a capital letter. It is a matter of respect for a group, just like when we use a capital letter for English, Irish and French.

### **Where do Gypsies and Travellers come from?**

Although Gypsies (Romanies and English Travellers), Welsh Travellers (Kale), Scottish Travellers and Irish Travellers (Pavees or Minceir) have different origins, they share similar experiences and traditions. Generally speaking Gypsies, Romanies and Kale originated in Northern India – although they have lived and worked in Britain for many centuries. Scottish Travellers mainly have their origins in Scotland and Irish Travellers have their origins in Ireland.

