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**OMBUDSMAN CALLS FOR GREATER AWARENESS
TO PREVENT TRAVELLER DEATHS IN JAIL**

Prisons need to be more aware of the higher risk of suicide and the prevalence of ill health among Travellers, said Nigel Newcomen, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO). Today he published a bulletin on the lessons that can be learned from Traveller deaths in prison.

'Gypsy or Irish Traveller' was first included as an ethnic group in the Census in 2011, and accounted for 0.1% of the population of England and Wales. It is difficult to know the actual size of the Traveller population in prison as it has only been possible to record ethnicity as "Gypsy or Irish Traveller" since 2011 when it was introduced on the prison record system. A survey by HM Inspectorate of Prisons found that 5% of prisoners identified themselves as Gypsy, Romany or Traveller, suggesting that this group is considerably over-represented in prison. Travellers have lower life expectancy than the general population and conditions such as bronchitis, asthma and angina are much more prevalent. There are no official statistics to show the suicide rate for Travellers in the community in the UK, but studies have shown the rate to be higher than the general population.

PPO investigations into Traveller deaths in custody have found that:

- all prisoners can be affected by separation from families, but this can be particularly acute for Travellers for whom family life is central. Lifestyle can also make family contact difficult and costly;

- there are high levels of mental illness in the Traveller population and Travellers have been found to be nearly three times more likely to suffer from anxiety and over twice as likely to be depressed compared to the rest of the population. The mental health support Travellers received in prison was variable;
- not being able to read and write is a barrier to accessing information and taking part in prison life and while literacy among prisoners is generally low, it is even lower for Travellers, which can impact on safety; and
- bullying in prison has been identified as increasing the risk of suicide and self-harm. Discrimination towards Travellers is still commonly experienced in the community and can manifest itself in prison as threatening behaviour, intimidation or bullying.

The steps that should be taken are:

- prisons should ensure they identify and record Travellers at reception and update their records for those in prison before it was included on the prisoner record system (P-NOMIS) in 2011;
- prisons should be aware that Travellers are at an increased risk of suicide in the community;
- prison equality groups should have both a prisoner and staff member representing the needs of Travellers;
- prisons should ensure that information and support to maintain family ties is given to prisoners and families;
- prisons should consider the risk of suicide and self-harm for apparent victims of bullying; and
- prisons should provide healthcare compacts and agreements in forms other than written for illiterate prisoners.

Nigel Newcomen said:

“Gypsies and Irish Travellers are among the most marginalised groups in society and there is research evidence that both physical ill health and suicide are more prevalent among this group than in the wider

community. Research also suggests that Travellers may receive poor treatment in the criminal justice system and in prison. Only a relatively small number of my office's fatal incident investigations identify the prisoner who died as a Traveller. However, it is evident that poor recording of ethnicity in prisons makes it difficult to know how accurate this is and how widespread the problems identified are. Not all the issues identified are unique to Travellers. Nonetheless, a number of learning points emerge for the Prison Service which I hope can contribute to keeping members of these groups safe in prison."

- ENDS -

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. A copy of the report can be found on the PPO website. Visit www.ppo.gov.uk.
2. The PPO investigates deaths that occur in prison, secure training centres, immigration detention or among the residents of probation approved premises. The PPO also investigates complaints from prisoners, young people in secure training centres, those on probation and those held in immigration removal centres.
3. Romany Gypsies, Irish Travellers and other travelling communities who share some historical and cultural traditions are recognised and protected as an ethnic group under the Equality Act 2010. We refer to these different groups as 'Travellers' for ease of reference in the report.
4. **Contact us:** Please contact Jane Parsons, PPO Press Office, on 020 3681 2775 or 07880 787452 if you would like more information, or email mail@ppo.gsi.gov.uk.