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## The ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ needs of Roma: a participatory mixed methods study

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### ABSTRACT

This article contributes to scholarship on participatory mixed methods research while and presents empirical evidence relating to the needs of Roma. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2005) acknowledged the specific nature of racism towards Roma as being persistent both historically and geographically; permanent and not decreasing; as systematic, accepted by virtually all the community; and often accompanied by acts of violence [2012, *National Roma Integration Strategies: a first step in the implementation of the EU Framework*. COM (2012) 226, 21 May 2012, [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/roma/eu-framework/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/roma/eu-framework/index_en.htm)]. This has repercussions for establishing trust in the research relationship. Thus, such research presents a methodological challenge which on this occasion could not have been completed without the active involvement of community researchers at every stage of the research process. Its aim was to assess the needs of Roma in a particular time and place. Scholarship on needs influenced the methodology and a participatory sequential explanatory mixed methods study was designed and completed. Nancy Fraser distinguishes between ‘thin needs’, which refer to universal needs, and ‘thick needs’, which are more specific [1989, *Unruly Practices*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 163]. This framework is utilized to explore the accommodation needs of Roma in Ireland.

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**KEYWORDS** Roma; needs; participation; mixed methods; community

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is twofold: to contribute to scholarship on participatory mixed methods research and to present empirical evidence relating to the needs of Roma in Ireland. Researching Roma is a challenging endeavour due to both their historical and current marginalization and their resulting and justifiable distrust of non-Roma (Hajioff and McKee 2000). This includes distrust of academic researchers who may have practised exclusionary research (Munté *et al.* 2011). It is estimated that at least half a million Roma were killed during the Holocaust and this was facilitated by systematic record keeping and ethnic profiling (Commissioner for Human Rights 2008). In 2005 the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) acknowledged the specific nature of the racism directed towards Roma as being persistent both historically and geographically (Council of Europe 2012b), referring to ‘anti-Gypsyism’ as a specific form of racism on a par with anti-Semitism. A survey by the European Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) found that every second Roma respondent said that they were discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity at least once in the previous twelve months (EU MIDIS 2009). According to Thomas Hammarberg, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights from 2006 to 2012: ‘Europe has a shameful history of discrimination and severe repression of the Roma. There are still widespread prejudices against them in country after country on our continent’ (Hammarberg 2006).

This background of discrimination and marginalization as well as a reluctance by some people to self-identify as Roma (Kósa and Adány 2007) has repercussions for establishing trust in the research relationship. It also presents challenges in accessing Roma, who despite constituting the largest ethnic minority in Europe remain undercounted. Estimates of the number of Roma in Europe vary from of 6–16 million (Council of Europe) to 10–12 million (EU) of whom approximately six million reside in the European Union, forming Europe’s largest ethnic minority at just over 1.35% of Europe’s total population (Parekh and Rose 2011). Thus, such research presents a methodological challenge which on this occasion could not have been completed without the active involvement of community researchers at every stage of the research process, from design through to analysis and presentation of findings and most importantly accessing respondents. Gómez and Marti (2012: 21) explain the value of creating knowledge using a critical communicative perspective ‘which advocates for the active involvement, throughout the entire research

process of community researchers, that is, those individuals or groups, whose experience is being analysed'. Process is central to a participatory methodology and involves research partners in the knowledge-production process (Flick 2009; Reason and Bradbury 2008). As Munté *et al.* remind us 'Roma people's social exclusion has been reinforced through research that has legitimized stereotypes rather than helping to overcome them' (2011: 256). This research echoes Denzin's belief that research empower people '... with a language and a set of pedagogical practices that turn oppression into freedom, despair into hope, hatred into love, doubt into trust' (2009: 29). Scholarship on needs influenced the methodology and the decision to undertake a participatory sequential explanatory mixed methods study.

## Background

The precarious situation of Roma in Ireland drew public attention in 2013 when two children were removed from their families and taken into state care as a result of ethnic profiling. This resulted in an investigation by the Ombudsman for Children, Emily Logan. The subsequent Logan Report (Logan 2014) recommended that a national needs assessment be commissioned to provide a socioeconomic analysis of the situation of Roma in Ireland, using a thematic approach reflecting the key priority areas of accommodation, health, education and employment as in the *EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020* and linked to this Ireland's National Traveller and Roma Integration Strategy (NTRIS, 2017–2021). The study was funded by the Department of Justice and Equality and conducted by a team of researchers at Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre (2018).

