*Critical and Radical Social Work* • vol XX • no XX • 1–17 • © Authors 2026
Print ISSN 2049-8608 • Online ISSN 2049-8675 • https://doi.org/10.1332/20498608Y2026D000000123
Accepted for publication 07 January 2026 • First published online 05 February 2026



research article

# Destitute Eastern European Roma migrants in the Swiss regimes of (in)tolerance

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The Roma represent one of the most vulnerable social groups in Switzerland, with Eastern European Roma migrants who have fled extreme poverty and social exclusion in their home countries being particularly at risk. Various Swiss cantons have adopted hostile political measures and institutional practices aimed at combating so-called 'welfare tourism' and discouraging Roma migrants from accessing public spaces and welfare services. These measures include punitive actions, legal criminalisation, restricted service access, detention and deportation. Despite this, there are also federal, cantonal and municipal initiatives that provide meaningful support to the Roma community. This article explores the specific vulnerabilities faced by impoverished, mobile Roma individuals in Switzerland and critically examines how Swiss welfare structures respond to these challenges. Furthermore, it highlights the role of social work within this ambivalent and often contradictory system.

**Keywords** Eastern Europe • Switzerland • Roma • migration • discrimination

To cite this article: Temesvary, Z., Mosimann, M., Roduit, S. and Drilling, M. (2026) Destitute Eastern European Roma migrants in the Swiss regimes of (in)tolerance, *Critical and Radical Social Work*, Early View, DOI: 10.1332/20498608Y2026D000000123

## Introduction

Roma is the largest ethnic group in Europe, comprising 10–12 million people, the vast majority of whom reside in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, primarily in Romania and Bulgaria (Vidra, 2013; Mattli and Jud, 2017). The Roma not only constitute the largest but also the most vulnerable ethnic group in Europe,

facing challenges in health, housing, employment and education (Yldiz and Genova, 2017; FRA, 2023).

Eastern European Roma are particularly mobile compared to other impoverished social groups. The first significant migration wave of destitute CEE Roma occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when thousands of poor Roma families moved from Slovakia and Hungary to Canada (Durst, 2013). After CEE countries joined the European Union (EU), the UK became the primary target of transnational migration for destitute Eastern European Roma. After the UK, Austria and Germany are the main emigration destinations for Hungarian and Slovakian Roma, while Romanians and Bulgarians more often choose to migrate to France, Spain and Italy (FRA, 2023). Additionally, Switzerland is among the most popular target countries for Eastern European Roma.

Presently, there are approximately 80,000–100,000 Roma who reside in Switzerland, the vast majority of whom are Swiss citizens fully integrated into Swiss society. Another Roma group consists of Western European travellers, approximately 4,000–5,000 individuals, who occasionally reside in Switzerland (Matras and Leggio, 2017). For these travellers, migration represents a cultural dimension, embodying a 'divergent lifestyle' (Kemény, 2006) and displaying a 'prototypical wandering behaviour' (Mattli and Jud, 2017). The third and steadily growing Roma group in Switzerland consists of destitute CEE migrants whose transnational mobility stems from absolute poverty and severe social exclusion in their home countries (Friberg, 2020). Additionally, due to the war in Ukraine, thousands of Ukrainian Roma have arrived in Switzerland in the past two years.

Due to the EU directive on the free movement of people and Romania's and Bulgaria's Schengen membership, Roma migrants can enter Switzerland relatively easily (Christen and Kurt, 2021; Götzö et al, 2021). The Roma's multiple social vulnerabilities and systemic exclusion in their home countries make them particularly mobile compared to other impoverished Eastern Europeans, as the uncertainties in Switzerland are perceived as more 'promising' than facing social exclusion, absolute poverty and racism in their home countries (Durst, 2013).

Similar to other Western European countries, the severe and visible vulnerability of Roma beggars, sex workers and rough sleepers is part of the everyday image of large Swiss cities (Tosi and Petrillo, 2006; Coulon et al, 2015; Götzö et al, 2021). Destitute Eastern European Roma migrants are disproportionately represented among the aforementioned groups in Western European cities, as experiences from France, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK demonstrate (Matras and Leggio, 2017; Scholten and van Ostaijen, 2018; Magazzini and Piemontese, 2019). Swiss studies indicate that nearly half of destitute Roma migrants resort to begging in Switzerland due to a lack of alternatives (Coulon et al, 2015; Temesvary et al, 2023). Exact numbers of destitute mobile Roma are challenging to assess, as most Eastern European Roma live in Switzerland without residence permits and their numbers fluctuate over time and space (Epple and Schär, 2015). Based on careful calculations, around 20,000 to 30,000 destitute and undocumented Eastern European Roma may live in the country (Epple and Schär, 2015; Temesvary et al, 2023). Like in other Western European countries, the majority of Eastern European Roma in Switzerland originate from Romania and Bulgaria (see Coulon et al, 2015; Temesvary et al, 2023).

