

Assessing the North Cork Traveller community's experiences of mental health issues and seeking appropriate mental health care



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Background

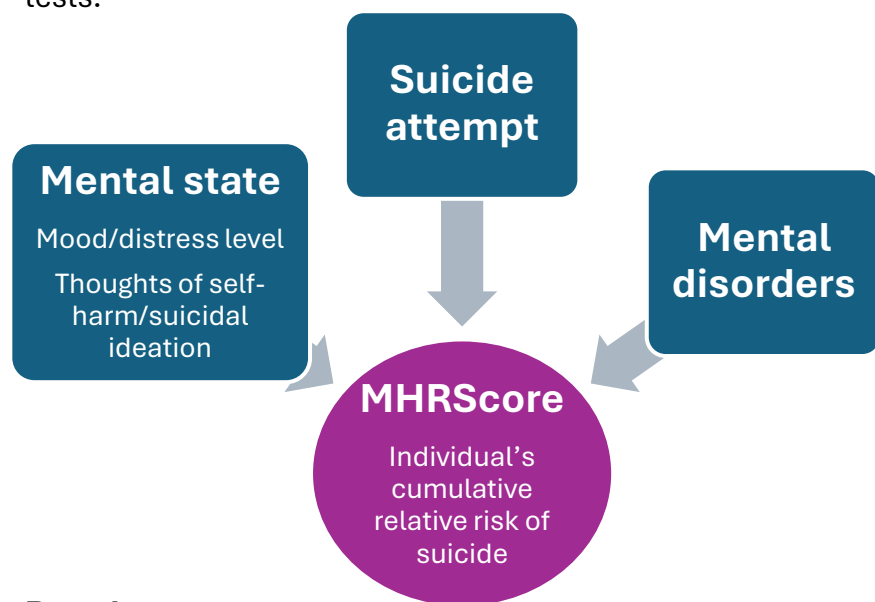
Irish Travellers are a distinct ethnic group indigenous to the island of Ireland. They suffer some of the worst discrimination of any ethnic group in Europe, fueling a mental health epidemic. The suicide rate for Traveller men is almost seven times higher for men and five times higher for women.

Aims and Objectives

This study aims to assess mental health needs and risk for the adult Traveller population within the catchment area of North Cork Mental Health Services. It aims to understand barriers and attitudes towards accessing mental healthcare.

Methods

A sample of 35 adult Irish Travellers (21 women, 14 men. 57% aged 18-44yrs) were recruited through Travellers of North Cork, a human rights organisation. Participants anonymously completed an electronic survey. Scores were formulated to estimate an individual's relative risk for suicide completion (MHRScore; Cronbach's alpha 0.710, McDonald's Omega 0.775), substance misuse (CAGE), barriers faced in accessing mental healthcare and attitudes towards healthcare providers and services. Data were analysed in SPSS using non-parametric tests.



Results

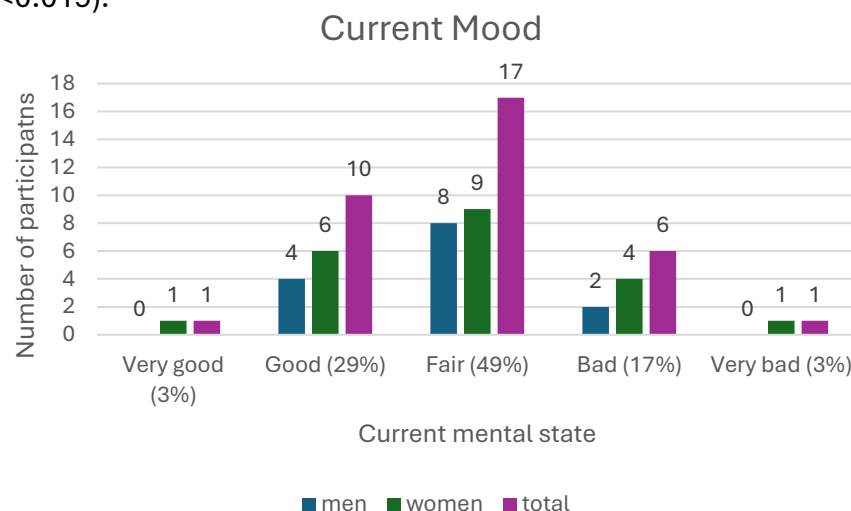
49% of participants rated their current mental state as "fair" and 20% as "bad" or "very bad". 86% had at least one mental disorder diagnosis. 21% of participants did not know how to get help in a mental health crisis and the same number had attempted suicide before. Thoughts of deliberate self-harm/suicide were reported by 18% and the same had a clinically significant CAGE score.

