

Investigating British and Polish horse owners' approach to turnout and the possible health and behavioural problems from limiting access

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Introduction

Equine welfare is getting more recognition not only amongst professional equestrians but also horse owners in general (Butler et al., 2019). Studies conducted over the past decade have shown sport horses of high value tend to be managed differently than regular non-competition animals, therefore questioning the ethical background of some practices for example limiting turnout (Campbell, 2021). This could potentially lead to poor animal management affecting both mental and physical health of the horses, resulting in the appearance of abnormal behaviors in stabled conditions (Lesimple et al., 2020). The aim of the study was to ascertain the current horse management practices used in two countries: Poland and the United Kingdom as well as looking into differences in turnout time between competition and non-competition horses.

Materials and Methods

An online Questionnaire was distributed via social media platforms including Facebook, and with the use of snowball sampling. A total of 749 responses from Poland and the UK were collected and then analyzed with descriptive statistics, content analysis and statistical testing. Spearman's rank tests were used to analyze correlations between injury risk and turnout, taking safety precautions (such as wearing leg protection while out in the pasture) in competition and non-competition horses. Chi-square tests were conducted to assess differences in turnout time between horses that are competing and those that are not.

Results

The results of the study showed great differences in turnout practices between the two countries, such as taking precautions while turning out horses is not as common in Poland as in the UK. The results significantly differed with 78% (n=339) UK (see figure 1) and 54% (n=167) Polish respondents claiming to do so (see figure 2). Analyzing open-ended questions gave an insight of opinions about turnout from horse owners from multiple equine backgrounds. When asked "Can you decide on your horse's turnout time?" a total of 129 (n=129) respondents from both the UK and Poland stated that they do not have a say in this matter (see figure 3). 110 (n=110) participants reported that the reasoning for their lack of control over turnout time is the yard rules and its owners' decisions. A Chi-square test revealed that competition horses receive a different turnout time than non-competition ones ($\chi^2=49.942^2$; $p=0.002$)

Discussion and conclusion

By examining the turnout practices in Poland and the UK, a greater understanding of horse owners' opinions and turnout trends was achieved. The comparison of results from those two countries showed the differences between equine societies of Western and Eastern Europe. This creates an opportunity for them to learn from each other and ideally, improve the welfare of their horses. These results encourage further research on management practices in the equine industry. By understanding the principles of equine welfare, owners' control of turnout could improve the conditions that horses are kept in and therefore lead to better quality of life for many horses in the industry.

References:

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Do you take any precautions while turning out your horse? (UK).

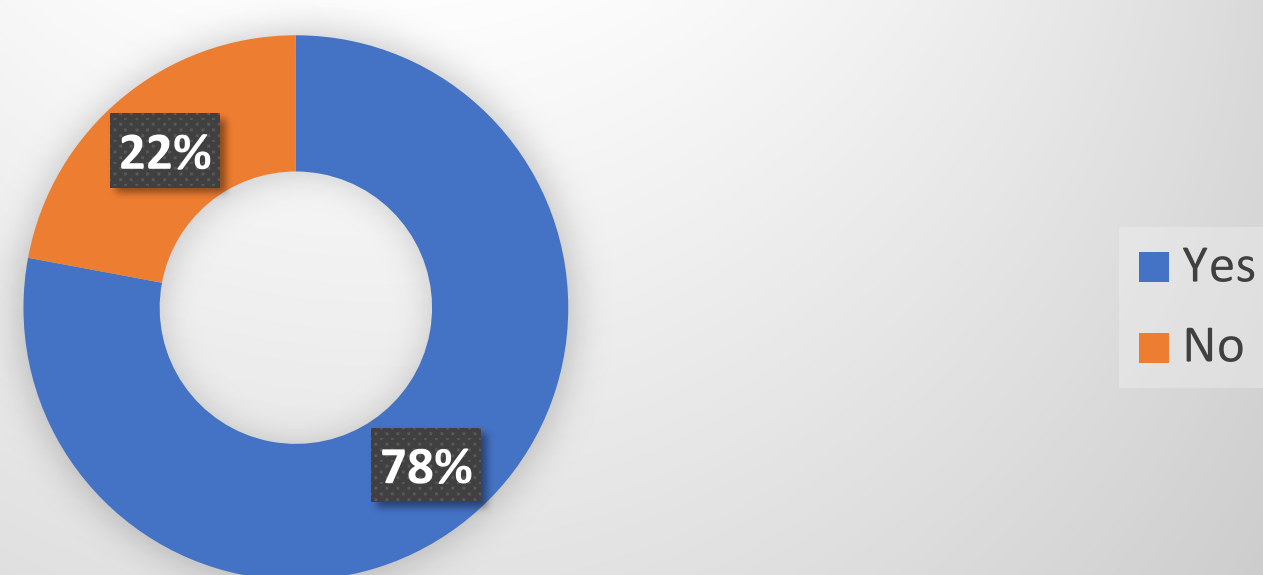


Figure 1. Percentage of British horse owners taking precautions while turning out their horses.