Swiss cantons' responses to the vulnerabilities of migrating Roma are ambivalent, as they employ various strategies, ranging from controlling, regulating, disciplining

and supporting the Roma (Coulon et al, 2015; Drilling et al, 2019; Temesvary, 2019). However, due to the country's federal structure, these measures vary significantly among cantons. These regulations are mostly framed as immigration policy issues and are reflected in cantonal constitutions, social acts, police decrees and legal and security department documents. Available studies suggest that Swiss cantons' responses to the presence of destitute mobile Roma are mostly repressive and punitive (Coulon et al, 2015; Epple and Schär, 2015). Similar to the UK and other Western European countries (Morgan, 2021; Radziwinowiczówna, 2024), many Eastern European rough sleepers in Swiss cities face detention and deportation practices (Coulon et al, 2015). Since Roma individuals are heavily over-represented among rough sleepers, they are often subjected to detention and expulsion, even when they are legally residing in the country as EU tourists within the 90-day period allowed in Switzerland without a residence permit or registration with cantonal immigration offices (Christen and Kurt, 2021).

Swiss cantons have largely introduced strict immigration policies against mobile Roma, contradicting European law. For example, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR, 2021) ordered Geneva to pay financial compensation for the police punishment of a Roma female beggar. In Bern, foreign Roma beggars are punished or expelled, even if they are legally staying in the canton as EU citizens. In Basel, the immense poverty of destitute Roma became highly visible when hundreds of impoverished Eastern European Roma appeared after the canton's begging decree was liberalised in 2020. In 2023, the city implemented the so-called 'Berner Model', allowing only Swiss residents to beg, while people from abroad are punished and expelled. These local regulations, as highlighted by the ECHR ruling, contravene European law on the free movement of people and the Schengen Agreement while also violating the European Charter of Human Rights (Striano and Young, 2018; Christen and Kurt, 2021; Kramer, 2023).

This article aims to explore the vulnerabilities faced by destitute Eastern European Roma migrants in the areas of housing, employment, health and access to Swiss social services. To achieve this, we employ a mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews involving both Roma migrants and social workers. We then examine various socio-political measures implemented by Swiss cantons and cities in response to these vulnerabilities and highlight the key dilemmas faced by social workers supporting mobile Roma people.

## Theoretical background on the regimes of (in)tolerance

Although Western-type welfare regimes have been developed to support people in need (Esping-Andersen, 1999) and to guarantee social citizenship through extensive and collective social rights (Marshall, 1949; Staub-Bernasconi, 2019), they often fail to protect the most vulnerable people (Esping-Andersen, 1983; Taylor-Gooby, 2013; Dallinger, 2016). Moreover, certain political regulations and actions can directly contribute to the exacerbation of severe social vulnerabilities through hostile targeting mechanisms or penalising behavioural conditions for services and transfers (Garland, 2002; Evangelista, 2019; Bonvin et al, 2023). These macro/systemic vulnerabilities (Spini and Widmer, 2023) are then transferred by meso-level 'agents' (Silver, 2006) and 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980), such as social workers and public administrators, to their clientele.

The most common strategies of Western governments in regulating Roma migration include: (1) the physical control of borders and other disciplinary spatial measures, such as the closure of public and semi-public spaces from beggars and rough sleepers; (2) deterrence, for instance, through hostile architecture or limited access to services; and (3) legislation, such as on begging, sleeping and drinking bans in public places (Wacquant, 2001; Doherty et al, 2002; Belina, 2007; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2010; Hanson and Mitchel, 2018). Behind these measures lies the neoliberal political concept of regulating public spaces and resources (O'Sullivan, 2020) through commercialising common goods and impeding the access of 'unwanted' people (Doherty et al, 2002; Garland, 2002). Mobile Roma people are not always intentional targets of hostile governmental measures but often 'accidentally' fall victim to arbitrary political actions targeting the poor. In contrast, other studies highlight the intentional and deliberate usage of punitive and disciplinary political strategies for cleansing public spaces and deterring unwanted people (Foucault, 1977; Silver, 2006; Nagel, 2007).

Rose (2000) refers to the interwovenness of the aforementioned strategies and actions as the 'circles of exclusion', while Garland (2002) describes the institutionalisation of punishing measures in welfare policies as the 'culture of control'. Political actions targeting mobile Roma and other destitute people are described as the 'regimes of new punitiveness' by Pratt et al (2005), while Mitchell (2001) sees the 'Americanisation of poverty' behind the Western European penal actions against destitute people.

