

# Life Histories and Life Stories of Undocumented Central and Eastern European Homeless People Living in Switzerland

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**15th European Research Conference on Homelessness,  
24th September, 2021**

## About the research project „Routes into Destitution”

### Previous observations

- Most vulnerabilities originate from home countries
- Very precarious living conditions in Switzerland
- Accumulated vulnerabilities in health, social relationships and employment
- Exclusion from welfare services
- Invisibility (as they are not counted in the Swiss statistics on migration)
- Scarce information on life course and migration – ethnographic methods are necessary to reveal deeper contexts

### Research question

How do individual and structural conditions lead CEE citizens living in Switzerland into destitution and how do they use available resources accumulated during their life course as coping strategies ?

## About the research project „Routes into Destitution”

- 2-years research project (2021-2022)
- Funded by LIVES Centre / SNSF
- Conducted in two cities: Zurich and Geneva (larger cities with undocumented migration issues with different political settings)
- Using mixed methodology, embedded in life course studies
- With interdisciplinary viewpoints (social geography, sociology, social work, social policy and social rights)
- In an international perspective: collaboration with CEE partner universities and think-tanks in Hungary, Poland, Croatia and Romania, international NGOs and local organizations in Geneva and Zurich

# RESEARCH METHODS



## Destitution in a life course perspective

- **Life course perspective:** study of stages, transitions, critical events in the individual lives (Levy, 2005; Settersten, 1999)
- **Interdependence across life domains:** events in one domain can influence other life domains. Here: housing - employment - social relations – health
- **Vulnerability:** process of resources loss or insufficiency in one or more life domains that exposes individuals to inabilities (Spini, Bernardi, & Oris, 2017)

## Methodology – mixed methods

### 1. Qualitative data collection:

- **Interviews with professionals** of the field (social workers, local politicians, NGO's)  
– 8 per city to identify local policies and practices regarding this issue
- **In-depth narrative interviews combined with Life-Event Calendars** among destitute CEE migrants - 20 per cities. 4 topics (living conditions/work/social resources/health)
- Analysis of routes «in» and «out» destitution, through qualitative analysis, to find significant patterns (federalist system, social rights, ethnicity, gender, age)

### 2. Quantitative data collection

- **Simplified Life-Event Calendar** (50 persons/city)
- Coding and analysing trends of coping strategies embedded in social structures

## Life History Calendar: grid with questions on 4 topics

Aim: collecting retrospective and objective data on life events (Gomensoro et Paredes 2017)

Graphic representation of time; life dimensions delimited by the researchers; personal events are linked with the interviewee (Glasner and Vaart 2009)

Age		1. Residency and housing conditions				2. Work and education						
Mention year of birth with a dot •		1.1 Country (CH canton initials)	1.2 City/village	1.3 Type of housing			1.4 Residential instability (if yes, check the box)		1.5 Residency permit (CH)	1.6 Nationality(ies)	1.7 Staying/residing out of Switzerland, while the centre of living was in CH (> 3 months)	2.2 Job position
Year	Age			1- own flat/house 2-with family 3-with friends/other persons 4-other (precise)	emergency and residential shelter	"Sofa surfing" at family/friends	inadequate housing (squat, garage, camping)	happened to sleep rough	1- CH citizen 2- C Permit 3- B Permit 4- N Permit 5 - L Permit 6 - No permit			2.1 Occupation and education training/school
2022												
2021												
2020												
2019												
2018												
2017												
2016												
2015												
2014												
2013												
2012												
2011												
2010												
2009												
2008												
2007												

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## Life History Calendar – completed, Hungarian woman sex worker in ZH

Allows “to grasp both objective and subjective events, and simultaneously chronological and subjective time scales” (Gomensoro and Parades 2017, 152)

Mention year of birth with a dot •		1.1 Country (CH canton initials)	1.2 City/village	1.3 Type of housing 1- own flat/house 2-with family 3-with friends/other persons 4- other (precise)	1.4 Residential instability (if yes, check the box)				1.5 Residence permit (CH) 1- CH citizen 2- C Permit 3- B Permit 4- N Permit 5 - L Permit 6 - No permit	1.6 Nationality(ies)	1.7 Staying/residing out of Switzerland, while the centre of living was in CH (> 3 months)	2.1 Occupation and education training/school	2.2 Job position 1- manager 2- employee/work er 3- independent 4- trainee
Year	Age				emergency and residential shelter	"Sofa surfing" at family/fr iends	inadequate housing (squat, garage, camping)	happened to sleep rough					
2022													
2021													
2020													
2019													
2018													
2017													
2016				3 (living with a new partner)									
2015				3 (living at a friend)									
2014													
2013													
2012													
2011		SWITZERLAND (ZH)	ZÜRICH	4 (living in the car)					6	x (HU)		STREET SEX WORKER	4
2010													
2009												WORKING IN THE HOMELESS CARE	2
2008												WORKING IN A BANK	2
2007													
2006												COLLEGE DEGREE	
2005													
2004													
2003													
2002												STARTING COLLEGE	
2001													
2000				1 (buying own flat after divorce)									
1999													
1998													
1997												WORKING AS A NURSE	2
1996												FINISHING SECONDARY WITH DEGREE	

