

## **Traveller precarity, public apathy, public service inaction, a reply to Jo Richardson's article from a community work perspective**

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In this short response to Jo Richardson's (2017) article on precariousness and the housing situations on Gypsy/Traveller/Roma sites in the UK, we seek to evaluate and apply the ideas within our own experience and that of relevant communities in Ireland by bringing perspectives based on community work and a rights-based approach. Our response will focus on the situation relating to Irish Travellers<sup>3</sup> and will incorporate a reflection on the most significant recent development relating to Traveller rights in Ireland – the official recognition in March 2017 by the Irish Government that Travellers are a distinct ethnic minority, following similar recognition by the UK Government. 2017 also marked the publication of a new National Traveller & Roma Inclusion Strategy in Ireland (Department of Justice and Equality 2017). Our response will also consider perspectives based on recent coverage of these issues by mass media.

### **Absolute precariousness and the Traveller accommodation crisis**

Richardson's article outlines the precarious situation relating to the accommodation of Travellers, Gypsies and Roma in the UK. The analysis is supported by the recent research undertaken with Codona (Richardson and Codona 2016), bringing a rich source of direct experience and personal testimonies of over 120 people on sites through England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Richardson considers absolute, relative and perceived precariousness that applies to the experiences of these communities.

In October 2015 a tragedy occurred in Carrickmines, a suburbs of Dublin City, that brings the absolute precariousness of Travellers' accommodation in Ireland into sharp focus. A sudden fire broke out at night on a local authority halting site, killing 10 Travellers, including 5 children, from an extended Traveller family. The incident was sympathetically reported widely in the media, with the funeral service shown on the evening news. When the family was moved from the site to be housed by the Council in a liminal space nearby – a Council owned vacant car park in a *cul de sac* – the residents nearby objected and formed a blockade. Despite

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<sup>3</sup> Since the 1990s the term Traveller is preferred by Travellers and is used almost exclusively in Ireland, while the term Gypsy is no longer in common use. Minceir a cant word, is used by many younger traveller activists.

voices in the media calling for empathy and tolerance, and public assurances from Council officials that the site would not become a long-term or permanent site, the blockade continued. After a few weeks the Council caved in to this pressure and opted for a less appropriate site. The extended family at the heart of the tragedy now moved back in to the redeveloped site but ensuing fire inspections in local authority halting sites have been followed by closure of other sites. This experience mirrors some of the findings in Richardson's paper that public discriminatory attitudes are often exasperated by local authority inaction or actions that further underscore discrimination towards Travellers.

Richardson's description of an ongoing accommodation crisis for Travellers in the UK is mirrored in Ireland. She (2017) references a difficult case: 'in a wider climate of political hostility, the former police and Crime Commissioner and a senior police officer were trying to reframe the debate, bringing local councils together to view the problem of unauthorised encampments through the lens of insufficient accommodation'. The right to accommodation and the current situation where there is insufficient accommodation for Travellers/Gypsies/Roma may be implicit but worth repeating as a necessary underlying factor in this analysis. In the Census 2016 analysis, Traveller accommodation in caravans, mobile homes or other temporary shelters increased just over 10% in the years from 2011 to 2016, having previously shown a substantial decline. Almost 40% of traveller households met the definition of overcrowding (where number of persons exceeds number of rooms) compared to 6% of households overall (Census Statistics Office 2016). This is especially concerning, given that Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights states that 'everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including [...] housing and medical care and necessary social services' (UN, 2012).

On May 5<sup>th</sup> 2017, two months after the March announcement of official recognition of Traveller ethnicity, *The Irish Times* published an article outlining how local authorities in Ireland failed to spend more than €1.2 million provided to them by the Department of Housing to build Traveller accommodation in 2016, failing to fulfil the legislative obligations of the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998 (Power 2017). The article cited examples of serious concern, including one of the largest halting sites in the country, which was described as being in 'shocking condition', having originally being built for 10 families and now housing 34 families and 150 people. The article reflects Richardson's findings of sites in liminal spaces being managed by local authorities in ways that range from neglect through 'ticking along' to well managed, and where poorly managed sites can generate greater public objections to any proposed accommodation solutions.

