



FROM COLLECTIVE CENTRES TO PRIVATE ACCOMMODATION: HOUSING TRAJECTORIES OF ASYLUM MIGRANTS IN SWITZERLAND

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Abstract

The housing situation of refugees and asylum seekers has recently attracted political attention due to the shortage of appropriate accommodation and the increased use of underground bunkers as a temporary solution. Asylum migrants encounter many obstacles in accessing the private sector of the housing market; thus, local authorities play an active role in shaping opportunities for social inclusion. Using the Swiss population register (2012-2019) for complete cohorts of asylum migrants, this study analyses the transitions from collective (communal) centres to private housing from the deposition of an asylum claim and during the first eight years in the country. Cox models for interval-censored data show the association between individual and contextual factors and the speed of access to private housing. Despite the quasi-autonomous management of refugee housing by region (cantons), priority rules regarding access to private housing were found to apply across the country. When choosing between different profiles, women, older asylum migrants, married individuals, and members of larger national groups are favoured in obtaining access to private housing. Nevertheless, the time spent in collective centres largely depends on the region to which a claimant is assigned, pointing to the minimal agency asylum migrants have during their first years of residence. Focusing on the early stages of the residential trajectory of asylum migrants this study provides insights into the logistics of housing attribution and different rationales governing these procedures.

Keywords

Refugee

Residential mobility

Housing

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1. Introduction

Quality housing is both a determining factor and a marker for the integration of asylum migrants (Ager and Strang, 2004, 2008). The literature consistently shows that long stays in poor housing negatively impacts asylum seekers' and refugees' socioeconomic integration, health and well-being, while proper housing shapes their sense of security and belonging (Bakker et al. 2014; Bakker et al. 2016; Phillips 2006; Ziersch et al. 2017; Ziersch and Due 2018). In Switzerland, the housing situation of asylum migrants regularly attracts media attention, given the shortage of appropriate accommodation and the increased use of underground bunkers as a temporary solution (Del Biaggio and Rey 2017).

Following the rules of the Dublin Regulation, the country examining the asylum claim is responsible for housing the asylum seekers during the procedure. Upon arrival to Switzerland, asylum seekers typically live isolated from the local population in an assigned federal reception centre, after which they are transferred to a cantonal housing facility, usually collective (communal) housing at first and then private (subsidized) housing. Accommodation in collective centres is a common experience for asylum migrants. On the one hand, these centres provide support and assistance, enabling refugees to access material aid, health care and different integration programs (language courses and employment programs). On the other hand, life in these centres is characterized by a climate of control, uncertainty, and lack of privacy. Access to employment or school can be particularly difficult for residents of collective centres, who may experience multiple transfers between reception structures and live isolated from urban centres with limited access to public transportation (Mottet 2022). In fact, the management of the asylum process considerably affects integration outcomes (see Hainmueller et al. 2016 for causal evidence on the economic integration of refugees in Switzerland).

Researchers in Europe, North America and Australia have documented the great difficulties asylum seekers and refugees face when moving from collective centres to [private and subsidized sectors of] the housing market (Berger 2008; Murdie 2008; Dwyer and Brown 2008; Francis and Hiebert 2014; Adam et al. 2019; Adam et al. 2020; Dotsey and Lumley-Sapanski 2021). These difficulties are sometimes exacerbated by the discriminatory attitudes of some landlords who refuse to rent to refugees (Werner et al. 2018; Weidinger and Kordel 2020). Given that refugees struggle to access this market through common paths (Adam et al. 2019), (local) authorities' actions weigh heavily in this process, shaping opportunities and barriers to social inclusion (Bolzoni et al. 2015; Zetter and Pearl 1999).

Using full-population register data (STATPOP 2012-2019), this study examines the transition from collective centres to private accommodations among asylum migrants in Switzerland. We contribute to the literature on refugees' residential mobility and integration in three ways. First, the study focuses on the early stages of the residential trajectory of asylum migrants and emphasizes one key transition: the transition out of collective centres. Recent studies have drawn attention to refugees' residential mobility and geographic choices (i.e., moves to urban vs. rural areas) after the restrictions of the dispersal policy have been lifted (see de Hoon et al. 2021 for the Netherlands and Vogiazides and Mondani 2021 for Sweden). However, these studies take as their starting point the end of the asylum procedure and, more specifically, entry into the first private housing. Residential dynamics that precede refugee status and freedom of movement, although critical to integration, have not yet been studied by quantitative researchers. Thus, this study provides a complementary perspective on the housing experience of refugees by analysing residential moves from the deposition of an asylum claim and during the migrant's first eight years in the country (regardless of whether the individual is granted refugee status).

