



OLLSCOIL NA GAILLIMHE  
UNIVERSITY OF GALWAY



Offaly Traveller Movement



# Traveller Mental Wellness Continuum: A qualitative peer research study of Travellers' views

Summary Report  
May 2023

Jacopo Villani,  
Tuuli Kuosmanen,  
Margaret Mc Donagh,  
Margaret M. Barry



Health Promotion Research Centre  
University of Galway  
Ollscoil na Gaillimhe



HSE  
Mental Health  
Engagement  
& Recovery

# Acknowledgements

The implementation of this study has been made possible by the assiduous work of different stakeholders and professionals across Ireland. Firstly, we would like to thank all the members of the Traveller community who took the time to participate in this study, and kindly provided their ideas on how to improve the mental health status of their community. We acknowledge their dedication and bravery in sharing challenging life stories and experiences.

We would also like to express our gratitude to all the Traveller Organizations that assisted the organization and delivery of workshops and individual interviews. Their administrative and logistical support was critical for the smooth implementation of this project. We thank the seventeen Traveller peer researchers and one Traveller research assistant, who were involved in recruiting participants, leading workshops, transcribing interviews recordings, data analysis and in creating a safe space where members of their community could openly talk about mental health and suicide.

We thank all the members of the Research Steering Group who played a fundamental role in making sure that all steps in the research process were culturally appropriate and relevant for Travellers. They were an important soundboard to guide the study and to outline relevant recommendations in the current policy context.

We are grateful to the Network of HSE Mental Health Service Coordinators for Travellers, whose organizational support was invaluable in fostering links with different Traveller groups around Ireland and in organizing workshops and trainings with peer researchers.

Finally, we would like to thank the funders of this study: the HSE National Office of Suicide Prevention (NOSP) and the HSE National office of Mental Health Engagement and Recovery (MHER). This project would have not been possible without all this support and guidance.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders. Illustrations throughout the report are by Lisa Fingleton.

Photos courtesy of Offaly Traveller Movement and the project team.

**Suggested citation:** Villani, J., Kuosmanen, T., McDonagh, M, Barry, M.M. (2023). Traveller Mental Wellness Continuum: A qualitative peer research study of Travellers' views. Summary Report. Health Promotion Research Centre, University of Galway.

'Full report: Villani, J., Kuosmanen, T., McDonagh, M, Barry, M.M. (2023). Traveller Mental Wellness Continuum: A qualitative peer research study of Travellers' views. Health Promotion Research Centre, University of Galway. Available at: [universityofgalway.ie/hprc/](https://universityofgalway.ie/hprc/)



[universityofgalway.ie/hprc/](https://universityofgalway.ie/hprc/)

# Traveller Peer Researchers and Traveller Organizations

	Name	Traveller Organization
1	Maggie McDonagh (Research Assistant)	
2	Mary Nevin	Co Longford Traveller Primary Health Care Project
3	Ellen McDonagh	Mayo Traveller Support Group
4	Celine McInerney	Offaly Traveller Movement
5	Martin Nevin	Co Longford Traveller Primary Health Care Project
6	Patrick Stokes	Co Longford Traveller Primary Health Care Project
7	Mandy Dinnegan	Westmeath Traveller Project
8	Winifred Pamela Nevin	Westmeath Traveller Project
9	Olive O'Reilly	Limerick (supported by Exchange House)
10	Margaret O'Brien	Limerick (supported by Exchange House)
11	Mary Helen Connors	Ferns Diocesan Youth Service – FDYS (Wexford)
12	James Patrick O'Brien	Wicklow Travellers Group
13	Christine O'Leary	Cavan Traveller Movement
14	Mary Kate O'Sullivan	Cavan Traveller Movement
15	Bridget McCarthy	Kerry Travellers Health & CDP
16	Tony Coffey	Kerry Travellers Health & CDP
17	Arianna Ward	Western Traveller & Intercultural Development Centre (Tuam)
18	William Jason McDonagh	Offaly Traveller Movement

# Summary Report

# Introduction

This collaborative research project with the HSE Mental Health Service Coordinators for Travellers nationally, was funded by the Health Service Executive, National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP)<sup>1</sup> and the national office of Mental Health Engagement and Recovery (MHER). The study was conducted through the Health Promotion Research Centre at the University of Galway, with the support of Offaly Traveller Movement and nine additional Traveller Organizations.

This research project set out to explore the views of Travellers on the strategies needed for promoting Traveller mental health and wellbeing and reducing suicide. These strategies need to be informed by Traveller views and knowledge concerning the determinants of good mental health and wellbeing and how these can be supported from a strengths-based and culturally appropriate perspective. Indigenous wellness frameworks, such as the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework<sup>2</sup>, identify cultural continuity and competence and the social determinants of health as the foundation for mental wellness and suicide prevention and a continuum of comprehensive supports for promoting mental wellness.