## Theoretical framework: need

The goal of the research was to identify the breadth and depth of needs of Roma in Ireland. It was envisaged that the findings would feed into NTRIS and subsequent progress would be reviewed as required by the European Framework, and as such could substantively improve the lives of Roma in Ireland. The concept of need has been central to discourse on the provision of welfare since the development of welfare states (Kennedy 2013: 103). Dean in *Understanding Human Need* (2010) presents 30 different concepts of need. He suggests that need has been an elusive and contested concept in social policy (2010: 1). The scholarship of

Maslow (1943) has influenced the conceptualization of need but many other scholars have added to the debate (Bradshaw 1972; Dean 2010; Doyal and Gough 1991; Forder 1974; Fraser 1989; Lister 2010). In their seminal book, Doyal and Gough argue that humans have common universal needs which can be taken for granted: 'It is possible to identify objective and universal human goals which individuals must achieve if they are able to optimize their life chances' (1991: 3). They conclude that human needs 'are universal and knowable, but our knowledge of them and of the satisfiers necessary to meet them, is dynamic and open-ended' (1991: 56). Doyal and Gough ascertain that personal autonomy and health are the basic needs that people must have met in order to participate in society. They recognize the importance of good physical health: 'to complete a range of tasks in daily life requires manual, mental and emotional abilities with which poor physical health usually interferes' (1991: 56). To be autonomous is 'to have the ability to make informed choices about what should be done and how to go about doing it' (1991: 157–168). Based on this criterion they present a list of basic universal needs which includes nutritional food; clean water; protective housing; a non-hazardous physical environment; appropriate health care; security in childhood; significant primary relationships; physical and economic security; appropriate education; safe birth control and childbearing, those things people need in order to thrive which could be described as 'thin needs' (Fraser 1989) or inherent needs (Dean 2010).

Nancy Fraser distinguishes between these universal needs as 'thin needs' and 'thick needs', which are more socially and culturally specific (1989: 163). Dean (2010) builds on this distinction linking it with well-being, suggesting that while meeting 'thin needs' prevent harm; meeting 'thick needs' facilitates flourishing and social quality (2010). Social quality has been used to explain a person's ability to participate in social and economic life and reach their potential (Beck *et al.* 2001: 7). Sen (1985, 1999) and Nussbaum (1995) like Dean are concerned with flourishing. Sen's capabilities approach focuses on the choices and opportunities open to people in order to flourish. While capabilities refer to what a person can be, 'functionings' refers to what a person actually manages to do. In our study, we were concerned with both.

Dean suggests that need is 'arguably the single most important organizing principle in social policy' (2010: 2) and says that how we measure need depends on the values we hold. Forder (1974) suggests that service providers draw on ideal norms to define need. Bradshaw (1972) differentiates between felt, expressed, normative and comparative needs. This allows

for a more complex multi-dimensional identification of need. Felt need implies that a person may feel a need but nevertheless may not express it. Some people may express need by vocalizing it to a service provider. Normative need relates to what is deemed appropriate by professional standards and comparative need relates to how the needs of an individual or group are viewed in comparison with other individuals and or groups in society.

Lister suggests that unless a need is met, there is an implication that ‘a person will be harmed in some way’ (2010: 169). Dean is concerned with how needs can be translated into social rights and he argues that rights to welfare can be framed as conditional, selective, protective or citizenship-based, depending on the understanding of need adapted. Fraser (1989) writing on the politics of needs interpretation identifies three stages: the establishment of the political status of needs; the practical interpretation; and the satisfaction of needs. Taking homelessness as an example, Fraser explains:

... as soon as we descend to a lesser level of generality, needs claims become far more controversial. What, more thickly do homeless people need to be sheltered from the cold? What specific forms of provision are entailed once we acknowledge their very general, thin need?(1989: 163)

Fraser (1989) argues that needs interpretation requires us ‘... to bring into view the contextual and contested characters of needs claims (1989: 163). Dean suggests inherent needs may be translated into ‘doctrinal’ rights and interpreted needs into claim-based rights (Dean 2010: 141). By excavating the thin needs of Roma in Ireland to illuminate the thick needs it is hoped that rights can be claimed.

