

Geography Matters:  
Results of a  
Quantitative Survey  
on Cantonal and  
Municipal Policies  
to Combat  
Homelessness

Matthias Drilling, Geography and Social Work

Magdalena Küng, MA Law

Esther Mühlethaler, Anthropology

Jörg Dittmann, Sociology and Social Work

Institute of Social Planning, Organizational Change  
and Urban Development

School of Social Work  
University of Applied Sciences FHNW

Bergamo, September 2022

Contact: [matthias.drilling@fhnw.ch](mailto:matthias.drilling@fhnw.ch)

## Research interest:

Majority of studies in Europe on homelessness are city-focused (Baptista/Marlier 2019 and country reports)

Important surveys on service providers have methodological problems in « finding a small town or village that actually ran, or commissioned, its own homelessness services » (Please et al. 2018)

Homelessness focussing on rural areas is mostly on profiling the poor (e.g. Cloke 2001)



The current state of research leads to the hypothesis that homelessness is primarily an urban homelessness



What is the situation in Switzerland, which is a very rural country?

Some findings from surveys that are discussing spatial aspects:

1

Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (Parkinson et al. 2019, p.2):  
Homelessness rates and shares are becoming more concentrated in major cities. There is substantial mismatch between the distribution of homelessness and specialist homelessness service capacity.

2

Annual Homeless Assessment Report (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2021, p. 76):  
COVID 19 pandemics: shelters in the regions had to reduce bed capacity by up to 50 percent. In some cases, shelters closed completely to limit the spread of COVID-19. (p. 76)



Geography of homelessness aligns with the changing geography of **demographic groups, housing and employment opportunities, service provider qualities** and that have become more spatially polarised

**The survey**  
financed by the Federal  
Ministry of Housing

Drilling, M., Küng, M., Mühlethaler, E.,  
Dittmann, J. (2022). Obdachlosigkeit in der  
Schweiz. Verständnisse, Politiken und  
Strategien der Kantone und Gemeinden.  
Bundesamt für Wohnungswesen, Bern.

German (full report):

<https://www.bwo.admin.ch/bwo/de/home/wie-wir-wohnen/studien-und-publikationen/obdachlosigkeit.html>

French (summary):

<https://www.bwo.admin.ch/bwo/fr/home/wie-wir-wohnen/studien-und-publikationen/obdachlosigkeit.html>

Italian (summary):

<https://www.bwo.admin.ch/bwo/it/home/wie-wir-wohnen/studien-und-publikationen/obdachlosigkeit.html>

Research questions:

What is the understanding of homelessness, the policies derived from it, and strategies and measures to combat homelessness at the cantonal and communal level?

What is the structure of the cantonal and communal homelessness assistance, how are the policy fields (housing, social affairs, health, etc.) interrelated and how are they linked up with non-governmental actors (NGOs, voluntary organisations, etc.)?

# The survey: three pillars

## Online questionnaire of all municipalities in Switzerland

3-4/2021: 2172 municipalities  
(full survey)  
response rate: 28.4%  
(616 municipalities)  
respondents: decision-makers  
in the municipalities  
35.8% [head of] social  
welfare, 34.9% [staff of the]  
mayor, 15.7% politician,  
10% management staff in  
dep.