Second, we take advantage of register data allowing for a comprehensive longitudinal mapping of the residential trajectories of all individuals who were registered as asylum seekers, provisionally admitted (similar to a subsidiary protection in European countries) or recognized as refugees in Switzerland between 2012 and 2019. Although qualitative research abounds on the subject of refugee housing (e.g., Adam et al. 2019, 2020; Aigner 2019; Alberti 2020; Darling 2016; Dotsey and Lumley-Sapanski 2021; Fozdar and Hartley 2014; Gold 2019; van der Horst 2004; Kisoorn 2010; Lietaert et al. 2020; Mottet 2022; Sirriyeh 2010; Szczepanikova 2013; Weidinger and Kordel 2020; Werner et al. 2018; Ziersch et al. 2017), quantitative studies are scarce—let alone longitudinal ones. Event history analysis applied to interval-censored survival time data will provide a descriptive yet exhaustive overview of transitions out of collective centres. Third, we provide insights into the logic of housing attribution by local authorities since (as discussed below) the criteria for transfer to private accommodation are not publicly available. Kaplan–Meier estimates will first be used to emphasize the time spent in collective centres and the proportion of individuals still living in these accommodations over time. Cox proportional hazards models will then be used to further examine the determinants (both individual and contextual) of a transition out of collective centres.

2. Refugee housing in Switzerland

As in many other countries, the number of asylum applications lodged in Switzerland has varied over the years depending on the international context. The 1990s were marked in particular by the arrival of applicants from the former Yugoslavia (with over 40,000 applications in 1991, 1998 and 1999). In 2015, Switzerland also saw an increase in asylum requests due to the war in Syria (nearly 40,000 applications). On average, over 21,500 applications were filed each year in Switzerland between 1986 and 2021. The three main countries of origin of asylum seekers in Switzerland are Eritrea, Afghanistan and Syria, which together account for 38% of the asylum requests lodged in Switzerland in the last decade (2011-2021).

Following the rules of the Swiss Asylum Act, the authorities are responsible for housing the asylum seekers during the procedure and beyond (for those who are unable to do so on their own). Thus, upon arrival to Switzerland, asylum seekers “typically live isolated from the local population in an assigned [federal] reception centre” (Hainmueller et al. 2016:1), after which they are transferred to a cantonal housing facility—either in collective or private accommodation (see Fig. 1). Such transitions can also happen after an asylum seeker is granted refugee status or subsidiary protection.

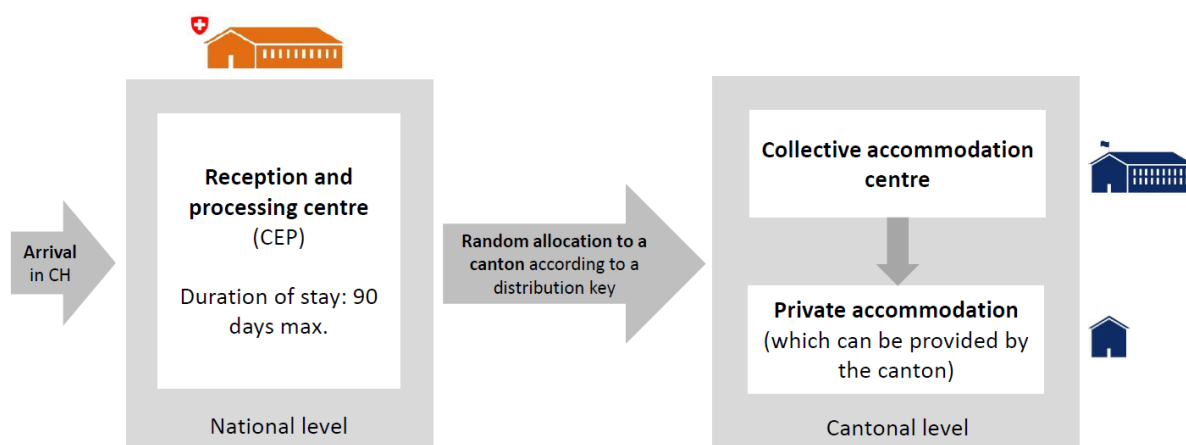


Figure 1: Housing for asylum seekers and refugees in Switzerland. Source: Schematic representation inspired by the one proposed by the State Secretariat for Migration (undated, year 2010).

