

# Interactions with the Traveller Community by Prison and Probation Staff

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**Summary:** Recent scholarship has provided insight into the experiences of ethnic minority offenders in prison (IPRT, 2014; Earle and Phillips, 2013; Costello, 2014; Edgar and Martin, 2004). Experiences of prison staff, including Probation Officers, working in prisons with ethnic minority offenders have not, however, been the subject of significant attention. Prison literature identifies that prison order requires cooperation between prison officers and those in custody. Prison functioning can be disrupted by communication issues based on cultural differences, as well as misunderstandings about authority. The efficacy of structured offender programming can be hindered when the approach taken in programmes is based on a different cultural perspective from that of minority ethnic members. Cultural competency, developed through formal training or life experience, can go some way towards overcoming challenges that can arise from cultural difference. Familiarity with ethnic minority cultures presents an opportunity to work constructively with minority group offenders. Based on interviews with a small sample of prison officers from three prisons, and Probation staff at one prison, this research considers the experiences of staff working with Travellers and Roma in Irish prisons. Interviewees were asked questions related to: prior life experience with minorities (particularly Travellers); their contemporary experiences with minorities and how these relate to their roles within the prison; suggestions for future training and preparation to enhance working with those from minority cultures in a prison setting.

**Keywords:** Cultural competency, Traveller, Roma, ethnic minority, prison officer, Probation Officer, bias, rehabilitation.

## Introduction

Overrepresentation of ethnic minorities in prison is a phenomenon in many national and subnational prison systems (Phillips, 2012; Lammy 2017; Nellis, 2016). The experiences of many ethnic minorities in prison have been the

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subject of studies (Costello, 2014, Edgar and Martin, 2004) that have focused on discriminatory treatment, denial of services and rehabilitation opportunities. The experiences of prison officers and Probation Officers working with ethnic minorities has been subject to less scrutiny. Although there is significant research with respect to racism within prisons, what has been subject to less scrutiny is the experience of prison officers working with persons of ethnic minority status. A large majority of criminal justice system personnel are white and male (MacNamee, 2018). Prison officers and Probation Officers working in prisons have their own knowledge, based in training, work experience, and occupational cultures (Garrity, 2018), as well as prior personal experiences of ethnic minorities. The literature on prisons identifies that prison management requires the cooperation between prison officers and prisoners around routine activities to maintain order. Cultural differences in communication, approaches to authority, and participation in daily life can interrupt prison management. The efficacy of structured offender programming, as well as regular supportive work undertaken by prison officers and Probation Officers can be hindered when the approach taken is from a cultural perspective that differs substantially from that of minority ethnic members. Cultural competence either through formal training or life experience can go some way towards overcoming cultural difference.

This research therefore was designed to examine aspects of the work of prison and Probation staff specifically as it connects with their formal skills and life experience of engagement with ethnic minorities. The focus was mainly on Travellers, although it also included Roma and other minorities. The research used a qualitative approach with a very small sample. Prison officers from three prisons and Probation staff from one prison were asked to participate in either a focus group or an individual interview. Three persons opted for an individual interview, and eight people participated in two focus groups — one of prison staff and one of Probation staff. The questions in the focus groups and interviews focused on: the participants' experiences with Travellers and/or Roma prior to working in the Prison or Probation Services; their contemporary experience in particular as it related to their roles within the prison; suggestions for adequate training and preparation for working with those from minority cultures in the prison setting.

Three distinct themes emerged from the collated data. The first is what is known in the literature as cultural competence, and subjects reported varying degrees of familiarity with Travellers based on a combination of prior personal experience before coming into the Prison or Probation Service, and on the

job experience. Related to this understanding was the ability to recognise cultural difference and integrate it into dealings with Travellers and, to a lesser extent, persons of Romani background. A second theme from the data was the level of engagement that Travellers and Roma were prepared to accept in order to pursue opportunities for rehabilitation and upgrading. The subjects reported on the need to work on ways to get Travellers involved in these kinds of activities. The last theme focused on the fact that routine activities of prison life require a degree of formal or informal cooperation between staff and prisoners. Staff recognise that there are different perspectives on this type of cooperation, based in cultural differences, and therefore some measure of adaptation is necessary. The paper will now consider each of these themes.