## Review of the cantonal laws

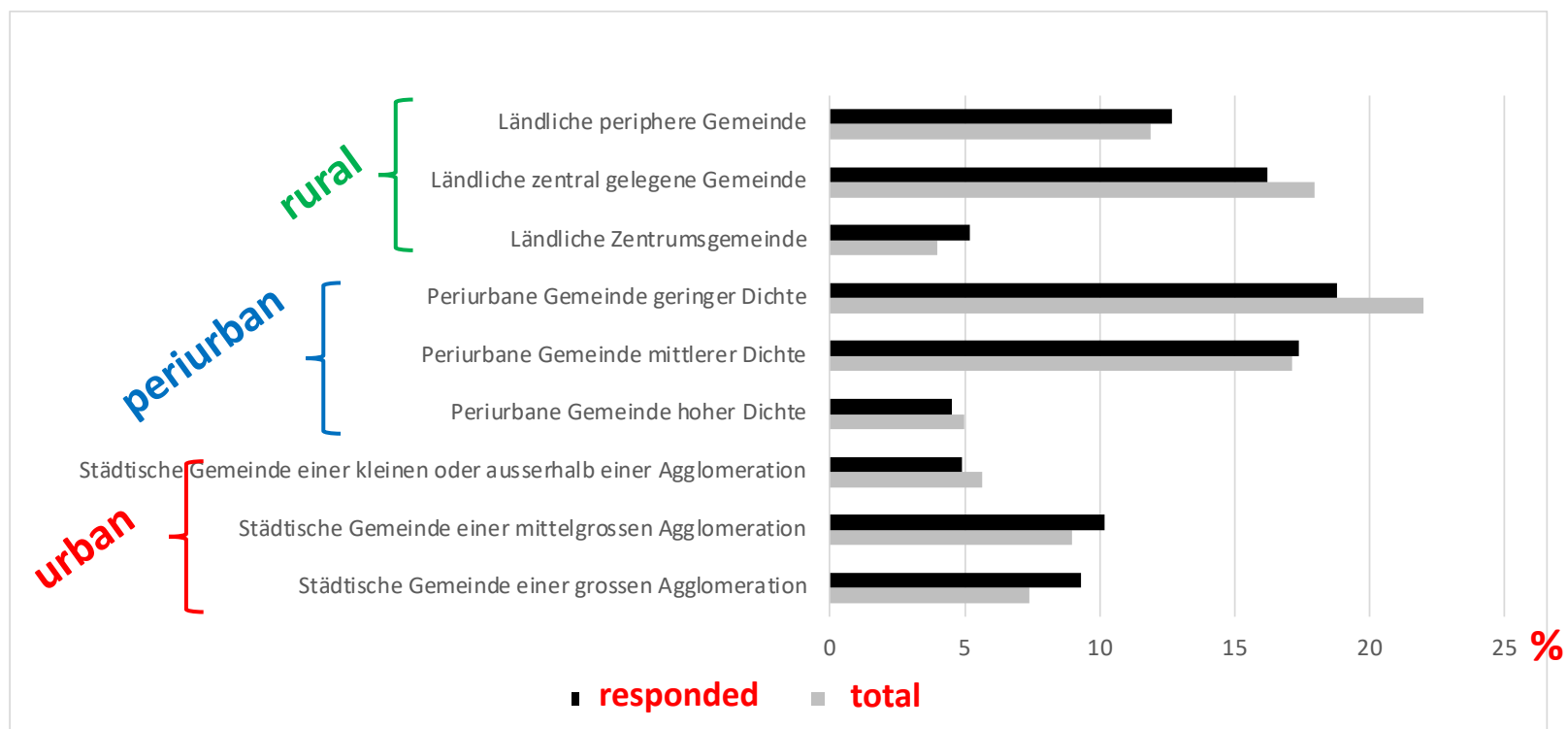
Drilling, M., Küng, M. &  
Dittmann, J. (forthcoming):  
Homelessness in Switzerland -  
Federalist pathways between  
ignoring, passing on  
responsibility and proactive  
prevention.  
In: Bevan, C.: International  
Handbook of Law, Policy &  
Homelessness. Routledge

## Telephone interviews with cantonal authorities

Mühlethaler, E., Drilling, M. &  
Küng, M. (2022)  
Fehlendes Politikverständnis in  
der Schweiz  
(A lack of understanding of  
politics in Switzerland)  
In: Zeitschrift für Sozialhilfe  
(Journal for Social Welfare),  
No. 2, pp. 26-27.

## Whom does the study represent

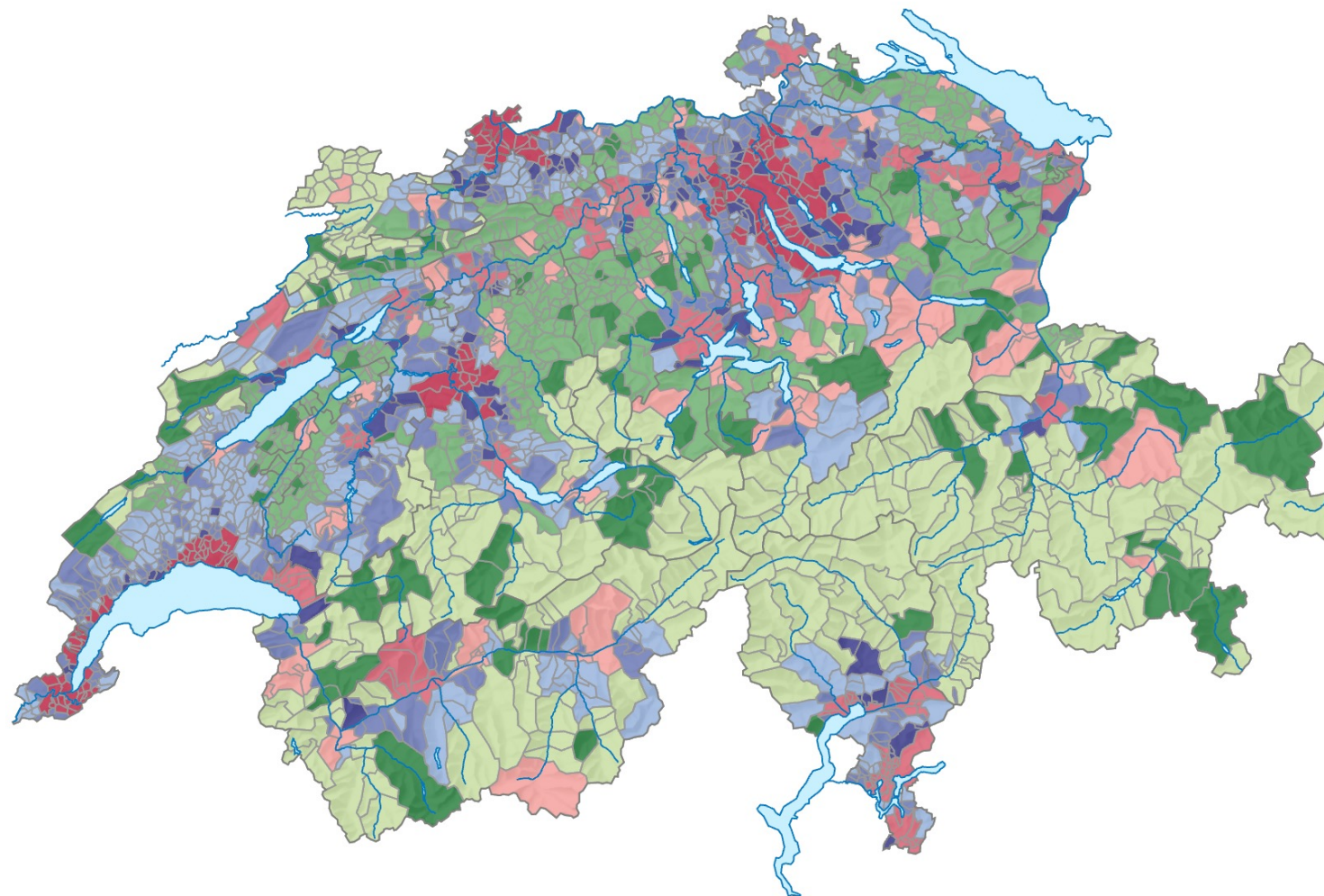
Number of inhabitants (31.12.2020)	municipalities (participated)	municipalities (total)	Response rate
<= 5000	470	1783	26.4
5001 - 10'000	73	226	32.3
10'001 - 15'000	24	77	31.2
15'001 - 100'000	36	80	45.0
> 100'000	6	6	100



