Irish Travellers Past and Present
The *Irish* Traveller Community: An investigation into their struggle to combat poverty and social exclusion in daily life.

“You’ve got to move fast to keep up with the times
For these days a man cannot dander
There’s a bylaw to say you must be on your way
And another to say you can’t wander”
Ewan MacColl – ‘Thirty Foot Trailer’
University College Cork, Ireland

- Ciara FitzGerald
- Suzanne Leclaire
Introduction: Our Project

Hypotheses:

1. Do the Traveller Community experience social exclusion due to prejudices held against them because of their unique culture?

2. In comparison to members of the settled community, is the Traveller Community’s poorer health status linked with their high poverty and social exclusion?

3. Could Occupational Therapy make a difference in improving their health status?
To gain insight into the current health/social status of members of the Traveller Community.

To increase our awareness of the rich, unique culture of the Traveller Community and how this often misunderstood culture impacts negatively on their access to health services.

To determine the accessibility of healthcare services to the Traveller Community, with a particular focus on Occupational Therapy Services.

To discover what Occupational Therapy Services may benefit members of the Traveller Community.
**The Irish Traveller Community**

- *Traveller community means the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and tradition, including historically a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland’. (Government of Ireland, 2002)*

[Image: www.geocities.com/~Patrin/ireland.htm]
Irish traveller history is mostly undocumented. Many theories exist:

1. Descendents of peasants forced onto the roads due to the Great Famine of 1840
2. ‘Culture of poverty’ (Gmelch, 1974)
3. ‘Drop out’ theory

Irish culture should properly be seen as an outcome of a complex interaction between settled and nomadic ways of life. (McVeigh et. al, 2003, p. 18)
Traditionally Irish travellers were commercial rural based nomads selling a wide range of goods and services- ‘**Transient Trading’**

After the 2\textsuperscript{nd} World War there was a decline in Irish Traveller economy forcing many Travellers to move from.....
Rural
Urban
This led to many illegal and unserviced sites, especially around the Dublin area.
A specific anti-Traveller racism developed from the 1960s onwards.
• Image of Travellers as:
  • Trespassers
  • Alcoholic
  • Criminal
  • In Need of Rehabilitation

• Increased use of the Government Sanitary Services Act (1948) to contain Travellers mobility
No traveller representation involved

Did not represent the real lives or activities of Travellers

Travellers were portrayed as a social and moral problem

Report has been the cornerstone of government policy since
Other Factors That Reduced Mobility

- Social welfare payments
- Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2002
- Presence of boulders preventing camping around the country
Media Portrayal

- "Deasy suggests birth control to limit traveller numbers"  
  (Headline in Irish Times, Friday, June 14, 1996.)

- "Good relations knackered"
  The conflict is not between settled and Traveller. It's between decent people and 'knackers'.
  (Sunday Independent 31 August 1996)

- "Killarney is literally infested by these people".
  (County Councillor quoted in Cork Examiner, 18th July, 1989)

- "The sooner the shotguns are at the ready and these travelling people are put out of our county the better. They are not our people, they aren't natives."
  Remarks of a Fianna Fail Councillor at a Waterford County Council meeting. (Sunday Independent, 14 April 1996)
Accommodation

• **Side of the road with little or no facilities**

• Members of the Traveller community are more likely to live in standard or group housing accommodation
Tinsmithing and horse dealing are no longer commercial enterprises but they still remain a big part of Traveller identity.

Disposing of the possessions of the dead—everything associated with the dead person is destroyed.
• Large families

• Celebrations

• The “Fair Fight” - fighting for honour
• Importance of family and kinship
• Importance of the extended family
• Travellers do not accumulate and therefore do not bequeath capital (Ní Shuínéar, 2005)
• Status measured through earning power and honour
• **No hierarchy**
Occupation and Work:

- Scrap metal recycling
- Market trading
- Horse dealing
- Often keen dog breeders such as greyhounds or lurchers (Burke, 2007)
Education

“Travellers should have equality of access, equality of participation and equality of outcome in a fully inclusive education system that respects Traveller identity and culture...”

(Department of Education and Skills, 2006)
Education:

• According to the recent “All-Ireland Traveller Health Study” (2010),
  • In ROI, only 38.5% of 30-44 year old Traveller’s and 25.8% of 45-64 year olds had primary education.