### **Sequential explanatory mixed methods design**

A sequential explanatory mixed methods approach was adopted in harmony with the theoretical framework. The choice of a quantitative method, a questionnaire with primarily closed questions but some open-ended questions, was designed to identify the ‘thin needs’ of Roma relating to accommodation, education, health care and employment. We began with the quantitative stage in order to survey as wide a group as possible to get an overview of the circumstances of a large number of people and as many households as possible in both urban and rural areas. We targeted, in particular, marginalized and hard to reach Roma including those who were homeless. We then progressed to

delve deeper through qualitative methods; focus groups and interviews to gain greater insights and knowledge to identify the ‘thick needs’. We wanted to expand the understanding of the quantitative data with qualitative experiences (see [Figure 1](#)). Using both qualitative and quantitative methods facilitates comprehensiveness and allows an issue to be addressed more widely and more completely (Morse 2003). A sequential explanatory mixed methods design was used, as quantitative and qualitative data were collected sequentially gaining synergy by the additional work of using both qualitative and quantitative data methods (Fetters and Freshwater 2015: 116). Bryman (2006) indicates that integration approaches can differ in that they can focus on integrating results from analyses of separate data components. This study integrates the results from analyses of separate components and data from the quantitative survey informed the subsequent selection of themes and participants for focus groups and interviews.

### Community-based participatory research

The invisibility and marginalization of the Roma community was considered in the design of the study and a community-based participatory research approach was employed. Gomez *et al.* (2011) explain the history and value of critical communicative methodology and outline how it is based on the idea that people can communicate and interact regardless of culture, ethnic and academic background and that everyone can contribute to constructing knowledge through social interaction and dialogue. This is linked to the principle of cultural intelligence (Racionero and Valls 2007) and challenges the exclusion of certain groups from academic activities, including research. It is based on the belief that the best research results from dialogues among people with various kinds of cultural intelligence. Munté *et al.* explain that research has reinforced the exclusion of Roma by legitimizing stereotypes rather than helping to overcome them (2011: 256). As a result, Roma have refused to participate in some types of research. The design of the needs assessment was focused on inclusion and participation.



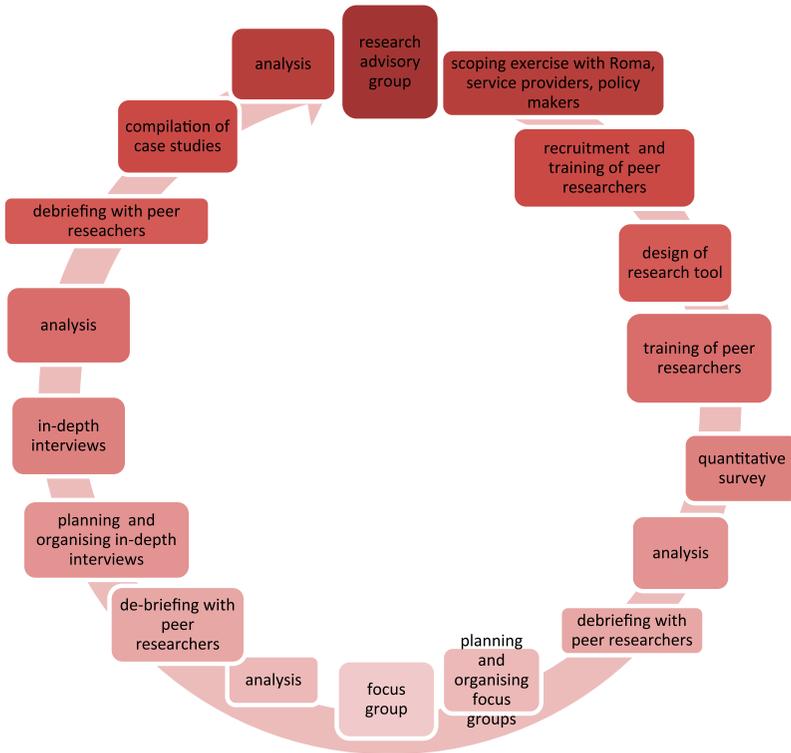
**Figure 1.** Mixed methods approach.

