Homeless EU Migrants in Zürich: Social Vulnerabilities and Access to Support Services

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Abstract_ *Each year, thousands of destitute individuals from various European countries migrate to Switzerland in search of a better life. Zürich, as the country's largest city, is particularly impacted by this movement, with many migrants experiencing homelessness and relying on social support services. On behalf of the Zürich City Social Department, researchers at the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland conducted a qualitative study to explore the migration-related motivations, housing and working conditions, coping strategies, and information sources of these migrants. The study involved 21 semi-structured interviews with European migrants living in homelessness in Zürich, analysed using qualitative content analysis. The findings reveal that key migration drivers include poverty, social insecurity in the home countries, and the influence of acquaintances with prior experience in Switzerland. All participants had experienced homelessness in Zürich, with most sleeping rough. Despite expressing a desire to work, respondents faced significant labour market barriers such as insufficient qualifications, limited language skills, and lack of experience. Support from social workers was limited, often impeded by language barriers and intercultural challenges. The research study concludes with a discussion of the political implications for enhancing services for European homeless migrants in Zürich.*

Keywords_ *Homelessness, Migration, Destitution, Zürich, Switzerland*

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Introduction

Similar to other economically developed Western European countries, homelessness in Switzerland is predominantly an urban phenomenon. It represents a living condition that is often intertwined with absolute poverty, psychiatric disorders, substance use, and long-term unemployment (Drilling et al., 2021). Housing is not defined as a basic human right in either the Swiss Federal Constitution (*Bundesverfassung*) or the cantonal constitutions and social legislation. Homeless individuals, therefore, live on the margins of Swiss society and are frequently among those most affected by societal changes and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many homelessness services were temporarily closed, and numerous individuals were left without adequate social support (Roduit et al. 2022).

Responsibility for homelessness services in Switzerland lies primarily with cities and cantons; there are no federal organizations or comprehensive national strategies directly addressing homelessness. The Swiss Federal Housing Office (*Bundesamt für Wohnungswesen*) addresses homelessness only indirectly, mainly within the broader framework of housing poverty. In the absence of a federal homelessness strategy or designated national institutions, responsibility for addressing homelessness remains with social, health, and police services at the cantonal and municipal levels. Smaller local communities, in particular, often overlook homelessness, resulting in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and church-based organizations assuming primary responsibility for service provision. While larger cities such as Zürich and Geneva operate their own shelters and soup kitchens, the majority of homelessness services—even in major urban centres—are provided by NGOs and faith-based organizations. As these organizations are largely financed by municipalities and cantons, public involvement in homelessness care often takes the form of indirect service provision through civil society. The largest nationwide organizations supporting homeless people include Caritas Switzerland, Diakonie, and the Salvation Army. Local service providers, such as Pfarrer Sieber and the City Mission in Zürich, are also key actors in homelessness support.

As with many areas of Swiss social policy, the organization of social support and the regulation of homelessness—including local rules governing street music, begging, and the use of public space—fall under cantonal and municipal jurisdiction. Within these regulatory frameworks, homelessness is frequently addressed not only as a social issue but also as a matter of public order and policing (Christen and Kurt, 2021).

The first nationwide homelessness count, conducted by Dittmann et al. (2022), identified 543 homeless individuals in Switzerland. Surveys were carried out with 1 182 people in the eight largest Swiss cities, with the involvement of 62 homelessness organisations. Individuals were considered homeless at the time of data collection if

they were rough sleepers or spent the night in homeless shelters (ETHOS categories 1 and 2). Homeless respondents completed a longer questionnaire on their living conditions, whereas for all other participants, only basic sociodemographic information was collected. Based on the main sociodemographic characteristics, 83% of the respondents were men, with an average age of 40 years; additionally, 83% did not hold Swiss citizenship. The highest number of homeless individuals was recorded in Geneva (359 people), followed by Lausanne (170 people).

In Zürich, Switzerland's largest city, 106 homeless individuals were identified within homelessness services such as shelters, soup kitchens, and day centres, representing the third-highest number among Swiss cities. Of these, 24 reported spending nights in public spaces, while 82 regularly stayed in night shelters. This means that approximately one quarter (22.6%) of respondents in Zürich were rough sleepers, a proportion closely aligned with the Swiss national average of 25.9%. Compared with other major European cities, the prevalence of homelessness in Zürich is relatively low, with only 29 homeless persons per 100 000 inhabitants (Dittmann et al., 2022).