This article synthesises these aforementioned concepts under a central notion called the 'regimes of (in)tolerance'. We define regimes as various supportive and punitive statutory and non-governmental actors and actions that are related to each other and organised by a dominant rationality or logic (Tsianos et al, 2009). Our interpretation of a 'regime of (in)tolerance' is of different actors (either statutory or non-governmental) supporting or punishing actions, measures, strategies, attitudes and practices targeting mobile destitute Roma. These actions and strategies are implemented and operated at the micro, macro and meso levels. International experiences from Germany (Striano and Young, 2018), Belgium (Striano, 2020), Sweden (Favell and Nebe, 2009; Hansson and Mitchel, 2018), Denmark and Ireland (Allen et al, 2020; O'Sullivan, 2020) point to the wide range of multilevel measures applied by Western regimes to regulate Roma access to public spaces and welfare structures.

In Switzerland, these supporting and punishing measures are within the jurisdiction of the cantons. Practically, there are 26 different welfare regimes in the country due to Switzerland's federal structure. The cantons have their own constitutions, social acts and police decrees that regulate the immigration of destitute Roma migrants.

## Research methods

The initial Swiss data collections on homeless people were conducted in shelters and daycare structures, which are often inaccessible to the Roma. Consequently, destitute and hiding mobile Roma were only partially counted and interviewed. The Swiss research project, called 'Routes to Destitution', focused on the homelessness of Eastern European Roma migrants and employed data collection methods that have never before been used in Switzerland to explore the hidden forms of homelessness. Instead of one-time counts, we conducted a long-term multi-sited field study (Johnson et al, 2007) to examine the vulnerabilities of destitute Roma and other CEE migrants. We implemented a comprehensive research strategy over the course of the more

than two-year research project, employing mobile methods like walking interviews and life-history calendars to gather broader and more detailed information on this extremely vulnerable and hard-to-reach group of people. In doing so, we examined the living conditions of destitute Eastern European migrants in Geneva and Zürich (the two largest Swiss cities) between 2021 and 2023. We conducted 38 narrative-biographical interviews with the application of life-history calendars to understand the deeper forms of social vulnerabilities of destitute (Roma) migrants from a life-course perspective. The interviewees were recruited through low-threshold homelessness services, such as soup kitchens, counselling centres and emergency night shelters, using a snowball sampling method and relying on recommendations from social workers. We recruited participants who (1) came from one of the CEE countries, (2) did not possess a Swiss residence permit and (3) experienced homelessness either through rough sleeping or staying in shelters (Amore et al, 2011). The interviews were conducted in German, English, French, Hungarian and Romanian and were transcribed and analysed using Mayring's (2000) qualitative content analysis method. This method allowed us to establish the main analytical categories based on the literature, which were then assigned codes during the qualitative analysis of the interviews. In the current article, we primarily focus on individuals who self-identified as Roma during the interviews (24 out of 38 participants).

Following the qualitative interviews, we surveyed 127 Eastern European travellers about the systemic social vulnerabilities they experienced in accessing Swiss social structures. In doing so, we developed a social vulnerability scale that assessed the systemic social, relational and health vulnerabilities of destitute Eastern European Roma migrants in relation to healthcare, housing, employment and social relationships. In the current article, we present quantitative results on both Roma and non-Roma to highlight the differences across various dimensions of vulnerability. Additionally, we interviewed experts, including social workers, street-level bureaucrats and public administrators, to understand the socio-political strategies targeting destitute (Roma) migrants from Eastern Europe (Temesvary et al, 2023). Expert interviews were conducted in the same institutions where the client interviews took place.

## Main findings of the study

The research findings revealed that among the responding poverty migrants, nearly two thirds (63.5 per cent) identified themselves as Roma. The vast majority of respondents were men (men = 89; women = 36; other = 1), and nearly two thirds (62.2 per cent) of the respondents arrived from Romania.

### *Housing vulnerabilities of mobile Roma people in Switzerland*

Our quantitative survey pinpointed that 98.6 per cent of Roma migrants did not have a residence permit, which is a significant difference compared to non-Roma poverty migrants, where 72.7 per cent lacked a residence permit. More than half (55 per cent) of the responding Roma had been in Switzerland for less than a year, while 35 per cent had stayed in the country from one to five years. In comparison, a third (34.7 per cent) of non-Roma Eastern European migrants had resided in Switzerland for less than a year, and more than half (52.2 per cent) of the non-Roma

had stayed between one and five years. The results indicate that most Roma migrants are newcomers in Switzerland.

