

Hold Out A Hand

Exploring mental health & suicide prevention within Gypsy & Traveller communities

Project Report – May 2022



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Executive Summary

Rural Media was commissioned by the Worcestershire County Council Public Health to collaboratively develop a film and a short report. The film, entitled [Hold Out a Hand](#), encourages community engagement

with mental health & suicide prevention support services and, within their own communities. We also hope **Hold Out a Hand** will stimulate conversations.

The project builds on work already carried out by GATEHerts (Gypsy and Traveller Empowerment in Hertfordshire), Traveller Movement, LeedsGATE (Leeds Gypsy and Traveller Exchange) and research conducted by Friends, Families and Travellers, by engaging with seldom heard Gypsy and Traveller communities, to empower them to share their own lived experience and encourage Gypsy and Traveller people to seek support and advice.

This report is intended to provide information and recommendations for anyone working in Mental Health services generally and for Worcestershire County Council Public Health specifically. Its purpose is to promote better engagement by Gypsy and Traveller people with mental health services and support.



Key barriers to engagement are:

- **Judgement:** Some Gypsy & Traveller people report being feeling ‘shameful’ brought up in communities where talking about mental health and depression are discouraged. Women fear being judged as ‘bad mothers’ or worry about having their children taken away and Men fear being considered weak and not able to support their families. Both genders reported a culture of being told to ‘pull themselves together’
- **Lack of confidence in public services:** Gypsy and Traveller people reported feeling excluded from Public Health and Mental Health services citing a lack of cultural understanding and providers ‘not speaking their language’ or recognizing themselves reflected in information materials.
- **Racism & Discrimination:** Social isolation and exclusion, racism and discrimination from wider society and negative media all compound to create a mental health crisis. This BBC report from Ireland explains <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-61133612>
It is felt that over time significant barriers have been put in place to prevent Gypsy and Traveller people leading a nomadic and traditional lifestyle which have greatly impacted on the mental health of Gypsy and Traveller people.

Key recommendations to tackle the issues raised by the research and story gathering:

1. Information and engagement resources could be made more culturally appropriate.
2. Gypsy and Traveller people should be represented within Mental Health prevention services as trained staff
3. Wanting to talk but not knowing how to start a conversation is a regular issue among those we spoke to. A need for trigger films, articles, social media posts and other resources as conversation starters are important and highly valued.
4. Key messages about ‘Looking after your mental health’ were valued by some and a need for Gypsy and Traveller people themselves to provide listen support to others.
5. Government intervention and financial support for services came up frequently. *Mortality data published by the ONS are collected from the information provided at death registration but as this information does not include the ethnicity of the deceased, there are no official data on deaths by suicide among Gypsies, Roma and Traveller (GRT) individuals in England and Wales. As noted by the Department of Health the failure to collect ethnic data through the death registration and inquest processes ‘is a major obstacle to getting reliable and accurate data on suicides and to improving the evidence base and monitoring trends’

*From the 2019 Traveller Movement policy briefing addressing mental health and suicide among Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in England

Recommendations

- Train more Gypsies and Travellers to work in front line Mental Health care services
- Create culturally appropriate films and information for Gypsies and Travellers
- The government should take positive action to collect data on deaths by suicide in Gypsy and Traveller communities which is not currently collected in England, Scotland and Wales.
- More financial support should be made available to bespoke support services such as 'One Call Away' or to train Gypsy and Traveller people in counselling and suicide prevention services.

Background

Rural Media is led by founder and CEO Nic Millington, supported by the Senior Management Team of Creative Director Grant Black, Finance & Operations Director Richard Deane, Head of Development Rich Matthews and Head of Production Julie Colman. The Charity has a Board of seven Trustees, to whom the CEO and SMT report. It has been working for almost 30 years with individuals of all ages and communities experiencing social, geographic and material deprivation, with multiple and/or complex needs.

Our approach is person and community centered, believing that everyone has an important story to tell and the right to be heard. Working with diverse communities we provide participatory training, production opportunities, support, work experience, information and advice.

"Travellers' Times gives us a seat at the table, a platform to speak that we don't get in the mainstream. When it comes from Travellers' Times people listen."

Davie Donaldson, Dec 2019

Travellers' Times is Rural Media's national Gypsy, Roma & Traveller-led project that enables Gypsies, Roma & Travellers – especially younger community members – to develop and use communication and media skills to challenge discrimination, celebrate their history, culture and achievements, and play an active part in all aspects of contemporary society. The offices are based in Hereford; activity and audience are nationwide. Recent societal changes triggered by Covid have demonstrated *Travellers Times* continued effectiveness with all *Travellers Times* staff working remotely across the country.

Travellers Times also provides unique and valuable tools and resources for working directly or indirectly with Gypsies, Roma & Travellers, bringing greater awareness and understanding alongside a unique line of communication that is highly respected and trusted by the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community throughout the UK.

A high-quality platform with more than 1 million unique views per year that enables Gypsies, Roma & Travellers to be heard, TT celebrates the culture and challenges stereotypes and negative mainstream media representation. A bi-annual print magazine and website (www.travellerstimes.org.uk), TT also delivers information, advice and guidance, media skills, news-writing courses and events to train and support Gypsies, Roma & Travellers to tell their stories, educate people and advocate for their communities.

Project overview

The project was delivered in three key stages:

1. Outreach & Programme Development

Level 1 Engagement with NGOs and Researchers working in this field: Zoom sessions and telephone calls were held with GATEHerts, Traveller Movement, Friends Families and Travellers and LeedsGATE to share knowledge and research

Level 2 Engagement with Gypsy and Traveller people: Conducted by phone, Zoom and in person with Gypsies and Travellers both in Herefordshire & Worcestershire and across the UK. The purpose of the consultation was to gather first person experiences and to inform the content, direction and creative treatment of the film to have the most impact.

