Work in Ontario Horse Stables

A report by Kendra Coulter
October 2018

About the Author

Dr. Kendra Coulter holds the Chancellor's Chair for Research Excellence and is associate professor and chair of the department of labour studies at Brock University. She is also a member of the Royal Society of Canada's College of New Scholars, Artists and Scientists. She specializes in the study of animals and work, including horse-human relations. An award-winning author, she has written widely in academic and media venues, and her latest book is Animals, Work, and the Promise of Interspecies Solidarity. A lifelong horse woman, she was on the back of a horse before she could walk.

HumaneJobs.org

2018, St. Catharines, Ontario

This research was funded through the Chancellor's Chair for Research Excellence at Brock University.

The contents of this report reflect the research findings and the author's analysis.

Dedicated to the horses we care for – and those we have failed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All activities with horses depend on the men and especially women who care for horses around the clock, 365 days a year. Yet the labour of caring for horses is often under-valued and under-appreciated. This can manifest in frustration about working conditions and high turnover rates among front-line workers, and difficulty recruiting and retaining talented and reliable staff for employers. This tension has long been part of equine cultures, but it has been gaining increased attention for good reason.

In order to be able to thoughtfully tackle any problem, first you need to properly understand the challenge. This report presents some key findings from a survey completed by just over 1000 people in early 2018 who work in Ontario horse stables, own/operate a stable, or used to work in the sector. As a result, it offers empirical evidence of much-discussed but not substantiated trends, greater clarity and detail, and some promising insights.

The data reaffirm that the large majority of both employers and front-line staff in Ontario's horse stables are white women. Love for horses is the prime motivator and source of satisfaction for both groups, and there is a widespread, shared desire to provide more individualized care for horses, and more or better turnout. There is also an interest in stronger animal welfare protections and enforcement.

The workforce specifics are not black and white but rather many shades of grey. Employers report high levels of satisfaction with their current workers, and employees identified similar rates of satisfaction about their current employers. Yet pay is low overall and working conditions intense. Stable workers are asked to do a lot of difficult work, at challenging hours, for very little pay and few (if any) benefits.

On the one hand, many employers have taken steps to try and attract better staff and to tangibly demonstrate their appreciation for committed front-line workers. But some are also paying below the legally-mandated minimum wage. There also are a noteworthy number of workers who are being classified as independent contractors. This has significant immediate financial implications for workers, and potential negative future outcomes for both employers and staff.

The report provides crucial context and more details about these and other related dynamics, in the interest of building deeper and broader understanding that can help better serve people and horses.

INTRODUCTION

Horses hold a special place in our imaginations and they have long worked with and for us. Some practices have endured but people's relationships with and uses of horses have also changed and expanded. Yet certain popular myths endure, such as the belief that only the wealthy interact with horses. This is incorrect. People of all classes, income-levels, and backgrounds are involved with horses in different ways, including for sport, leisure, friendship, and therapy.

Moreover, all activities with horses not only depend on horses' work but on the men and especially women who care for horses around the clock, 365 days a year. This work makes interactions with horses possible, and has a significant effect on the quality of horses' lives.

However, another enduring myth held by some members of the public is that stable work is "un-skilled," an ill-informed premise I reject outright. Those who work with and for horses must perform physically demanding tasks in all types of weather, and, simultaneously, be attuned to the intricacies of horses' bodies and minds. It is constant multi-tasking. Horses have species-specific attributes, and workers must have accurate and, at times, highly specialized and technical knowledge about horses' physiology, behavior, and cognition.

At the same time, horses are also individuals who have developed their own personalities, preferences, and dislikes, due to their specific life journeys, their relationships, and their own choices. Labour in horse stables involves working proactively and responsively with animals who cannot speak to us in our languages, but who nevertheless have a lot to say and their own perspectives and opinions. To work effectively and thoughtfully with horses, people need multi-faceted intellectual and physical skills, knowledge, understanding, and empathy. And let's not forget that stable staff must continuously work with and for other people, as well. This poses its own challenges and also requires interactional and emotional skills.

Despite these facts, the front-line work of caring for horses is often under-valued, economically and socially. This can manifest in frustration about working conditions and high turnover rates among front-line workers, and difficulty recruiting and retaining talented and reliable staff for employers. This tension has long been part of equine cultures, but the core issue and its effects have been gaining increased attention in the equine media. And for a number of reasons, we do not have a clear or detailed picture of the equine workforce across Canada or in the province of Ontario.

Statistics Canada does not collect targeted information about horse stable staff as an occupational group, and equine workers are instead (unhelpfully) subsumed into larger agricultural categories. It is even challenging to pinpoint the precise number of horse stables in a province like Ontario because of how they are counted (or not counted) at the national level. Occasional studies undertaken by university or industry researchers have shed some light on the national picture. But there is a pressing need for more information and more current data.

We need to better understand the specifics, areas of strength, and challenges, for the benefit of people and the remarkable animals to whom we owe so much. This report contributes to these important tasks.

ONTARIO'S EQUINE LANDSCAPE

Snapshot of Ontario's Equine Landscape

ENGLISH

- Hunter/Jumper
- Dressage
- Eventing
- Racing
- Pleasure Riding
- Lessons/Riding School
- Polo
- Driving
- Fox Hunting

WESTERN

- Working Ranch
- Trail Riding
- Barrel Racing
- Cutting/Penning
- Show/Performance

BOTH/EITHER

- Equine-Assisted Therapy
- Endurance Riding

HORSE RESCUE / REHABILITATION

PREGNANT MARE URINE

This research focuses on stable work in Ontario's equine industries. The term industries is used rather than industry because of the different ways horses are employed. While horses are the common factor across sub-sectors and there are certain shared features, there are noteworthy differences in the practices and priorities, including in how horses are viewed and treated. For example, an equine-assisted therapy stable is very different from a pregnant mare urine (PMU) facility.

The focus here is on workers in stables themselves, not on occupational groups which regularly move between a series of workplaces (such as mobile veterinary staff, farriers/blacksmiths, etc.) or jobs in supportive workplaces (feed mills, retail shops, research laboratories, equine associations or media, and so on).

The table (at left) introduces the types of activities being pursued, but is not an exhaustive list, and it is common for there to be overlap or multiple focuses within stables.

There are also other more specific pursuits under certain categories. For example, racing can be further sub-divided into Thoroughbred, Standardbred/harness racing, and Quarter Horse racing, and racing stables might focus on on breeding, training, or retirement, or on some combination.

