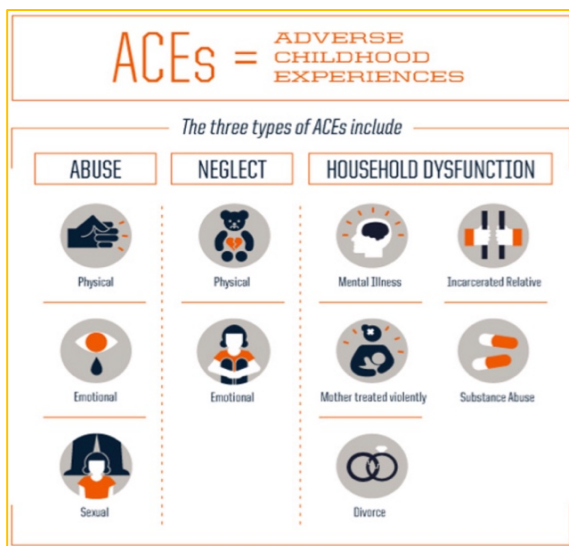


Over-population of Roma in Europe's prisons: A briefing for Ministries of Education

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.
- ◆ **Exclusion from formal schooling** is reported in a number of Council of Europe member states, ranging from complete exclusion to truancy and abandonment.
- ◆ **Statelessness** or a lack of proper documentation may hinder Roma and Traveller children accessing education.

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.

From an educational perspective, the challenges facing Roma and Traveller children are numerous. Of Roma and Traveller children aged 7-15, about 43% reportedly do not attend school, compared to 6% of non-Roma⁶. Several human rights bodies, including the Council of Europe, have also expressed their concern for segregation in education, specifically the disproportionate number of Roma children placed without justification in special schools usually for children with disabilities⁷. A 2010 survey found that 40.5% of marginalised Roma have not completed an elementary education⁸, a worrisome figure when 30% of Roma and Travellers are under 15 years of age and only 5% are over age 60, which can partially explain the relatively low rates of literacy in Roma population groups⁹.

Research shows that support from a single adult can help a child to develop greater resilience and to cope with parental imprisonment¹⁰, and schools and teachers are in a unique position to provide such support. School is the great equaliser—the sole institution through which all children pass and often the only contact the state has with children in need of support—and so schools are in some sense the primary locus of intervention in supporting children broadly,

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 (2017), 'Hearing their Voices: Traveller Women in Prison', Health Service Executive, Travellers in Prison Initiative.

⁶ *Human rights of Roma and Travellers in Europe*, Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe.

⁷ *Thematic report of the group of experts on inclusive pre-school education for Roma children* (2015), Ad Hoc Committee of experts on Roma Issues (CAHROM).

⁸ *Thematic report on inclusive education for roma children as opposed to special schools*, (2012), CAHROM.

⁹ 'Education: The situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States' (2014), European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

¹⁰ *Children of Prisoners: Interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health* [COPING Project] (2013), eds. Jones, Adele D. and Wainaina-Woźna, Agnieszka E, University of Huddersfield, UK.

and especially those Roma and Traveller children who may be coping with a litany of issues stemming from poverty, issues that compound when a parent is imprisoned.

Recommendations for Ministries of Education

- ◆ Recognise the additional burden of stigma in schools and how it affects the quality of life and development of Roma and Traveller children, especially those with parents in prison.
- ◆ Encourage support within schools for Roma and Traveller children experiencing the imprisonment of a parent.
- ◆ Develop teaching kits explaining how professionals can aid Roma and Traveller children with incarcerated parents.
- ◆ Ensure that schools are not taking part in discriminatory practices, such as the placement of Roma and Traveller children in remedial courses or schools without justification.
- ◆ Encourage policies that would make sure that children's visits to their parents would not interrupt their daily schedule or school.
- ◆ Develop programs that can aid in the dissolution of statelessness for Roma and Traveller children.

The Ministry of Education can also encourage contact between Roma and Traveller children with organisations such as COPE, which can offer support in maintaining contact with imprisoned parents. Engaging in beneficial mental health practices 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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