Because of their experience of persistent racism throughout history, many Roma have little trust in authorities who have often been perpetrators of human rights abuses (Council of Europe 2012a). Vermeersch has described attempts to construct a common Roma identity as a 'double jeopardy' as identifying as Roma can invite a negative response (2001: 182). Writing on the situation of Roma in Italy, McGarry argues that ethnic profiling generated the most attention from the international political community but was justified by the Italian authorities as a means of protecting Roma (2011: 290). This resonates with Thorburn's writing when he differentiates between identification, surveillance and profiling and he argues 'While conceptually distinct, in practice these three forms of state action are often tightly connected and the fear that identification-actions might lead to profiling and sorting, and further on to increasing surveillance, is legitimate' (2012: 6). Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, in a research report on ethnic data collection (2016) indicates that ethnic data collection in Ireland is still the exception rather than the rule. Pavee Point advocates for collection of ethnic data as a tool to support inclusive policies, combat discrimination and promote equality of access, participation and outcome for minority ethnic groups in Ireland. This resonates with Barany's contention that it can help in the achievement of goals of Romani mobilization by facilitating 'enhanced interest representation; the cessation of political, social, economic and other forms of discrimination; and the improvement of the given collective's conditions and relative standing in society' (1998: 309–310) where data has been used positively. Roma identity is not related to place and thus it transcends national boundaries (Acton 1997: 166). Thus political mobilization transcends state boundaries. McGarry suggests that activists can 'maintain that their ability to articulate interests, combat discrimination and improve their relative standing in society is enhanced in the transnational political context' (2011: 286). McGarry writes in relation to mobilizing at a national and transnational level and he draws on experience of Roma in Italy to demonstrate this. McGarry outlines the difficulties of uniting under a single ethnic identity in national contexts, for example, Spain where there is little contact between Spanish Gitanos and recently arrived Eastern European Roma migrants and writes of the necessity to attend to both the national and transnational contexts concurrently (2011: 286). While advocating for ethnic identification, Pavee Point acknowledges that there are some sensitivities and barriers to the collection of disaggregated data (Donse *et al.* 2013; Fremont and Lurie 2004) including privacy and confidentiality, data misuse, participation, data

collector discomfort, as well as some practical issues including categorization, technical issues, time and associated costs.

A community-based participatory research approach was adopted in recognition of the vital role that Roma researchers would play in guiding the research and ensuring wider Roma participation. This was because they had the trust of the community; the networks, cultural competence and language. Participatory research enables members of marginalized groups to participate as co-researchers, gaining recognition and new skills and insights (Russo 2012). von Unger (2012) reports that capacity building on the part of research partners represents a core aim in community-based participatory research. It is interesting that, in this way, the participants develop not only specialized competencies required for participation in the research process, but also more general competencies, all of which contribute to personal development. Russo (2012) points out that it is possible to validate findings communally in focus groups and that other effects can be observed at the same time. This method ensures that there is authentic rather than tokenistic participation and that the research process is empowering for all involved. This was one of the goals of the agency which collaborated in the research. Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre has a 30-year history of working from a human rights perspective with Travellers and Roma. It was envisaged that this research project was not only an opportunity to gather empirical data on the needs of Roma but also would empower individual Roma through the development of new skills. The community researchers, some of who were already Roma advocates had visibility and trust within their communities. They were involved in framing the research questions and in interpreting the data, facilitating greater understanding of the subject (Cleaver 2001). A shared language and cultural understanding can support effective communication. Smith *et al.* conclude that ‘... participatory research is beneficial both because of its implicit values (such as empowerment and inclusion) and also because it improves our level of understanding of the substantive subject area’ (2002: 2). Community researchers were involved in every stage of the process: selecting respondents; designing and administering the questionnaire; participating in focus groups; translating at interviews and analysing data (Figure 2).

A multi-disciplinary research advisory group consisting of representatives of statutory agencies and NGOs was established with the objective of providing expertise, access to frontline service providers and Roma participants, to advice on the research process and draft findings. Eighteen



**Figure 2.** The research process.

men and women aged from 18 years upwards, from Romania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic were recruited as community researchers. They had spent different lengths of time living in Ireland and had a varied educational experience from less than five years of primary school to university level in two cases. While some of them were advocates for their own communities none of them had an academic background. Prior to administering the questionnaires, the community researchers played a vital role in publicising the research among the Roma community and making contact with potential respondents. Training was designed to ensure that community researchers were confident in obtaining informed consent and had the skills to effectively communicate the limits of confidentiality, to conduct the research ethically and to follow protocols established to ensure researcher and respondent as much safety as possible when undertaking fieldwork (Liamputtong 2007).

The community researchers were involved in the design of the questionnaire which was based on that used in the *All Ireland Traveller Health Study* (2010). The community researchers advised that it was

unnecessary to translate the questionnaire as they believed that literacy may be an issue for respondents and that the researchers could translate. The consent and explanatory forms were translated into five languages. The researchers spoke Romani but wrote in English. Once the questionnaire was designed and agreed on, as part of their training, the community researchers worked together as a group, completing the questionnaire as investigator and respondent and then piloted the questionnaire with two Roma families. The pilot phase was important as it helped to clarify confusion around specific technical details, for example, the 'Habitual Residence Condition' (HRC). It also highlighted the vulnerability of Roma in face to face encounters with other Roma and how to respond to requests for tangible support, including money, food and accommodation and also how to cope with their own feelings as well as the ethical challenges. It also helped to identify what supports could be put in place for both researchers and respondents (Liamputtong 2007).