## **Cultural competence**

There are many descriptions of cultural competence, beginning in the 1980s in the fields of health and mental health (Martin and Vaughn, 2007). Generally speaking, it refers to the ability of individuals and/or organisations to understand, appreciate and feel comfortable with persons of other cultures, customs, languages, etc. Most of the literature on cultural competence in health and social service settings suggests that the development of such competence is a process that includes recognition of difference beyond 'learning a given set of facts about specific populations ... or attending a training on cultural competence' (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, p. 9) More important, particularly in the context of this research, is that it includes recognition that people from diverse backgrounds may 'perceive, interpret, or encounter similar experiences' differently (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, p. 9). In the prison setting, 'cultural competence is a necessary key to enable prison officers to be more effective in supervising and managing inmates coming from different cultures than their own' (ToersBijns, 2014). For prison officers, this can mean that understanding difference becomes important for the daily routine management of the prison, as well as providing opportunities for rehabilitation, personal growth and desistance from further offending after release (Herbert, 2015). The prison officers and Probation Officers in this sample had previous experiences with Travellers prior to entering the Prison or Probation Services, or had an openness to understand the culture of Travellers, and to a lesser extent

Roma, and how that impacted on their prison experience. Cultural competence was therefore something learned from work experience and, in some cases, learned against a background of previous, largely sympathetic experiences from the past.

One prison officer described contact with Travellers as a child on a farm when his father had regular contact with the Traveller community:

My dad had horses so we used to travel around the country when I was young so I would have had [interactions] with Travellers since I was small. When they came to our area they might camp on our land, they might try and sell my dad something, they've always called to us.

Another prison officer, also from a small rural community, spoke about his mother's contact with Travellers in his village.

I am from a little village in [a county] and there would be a large number of Travellers there and my mother used to look after them. I remember growing up and having them in around our house and stuff like that especially, they lived in tents and so, on bad stormy nights my mother would take in their kids and you would have them sleeping on our floor and stuff like that.

Other subjects shared similar experiences, although they were not always positive. One prison officer described contact with Travellers when they were young, using an older pejorative term to describe them:

I hadn't got much dealings with Itinerants before I came into this job other than there was a halting site in my town.... It was on the [two counties] border, but we must have got the problem kids of the Itinerant community, constantly shootings in the halting site; it was a kind of no-go area for the townspeople.

For those subjects who did not have childhood experiences with Travellers but rather learned about Travellers through work experience, the following is a typical comment, in this case from a Probation Officer:

I personally actually enjoyed working with members from the Travelling community even when I worked in the young offender institution ... they

were kind of my favourite clients that used to come in. Maybe because they were a little bit more challenging, they were never honest....

The Probation staff and prison officers in one of the prisons where this research was conducted understood and recognised that cultural difference was important. It was not clear from the data if this recognition was based on the individual subject's perception of its importance, or part of a broader systemic approach. This research was not intended to consider this. However, other prison systems with longer experience with prisoners of diverse ethnic backgrounds have been slow to acknowledge the need for appreciating diversity in work with prisoners (Douyon, 2016). On an individual level, the participants spoke about both what they learned and what skills they were able to utilise in their work with both Travellers and Roma prisoners:

I think like the cultural thing it is, like I say it's helpful to know but I definitely think it poses a lot of challenges particularly in terms of when it comes to release ... I think that is quite a challenging thing and you know, it's because let's say family is obviously very important for let's say, Travellers. Trying to separate someone from that side of things to encourage them around I suppose, more pro-social behaviours sometimes you know, you're at a loss straight away because of the environment [they are returning to]. (Probation Officer)

Family is a big thing with Travellers. If your dad is King of the Travellers, then when you're in here you're Prince of Wales. It doesn't matter how big or small you are because they know if they do anything to you when you go out or your family are out there, so there is like a hierarchy. (Prison Officer)

The women Travellers when they are vulnerable, they are very vulnerable, but the male Travellers it's not that they aren't vulnerable, but they wouldn't let on, but they seem to be more [able to] adapt to prison life than the women do. (Probation Officer)

For Roma prisoners, the fact that there is often a language barrier and that their culture is probably less well understood than that of the Traveller community can present particular challenges. Horgan's study of Roma women's encounter with a Probation project in Tallaght (Horgan, 2007) is instructive in terms of an

understanding of Roma culture. In particular, he was able to highlight both the insularity, especially of Roma women, from the dominant Irish way of life, and also the strengths their culture provided. Similarly, the report of the Tallaght Roma Integration Project (Jacob and Kirwan, 2016) highlights various aspects of Roma culture and traditions, but also draws attention to the disadvantage and marginalisation they have experienced in Europe, including Ireland. A lack of trust between the Roma community and agencies of the Irish State was highlighted in the Logan report, which recommended that 'State agencies need to develop their cultural competence' in dealings with the Roma community (Logan, 2014, p. 104). The comments from the subjects in the present study reflect these aspects:

I think with the Roma women, the barrier ... for me is the language, do you know what I mean? (Probation Officer)

I just find the Romas great to work with ... I really get on well with them, they've got that cheeky impishness about them. I like the Romas.... Not all the staff now would have much time for them. They'd be pretty well thought low of. (Prison Officer)

You can never believe a word they [Roma] say. Not one word that they will say is truthful and that's, I won't say that's not their fault, it's that that's their culture, they don't genuinely, they are like Travellers, they don't genuinely know the difference between truth and lies. (Prison Officer)

The Logan report highlighted a particular issue with respect to the perceptions of the Roma in Ireland. When there was no training with respect to understanding of the cultural difference between the Roma and the majority Irish population, '[I]n reality, this meant that stereotypes and generalisations about the Roma community were left unchallenged' (Logan, 2014, p. 109). Such stereotypes, overwhelmingly negative, have been recognised as a major issue in relations between the Roma peoples and majority populations not only in Ireland, but throughout Europe. When there is little in the way of understanding of cultural difference, there is a tendency to fall back on negative stereotypes. This has been well documented, particularly as it affects the Roma and Travellers (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2012)

## Engagement

The second theme from the interviews and focus groups related to the capacity as well as interest in ethnic minorities participating in correctional programming offered in the prison setting. There has been significant research on the participation of ethnic minority offenders in correctional programming in several other countries. A review of rehabilitative programme research with Australian Aboriginal offenders (Day *et al.*, 2003) suggests that the dominant paradigm for programming — the risk, need and responsivity framework — may need some adjusting for both indigenous and ethnic minority offenders. For example, they suggest that risk of imprisonment may be connected to discriminatory practices in a criminal justice system, need may be heavily influenced by non-criminogenic factors, and importantly for present purposes, ‘responsivity can also be improved by consideration of culturally appropriate ways of program delivery’ (p. 129). In a review of Canadian correctional programmes in the federal Correctional Service of Canada (Usher and Stewart, 2011), the authors found that ‘Offenders who participate in programming are less likely to return to custody than offenders who do not participate in programs, regardless of ethnic background’ but also that ‘Offender ethnicity and culture remain important responsivity factors in effective correctional programming’ (p. iii). A British review of the research (Shingler and Pope, 2018) found similar results in terms of programme effectiveness, irrespective of ethnic background. However, they also reviewed qualitative studies that considered the views of ethnic minority prisoners and suggested:

[T]reatment is perceived as most effective when it is delivered by culturally aware and sensitive treatment providers, and when it recognises and accommodates cultural differences. Treatment providers should be particularly mindful when there may be a single individual from a minority ethnic background participating in a programme. Evidence suggests this can lead to an individual feeling isolated and misunderstood in standard correctional programmes. (p. 21)

This last point is similarly reflected in the work of the Irish Penal Reform Trust, specifically in their report based on interviews with Travellers in prison. Some of the people interviewed for that report ‘spoke of how fear of discrimination could prevent someone from attending education and training courses’ (Costello, 2014, p. 14).

The participants in the study spoke of the challenges in working with Travellers and Roma, both in terms of establishing a working relationship around reducing the chances of reoffending, and with respect to cultural and linguistic barriers. The comments were often made within a comparative context, either comparing Travellers and Roma, or either group with Irish prisoners from the settled community.

I think it's difficult to form a relationship [with a Roma prisoner] like where sometimes like with the [prisoner] from the Travelling community, you can use a little bit of banter as well like you know what I mean, and they might pass a comment and say 'oh I like your shoes' or something you know, or just normal chat as well like but with the Roma [prisoner] it's quite difficult because of the language. (Probation Officer)

It's that kind of, you can give them [Roma] and offer them everything; if they don't see the value in it, they won't participate. (Prison Officer)

In this next quote, the prison officer mentioned the low expectations that Travellers might have with respect to their chances of not coming back to prison following their release, based on their assumptions about both what is expected of them and what they expect of themselves.

The Travellers kind of are, 'I am not coming back', but they really believe they will. There is no stigma really to it, they know that in their culture whatever they are going to be doing, they are going to go back robbing, 'I'll be back in prison,' it's you know, it's fine, it's part of the life.... So, middle class Ireland don't go to jail, Travellers go to jail all the time. (Prison Officer)

Research on ethnic minority prisoners in other jurisdictions provides some context for the issue of support after prison. For example, research that compared issues of re-entry between Roma and Romanian prisoners following release (Durnescu *et al.*, 2016) highlighted the importance of cultural and family support. Roma had stronger cultural and familial support to ease the difficulties of re-entry than Romanian prisoners.