The Richardson and Codona JRF (2016) study highlights another aspect that is familiar in the Irish context, the sad observation by individual public servants that low-key or under the radar approaches to accommodation needs (for example, through negotiated stopping where services are provided and unofficial temporary encampments are tolerated) are necessary, because by shining a light on that hidden method the whole approach could be eroded. It speaks to an acceptance that the current housing response is dysfunctional and normalises responses that are unconventional and outside public policy. But it also speaks a little to the humanitarian and public service instincts of individuals and some 'lone voices' whom Richardson found to be attempting to improve situations locally against a background of challenging realities. This is important, if only because a recent Behaviour and Attitudes Traveller Community National Survey found that 78% of people would not have Travellers as neighbours. This points to local authority difficulties in providing suitable accommodation against enormous push-back from settled communities. The same survey finds these same attitudes replicated by public agencies with 33% of Travellers reporting having experienced discrimination from local authorities and housing bodies (O'Mahony 2017).

In considering the significance of the state recognition of Travellers as a distinct ethnic group, being made up by people who share certain characteristics such as culture, language, religion or traditions, it may be worth asking whether the analysis of the housing and accommodation needs of Travellers/Gypsies/Roma should be viewed through this lens, rather than the lens of the settled majority population, from which the policy makers, decision makers and academics come.

Emily Logan, chief commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) that reports to the UN, reflected this view when she said that Travellers as a recognised ethnic minority have a ‘right to culturally appropriate housing’ (Power 2017). This would mark another significant departure from a policy of ‘assimilation’, the key recommendation from the first Government policy relating to Travellers – A report of a Commission on Itinerancy in 1963, and fulfil some of the spirit of the Irish Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act in 1998, which obliges local authorities to meet the current and projected needs of the Traveller community in consultation with Travellers locally.

This question of providing ‘culturally appropriate housing’ is at odds with the observation posed by the finding of the Richardson and Codona JRF (2016) study that the current response to accommodation needs in the UK generate self-reinforcing negative discourse around Gypsies and Travellers. The National Traveller & Roma Inclusion Strategy attempts to strengthen central government efforts on provision of Traveller Accommodation by robust monitoring and reviews to prevent the underspend by local authorities as referenced in The Irish Times (Power 2017) article.

Richardson’s article mentions but does not directly address other aspects of precariousness affected by housing, such as health, wellbeing and education. The All Ireland Traveller Health Study of 2010 (Institute of Public Health 2010) also co-produced research, found significant health disadvantage particular to the Traveller population while a more recent ESRI (Economic and Social Research Institute) Report in Feb 2017 highlighted extreme disadvantage suffered by Travellers in Ireland across a range of indicators, including health, housing, education, employment and mortality (Holland 2017). Travellers surveyed for the Behaviour & Attitudes Survey cited ‘mental health, accommodation and unemployment as the aspects of life which they perceive to have declined over the past five years’ (O’Mahony 2017). In O’Mahony’s survey, over 90% of Travellers agree that mental health issues are common within the community but also that there is general discomfort in discussing mental health issues. Most shockingly perhaps 82% of Traveller community members report that they have been affected by suicide. A traveller woman responding to this survey captured vividly the toll this has enacted on the community: ‘We’ve a pain in our shoulders from carrying coffins’ (O’Mahony 2017).

Significantly, the ESRI stated that the recognition of ethnicity could be of considerable benefit ensuring respect for the cultural identity of Travellers in the context of targeted services. Given that the report also stated that 70% of Travellers live in caravans or overcrowded housing, and that there is a higher birth rate among the Traveller population, the need for an appropriate housing response is urgent and growing.