Level 3 Engagement: Direct Contact – with Gypsy and Traveller people with powerful and impactful real lived experience stories to share.

2. Interviewing and Production

Through the outreach and programme development we identified three key contributors who were comfortable being interviewed, all with lived experience different experiences – two with personal stories to tell and one with professional experience.

3. Dissemination & Reporting

Travellers Times and Rural Media are leveraging in-kind value to the project including 'long-tail' promotion and specialist articles. As the only UK- wide GRT platform and publication, we hope the project will benefit from a high level of community engagement on an ongoing basis. TT's existing help and

support channels will also ensure a legacy of care and wellbeing for any contributors to the project, which will be of paramount importance given the very personal and sensitive nature of the subject for the community.

Delivery of the final film and this report will precede a dedicated campaign and distribution plan we will provide feedback and engagement figures on an ongoing basis.

The issues below have been summarised in three broad categories and discussed to identify potential solutions with GRT charities, groups, NGOs and community members.

Judgement and Shame

Some of the people we spoke to talked about the shame men and women feel about speaking out about their Mental Health. Being told to 'pull themselves together' is a recurring theme.

"If a women gets married and her husband is abusive she'd rather hang herself than leave. They won't see leaving as an option. Their family won't stand by them, they won't get to keep their kids, they have nowhere to go and no money anyway. A lot won't understand how bank accounts work. We need to stand by our sisters, daughters, friends, nieces, granddaughters and make sure they know its not shameful to leave – its strong and brave" **Katrina, Romany Gypsy**

"Nobody wants to talk about it. Nobody. It's shameful in the eyes of God and it's shameful if you are a parent because you haven't done right by your kids" **Charmaine, 35, Irish Traveller**

"As a Gypsy Man it's my job to provide for my family, keep everyone safe, keep every in a home, keep everyone happy – it's a lot of pressure but Men don't talk things it's just not our way, maybe we should but I wouldn't know how to start and I'd worry people would think I was weak fool" **John, 49, Irish Traveller**

"I seen young girls called out by their 'family' and 'friends' on so called 'Traveller Shame pages. Young women tricked in to sending pictures or photoshopped pictures or just lies made up about them and they feel so shameful they take their own life. It has to stop"

Lack of confidence in Services

Many people feel that racism and misunderstanding about Gypsy and Traveller culture remains rife. It's also widely thought that suicide support services generally are not equipped to understand travelling communities or their culture.

"We are Travellers and family is everything to us so we should support each other better. It's hard though, maybe it would be easier to talk someone we don't know" **Chris, 34, Irish Traveller**

“Main stream services don’t understand us. Don’t understand our language. More money needs to go in to training Travellers to be counsellors and support workers – we won’t to talk to people who understand us – but don’t know us – so we can be understood but completely safe. Mille, 25, Romany Gypsy

Racism and Discrimination

Feeling socially excluded, stereotyped, bullied in school and the workplace, abused online and in the media came up as a recurring theme.

“Every single day of my life I see something online that is damaging to me and my community, sometimes it just horrible and racist, sometimes it’s just a throwaway ‘joke’ – doesn’t matter every time it makes me sad and ashamed of who I am and that’s hard to deal with .” Jason Romany Gypsy

“Bullied in school, hid my identity to get a job when I left, I never speak out about all the casual racism, feel sick with guilt all the time ... I hate myself sometimes” Shannon, Romany Gypsy

*“We get treated like s**t all the time, I always feel angry and assume everyone wants to fight me so I’m always on the attack. I know it don’t help really but I just get so mad with people I see red, use my fists and get in to trouble with the law. I make my Mum sad – she says she couldn’t stand another of sons in prison and I really think she wouldn’t cope but I can’t help myself although I try and try – life just feels too hard some days” Johnny, Irish Traveller*

Observations

Travellers Times are in a trusted and privileged position of getting access to a traditionally very private community but it is clear that the appetite for dialogue and discussion with services is there. Official data shows that Irish Traveller people living in Ireland are over six times as likely to die by suicide. It is widely believed that the figures in England, Scotland and Wales are similar and that the Government can and should be taking action to address this. However, data on deaths by suicide in Gypsy and Traveller communities is not collected in England, Scotland and Wales and this means the Government know little about how suicide impacts Gypsy and Traveller people. This in turn means that the Government does not have any targeted activities planned to reduce suicides within Gypsy and Traveller communities as it does with other groups such as middle aged men or people who have served in the army.

Without data, it is difficult to make the case that there should be more support for Gypsy and Traveller

people who may be struggling with suicidal thoughts.

Statistics

We engaged with a total of 117 Gypsy and Traveller People and five organisations working on mental health research or front line services.

Of people we spoke to in person

- 63% were female
- 37% were male
- 23% were Irish Travellers
- 77% were Romany Gypsies

We spoke to people in the counties of

- Herefordshire
- Worcestershire
- West Midlands local authority
- Hertfordshire
- West Sussex
- Hampshire
- Cambridgeshire

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Organisations involved:

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GATEHerts
Travellers Times
Rooftop Housing Group
One Call Away

Film contributors

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And with a huge thanks to all our contributors who spoke to us so honestly and openly for this report.

Further reading

LeedsGATE – Don't be Beat Report <https://www.leedsgate.co.uk/dontbebeat>

FFT – Researching Young Travellers Mental Health Report <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/researching-young-travellers-mental-health.pdf>

The Traveller Movement – Addressing Mental Health and Suicide among GRT communities <https://wp-main.travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Mental-Health-and-Suicide-among-GRT-communities-in-England-Briefing-2019.pdf>