This study was designed to explore the range of community supports, services and actions that members of the Traveller community consider to be essential for promoting their mental health and wellbeing. The study findings will help inform the development of a Traveller Mental Wellness Continuum, rooted in Travellers' views and knowledge on the determinants of mental health and encompassing all aspects of Travellers' life and cultural identity, which the community perceives as essential to prevent suicide and achieve and sustain positive mental health over the longer term.

## Study Aim and Objectives

This study aims to create the research base for the development of a culturally sensitive continuum of mental wellness and suicide prevention strategies for and by members of the Irish Traveller community. The findings from this research will identify, from the perspective of Travellers, the actions needed to improve Travellers' mental health and wellbeing, reduce suicide rates, and improve Travellers' engagement with services. More specifically this study has the following objectives:

- To explore the views of Travellers and Traveller groups on the factors and strategies needed for Travellers to achieve optimal mental wellbeing and prevent suicide, including timely access to mental healthcare services.
- To examine the meaning and nature of culturally appropriate suicide prevention and mental healthcare services from the perspectives of members of the Traveller community.
- To identify the core requirements for the development of a comprehensive continuum of care for Travellers (mental health promotion, suicide prevention, treatment, recovery) which can be integrated into mainstream health services and community actions.

<sup>1</sup> The HSE NOSP is administering funding on behalf of Sláintecare (Department of Health), as part of its strategic commitment under Connecting for Life.

<sup>2</sup> Health Canada. (2015). First Nations Mental Health Wellness Continuum Framework. Ministry of Health, Government of Canada. Ottawa, Canada. Retrieved 8 February, 2023, from <https://bit.ly/31LvqZ8>.

# Methods

This study adopts a community-based participatory research approach consisting of qualitative participatory workshops augmented by individual interviews, employing the same protocol, with adult members of the Traveller community. Seventeen Traveller peer researchers were engaged in the collection and analysis of the data, working in collaboration with the core research team, which also included a Traveller research assistant.

**Sample:** During the Summer of 2022, thirteen workshops and five individual interviews were conducted with a total of 87 participants, who ranged in age from 18-78 years (mean = 33 years) with the majority (83%) being female. The sample was recruited by ten local Traveller organisations across Ireland with the help of the Traveller peer researchers. Existing Traveller groups were contacted, as trust had already been built within these groups.

**Protocol:** The protocol for the participatory workshops was adapted from previous research and focused on three main areas:

- maintaining good mental health and wellbeing among Travellers
- preventing suicide and mental health problems
- developing culturally appropriate mental health services.

A case scenario and a short video were used to encourage discussion. The protocol was reviewed by the Research Steering Group and the peer researchers to ensure the cultural appropriateness, accessibility and sensitivity of the questions.

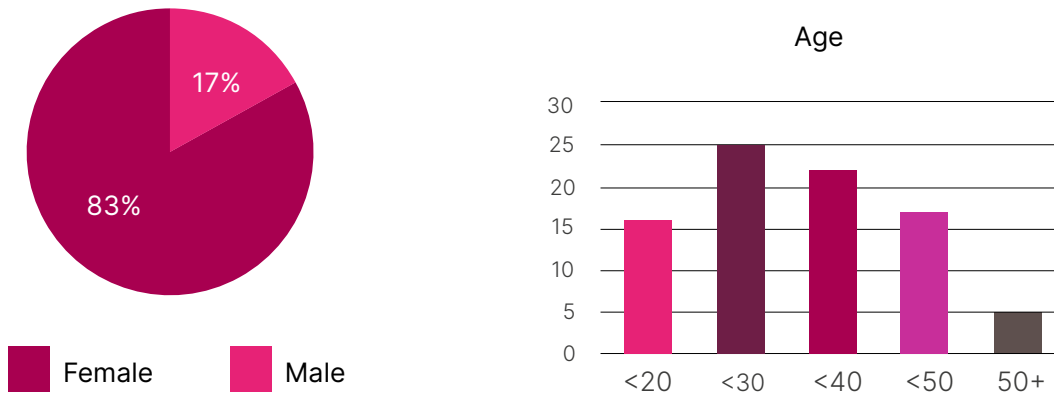
**Analysis:** The data analysis method was based on the six-step process to thematic analysis developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) and the participatory methods of analysing qualitative data outlined by Jackson (2008). The group participatory data analysis procedures followed in this research project involved Traveller peer researchers in the classification and interpretation of the data they previously gathered.



Figure 1. Research Participants' Demographics

### Gender and age

The age of participants range from 18-78 years (M=33 years) with the majority (83) being female.