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## Methodology - challenges

### Strenghts

- Gather information on several life domains at the same time
- Retrospective data: interviewer can encourage the narration, going back and forth between the calendar and in-depth narrative follow-up questions

### Challenges

- This tool can appear unfriendly (illiteracy, problem for memorising dates)
- Subjectivity in recovering memories
- This data collection needs flexibility: adapt to the interviewee (can do it alone, with her/him, or through asking questions)

## **RESULTS**

Based on the expert interviews

## Housing, Zurich

Hidden homelessness

No access to the primary  
housing market

Growing role of „Housing  
Usurers”

„If people are homeless and unemployed, it is practically  
**impossible finding an apartment** in the city”

(Social Worker at soup kitchen, ZH)

„Destitute people **hide their miserable housing  
conditions** from social workers as they are afraid that  
their children will be taken away.,,

(Manager at the City Social Department)

„In summer **the whole city functions as a big  
sleeping place**. People are invisible during the day, but  
at night bushes and gateways are filled with homeless  
people.,,

(Manager at a counselling station for sans-papiers)

## Housing, Geneva

No access to the primary  
housing market

Problem of policy, only  
emergency shelters

Resources through NGO  
network

Know-how/strategy to  
live outside

„There is a gap for the people we cannot assert their rights, we are **only in the emergency economy** and they **cannot access the rest**”

(Social Worker at emergency shelter, GE)

„Finding accommodation in Geneva is a nightmare. For people in a very precarious situation, there is no housing, we can say that clearly! **It's the emergency shelters or the bridges!**”

(Manager at the City Social Department)

„Roma are relatively well adapted to sleep outside and know where to go. **There is a whole know-how of this survival under the bridge**”

(Social worker)

## Health, Zurich

No medical insurance

Limited access to health  
services

Serious psychiatric  
diseases – often without  
diagnose

“Many of our clients suffer from depression or anxiety, most of them **without any diagnosis and care.**”

(Manager at a counselling station for sans-papiers)

“Even if they are in psychosis and are hospitalized, **they are dismissed within 24 hours** in the absence of medical insurance.,”

(Social worker at an integrated service for the homeless)

“Medical help is **not the responsibility of the city** - if they need constant care, they can receive it in the home countries.,”

(Service manager at the City Social Department)

## Health, Geneva

No health insurance

Unit dedicated to  
precarious persons

Limited access, case-by-  
case decision

Specific homeless  
problems: dental,  
addictions, mental health  
and ageing

“In Geneva, there is no insurance. They only treat emergencies, **they don't treat major health problems** that occurred in the home country.”

(Community mediator in an NGO)

“Fortunately, there is the CAMSCO, even if for Europeans it is **still complicated and does not go very far,**”

(Manager at the City Social Department)

“People who are on the street **are getting old faster**, they have back problems, joint problems... They are 50-60 and look much older.”

(Social worker at an emergency shelter)

## Employment, Zurich

Missing language skills

Poor qualifications

Exploitation in the CH  
labour market

„Devilish circle” with  
registration and work  
contract

“**Without speaking German** it is almost impossible finding a job.”

(Social worker at a day care service)

"It can be extremely exhausting applying and **going to work as a street homeless**.,,

(Social worker at a counselling station)

"It is very hard to find a proper job **without registration**.,,

(Service manager at the City Social Department)

## Employment, Geneva

Lack of skills/illiteracy

Stigmatisation of Roma  
community

Illegal activities

„Devilish circle” with  
registration and work  
contract

“The Roma community is stigmatized. Compared to other European nationalities, they will probably have **less chance of finding a job**”

(Manager at the City Social Department)

“The access to permit is easier in sex work than in other activities. Surely for some persons there is a **combination of prostitution and begging**”

(Social worker at an NGO helping sex workers)

“To get housing, you need a job, and **to get a job, you have to prove you have housing**”

(Social worker at emergency shelter)



## Social relationships, Zurich

Loneliness

Interest-based  
relationships in CH

Primary relationships  
toward their families in  
home countries

“Most of our clients are **lone travelers** without family relationships.”

(Manager at a counselling station for sans-papiers)

"Particularly the younger ones **travel in smaller groups** and help each other, even though these are mostly interest-based relationships.,,

(Social Worker at soup kitchen)

"They are in **contact with families via the phone or social media**. Smartphones are very important for them. They often show us their photos about relatives.,,

(Social worker at a day care service)

## Social relationships, Geneva

Ambivalence in the  
family/community support

Loneliness

Social link through NGOs

“Through exclusion, you reinforce what you are,  
in relation to others. One way to defend yourself  
is to be strong in a group”

(Manager at an NGO supporting migrants)

“There are communities that help each other  
more, others that are very fragile and don't help  
each other much,,

(Community mediator in an NGO)

“Fortunately we have the **associations that  
provide answers** to the needs”

(Manager at the Cantonal Insertion Department)

## Conclusions (main domains)

SOCIAL EXCLUSION

EXISTENTIAL POVERTY

COMMULATIVE VULNERABILITIES

RIGHTLESSNESS

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