

Extent, Profile, and Explanation of Homelessness in Eight of Switzerland's Largest Cities.

Summary

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BACKGROUND

This study aims to fill a gap in the discussion of homelessness and to determine the extent and structure of homelessness in Switzerland. The study also focuses on the question of the significance of the international discussions on poverty-, health- and migration-related approaches to the topic of homelessness in this country.

DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS

The understanding of homelessness is based on the internationally recognised ETHOS typology, which was developed by the European umbrella organisation of national organisations in the field of homelessness (FEANTSA)¹. Homelessness in its narrowest sense is when people are forced to spend the night on the street, in public places or in those emergency shelters and emergency sleeping facilities that do not usually offer daytime accommodation.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The study is based on a quantitative face-to-face survey of people aged 18 and over in eight cities in Switzerland. In selecting the cities, care was taken firstly to ensure that municipalities with the largest possible population were included. Second, the three largest language regions of Switzerland were also considered. Zurich, Geneva, Basel, Bern, Lausanne, Lucerne and St. Gallen as well as Lugano (as the largest city in the Italian-speaking region) were selected for the study.

In the eight cities, a total of 62 facilities were selected that target people who do not have a place to live. These include daytime facilities such as Gassenküchen (soup kitchens), Wärmestuben (warming-up facilities) and Treffpunkte (meeting places). Twenty-five of the 62 facilities are emergency shelters or emergency sleeping facilities. A survey week in December 2020 was defined as the survey date. Against the background of the coronavirus pandemic, the surveys in Lucerne and Zurich had to be postponed until March 2021.

In order to validate the results and to extrapolate the results to the whole of Switzerland, additional statistics on emergency shelters in a total of 17 cities in Switzerland.

RESULTS

Extent and dynamics of homelessness

543 people are homeless

A total of 1,182 people were surveyed. Of these, 543 people, or 45.9% of all respondents, were homeless at the time of the survey: of the 543 homeless people, 209 people (38.5%) were sleeping outside. 334 people (61.5%) were considered homeless because they were staying at an emergency shelter on the day of the survey.

Most homeless people live in Geneva

To get a more complete picture of homelessness in the cities studied, parts of the survey data (people who spent the night outside) were added to the statistics from the emergency shelters: the highest number of homeless people is found in Geneva. For every 100,000 inhabitants (aged 18 and over), 210 people are homeless there, while in Lausanne the figure is 150 Per 100,000 inhabitants. The cities of Bern (58), Basel (46) and Lugano (38) follow at a greater distance. After that comes Zurich, Switzerland's largest city in terms of population, with 29 homeless people per 100,000 inhabitants. Lucerne (11) and St. Gallen (8) have the

¹ European Federation of National Associations Working with the Homeless FEANTSA / Fédération Européenne d'Associations Nationales Travaillant avec les Sans-Abris AISBL.

lowest numbers of homeless people in the city comparison. The city of Lugano presents a unique characteristic, in that it does not have any on-site assistance. City officials referred people to the emergency shelter in the city of Mendrisio, 15 km away, and to the soup kitchen in the neighbouring municipality of Porza. Thus, the results for Lugano represent the figures for outsourced assistance in Mendrisio and Porza.

31% of homeless people do not know where they will sleep in a week's time

For most respondents, there is little change in their housing situation within a week: 295 people or 63% of the 468 respondents say they will be staying in an emergency shelter the next night and 152 people or 32.5% report they will be sleeping outside. Twenty individuals, or 4.5%, assume that they will neither spend the night outside nor in an emergency shelter and 75 people, i.e., 14.0% of all currently homeless people, do not yet know where they will spend the night on the following day. This percentage increases to 31.0% when asked where they will sleep in the next week.

88% of all facility users have experience of housing difficulties or homelessness

All 1,182 people staying at the facilities were asked about whether – and if so – what experience they had had with various forms of homelessness in their lives. Some 797 people, or 67.4% of respondents, had slept outside on some occasion and 766 people, or 64.8%, had slept in an emergency shelter. Just under half (46.4%) had also stayed temporarily with acquaintances. Of all users surveyed, 87.7% had one of the three experiences mentioned above.

Socio-demographic profile of homeless people

Eighty-three percent the people affected by homelessness are men

Across all eight cities, there are significantly more men than women among the homeless population. Of the 534 individuals who provided information about their gender, 443 are men (83.0%) and 91 are women (17.0%). This is a significantly lower proportion of women compared to the overall population in Switzerland, where women make up approximately 50%.

