

Mental Health among Traveller School Children in Ireland - A Comparative Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

There is a gap in the literature on mental health outcomes among Traveller children in Ireland. Although there is evidence suggesting that the Roma people in Europe and Travellers in the UK have disproportionately high levels of depression and suicidality, there is limited research which focuses specifically on Irish Travellers and even less on Traveller youth.^{1,2,3} Those studies which have sought to fill this gap, such as the All-Ireland Traveller Health Study (AITHS), included only young adult and adult populations.⁴ Although the AITHS suggests that Irish Traveller adults are disproportionately burdened by mental ill-health in comparison to their non-Traveller counterparts, we seek to understand if the same patterns exist for Traveller youth.⁴

METHODOLOGY

This report includes data from a sample of 15,557 school children in Ireland who completed the 2018 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study. The HBSC study is a cross-national research study conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO) Regional Office for Europe and all countries abide by the HBSC International Protocol.⁵ The study aims to increase understanding of young peoples' social context, health behaviours and wellbeing and findings are based on students' responses to self-completion questionnaires administered in classrooms. Of the children who disclosed their Traveller status and gender, 450 out of 15,022 identified as Travellers. Six outcomes related to mental health and wellbeing were included in this report: The mental health summary score (MHI-5),⁶ perceived stress scale, Cantril life satisfaction ladder,⁷ happiness with self, self-confidence, and happiness with life. MHI-5 and perceived stress were analysed as continuous variables and t-tests were used to compare means between Travellers and non-Travellers. Life satisfaction, happiness with self, self-confidence, and happiness with life were captured as scale items and transformed to binary outcomes and chi-square tests were used to assess independence between Travellers and non-Travellers.

RESULTS

The majority of school-children in Ireland reported high life satisfaction and there were no significant differences between Traveller (79% for boys and 71% for girls) and non-Traveller (77% for boys and 70% for girls) school children. However, Traveller school children were significantly more likely to report being very happy with their lives than non-Traveller children (59% vs. 51%, $p < 0.01$ for boys; 58% vs. 45%, $p < 0.01$ for girls). Traveller children were also significantly more likely to report being very happy with themselves compared to non-Traveller children (41% vs. 30%, $p < 0.01$ for boys; 41% vs. 26%, $p < 0.01$ for girls).

Although Traveller children also reported higher levels of self-confidence than non-Traveller children, this difference was only significant in girls (26% vs. 22% for boys; 18% vs. 8%, $p < 0.05$ for girls). Finally, we found that there were no significant differences between Traveller and non-Traveller childrens' scores on the mental health summary scale or self-reported feelings of stress.

It is important to note that the analyses above have not matched Traveller samples with non-Traveller samples based on family affluence, family structure, or other social determinants of health.

CONCLUSIONS

Traveller school children in Ireland report either similar or better outcomes than non-Traveller children across all mental health items. While this differs from the evidence from Traveller adults, further work is needed to understand these patterns and to explore the emergence of mental health difficulties among youth and young adults. Longitudinal studies with Travellers would be beneficial in elucidating the epidemiology of mental health outcomes throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

REFERENCES

Available on request.