

Stories of change

10 years of the Traveller Justice Initiative

The **Traveller Justice Initiative (TJI)** (formerly the Travellers in Prison Initiative) was established in 2014 by **St Stephen's Green Trust (SSGT)**, in response to research by the **Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT)** that highlighted the deep inequalities Travellers face within the criminal justice system. Over the past decade, TJI has worked with Traveller organisations, criminal justice agencies, and advocacy groups to create change at individual, community and structural levels by addressing both the causes and consequences of the over-representation of Travellers in the criminal justice system.

This document is not intended as an impact report – instead, it captures a sample of the sentiment of key stakeholders who were interviewed in advance of TJI's tenth anniversary. This is a summary; for more, see *Stories of change: 10 years of the Traveller Justice Initiative 2015-2025*.

Key Findings and Impact

TJI has empowered Travellers with lived experience of the criminal justice system to share their stories and advocate for change. TJI-supported peer support programmes in prisons have created stronger networks and increased visibility of Traveller identity in the justice system, fostering a sense of belonging and support.

“For the first time, I saw my community as equals to the prison staff – before [that] the only Travellers I saw in prison were prisoners”

A significant milestone has been the introduction of ethnic identifiers by the Irish Prison Service (IPS) and Probation Service, allowing for improved data collection on Traveller representation. This has paved the way for more targeted support measures, including the introduction of Traveller Liaison Teachers (TLTs) across all prisons to support education access. Peer mediation programmes supported by TJI, initially piloted, have also been mainstreamed in several prisons.

“The training of prisoners to become peer mediators was a ‘wow’ moment”

TJI has also played a crucial role in facilitating direct engagement between Travellers and decision-makers, shifting perceptions and increasing institutional awareness of Traveller needs. These initiatives have led to greater

understanding within criminal justice agencies.

“The TJI has opened a lot of doors for Traveller organisations... there is a lot of engagement [with us] now from the prisons and probation that was not there before the TJI”

The Role of Philanthropy in Driving Change

Independent funding from SSGT has allowed TJI to operate outside state constraints, testing and scaling innovative solutions while securing state buy-in. By providing longer-term financial support, SSGT enabled TJI to take risks, build relationships, and influence policy at a systemic level.

“It helped that the TJI was separate as there are competing demands – and the statutory obligations around security trumps other concerns. A dedicated ringfenced funding and focus is needed and some lever to hold this funding was needed – and the SSGT provided this.”

“You need to have spaces outside of the state and the mainstream to bring about change. There are important lessons for philanthropy in Ireland”

The ability to experiment with new approaches and build trust with both the Traveller community and criminal justice agencies has been crucial to its success.

Milestones of Change

Since its establishment, TJI has led several transformative initiatives. In the years following its formation, TJI provided funding through SSGT for peer support projects, published research on the experiences of Traveller women in prison, supported training programmes, and held a national conference in Dublin Castle.

By 2017, the introduction of ethnic identifiers in prisons allowed for a clearer understanding of Traveller representation, leading to more targeted services. Several peer support pilot programmes have since been mainstreamed and fully funded by the IPS, ensuring sustainability. In recent years, TJI has directly published several reports and briefings, and has supported organisations including National Traveller MABS, Galway Traveller Movement and the National Traveller Women's Forum (NTWF) to publish reports and guides.

Through TJI, Traveller representatives have been invited to speak at Oireachtas Committee meetings and the District Court Judges' conference, marking a new level of engagement at a national level. More recently, TJI provided support to Oberstown to establish a Youth and Family support initiative for young Travellers, and to Barnardos and the NTWF to commence a pilot model of support for Traveller women in the criminal justice system and their families.

“There is an openness and attitudes have changed – there is an absolute recognition of the disproportionate representation and that we need to do more.”

In its early years, TJI was primarily funded by SSGT. As the initiative gained traction, the IPS and the Probation Service progressively increased their financial support. Since 2024, TJI has been fully funded by the IPS and the Probation Service, a milestone that reflects institutional commitment to sustaining and embedding this work.

Looking to the Future

While TJI has made significant progress, there is still much work to be done. Ensuring

sustained funding for Traveller-led justice initiatives will be key to expanding the impact achieved over the last decade. The ethnic identifier must continue to shape policies and services, ensuring that data-driven decisions lead to tangible improvements. Additionally, increasing Traveller employment within the criminal justice sector remains a critical goal, breaking cycles of marginalisation and ensuring representation at all levels.

“We need to mainstream Traveller employment in the IPS [...]. We need to reach the stage that Travellers are part of the prison staff – this impacts on behaviour... and once behaviour has changed, attitudes will change too.”

Continuing to strengthen partnerships between criminal justice agencies and Traveller organisations will be essential to sustaining progress. TJI's work has demonstrated that systemic change is possible when communities, policymakers, and funders work together.

“The root causes must be addressed – the criminal justice system alone cannot fix the issue of the over-representation of Travellers in prison. But we have a really important part to play – and we are committed to playing our part and look forward to working with [TJI] in doing so.”

As the housing of TJI fully transitions from SSGT to IPRT in early 2025, TJI carries forward a strong legacy of advocacy and systemic reform.

Conclusion

TJI's journey is a powerful example of how community-driven initiatives, supported by philanthropy, can reshape systems. Over the past decade, policy shifts, relationship-building, and Traveller participation have created a lasting impact. Moving forward, a key challenge will be ensuring that these changes are embedded permanently.