Those experiencing homelessness are on average 40 years old

The age range of homeless people is from 18 to 82 years old, with an average of 40.1 years old. Of the 530 affected individuals who report their age, 188 individuals, or 35.5%, are between 36 and 50 years old. Only 21 people, i.e., 4.0% of the homeless population are 65 years old and older. This compares to 19.0% in the general population.

Four-fifths of homeless people do not have Swiss nationality

Ninety-one individuals, i.e., 16.8% of the 543 homeless people, are Swiss nationals and 452 affected people, i.e., 83.2%, have a foreign nationality. Of the foreigners, the majority report being from Romania (88 people, 19.5%), Nigeria (52 people, 11.5%) and Algeria (41 people, 9.1%). An equally high proportion report coming from neighbouring France (25 people, 5.5%) and Italy (17 people, 3.8%). Foreigners are significantly more likely to be homeless than is predicted by their presence as around 26% of the permanent resident population in Switzerland.

Just over 61% of homeless people have no official residence status

Of the 543 homeless respondents, 332 people, or 61.1%, report having no official residence status. They are considered *Sans-papiers*. Fifty-two (9.6%) report having a B or C residence permit, and 12 (2.2%) report being asylum seekers. Just 8 people, or 1.5%, say they have a short-term residence permit and three individuals, or 0.6%, report being provisionally admitted, as a foreigner with or without refugee status. Two people report holding an S permit for individuals in need of protection and another two, i.e., 0.4%, say that they are in possession of a cross-border commuter permit.

Education and employment

Sixteen percent of those affected do not have a high school certificate

Among the 522 homeless individuals who report their highest educational attainment, 85 individuals, or 16.3%, state they do not have a high school diploma or have never attended school. Slightly more than one-third of homeless people (191) report having completed compulsory education as their highest level of education, and 100 people, or 19.2%, have completed vocational training. Some 58 individuals (11.1%) report having a university degree and 56 (10.7%) have completed a baccalaureate or teacher training. Thirty-two people, or 6.1%, report having attended a college of higher education/arts and crafts school. Compared to the total population in Switzerland, the educational level of homeless people is lower. The proportion of people who have completed at most compulsory education or have no school-leaving qualifications is significantly higher in this survey than in the total population.

Three quarters are without paid work

Of the 404 people who provide information about their paid work, 24 people or 6.0% people are in regular paid work (full or part time). Three-quarters of homeless people do not have regular paid work. Only 8.3% of them are officially registered as unemployed and 6.8% are in receipt of a pension, i.e., they receive Old-age and Survivors' insurance (AHV). A Disability Insurance (IV) is received by 2.0% of the homeless. Slightly less than 176 of the 404 people who provide information on work (43.2%) report having earned money in the last 12 months through other, i.e., non-regular, work, e.g., begging, short non-contractual work assignments or household chores.

Health

Sixteen percent are in bad or very bad health

Of the 464 respondents, 38 (or 9.2%) report that their health is poor and 28 respondents, or 6.7%, rate their health as very poor. Slightly more than half of homeless individuals rate their health as good or very good. 32.8% of the respondents say they suffer from a chronic disease. Although the overall population is older on average, the population in Switzerland estimates their state of health to be better than those affected by homelessness.

Subjective perception of assistance and care

Meal offers for people experiencing poverty are predominantly rated positively in all eight cities

With regard to meal offers, almost 90% of the 523 people affected who had an opinion on this gave a positive assessment. In Basel, 91.1%, in Geneva 90.3%, in Lucerne 88.9% and in Zurich 88.3% completely or rather agree with the statement that there are facilities in the city that offer "decent food". The approval ratings are somewhat lower in Lugano (75.0%), St. Gallen (80.0%) and Lausanne (81.5%).

Only 11% of the people affected by homelessness are registered with social assistance; there is high level of scepticism toward social assistance regarding housing assistance

Only 11.4% of the 543 homeless respondents are registered for social assistance. Of the 454 respondents who provided information about this, 64.0% believe that social assistance cannot help them find housing. In Lucerne (9 people), 75.0% are "completely" or "rather" of this opinion, with the second highest (70.9%) level of scepticism towards social assistance appearing in Geneva (203 people). Overall, 16.8%, i.e., 89 of the 543 people concerned, refused to say anything about housing assistance, which may be related to the fact that the people concerned have not yet been in contact with social assistance.

Twenty-one percent of the homeless individuals feel they do not receive adequate medical care

For 21.0% of the 480 respondents, there are not enough services in their city where they can get medical care when they need it. Overall, 79.0% feel they are well served by medical services in the corresponding survey city. In the subjective assessment of those affected regarding medical care, Basel performs significantly worse in comparison to the other cities: 41.1% of the 39 people affected there are of the opinion that there are not enough medical services in the city. With a share of 79.6% in Zurich (54 people) and 90.9% in Lugano (11 people), homeless people rate the health care in these cities more positively.

