Homelessness in Switzerland: From a Blind Spot to New Approaches in Research and Practice
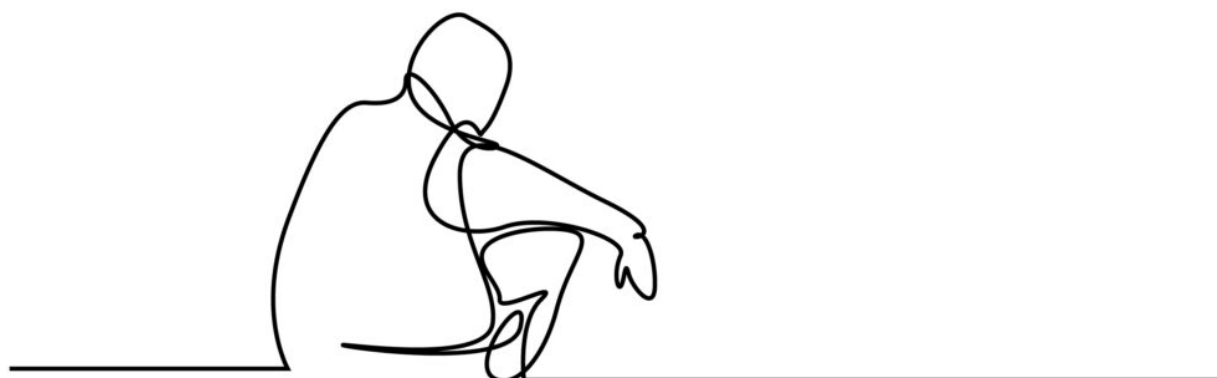
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*This is part of our special feature, **Homelessness and Poverty in Europe**.*

Mentioning poverty in a rich country such as Switzerland is sure to incite reactions of irritation and astonishment. Therefore, to address homelessness—one of the most extreme forms of poverty—and be taken seriously in public and political discussions, it is necessary to produce factual evidence. However, until a few years ago, there were no data on homelessness in Switzerland, and homelessness was hardly researched there. Homelessness did not rank high on the social policy agenda or in poverty research either. Thus, this article explains how social scientists have approached the topic of homelessness historically and what sociopolitical implications can be derived from this dearth of research for current studies on the topic.

In spite of the dearth of information about housing needs or homelessness, the issue of affordable housing has been politicized for more than four decades in Switzerland, and scholars have demonstrated that housing policy has indeed been part of the Swiss political discourse (Drilling et al. 2021). Such studies have also shown that homelessness has been considered a possible and avoidable consequence of inadequate housing

provisions and that recommendations for housing policy regulations that limit housing insecurity have been made. Overall, however, social policy has not focused enough on homelessness. Moreover, parliamentary debates have characterized homelessness as the individual fate of people experiencing homelessness, rather than as a socioeconomic problem to be addressed more generally. The tendency to individualize problematic situations has led to a primary focus on the drug addiction and mental illness of individuals rather than on social and structural poverty trajectories. In this sense, the political discourse has oscillated between an account of the failure of the housing market and the individual fates and poor personal choices of those who have become homeless (Drilling et al. 2021, 12). One explanation for the individualization of social problems such as homelessness may lie in the increasing individualization of western societies (Beck 1983). In societies that emphasize liberal values and personal freedom, success and failure are more strongly blamed on the individual.

Evolution of research on homelessness in Switzerland

When research on poverty in Switzerland began at the national level in the late 1980s, (Buhmann 1988; Leu et al. 1997), scholars defined poverty primarily in relation to the overall level of personal wealth in Switzerland. These studies mainly used a resource-based conceptualization of poverty, using personal income as the central resource. Homelessness, as a phenomenon exemplifying absolute and extreme poverty, was excluded from consideration when defining relative poverty. The few studies that conceived of poverty from the perspective of a broader understanding, i.e. an understanding of poverty based on people's living situations, included an assessment of people's material situation, education level, and working status; they also considered the problem of precarious housing (Leu et al. 1997); but they did not address homelessness per se, i.e., the living situation of those people living on the streets or in public spaces, without a shelter that could be defined as living quarters.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that until recently, studies of homelessness in Switzerland have been qualitative, single-case studies or medical-pathological or regional studies. Qualitative work on the topic has examined the lifeworld, biographies, milieus, or sociospatial settings of individual homeless people (Mauron 1995; Staub 2002; Christinaz 2007; Bittel 2009; Wyss 2011). Medical-pathological studies conducted in Switzerland have focused on medical and psychological issues and found strong correlations between substance dependence and mental illness among people experiencing homelessness (Lauber et al. 2005, 2006; Briner et al. 2017). However, the generalization of these results has been limited because they are based on studies including only selective groups of homeless people, i.e., those in medical (mental health) or therapeutic facilities. Until a few years ago, quantitative studies on the extent of homelessness in Switzerland had been conducted at the regional scale and mainly based on municipal officials' estimates of social services provided. For example, the study by Egli (2001), which focused on the Basel region, identified a total of 125 homeless people through the use of surveys and document analysis. Results revealed that there were 72 fewer homeless people in the