The mean MHRScore was 14.35 (95% CI 10.08 – 19.17) with range of 1 – 46.73 and risk varied between townlands (Kruskal Wallis 10.157, $p < 0.038$). There was an inverse correlation between MHRScore and being in a relationship or married (Mann Whitney U -2.027, $p < 0.042$) and knowledge of dealing with a mental health crisis (-2.008, $p < 0.044$). 91% had lost a loved one to suicide.

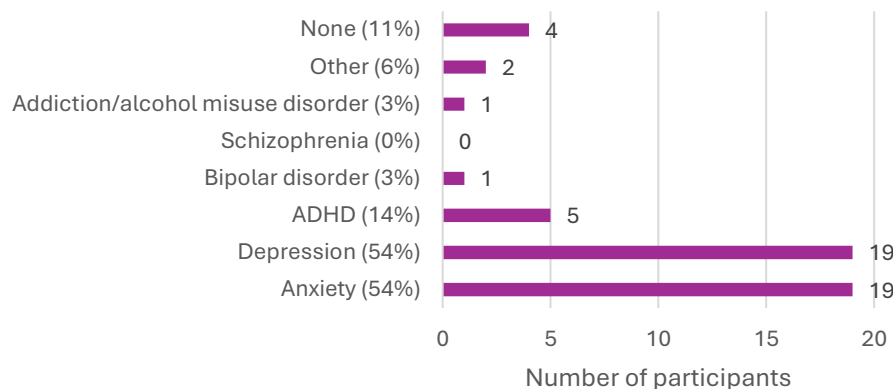
A previous suicide attempt correlated with more mental disorder diagnoses (Spearman's 0.457 $p < 0.006$), worse mood (0.397, $p < 0.018$) and more barriers in accessing services (0.375, $p < 0.026$), and was associated with active thoughts of self-harm/suicide (Chi square, 28.966, $p < 0.001$).

More diagnoses correlated with worse mood (0.669, $p < 0.001$) and having thoughts of self-harm/suicide (Mann Whitney U 2.44, $p < 0.015$).

43% said they faced barriers in accessing care, most commonly privacy, family embarrassment, remembering future appointments and unsuitable appointment locations. Those with a higher MHRScore faced more barriers (Spearman's Rank Order 0.395, $p < 0.019$).



Mental Health Diagnoses



46% of respondents had used mental health services and 88% were satisfied with their care. 74% said they would feel comfortable talking to their GP about a mental health problem and 89% said they trust their doctor. A positive attitude towards healthcare correlated with a higher level of education (0.334, $p < 0.05$). 27% of respondents said they experienced discrimination in a healthcare setting.

Discussion

Travellers are at a much higher risk of suicide and have numerous mental health needs complicated by bereavement, substance misuse and barriers in receiving care. Substance and alcohol dependence may be underdiagnosed as there is a discrepancy between disclosure of addiction and CAGE scores. This study was limited by the high prevalence of literacy issues in the Traveller community and may not have captured a vulnerable cohort.

Conclusions

There are opportunities for North Cork Mental Health Services to develop cultural competence. Follow up studies are needed for predictive validation of the individual suicide risk model. The results reflect the impact of negative societal attitudes towards the Traveller community.