THE STUDY

The results presented here are one part of a larger, multi-year project on horses and work. The research methods used in the larger study include interviews, field research, direct observation of people and horses, and legal, financial, and media analysis. This report provides key results of a survey about stable work in Ontario. Not all of the survey data and findings can be considered here. The focus is on the insights most significant for a diverse audience, including members of the equine industries and horse cultures, provincial policy makers and elected officials, labour advocates, and the general public.

The online survey was open for two months in early 2018. The survey was promoted through social media, equine media, and word-of-mouth. Completion of the survey was voluntary and respondents self-selected. Participants were required to fit into one of three categories:

- Current stable staff in Ontario
- Former stable staff (those who no longer work in horse stables in Ontario)
- Owners/operators of stables in Ontario

Three different sub-surveys were created (one for each category). The surveys were tailored to each category of participants (for example: for staff, "how is your occupation legally classified?" versus, for owners/operators, "how do you classify your workers?"), but they probed similar themes relating to front-line work, working conditions and relations, and the place of horses. The survey for former stable staff only focused on the reasons for leaving stable work.

Once corrected and adjusted (such as to exclude the answers of those who completed the wrong survey), there were just over 1000 responses. The high level of participation and large pool of data make this study a valuable and timely source of information.

It is important to keep in mind that the employers who participated may or may not have been the employers of the front-line workers who completed the survey. In other words, the survey does not verify or assess the practices in specific stables, but rather provides insight into broader patterns.

32.9%
Currently work for pay in a horse stable in Ontario.

45.9%
Used to work for pay in a horse stable in Ontario but have stopped doing so.

21.2%
Currently own and/or operate a horse stable in Ontario.

The survey contained mostly closed questions with pre-determined answers, but certain open-ended qualitative questions allowed participants to elaborate or share additional information.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

The survey was anonymous but basic demographic information was compiled about current stable workers and stable owners/operators.

Current Stable Staff

AGE

8.8%	Under 18
28.1%	18-24
23.2%	25-30
14.0%	31-36
8.4%	37-45
6.3%	46-51
7.7%	52-59
2.5%	60-65
1.1%	Over 65

GENDER

95.4%
Women

4.2%
Men

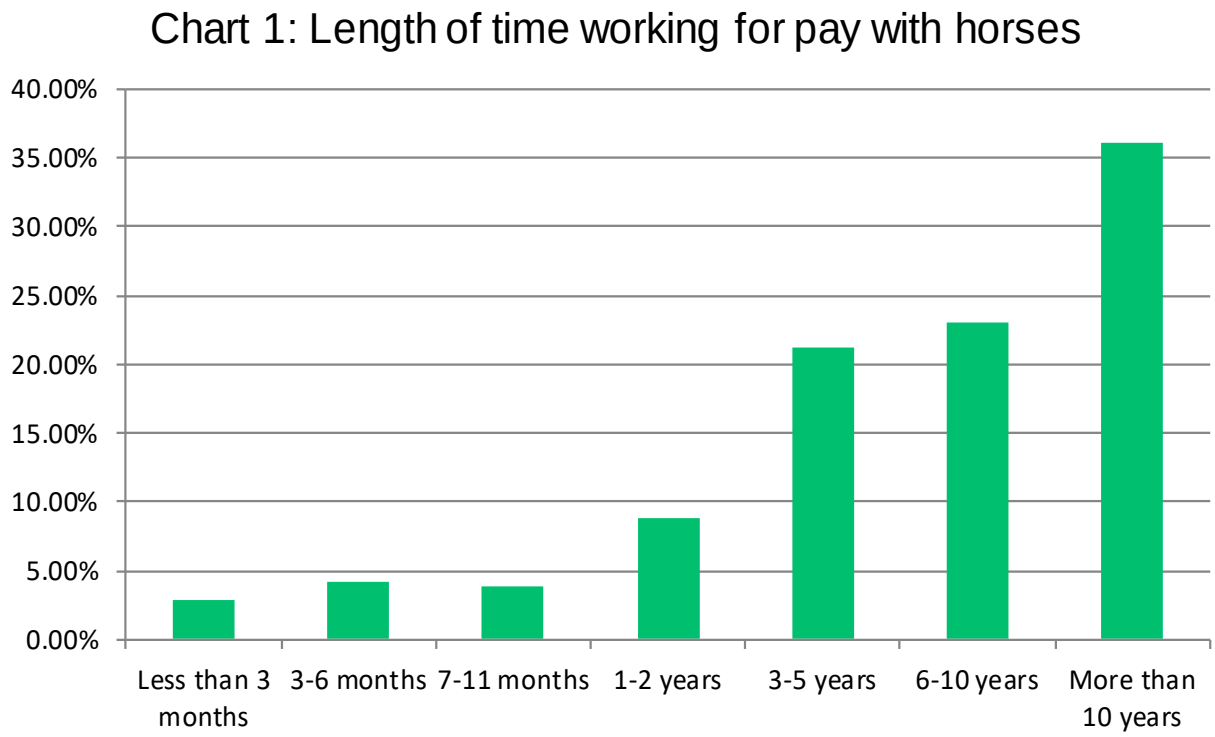
0.4%
Other

These figures suggest that front-line stable workers are on the younger side overall, with most being under 36, but that this is a career for people of all ages. One quarter of participants were over 37 years of age.

Additionally:
- 96% identify ethno-racial identity as white; and,
- 97% are Canadian citizens.

Migrant workers, particularly people from Latin America and the Caribbean, do work in horse stables in Ontario, most commonly in Thoroughbred racing and show jumping, altough changes to the federal Temporary Foreign Workers Program which took effect in 2015 have reduced the numbers and prevented many experienced workers from returning to Canada.