# Whom does the study represent

rural periurban urban

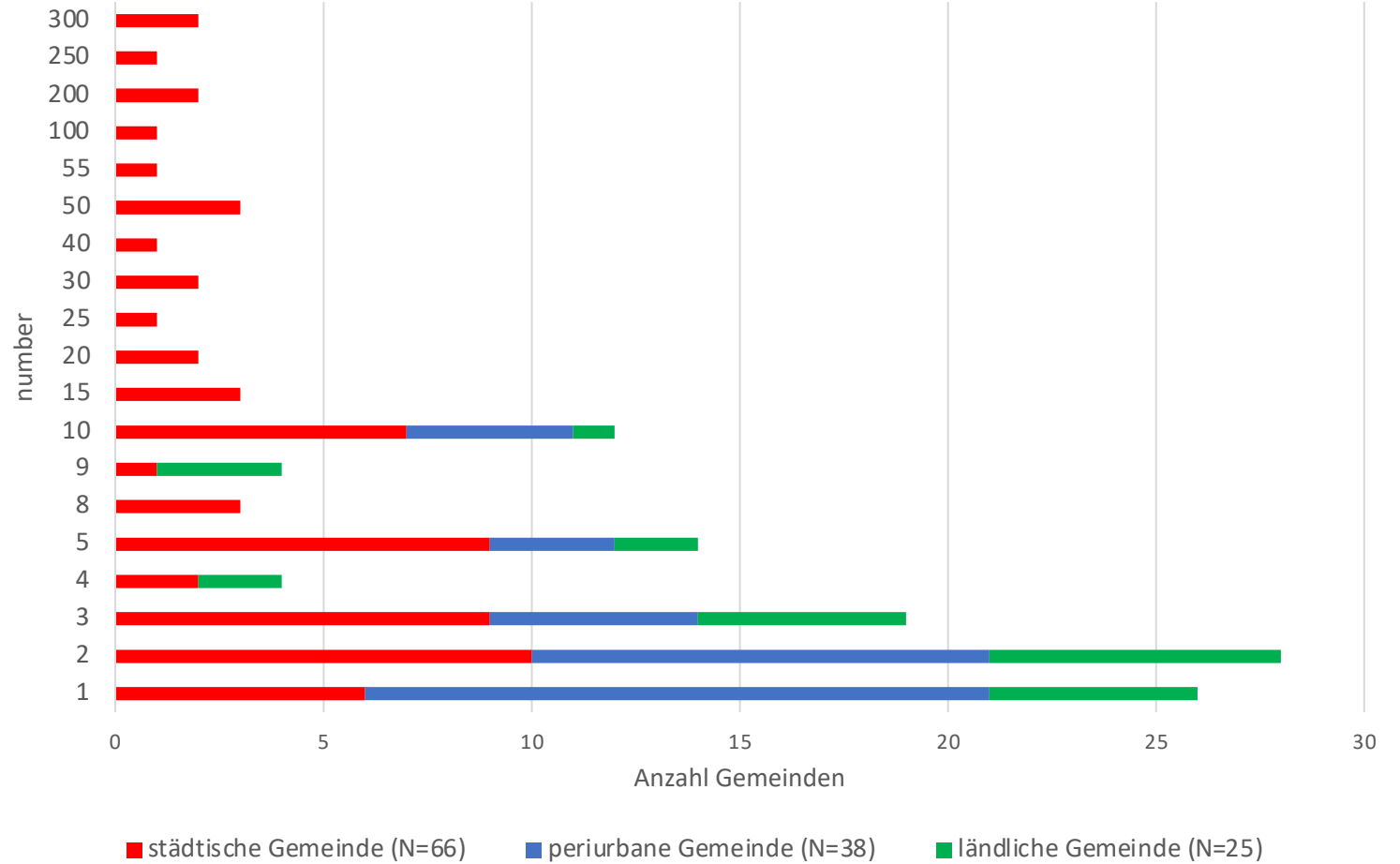
- Städtische Gemeinde einer grossen Agglomeration
- Städtische Gemeinde einer mittelgrossen Agglomeration
- Städtische Gemeinde einer kleinen oder ausserhalb einer Agglomeration
- Periurbane Gemeinde hoher Dichte
- Periurbane Gemeinde mittlerer Dichte
- Periurbane Gemeinde geringer Dichte
- Ländliche Zentrumsgemeinde
- Ländliche zentral gelegene Gemeinde
- Ländliche periphere Gemeinde