Furthermore, the qualitative interviews showed a variety of migration trajectories among mobile destitute Roma. Some Roma reported that they repeatedly came to Switzerland for several years and stayed in the country without a permit the whole time. Others remained for up to three months and then left again to avoid illegality. However, most respondents reported staying longer than the three months permitted under Swiss immigration law. Roma migrants often reported negative encounters with the police when checked for their eligibility to stay in Switzerland. Since securing housing without a permit is very challenging, the lack of a residence permit and homelessness are closely linked.

Compared to the housing situation in their countries of birth, we observed a significant deterioration. Even though some Roma were already homeless in their country of origin, 78.7 per cent of them had a safe place to stay there. In contrast, only 3.8 per cent of the Roma had a safe place where they could sleep and stay at any time in Switzerland. There was a significant difference in the security of housing compared to non-Roma migrants, as 34.1 per cent of the non-Roma had a safe place to live in Switzerland. As a result, the vast majority of Roma lived in homelessness in Switzerland, and they considered the lack of housing a major problem. Only half of the Eastern European Roma could occasionally spend the night in an emergency shelter in Swiss cities. However, there were huge geographical differences in the availability of social structures. In Geneva, most Roma could use temporary shelters at least during the winter months, while shelters were practically inaccessible in Zürich. Even if they occasionally gained access to shelters, these emergency shelters were only temporary solutions for them:

> Thank God [the night shelter] exists! They've taken me in, and I hope it lasts a little bit longer because, otherwise, I don't know what would have happened. You have a bed, a hot meal in the evening, your shower – everything is here.… Everyone here is nice; they're all welcoming. I've known them for a year now. (Woman, 37, Romanian)

The Roma reported in the interviews that it was difficult to find a secure place to stay overnight in Swiss cities, as there is hardly any permanent accommodation and sleeping places for homeless and undocumented Eastern Europeans. Thus, the majority of Roma migrants residing in Switzerland experienced the most precarious forms of homelessness. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when some Swiss cities opened their shelters for Roma migrants for free, most Roma avoided these institutions because they feared being registered and deported by the authorities. Our data show that the Roma people almost always avoided such registration, as authorities can legally expel them after 90 days of stay in Switzerland, according to the Swiss immigration law.

As an alternative to statutory social services, mobile destitute Roma often create camps in or outside Swiss cities. A typical strategy in border regions like Geneva and Basel is for Roma to stay overnight in German or French territories, as the police are more tolerant there compared to Switzerland. Then they come to Switzerland during the day to beg, collect goods or do small temporary jobs before returning to France or Germany at night: 'I live on the street. At midnight, when people go

to sleep, I seek a bush or a gateway where I can lay my mattress, and I leave early in the morning so that people do not even know that I sleep in their doorway at night' (man, 43, Slovakian). The interviewed experts agreed that in the absence of social resources and supporting structures, destitute mobile Roma could not improve their housing conditions in Switzerland. In most cases, housing circumstances became more precarious than they were in their home countries prior to migration. As one social worker stated, 'The terrible irony of this transnational migration is that they go from one poverty to another!'.

The Roma are particularly stigmatised compared to other disadvantaged social groups, such as refugees and homeless people, in the Swiss housing market, where poor people without proper residency documents are usually excluded. Roma people are also regularly affected by the general biases of homeowners and rental agencies, in addition to their precarious financial condition and vulnerable legal status.

### *Employment-related vulnerabilities and strategies*

A total of 70 per cent of the Roma lacked an employment contract in their country of origin. Many cited the loss of jobs, the inability to find employment or insufficient earnings (working poor) in their home countries as a primary reason for migration. Some respondents shared that they worked earlier both with and without contracts at home. All employed respondents were engaged in temporary assignments only, and no one reported permanent employment in their home countries before their migration. They often mentioned that they worked more than eight hours a day, and many stated that they were poorly compensated or did not earn enough to support their families. Before arriving in Switzerland, the majority of the surveyed Roma tried to find work in other European countries, such as Germany, France, Italy, Spain or Austria: 'We earned 300–400 euros a month … which isn't much. Besides, we often had to do the hardest jobs, for example, working on the roof all summer, and almost for nothing. You work very hard and still see no results' (man, 55, Slovakian).

In Switzerland, 96.3 per cent of the responding Roma did not have an employment contract, and they perceived the lack of access to legal employment as a major issue. The fact that many did not engage in legal work did not mean that they did not work at all in Switzerland. The men frequently worked as scaffolders, roofers, painters or electricians without a contract. Other mentioned jobs included cooks, field or harvest workers, and moving company employees. The majority of the women worked as cleaners (in hotels, businesses or private homes), as nannies, in the hospitality industry (as waitstaff or kitchen assistants) or as sex workers.

A third of the Roma used to beg. Those unable to find employment often resorted to begging to earn a minimum amount of money for food or to support family members back home. Four of the 18 responding Roma women were sex workers. They conducted sex work illegally and were usually punished by the police.