However, as Dittmann and his colleagues also state in their report, the actual number of homeless people is likely much higher than this one-night count suggests, as only individuals staying in homelessness service organizations were included. Individuals sleeping rough in public spaces or abandoned buildings were excluded from the study. A significant portion of this hidden homeless group consists of undocumented migrants, who are often barred from mainstream homelessness services due to a lack of residence permits (Temesvary et al., 2023). Like the Swiss national pattern, more than 80% of Zürich's homeless population were born abroad, and approximately 40% lacked valid Swiss residence documents (Dittmann et al., 2022). This creates insecurity regarding their legal status and restricts their access to most city-run homelessness services, which generally require residence permits. As a result, undocumented homeless individuals can only access limited support from a few NGOs providing low-threshold social services. Notably, the only night shelter available for undocumented people operates only in winter and limits stays to two weeks. Several soup kitchens and daycare services run by NGOs and churches also provide some support, but many undocumented homeless people resort to sleeping in public spaces due to the lack of institutional options (Temesvary et al., 2023).

The increase in homeless migrants from Eastern Europe and the Balkans followed the EU's expansion to these regions (Epple and Schär; 2015; Coulon et al., 2015). EU and Schengen membership for Bulgaria and Romania—the poorest EU countries—facilitates easy travel to Switzerland. According to the EU-Switzerland treaty on free movement, Switzerland cannot restrict entry or stay for destitute

migrants from EU countries for up to 90 days as tourists. However, beyond basic emergency services, EU tourists are generally not eligible for Swiss welfare structures. If migrants stay longer than 90 days, they must obtain residence permits, which are often denied without employment or rental contracts. (Christensen and Kurt, 2021) Additionally, under the Foreign Nationals and Integration Act (FNIA), Swiss cantons may require EU migrants to demonstrate that they have sufficient financial means to support themselves while residing in Switzerland; otherwise, they may face expulsion.

Based on the statistics of Dittmann et al (2022, p.55), one-fourth (24%) of non-Swiss homeless people in Zürich come from Eastern Europe, including the Balkans, followed by Western Europe (22%) and Africa (22%). European homeless migrants in Switzerland form a diverse group in terms of gender, ethnicity, and age. Roma people are notably overrepresented among destitute European migrants (Coulon et al. 2015, Colombo et al. 2016). A particularly large number of Roma appear among Eastern European poverty migrants: 63% of the Eastern European migrants who used Swiss homelessness services were Roma (Temesvary et al. 2023). While men are strongly overrepresented compared to women in general, the proportion of women among European homeless migrants (26.5%) is higher than in the overall Swiss homeless population (17%). Regarding age, European homeless migrants (average age 34) are younger than their Swiss counterparts (40), as destitute older individuals with poor health are often unable to leave their home countries. (Dittmann et al., 2022; Temesvary et al., 2023).

Destitute European migrants are often labelled as “welfare tourists,” “EU migrants,” “poverty migrants,” or “guest workers” in both Swiss and international political discourse (Scholten and van Ostaijen, 2018; Gaisbauer et al., 2019; Raithelhuber, 2019). Most Swiss cantons try to restrict or quickly expel mobile destitute people such as beggars, sex workers, garbage collectors, and rough sleepers, but EU free movement laws complicate these efforts. For example, in 2021, the city of Geneva fined and expelled a Romanian Roma beggar, but the European Court of Human Rights ruled the expulsion violated EU law and ordered compensation. Since then, Swiss cantons have been more cautious with expulsions and fines, exploring alternative measures like the “Berner Model,” which requires proof of sufficient funds for self-support as EU tourists or results in fines and possible expulsion.

In Zürich, homelessness organizations attempt to mitigate the social vulnerabilities of European homeless migrants with various services, though success is limited, often maintaining only the status quo. Many vulnerabilities—such as poor education and health—preceded migration and accumulated over years or decades in the countries of origin. Limited resources, administrative and legal obstacles, and

language barriers between staff and clients further complicate support efforts. Additionally, a lack of trust in social institutions among migrants poses significant challenges for effective social work (Temesvary et al., 2023).