# Homelessness in Switzerland is an urban phenomenon



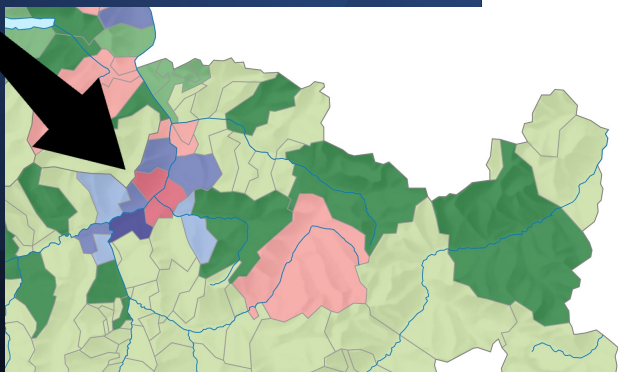
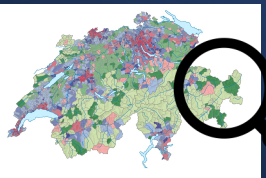
People experiencing homelessness: estimate of number per municipality by type of municipality



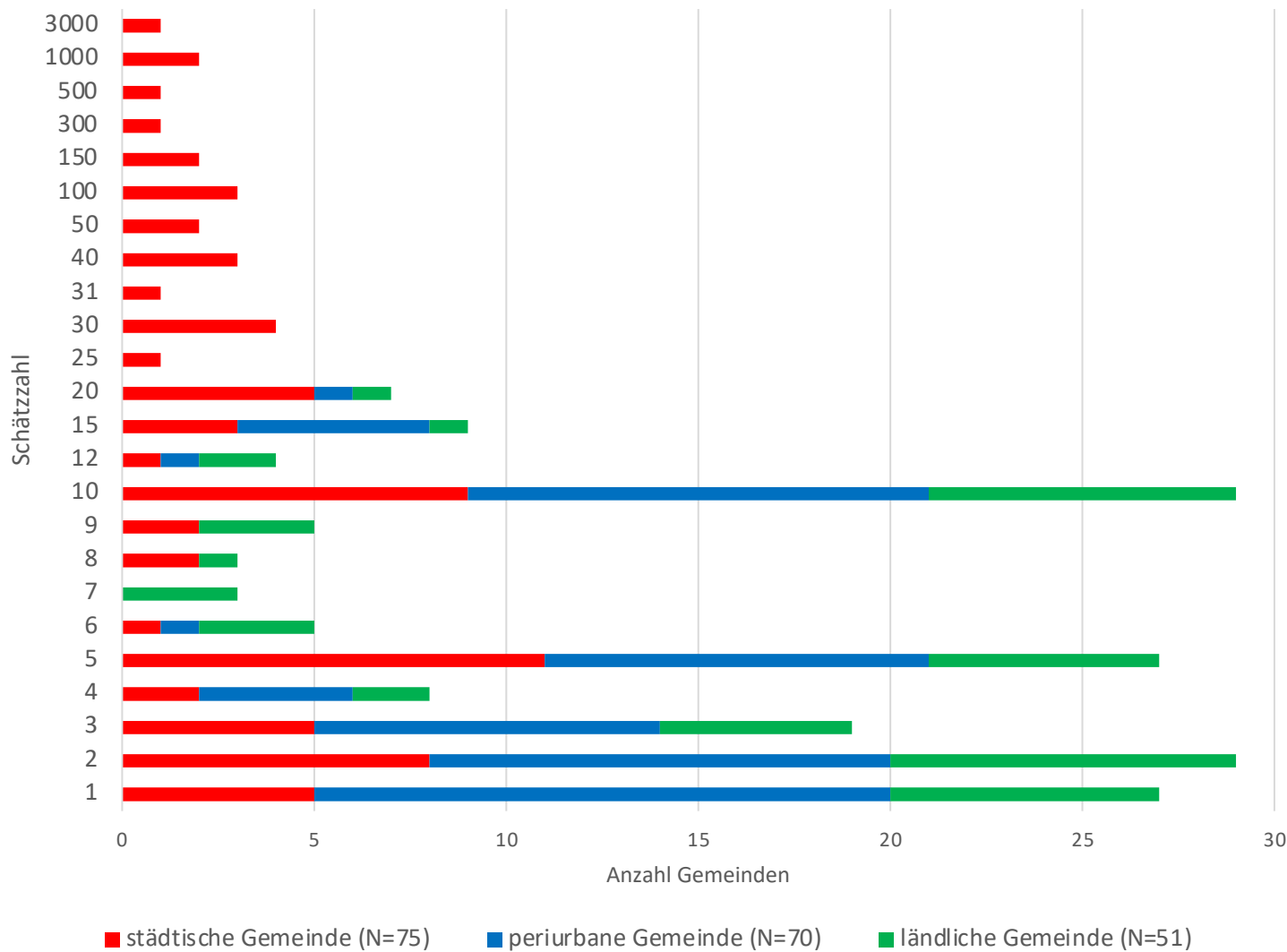