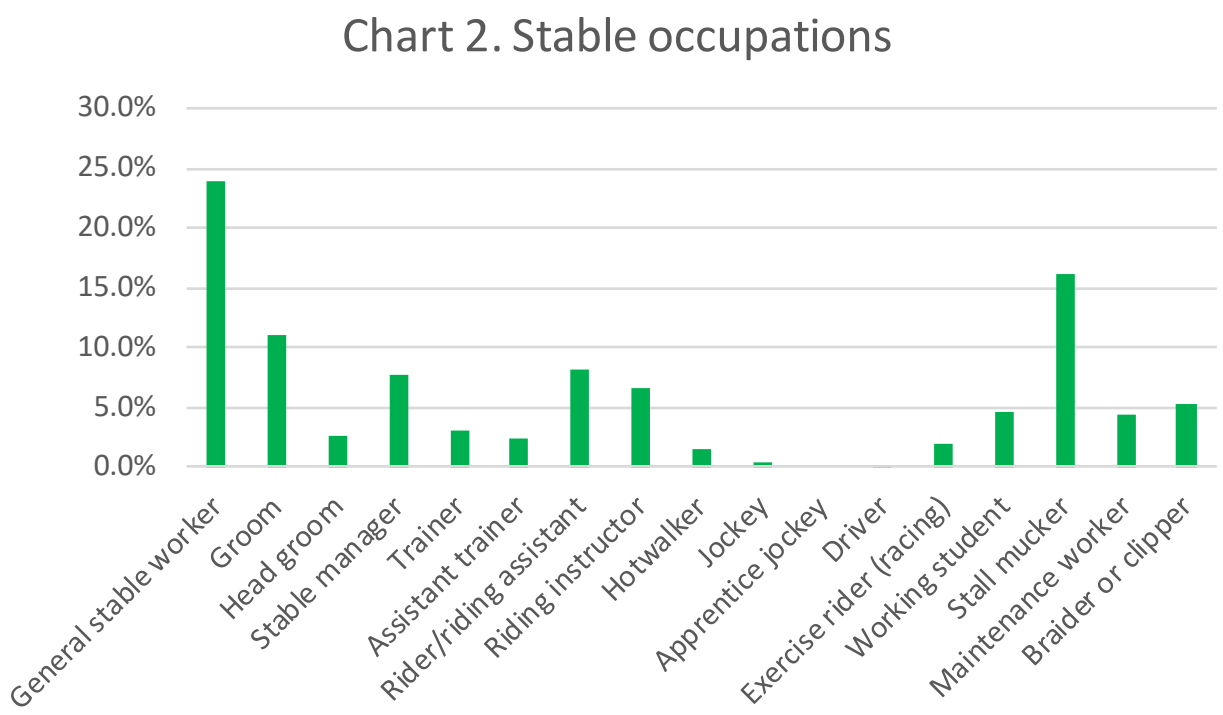
The survey results are not a good portrait of migrant workers' experiences. The low level of participation among migrant workers is not surprising since the survey was only in English, required a particular level of technological access, and might seem intimidating or risky for workers who feel their status in Canada is precarious, even if working under a recognized program.



Participants were a long-serving group of workers (see Chart 1), with a good majority having worked for pay with horses for more than three years, and the largest group having done so for more than a decade. As a result, their perspectives stem from many years of experience and this is noteworthy.

The survey provides a good portrait of the cross-section of occupations, with a particularly strong picture of general stable workers who are responsible for many kinds of direct and indirect care work in stables (see Chart 2).

Participants could select multiple occupational titles, and this is because it is very common for stable workers to do many kinds of work and be responsible for various tasks within stables.



Throughout this report, the terms stable staff and front-line stable workers are used to reflect and refer to this broader cluster of occupations, but it is still prudent to recognize the diversity of job titles and accompanying workloads, as well.

Stable Owners/Operators

AGE

3.9%	18-24
10.6%	25-30
12.2%	31-36
18.3%	37-45
10.0%	46-51
21.7%	52-59
14.4%	60-65
8.3%	Over 65

GENDER

82.8%
Women

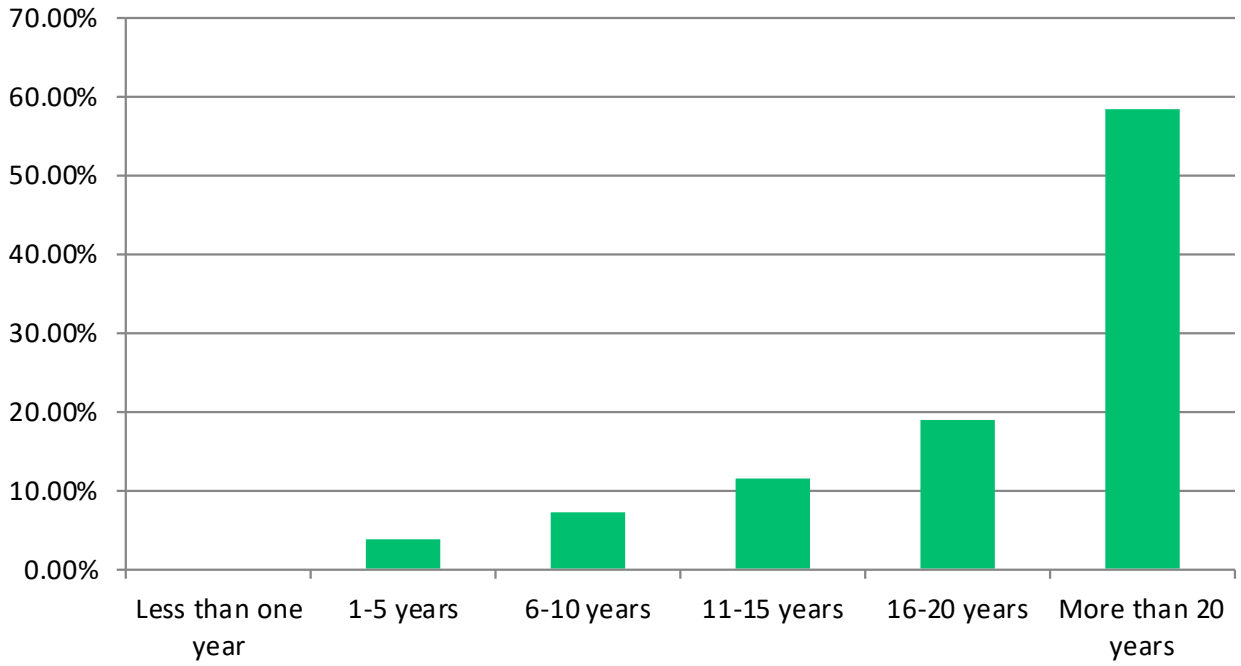
17.2%
Men

For stable owners/operators, a large majority are still women, but the greater proportion of men in comparison to the front-line workers is noteworthy. This is consistent with larger trends in the labour force which see men in higher status/paying positions more often.

Additionally, 96% of stable owners/operators identify ethno-racial identity as white.

Stable owner/operators represent all age categories and 73% of them are over 37 years of age.