This study aims to scrutinize the migration-related motivations, housing and employment-related vulnerabilities, and future perspectives of mobile European homeless people in Zürich. It further seeks to understand their reasons for staying in Zürich and to capture their perspectives and information channels regarding available assistance services.

Methods

Researchers from the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW) conducted 21 semi-structured qualitative interviews with European homeless migrants in shelters, soup kitchens, and day-care facilities in Zürich between November 2024 and January 2025. The interviews were conducted in German, English, French, Hungarian, and Romanian. All interviews were transcribed and subsequently analysed using the method of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015) and processed with the software *Atlas.ti,* using main categories such as the (1) reasons for migration, (2) housing conditions, (3) labour market participation, (4) coping strategies, (5) future perspectives, and (6) the sources of information. Codes were then organized under these previously created categories. The research focus and main analytical categories were defined in consultation with the City Social Department and reflect the areas that social workers and managers of the city homelessness services identified as most relevant for collecting information to support the further development of structures.

Sampling was conducted using the snowball method (Flick, 2017), with some respondents recommended by social workers who were familiar with their biographies and deemed them suitable for the study. The duration of the interviews varied between 37 and 84 minutes. Some interviews were conducted across multiple locations and at different times. In some cases, interviews began in the morning at a soup kitchen and concluded later that night at a shelter. Based on the agreement with the City Social Department, we interviewed homeless migrants who met the following criteria: (1) they were citizens of a European Union country, (2) they had experience with homelessness in Zürich, and (3) they were either currently active in the Swiss labour market or had made efforts to find work in Zürich. We selected only individuals with EU citizenship, as their eligibility for access to the Swiss labour market and to social and medical services differs significantly from that of migrants from non-EU countries. The two participants, originally from Kosovo, also held EU citizenship in other countries. We classified individuals as homeless according to

the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) (FEANTSA 2017). The City Social Department considered work participation or work-related efforts an important selection criterion, as it aimed to identify opportunities for integrating the target group into the labour market. We anonymized all interviewees after data collection, avoided interviewing when social workers or other clients were present, obtained written or verbal consent before interviews, and securely stored all materials—including audio recordings and transcripts—on protected university servers.

The research design—including the interview guides and data collection procedures—was developed in accordance with the ethical guidelines of *Swissethics*, the national ethics board for research in Switzerland. The study also followed the standards set by *Avenir Social* (Swiss Association of Social Workers) and the ethical recommendations of the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland. For the publication of our qualitative findings, we adhered to the SRQR (Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research) and followed the accompanying reporting checklist (O`Brien et al., 2014).

Results

Socio-demographical Characteristics

The youngest respondent was 19 years old, and the oldest was 70 at the time of data collection. Among the respondents, there were 5 women and 16 men. The average age of the participants was 39 years. Regarding their countries of origin, 6 individuals came from Romania, 5 from Hungary, 2 from Germany, 2 from Kosovo, and one each from Italy, the United Kingdom, Poland, Croatia, Slovakia, and the Netherlands. In some cases, the current nationality did not correspond to the respondents' country of origin. For example, the respondent with British nationality was born in Brazil, the person holding an Italian passport was born in Tunisia, and the participant with Dutch nationality was born in Morocco.

Reasons for Migration

Initially, the interview guide addressed the respondents' motivations, aiming to understand which causes and events in their home countries had led them to Zürich. We were also interested in why they specifically chose Zürich and not another (Swiss) city when planning their migration. After several rounds of analysis, we assigned six codes to this category (reasons for migration): (1) poverty, (2) ambitions, (3) friends and family, (4) health, (5) conflicts and crises, and (6) housing problems/homelessness.

The respondents mainly cited two central factors: the influence of friends and family (13 persons) and the role of poverty and lack of prospects (12 persons) in their home countries as decisive for their migration-related decisions (see Figure 1). Under poverty, unemployment, very low wages, and general hopelessness in the countries of origin were often mentioned. We were particularly interested in the motivations of European homeless migrants who were already employed in their home countries but decided to migrate. Respondents came not only from Eastern Europe but also from Western Europe, who, despite working, could not secure their livelihood and lived as "working poor" in their home countries. One example is a young German nurse who was pushed out of the housing market in Dortmund due to high rents.