Threatened by the loss of housing is a phenomenon of centre-function

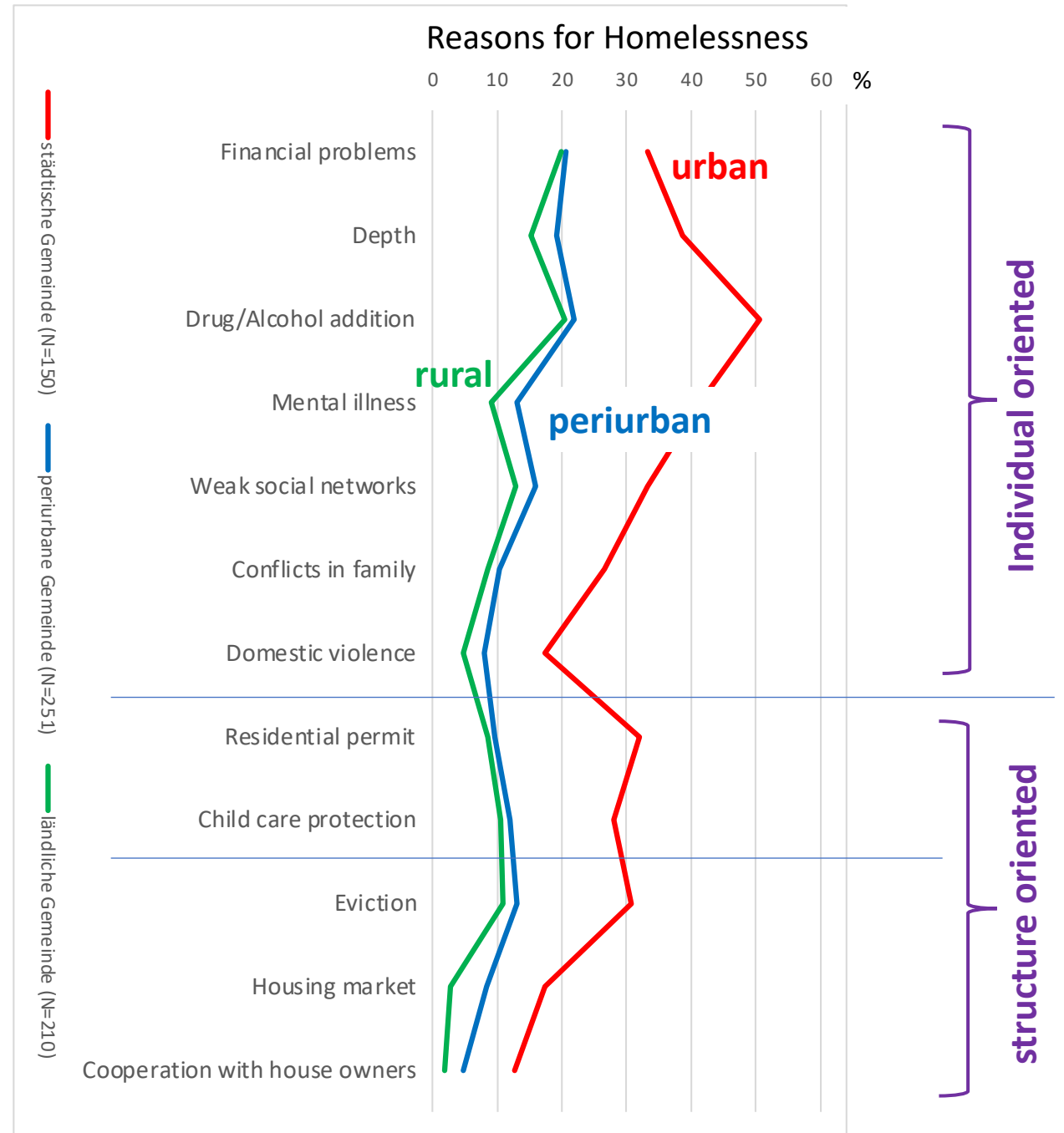
“urban”, “periurban with agglomeration”, “rural center”



People threatened by a loss of housing: estimate of number per municipality by type of municipality