### **Purposive sampling**

Purposive sampling techniques can be defined as selecting units based on specific purposes associated with answering research questions (Maxwell 1997: 87) and the data contribute to a better understanding of a theoretical framework (Bernard 2002) which in this case is 'thin' and 'thick' needs. It is most effective when researching a certain cultural domain with knowledgeable experts within. The researcher identifies respondents who can provide the required information based on their own knowledge or experience (Cresswell and Plano Clark 2011; Etikan *et al.* 2015: 2). The willingness to participate is vital in purposive sampling (Spradley 1979). The current research targeted households, rather than families, to capture the experience of people living with extended families. Household is defined as by the Central Statistics Office as

A private household comprises either one person living alone or a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address with common house-keeping arrangements - that is, sharing at least one meal a day or sharing a living room or sitting room ([www.cso.ie/en/media/cso.ie/census/documents/vol13\\_appendix.pdf](http://www.cso.ie/en/media/cso.ie/census/documents/vol13_appendix.pdf)).

Roma are not a homogenous group and it is crucial to capture the diversity of experiences, including the experiences of particularly vulnerable households. This was facilitated through linking with established services and through the individual contacts of the community researchers. Questions

were included which would collect data on individuals of all ages within households. The need to capture urban/ rural experiences was recognized and Roma in the major cities as well as more rural areas throughout Ireland were targeted. Gender balance of respondents and country of origin was also a key concern. To facilitate implementing a community-based participatory research approach, regions, where Roma were located, were identified within which to locate the fieldwork.

### Quantitative survey

In September and October 2015, 108 questionnaires were completed by Roma community researchers, working in pairs, a male and female, both aged over 18 years. On completion of the questionnaires, each community researcher forwarded the questionnaires and the consent forms directly to the principal researcher who coded them. Of the 108 completed questionnaires, 78 respondents answered the qualitative questions of which there were nine open-ended questions. Bryman (2006) discusses the inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative questions in a single research instrument and whether it is a mixed method. In this instance, the open-ended questions yielded very rich narrative data.

### Community debriefing

Several writers have suggested that community debriefing enhances the trustworthiness and credibility of a research project (Janesick 2007; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Once the preliminary findings were collated from all the questionnaires, community researchers participated in a group debriefing session. This provided a space for all to reflect on their experience of conducting the research and served to clarify any issues which had arisen from the field work. This resonates with Gómez *et al.*'s commitment through critical communication to '...continuous and egalitarian dialogue among researchers and the people involved in the communities and realities being studied' (2011: 235). It was both inclusive and informative as it helped to clarify any anomalies and also facilitated the planning of future focus groups and interviews. Thematic focus groups were organized and conducted by the research team. The themes were accommodation, health, education and employment. Thus the analysis of the data generated by one method helped to develop the sample for the subsequent method. This is sequential mixed methods sampling (Teddlie and Yu 2007). Thus, one component of a study is

facilitated by the presence of the other. The sequence of quantitative-qualitative was important as it facilitated the objective of collecting data on 'thin needs' and subsequently more detailed data relating to 'thick needs'.

### **Focus groups**

Barbour suggests that focus groups 'are efficient and amenable to a broad range of topics' (2010: 327). This stage of the research facilitated the identification of the 'thick needs' of Roma relating to accommodation, health, education and employment. Eight focus groups were conducted in six different geographical areas throughout Ireland and included Roma, representatives from statutory agencies representing children and families, health, social protection, justice, housing, education and a wide range of community-based NGOs. In total one hundred and twenty individuals participated in the focus groups.

### ***In-depth interviews***

Interviews and focus groups generate different information, reflecting public versus private views (Morgan 1993). Subsequent to the focus groups, the study involved 31 qualitative, in-depth interviews with Roma, service providers and policy makers throughout Ireland representing a wide range of statutory and NGO sectors. These were conducted by the principal researcher, sometimes with translation by community researchers. This enabled the researcher to focus on sensitive topics which had arisen in the questionnaires and the focus groups, such as individual need relating to hunger and poverty as well as issues around sexual and reproductive health and intimate violence and respondents shared personal experiences and observations.

### ***Findings***

While the four themes of accommodation, education, health and employment were the focus of the needs assessment, the focus of this paper is on accommodation. This will illustrate the usefulness of our sequential explanatory mixed methods design. Furthermore, we make a contribution where there is a dearth of empirical evidence. However, first some general demographic data and findings on discrimination are presented.