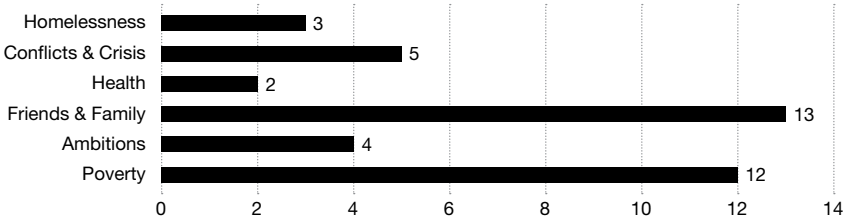
"I was poor, but I had a job as a caregiver in a nursing home. I couldn't afford an apartment in the city and didn't want to move back in with my mother." (Man, Germany, 28)

The role of friends and family was significant in migration decisions. This influence manifested itself on the one hand through friends, former colleagues, and family members already living in Zürich who "invited" the respondents. On the other hand, former migrants who reported positively about their life in Zürich after returning home also played a role. If the family in the home country lives in (financial) distress, often a family member is encouraged to emigrate to support their relatives from abroad.

"I really wanted to leave Croatia and live in Western Europe to work in the fashion industry. A friend from primary school was working in Switzerland, in Zürich. One time, when she was home, she told me about it, and I wanted to try it too – to live in Switzerland, earn money, and have a better life. She was working for a Swiss family as an au pair. When she had to return to Zagreb due to family reasons, she recommended me to the family to take over her position." (Woman, Croatia, 32)

The targeted use of Swiss social benefits and medical services was never mentioned as a motivation for migration in any of the interviews, which contradicts the popular theory of welfare tourism. Homelessness was primarily discussed in relation to poverty, while health was mentioned only twice as a motivation for migration—more as a "push factor" than a "pull factor," meaning that poor health contributed to migration rather than the prospect of using Swiss healthcare services. Under ambitions, we grouped concrete goals the respondents wanted to achieve in Zürich, such as completing a training program or gaining work experience. However, such specific goal-settings were rarely mentioned.

Figure 1. Most frequently mentioned reasons to migration (multiple responses possible, n=21)



Labour Market

Since participation in the labour market was a central focus of our study, we also asked participants about their qualifications, work experience in Switzerland and their home countries, the main obstacles they faced in finding suitable employment, and their previous efforts to secure a job in Zürich. Our findings showed that the vast majority of respondents had not completed any formal vocational training. Eleven out of 21 participants had no school qualifications or had dropped out of their studies for various reasons—most commonly due to poverty and the need to find work to support themselves and their families. Seven respondents had completed vocational training, for example, as bricklayers, electricians, seamstresses, or nurses.

Almost all individuals (six out of eight) who had obtained a school qualification and thus a professional credential in their home countries had either a job in Zürich or prior experience in the primary (open) labour market. Conversely, nearly all those who arrived in Zürich without qualifications were unable to find employment in Switzerland. This suggests that qualified and employable European destitute migrants can, in many cases, be integrated into the Swiss labour market relatively quickly and smoothly.

"A construction site is a construction site, no matter where. I work on the scaffolding, and I don't care whether I'm in Romania or in Switzerland – the only difference is that the wages are five times higher." (Man, Romania, 48)

Seasonality has a significant impact on employment opportunities, particularly for construction and agricultural workers. One man from Romania, for example, worked throughout the summer and into autumn on a construction site. His employment ended in the winter, and during that time, he was unable to find another position in the construction sector. He had to wait until spring to be rehired by the same company. As long as he had money, he stayed in a cheap hotel, but once his savings were exhausted, he became homeless and lived on the street. Age also

represents an added vulnerability for foreign workers. A trained bricklayer from Germany, for instance, had sent dozens of job applications since arriving in Switzerland but received no offers. At 59 years old, he is considered "too old" for the construction industry and is not hired despite his extensive experience.