### Children

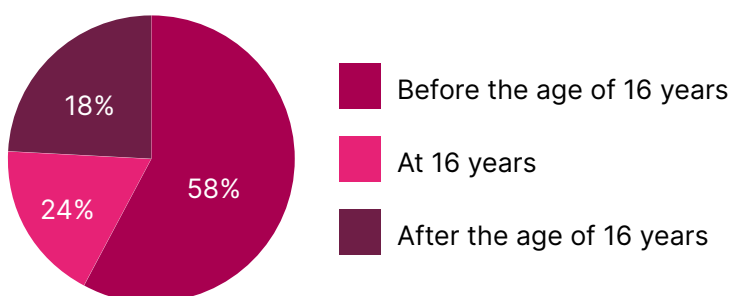
Of the participants, 40.2% (n=35) reported having children. The number of children ranged from 1 to 7, with the average number of children being 4.9.



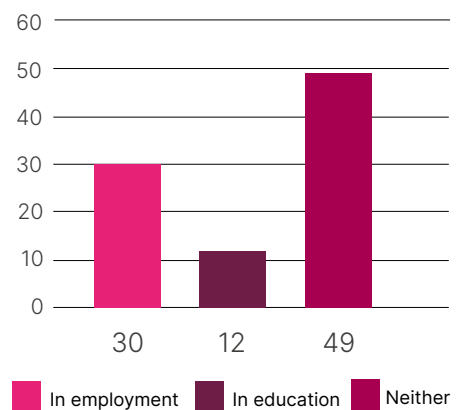
### Education and employment

The majority of the participants (78.2%, n=68) reported having left education on or before the legal age of 16 years. Over half of the participants (56.3%, n=49) reported not currently being in education or employment.

#### Age of leaving education



#### Proportion of participants in education or employment



# Results

Four overarching themes were developed with the peer researchers, as shown in Figure 2 below:

- 1) Culture and Identity,
- 2) Health and Community Services,
- 3) Life Opportunities and Choices,
- 4) Discrimination.