## **Demographic data**

Community researchers completed questionnaire with 108 respondents, 56 women and 52 men aged between 18 and 65, who shared households with 501 people, including 281 children. Reflecting the dominant country of origin of Roma in Ireland 79.4% were from Romania, 14% from the Czech Republic and 5.6% from Slovakia. Of the 609 participants, 5.6% adults and 52.2% of children were Irish citizens. Seventy per cent had been living in Ireland for 5 or more years; 30% for at least 10 years; 30.5% for 4 years or less; and a further 12.4% were fairly recent arrivals having lived here for a year or less. Sixteen respondents lived in Ireland for 15 or more years. Romani was reported as the most prevalent language spoken at home (61%), followed by Romanian (14.3%), English (9.7%) and Slovakian (4.5%). 37.8% of adult Roma respondents had never attended school, a figure which hides a striking gender disparity in that 41.1% of women had no experience of schooling compared to 22% of men. For those adults who had attended school, the average attendance was five years and this was outside of Ireland. The survey data revealed that most respondents did not have enough English to negotiate life in Ireland independently and relied upon others to translate. A key finding from the survey was that 32.2% of Roma adults reported relying upon their children to translate.

## **Discrimination**

Discrimination emerged as a key issue throughout the research. Respondents reported feeling discriminated against at both an institutional and individual level. Of the respondents, 94.9% reported having felt worried about experiencing unfair treatment due to being Roma in the past year. In the open-ended questions, focus groups and interviews individuals explained the complexity of their experiences. Discrimination was both overt and covert; sometimes because of skin colour and sometimes by being identifiable as Roma by dress or by association with others wearing traditional Roma dress. This particularly affected women and participants in interviews and focus groups described not wearing traditional dress in public to hide their identity. There was evidence of anti-Gypsyism with respondents reporting hiding their identity at school and in the workplace. This resulted in some people choosing to hide their identity, out of fear and shame. A young woman explained the conflicting experiences for Roma in Ireland, noting that she had great experiences in Ireland and appreciated the opportunity to receive an education, but nevertheless:

I would not dress in Roma because we get treated badly, followed, and discriminated against

For many, this was experienced through verbal abuse and racist taunts. One woman explained the pain of being told:

‘go home to your own country’

While another woman reported:

I don’t feel safe in my own area because Irish people broke my house windows.

A third woman reported:

It is bad. People discriminate when we wear our clothes.

For one man this resulted in neighbours not allowing their children play with his children and he concluded:

I have experienced racism from the way I dress- and my wife.

Some respondents spoke about experiencing particular treatment due to ‘looking non-Irish’. In some cases this involved direct racism when they were told to ‘go home’. Respondents disclosed that these experiences caused enormous emotional stress. One man described the attitudes of neighbours and their children, saying:

They don’t like me because of being Roma. I do not challenge them because I do not want to cause trouble.

Perceived discrimination was reported in accessing social protection (84.3%); accessing employment (78.9%); at health services (70.5%); getting served in a shop, restaurant, pub or other social venue (74.7%); in the street or another public setting (81.1%) from the police or in the courts (53.8%). The greatest discrimination was experienced in accessing accommodation (93%) and 76.2% was perpetrated by a landlord or local authority. While 61.5% said they felt safe in their homes; 51.9% said they felt safe in their local areas, a sizeable number felt unsafe and this was reflected in their reluctance to go outside from late afternoon.

### **Accommodation need**

Access to safe and appropriate housing is essential for health and well-being. It is ‘a foundation for engagement with education, employment, social services’ (Carson and Kerr 2017: 228). While access to good-quality affordable housing is a basic need, it is central to achieving a number of social policy

objectives, including poverty reduction, greater equality, social inclusion and social mobility. The right to adequate housing is a fundamental right and a prerequisite for the enjoyment of other economic, social and cultural rights. Under the European Social Charter (Article 31), as interpreted by the European Committee of Social Rights, '[s]tates must guarantee to everyone the right to adequate housing'. Roma surveyed in Ireland are denied the most basic rights to safe, secure and appropriate accommodation. Respondents emphasized the problem of homelessness with 45.7% reporting having been homeless at some stage and 6.6% of respondents were currently homeless. A 2015 Eurofund study shows that take-up of social housing by EU10 mobile citizens is lower than that of native populations. Data from Ireland and the UK show that the difference is significant even when their socioeconomic characteristics are the same as natives. One reason is insufficient supply, an issue across the population. One service provider in a focus group described the situation as 'shocking', another participant stated:

I don't find any of the statistics surprising at all and I think with the housing crisis and finances I think there is a lot of people in the same boat, I'm are not surprised by it.