Although they felt a visit to the doctor was necessary, under one-third of the 155 homeless people had refused to go to a doctor in the past 12 months.

Three-quarters of homeless people are very sceptical about the state of the housing market

Across all eight cities, more than three-quarters of those affected rate the situation in the housing market for people experiencing poverty as very difficult. Scepticism about the housing market is highest in the cities of Zurich, Geneva, Lausanne and Lucerne, where it exceeds 90% (N=499). The assessments of those affected largely coincide with rental prices in the eight cities. Zurich, for example, has the highest average rental price of CHF 1,584 per month for a rental apartment. Geneva is in second place with an average monthly rent of CHF1,420, followed by Lucerne at CHF1,392 and Bern at CHF1,323 for average monthly rents.

For 32% of those affected, there are not enough public places where they can stay

Across all eight cities, 69.3% of the 514 respondents believe that there are enough public places in their city where they can relax (e.g., park, library, pedestrianised zone). But for just under a third (31.7%), this is not the case. With percentages of 60% in St. Gallen (N=5), 55.6% in Lucerne (9 people) and 43.2% in Lausanne (111 people), criticism of public places is significantly higher than in the cities of Geneva (24.6%, 236 people), Zurich (17.4%, 62 people) and Lugano (21.8%, 13 people).

Social contacts and social capital

More than a quarter of the people affected by homelessness do not have contact with friends, 35% do not have contact with family

In terms of friendly relationships, more than a quarter (25.9%) of the 464 homeless people who provided information about this state that they have no close friends at all. 27.2% say they have three to five close friends. More than half of the people concerned maintain contact with these close friends several times a week (55.8%). As far as the relationship with family or relatives is concerned, 34.8% have no regular contact. 65.2% have regular contact with them.

Almost a quarter of those affected can scarcely count on support from friends or family

Support arising from social relationships is referred to as social capital. For this reason, those affected were asked how much their friends or family would support them (emotionally or with practical help) if they needed it. Only 24.0% stated that they would receive a lot of support from their friends. 20.0% could count on great support from their family (great support = scale values 9 or 10 on a scale of 0 to 10). Conversely, 23.2% (friends) and 23.6% (family) of those affected can scarcely rely on any support.

Over 70% of those affected are without a partner.

Of the 464 homeless respondents, 70.7% do not have a partner. The risk of becoming homeless is greater for single people than for people who are in a couple relationship. This finding is also in line with the results of the Federal Statistical Office, according to which single individuals are more affected by poverty or poverty risk than couples.

Perception of social exclusion, belonging and trust.

One-fifth of homeless people feel very much excluded from society

19.8% of the 398 homeless respondents feel "very much" excluded from society. About the same proportion, i.e., 20.4%, indicate that they feel "not at all" socially excluded.

More than 40% of homeless perceive discrimination in public space

Discrimination in public spaces against homeless people is not an exceptional event. Forty-two percent of the 513 homeless respondents report that they are often treated disparagingly in public spaces. For 58.0%, however, this is not the case. In Lucerne (50.0% of those affected) and Geneva (47.2% of those affected), there are more reports of discrimination than in the other cities. In St. Gallen (20.0%), Lugano (23.1%) and Basel (31.1%), less than a third of respondents feel they are treated disparagingly in public spaces.

With a share of 55.1%, homeless women feel they are treated disparagingly in public space significantly more often than men (39.2%); no differences between homeless Swiss and homeless foreigners can be found.

Homeless people show a high degree of attachment to their city

Basically, homeless people feel strongly connected to their city. For 49.4% of all 521 respondents, this is completely true and for 26.4% it is somewhat true. The high degree of attachment is even more pronounced in the smaller cities. In St. Gallen, as many as 100% of respondents feel closely connected to the city, and in Lugano this is true for 92% of respondents. Even in the city of Zurich, which has the lowest level of attachment in a comparison of cities, 77% feel completely or rather attached to the city.

Little trust in Swiss governmental, political and social institutions

Forty-seven percent of the homeless people have great trust in social welfare (N=378). Conversely, 53.0% do not have a high level of trust in social welfare. Trust levels for the political system (30.7%, N=378), the police (32.4%, N=435) and the legal system (36.4%, N=374) are even lower than for social assistance. Among the overall population, trust in governmental, political and social institutions is higher.