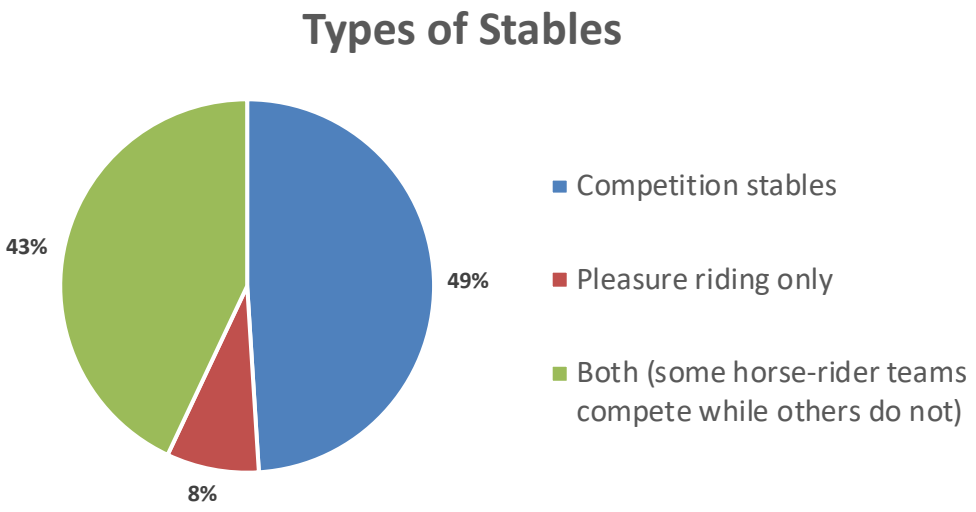
Chart 3. Length of time working in the equine industries.



The large majority have been working with horses for over a decade (see Chart 3). Their responses are therefore the product of a great deal of experience.

THE STABLES

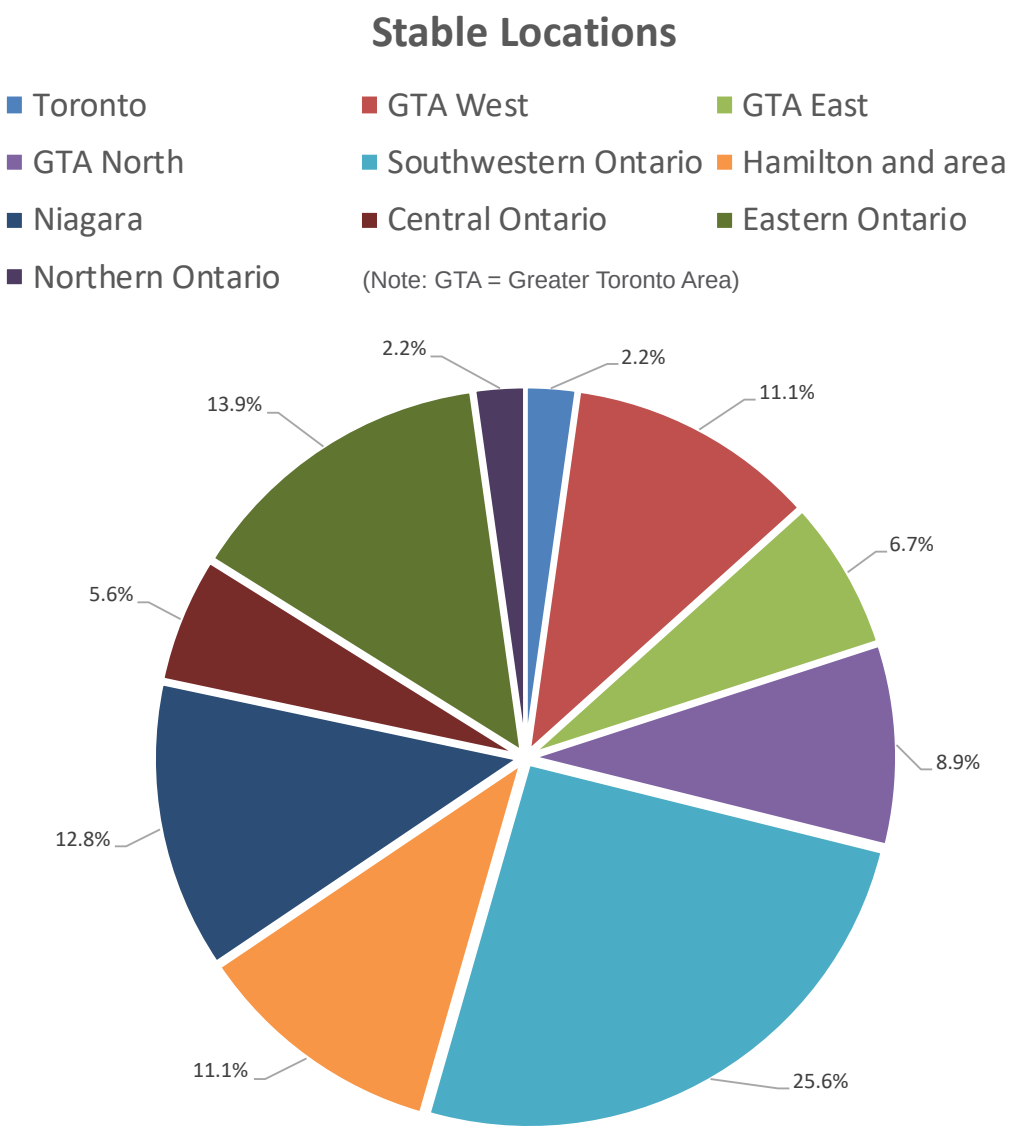
About three-quarters of the stables are English, under 10% are Western, and the remainder include both approaches.



The disciplines being pursued in the stables were a good reflection of the cross-section of equine activities. A majority of the stables were entirely or part hunter-jumper. Many focused on or included dressage, pleasure riding, trail riding/hacking, eventing, lessons, Thoroughbred racing, harness racing, sales, and breeding.

A smaller percentage focused or included rescue and rehabilitation, equine-assisted therapy, horse camps, retirement and rehabilitation, and/or breed-specific pursuits (including draft horses or miniature horses). A very small number focused on or included Quarter Horse Racing, Western pursuits (barrel racing, etc.), driving, fox hunting, and PMU production.

Most of the workplaces are small (1-4 paid staff) and in rural areas.



