

Factors associated with rehoming and time until rehoming for horses listed with an equine charity

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Introduction

The number of unwanted horses in the UK has increased in recent years, representing a serious welfare issue. Horses can become unwanted due to horse-related and/or owner-related factors. Reasons for owners seeking to rehome horses may include lack of money or time, poor health or owner death, or a change in family circumstances. Horse characteristics that may result in them being unwanted could include health issues, old age, unsuitability for its intended purpose or undesirable behaviours.

In the UK, limited data exist regarding horses available for rehoming, and, to date, no studies have investigated the association between owner or horse factors and the likelihood of rehoming or the time until rehoming. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to evaluate factors that may influence whether a horse is rehomed and the time it takes to be rehomed.

Approach

This was a retrospective cohort study of horses and ponies that were listed for rehoming on a UK-based equine rehoming charity's website between 1 January 2013 and 1 January 2014. Data were downloaded from the charity's database in an anonymised format. The information

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KEY FINDINGS

- Younger horses and those requiring a more skilled rider were less likely to be rehomed.
- The time it took to rehome a horse was influenced by the animal's age, breed type and whether it was available as a companion only, as well as factors relating to the location of the current owner and potential new owner.

collected included horse signalment and management details, owner preferences for the location and type of rehoming, required skill level of the rider and reasons for rehoming. Multivariable logistic regression analysis was then used to determine factors associated with whether a horse was rehomed. Survival analysis was also conducted to determine factors affecting time until rehoming.

Results

Data were available from 791 animals listed for rehoming – 64 per cent of which were horses and 36 per cent of which were ponies. Their mean age was 12.5 years (SD 5.9), and 58 per cent were male. The most commonly cited reason for rehoming was lack of time (39 per cent).

A total of 410 animals (52 per cent) were rehomed during the study period, with 40 per cent (n=163) of these being rehomed through the charity. The median time taken to rehome was 39 days (IQR 24 to 75 days). Horses and ponies offered for permanent rehoming with ownership transfer were nearly three times more likely to be rehomed than horses available for loan. Animals that were suitable for beginners were three times more likely to be rehomed than those requiring advanced riders.

Horses located in southern England were rehomed at a 57 per cent higher rate than

those in mid-England, and those seeking a new home nationwide were rehomed three times quicker than those whose owner wished them to remain within a 50-mile radius of their current location. Horses over 17 years old and horses between 11 and 17 years old were, respectively, rehomed two and nearly three times more quickly than horses under five years old. Those described as sports horses were rehomed twice as quickly as native breeds. Horses for which the suggested donation amount was between £250 and £499 were rehomed two times quicker than horses with a donation amount of less than £100.

Interpretation

Although this study has identified factors associated with equine rehoming, care should be taken in extrapolating the findings to the wider population of unwanted horses in the UK.

In the current study, horses that were deemed suitable for novice or beginner riders were more likely to be rehomed, compared with horses that required advanced riders – highlighting the potential importance of a 'safe and sensible' ride to the new owner. However, it could also be a reflection of the population of horse owners seeking to rehome a horse from a charity, with more advanced and competitive riders potentially being less likely to do so. Alongside assessing the suitability of the horse, further work on the demographics of people seeking to rehome a horse through a charity should be considered.

Significance of findings

The findings of this study can be used not only to inform rehoming strategies but also to identify horses that are less likely to be rehomed, and, thus, where alternative options should be considered. Owner education regarding the commitment required when taking on a horse may reduce the supply of unwanted horses.