

Research Study of
Traveller Horse Owners
The Influence of Family Horse Ownership in Young Travellers' Lives

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Introduction and Aim of Study

The report of The Task Force on the Travelling Community (1995) estimates that one quarter of Travelling families own horses. Not only are horses of economic value to the Traveller, but also of immense cultural importance to them. Since the *Control of Horses Act* was introduced in 1996, it has become increasingly difficult for Travellers to carry on the tradition of breeding, buying and selling horses. Travellers live in constant fear of having their horses impounded at a cost of over one hundred pounds per day. Also an earlier report compiled by Philipp Fritzsche (2000) detailed the difficulty experienced by Travellers in locating land to rent for horse rearing. These pressures have resulted in a decline in the number of Travelling families who keep horses.

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The Traveller Visibility Group (T.V.G.) based in the Glen in Cork City has formulated a plan to set up a project that will enable Travellers to carry on their tradition of keeping horses. Fritzsche's research

revealed some of the difficulties facing Travellers in accessing land and indeed concluded that their chances of locating appropriate land are remote. The T.V.G. are hoping to acquire land with the support of local government to develop the Horse Project.

Lack of commitment to the project to date suggests that the Local Authorities are blind to the advantages of Traveller horse ownership.

Apart from the cultural importance of horse ownership, anecdotal evidence suggests that the adolescent children of Travelling families who own horses are less likely to be involved in crime and drugs. The aim of this study is to discover to what extent this is actually the case. If it is concluded that this is indeed the case; that spending time with their horses significantly reduces the incidence of adolescent Traveller crime, then what are the policy lessons that can be learned from this research?

According to Gilligan (2000) in his research into the importance of hobbies for marginalised children, hobbies provide an enhancement of children's lives, by offering them new ways of learning responsibility and self-reliance and are a major preventative factor in deterring children from becoming involved in juvenile crime, drug-taking etc.

"While their importance may seem obvious they may also be easily forgotten, so it is probably worth rehearsing how spare time activities and interests may enhance resilience. Involvement in cultural and leisure activities serve many valuable preventative functions. These activities can embrace sport, cultural pursuits, the care of animals, volunteering to benefit the community and even part time work" (Gilligan, p116).

About the Researcher

Dermot O'Regan is a NCVA Level 2 student of Social Studies at Colaiste Stiofain Naofa, Cork. He is originally from West Cork and hopes to carry on to third level education to study Social Science. As part of his present course Dermot has worked with the T.V.G. which enabled him to carry out this research.

Methods used in Study

The methods used in the study were qualitative and quantitative: structured interviews using a questionnaire, carried out both in person and by telephone.

1. Interviews with Fathers in fourteen Traveller families using the following questionnaire:

Question 1: How many horses do you own? 1-5, 6-10, More than 10, (circle the right answer)

Question 2: How much time does each of your children spend with your horses if you include feeding, exercising, watching over them, training them and travelling to and from where the horses are kept?

Child Age Number of hours per week

Question 3: What other activities do your children get involved in either with you or in the home with their mother?

Question 4: If your children did not have horses or other activities in the home, what else is there for them to do with their time?

Question 5: What are the problems facing kids and teenagers today?

Question 6: What does having a horse mean to a Traveller child?

Question 7: In Traveller families who own horses, children are less likely to get involved in crime or drugs. Do you agree with this statement?

Agree 100%, Yes to a certain degree, You are not sure, You are not inclined to agree, Definitely not.

What are your reasons for saying this?

1. Interviews with eleven professionals using questionnaire.

In Traveller families who own horses, children are less likely to get involved in crime or drugs. Do you agree with this statement?

Agree 100%, Yes to a certain degree, You are not sure, You are not inclined to agree, Definitely not.

What are your reasons for saying this?

Correspondence with Probation and Welfare Services.

- The Probation and Welfare Service was asked to state the number young Travellers from horse owning families who were involved with the service in the year 2000.

- The service was also asked to comment on the theme of the study.

They were asked to indicate the number of Traveller children in 2000 who come from horse owning families.

Research Findings

This study is based on a belief that adolescent Travellers whose parents own horses are less likely to be involved in crime or drugs activities. The aim of this study is to establish to what extent horse ownership has this effect.

Interviews with Travellers

Families interviewed

No: Of Families Interviewed	No: of Children involved in horse care	No: of Children aged 3 to 10	No: of Children aged 11 to 19 years	No: of Children 20 yrs and over
14	38	17	20	1

Time spent with horses

Total No: Of Children	Total no. of hours children spend each week with horses	Average no. of hours each child spends each week with horses	Least no. of hours a child spent weekly working with family's horses	Greatest no of hours a child spent weekly working with family's horses
38	709.5	18.7	5	27.5

Number of horses per family

Number of horses owned by the family	Number of families
1 to 5	10
6 to 10	4
More than 10	0
	Total: 14

Rate of child involvement in horse care and related activities

Number of horses owned by family	Average number of hours each child spends per week in horse care and related activities
1 to 5	15.4
6 to 10	24.0
More than 10	n.a.

