

Poll says most people support a ban on whips in Australian horse racing

Written by Paul McGreevy, Professor of Animal Behaviour and Animal Welfare Science, University of Sydney

Three-quarters of Australians quizzed in a poll said they do not support the whipping of horses in racing, a study [published today in PLOS ONE](#) shows.

Most of those identified as racing enthusiasts said they would continue to attend or gamble on racing if the whip was banned. Only one in eight of those racing fans said they would no longer watch or bet if the rules did not allow a horse to be whipped for purposes other than jockey safety.

The study used anonymised data from a recent independent survey commissioned, but not administered, [by RSPCA Australia](#). It explored the level of support for the whipping of racehorses, and the proportion of racing enthusiasts who would stop gambling if horses were not whipped.

Of the 1,533 respondents from across the country, only 25% (113 women and 271 men) supported the whipping of racehorses.

Read more: [***Why horse-racing in Australia needs a social licence to operate***](#)

The more frequently respondents attended races or gambled on them, the more likely they were to agree that horses should be hit with a whip during the normal course of a race. This probably reflects a belief that whipped horses are more likely to win races, although this is [contrary to scientific studies](#).

So the poll looked at the 843 people who were identified in the sample as racing enthusiasts – those who attended or bet on horseracing at least “once or twice a year”.

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Only 13% (44 women and 63 men) of those identified as racing enthusiasts in the sample said they would stop watching races and betting on them if whipping were banned.

What's interesting when digging into the data is that these "no" respondents were particularly common in the lowest income bracket (defined as those earning less than A\$20,000 a year). The rate of "no" responses in this bracket was significantly higher than among those earning over A\$150,000 a year.

Growing concern for animal welfare

The use of animals is being questioned in every context, from [eating meat](#) to the testing of [cosmetics](#). It is clear that societal values and consumer preferences are changing.

These changes extend to the use of animals in sport, recreation and display. There is growing concern about modifying animal behaviour or pushing animals to their physical limits with techniques that cause pain.

Horseracing is a prime example because, even though it depends largely on traditional practices, it is increasingly the focus of [various welfare concerns](#). This includes the physical dangers to horses, notably in jumps racing and steeplechasing and, more broadly, the use of the whip.

Whipping tired horses in races, as one of us (Paul) has argued before, is [the most widely televised form of violence to animals](#).

Ironically, if a racehorse was whipped outside the racetrack, the person whipping it would face charges under animal cruelty legislation that outlaws any unnecessary, unjustifiable or unreasonable action that causes harm or injury. They [could face significant fines or imprisonment](#).

In defence of the whip

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Historically, one of the main defences for whip use in thoroughbred racing was [the belief that it makes horses run faster](#)

Read more: [Australia's harness racing leads the world in banning the whip on horses](#)

But there is no evidence that the placing of horses in races is influenced by whip use. That's because most horses are whipped at the end of the race and, on balance, are generally too fatigued to offer more than they already are.

Increasingly, whip use is justified as an aid to steering and thus a means of improving jockey safety. But counter-evidence associates [whip use with falls](#), which clearly [compromise jockey safety](#)

One response to concerns about whipping has been the use of padded whips. But there is growing evidence that padded whips do not spare horses because the [unpadded section of these whips hits the horse more often than not](#), and that the [rules surrounding whip use are not easily policed](#)

Indeed, Norway adopted whip-free racing in 1982, not because whipping was considered a bad look for the racing industry back then, but because national legislation included whipping as a form of cruelty.

Whip way to go

Regardless of age, household income, and involvement with horse-racing, men in the current study were more likely than women to support horses being whipped. Of the 731 men who

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answered the poll, 37% agreed with whipping a horse, while only 14% of the 802 women polled agreed with using the whip.

Racing administrators and the industry at large may find these new findings helpful as they consider the needs of their primary stakeholders and deliberate over the merits of continuing the practice of whipping tired horses in the name of sport.

Read more: [The Hendra vaccine has no effect on racehorse performance](#)

At the very least, eroding support for and growing concerns about the practice merit further monitoring of public opinion.

One obvious question, and one that wasn't answered by this study, is to what extent whipping deters potential punters (men or women), and whether its absence might increase the appeal of racing.

More generally, as sponsorship dollars are more keenly contested, it may be that boards of directors become less inclined to associate their brands with a practice that is ethically questionable, scientifically unsupported, lacks majority support, and has become a bad look.

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