2.1. The federal reception and processing centres (CEP)

The reception of asylum seekers starts in one of the five federal reception and processing centres (CEPs) run by the Swiss Confederation, which can accommodate between 200

and 300 people each (ECRE 2015)¹. Where there is a shortage of space, the Confederation may also choose to place asylum seekers—particularly those subject to removal under the Dublin Agreement—in ‘remote sites’, typically former military shelters (ECRE 2015). The CEP registers asylum seekers (identity check, photograph and fingerprinting, questions about the route taken and first interview about the grounds for asylum). The migrants’ ability to leave the centre is limited to certain hours, and their comings and goings are highly controlled, with body searches at every entry and exit by security officers. In the case of unjustified absence or lateness, they may be punished by a ban on going out or financial penalties. As Gold (2019) notes, in these centres, “most of the day is spent waiting: for the results of the first interview, for papers to arrive from overseas, for news from relatives.” The overall duration of the stay in the CEP cannot exceed 3 months.

2.2. The cantonal collective centres

Asylum migrants are then allocated to the Swiss cantons at random according to a distribution key (SEM 2019). This distribution key allocates a certain percentage of asylum migrants to each canton according to the size of its population. Only nuclear families cannot be separated². Each canton is then responsible for housing the asylum migrants, who “are bound to their canton of attribution and must reside within that canton” (ECRE 2015, p.71). Cantonal reception systems generally include several types of accommodations (collective centres, individual housing, and specific housing for unaccompanied minors.). As each canton is free to manage the accommodation of asylum migrants as it sees fit, there are major differences between them, leading to significant variations in the living conditions of the persons concerned (Alberti 2020) and consequently to a strong sense of injustice among them (Mottet 2022).

Usually, the cantons organize accommodation in two phases: the first phase is in collective centres, and the second phase is in private accommodations (see Fig. 1)³. Cantonal collective centres have two functions: to monitor asylum seekers during the procedure and beyond (that is, after they obtain refugee status or a provisional admission⁴) and to control their comings and goings to ensure “that they are located

¹ See ECRE 2015 for the procedure at airports. It should also be noted that we describe here the procedure as it was in force at the time of the data collection. This procedure has changed somewhat since the 2019 asylum reform (see <https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/fr/home/asyl/asylverfahren/asylregionen-baz.html> [15.07.2022]).

² The failure to consider other criteria, such as closeness to extended family members or language skills, is a recurrent criticism (ECRE 2015).

³ This organisation of housing for asylum seekers is similar to that used elsewhere in Europe, as Werner et al. (2018) shows with the example of the German city of Leipzig.

⁴ Provisional admission is a status roughly equivalent to subsidiary protection in EU law.

where they should be and are at the disposal of the authorities” (Alberti 2020: 4)⁵. However, the centres also offer asylum migrants support and assistance to ease their integration in Switzerland. To this end, counselling and support in their daily lives are provided by social workers. Asylum migrants also receive material assistance and have access to health care, language courses and employment programs. In addition, they must attend training modules on various subjects (e.g., health, housing, professional integration, sex and gender, or the habits and customs of their host region). ‘Occupation programmes’ are also offered to keep them busy and prepare them for their future entry into the labour market. People in these centres may experience living in collective accommodation as an ordeal (lack of privacy, feeling of confinement, lack of links with the host society, sometimes spatial relegation away from urban centres) and look forward to their transfer to individual accommodation (Mottet 2022). It should also be noted that transfers from one collective centre to another within the same canton are common. These successive rehosings are, like many ruptures, difficult for migrants to cope with as they seek stability (Mottet 2022).

Overall, these collective centres can be considered a space “between home and prison. It is both a space of care and recomposition of the self, and a space of semi-confinement” (Alberti 2020: 169). This dual function—control and assistance—is also found elsewhere in Europe (Szczepanikova 2013). In the Swiss asylum system, collective centres are perceived as a transitional phase, a parenthesis whose aim is to ‘prepare’ people as well as possible for their transfer to private housing, which is synonymous with a more independent and autonomous life (Alberti 2020).

2.3. From collective centres to private accommodation

In Switzerland, access to private housing for asylum migrants can either be the result of an individual initiative or decided (and financed) by the cantonal authorities, as private accommodations include subsidized flats; due to asylum seeker and refugees’ lack of financial resources, the latter is much more common. Therefore, when they are transferred into such private accommodations depends on the canton and its private housing capacity (OFS 2016). In practice, when a place in private accommodation becomes available, the canton notifies the officers of the collective centres, who then propose the files of “persons suitable for transfer” (as the officers themselves put it—

⁵ Life in the cantonal centres is less strictly regulated than in the CEP, particularly with regard to the monitoring of entry and exit (ECRE 2015).