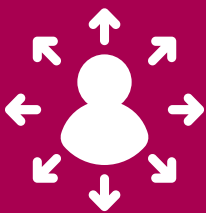
Figure 2. Four overarching themes



**Culture and  
Identity**



**Health and  
Community  
Services**



**Life Opportunities  
and Choices**



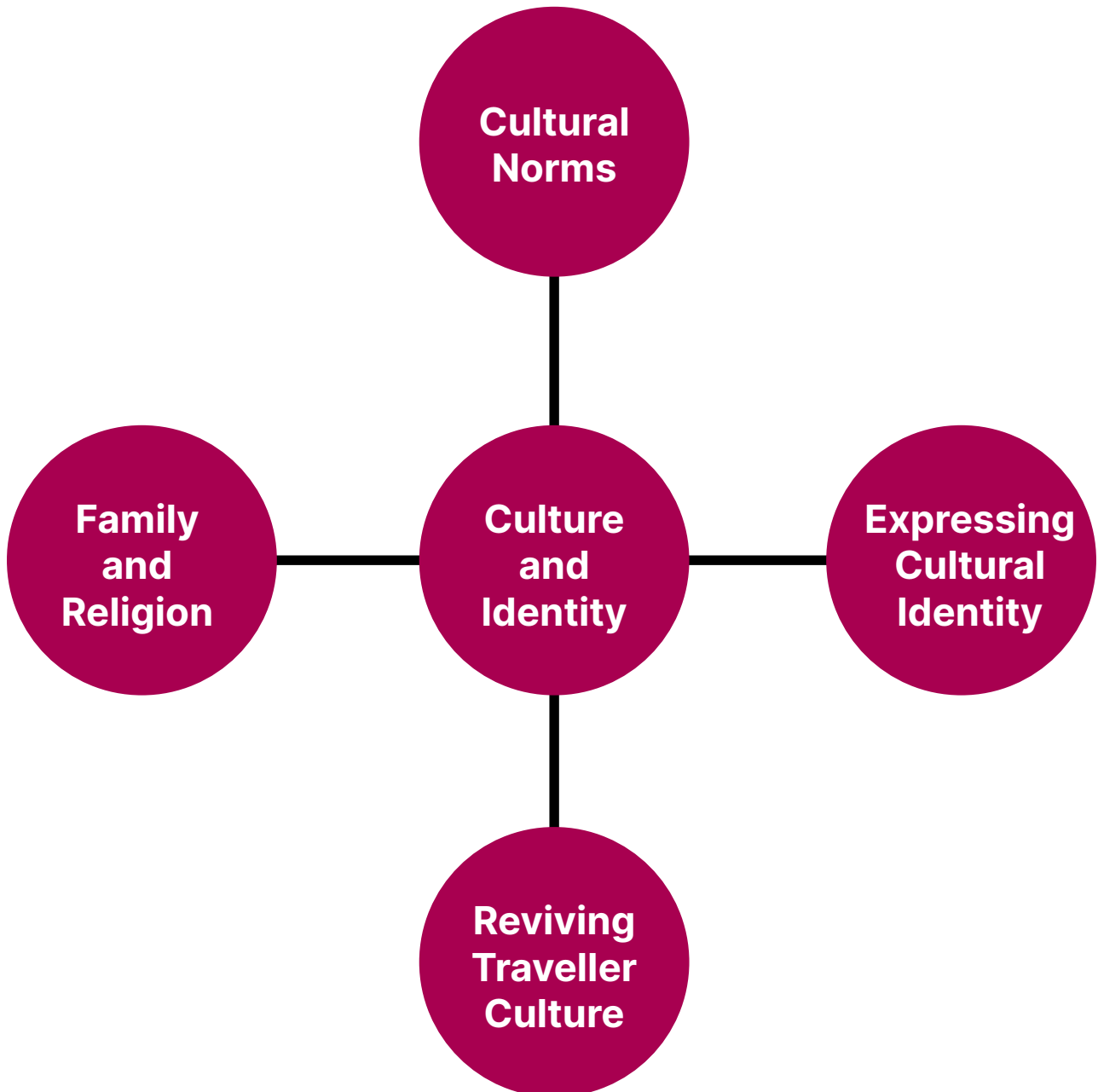
**Discrimination**

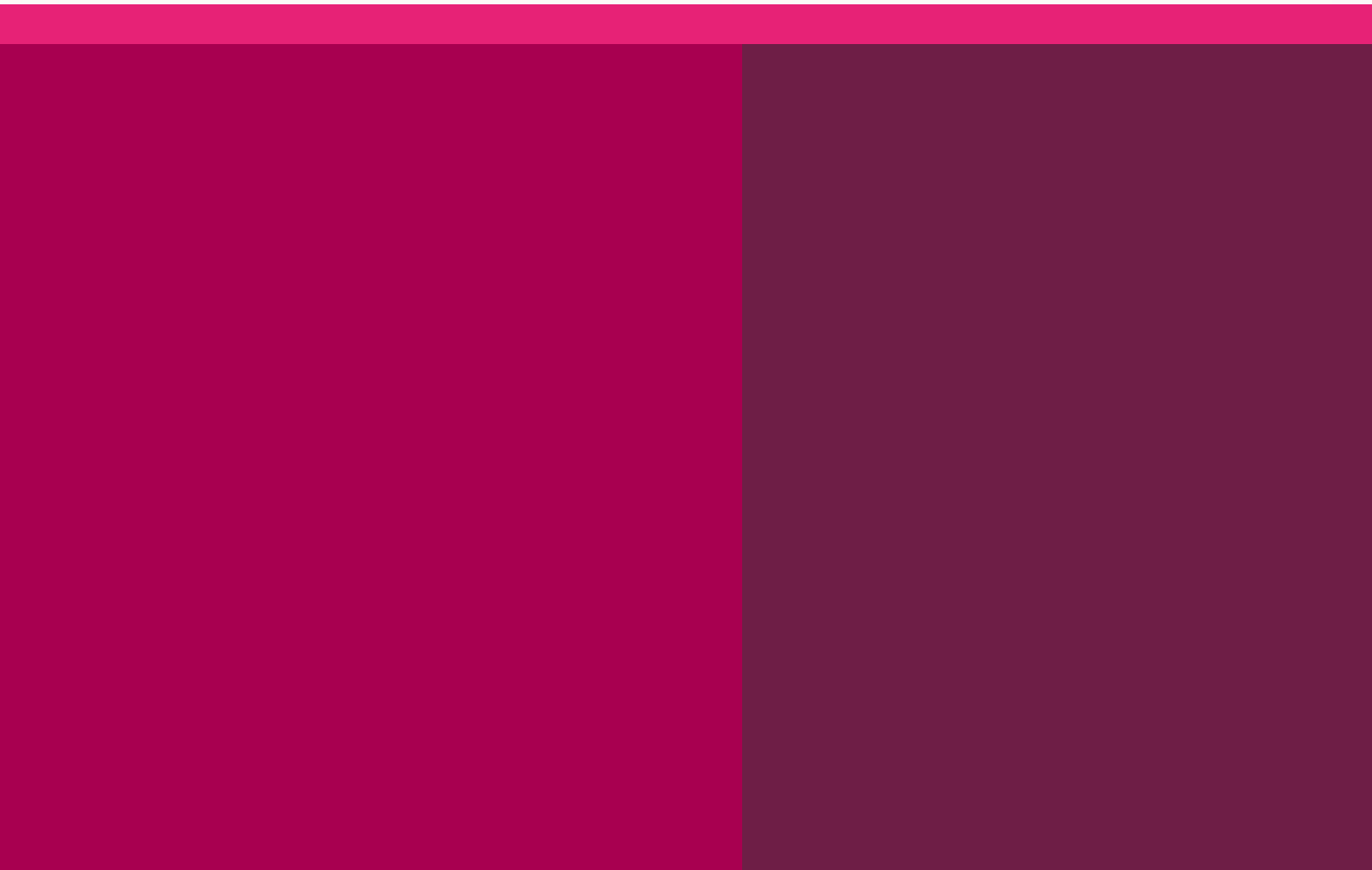


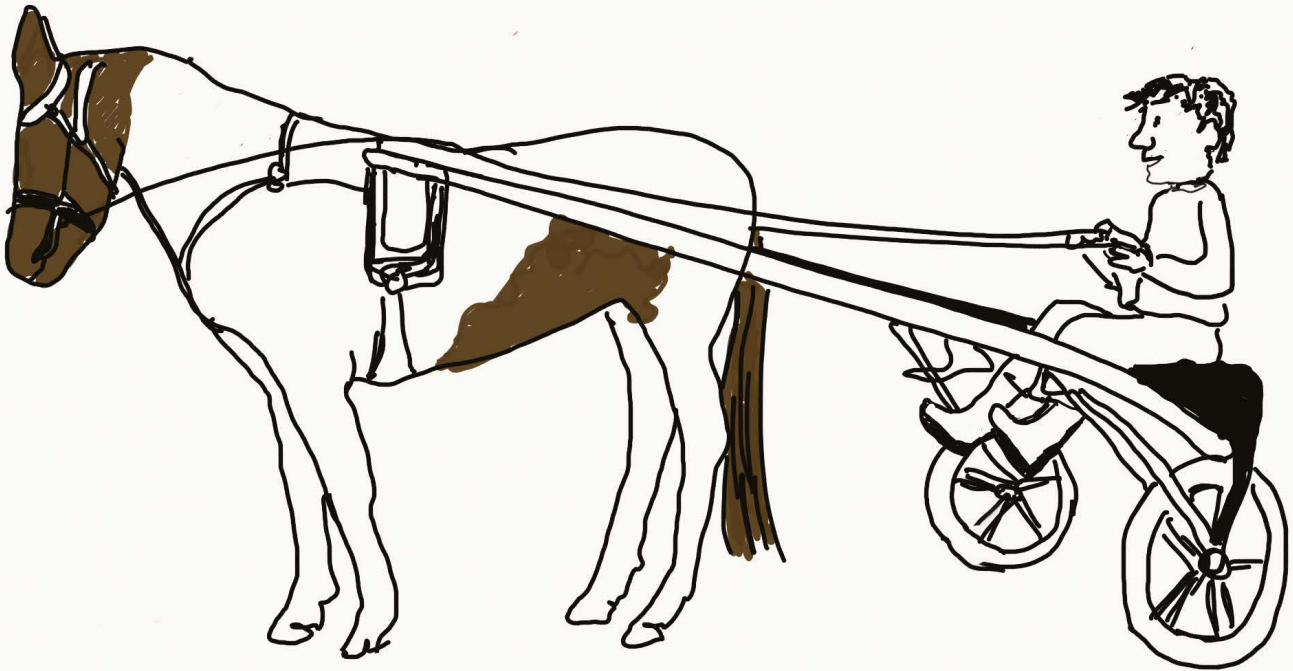
## Culture and Identity

This theme highlights the need for recognition of the importance of cultural identity and cultural expression for the mental health and wellbeing of the Traveller community. Cultural identity was viewed by the study participants as providing a positive sense of identity, which was considered critical for good mental health and wellbeing. The importance of cultural expression was also endorsed as it creates a positive sense of self-worth and respect.