Do you take any precautions while turning out your horse? (PL)

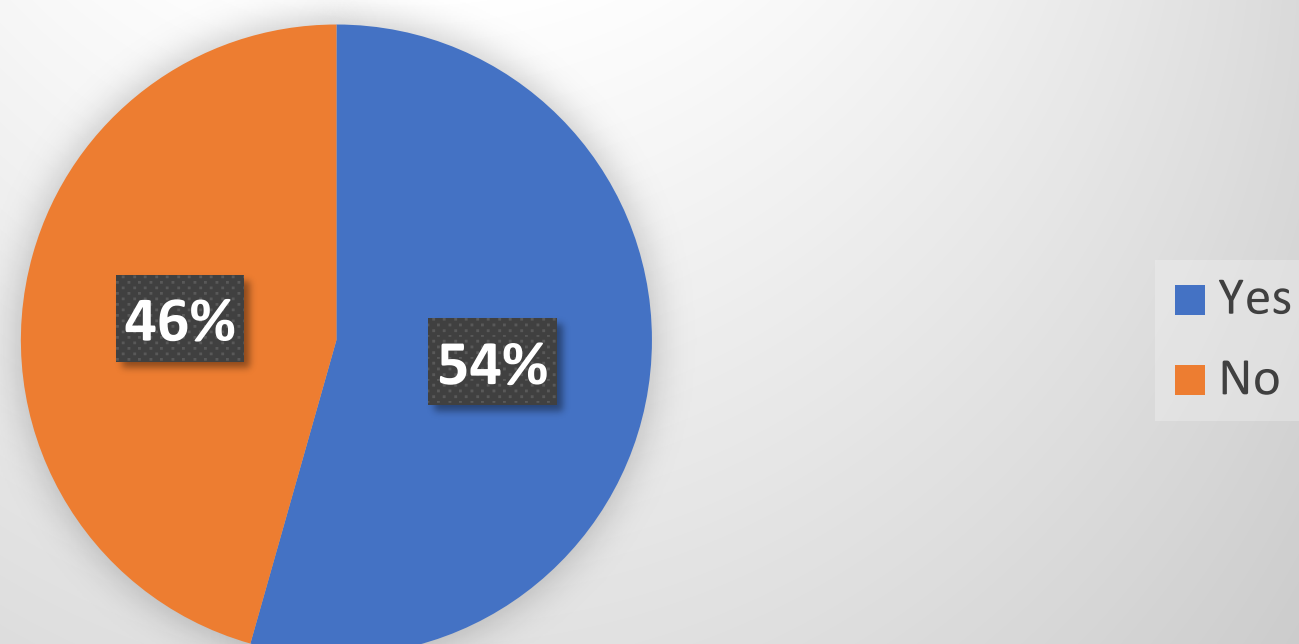


Figure 2. Percentage of Polish horse owners taking precautions while turning out their horses.

'Can you decide on your horses's turnout time?'

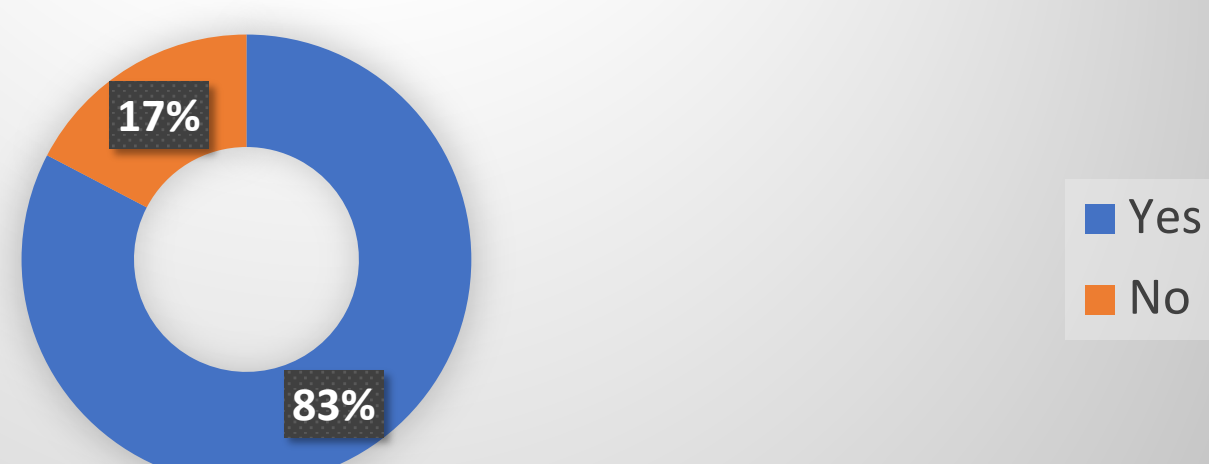


Figure 3. Percentage of both Polish and British horse that can decide on their horses' turnout time.