"I sent out many applications. Twice, I managed to get something for a short time: two days on a construction site, but then I was sent away – I don't know why. Then seven days at a moving company, but after that, they just never got back to me." (Man, Germany, 59)

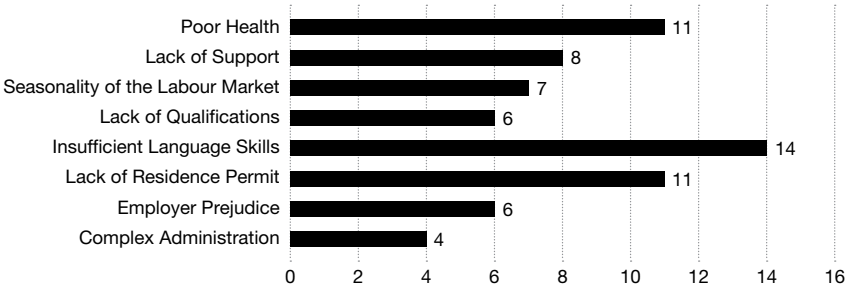
Another interviewee, already 70 years old, receives a small pension from his Eastern European home country and occasionally works as a cleaner in a church in Zürich. The Zürich labour market often lacks employment security. An injury or job loss can place individuals in a precarious situation—especially if they have only short-term employment and a temporary residence permit. Agencies and labour intermediaries can also play a role in supporting job seekers by bringing workers from other European countries directly to Switzerland to fill labour shortages. A young woman moved to Zürich directly after completing vocational school and, like many Eastern European women, initially worked as a child caregiver through an agency. Later, she found a position with a Swiss supermarket chain that matched her original training. Unfortunately, she had to quit due to conflicts with colleagues.

In addition to advanced age, low qualifications, and limited work experience, the respondents' health status also occasionally hindered their entry into the labour market. Half of the respondents (11 individuals) suffered from a chronic illness, a psychiatric disorder, or the consequences of an injury. Psychiatric conditions (either diagnosed or non-diagnosed) were particularly common among participants and significantly affected their daily lives and quality of life. Five young men were diagnosed with schizophrenia in their home countries but did not receive adequate psychiatric treatment in Zürich. While individuals with injuries and physical illnesses are generally treated relatively effectively within the Swiss healthcare system, the lack of sufficient psychiatric care represents a major gap in the available support services.

Beyond the formal or open labour market, some individuals found income through informal or illegal work. Among the respondents, there were beggars, sex workers, and street musicians who operated in the grey or half-legal zone of the labour market. One young man from Italy, for example, sold mobile phones on the street that he had purchased cheaply in Italy, earning a small income during his first months in Zürich. According to the respondents, the main barriers to integration into the labour market were: insufficient language skills, prejudice from employers against Roma and/or Eastern Europeans, seasonality of the job market, lack of qualifications, absence of a residence permit, and the complexity of the Swiss bureaucracy (see Figure 2).

Fourteen respondents named language barriers as the main reason for their difficulties in finding work. They reported having trouble writing a résumé or participating in a job interview in German. The lack of a residence permit was also a major hurdle, as employers often require a valid permit before hiring. Eight participants mentioned that, despite needing support, they had not received any assistance from Swiss aid organizations in finding work.

Figure 2. Most common obstacles in the job search (multiple responses possible, n=21)



The majority of respondents (17 individuals) had already made concrete efforts to find a job on the Swiss labour market. Some received professional support from social services, while others sent their résumés directly to employers on their own. Most of the job searches were conducted online via job portals, through offers from aid organizations, or through informal exchanges with peers.

Housing and Homelessness

At the time of the interviews, all participants were living in precarious housing conditions (see Figure 3). Since most of the interviews were conducted in homeless shelters, all respondents had experience with various forms of homelessness, and many were either staying in emergency shelters or sleeping in public spaces. Street homelessness is a particularly severe form of homelessness, yet half of the respondents (11 individuals) regularly slept on the street. The high number of street homeless individuals can be explained by the limited number of places in emergency shelters, which are also available to foreign homeless persons. In rare cases, sleeping on the street is a personal choice. Individuals who theoretically have access to emergency shelters but choose not to use them often reported negative experiences—such as theft, violence, or interpersonal conflicts encountered in these facilities. Train stations sometimes offer a temporary retreat from the street, where people can warm up for a short time before being asked to leave by security personnel.