In focus groups, service providers explained that the current housing crisis in Ireland was aggravating the situation as it was a landlords' market. Service providers reported witnessing direct discrimination and landlords blatantly refusing to accept Roma as tenants. Those who do not satisfy the Habitual Residence Condition cannot register for social housing or access rent allowance. Other barriers include not having adequate documentation including PPS number, proof of current address, evidence of income, etc. Communication with the housing authorities is difficult due to lack of translation services.

In the current study, 76.9% of respondents were in rented accommodation; of these 77.1% were renting from a private landlord; 13.3% were renting from a local authority; 9.6% did not know who they were renting from and only 63.4% had a tenancy agreement. The average length of time in Ireland for those without tenancy agreements was shorter than those with, but at six years was still a long time and it was linked with not having basic documents to prove tenancy and thus the associated security. Those with tenancy agreements lived in smaller households (average 4 people) than those without (average 5–6 people). Only three respondents without a Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) had a tenancy agreement. The precarious housing situation was perceived

as linked to difficulties accessing social protection payments. A 29-year old man described how he is lacking the basic essentials:

There is no electricity and no gas in the house. There is no table or chairs. It is an empty house. I don't have a PPSN.

Another man explained:

My rent was stopped without me being informed for three weeks. I had to borrow money to pay rent and only when going to the social with integration worker that it was sorted.

A thirty-two year old man described his situation:

I live with my parents. I have three children. We don't have work, only occasionally. I applied for child benefit. No chance, I am not habitually resident.

### ***Quality of accommodation***

The quality of private rented accommodation was highlighted. A worker from a homeless organization described assisting a number of Roma households living in rat infested warehouses. The tenants were paying regular rent to a landlord and in some cases were locked in the warehouses overnight. In both Dublin's inner city and more regional areas, service providers reported seeing rats tunnelling through properties and explained that the rent-paying tenants did not complain for fear of becoming homeless. Extended families were sharing inadequate rental accommodation. Public health nurses, community midwives, social workers, family support workers, and workers from homeless organizations expressed concerns about food safety and the general health and well-being of adults and children.

### ***Overcrowding***

High numbers in accommodation would suggest hidden homelessness and severe overcrowding, with extended families and none family members sharing inadequate accommodation. Public health nurses and family support workers who visit families with young children described horrific living conditions with people sleeping on mattresses on floors, cooking on open flames and electric plates which are also used as a heating source. One family support worker reported:

I had to step over six men sleeping on mattresses on a floor, to access a young mother and baby.

Similar situations were reported by social workers and public health nurses. In a number of situations, there were 4, 5 and 6 people living in one room. A 42-year old woman who has lived in Ireland for nineteen years described her situation in a household of ten people:

My husband and I live with my son, his wife and five kids and my youngest child in a two bed apartment. We have been living here for six years I sleep in the living room on the floor, in the same room is the kitchen, the dining room, sitting room and bedroom. It is very hard for me to get rent for myself.

### *Access to basic facilities*

Social workers, family support workers and public health nurses all described the welfare issues associated with such deprivation, particularly for mothers and infants. They describe the difficulties experienced by families in trying to access food and then cook it with inadequate facilities. 12.4% of respondents did not have a kitchen, 9.6% did not have a cooker, 13.5% did not have a fridge, 49.5% did not have a safe cupboard in which to store food. There were several accounts of homes with no heating. Fuel poverty was identified as a severe challenge and 66.3% could not afford to keep the house warm all the time and 45.6% said they could not afford hot water when needed. Sanitation was an issue for many, as 14.4% did not have a bathroom and 26.2% did not have a bath or shower. 44.8% of respondents reported not having enough beds. One of the respondents, a single mother, who was severely physically disabled, explained:

We live at the moment in a house with no electricity, no gas, and no facilities. I am afraid to go to authority. They can do bad things to my family. I have three children. I live from what we beg.

Service providers described as a regular occurrence, utilities being cut off due to non-payment of bills, water being cut off and fuses being removed by landlords when rent was overdue. The hardship of such conditions was described by a thirty-nine year old mother of two, who is living in a two bedroom apartment with nine others:

Me and my two children live with my sister. She has five members living with her. My Dad is old and ill. We all live in a house where there is no electricity, no hot water. Nobody cares about us. I don't have social welfare ... I am very poor. I have a very hard life. I came to Ireland to have a better life, but instead I am worse.

These issues were further explored in focus groups and interviews. There were cases of landlords turning off gas, electricity and water. As one man explained:

My landlady is asking for lots of money for rent and doesn't want to fix anything. If I complain I am told that I'll be kicked out if I don't like it.

