

# Irish Travellers

## Challenging the Myths

### Myth:

#### TRAVELLERS CHOOSE TO LIVE ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

Travellers do not want to live without access to basic facilities such as water, electricity and sanitation. The vast majority of Travellers living on the roadside are on local authority accommodation lists and are living on the roadside because there is nowhere else for them to go.

In 1995, the Government Task Force on the Traveller Community recommended that 3,100 units of accommodation be provided for Travellers by the year 2000. 900 of these units were local authority houses and 2,200 were bays on halting sites. The Task Force also recommended that 1000 units of transient accommodation should be delivered through a network of sites throughout the country.

Since 1995 an additional 409 Traveller specific units have been provided with the numbers of bays declining every year. The numbers of families accommodated in standard housing has risen to 1311. (Dept. of Environment, Heritage and Local Government 2006).

Much progress has been made on the provision of local authority housing to Travellers. However, delivery of culturally appropriate accommodation, such as halting sites, group housing schemes and transient accommodation has been alarmingly slow. This leaves Travellers with few choices or options as to where they can live and denies them the right to live in accommodation which is culturally appropriate. Transient accommodation has not been provided as promised to cater for the nomadic patterns of Travellers. Failure to provide a system for pull in sites for short term stays continues to create situations where Travellers come into conflict with wider society over the use of public lands.

### Myth:

#### TRAVELLERS DO NOT WANT TO BE PART OF IRISH SOCIETY

Travellers have always been part of Irish society. Unfortunately, Traveller experience of Irish society is often one of exclusion from the mainstream. Travellers are often viewed as 'a problem'- one

that would be solved if Travellers would just 'be normal' and 'fit in'. This attitude comes from a failure to recognise Travellers as a minority ethnic group. Travellers are a distinct ethnic group with their own culture, shared history, language, traditions, perceptions and sense of belonging.

Discrimination is now, and always has been, the main barrier facing Travellers when it comes to equal participation in society. Discrimination has a deep effect on Travellers and gives Travellers the message that they are not wanted.

Up until recently there was no legal redress for Travellers, or other groups experiencing discrimination. Now, with the Equal Status Act and the Employment Equality Act, and the Race Relations Order in Northern Ireland Travellers are beginning to challenge the treatment they receive.

### Offensive Labels

Offensive terms are often used to or about Travellers. Most people are aware that the term 'knacker' is highly offensive to Travellers yet they persist in using the term. While the origins of this term may have been different, it is now commonly applied to Travellers in the same way negative words are used against Black people.

"Itinerant" is also an offensive term to Travellers and continues to be used as a pseudo-scientific word.

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This leaflet can be downloaded electronically from [www.itmtrav.ie](http://www.itmtrav.ie) / [www.paveepoint.ie](http://www.paveepoint.ie) / [www.equalityni.org](http://www.equalityni.org)



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## Challenging the myths

The leaflet sets out to challenge some of the most recurring myths and misinformation about Irish Travellers in Ireland.

This leaflet does not seek to stifle debate or to criticise media reporting that is in the public interest or which is balanced and fair. These are essential components in a democratic society where freedom of the press is valued.

The purpose of this leaflet is about encouraging reporting and discussion that is balanced and which seeks to be informed by adequate contextual information from a range of sources and which seeks to highlight the potential damage to intercultural relations as a consequence of irresponsible, or sensationalised media coverage and related public discourse.

While much of the media reporting in Ireland in relation to the Traveller community continues to be of a high standard, there is also evidence of alarmist, selective and sensationalised journalism in a minority of newspapers.

Travellers are often thought of as a group who are, at best, a romantic leftover from the past, and at worst, cheats, criminals and people who choose to live in dirty conditions without respect for anyone else. Such labels serve to promote racism and discrimination and prevent Travellers achieving full equality in accommodation, education, health and the provision of services.

Irish Travellers are an important part of the existing cultural and ethnic diversity in Ireland. Travellers have a long shared history, a nomadic tradition and a distinct cultural identity.

Census 2006 records 22,435 Irish Travellers in Ireland, representing 0.5% of the population. According to the Census Travellers continue to have a much lower life expectancy

compared to the general population. Those over 65 years account for 2.6% of the population compared with 11.1% of the general population.

This leaflet seeks to challenge the belief that Travellers are to blame for their own situation. It recognises that the whole of society, including Travellers, have a responsibility to improve the living circumstances of Travellers

## CHALLENGING THE MYTHS

### Myth:

#### ALL TRAVELLERS ARE INVOLVED IN CRIME

Travellers are often blamed for crime and anti-social behaviour. This may occur even when it emerges subsequently that others were responsible. As in all communities there will be some Travellers who engage in crime, but, to associate all Travellers with crime, or to blame Travellers for crime without proof, is offensive and contributes to the exclusion of Travellers.

Travellers are often associated with violent behaviour, although there is no evidence that violence of any type is more prevalent among any one ethnic group than another. This label is often used to paint Travellers as brutish and as a justification for racism and discrimination which excludes Travellers.

### Myth:

#### TRAVELLERS DON'T PAY TAXES

Travellers are often labelled as cheats who do not pay taxes and do not pay for the services they receive on halting sites. Travellers on official halting sites pay rent to local authorities, even when such sites and services are sub-standard. Any Traveller in receipt of social welfare is means tested in the same way as the general population. Travellers in the PAYE sector pay tax in the same manner as the general population and self-employed Travellers make their own tax returns, as do members of the general population. Travellers also pay tax in the form of VAT on goods and services.

### Myth:

#### TRAVELLERS DO NOT CONTRIBUTE TO THE ECONOMY

Travellers are often labelled as being work-shy. Discrimination is the main barrier to Travellers joining the mainstream labour market. Against the odds, there are an increasing number of Travellers joining the labour force and working as workers in service industries. Other Travellers are also successfully self-employed.

### Myth:

#### TRAVELLER ACCOMMODATION LOWERS NEARBY HOUSE PRICES

Independent research has shown that there is no drop in house price due to adjacent Traveller accommodation. This myth is generated to try to keep Travellers out and results in Travellers being deprived of a place to live.

### Myth:

#### TRAVELLERS DO NOT CARE FOR THEIR ACCOMMODATION

Travellers are often condemned for halting sites being badly maintained. Some Traveller sites are very well looked after by Traveller families and local authorities, but many local authority halting sites are poorly serviced in terms of sanitation and refuse collections.

After 10 years of the National Accommodation Strategy funded by the State, there are still over 2000 families awaiting permanent accommodation from Local Authorities. Of these, approximately 630 families are living on the roadside with no:

- Flush toilets
- Electricity
- Water supply
- Bath or shower