In Switzerland, the Roma face major barriers in accessing vocational training or language courses, exacerbating their already precarious situation. A mere 19.7 per cent of surveyed Roma individuals have participated in a language course, and only 4.1 per cent have undergone professional training. Although most of the Roma interviewed have attained primary education, they could not complete secondary education in their home countries. The reasons for not continuing education after

primary school included poverty-induced exclusion, lack of further support from parents, lack of engagement in education and family care duties. Nearly a third of respondents had discontinued their schooling or vocational education, with over half of these being women. Young women were particularly affected by early drop-outs due to very early childbearing in the home countries. Of these discontinuations, more than half were from vocational education programmes, with the rest mostly involving secondary school dropouts and, on rare occasions, primary education. Only a few Roma respondents reported completing vocational education: 'I do not have a special qualification. After finishing elementary school, I had to go to work to support myself and my family' (man, 43, Kosovan).

According to our experts, due to the lack of workforce in Switzerland in the demanding lower segment of the labour market, even the poorly skilled Eastern European Roma have chances to find a job. Some experts highlighted that the Roma often follow a mixed labour market strategy as they seasonally combine employment in Switzerland and their home countries. According to a social worker at a counselling station, the Roma spend a short period of time in Switzerland, then travel home and take another job: 'Some of them work in their home countries as harvest workers during the summer season and come to Switzerland as beggars or sex workers in the winter if they do not have other opportunities at home.'

Besides this seasonality, there are mobile Roma people who stay in Switzerland only for a very short period of time (for a few weeks) with multiple repetitive travels between Switzerland and their home countries. This kind of migration is called 'liquid migration' by Engbersen et al (2013), referring to the short repetitive phases in the migration trajectory. In this case, the wandering European Roma live from the money earned in Switzerland for the rest of the year in their home countries. This is a typical behaviour among sex workers and beggars. In this case, the only goal of the Roma migrants is to earn as much money as possible in the shortest period of time (Götzö et al, 2021; Temesvary et al, 2023).

### *Health conditions and access to healthcare facilities*

The general health status of mobile Eastern European Roma is very poor. They are often affected by various infections and acute medical diseases. However, the prevalence of mental issues and alcohol- and drug-related problems was less common among the Roma compared to other (non-Roma) destitute Eastern European migrants. The Roma particularly needed dental care and some forms of special care, such as gynaecological and psychiatric treatments, which they could not receive in Switzerland in the absence of health insurance: 'I have no insurance; therefore, I do not have medicines now. I do not know how to have my pills here. Depression is a terrible thing; if I cannot have my medicines, I collapse mentally like an old house' (man, 28, Hungarian).

Based on our interviews, there were two main reasons behind the poor availability of healthcare for the Roma in Switzerland. The first one is that they were not eligible for Swiss medical insurance without a residence permit, and even in those rare cases when they did possess a permit, they were unable to pay the fees of the Swiss private insurers. The second reason was the mistrust towards the Swiss medical system and Swiss doctors. As one of the expert interviewees explained, 'There is a mistrust towards Swiss medical services among the destitute people. A Roma woman, for example,

left the emergency station a day after she was admitted despite her serious heart problems'. Like other undocumented migrants, the mobile Roma are only treated by Swiss hospitals if they possess health insurance. Without insurance, they are treated only in emergency cases, in the case of pregnancy or in a pandemic situation, and they are discharged very early. However, even in these urgent cases, the medical services issue bills for the patients. As a social worker at a counselling station stated, 'A lot of destitute Eastern Europeans are sent to us by hospitals. They receive care but cannot pay the bills without insurance. So, they are sent to us by hospitals or by the insurers, where they gathered serious debts because of unpaid fees'.

### *Future prospects*

All respondents expressed a desire to improve their living conditions beyond their current experiences. For the majority, this entailed finding secure employment that guarantees a consistent income. Furthermore, most aspired to achieve secure residency status and to have their own homes. Many expressed the wish to settle in Switzerland permanently, forgoing a return to their homeland. These individuals often compared the wages and living conditions attainable in Switzerland with those in their countries of origin during the narrative interviews. Those disinclined to return home felt particularly ambivalent, being torn between a desire to remain in Switzerland and missing their families. Typically, some family members, occasionally including children, still reside in the country of origin. Parents among the respondents especially hope for a brighter future for their children: 'We would all like what is best for our children.… What's not fair is that it depends on the family you come from. That's why I would like to change my life, so that my daughter is not like me' (woman, 23, Romanian).