KEY FINDINGS

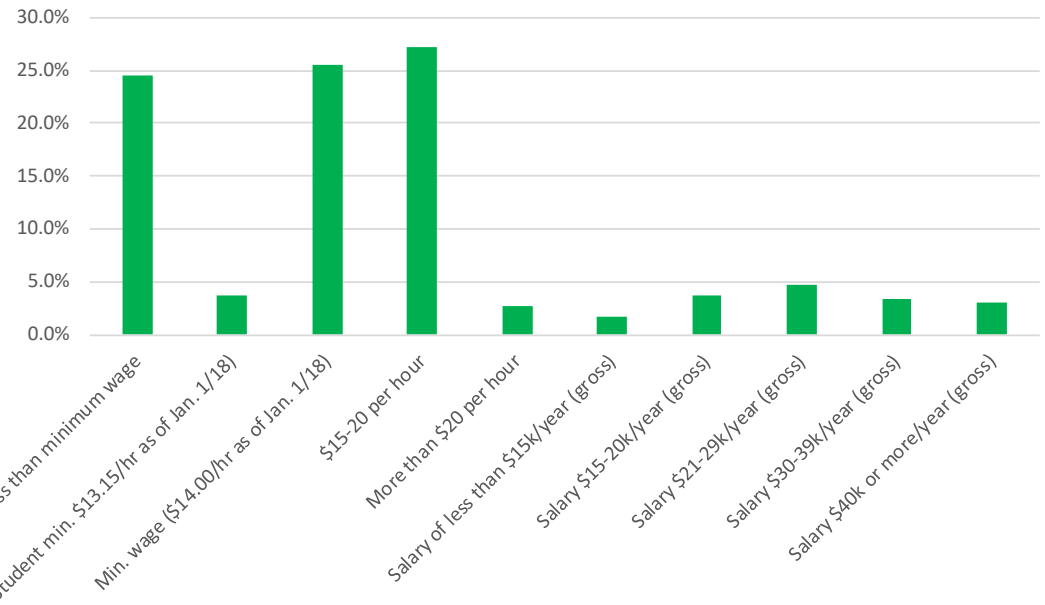
The results provide empirical evidence of a number of trends and patterns which are widely discussed within horse cultures and industries. Many of the findings reaffirm earlier academic research and studies from other jurisdictions, as well as the beliefs of some horse people based on their personal experiences. For certain issues, the data provide insights into the severity of a problem. For example, the existence of a trend may be quite widely known within equine industries, but the degree to which that problematic practice is being used is less known. The findings help provide clarity.

At the same time, there are certain promising findings which suggest shared priorities, mutual respect, and a widespread commitment to horses' wellbeing. There are also areas of common concern which demonstrate the ethical commitments of horse people.

Overall, the data paint a textured picture of the workforce dynamics, one that is likely a fairly accurate depiction of the mixed and uneven realities which cannot be painted with one large brush.

Key Findings: Low Pay

Chart 4. Pay



The data reaffirm that work in stables is at the lowest end of the pay scale (see Chart 4). 26% of positions are reportedly being paid the minimum wage. This is the lowest pay level legally permitted and its rate is determined by the provincial government. 27% are being paid above the minimum wage, but less than $20/hour.

The data also reveal that a troubling one quarter of respondents are being paid below the legally-mandated minimum wage.

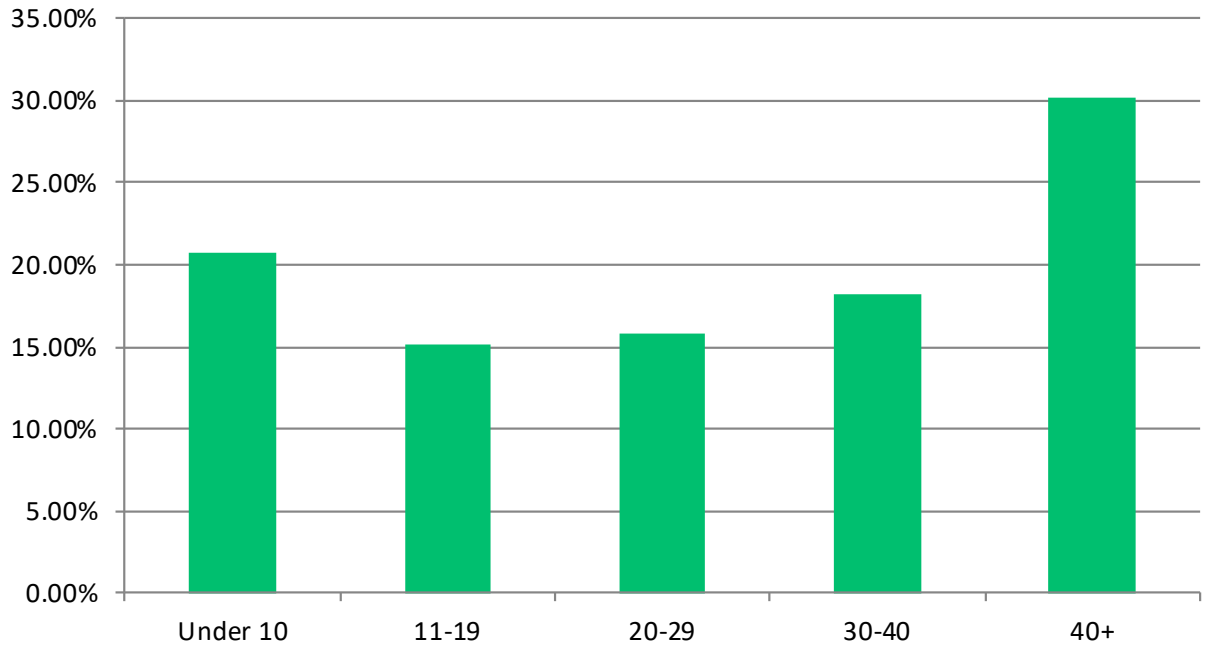
Fifty-percent of the stable staff report being paid minimum wage or less.

The rates of pay must also be understood in relation to the number of hours that are assigned or expected.

The number of hours being assigned ranges substantially (see Chart 5), with 1 in 5 people working a much smaller number of hours (under 10), and close to one-half having full-time schedules.

When asked if they work more than their scheduled number of hours, 60% of respondents said yes. This is not a surprise to anyone who has spent time in horse stables, and is likely indicative of a commitment to the horses and their care, and/or of staff levels being smaller than would be required for the workload.

Chart 5. Number of hours normally scheduled to work per week



More than 60% of employers indicated that they would like to hire more staff. They report that lack of funds is the reason they do not do so 63% of the time. For 28% of the time, a lack of qualified applicants was the reason they do not hire more staff.

Key Findings: Working Conditions Beyond Pay

Workers were asked about a broad range of possible other workplace benefits or indirect forms of payment or subsidies they receive. The most common was the receiving of tips from clients, followed closely by receiving discounted board for a horse — which could be a savings of anywhere from $100 to a few hundred dollars per month.

The next most common benefit was receiving one's schedule more than two weeks in advance, followed by free lodging or an annual bonus.

Very few receive paid sick days, and even fewer have benefits (such as drug, dental, or vision coverage) through their workplace. Workers in racing may be members of industry associations through which they can access supplementary health and/or long-term disability insurance.

Overall, stable staff are required to do a lot of difficult work, for very little pay and very few benefits.

Key Findings:
Why Workers Leave — and What They Share With Those Who Stay

The results from the survey for people who had left stable work are pertinent here, and intersect with key findings from the current workforce, as well.

Respondents could select up to three factors which influenced their choice to leave work in horse stables.