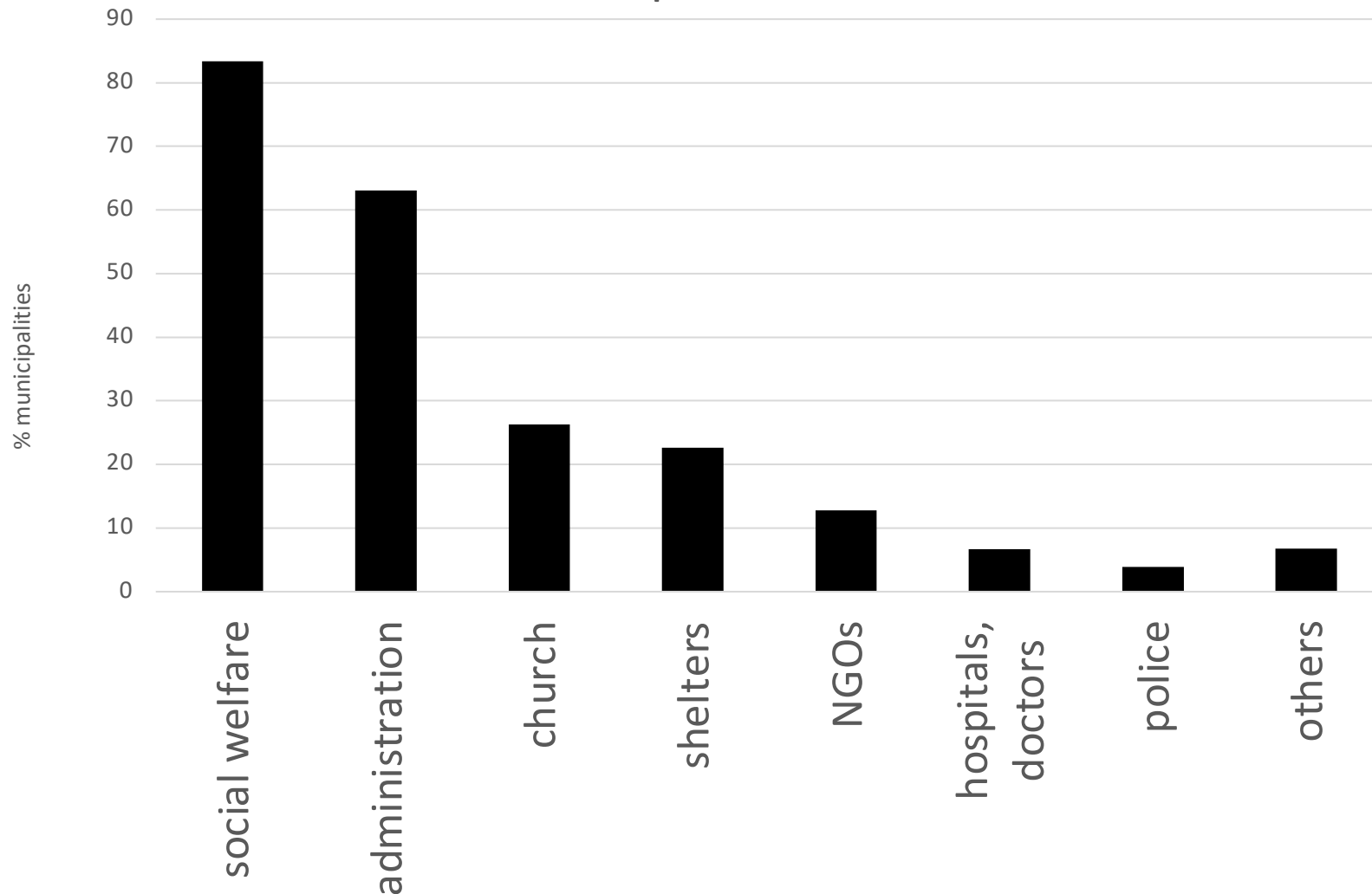


# From a municipality view homelessness is an individual based problem



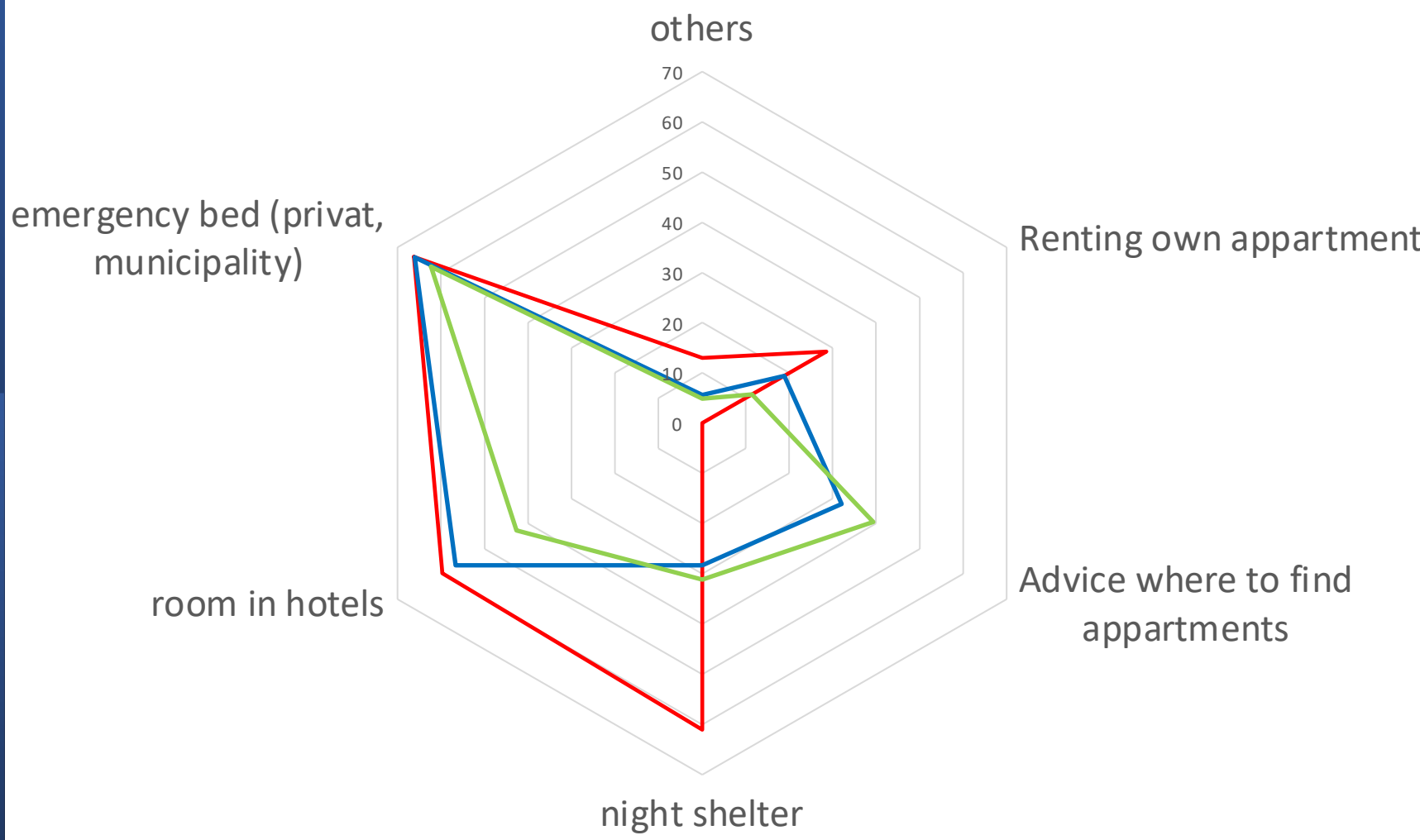
**Municipalities with a population of 8000 or more indicate three contact points and those with a population of less than 1200 do not indicate a contact point at all.