Alberti 2020: 153). From this list, the cantonal authorities decide who will ultimately be transferred.

At the national level, there are no official guidelines outlining the precise criteria for the profile of people who should be given priority for private housing, as this is left to the cantons. However, to the best of our knowledge, there are also no such guidelines at the cantonal level. Internal documents might exist within some of the organisations mandated to run the collective centres, but if so, these are not made public. Thus, the criteria for transferring to private housing are vague: while time spent in collective centres may play a large role, it is not entirely decisive, and other criteria may prevail. In particular, residence permits have an important impact (Alberti 2020) since people with asylum-seeker status are much less likely to be allocated private housing than those with more stable residence permits. The situation of 'vulnerable persons' (families and persons with health problems) is more ambiguous: on the one hand, one can imagine that they are considered a 'priority' for a transfer; on the other hand, one can conceive that they require closer care, corresponding to a longer period in a collective centre⁶. Finally, Alberti (2020: 166) notes that the agents in charge of collective centres rely on participation in the various training modules to "assess whether a person is ready to be transferred to individual housing and to settle on his or her own".

In all cases, the transfer is experienced as "a moment of joy for many residents who are looking forward to a personal living space that will allow them to live more independently. In this sense, the transfer is perceived by the residents as a success, a further step toward settlement in Switzerland." (Alberti 2020: 168). However, we have seen that individuals have little influence on when this transition occurs since it depends on structural and organisational aspects (available places), legal status hierarchy (priority given to the most stable residence permits), and the assessment of the officers in charge of managing the collective centres as to the supposed ability of individuals to get by 'outside' independently⁷.

2.4. Determinant of refugee access to housing

Alongside the growing media interest in the subject, researchers have studied the issue of the housing conditions of (asylum) migrants. However, to date, most research has focused on the impact of housing on different life outcomes, such as mental and physical

⁶ Alberti (2020) notes that the notion of 'care' dominates in collective housing, while it is the notion of 'integration' that guides the follow-up of individuals after their transfer to a flat.

⁷ Supervision does not end at the door of the centre but is later conducted on a more ad hoc basis, usually with regular appointments at the office responsible for providing social benefits.

health issues (Bakker et al. 2016; Ziersch et al. 2017; Ziersch and Due 2018), socioeconomic integration (Bakker et al. 2014), family life (Lietaert et al. 2020), or integration in general (Adam et al. 2020; Francis and Hiebert 2014). In contrast, the determinants of access to quality housing have received limited attention. This section focuses on the literature documenting the association between individual and contextual factors and access to housing for (asylum) migrants.

The literature documents variations in access to quality housing by socioeconomic characteristics. Women experience more stable housing trajectories than men, including a faster transition to the private rental sector of the housing market and access to homeownership (Berger 2008; Shier et al. 2014). The reasons for migration explain part of this dynamic: women more often migrate as part of the family reunification program, meaning that they more often move in with an established partner who likely has further progressed on the housing ladder. Nevertheless, it was shown in the French context that after controlling for the reason for migration, women were less likely to live in precarious accommodations, such as hotels or other collective accommodation centres (Berger 2008). In Switzerland, when there is a lack of space in 'standard' collective centres, single men are the first to be housed in emergency shelters (civil protection shelters) (ECRE 2015). The climate of insecurity and tension that can prevail in collective reception facilities may be perceived as unsuitable for women and the children who often accompany them. As such, we expect women to make a faster transition to private housing.

Family configuration also plays a role in housing transfers. On the one hand, families are generally given priority in access to private housing (ECRE 2015; Shier et al. 2014). On the other hand, it has been pointed out that the structure of the housing market (lack of small units) is not suited to accommodate the household structure of the asylum population (i.e., many single people and, to a lesser extent, large families) (Adam et al. (2020). This suggests that family size matters and that single people and large families may be at greater risk of prolonged stays in collective centres. However, many so-called private dwellings are in fact shared flats that house several unrelated single persons, which could counterbalance this 'favouritism' towards families.

The impact of legal status on housing type has also been highlighted in various countries (Baier and Siegert 2018; Borevi and Bengtsson 2014; Doherty 2012; Murdie 2008). From what we know from field observations in asylum centres in Switzerland (Alberti 2020; ECRE 2015), we expect the same logic to apply: "the closer a new arrival comes to full citizenship status, the less legitimate we would expect restrictions in their autonomy [in the housing market] to appear" (Borevi and Bengtsson 2014: 2603). Specifically,

recognized refugees (with a 'B' permit) would get an apartment more quickly than holders of provisional admission/subsidiary protection (the 'F' permit), and even more so than the asylum seekers (the 'N' permit) whose procedure is still pending. In short, we expect the chances to move out of collective centres to reflect the hierarchy of residence permits ($N < F < B$).