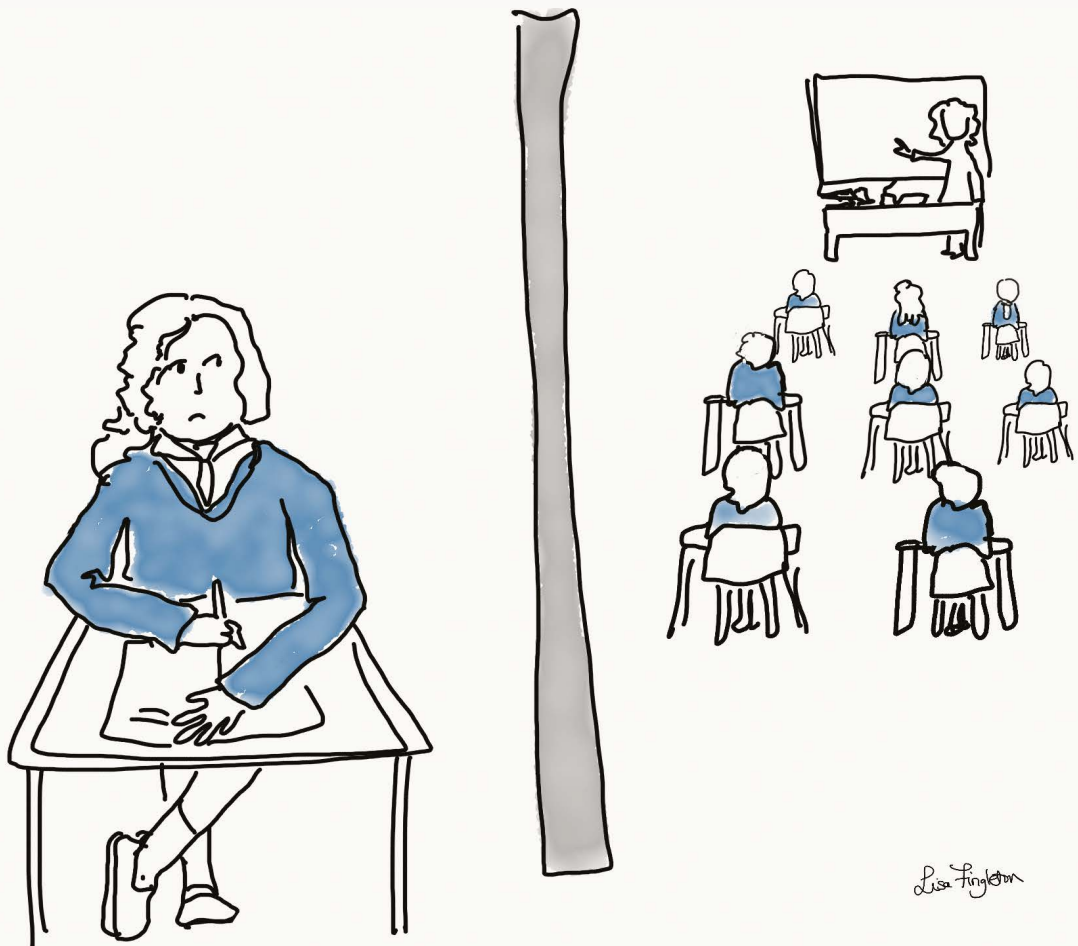
“My father never could read or write yet could do anything with his hands. He’d be all into horses all things like that. There was plenty he could do even though he couldn’t read and write and his mental health was perfect.”