Number of hours spent with horses by each age group in the study

Age group	Children aged 3 to 10	Children aged 11 to 19	Children 20 and over
Number of hours each week spent with horses	13.9 hours	22.75 hours	17.5 hours

Other Activities –results show family statistics

Total No. of Families	Working with Father	Working in the Home with Mother	Playing around Site with Friends	Doing Homework
14 (Total no. of children: 38)	12	4	11	12

Problems Facing Young People Today

No: of Families Interviewed	No: who Answered Drugs	No: who Answered Alcohol	No: who Answered Crime	No: who Answered Unemployment
14	12	9	8	1

"What does having a horse mean to a Traveller child"?

- My son owns a horse and it is his life. He spends most of his days looking after his horse. It is a culture thing with Travellers.
- It is their culture. It is handed down through generations.
- It is their culture, their way of life. They learn to look after them and treat them if the horses get sick. Travellers are their own vets.

**"In Traveller families who own horses children are less likely to get involved in crime or drugs."
Do you agree with this statement?**

The responses of the Traveller fathers interviewed were as follows:

Agree 100%	Yes to a certain degree	Not sure	Not inclined to agree	Definitely not
14	0	0	0	0

The responses were similar, with the consensus view being that when Traveller children are minding horses:

- *They are out of trouble*
- *Parents know where they are.*
- *They are occupied*
- *They can't be doing drugs and getting into trouble.*
- *They won't be on the streets.*

One quote represented the opinions of all Traveller parents interviewed:

I am sixty-seven, and in my time if a Traveller child has a horse to look after they don't have time to get into bother.

Feedback from the Probation and Welfare Service

"The consensus view of the group is that youths from all walks of life who have an interest and who are involved in any kind of industrious activity are much less likely to become involved in anti social behaviour."

Out of the 22 horse owning families in Cork, not one young person came into contact with the Probation and Welfare Service in 2000.

Phone interviews with professionals who work with Travellers

The following question (question 7) was put to 11 professional workers:

"In Traveller families who own horses children are less likely to get involved in crime or drugs." Do you agree with this statement?

The answers given, and the reasons for the answer, are set out in the table below

Agree 100%	Yes to a certain degree	Not sure	Not inclined to agree	Definitely not
0	7	4	0	0

Reasons why people agreed with the statement to a certain degree

The general consensus was that if Traveller children are spending their time caring for and playing with horses, then like any children, whether Traveller or settled they are less likely to become involved in crime or drug activities as their time is filled with a healthy activity. Also, according to some of those who answered, it provides a physical outlet for the children involved.

Here are a few examples of the answers that were given:

"Horses keep young male Travellers occupied and this promotes a healthy outlet in their lives and fills up a lot of their day with training, feeding etc."

"I would agree that Traveller children, the same as settled children, would be less likely as their time is spent with horses or other pets"

"If young people are occupied by hobbies they are less likely to become involved in anti-social behaviour"

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Reasons offered by people who answered that they were not sure

Here the consensus was that there is no evidence to suggest that this statement is true. However, those who gave this answer agreed in their opinion that horses were a big part of Travellers' lives and that if they were with their horses then they were less likely to be involved in crime or drug activities.

Here are some examples of what was said:

"I am not sure, there is no evidence to suggest this, but horses are a healthy activity and they promote health and exercise and if Travellers don't have horses what else is there"

"It is difficult to agree as there is no evidence to suggest this but horses are a big part of their culture and there is a vacuum in Travellers lives caused by the fading influence of horses which is being replaced by the need for material gain".

Conclusions

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The conclusions drawn from this study are as follows:

- Horses are a large part of the Traveller culture.
- On average the children and young adults of those families interviewed spent over eighteen hours per week with their horses.
- Apart from the fact that the children used up their time in caring for their horses, it also provided a valuable opportunity for outdoor physical activity.
- The social activities available to Travellers are limited, and Travellers face daily obstacles in trying to access the same level of social and sporting activities which the settled community take for granted.
- 12 out of 14 parents identified drugs as a problem facing young people today. 9 out of 14 identified alcohol as a problem. 8 out of 14 identified crime as a problem. These responses highlight the degree of Travellers' awareness of these threats, and their acceptance that young Travellers are at risk of deviant behaviour just as their settled counterparts are.
- There is strong evidence that a young Traveller growing up in a horse-owning family is less at risk of becoming involved in drugs and crime.

Recommendations

The findings of the Fritzsche report (2000) show how difficult it is for Travellers to rent land for horses. It might have been expected in the wake of that report that Cork Corporation and all other relevant public bodies would be more sympathetic towards Traveller horse owners. *The Control of Horses Act* was originally set up to tackle the issue of *urban cowboys* but has ended up discriminating against Travellers. Horses are a vital part of the social and economic life of Travellers. To rob Travellers of a potential income and a way of life would be a grave injustice. The recommendations of the study reflect this. They are as follows:

1. From the evidence gained in the study it is safe to say that horses do play a major role in young Travellers' lives. The Local Authorities and all other relevant public bodies should look at the fact that horses have already put in place an effective diversionary youth project which just needs to be nurtured and developed to enhance it even further.

2. There is also the cultural argument which suggests that support from local government should be forthcoming to enable Travellers to continue and develop the tradition of horse breeding and dealing, bearing in mind the difficulties they experience in trying to become part of mainstream social and sporting activities.

3. The Equality Act of 1998 recognises the ethnicity of Travellers. However they suffer discrimination in many areas of their lives, and laws and regulations are imposed that directly prohibit or inhibit Travellers ability to preserve their culture. Government policy should be designed to support and enable Travellers to continue the age-old tradition of horse breeding and dealing.

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