• Quote from Traveller teenager:
  “Slow learners, like I got put into a room with the teacher fixing jigsaws and I got put into the slowest class in school. Slow learners every one used to call it. And I got put into that like automatically without even doing a test. And just putting me down like”.
Play and Leisure

- Road bowling
- Cycling
- Horse and carts - “Sulkys”
- Boxing
- Soccer
- Handball
- Horse Shoes
Language

A “Secret” Language

1. Shelta, Cant, Gammon.

2. “Markers” (Hayes, 2006)

What is health?

“What is health? “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” (W.H.O., 1948)
Health

• “All people need to be able or enabled to engage in the occupations of their need and choice, to grow through what they do, and to experience independence or interdependence, equality, participation, security, health, and well-being.” (Wilcock & Townshend, 2008, p.198).
Female Life Expectancy 11 Years Less

Male Life Expectancy is 15 years less

Only 3.3% of the Traveller Community are over 65 years compared to 11% of the general population.

Traveller men mortality rate x4

Traveller women mortality rate x3

Suicide Rate x6
Most Travellers believe they experience poor health and attribute this to three main factors:

1. Lack of Appropriate Accommodation
2. Discrimination
Use of Hospital Facilities by the Traveller Community (2005)

- Differences occur at all levels from access to follow up appointments
  - 50% of settled people used outpatient services compared with 11% of Traveller patients

71% of settled patients were referred to clinical services while only 18% of Travellers were referred
Methodology

- Literature review - Major gap identified

- Qualitative Phenomenological Methodology

- Analyse participants’ experience of meaning

- Examine personal descriptions of lived experiences so these experiences can be better understood (Giorgi, 1985).

- Comprehend the holistic complexity of people’s lived experiences
Subjects for the questionnaire and interview were located by contacting the Traveller Visibility Group in Cork City

- Issued questionnaires to 10 members of the Traveller Community

- Group Interview with three members of the Traveller Community, one who is a Health Development Worker. Also one non-Traveller who is also a Health Development Worker
Data Analysis
How would you rate your health?
Do you feel like your access to medical services has been affected by being a member of the Traveller Community?
Are you aware of your access to Primary Healthcare services such as Public Health Nurse, Occupational Therapy, Social Work?
Do you know what Occupational Therapy is?
Conducted a Group Interview with 3 members of the Traveller Community, One Who is a Health Development Worker and One Non-Traveller Health Development Worker
General Health

“Lack of exercise, unhealthy lifestyle”

“Chesty coughs, colds…”

“Conditions are extremely tough in the sites....the outside bathroom is hard concrete, no heating....spread of viruses....overcrowding”
Life Expectancy

“The men would have to be on their **deathbeds** before they’d go to the doctor”
Access to Services

“Some G.P.s won’t take on Travellers”

“People living in houses have better access to services”
Awareness of Occupational Therapy Services Among the Traveller Community

“No outreach from health professions to the Traveller Community”

“Trust Issues...A Trust Barrier”
Evidence that the Traveller Community experience social exclusion due to prejudices held against them

Both literary and qualitative reports of poor health status and low life expectancy
Role of Occupational Therapy?

- Lack of awareness in the Traveller Community

- Services of interest:
  - Behavioural management
  - Health Promotion
  - Rehabilitation Services
  - Home Modification
  - Mental Health Support
  - Adaptive Equipment Provision
  - Education Programmes
  - Work Skills Training
  - Communication and Social Skills Training
Conclusion

- Occupational therapy is a service which could benefit the Traveller Community in the above ways
- Promotion of Occupational Therapy and Occupational Therapy Services
- More Occupational Therapy Literature is needed which applies to the Traveller Community

Future Actions:
In conjunction with the Traveller Visibility group, develop a leaflet about Occupational Therapy that is Traveller oriented
Acknowledgements

- We would like to thank everyone working at the Traveller Visibility Group located in Cork City, Ireland for their support and invaluable information.

- We would also like to thank all our lecturers in the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy in University College Cork, in particular our mentor Shelley Mack.
Members of the Traveller Visibility Group
References

- Adelaide and Meath Hospital incorporating the National Children’s Hospital (2005). Use of hospital facilities by the traveller community. Eastern Region: Traveller Health Unit.


• University College Dublin School of Public Health and Population Science. (2010). All Ireland Traveller Health Study.

Bibliography


Thank you!

Any Questions?