Richardson, in introducing the idea of liminal spaces, mentions that these spaces are often located near roadsides, dumps or power lines. These spaces are uninhabited and available for temporary encampments because they are unsafe or unfit for human habitation. The fact that these are often the only spaces available for Traveller/Gypsy/Roma accommodation, and the effect of this on the health, education and well being of those who live there, in particular the youngest and the oldest in the population, needs to be set against the background of insufficient accommodation provided by the local and national Government. The voice and visibility of Travellers in these processes needs to be mentioned here. In Ireland organisations such as the Irish Traveller Movement and Pavee Point operate at national level, while, locally,

organisations such as the Traveller Visibility Group<sup>4</sup> (TVG) in Cork, are Traveller-led for Travellers. These organisations act as advocates for Travellers' needs and rights and represent Travellers on consultative committees including the Local Traveller Accommodation Action Committee LTAAC. A response from such organisations in the UK to the findings of the Richardson and Codona (2016) survey would add usefully this perspective to the analysis.

The cultural identity of Travellers is strongly connected to their tradition of nomadism, and the dynamics around their housing needs can be viewed as distinct to those of other groups. In the Irish context, Travellers often maintain possession of caravans, enabling their tradition of nomadism to be still relevant and practised, often seasonally, within Ireland and also across to the UK. Most sites that Travellers live on, both official and unofficial, are adapted or in some cases designed to have space for these caravans. In addition, in keeping with their history, the horse has a central role in Traveller culture and ownership of horses is still prevalent. This brings other challenges both for Travellers themselves, for the settled community and for local government in terms of the use of liminal spaces for grazing, and brings up questions of animal welfare. While some good practice projects have been supported in Dublin and Tralee, there remains local opposition to other such initiatives. A recent Horse Project in Cork, which would have supported horse grazing and some training for young Travellers in horse welfare was supported by an interagency grouping including Traveller Projects and Cork City Council. The site identified for this project did not require planning permission. However, when the local authority decided to seek it anyway, they were met by 128 objections in an area where there are perhaps 30 residents. Predictably perhaps in light of this, planning permission was refused, but those same residents are appealing this decision on the grounds that the refusal wasn't strong enough!

Richardson suggests that the use of the term 'ghetto' or 'ghetto-like' is useful as a means of analysing the control of this minority by the dominant sector of society and the poor maintenance of sites in this light. The comparison of Traveller-specific sites to ghettos is a challenging one, but the observed effects of poorly managed and maintained sites contributing to the creation of self-perpetuating perceptions among the settled population, while troubling, cannot be ignored. However, the usefulness of the term to critique attempts at state control may need to be balanced against its being imposed from a different setting and reflecting quite different social dynamics. An alternative way of looking at this that reflects another analysis is to recognise the origin of the word 'site' as camp-site, and to recognise that Travellers live in extended family groupings, or 'clans', separate from other family groupings, with a range of complex inter-family social norms that are a much stronger factor in determining individual behaviour than the factors that typically apply to individuals or families in the settled community or, indeed, in city 'ghettos'. As such, the idea of a 'ghetto' or 'ghetto-like' may not always be useful, and if it is to be used we would advocate consultation with Travellers themselves.

In conclusion, the article poses a number of useful, if challenging and troubling, questions that have a strong resonance in Ireland. If the vision of a diversity of culture and the embracing of difference that Jo Richardson poses is to be achieved then shining a light on the current situation is both necessary and urgent. However, if the observed effect of current public housing policy in action in the UK in relation to Travellers/Gypsies/Roma is as Richardson suggests, through either neglect (e.g. the pothole of doom) or in mainstreaming management,

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<sup>4</sup> The TVG are members of CESCA (Cork Equal and Sustainable Communities Alliance) and were participants in the cross-cultural working group in Cork, hosting one of the sessions featuring a presentation by Mary Graham, a representative of the aboriginal people in Australia. This generated a rich exchange on the values shared by both peoples. NASC (The Irish Immigration Support Centre), an NGO is another member of CESCA that supports people from the Roma community in Cork and throughout the country.

it is instead generating self-reinforcing negative discourse around Gypsies and Travellers and this vision is further away than ever. The space provided by the cross-cultural working group has brought these questions up in a new way and has provided the authors with a sense that there is solidarity around addressing the precariousness that Travellers/Gypsies/Roma and Aboriginal people face than was previously unimagined.

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