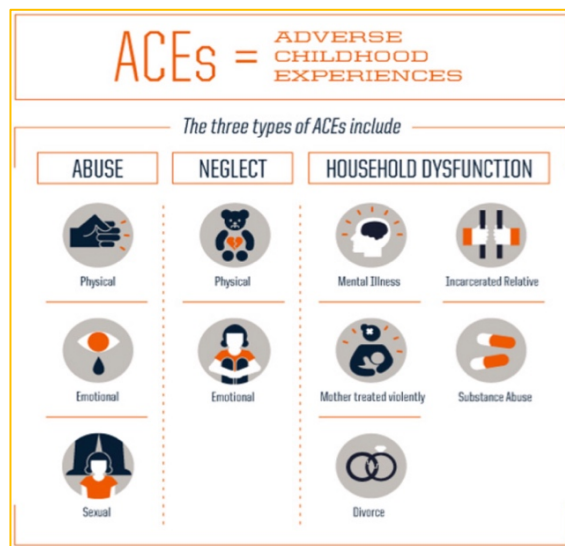


## Over-population of Roma in Europe's prisons: A briefing for Ministries of Health

Today we are aware that over 2.1 million children<sup>1</sup> 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'<sup>2</sup>. The imprisonment of a parent is included in one of ten Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs; see Figure 1)<sup>3</sup> 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. Prolonged exposure to ACEs can result in physical changes to neurobiological and genetic pathways, directly **impacting brain development**.
- ◆ Roma and Traveller populations are **disproportionately affected by infectious or chronic ailments most common in childhood**.
- ◆ Roma and Travellers have on average a **life expectancy ten years shorter** than Europe's general population.

<sup>1</sup> 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*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

<sup>2</sup> 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*.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

From a healthcare perspective, the challenge of confronting the negative effects of parental imprisonment is compounded by marked health problems in Roma and Traveller communities broadly. Roma and Travellers have on average a life expectancy ten years shorter than Europe's general population, for reasons including malnutrition, a lack of vaccinations, limited health education and access to healthcare and high rates of poverty. As a whole, Roma population groups are also disproportionately affected by infectious or chronic ailments, including preventable upper respiratory illnesses in childhood and diabetes in adults<sup>4</sup>.

Many of the reasons for these poor health standards are the same reasons for the problematic over-population of Roma and Travellers in prison. These factors include poverty, an increased likelihood of statelessness, a lack of access to identification documents, education and permanent housing and growing stigmatisation. The stress of poverty, poor physical health and issues such as parental imprisonment can compound and multiply in the bodies and minds of Roma and Traveller children and can put them at risk of long-term mental and physical health problems, which carry with them the affliction of continued poverty.

#### **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.

For these reasons and more, the challenges facing Roma and Travellers are an urgent set of issues that necessitate attention from health officials. It is the task of Ministries of Health to ensure that all citizens receive adequate information and proper treatment to lead healthy lives. Especially for a population as precarious as Europe's Roma and Travellers, engagement on the part of health officials to perform outreach can create significant change for Roma and Traveller children, especially those coping with the effects of having a parent in prison.

#### **Recommendations for Ministries of Health<sup>5</sup>:**

- ◆ Ensure that Roma and Traveller have geographical and affordable access to healthcare and health education to the same degree as the general population.
- ◆ Recognise the systemic nature of the challenges facing Roma and Travellers, especially children with imprisoned parents, and ensure the multidisciplinary consideration of issues affecting these populations.
- ◆ Advocate for public health awareness and destigmatising of Roma and Travellers, as well as the destigmatising of children of imprisoned parents.

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<sup>4</sup> Council of Europe Roma and Travellers Team, 'Health', <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/health>, accessed 13 November 2019.

<sup>5</sup> The following recommendations are drawn from the Council of Europe's Recommendation Rec(2006)10 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on better access to health care for Roma and Travellers in Europe, Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 12 July 2006 at the 971st meeting of the Ministers' Deputies.

Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE)

8-10 rue Auber | B.P. 38 | 92120 Montrouge | France

<http://childrenofprisoners.eu/>

<https://www.facebook.com/networkcope/>

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