The contemplation of return is closely associated with the prospect of improved future conditions in the homeland. Yet, most acknowledge a lack of necessary resources for such improvements. Among the barriers identified were the absence of professional qualifications or proper residency status, as well as a lack of dependable social support networks. In essence, while many see greater opportunities in Switzerland, they concurrently recognise a shortfall in the personal resources needed to seize these opportunities. A prevailing theme across interviews was the profound uncertainty surrounding their futures. Many stated that although returning to their homeland is not viable, they lack alternative plans or visions for their futures. Some intend to continue their travels in search of better prospects elsewhere, while for others, their current situation is the sole option considered viable. Respondents with a history of frequent migrations mentioned a periodic urge to move in search of new beginnings. The pervasive despair regarding their life situations can be summarised by one individual's remark: 'I have no grand plans for the future. I don't dare to dream, having faced numerous disappointments' (woman, 36, Romanian).

### *Barriers to accessing cantonal welfare services*

From a social work perspective, it is important to note that the Roma reported less access to professional social work services and the support of social workers than the Eastern European non-Roma migrants. For instance, there was a significant gap

between Roma and non-Roma people in access to counselling with social workers. While only a third of the non-Roma did not have access to social structures, 92.5 per cent of Roma had no access to these services. However, interviews carried out with Roma individuals emphasised their heavy need for accessible facilities, such as soup kitchens, emergency shelters and daycare centres. The motivations of Roma migrants for accessing these services range from finding shelter and Internet access to assistance with administrative tasks and, occasionally, medical support, alongside the opportunity to forge new social connections and feel a sense of belonging. The need for small financial supports, for example, for public transportation costs, was also noted by the responding Roma. Emotional support was also important for the interviewees, who valued the attention and care provided by social workers.

Some of our respondents were supported by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and Church-based organisations, and most respondents exhibited mistrust towards state social services and authorities. For them, the actions of social workers in these institutions were dubious, leading to an ambivalent relationship. Several respondents felt discriminated against based on their ethnic origin and for being members of the Roma community. They often reported unequal treatment at social agencies and cantonal authorities because of their ethnic background.

None of our respondents mentioned the police as a source of support during the interviews. Some were afraid that their Roma ethnicity would prevent them from receiving help. Several respondents expressed negative encounters with the police, where they felt threatened and unfairly controlled. Their experiences with the police involved being fined, arrested or occasionally expelled. Some of the respondents talked about legal issues, including theft, begging, the possession of narcotics and unauthorised sex work. It was mentioned by the majority of respondents that Swiss police officers had prejudices against the Roma that led to more frequent control or suspicion.

## Discussion of the results from a social work perspective

The growing immigration tendency and the severe and multiple social vulnerabilities of destitute Eastern European Roma pose an unsolved problem for the Swiss welfare state and its social services. The responses of cantonal organisations and NGOs on the Roma issue vary significantly in Switzerland. Cantonal structures mostly follow penalising policies and attempt to keep the Roma away from social structures through various hostile measures of migration policy, such as punishment and expulsion. Social workers at these cantonal structures mostly follow the mandate of their agencies and transfer punitive measures to their clientele. In some cases, social workers, worrying about their careers and status, do not have any other choice but to carry out cantonal orders and simply reject undocumented Roma in the social administration, daycare and night shelters. In other cases, social agencies voluntarily support authorities in penalising the Roma. For instance, during large police controls against Roma migrants in Basel in the summer of 2021, social workers from the Children and Adult Protection Services (KESB) accompanied police officers during night patrols when they controlled and fined Roma people in public spaces.

Even in the case of NGOs, many organisations reject undocumented Roma, as the cantons, from where they receive the majority of their subventions, require it. In the case of Basel City, cantonal financial support was suspended for some NGOs

when they continued supporting undocumented Roma. This led to a controversial situation where social workers served the interests of their organisations instead of reflecting on the real needs of their clientele. We experienced more openness and support towards the Roma in the case of smaller NGOs and Church-based organisations, where the subvention of the organisations came from local communities and private donors. Social workers in Church-based organisations, such as the City Mission or the Pfarrer Sieber Association in Zürich, provided significant support to Roma migrants abandoned by statutory structures. These organisations offered relatively flexible, low-threshold services that met the most pressing needs of the Roma. Without statutory mandate or penalising tools, these professionals and their services were particularly popular among the interviewees. However, in these local NGOs and Church-based services, we could find only a few qualified social workers, as they worked with a lot of volunteers and professionals from other fields (like priests and teachers). Besides the lack of qualified social workers, these organisations were particularly vulnerable to social and economic changes. For instance, many such institutions closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, as their volunteers could not work anymore and their private donors could not support them. As a result, hundreds of destitute Roma migrants remained without any support during the first two years of the epidemic.

