

The distribution of Traveller students across education settings in Ireland¹

Emer Smyth,* Joanne Banks*

ESRI Research Bulletins provide short summaries of work published by ESRI researchers and overviews of thematic areas covered by ESRI programmes of research. Bulletins are designed to be easily accessible to a wide readership.

INTRODUCTION

Education policy on Traveller students has changed over time, with a shift away from specific supports towards provision within mainstream education. To date, however, there has been a lack of information on the distribution of Traveller students across different types of schools and educational settings. This paper examines whether Traveller students are, in fact, equally distributed across different types of education setting, and the implications for targeted support for this group. .

DATA AND METHODS

This paper uses data from the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) principal survey and survey data from providers of alternative education (The National Youthreach Programme). The paper uses data from GUI Cohort '08, wave 5 to look at primary school patterns and Cohort '98 data, wave 2 to look at second-level patterns. For alternative education, data are used from a national survey of Youthreach Centre coordinators and Community Training Centre managers conducted in late 2017 (see Smyth et al., 2018). Both school principals and Youthreach coordinators were asked about the total number of learners and the number of learners from Traveller backgrounds.

RESULTS

Traveller students are overrepresented in certain schools, reflecting significant geographical variation in the distribution of the Traveller population as well as the

¹ This Bulletin summarizes the findings from: Smyth, E., & Banks, J. (2024). The Representation of Traveller Students Across Different School Contexts in Ireland. In R. Rose & M. Shevlin (Eds.), *Including Voices* (Vol. 23, pp. 217-229). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-363620240000023017>

* Correspondence: emer.smyth@esri.ie; banksjo@tcd.ie

interaction of parental choice and school admissions criteria. Overall, 65 per cent of Traveller students would have to change primary school to have an equal representation across schools (using an index of dissimilarity, a measure of segregation); the figure for second-level is 57 per cent. In particular, there is a much higher representation of Traveller students in schools designated disadvantaged (DEIS), schools that are more likely to have greater numbers of disadvantaged students, those with disabilities and those from migrant backgrounds. At primary level, Urban Band 1 DEIS schools (the most disadvantaged in terms of school profile) are over eight times as likely as non-DEIS schools to have a high concentration of Traveller students. Urban Band 2 and rural DEIS schools are also more likely to have a higher representation of Traveller students than non-DEIS schools. Representation is related to school size, with concentration being greater in larger primary schools. Traveller students are less likely to attend Irish-medium schools and schools that are oversubscribed, that is, have more students apply than there are places available. The patterns are broadly similar at secondary level, with a much higher representation of Traveller students in DEIS and larger schools and a lower proportion in oversubscribed schools. Nonetheless, over half of Traveller students do not attend DEIS schools.

A sizeable proportion of Traveller young people leave school before the end of lower secondary education; over two-thirds (68%) of Traveller 20-24-year-olds have not reached Leaving Certificate level compared to 11 per cent of the total population (Census 2016). Traveller young people were found to make up 15 per cent of learners in Youthreach/Community Training Centres, very much higher than their representation either in the population as a whole or in the school system. Contrary to the pattern at school level, no variation in Traveller representation is found by centre size. However, Travellers have higher representation in centres that have increased in size over the past five years. Looking at changes over time in Traveller numbers, they are more likely to have increased in larger centres (28%) compared to medium (21%) or small (15%) centres. There is strong regional variation, with a much higher representation of Travellers in Connacht than in other regions. There is less segregation between centres than is found at school level.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis indicates challenges in ensuring a fully inclusive approach to Traveller education in the context of a significant degree of segregation at school level. The findings add to the evidence base on the need for targeted supports for schools and education providers with a concentration of complex need, with additional resources required to match the scale of disadvantage present in some settings. However, many Traveller and other socio-economically disadvantaged students attend more socially mixed schools, highlighting the need for targeted supports to also follow the student.