## Discussion and conclusion

According to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights CESCR (1991) the right to housing should not be interpreted in a narrow or restrictive sense which equates it with, 'shelter' but should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity and the right to housing is linked to other human rights and should be ensured to all persons irrespective of income or access to economic resources. It must be 'adequate' in terms of space, security, lighting and ventilation, basic infrastructure and location with regard to work and basic facilities – all at a reasonable cost and affordability. An adequate house must contain certain facilities essential for health, security, comfort and nutrition. The Committee encourages States to comprehensively apply the *Health Principles of Housing* (WHO 1989) which views inadequate and deficient housing and living conditions as invariably associated with higher mortality and morbidity rates. Housing must facilitate the expression of cultural identity and diversity. The evidence presented here, which illuminates not only the 'thin needs' but the more substantial 'thick needs' of Roma in Ireland was gathered using critical communicative methodology because of the effectiveness of participatory community research. It unveiled serious discrimination in both public and private spheres but in particular in relation to accessing accommodation. It revealed issues in relation to accommodation need including access, homelessness and overcrowding, quality of accommodation, and access to basic facilities. Findings mirrored that of previous studies on the living conditions of Roma in Europe (FRA 2009).

The objective of this paper is twofold: to contribute to scholarship on community participatory research methods and secondly to add to the dearth of information on the needs of Roma in Ireland. While the research came about as a result of a very serious incident which led to two Roma families having their children erroneously taken into care, a positive repercussion was the recommendation by Emily Logan Ombudsman for Children that a needs assessment of Roma in Ireland be undertaken focusing

on accommodation, education, health and employment needs. It was timely in that it coincided with the EU Framework on Roma and Traveller Integration and so has the possibility to be transformative, if the findings can be incorporated into the National Traveller Roma Inclusion Strategy under development.

A community participatory research project was designed as it was felt that it would be the most effective way to access the Roma community, ensure real participation and contribute towards empowering the community. The methodology reflected the vast scholarship on needs (Bradshaw 1972; Dean 2010; Doyal and Gough 1991; Forder 1974; Fraser 1989; Lister 2010) and the belief that in order to understand the 'thin needs' (Fraser 1989) which are universal/ inherent needs (Dean 2010; Doyal and Gough 1991) and the more substantive needs or 'thick needs' (Fraser 1989) that a mixed methods sequential design was appropriate. Needs interpretation was central to the methodology and it was only with the expertise of the Roma community researchers and the guidance of the multi-agency, multi-disciplinary research advisory group that this could be achieved. The intention was that the process involved (Flick 2009; Reason and Bradbury 2008) in a participatory research project would facilitate flourishing (Dean 2010; Nussbaum 1995; Sen 1985, 1999) by empowering the researchers through the research process and interpreting the needs by those best equipped to do so, the often silenced, marginalized Roma community (Hajioff and McKee 2000; Kósa and Adány 2007).

Identification of the thick needs of Roma will contribute to our understanding of two important issues: 1) how to improve access to social housing for Roma and 2) how to protect Roma in accessing the private rented sector. In 2011 the Commission published an *EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020* with the aim of making a 'tangible difference in Roma lives' through coordinated action. The Framework document required each Member State to draw up a national Roma integration strategy up to 2020 with specific actions and funding streams in areas of education, employment, health and housing. The needs identified here can help achieve this goal. Fraser (1989) identifies three stages in the politics of needs interpretation: the establishment of the political status of needs; the practical interpretation and the satisfaction of needs. The needs assessment is an important step in this process for Roma in Ireland. It has brought 'into view the contextual and contested characters of needs claims' (Fraser 1989: 163) and as Dean suggests interpreted needs can be translated into claim-based rights (Dean 2010: 141).

This is a potential vehicle for transformation which our findings can influence and can be part of a national and transnational political mobilization by facilitating ‘enhanced interest representation; the cessation of political, social, economic and other forms of discrimination; and the improvement of the given collective’s conditions and relative standing in society’ (Barany 1998: 309–310). As Gómez and Marti (2012: 24) remind us in their scholarship on critical communicative research with Roma: ‘what is important is to achieve results which are socially useful, and which also contribute to the transformation of systems of exclusion’. The needs assessment has removed any potential claim by policy makers that there is a dearth of information on the housing (and other) needs of Roma in Ireland. The participatory research method has ensured that Roma are expressing their needs, which they feel, and have identified and interpreted. This is an important step in achieving positive policy change.

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