Besides structural elements, there were also other reasons behind the missing support for destitute mobile Roma migrants. Many Roma avoided social structures because they were afraid of registration, punishment and expulsion, as detailed earlier. Social services could only moderately reach these hidden Roma people. The most effective services were outreach services like street work and low-threshold social services like certain daycare structures and soup kitchens. Most of these organisations, even if they provided some forms of social support, limited their activities to satisfying the daily biological needs of Roma people. In doing so, they provided food, clothes and shelter but rarely engaged in real social work like empowerment, advocacy or ethnically sensitive practice.

The lack of language skills for both social workers and the Roma, as well as cultural differences, hampered effective casework. In some cases, social structures were unprepared for the special needs of the Roma. Compared to Swiss homeless people, there were a lot of children and women among destitute Roma migrants, as they mostly came from Eastern Europe as whole families and not as individuals. However, most institutions could not admit children, and they could not address the special needs of Roma women. For instance, there were rarely separated bathrooms for women in soup kitchens and daycare structures, night shelters were usually divided for men and women, whole families could not store their belongings in the shelters, and many Roma received support that was offered on an individual basis and not combined, despite wanting to remain as one unit. Only in Geneva did we encounter a special family centre where whole Roma families could stay together for three months and children could receive special education. Swiss Child Protection Services are highly sensitive to the dangerous living conditions of children, and the police, as the primary signalling system, intervene swiftly when child homelessness is detected. Homeless children can be taken into protective care by Child Welfare Services and separated from their families. As a result, begging with children is less visible in Swiss cities compared to other Western European countries. Roma families often leave their children in camps with the elderly, sometimes deliberately keeping

them out of sight, while the parents beg on the streets in order to avoid attracting the attention of the authorities.

Our results show that homelessness and exclusion from the labour market are the two main obstacles that the Roma mentioned that hinder successful integration in Switzerland. As these are structural vulnerabilities rooted in the systems of Swiss housing and labour markets, social workers were only rarely able to change these macro-level conditions. However, in some areas, social workers could achieve some results, particularly where social professionals could cooperate with other actors in the area of medical services, cantonal administrations and employers' organisations. Advocacy for the clientele through securing access to supporting structures became the main task for Swiss social workers at low-threshold services accessible to the Roma.

This advocacy for vulnerable Roma people is particularly important to avoid the 'dark side of social integration' (Grunow et al, 2023: 17), which can entail forced assimilation into dominant societal norms and undermine Roma identities, agency and cultural practices. A contemporary, ethnically sensitive and anti-bias approach to social work, as implemented by a few Swiss organisations, has the potential to empower destitute Roma by fostering their social participation while preserving their self-determination.

The City Card programme in Zürich, for example, enabled the usage of the city's social services for destitute mobile Roma (and other vulnerable people). As a pilot project, the canton provided City Cards to needy people through its social organisations, and this card could be used in a similar way to a regular residence permit, for instance, at social agencies and medical facilities. The whole pilot project demanded 3.2 million Swiss Francs from the canton, and according to social workers, a lot of undocumented mobile poor people were supported through medical and social organisations during a two-year period. Unfortunately, the exact results are not yet available due to the absence of proper monitoring of the project. However, this project drew attention to the necessary cooperation between social and medical organisations, as well as cantonal authorities.

With the City Card, destitute mobile people could identify themselves to authorities with a 'real Swiss document', and they could open a bank account and receive different discounts at public and private services. Not only destitute people but all residents in Zürich City can receive a City Card with the same privileges, so holding the card is universal and not stigmatising for homeless people, undocumented migrants or Roma migrants. The City Card also improves the chances of social workers in supporting the interests of their clients. For instance, social professionals can transfer their clients to medical facilities, cantonal agencies and police stations without worrying that clients will be threatened, rejected or punished. The Zürich City Card is a first Swiss attempt to legitimise the residence status of nearly 100,000 undocumented migrants, a third of whom are Eastern Europeans (mostly Roma). Besides this large cantonal project, there are some smaller local initiatives that target destitute mobile Roma.

Another practice is the *Katzentaler* (Cat Coin) project in Bern that enables people to purchase small wooden coins at various social organisations. These coins are then distributed as donations among beggars and/or homeless people, who can turn their tokens into food or shelter at designated social organisations. After that, all the coins will be distributed again, enabling voluntary public support for private persons and organisations. According to the initiators of the Cat Coin project, Cat Coins are less humiliating than giving money to needy people, and the money will be turned into

goods and reasonable services. For the programme's opposition, Cat Coin is another example of patriarchal supporting schemes, where supports are strictly tied to in-kind services. Furthermore, this indirect form of support may incentivise the public to distribute Cat Coins instead of cash, thereby constraining recipients' autonomy in determining how to use the aid and ultimately 'interfering with the freedom and opportunities of individuals' (Pérez-Muñoz, 2018: 923). However, for many social workers, the Cat Coin project is the only way to establish a relationship between destitute Roma and their institutions. After the Roma go to the designated organisations for food, clothes and shelter with their coins, social workers can do 'more' for these people, including counselling, empowerment and advocacy, besides the ordinary physical supports (in terms of food, shelter and clothes) provided for the Cat Coins.