region in 2001, compared to an earlier estimation from 1989; at that time, 197 homeless people had been identified in the Basel region (ibid. 193). However, it is not possible to answer clearly whether homelessness in Basel actually decreased during that time, since there has been no consensus in the understanding of homelessness across the institutions providing information; moreover, the different methodological approaches also limit comparability.

Since 2017, scholars have addressed the insufficiency in research on the extent and structure of homelessness in Switzerland. Between 2016 and 2021, the EU COST Action CA 15218 "Measuring Homelessness in Europe" was constituted as a European network focusing on homelessness research. Under that umbrella, a scientific project was elaborated to collect data in the city of Basel through face-to-face interviews with service users such as people experiencing homelessness (Drilling et al. 2019). Users were surveyed to find out how many people were homeless in Basel at that time, what housing situations people were in, how long-term homelessness had persisted, and what professionals needed to better support homeless people and foster greater stability. The results of the survey allowed for the identification of approximately 100 homeless people in the city at the time of the survey (November 2018). The results showed that 61 percent of the people surveyed lived on the streets or in other types of public spaces; moreover, 24 percent of the respondents who had been using night shelters had been homeless for more than one year. Based on the results about the tight relationship between homelessness and the lack of social housing, recommendations were made about changing how spots were allocated in emergency shelters, and a "Housing-First" strategy was developed. Originally developed in New York in the 1990s (Tsemberis 2010), the Housing First approach seeks to provide permanent housing to the homeless as quickly as possible without preconditions such as abstinence from drugs.

Among the 469 respondents, a total of 206 were categorized as roofless or houseless or facing insecure or inadequate housing. The European typology of homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS) was developed by the European Federation of National Associations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA 2023). It is based on the material, legal, and social components of housing.

Having a home can be understood as: having an adequate dwelling (or space) over which a person and his/her family can exercise exclusive possession (physical domain); being able to maintain privacy and enjoy relations (social domain) and having a legal title to occupation (legal domain).

This definition has led to the four main concepts: rooflessness, houselessness, insecure housing, and inadequate housing, all of which can be used to indicate the absence of a home (FEANTSA 2023).

First national homelessness survey in Switzerland

The study was based on a quantitative face-to-face survey of 1,182 people over 18 years-old in eight of the largest cities in Switzerland. Eighty percent of the respondents had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. The survey was conducted in 62 facilities (e.g., night shelters, day centers for the homeless, or soup kitchen) in Zurich, Geneva, Basel, Bern, Lausanne, Lucerne, St. Gallen, and Lugano. A total of 543 respondents (45.9 percent of all respondents) were homeless at the time of the survey, 209 (38.5 percent) were sleeping outside, and 334 (61.5 percent) were considered homeless because they were staying at an emergency shelter on the day of the survey.

Across all eight cities, there were significantly more men than women among the homeless population. Of the 534 individuals who provided information about their gender, 443 were men (83 percent) and 91 were women (17 percent). The proportion of homeless women was thus significantly lower compared to the overall proportion of women in the general population of Switzerland, where women make up approximately half of the population. This finding confirms numbers generated in other countries that point to homelessness as a phenomenon affecting mainly men. The fact that there are relatively more homeless men than women may be the result of the accumulation of stressful factors that occur more frequently among men (FEANTSA 2014, 62). Women often avoid drawing on existing services, for example out of shame or because the support is not tailored to their needs. Thus, women often cope with their housing need informally, for example by staying overnight with acquaintances or entering into forced partnerships (for Germany, see Gerull 2006; for Ireland, see Mayock et al. 2016).

