



Older Travellers

The definition of 'older people' among Travellers is quite different to that of the majority population. Many Travellers could be grandparents at 40 years of age although, similar to the majority population, the demographic profile of the Traveller community is changing as people are marrying later and having fewer children.

Nonetheless, the age profile of Travellers remains very different to that of the general population. According to The All-Ireland Traveller Health Study 2010 the gap in the health status and life expectancy between Travellers and the general population has widened since the last study on Travellers health which was conducted in 1987. The life expectancy at birth for Traveller women is now 70.1 years, which is 11.5 years less than women in the general population, and is equivalent to the life expectancy of the general population in the 1960's. Life expectancy at birth for Traveller men has remained at the 1987 level of 61.7 years which is 15.1 years less than men in the general population.

- 3% of Travellers are aged 65 years and over compared with 13% of the general population.
- Only 8 Travellers were found over 85 years of age.

Just like older people in the majority population, older Travellers are experiencing increased loneliness and social isolation in modern Ireland. Unlike the majority population, these difficulties are compounded by racism, higher than average rates of poverty and significant levels of social exclusion based on ethnicity – experiences common to many Travellers. The changing economic, social and demographic profile of Ireland has also had a disproportionate effect on Travellers.



Older Travellers have expressed frustration and alarm at the growing level of discrimination and intolerance emanating from an increasingly hostile settled community. While welcoming increased levels of literacy and, as a result, opportunity among younger Travellers, older Travellers find adapting to the pace of such changes and the subsequent erosion of intergenerational solidarity to be equally unsettling.

Travellers perceive a lack of understanding of Traveller culture and issues presenting to Traveller people, such as literacy problems and living standards, among health and social service providers. This led to an almost complete absence, in their experience, of intercultural competent service delivery. Health services, for example, were described as being 'provided by settled people, for settled people.'

"And that's what happens sometimes, when people go to hospital. They can't read or write, they could be late for their appointment, they mightn't get there till the following day, and if you go into that hospital, if you're

dirty, which no one likes, the nurses and doctors don't know what that person came out of. They don't have an understanding. She doesn't know type of conditions." (Pavee Point 2008)

Older Travellers share a sense of being disregarded by younger members of their own community. This was attributed to significant changes that have occurred to the Traveller community over recent decades. As a result, older Travellers not only faced discrimination from the settled community, they also felt alienated from the rest of the Traveller population. They shared a strong sense of social isolation. Experiences described were in this sense new, as participants described a past in which Travellers were an accepted part of Irish society.

"We were accepted, we were accepted travelling and at the side of the road, there was no fear in us. Where today if you went on even in a trailer and there was a space to pull in, you'd be afraid, you'd be afraid what'd happen to you."

The issue of long stay care is also a more recent phenomenon for older Travellers. Increasingly older Travellers are going to nursing homes but staff are often ill equipped to cope with cultural differences among residents and lack formal training in cultural awareness, and anti-racism measures necessary to adequately and sensitively facilitate older Travellers.

In 2013 Pavee Point completed an intergenerational project with Older and Younger Travellers. The initial stage of this initiative was older and younger Travellers working together on projects which represented their lives and culture and how these had changed. In December 2012 a showcase event was held in the European Union House in Dublin where these projects were displayed. The project led to the launch of a booklet, "Pavees Travelling through the Generations."