THREE MOST COMMON REASONS
WHY PEOPLE LEFT WORK IN STABLES

#1
Wanted better pay

#2
Wanted more respect

#3
Wanted better hours/schedule

These reasons were followed closely by secured better employment and dissatisfaction with employers.

The low levels of pay were by far the most infuential factor causing people to leave work in stables. Low pay is also the number one source of dissatifaction identified by the current workforce.

This issue is reflected in broader public discussions about living wages and in campaigns like the prominent $15 and Fairness movement in Ontario. In many jurisdictions, the legally-mandated minimum wage has been determined by economists to be insufficient for maintaining a basic standard of living, and certainly for sustaining a family or household. Such minimum wages are often referred to as poverty wages because people working full-time hours year-round at this pay level still fall below low-income cut-offs and other poverty measures ("the poverty line").

This rate is in contrast with living wages which are calculated as the actual minimum required for a decent but still very basic standard of living. The pay rate that constitutes a living wage varies depending on the context (living in the urban Greater Toronto Area is more expensive than in small-town southern Ontario, for example). However, a living wage is normally at least a few dollars per hour more than the minimum wage.

The 27% of stable positions that are being paid between $15-20 per hour are closer or at the floor of a living wage (as are some of the few stable staff being paid a salary), although total take-home pay must be considered in relation to number of hours assigned ($20 per hour for 10 hours of work per week still falls well below poverty cut-offs, for example).

A non-pay related factor — the desire for more respect — is the second more common reason people left work in horse stables. The desire to be respected at work is a consistent, central, and influential finding in labour research across sectors and industries.

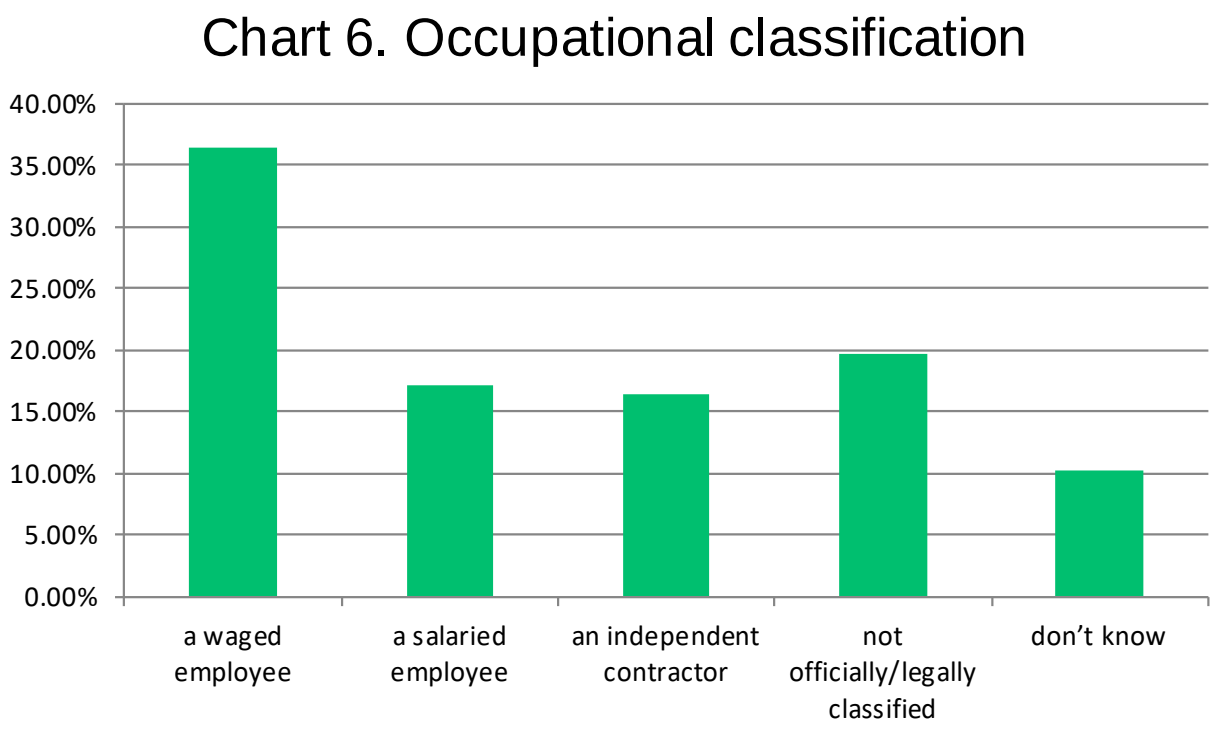
Among the active members of workforce, there are quite high levels of satisfaction with their current employers (3.9/5) and the clients/boarders (4.1/5). Yet there was also widespead and undeniable frustration expressed about earlier employers, and a proportion whose current employers are an ongoing source of dissatisfaction.

The third most influential factor, a desire for better hours and/or a better working schedule is both revealing and unclear. Interest in a "better" schedule/hours could mean more hours or fewer. It could also include aspects such as the total number of hours worked and assigned, how those hours are allocated over the course of each day and week, or the number and frequency of days off and vacation time. Depending on the person and their particulars, it is likely that all of these dimensions had some effect on their decision to seek work elsewhere. Among the current worforce, the lack of days off and vacation were two of the three greatest sources of dissatisfaction, after low pay.

Prevalent in the data was the compounding combination of low pay and interpersonal disrespect. Quite a few former and current workers indicated that they had accepted that work with horses would mean low pay, but that rudeness, insensitivity, and thoughtlessness from certain employers and/or boarders/clients added insult to injury, and could not be tolerated.

Key Findings: Labour Laws and Occupational Classification

Chart 6, below, provides an overview of what workers revealed about their occupational classification.



A waged employee is someone paid by the hour, while a salary is normally an annual sum not affected by the total number of hours worked. An independent contractor is something very different which will be outlined below.

These findings are very significant for a number of reasons. How occupations are classified has significant impacts on what protections and rights are afforded to workers. It also has financial implications.

To fully grasp the significance of these findings, they must be understood in combination with the pertinent provincial labour laws.

Ontario's Employment Standards Act (ESA) sets out the most basic workplace standards. It is often referred to as "the floor" which means protections and rights cannot fall below this level. The law is publicly available online and employers are required to post basic information about the ESA provided by the Ministry of Labour.

OCCUPATIONAL CLASSIFICATION

According to staff:
36.5% - a waged employee
17.2% - a salaried employee
16.5% - an independent contractor
19.7% - not officially/legally classified
10.2% - don't know

According to owners/operators:
33.3% - employees
42.9% - independent contractors
23.8% - both

The ESA is not a robust piece of legislation, and workers across industries are often surprised at how few rights they have.