Three quarters of homeless people perceive a worsening of their everyday life due to the coronavirus situation

The coronavirus situation has worsened the daily life of 76.0% of the 508 people experiencing homelessness who provided information on this issue. An already vulnerable population group thus suffers particularly from the coronavirus pandemic. 83.9% of those affected in Lausanne and 82.2% in Geneva perceive a worsening of their everyday life. This contrasts with 46.2% in Lugano and 50.0% in St. Gallen.

Causes of homelessness

Subjective reasons for homelessness mainly include financial and migration-related aspects

231 homeless people provided information on why they lost their apartment or room. 42.0% (97 people) of respondents cited financial problems as one of the main reasons. 23.8% of respondents (55 people) state they came to Switzerland without a place to live, which resulted in not being able to find a place to live. This could be an indication that a significant proportion of the predominantly foreign individuals came to the country without means. Sorted by number of mentions, the following are the subjective reasons for homelessness: loss of job including bankruptcy for 21.6% (50 people), termination of lease for 18.6% (32 people), divorce and separation for 10.4% (24 people), conflicts in own household for 9.5% (22 people), mental or physical health problems for 6% (14 people), addiction problems 5.6% (13 people) and domestic violence for 4% (9 people).

Identification of five groups of people differently affected by homelessness

Using cluster analysis, the 543 homeless people could be grouped into clusters with similar characteristics:

- Cluster type 1 consists of people between the ages of 36 and 59; they do not have valid residence papers and have few social resources. Their vulnerability is also particularly high because they have health problems. 48 people are in this group.
- Those in cluster type 2 are between 36 and 59 years old; this group has a regular residence status: either they are Swiss or have a valid residence status as foreigners. They state that they have no health problems and have social resources in that they can fall back on either friends or family members for support. 101 people are in this group.
- Cluster type 3 combines affected people who are between 18 and 35 years old, have valid residence papers and tend to feel healthy. They also have social resources. This group, which includes a total of 55 people, differs from cluster type 2 only in that it includes younger people.
- In cluster type 4 people are between 36 and 59 years old, they present health problems and have social resources. Most of these people have valid residence papers. In total, 105 people are in this group.
- In cluster type 5, people are between 18 and 35 years old; they do not have valid residence papers. They report having no health problems and have social resources. This is the largest group, with 234 individuals.

Three projection models to determine homelessness in Switzerland as a whole

To estimate the number of homeless people (18 years and older) in all of Switzerland for December 2020, three projection models were used based on the results from the eight cities studied and with the addition of other statistics.

- Extrapolation model 1 (lower cut-off for the expected value) identifies 918 homeless people in Switzerland, of which 687 seek emergency shelter and 229 people spend the night outside.
- Projection model 2 estimates 1,688 homeless people for Switzerland. Of these, 1,167 seek shelter and 421 spend the night outside.
- Extrapolation model 3 (upper cut-off for the expected value) comes to 2,740 people experiencing homelessness in Switzerland. Of these, 2,057 people are housed in an emergency shelter and 683 people spend the night outside.

Compared to the rest of Europe, homelessness in Switzerland is low

International comparisons are possible to a limited extent, but the existing data suggest that the figures on homelessness in Switzerland are rather low in a European comparison.

Based on the mean projection, 0.02% of the adult population is homeless in this country. The proportion in neighbouring Austria is 0.25%. In Germany, the share of homelessness is 0.41%, in France it is 0.22% and in Italy the share is 0.08%.

CONCLUSIONS

The international discussions on poverty- and migration-related approaches to the topic of homelessness are also important for Switzerland. The health issue, especially health problems, medical care, and addiction, is important for the description as well as for the explanation of homelessness, but it does not prove to be the dominant factor. In addition, social and educational resources take on a particular importance, since they are also significantly lower among the homeless population compared to those experiencing poverty in secure housing.

Implications for preventing and addressing homelessness emerge from the study's findings. These implications are based on the understanding that:

- homelessness is a reality in Switzerland;
- homelessness can be prevented or combated through low-threshold housing services;
- exclusion from society should be prevented, intercepted or alleviated at an early stage;
- specialised coordinating agencies are needed to deal adequately with the complex issue of homelessness and its existential significance for those affected;
- the offer of emergency aid for homeless people in particularly threatening life situations needs to be examined;
- the self-help potential of those affected should be better taken advantage of;
- the use of social assistance by the homeless needs to be increased;
- the interrelationship between homelessness and migration should be strengthened, including rights to residency.

With a view to conducting future studies, the results and experiences of the study indicate that:

- homelessness is empirically measurable and thus determinable;
- hidden homelessness continues to exist and the findings in this study represent just a snapshot of the reality of homelessness;
- the coronavirus pandemic has tended to lead to an underestimation of homelessness in this study;
- the study can serve as a baseline for future national monitoring.