Lisa Fingleton

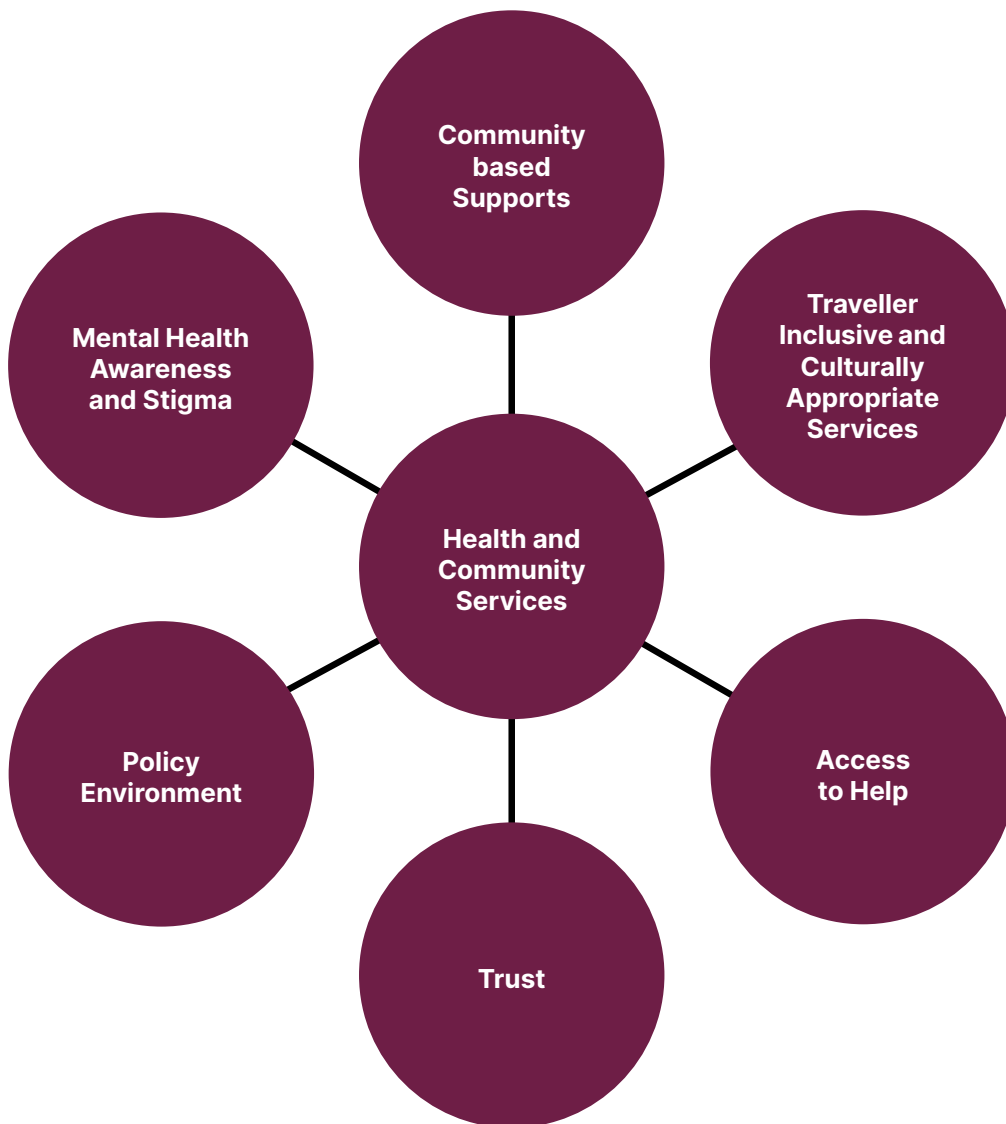


Lisa Fingleton

## Health and Community Services:

This theme identifies some of the changes needed to create a more inclusive, diverse and culturally sensitive mental health service for Travellers and to strengthen community-based actions to improve Travellers' wellbeing and prevent suicide. This theme also points to the need to improve Travellers' mental health literacy, combat mental health stigma and improve mutual trust between Travellers and HSE service providers.

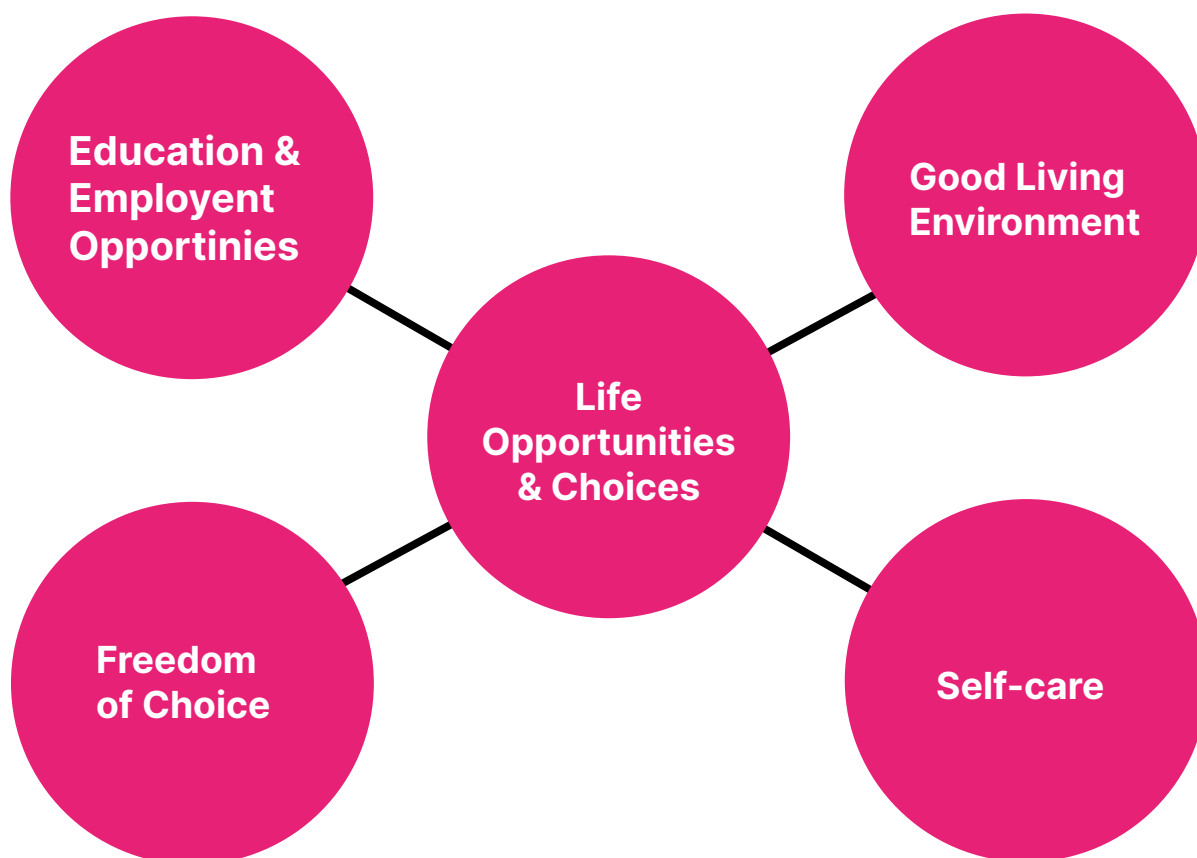
“Listening to the Traveller community and designing services with the Traveller community and not for the Traveller community. I think then only will we be able to tackle this problem of mental health.”