Others in the research sample recognised that with Traveller women there was a possibility of making a connection to provide support, but that the language barrier and a cultural issue with respect to gender roles with Roma women and men made this more difficult. As one Probation Officer said:



Travellers, [it's] really positive, I think if you can get them on board and they realise you are there to support them and help them and they buy into that relationship, I think that can be used really positively, do you know, to motivate them, to address whatever, their offending, their addiction or you know, link in with their kids or if there is social work involved or whatever I think that can be really positive. Yeah, with the Roma, I mean I don't have huge experience with Roma either to be honest, but my experience is that it's harder to get that connection or that trust, because they are not forthcoming with information or they don't really tend to want to engage but yet, they feel they are quite innocent in all of it, you know, they kind of feel like they're the victim ... the husband or the man is always kind of there in the background so, it's harder to work with them I think.

A prison officer echoed this comment in terms of the engagement of Travellers if they can be convinced that it might be important to be involved in work training.

Generally, for the work training it would be very rare for Travellers to get involved with it even though I have tried ... they are actually quite good, when they put their mind to it actually they're quite good, but generally no, there would be little engagement there starting off, you have to encourage them to work.

## **Influence of cultural difference on legitimacy and prison management**

The third theme highlights the fact that the routine activities of prison life require a degree of formal or informal cooperation between staff and prisoners. A prison's daily routine has been described as being the result of the work of both prison officers and prisoners to see that prison order in some form is developed and maintained. As explained by Anthony Bottoms, 'order in prisons is to a large extent achieved through the subtle interplay of relationships between prison officers and prisoners, as they work their way through the prison day' (Bottoms, 1999, pp. 210–211). How that order emerges and is maintained is dependent on relations between the prison officer and prisoners. The potential for disruption is present when there are cultural differences in terms of communication and what is and is not

acceptable behaviour. As well, these cultural differences can be exacerbated if they lead to prejudice and/or feelings of discrimination. The study by the Irish Penal Reform Trust, referred to earlier, found that Travellers experienced both discrimination and respect from prison officers.

Interviewees also experienced offensive name-calling from prison officers. There was a shared view that this did not come from all prison officers; rather, people spoke of the 'odd, bad' prison officer who exhibited such behaviour ... another ... interviewee put this case more strongly, suggesting that prison officers treated with respect those who showed respect to them, and that this often led to particularly positive relations between Travellers and prison officers. (Costello 2014, p. 16)

The sentiment — when prison officers treated prisoners, in this case, Travellers, with respect, that such respect was returned — was expressed by several prison officer participants in the current research.

I find Travellers generally the easiest prisoners to deal with once you come to their level to deal with them. I find them quite easy to deal with compared to other prisoners.

One thing that stuck to me, an officer that we worked with in [a prison] said it to me and he was in the job a little bit longer than I am, he said historically Travellers had, and do have, respect for the officer.

From this perspective one might also assume that Travellers recognise a certain amount of legitimacy resides in the prison officers. Garrihy identifies prison officers' daily work as 'the frontline of prison legitimacy' (Garrihy 2018, p. 265). Prison officers must use their authority in a way that is seen as fair, and such procedural fairness means that the authority therefore is in some way legitimate. In working with Travellers, the participants in the research sample explained that they believed Travellers recognised and acknowledged that legitimacy. Prison officers, at least when working with Travellers, were, as Liebling describes it, less about enforcing the rules and more about handling a situation (Liebling, 2011). This was expressed in an exchange in one of the focus groups about what would happen if prison officers needed to break up a fight among Travellers, usually a fight that was based in a long-running feud between Traveller families external to the prison.

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Yes, with the Travellers yeah, if they are feuding with no fair play man, once the blue shirts arrive, it's fair game it's all over. Whereas, if it was the Irish or the Polish or whatever, we actually have to go in and break it up.

Another participant then added their agreement about dealing with Travellers when there is fighting among them in prison.

We are in less danger with a Traveller fight than we are breaking up any other kind of fight, but I know there was an incident recently where an officer got hurt with Travellers, but again they were Travellers that are down a different path, they are on drugs, mental health issues, but in my point of view if I am going into the yard when Travellers are fighting, I have a fair degree that I know that no staff is going to come out hurt, but if I go into the yard with settled people, I have no idea what is going to happen, you're talking blades, you're talking, anything could happen....

A different participant mentioned, in a different context, their preference to work with Travellers over other prisoners, and concern about working with other than Travellers.