**

Whom affected persons can contact



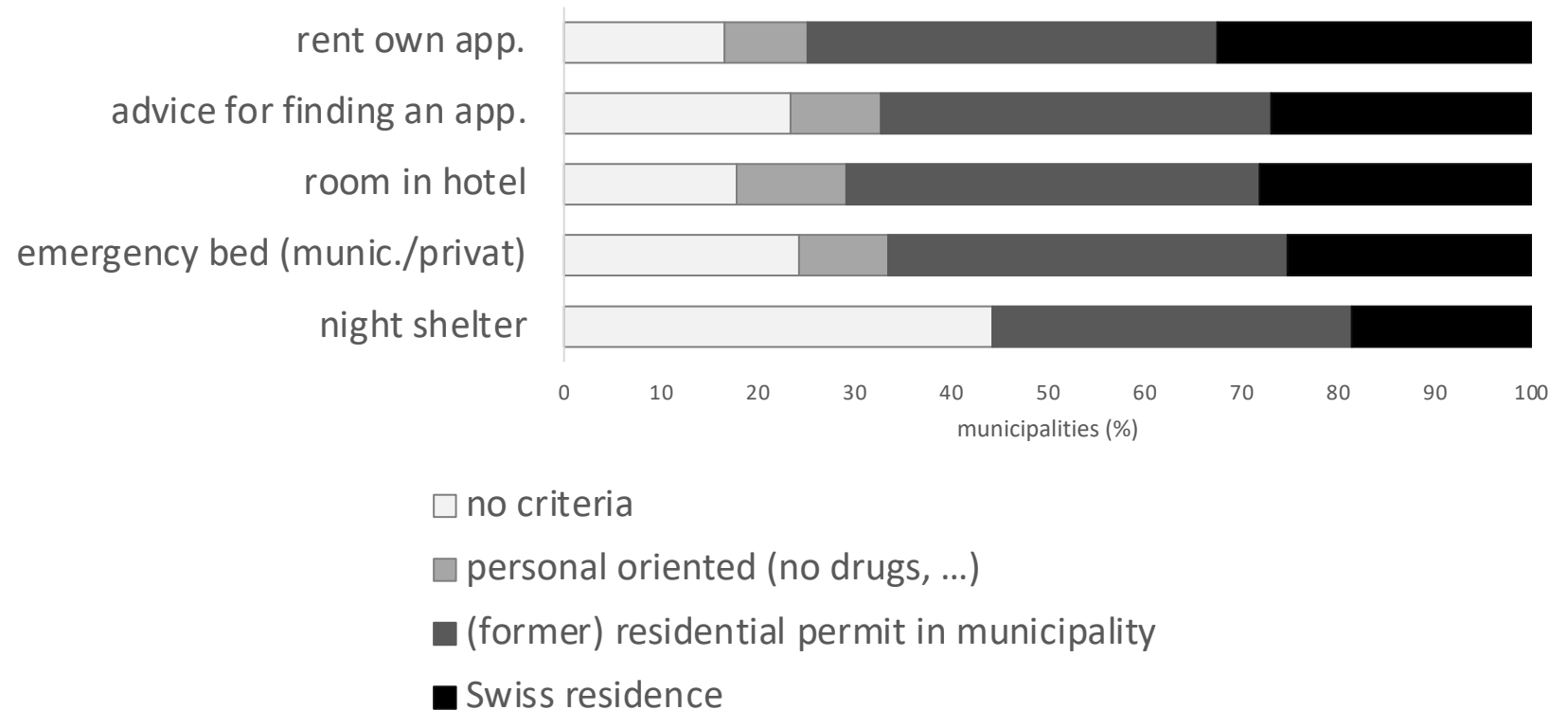
Number of inhabitants (31.12.2020)	municipalities (total)	Response rate
<= 5000	1783	26.4
5001 - 10'000	226	32.3
10'001 - 15'000	77	31.2
15'001 - 100'000	80	45.0
> 100'000	6	100

