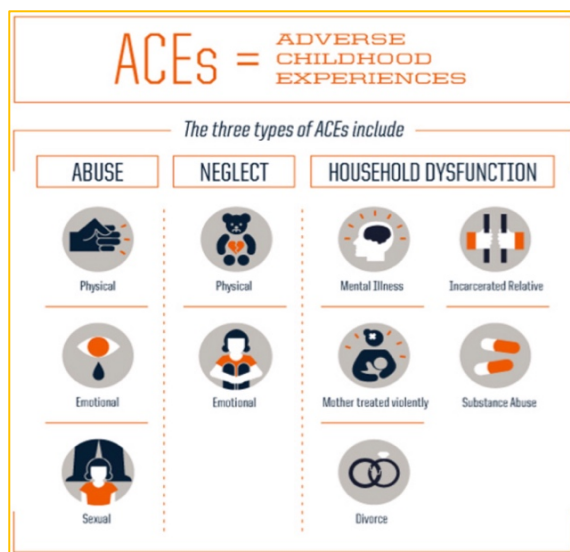


## Over-population of Roma in Europe's prisons: A briefing for Protective Services Ministries

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.
- ◆ Roma make up an estimated **fifty percent of sentenced prisoners** in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania.
- ◆ An **integrated child protection system** places the child at the system's center and adheres to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

<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.

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. 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 make Roma and Traveller children more susceptible to discrimination, school segregation, hindrances when navigating bureaucratic processes and a higher rate of arrest as these children become adolescents and adults<sup>4,5</sup>. The circumstance of statelessness generally and the lack of identification documents in particular is one primary factor that can impede working with and for Roma and Traveller children, when doing social work or collecting data.

### **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.

Discrimination against Roma and Travellers in the last half century led to an explosion of cases of government intervention in the care of Roma children<sup>6</sup>, and Roma and Traveller children today may be more susceptible to placement in institutions and foster care as a factor of the economic status of their parents and their living conditions. Practices of separating families can be unsettling for children and detrimental to their healthy development; especially in the case of Roma and Traveller children, the effects of poverty, compounded by their parent's conflict with the law, can leave this population of children in a vulnerable situation. As a rule, the institutionalisation and removal of children from the home should be solely based upon what is in the best interests of the child.

## **Recommendations for Child Protective Services**

- ◆ Encourage policies that promote healthy family practice with an emphasis on keeping families together.
- ◆ Host workshops that focus on the needs of parents who have children with a spouse or co-parent in prison.

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<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Doyle (2017), 'Hearing their Voices: Traveller Women in Prison', Health Service Executive, Travellers in Prison Initiative.

<sup>6</sup> Unjust state practices post-WWII—including forced female sterilisation—contributed to the breakdown of families and has left a stained legacy of Roma mistrust for government. See 'Human rights of Roma and Travellers in Europe' (2012), Council of Europe, and 'Education: The situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States' (2014), European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

- ◆ Develop policies that ensure the proper assessment of families, therefore preventing Roma and Traveller children with parents in prison from unnecessarily becoming wards of the state.
- ◆ Develop training for social workers to aid children with incarcerated parents and keep their best interests at the forefront.

Child Protective Services can also encourage contact between Roma and Traveller children with organisations such as COPE, which can offer support to children with imprisoned parents and to social workers.

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