Notably, 61 percent of the 543 homeless respondents surveyed (representing 332 people) reported having no official residence status and being considered *sans-papiers*. From a European perspective, the high proportion of homeless people without valid residency documentation is specific to Switzerland. Thus, the results of the study is indicative of a socio-legal crisis. A cluster analysis showed that undocumented migrants are excluded from key dimensions of everyday life, such as employment, housing, access to public space, and social contacts (Dittmann et al. 2021). Furthermore, the study indicated that when civil rights are forfeited or massively restricted by the lack of a residence title, the help provided by state services is reduced to survival assistance, which in the case of the *sans-papiers* depends primarily on charity, such as that provided by civil society and private aid organizations (e.g., Caritas). This situation does not provide any viable option out of poverty and homelessness for this population. Therefore, solving the problem of expired residency status and illegal stays constitutes one main solution that could improve the precarious living conditions of homeless *sans-papiers* in Switzerland (Dittmann et al. 2022, 98).

Additionally, this national-scale study was pioneering in showing that homeless people greatly distrust the welfare system. In fact, only 11.4 percent of the 543 homeless respondents were registered to receive social assistance, and 64 percent believed that social assistance could not help them find housing. The low rate of utilization of social assistance is also due to the fact that a great proportion of individuals do not have valid

residence documents. In fact, these people must expect to have to leave the country at some point. But even among those with valid residence papers, a disproportionate number refuse support from the state. Shame, debt, possible responsibility toward children, and unreasonable demands (such as having to fill out documents) make it difficult for the homeless to access social assistance. Thus, increasing the number of people drawing from welfare and emergency assistance is another important solution to combat homelessness.

The study also revealed that the highest number of homeless people is found in the French speaking region of Switzerland, in particular in Geneva and Lausanne. In Geneva, for every 100,000 inhabitants (aged 18 and over), 210 people are homeless, while in Lausanne that figure is 150. At least two explanations come to mind to explain the variations in the rate on homelessness across the eight cities included in the survey. First, there are regional differences in poverty and differences in the rate of failed migration integration, which are all causes of homelessness. Second, people experiencing homelessness tend to stay in regions and cities where it is easier for them to access municipal assistance services.

Based on surveys in eight Swiss cities and figures on the number of people in shelters in all of Switzerland, as well as on a community survey (Drilling 2022), three projections models were built to estimate the extent of homelessness in Switzerland. Estimates showed that there were between 918 and 2057 homeless people on any given day in December 2020. Although comparisons with the situation in other countries were made, they were limited; however, the data produced suggest that the figures on homelessness in Switzerland are rather low compared to the overall European context. The study reviewed here confirmed findings made in other countries on the relationship between homelessness and poverty and migration. In addition, the study indicates that health problems, the lack of medical care, and addiction should be considered when describing and explaining homelessness and in discussions about possible solutions. While poor physical health has not been proven to be the dominant factor leading to homelessness; factors such as the availability of social and educational resources have become particularly important. Indeed, the study has shown that access to such resources remains significantly lower among the homeless population compared to people experiencing poverty while living in secure housing.

Impact of research on policy design and professional action

In recent years, research on homelessness in Switzerland has had a positive impact on social policy and has led to concrete action. In the canton of Basel-Stadt, for example, the right to housing has been written into the cantonal constitution, and the canton has established a housing foundation, set up a fund to finance cooperative housing, expanded social welfare assistance, put a Housing First model into practice, decided on affordable new construction in new housing sites, and established a coordination office tasked with addressing precarious housing conditions. Homelessness research in

Switzerland has also been a good example of successful European collaborative research (through the COST Action described above). Through international support, empirically validated figures on the extent of homelessness in Switzerland could be generated. Ultimately, this research has led to increased awareness about homelessness, and the study showed that when the regional context is taken into account, as in the case of the canton of Basel-Stadt, homelessness can be better prevented or tackled.

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[1] Switzerland is a federal state, which means that state powers are divided between the Confederation, the cantons, and the communes. Each entity has its own tasks. "Canton" is the term used to each of the 26 states comprising the Swiss Confederation. Each canton has its own constitution, legislature, executive, police, and courts. Similar to the Confederation, a directorial system of government is used by the cantons.

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