# What municipalities offer



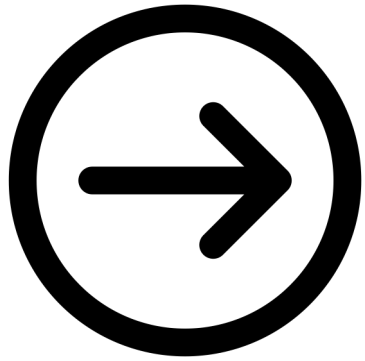
Only 20 municipalities have their own housing stock and have a total of 3,071 flats of their own. These flats are almost exclusively clustered in urban municipalities of a large or medium-sized agglomeration, with the six largest cities in Switzerland each having more than 100 flats or a total of around 3,000 flats.

## Criteria for help



Even if municipalities offer further services for homeless people or people at risk of losing their homes, these are not accessible to everyone. Rather, the services are subject to certain criteria

What is the understanding of homelessness, the policies derived from it, and strategies and measures to combat homelessness at the cantonal and communal level?



## Results

What is the structure of the cantonal and communal homelessness assistance, how are the policy fields (housing, social affairs, health, etc.) interrelated and how are they linked up with non-governmental actors (NGOs, voluntary organisations, etc.)?

**Social-political haphazardness:** 192 out of 616 municipalities answer that they have neither a strategy, nor a plan, nor a specific approach. No common understanding, no consistent strategy, no measures/monitoring.

**Problem setting:** Only in 19.6% of all urban municipalities in a large agglomeration and in five of the six largest cities in Switzerland, homelessness is often an issue in municipal politics.

**Individualization:** Homelessness is seen as a problem of financial poverty, drug/alcohol addiction, and other individual oriented problems; thus housing must be earned (it is not a right) and all services are subject to certain criteria.

**Principle of subsidiarity:** Homelessness (1) is a social welfare task, not housing/health/youth (2) is in the responsibility of 2172 municipalities.

### Processes of push and pull :

(1) the more rural a municipality is and the less central its function, (1) the more important the (regional) social services and the municipal administration become as a point of contact, (2) the fewer offers are available

(2) Municipalities with a population of 8000 or more indicate three contact points and those with a population of less than 1200 do not indicate a contact point at all.

## recommendations

### **Defining homelessness and providing a national guidance framework**

ETHOS-Typology & understanding the problem: Busch Geertsema, V., Edgar, W.J. Pleace, N. (2010)

### **Examine comprehensive support systems and strengthen regional cooperation**

esp. models of housing provision; connection to fields of action in health, social affairs, education; promoting social institutions in the housing; preventive structuring of tenancy law; possibilities of securing housing, connecting to the expertise and experience of people affected by homelessness and people at risk of homelessness in developing solution scenarios

### **Improve housing provision and remove barriers to permanent housing for homeless people on communal level**

esp. supporting organisations and investors who create permanent housing for hp; self-help organisations should be supported in becoming promoters of these projects; pilot projects for the targeted provision of housing for homeless people; access criteria to state accommodation (especially emergency sleeping facilities, but also emergency rooms, short-term accommodation, etc.) should be standardised

### **Improve data basis and build up monitoring**

esp. establish a national monitoring system; networking between municipalities, cantons, the federal government, science and the organisations that represent the people affected.

# Literature

Baptista, I. and Marlier, E. (2019) Fighting homelessness and housing exclusion in Europe: A study of national policies. European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission.

Batterham, D., Cigdem-Bayram, M., Parkinson, S., Reynolds, M. & Wood G.A. (2022) The Spatial Dynamics of Homelessness in Australia: Urbanisation, Intra-City Dynamics and Affordable Housing. *Applied Spatial Analysis and Policy*, 1 - 23

Busch Geertsema, V., Edgar, W.J. Pleace, N. (2010) Homelessness and Homeless Policies in Europe: Lessons from Research. Brussels: FEANTSA.

Parkinson, S., Batterham, D., Reynolds, M. and Wood, G. (2019) The Changing Geography of Homelessness: A Spatial Analysis from 2001 to 2016, AHURI Final Report 313, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.

Paul Cloke , Paul Milbourne & Rebekah Widdowfield (2001) The Geographies of Homelessness in Rural England, *Regional Studies*, 35:1, 23-37.

Pleace, N., Baptista, I., Benjaminsen, L. & Busch-Geertsema, V. (2018) Homelessness Services in Europe. *EOH Comparative Studies on Homelessness*. No. 8