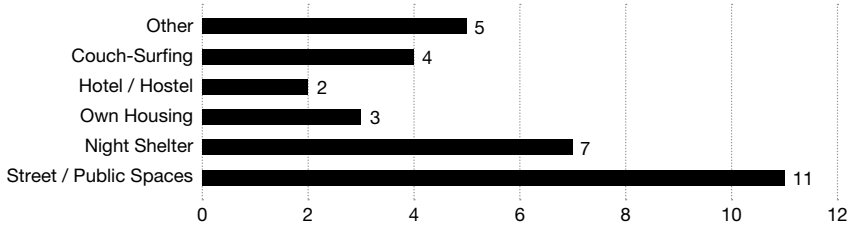
"I sleep at the main train station, where homeless people are tolerated by security staff. I sleep in the heated waiting room, but only 2–3 hours per night. That's why I'm tired and exhausted all day." (Man, Italy, 19)

Some participants reported repeated harassment by the police and therefore tried to hide—for example, behind the old city wall or in a forested area. This invisibility increases the risk of hypothermia and frostbite, and these individuals often remain out of reach for social workers. Among the homeless respondents were also individuals who had been pushed out of their apartments due to the tense housing market in Zürich and ended up on the streets after losing their accommodation. Two young men, for instance, could no longer afford their apartments after renovations led to increased rent.

"I lost my apartment in December 2024 due to renovations. (…) We were simply put out on the street. Now I sleep in emergency shelters like this one." (Man, United Kingdom, 28)

A combination of sleeping on the street and using emergency shelters or other temporary accommodations (e.g., hotels, couch surfing) is quite common among mobile European homeless individuals. We asked the participants where they had spent their nights during the past month. The results show that, in addition to street homelessness, many also use available emergency shelters. However, they are allowed to stay there only for a limited period, and outside operating hours, they must find alternative accommodations. As alternative solutions to night shelters, two homeless women, for example, stayed in shelters that allow longer stays, while Romanian construction workers were living in a low-cost hotel, using their savings until they could start a new job in the spring — a job that would include accommodation. Furthermore, one woman was living in a container placed in the courtyard of a private home, where she worked as a domestic helper.

Figure 3. Housing conditions in the past month (multiple responses possible, n=21)



We also asked about participants' housing situations in their countries of origin, and only 4 out of 21 had experienced homelessness there. However, all respondents had struggled with homelessness in Zürich. Although almost all lived in poverty

in their home countries, they had access to relatively stable housing that provided a sense of security. From this perspective, migration did not lead to an improvement in their objective housing conditions.

Coping Mechanisms and Received Assistance

Under the main category "coping strategies," we asked participants about their sources of income and how they manage to survive in Zürich. Our focus was particularly on alternative survival strategies such as begging, street music, or petty criminal activities. We also explored which types of support the respondents receive from Zürich-based aid organizations and how these services contribute to improving their living conditions. Based on our interview data, many respondents followed a relatively strict daily routine, largely determined by the opening hours and availability of homeless shelters, where they could eat, sleep, and warm up during the day. Some individuals never—or only occasionally—made use of Zürich's homeless services and had instead developed an alternative, nature-based survival strategy: they live in tents in the forest, sleep there, and wash themselves in the river.

Several participants reported that they need to hide in order to avoid being expelled from the city. For this reason, they do not access social or medical services and avoid busy public spaces to remain unnoticed. Other mobile homeless people were less cautious and saw their EU passports as a key guarantee for staying in Switzerland long-term. One common strategy involved collecting train tickets from travellers arriving from their home countries at Zürich's main station to "prove" they have only just arrived in Switzerland within the past week.

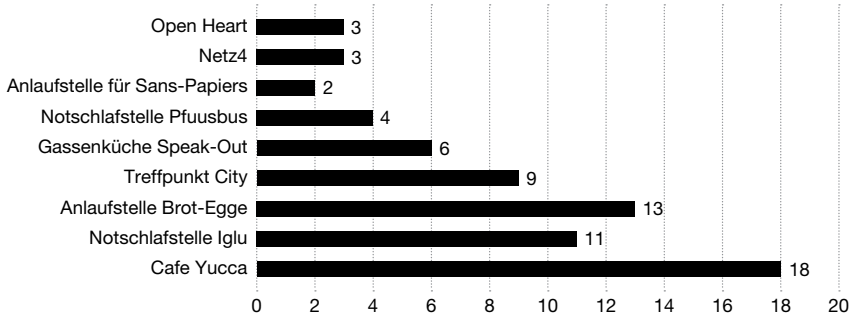
Respondents reported having very limited contact with Swiss nationals, and their social networks mostly consisted of other homeless people. Occasionally, they received support from this community, helping one another in job searches or sharing information about available aid services. Social workers and their organizations often represented the only connection to Swiss society.