We experienced deviating cantonal responses to the vulnerabilities of destitute Eastern European Roma migrants in the German- and the French-speaking parts of Switzerland. In the north-western, German-speaking cantons like Zürich and Basel, we met stricter statutory responses compared to the French-speaking Vaud and Geneva. Basel, Bern and Zürich introduced strict begging bans and limited the access of undocumented Roma to the cantonal structures. The Roma were excluded from the system of social assistance and the night shelters. They were often punished by the police and expelled, even if they stayed in the cantons legally as EU tourists. In doing so, the authorities used a loophole in Swiss migration law, namely that all tourists must provide enough money to sustain themselves in Switzerland, and if people do not have enough money, they can be expelled within the 90-day legal residence, even with an EU passport.

In Geneva and Lausanne, we met more supportive regimes. Around half of the mobile Roma had access to temporary shelters, while this proportion was less than 10 per cent in the northern cantons. In these French-speaking cantons, NGOs supporting homeless people were more independent from political regulations compared to the northern cantons. They relied more on private and public donations, while north-western NGOs relied heavily on cantonal subventions. This independence enabled them to support needy people, such as homeless people, rough sleepers and undocumented Eastern European Roma beggars, which cantonal authorities would rather get rid of.

## Conclusions

Swiss social workers supporting Eastern European Roma migrants face multiple challenges, such as growing political pressure to reject support for the Roma, as well as the institutionalisation of this political stance, which perpetuates discriminatory practices towards their clientele. In addition, they must deal with language barriers, mistrust and intercultural obstacles that complicate their daily work with Roma migrants. These political, institutional and interpersonal barriers significantly hinder the effectiveness of comprehensive social support.

Social advocacy provided by independent Swiss NGOs, such as Contact Points for Undocumented Migrants in Basel and Zürich, and their social workers can challenge discriminatory cantonal and communal policies and support the creation of inclusive services and spaces for Roma migrants to access without fear of rejection. These alternative spaces and services can empower Roma through building trust and fostering solidarity with critical social workers.

Our research results emphasise the urgent need for an ethically sensitive social work perspective in Switzerland that simultaneously considers the special needs of the Roma and other ethnic groups, fights institutional biases, and addresses systemic discrimination. To achieve this goal, it is essential to sensitise practical social workers through further education and the continuous development of graduate and post-graduate curricula. This education should include theoretical knowledge, such as intersectionality, and methodological skills like community work with minority ethnic groups. Currently, Swiss social workers receive limited knowledge about the Roma and their special needs. While subjects like international social work or critical social work occasionally touch upon information about the Roma, a comprehensive approach to this highly vulnerable group is mostly missing.

Our field observations and expert interviews have highlighted that effective social interventions can be implemented through multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary services at multiple administrative levels (federation, cantons, communes and NGOs) and through cooperation between medical, social and administrative stakeholders. Creating this socio-political environment would provide social professionals with a working area where their daily activities are not limited to satisfying the basic biological needs of their clientele but incorporate comprehensive solutions with proper legal guarantees, such as regarding the deportability of their clients. At this political level of cities and cantons, critical social workers can facilitate structural changes and support social justice within broader political frameworks, including public sensitisation towards migrating Roma. Innovative and sustainable projects, like the novel City Card programme in Zürich, can serve as a good starting point in this direction. These initiatives demonstrate the potential for collaboration between various stakeholders and the development of inclusive solutions to address the complex needs of vulnerable populations like the Roma.

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**Funding**
This work was supported by the Swiss Centre of Expertise in Life-Course Research (NCCR LIVES).

**Contributor statement**
ZT and MM prepared the initial and subsequent drafts of the manuscript, incorporating comments from MD and SR. ZT and MM defined the initial study design and organised the data for the Roma. The final study was developed by ZT and MM, based on the initial analytical framework elaborated by ZT, MD and SR. ZT and MM conducted the data analysis and interpretation, with contributions from SR and MD.

**Research ethics statement**
Ethical approval was not sought for the present study because the research project, including the data collected and processed, was not subject to compulsory ethical authorisation under Swiss or international law. The researchers adhered to the recommendations of

the Swiss Association of Research Ethics Committees, as well as to the ethical guidelines of their respective universities and the funding body, the NCCR. Permission to conduct the interviews was obtained from all participants, who were fully informed about the purpose of the research and how their responses would be used and stored.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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