## Life Opportunities and Choices:

The need for, and right to, equal life opportunities for Travellers was strongly endorsed in this theme. The importance of Travellers being able to not only survive, but to flourish, have a sense of purpose and enjoy life was articulated as being central to good mental health and wellbeing. This theme underscores the need for a continuum of mental health promotion initiatives delivered for and by members of the Travelling community.

“We’re not given our freedom or our choice. We have to accept what they throw at us.”



## Discrimination:

This theme highlights the profound detrimental effect of racism, prejudice and discrimination on Travellers' mental health, including high psychological and emotional impact. Discrimination is reported to happen throughout the life course in all domains of life, to the point that it can be described as systemic. These circumstances were perceived as contributing to the marginalization of Travellers and fuel the mental health crisis affecting the community.

“Teachers never had an interest in Travellers. They provide more time for settled people than what they do for Travellers.”



# Conclusions & Recommendations

The findings from this qualitative peer research study identify a number of critical issues to be addressed in order to improve Traveller mental health and wellbeing and reduce the risk of poor mental health and suicide. The data indicate the importance of factors such as Traveller cultural identity and expression; the right to equal opportunities and life choices; the detrimental effect of discrimination on Traveller's mental health and wellbeing and the changes needed in how health and community services are delivered.

The study findings also suggest a range of community supports, services and intersectoral actions that members of the Traveller community deem to be essential in promoting and protecting their mental health and wellbeing. This evidence provides an important basis on which future actions and priorities can be developed. The importance of addressing the social determinants of mental health comes through clearly from the data analysis, including improving educational, training and employment opportunities, improving Traveller accommodation, curbing discrimination, celebrating and reviving Traveller culture and improving access to culturally appropriate mental healthcare. These strategies call for coordinated intersectoral action to improve Travellers' mental health and wellbeing.

Discussions were held with the Research Steering Group concerning the findings in order to identify actionable recommendations that could be taken forward from this study. Based on these, an overarching recommendation from this study is that there is a need for the implementation of a national plan to urgently address the specific mental health needs of the Traveller community. There was a clear view that national plans need to be realised through a process that is owned and led by members of the community and supported by national and local agencies. This process, similar to that successfully employed in the development of the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework in Canada, needs to be underpinned by key principles, which are also reflected in the findings from this study. These include:

- a strong foundation in Traveller culture and ethnic identity
- an empowering and strengths-based approach to promoting Traveller mental health and wellbeing
- an intersectoral approach that can address the social determinants of Traveller mental health
- the provision of funding for a continuum of mental health promotion and mental health service and community supports based on a co-production process and a peer-led model of delivery.

The study findings provide a research base for advancing the development of a coordinated Traveller-led continuum of culturally relevant, safe community-centred mental health services, supports and actions. Drawing on the experience of developing indigenous frameworks and cultural intervention models in other countries such as Canada, effective collaboration, partnership, leadership, sustained commitment and resourcing will be needed to guide this process, which will need to be led and owned by the Traveller community. The study findings identify some of the key components of a Traveller Mental Wellness Continuum, which are outlined below under each of the themes.

## Culture & Identity

- Cultural empowerment of Traveller Youth
- Revival of Traveller cultural expression, identity and heritage
- Traveller cultural awareness across sectors

## Health & Community Services

- Mental health promotion and prevention programmes (mental health literacy, combat stigma, improve self-efficacy and agency, mental wellbeing programmes in key settings across the life course)
- Cultural Safety and Humility ethos
- Travellers employed in the health services
- Strengthening Trauma Informed Care
- Trust, Partnership & Co-Production
- Crisis Response
- Early Intervention & Community Outreach
- Community Development
- Traveller-led services and initiatives (peer-led model of delivery)

## Life Opportunities & Choices

- Education & Training opportunities
- Employment access
- Culturally appropriate accommodation
- Community wellbeing empowerment & Community participation
- Positive youth development
- Peer-led support (family strengthening, domestic violence, substance misuse, healthy lives)

## Discrimination

- Anti-discrimination campaigns and policies
- Protection of Travellers human rights
- Anti-bullying guidelines

Based on the study findings and consultations with the Research Steering Group, a number of recommendations for actions are identified, supported by reference to existing policy frameworks and strategies. These are available in the full report.