Many respondents stated that they had received little or no support from social services in Zürich. Some also expressed dissatisfaction with the services and found them inadequate. These statements were at times contradictory, as several interviews took place while the respondents were eating, washing, or preparing to sleep at homeless organizations. Some interviewees voiced strong criticism of the city's only emergency shelter specifically for homeless migrants. According to some, this shelter was too noisy and overcrowded; there were reports of thefts and fights that disturbed their sleep. However, this criticism seemed somewhat vague, as during our own visit, this shelter appeared particularly clean, well-organized, and equipped with lockable storage compartments.

"The social workers don't help me. They listen to me, but they don't help at all. There are always favourite clients who get support, and others who receive nothing. I got some clothes, a bit of money, and a ticket to Hungary, but no one here wants to really listen to me." (Man, Hungary, 30)

A functional and combined use of various support services—including soup kitchens, emergency shelters, daytime drop-in centres, and food distribution points—was common among the participants. Visiting these facilities became part of their daily routine, which was adjusted according to the time of day, season, and individual needs. According to the interviews, nearly all respondents (18 out of 21) regularly visited *Café Yucca* (a popular soup-kitchen in the centre of Zürich), citing its easy, central accessibility and the low-threshold nature of its support. The *Iglu* emergency shelter for mobile homeless people (11 individuals), the *Brot-Egge* drop-in centre (13 individuals), and *Treffpunkt City* (9 individuals) were also frequently mentioned as places where participants spent time (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Facilities visited by the participants (Multiple answers possible, n=21)



Sources of Information

We asked the interviewees how they obtained information about support services in Zürich and received very different accounts of the available options. Some participants reported that they simply walked through the streets, came across a facility by chance that could help them, and walked in. However, the primary source of information was the peer group—that is, other poverty migrants, homeless people, or beggars who were already familiar with the services and had had positive experiences with them (see Figure 5). These informal exchanges primarily took place in direct settings such as the dining rooms of emergency shelters, over a cup of coffee in day centres, or on a bench at the train station—settings also observed by the researchers during data collection. Older and more experienced homeless migrants often acted as mentors, introducing younger people to the world of home-

lessness care and job searching in Zürich. They shared their experiences, gave valuable advice, and helped younger people navigate the complex system of support services and the labour market.

"First, I went to a street cafe and asked the other homeless people as well as the staff where else I could eat and sleep. It's really quite simple like that. It was 15 years ago, and ever since, I have been supporting younger people arriving in the city." (Man, Hungary, 70)

Another important source of information was the staff of social organizations. However, communication with social workers and counsellors was often difficult due to language barriers and the high workload of the staff. This was observed by the researchers, for example, in emergency shelters and drop-in centres: staff members had so many urgent tasks (e.g., organizing dining areas, distributing food, admitting guests, receiving donations, and handling administration) that they had little time left for individual counselling. Multilingual information brochures were also mentioned as sources of information, but were less popular than the organizations' websites.

Information and communication technologies were also important resources for homeless migrants. All participants owned a mobile phone or a laptop that allowed them to access the internet. Many organizations provided internet access for those without a personal subscription. For job searching, the participants often used typical Swiss platforms or turned to social media such as Facebook, which was also frequently used for finding jobs. Among younger people, ChatGPT was also mentioned as an important source of information when looking for places to sleep or eat in Zürich.

"I received information about support services through ChatGPT. I ask my questions, and the AI answers them immediately. I also use ChatGPT for translations." (Man, Italy, 19)

Figure 5. Sources of Information about Support Services (multiple responses possible, n=21)



Future Perspectives

Regarding future perspectives, we wanted to know whether the respondents could imagine their future in Zürich, in their home countries, or elsewhere. The clear majority (13 people) wish to stay in Zürich and build a stable future there. However, the scenarios mentioned were often vague and lacked concrete goals, instead expressing general desires for work, a family, and a home. For several people, returning to their home countries was not an option, as they perceived it as a failure and proof that they could not achieve their goals and plans in Switzerland.