There are also a number of industries with special rules or exemptions to the provisions of the ESA. "Horse boarding and breeding" is one such industry. The Ministry of Labour specifies that staff in horse stables are entitled to:

- minimum wage
- personal emergency leave
- vacation with pay
- notice of termination/termination pay
- severance pay

Staff in stables are exempt from a number of ESA provisions including those on:

- hours of work
- daily rest periods
- time off between shifts
- weekly/bi-weekly rest periods
- eating periods
- overtime pay
- public holidays

In other words, workers in horse stables are not even legally guaranteed some of the most basic protections afforded to most workers by the ESA, such as the right to a 30 minute eating period for every 5 hours of work. Many Ontario workers are entitled to 11 consecutive hours in a 24-hour period in which they cannot be required to work, and they cannot be required to work more than 48 hours in a given 7-day period. However, stable workers are simply excluded from these and related rules limiting work hours.

Unfortunately, the list goes on. Stable workers are not entitled to the overtime pay that is associated with working above a given threshold (normally 44 hours). Plus, stable staff are neither entitled to take public holidays off (or a substitute day) with pay, nor guaranteed extra pay (e.g., time and a half) for working on such days.

Employers can provide better conditions than those stipulated in the ESA (and many do), but the legal protections for stable staff are woefully inadequate. The legal protections for most workers in Ontario are slim. For stable workers, they are even thinner. Workers in horse stables are simply expected to do more and to accept fewer protections, and this is enshrined in the provincial legislation.

Crucially, when people are classified as independent contractors, the ESA no longer applies. They are essentially considered to be their own business under contract to another business. The Ontario Ministry of Labour[1] states that at least some of the following must apply in order for someone to be an independent contractor:

- you own and are responsible for some or all of the tools or equipment you use to do your job
- you are in business for yourself, make profit and have a risk of losing money from the work you do
- you determine how and/or where your work is completed
- you can subcontract some of your work
- the business can end your contract for services, but cannot discipline you

In certain cases, such as for some riding instructors, some of these elements could apply. However, these dimensions do not describe the realities for most stable staff.

Under the ESA, employees (as opposed to independent contractors) are provided with tools and equipment, are under direct supervision, can be disciplined, and what they do, how much they are paid, and when and where they perform paid work are determined by their employers. This describes the normal course of action in horse stables.

More than 16% of stable staff report being classified as an independent contractor. Employers state that at least 42% of their staff are independent contractors. If some employers are misclassifying employees as independent contractors, this could be happening unintentionally or for deliberate reasons.

When someone is an independent contractor, they are excluded from various protections and benefits. Some of these are not prevalent in equine workplaces (such as pensions) but there are a number of other implications.

Most significantly, independent contractors must pay their entire Canada Pension Plan (CPP) contributions (in contrast, for employees, they and their employer both contribute). Independent contractors must normally pay their own taxes — that is, income tax is not deducted automatically by the employer. They are also not automatically protected by the

Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). Independent contractors can claim/deduct certain business expenses, but usually require the guidance of a trained accountant in order to do so.

These factors save employers money in the short term, but increase the costs and financial and legal responsibilities of the people hired.

Plus, if an employer hires someone who is later deemed to be an employee by the Ministry of Labour or Canada Revenue Agency, the employer will have to remit unpaid payroll taxes (and may be subject to penalties and/or interest), and retroactive CPP premiums. Workers may also have to repay the business expenses they claimed. Even when people agree in writing or verbally to be independent contractors or use their own vehicles for work-related purposes, they can still be legally recognized as employees.

With respect to the troubling number of workers who report not being officially or legally classified (nearly 20%), we cannot know exactly what is happening financially or legally. They could be being paid less than the legally-required minimum wage and/or excluded from even the modest protections of the ESA. Undoubtedly, they are not protected by WSIB or contributing to CPP or EI.

Key Findings: An Employer Tension

The large majority of employers see front-line staff as essential to the success of their business and their ability to properly care for horses. They report high levels of satisfaction with their current staff overall (4.14/5). Only a small minority shared negative comments about young women, their work ethic, and/or their expectations about work with horses.

A lack of reliability was the number one reason by far that staff had been terminated. Reliability was also identitifed as the most important factor for good stable staff. Given that a lack of reliability in these workplaces means the difference between horses getting fed or not, stalls getting cleaned or not, and medication or treatment getting allocated or not, employers' prioritization of reliability is understandable, crucially important, and reassuring. A failure to show up, a decision to leave early, the forgetting of a task, the disregarding of instructions — all of these take on even greater significance when living beings are directly affected.

Employers are almost evenly split (46% to 54%) about whether the challenge of recruitment and retention had long been serious, or whether it is getting worse. The most common ways that employers have tried to recruit and retain quality staff include, in order: increased wages, taken on more work themselves, and increased opportunities for staff to ride and/or compete. Additionally, many had worked to demonstate respect and create a more collaborative team-based approach.

At the same time, some employers are paying below the legally-required minimum wage, and/or by classifying staff as independent contractors, downloading a number of financial responsibilities and costs onto people who are already at the bottom of the income scale. As noted, stable owner/operators cannot all be painted with one brush, and many are striving to be good or better employers. But the questionable practices being pursued by some cannot simply be swept under the mat.

Key Findings: The Power of Horses

Whether employer or employee, a love for horses unites people in stables. The ability to work with and care for horses was the overwhelming primary motivator and sustainer for those working in equine industries. All questions related to horses revealed a definitive commitment to their care, to seeing them as partners, to understanding them to be sentient beings with complex minds and emotions. The horses are by far the source of the most workplace and career satisfaction.

The accompanying physical demands, risks, and toll of working in stables were not discounted, nor were the difficult working conditions downplayed. But the power of horses drives those in horse stables. Those who had left the industry were adamant that the horses were the best part of their former jobs.

Employers and employees were also united in the two things they would most like to do for horses: provide more individualized care, and provide more or better turnout. Barriers to such aspirations include a shortage of staff, time, and space, as well as owner/client wishes (with respect to more turnout).

Key Findings: Desire for Legal Change

A promising finding relates to animal welfare and cruelty laws, and their enforcement. A number of employers in particular singled out both the inadequacy of provincial and federal animal welfare laws, and the need for more investment in cruelty investigations and prevention.

Normally law enforcement is the responsibility of publicly-funded agencies and/or police forces. Yet when it comes to investigations into suspected animal cruelty, in Ontario, the primary responsibility falls the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (OSPCA), a charity reliant on donors. This is mandated in provincial legislation.