For the sake of your research and it's a wonder one of us hasn't said it already but, I much would rather have a landing or a jail full of Travellers than a landing full of heroin[users] up in Dublin, it would be, they are a hell of a lot easier to manage.

The experience with Roma prisoners was, however, different. In the eyes of the participants, Roma were much more difficult to manage, because of language and the lack of shared understandings about the prison, and also the disruption to the prison order that came with this. Two prison officers expressed their views in this way:

You try and have a routine that they [prisoners] stand and wait and have respect, waiting for me. Travellers, within reason, will abide to that, I'll have to bark at them and tell them 'I am talking to someone else, stay your time or else move on', they will. The Roma, no they don't understand this, and they will keep interrupting you, they won't learn, like you are trying to teach I suppose one way....

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Well when you're maintaining good order, which is one of our primary functions, maintaining good order is not going to happen when you have someone [Roma] constantly disrupting that order.... We learn to manage it our own way, but they're not going to change in the time that they are here, and they have no intention of it.

This was not a view universally shared among the participants. For example, one participant expressed a different view.

They wouldn't be a difficult prisoner to deal with, as we said, in the kind of work, they always look sad but they would generally whinge and kind of whinge about going home and about a phone call, but they wouldn't be difficult, there would be no discipline issues with them. I find there would be no discipline issues with the Roma whatsoever.

The participants overall had a generally favourable view of Travellers with respect to shared understandings about maintaining good order in the prisons, with mixed views on the Roma. It should be stated that the Roma were not seen as disruptive in a way that required the imposition of severe discipline. Rather, to some they were more an irritant in the smooth order of the prison, as opposed to being highly problematic.

## **Conclusion**

It is difficult to draw any major conclusions from this study due to the small size of the sample. It should also be noted that as participation was strictly voluntary, it is very possible that only those prison officers and Probation staff who had sympathetic views towards Travellers, as well as Roma, in prison would have agreed to participate in the study. As nine out of the 11 participants in the sample had experience with Travellers, either when growing up or in previous employment, this might be a safe assumption. Notwithstanding the small scale of the study, there are some interesting messages that are worthy of further consideration and wider research. As the data indicate, there was a general feeling that past life and work experience could be used to good effect when working with Traveller prisoners. This is also an indication that there are persons working in the prisons and probation systems who have personal experience and perhaps some level of 'cultural competence' that positively informs their work. Other participants were clearly open to learning through their work about different cultures.

None of the sample had personal experience prior to employment in criminal justice with persons from the Roma community. One suspects that the opportunities for personal interaction with Roma are very limited, and, at least in urban centres, may fit the negative stereotype of Roma as beggars. This can create limitations in terms of the development of cross-cultural experience among prison staff and Probation staff. The participants' experiences, however, would suggest a level of skill, or cultural competence, in work with Travellers that exists in both services. There was less familiarity with Roma, which likely reflects the wider community lack of understanding and respect for their culture, and highlights the additional challenges for the Roma community in relation to post-release integration.

Research into the overuse of custody with ethnic minority/indigenous minority offenders goes back almost five decades, and comes right up to the present day (e.g. Hylton, 1981; Gavin, 2019), but little has changed with respect to the numbers in custody. Recent criminal justice research on ethnic minorities and criminal justice systems has focused more directly on the issue of implicit bias (e.g. Lammy, 2017; Brandon and O'Connell, 2018), in the sense that a person's actions may be based in a prejudice against others that is not conscious and/or overt. Overcoming implicit bias is difficult. However, the literature on effective work with ethnic minority prisoners highlights the need for sensitivity to, understanding of and competency with the culture, traditions and languages of minority ethnic offenders. The Logan report referenced earlier had a suggestion in this regard: 'Training should be provided across public services to ensure that when engaging with minority communities, including Roma, all staff are culturally competent and informed about the communities they serve' (Logan, 2014, p. 107). The issue of cultural competence is not without its critics. Such criticism highlights that by drawing the attention of the majority to issues that are 'problematic', such as language and culture (see, for example, Beagan, 2018), ethnic minorities become a 'problem' group to manage, as opposed to persons whose differences are to be respected and understood. Cultural training on work with minorities should be considered within a context of greater familiarity with diversity and difference in contemporary Irish society. The current study suggests that prison staff and Probation staff who participated in the research had both experience of and/or openness to cultural difference that they used in their day-to-day work. Perhaps there are ways that this knowledge and experience of existing staff could be blended with more focused training for all prison-based staff, given that they are or will be working with a range of ethnic minorities in an increasingly diverse Ireland.

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