"I don't want to return to Slovakia; it would be a defeat for me if I couldn't find my place in Switzerland." (Man, Slovakia, 55)

Sometimes, they feared the shame in front of their families, especially if the family had financed their journey. Other respondents reported that they want to travel to another country. Many of them mentioned Germany and France, as well as the USA or Canada, as possible destinations. Almost all participants excluded returning home or considered it only possible at a later time, for example, at retirement age.

"One day I might return to Romania, maybe only when I am old. Until then, I want to live a somewhat better life than I could in Romania." (Man, Romania, 33)

Conclusions

According to the respondents, poverty and social insecurity in their countries of origin are the primary reasons for migration. In Switzerland, certain cantonal social policies—such as severely restricted access to welfare services—are deliberately designed to prioritize assistance for the local poor and to deter so-called "poverty migrants," including beggars, street musicians, and homeless individuals (Christen and Kurt, 2021; Temesvary et al., 2023). Social legislation often operates on a dual system: one that offers comprehensive services to Swiss residents, and a significantly more limited system for mobile destitute persons, who are typically only entitled to basic assistance such as food and temporary shelter (Colombo et al., 2016; Roduit, 2021). Due to the limited accessibility of homelessness services in Switzerland, the overall living conditions of European homeless migrants are significantly poorer than those of Swiss nationals experiencing homelessness. They are more frequently affected by street homelessness and rely primarily on support from experienced peers rather than professional social workers. Support from friends and family members is another important factor influencing migration-related decisions. With open borders within the Schengen Area, individuals are free to visit relatives and acquaintances in Switzerland and may initially stay with them while exploring their own opportunities. However, these contacts often live under precar-

ious conditions themselves and are therefore unable to provide substantial support to newcomers—a pattern also observed in other European cities, as reported by Scholten and van Ostaijen (2018).

The Zürich system of homelessness care is not equipped to support the increasing number of destitute European migrants. City social services are primarily designed to assist local homeless individuals or those with an official residence permit who have lived in Zürich for an extended period. Our research revealed that individuals with special needs—such as elderly homeless people or those with psychiatric disorders—often do not receive adequate care. The limited services available to homeless migrants primarily address only basic needs and fail to respond to more complex life situations. In the area of psychiatric care, although some psychiatric services are already accessible to destitute migrants in Zürich, the inadequate treatment of mental illnesses remains a significant issue for this target group. Mental health services are particularly inaccessible to individuals who sleep in public spaces and generally remain outside the reach of social service organizations (Blaser et al, 2021).

The vast majority of European homeless migrants come to Zürich in search of employment and a better quality of life than in their home countries (Frick, 2010). However, their efforts often remain unsuccessful due to a lack of work experience, language skills, and a valid residence permit. There is a shortage of workers in Zürich's gastronomy, cleaning, construction, and care sectors; however, these positions are often inaccessible to homeless migrants due to a lack of skills and support. The majority of respondents reported that, despite some minor support services, they received no concrete help in job searching from Zürich's homelessness organizations. The high workload of staff and language or intercultural barriers within the facilities hinder effective job counselling. This leads to a paradoxical situation: despite an existing labour shortage, the homeless migrants remain excluded from open job opportunities.

Lack of language skills was cited as the main reason why respondents couldn't find work, had difficulty representing themselves before authorities, or struggled to interact with Swiss citizens. Only two interviewees spoke German as their native language, and the majority were unable to communicate adequately in German, which significantly hindered their daily activities—particularly their job search. According to the international literature (Mostowska, 2014; Striano and Young, 2018; Scholten and van Ostaijen, 2018), language skills are key to successful social integration. Experiences from previous Swiss studies (Temesvary et al., 2023) also show that homeless migrants in Zürich have significantly less access to language courses compared to those in Geneva or Lausanne. Online offerings and information sources are particularly popular among homeless

migrants, especially the younger generation. Websites of aid organizations are frequently visited, and the use of artificial intelligence to find food and sleeping opportunities is increasing. Although several online platforms from aid organizations already exist in Zürich—mostly informative and in some cases multilingual—there is still room for improvement.

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