

Translocations:

The Irish Migration, Race and Social Transformation Review

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REVIEW ESSAY

Travellers and Roma - Education and Health Issues

Pavee Point (2006) *Assimilation Policies and Outcomes: Travellers' Experience*, Dublin: Pavee Point, 68 pages

Pavee Point (2005) *A Review of Travellers' Health Using Primary Care as a Model of Good Practice*, Dublin: Pavee Point, 48 Pages

Lesovitch, Louise (2005) *Roma Educational Needs in Ireland. Context and Challenges*, Dublin: City of Dublin VEC in association with Pavee Point Travellers Centre and the Roma Support Group, 107 pages

Multiple parallels can be drawn between Roma and Traveller communities in terms of traditions and life-style, but also the experiences of racism and social exclusion from the majority society. Although most of us may believe we have a pretty good idea about who the Roma and Travellers are and what precisely their particular needs are, this may be far from the truth. Common sense knowledge that the majority society shares is usually rich in myths of nomadic, ever-on-the-move people, usually involved in criminal activities and begging, whose only talents revolve around singing, dancing and tinkering. However, the reality is that most Travellers and Roma now live settled in communities and lead a sedentary life. Lack of reliable data and stereotyping were and still are impediments in designing an efficient set of policies and programmes to improve the quality of life of a targeted group.

As a result of outstanding research designed to address this lack of knowledge about the Roma and Travellers population in Ireland, the three reports bring rich evidence and highlight critical issues of access to health services, education and accommodation as experienced by these ethnic groups. International academic literature and policy papers in the field of social integration have insisted on the need to give priority to special initiatives and programmes covering key areas such as education attainment, health status and service provision to ethnic minorities.

The *Assimilation Policies and Outcomes: Travellers' Experience* report presents data obtained from an exploratory research on the Traveller population, which

continues to be one of the most discriminated-against minority in Ireland. The aim of this research was to outline Travellers' perceptions on key issues such as their history and traditions, the relations with local community and institutions, experiences of discrimination and access to accommodation and education. Two towns have been chosen as field locations in order to reflect different local policies and provisions for the Travellers. Besides group discussions, interviews with service providers in both towns as well as secondary data analysis on policy documents and print media contribute to an integrated and original approach on the Travellers' image and identity.

It is interesting to note that, although Travellers have been targeted by multiple initiatives to improve their access to education, employment and, generally speaking, to a better quality of life, most of these initiatives have failed due to a lack of understanding and consideration for the Travellers' culture. However, culture should not be taken as a 'given' and fixed set of values, traditions and norms. In an excellent selection of interview data, the researcher highlighted the effects that abandoning the nomadic life-style and adopting a 'settled' living have had on traveller culture and the sense of their identity. The children of the long-gone nomads show still strong group solidarity, however, the sense of adhering to a common identity and set of values has diminished considerably. 'Borrowing' from the settled community's habits and life-style, appears to have had little impact, however, on the equal treatment of Travellers in the communities where they live. Major obstacles encountered, such as accessing accommodation, show clearly the persistence of discrimination and lack of social integration. This study concludes that in order to design efficient community development initiatives and programmes, more research needs to be carried out in order to answer the key question about the 'true' Traveller identity.

The report has a balanced structure covering both historical and present aspects of the Travellers' Community. Starting with a comprehensive review of the historical developments of the relations between the Traveller and the settled community, the report then proceeds to an analysis of the written local press to portray the image of the Travellers. Enriched by multiple and very relevant quotations from the group discussions with Travellers, the research report illustrates their own perception on the relations and interactions with the local community.

The second publication, *A Review of Travellers' Health Using Primary Care as a Model of Good Practice*, is part of a series of reports produced by Pavee Point as part of the Primary Health Care for Travellers' Project. This report presents the outcomes and as well as the challenges of the project, highlighting its multi-level approach to the primary health care issues of the Traveller population. The report begins with an outline of the key issues related to the Traveller health status, showing comparative health statistics of Travellers and settled population. It proceeds next to the identification of the main factors that are impacting on the health status of Travellers. Lack of recognition of the Travellers' culture and ethnic identity, discrimination, lack of proper housing and living conditions, and low levels of

participation in education are factors that are linked to the health situation of the Travellers.

The Primary Health Care for Travellers Project began in 1994 and it was designed to target multiple dimensions linked to the poor health status and difficult access to health services. The project's objectives were to establish a model of Traveller participation in the promotion of health and also to highlight the existing gaps in the delivery of health service. In addition, there are also key objectives aimed at developing the skills of women in Traveller communities, and at facilitating the dialogue between Travellers and health service providers.

This report brings valuable evidence about a successful project for improving the primary health care for Travellers, thus allowing this model to be replicated by other NGO's in other areas and with other groups as target. Along with research data on such key issues such as health or education etc., evidence of successful initiatives are welcome and very useful in order to improve the situation of marginalised populations.

The third report, *Roma Educational Needs in Ireland*, was a result of research undertaken by the City of Dublin VEC, Pavee Point Travellers Centre and the Roma Support Group under the Education Equality Initiative. The first of its kind in Ireland, this research aimed to assess the specific needs and barriers encountered by the Roma population in accessing and participating in the Irish educational provision. The research, mainly qualitative, has engaged a mix of data collection methods, such as: focus groups and life history interviews with Roma adults and interviews carried out with service providers in the field of education. The use of drawing interviews with Roma children has innovatively complemented the set of fieldwork data. In an effort to overcome the dearth of statistical information and knowledge about Roma, the report starts by outlining a profile of Roma community and its traditions using as main sources previous surveys and existing international literature. As in the case of Travellers, persisting images and stereotypes of nomadic life-styles still dominate the knowledge that we have about this ethnic minority.

However, an interesting approach proposed by this research is one that views exclusion of the Roma as a phenomenon experienced on multiple levels. First, members of this community have experienced numerous difficulties and have been persecuted in the countries of origin. From an estimate of 12 million Roma, most of them are believed to live today in Europe, with large populations living in Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary. As refugees and asylum seekers in Central and Western European countries, Roma have not escaped racism and discriminatory treatment as the report shows. In particular, the participation of the Roma in Irish educational system is still very low due to multiple barriers encountered.

Following a comprehensive review of the initiatives and programmes developed in Ireland and internationally to facilitate the access of Roma to education, the report then proceeds to present the main themes emerging from the fieldwork. Going further than merely identifying the barriers encountered by the Roma related to participation in education, the interviews show interesting links between access to education and some aspects of Roma culture and traditions, in particular their views on family and gender roles. Having acknowledged the main problems that children and adult Roma population are experiencing, viewed in the context of their unique culture, the researcher proposes a set of measures and recommendations that need to be taken in account in order to improve Roma access to education in Ireland.

Due to their original and innovative approach and methodology, these reports are contributing to filling some of the long-existing knowledge gaps that exist about the Roma and Traveller population. Moving away from the traditional image and stereotypes of the Roma and Travellers is a necessary step in order to initiate and promote a comprehensive set of social inclusion measures and programmes. However there are also multiple remaining problems and, therefore, there is a need for further research projects and evaluations of existing programmes in this area.

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