

I want to thank everyone for their contributions. This has been a very important day.

I also want to say I've been doing this for 18 years and I'm sorry to see that we're still talking about the same issues that all of us have been talking about all this time.

In my remarks, I'd like to focus on some of the issues that I have been focused on. (Some of these have been raised here earlier, which, I think, shows the place they hold in our community.)

Accommodation, education, employment and health and mental health are extremely important, and we need to meet our responsibilities as a Government and as a committee.

First, I want to speak to the importance of hate crime legislation, because I think this is vital. Hate crime has a negative impact on all the issues I mentioned. It should not be acceptable, when we have a housing crisis, that we see accommodation burned that was earmarked for Travellers or people seeking international protection.

I feel it's important that my colleagues understand the huge importance that people from our community and all minority communities attach to having a State and institutions that will protect them from acts of violence and hatred that are motivated by racism and other forms of bigotry.

This is not a "hate speech bill". It is a Hate Crime Bill, which contains a much-needed update on the unworkable 1989 Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act.

As Minister McEntee has said, opinions are not going to be criminalised.

This legislation will send a signal to our minority communities that acts of violence carried out against any minority group because of their identity is unacceptable and contrary to our values of equality and inclusion, and to our vision of an equal and inclusive society.

It's also important to remember that, for example, if a Traveller is attacked on a street for being a Traveller, the psychological harm can run much deeper than if someone is mugged at random for their wallet.

Hate crime really strikes at the core of your identity. It has an impact on everyone else in your community and other minority communities.

Everyone in our country must feel that they belong. They must know the State has their back.

I also want to repeat what I've said before in relation to accommodation – we need a National Traveller Accommodation Authority.

We've seen that local authorities have not met Traveller housing needs. We need an oversight structure to ensure safe and culturally appropriate accommodation is provided to Traveller families and individuals.

This was one of the recommendations from this committee in our 2021 report.

The authority would oversee development and implementation of Traveller accommodation and have input into the Traveller Accommodation Policy each local authority develops.

I have also spoken often about the mental health crisis our community faces.

Lives are at stake.

Travellers should be treated as equal human beings in this country.

Every day we see the impact of addiction and mental health issues on our community.

I have asked the minister for progress on the National Traveller Mental Health Strategy that this Government promised in its Programme for Government.

We are still waiting to see movement on this strategy.

This committee also recommended establishment of this national strategy, in a recommendation that came from the National Traveller Mental Health Network.

The most recent figures we have show the terrible impact of the mental health crisis on the Traveller community.

We have all heard the statistics and we can never forget that we're talking about people, real people.

The level of suicide we're talking about in our community is dire. It's at crisis point.

It's taking children like Patrick McDonagh, the young man we saw in the RTÉ documentary. It's taking young men and women that we all know.

Every single one of us Travellers in this chamber and every Traveller listening in would have family members suffering from mental health.

Travellers' experiences of racism and exclusion have a serious effect on our mental health and well-being.

We need to see action on this crucial recommendation. We know that lives are at stake.

Finally, I'd also like to raise the issue of the overrepresentation of Travellers in the prison population.

In 2022, researchers at the University of Limerick examined the relationship between Travellers and the criminal justice system.

The report, called Irish Travellers Access to Justice, found that Travellers were greatly overrepresented in prisons in 2021, where they made up 7.3 per cent of the prison population, but just 0.7 per cent of the general population, according to the 2016 Census.

Most respondents said they felt they experienced discrimination within the criminal justice system.

We have to make sure our criminal justice system works for all of our citizens.

(I'm also waiting for information from the Travellers in Prison Initiative and I'll add that to my speech)