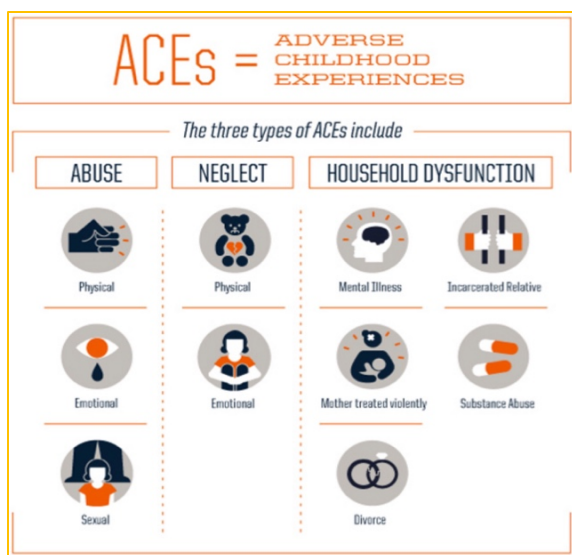


Over-population of Roma in Europe's prisons: A briefing for Children's Ombudspersons

Today we are aware that over 2.1 million children¹ across Europe have a parent in prison. From the moment children experience the arrest of a parent, they become vulnerable to social isolation, stigma, increased poverty, violence, bullying, a breakdown of family ties and shame. Without adequate support—especially from schools—a child's separation from a parent in conflict with the law can have a range of ill effects, from separation anxieties, feelings of abandonment and internalised stigmatisation to what has been described as 'distress', 'disruption', 'deprivation' and 'developmental effects'². The imprisonment of a parent is included in one of ten Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs; see Figure 1)³ which can be a significant detriment to a child's well-being and overall development, possibly also contributing to a likelihood for future imprisonment. Roma and Traveller children with a parent in prison may experience an even greater amount of difficulty due to multiple variables, including discriminatory attitudes and practices, language barriers, and diminished access to resources.



- ◆ **Imprisonment of a household member** is one of 10 ACEs known to have a significant impact on long-term health and well-being.
- ◆ Roma make up an estimated **fifty percent of sentenced prisoners** in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania.
- ◆ **Anti-gypsyism** may contribute to the difficulties Roma and Traveller children face.

¹ Figure based on calculations made by Children of Prisoners Europe, from an extrapolation of a 1999 INSEE study to prison population figures supplied by the [International Centre for Prison Studies](#). For more information see: Ayre, L., Philbrick, K., & Lynn, H., Eds. (2014), *Children of Imprisoned Parents: European Perspectives on Good Practice*, 2nd ed.

² H. Millar and Y. Dandurand (2017), 'The Impact of Sentencing and Other Judicial Decisions on the Children of Parents in Conflict with the Law: Implications for Sentencing Reform', *Analysis submitted to the Department of Justice Canada*.

³ Felitti V.J. et al. (1998), 'Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experience Study', *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 14(4), 245-258.

Roma are among the most marginalised minority population groups in Europe, with a long history of persecution and statelessness that continues today, and which partially accounts for the vast over-representation of Roma and Travellers in Europe's prisons today. This over-population can also be attributed to factors such as an increased likelihood of statelessness, poverty, discriminatory policing, a lack of access to identification documents, education and permanent housing and growing stigmatisation. The effects of these factors may affect Roma and Traveller children and assist in making them more susceptible to discrimination, school segregation, hindrances when navigating bureaucratic processes and a higher rate of arrest as these children become adolescents and adults^{4,5}.

A Note on Language

Following terminology that the Council of Europe employs, the term 'Roma and Travellers' refers to a wide range of groups:

- a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/ Rudari;
- b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali);
- c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal);
- d) Travellers, Yenish, and persons who identify as 'Gens du Voyage' and Gypsies.

The circumstance of statelessness generally and the lack of identification documents in particular can impede working with and for Roma and Traveller children, whether when doing advocacy work, social work or collecting data. The maintenance of the child-parent relationship when a parent is imprisoned, for example, may be especially difficult for Roma and Travellers, due to high levels of poverty and social exclusion that reduce the possibilities of travelling to visit and imprisoned parent, call them frequently, or access services or assistance⁶.

The children of Roma and Travellers are also the victims of negative media portrayals, especially in a moment marked by the rise of xenophobic rhetoric scapegoating Roma and Travellers for societal ills as right-wing populist movements again come to power. This kind of stigmatisation can bear heavily upon the shoulders of Roma and Traveller children, especially when compounded with the stigmatisation of parental imprisonment.

European Ombudspersons have an essential role to play in raising awareness of and supporting the rights of all children, especially for a population of children as marginalised and excluded societally as Roma and Travellers. Ombudspersons have an obligation to protect human rights, pursue the rectification of complaints and protect against discriminatory practices. The children of Roma and Travellers with parents in prison are underserved in these areas and can greatly benefit from the Ombudsperson's outreach.

⁴ Families Outside response to COPE Questionnaire; TPI Strategic Plan: 53.5% of Travellers in British prisons have self-reported literacy problems. P6; Overlooked and Overrepresented: Gypsy, Traveller and Roma children in the youth justice system (The Traveller Movement, 2016); Pavee, Point joint submission to CEDAW; The situation of Roma in Latvia (Riga, 2003).

⁵ Rachel Doyle: 'Hearing their Voices' Traveller Women in Prison (Travellers in Prison Initiative, Draft March, 2017).

⁶ Republic of Croatia Ombudsperson for Children response to COPE questionnaire 14 September 2016.

Recommendations for Children's Ombudspersons

- Host workshops where Roma and Traveller children can devise their own wish list for what they would want their visits with an incarcerated parent to be like.
- Encourage policies that are based on the principle and benefit of family reunification.
- Encourage policies that support the specific training of prison staff that have contact with children visiting their parents.

The Children's Ombudsperson can also encourage and facilitate awareness for Roma and Traveller children and their families about organisations such as COPE, which can offer support in maintaining contact with imprisoned parents. Engaging in positive practices that keep the child at the centre of all initiatives helps avoid the dissolution of the child-parent relationship, feelings of isolation and abandonment, and helping to facilitate the reintegration of an imprisoned parent into a healthy family structure.

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This briefing was funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (REC 2014-2020). The content of this report represents only the views of Children of Prisoners Europe and are their sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.