

Exploring Physical Activity Engagement in Traveller and Roma Populations: A Qualitative Study of Barriers and Facilitators

Executive Summary

This qualitative research evaluation explored the barriers and facilitators to physical activity participation among Traveller and Roma communities in Ireland, with the aim of informing the design of culturally tailored, community-based interventions. Using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, data were analysed through an inductive thematic approach and mapped to the COM-B model and Theoretical Domains Framework (TDF).

Key Findings

1. Barriers

- **Structural and environmental barriers:** Limited access to affordable, safe, and culturally appropriate facilities; transport challenges; and lack of dedicated spaces for group-based activity.
- **Socioeconomic constraints:** Financial insecurity and competing priorities limited the ability to commit to structured programmes.
- **Cultural and social norms:** Among Travellers, gender expectations influenced participation, particularly for women, while some Roma participants reported uncertainty about mixing genders in activity settings.
- **Discrimination and exclusion:** Traveller participants described experiences of being turned away or feeling unwelcome in mainstream facilities, reinforcing disengagement. Roma participants, by contrast, did not frequently report discrimination, which may reflect normalisation, reluctance to disclose, or context-specific differences.

2. Facilitators

- **Community-based delivery:** Trust in familiar, local settings (e.g., libraries, community centres) was seen as essential.
- **Cultural relevance:** Activities reflecting traditions, such as dance for Roma participants, were highly motivating.
- **Social connection:** Group-based programmes fostered belonging, motivation, and peer encouragement.
- **Role models and peer leaders:** Participants highlighted the potential of Traveller and Roma instructors to increase trust and uptake.

Discussion and Implications

The findings underscore that structural inequalities, cultural norms, and lived experiences of exclusion must be explicitly addressed to improve participation. While Traveller participants highlighted discrimination as a significant barrier, Roma participants placed greater emphasis on access and resource limitations. Across both groups, the importance of culturally tailored, community-led, and socially engaging activities was evident.

Recommendations for Practice

- Develop **culturally sensitive, co-designed programmes** that incorporate community traditions and preferences.
- Provide **accessible, low-cost, and local exercise opportunities** to reduce structural barriers.
- Train and empower **community members as peer leaders/instructors** to foster trust and sustainability.
- Build partnerships with health and social inclusion services to integrate exercise opportunities into wider wellbeing initiatives.

Summary of Key Recommendations

- **Policy Alignment:** Ensure future health and sport policies include cultural competence, gender equity, and access as core metrics for funding and evaluation.
- **Inclusive Delivery:** Programmes must reflect the voices, identities, and preferences of Traveller and Roma participants—no "one size fits all."
- **Co-Design and Co-Delivery:** Empower communities to take part in planning and delivering programmes, ensuring ownership and sustainability.
- **Invest in Trust:** Build ongoing, visible relationships with Traveller and Roma organisations to counteract past exclusion and discrimination.
- **Funding for Continuity:** Advocate for long-term funding mechanisms with KPIs that reflect participation, community impact, and health outcomes—not just attendance numbers.
- **Establish ring-fenced local funding** to support ongoing, community-led physical activity programmes for Roma and Traveller populations.
- **Incorporate Roma and Traveller voices** into local authority decision-making bodies related to health and recreation.
- **Support capacity development** for community members to become accredited instructors, particularly in culturally significant practices such as dance.
- **Embed anti-discrimination training** within mainstream physical activity services and monitor uptake among marginalised groups.

Conclusion

This study highlights that while barriers to physical activity in Traveller and Roma communities are multifaceted, there are equally strong facilitators that can be leveraged. By embedding cultural relevance, tackling structural inequalities, and building on social strengths, community exercise programmes can play a vital role in reducing health disparities and promoting inclusion.



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