This very unusual model results in volatile funding, under-staffing, and public misunderstandings. Around 75 officers are now responsible for investigating an average of 16 000 complaints per year across the entire province. In some areas, officers must cover regions which take five or more hours to traverse, do not have two-way radios, and/or do not have an office space. These working conditions have a direct impact on the officers' abilities to investigate each case of suspected cruelty, and to do so thoroughly and thoughtfully in order to best serve the animals and people involved. They are also highly constrained by outdated and inadequate legislation and detailed protocols.

Horrifying cases of horse abuse and neglect have gained a great deal of attention in recent months and years, and it is clear that many in the equine industries want to see better protections and enforcement.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

This report has highlighted some of the most significant findings gathered from the survey. Due to the large pool of data on which it is based (1000 responses), the report helps deepen our understanding of key workforce specifics, and offers new insight. It also provides empirical evidence about practices informally understood to be taking place.

The report has not fully captured all of the dynamics at play, nor thoroughly considered some of the complexities and specific sub-sectors in detail (such as Thoroughbred racing which is quite a distinct subculture). Those who work with Standardbreds were the most passionate respondents whose frustration with recent governmental decisions about revenue from slots at racetracks endures, although some were also adamant that difficult working conditions have long been part of harness racing.

Some workers, particularly from the racing sub-sectors, also shared powerful stories about their personal struggles and journeys, including with poverty and addictions, and certain instances of apalling workplace abuse. I have not done justice to their experiences in this format and hope to do so in the future.

Equine industries and sub-sectors vary, and even among stables within a single sub-discipline, there are noteworthy differences among them. These can stem from their geographic regions, the clientele, the competitive level, and the choices and prioroties of those in charge. The workforce is also mixed terrain. Lower quality working conditions are widespread, but are not universal. Passion for horses motivates people to work in stables, to run stables, and to stay in the equine industries. People are enduring difficult work-lives in order to work with and care for horses, and participate in sports, cultures, and industries they value. In order to do so, they are accepting or tolerating specifics which otherwise would be unacceptable and intolerable. For some, however, the compensation is simply too low and the disrespect too severe.

The legal dimensions of pay below the legal minimum and seeming occupational (mis)classification — or the complete absence of legal classification — are the most troubling findings, and are putting workers who are already at the bottom end of the pay scale in even more trying circumstances.

Without question, running a horse stable is costly. The prices for the necessary feed, equipment, facilities, and utilities are high. Some stable owners/operators are struggling to secure dependable, capable staff and to balance the books. Many are trying to improve the working conditions and workplace cultures in order to better serve horses and clients/boarders, and demonstrate their appreciation for professional and competent front-line staff. A few are cutting corners and doing so in legally and ethically questionable ways.

Further eroding working conditions is not an appropriate path forward for employers who are struggling financially. Even worse would be compromising horse care. There is no easy solution to these challenges, but legal obligations to workers — which set a very low bar

— should be met, at miminum. And there is abundant evidence that treating workers well directly benefits small businesses. In the case of equine industries, it also benefits horses.

When there are sufficient people with the time and ability to properly care for each individual animal, this has a positive effect on horses' and ponies' experiences and wellbeing. Staff cannot fundamentally change the structure or certain details of horses' work-lives, or what happens to them afterwards. But attentive and knowledgeable staff with reasonable workloads who feel respected will be able to provide more and better care, and improve horses' quality of life on a daily basis. Decreased turnover also means staff get to know individual horses better and can better tailor the care provided accordingly, in the interest of the horses' physical, psychological, and social wellbeing.

Workers ought to ensure they understand the pertinent laws, the rights and protections they are owed, and what resources are available for supporting them. It can be intimidating and risky to advocate for your rights, especially in small workplaces, but there are organizations and individuals who can help. Staff would also be well-served by working collaboratively to self-advocate. Staff and employers could both learn from countries which offer somewhat better conditions, and other sectors and industries close to home about how to improve job quality. And clients/boarders should treat staff with respect on a daily basis, as well as support efforts to improve working conditions and job quality in stables.

Some discussions have begun and efforts are already underway, a promising sign that more people are recognizing that horses — and the people who care for them — deserve better. There is much more work to do.

GLOSSARY OF SELECT EQUINE TERMINOLOGY

Board. The amount paid each month to keep a horse at a stable. What is included varies, but the minimum is usually space for the horse (often indoors but sometimes outdoors only for a discount), daily feed and water, stall cleaning, and turnout in a pasture. Services provided can include grooming, medical monitoring, the application and removal of blankets, boots, flymasks, etc. Lessons or training can be added to or included in the board.

Boarder. Someone who pays to have their horse kept at a stable. A boarder can also be called a client. Boarders/clients may ride or may pay professional riders or trainers to ride, train, and otherwise work with their horse(s).

English. One of two primary styles of riding characterized by particular equipment, horse gaits, ways of riding, and, often although not always, involving particular breeds of horses.

Equine-assisted therapy. Physical and/or psychological counselling, programs, or other therapeutic activities involving horses.

Pregnant Mare Urine (PMU). An industry and accompanying set of facilities wherein mares (female horses) are repeatedly impregnated and their urine collected to make hormone-replacement pharmaceutical products for women.

Western. One of two styles of riding characterized by particular equipment, horse gaits, ways of riding, and, often although not always, involving particular breeds of horses.

RESOURCES

Agricultural Employees Protection Act:
https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/02a16
(Stable workers are 'agricultural workers' excluded from the Labour Relations Act.)

Employment Standards Act:
https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/00e41

Employee versus Independent Contractor:
https://www.ontario.ca/page/difference-between-employee-and-independent-contractor

Industries with Exemptions or Special Rules:
https://www.ontario.ca/document/industries-and-jobs-exemptions-or-special-rules/agriculture-growing-breeding-keeping-and-fishing

Legal Aid Ontario:
https://www.legalaid.on.ca/en/

Minimum Wages:
https://www.ontario.ca/page/minimum-wage-increase

Ministry of Labour:
https://www.ontario.ca/page/ministry-labour

Payment of Wages:
https://www.ontario.ca/document/your-guide-employment-standards-act-0/payment-wages

Workers' Action Centre:
http://workersactioncentre.org/

Workers Health and Safety Centre:
https://www.whsc.on.ca/Home

Workplace Safety and Insurance Board:
http://www.wsib.on.ca

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere thanks to all of the horse people who completed the survey and shared it — and to those who have offered their experiences and perspectives in other ways. I am grateful to the equine media sources that helped spread the word about the survey and larger research project, to Richard Telfer for his skilled methodological, technical, and design assistance, and to Dr. Alison Braley-Rattai and Dr. Leah Vosko for their expertise on the legal intricacies.

ENDNOTE

1. https://www.ontario.ca/page/difference-between-employee-and-independent-contractor