Studies also stress the role of social networks in the chances of accessing independent housing (Adam et al. 2019; Berger 2008; Francis and Hiebert 2014; Hanley et al. 2018; Murdie 2008; Wyckaert et al. 2020). In addition to family and friendship networks, the size of ethnic communities plays an important role in the integration process (Adam et al. 2020). Belonging to the same 'ethnic background' or national community can provide access to information and support in the search for housing (Adam et al. 2020: 206). The logic of housing attribution for asylum migrants within subsidized shared flats may also accelerate the relocation of larger nationality groups: whenever possible, Swiss authorities group unrelated people of the same nationality together, thus following the logic of encouraging 'subgroup identities' (see Borevi and Bengtsson 2014: 2604).

The temporal and geographical context is not to be overlooked. The so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015-2016 impacted reception structures in many European countries (Werner et al. 2018), including Switzerland (Alberti 2020). Hence, it is expected that 2015 might be a turning point in the likelihood of moving into private accommodation due to a 'saturation effect' of available (subsidized) flats. In addition, as in other countries, such as Germany (Adam et al. 2020; Werner et al. 2018), Austria (Rosenberger and König 2012) and Belgium (Wyckaert et al. 2020), there are significant subnational differences in the reception and support conditions for asylum migrants in Switzerland (Alberti 2020). Asylum migrants are randomly assigned to a canton with no option to change it, and the canton of attribution strongly influences their housing trajectories (ECRE 2015). In 2015, for example, some cantons (Aargau, Glarus, Zug, Appenzell Innerrhoden) housed almost all asylum social assistance beneficiaries in collective centres, while others (Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Ticino) made very little use of them (OFS 2016). These intercantonal discrepancies can be explained in particular by financial (according to the respective costs of the different types of housing in each canton (Alberti 2020)) and political (as collective centres are generally not well accepted by the population) considerations. Finally, access to independent housing is more difficult in urban areas (Berger 2008), and asylum migrants can face difficulties in finding a flat in small and densely populated cantons (such as Geneva and Basel-Stadt) with tight housing markets (Alberti 2020), especially when there is a shortage of subsidized flats (Adam et al. 2020).

3. Analytical strategy

3.1. Data

We used data from the Swiss population register (STATPOP) for the period 2012-2019. The register contains information on different demographic dimensions for all persons living legally in the country on December 31 each year. The variables include gender, age, marital status, country of birth, residence permit, municipality of residence, and dates of immigration and emigration. The data also document the type of housing—private or collective—in which people live.

To be identified as an asylum migrant, one must hold an “N” or “F” permit on December 31 the year of their arrival to Switzerland (i.e., when they are first observed in the data). The N permit is the asylum seekers’ permit and is for people whose asylum request is being examined by the authorities (Art. 42 *AsylA*). The F permit is a provisional admission that allows temporary stay in the territory for rejected asylum seekers that Switzerland cannot deport (either because sending them back would put their lives at risk or merely for practical reasons, Art. 83 *FNA*) (Bertrand 2019). The residence permit that allows the identification of asylum migrants is only available on a yearly basis. This means that a few housing trajectories are not observable from these data, such as those relating to individuals for whom the asylum claim is promptly rejected (e.g., Dublin procedure) and those who are quickly recognized as refugees. Specifically, individuals who applied for asylum and left Switzerland before December 31 during their first year of arrival are not recorded in the data. In addition, individuals who obtained refugee status during this time window cannot be identified as asylum migrants. This is because when people are recognized as refugees, they receive a B permit. As the B permit is also issued to foreigners who have obtained a residence permit in Switzerland for professional or family reasons, recognized refugees who obtained this permit the same year as their arrival in the country cannot be distinguished from other migrant populations. Minors are excluded from the analysis because housing allocation procedures and reception facilities differ considerably for this population. The study population comprises 50,871 asylum seekers and refugees aged 18 or older.

3.2. Methods

We used event history models to analyse the transitions out of collective centres. Individuals are at risk from arrival to Switzerland (at the earliest on January 1, 2012) until a transition to private housing, emigration, death, or the end of observation (December 31, 2019). The data document the exact date of arrival in Switzerland, emigration, and

death. Housing transitions are available on a yearly basis. All trajectories start in a federal collective centre. When they are observed (i.e., on December 31 each year), asylum migrants are classified as living in a federal or cantonal collective centre (event=0) or private accommodation (event=1). The observation period ranges from 1 to 2922 days (8 years).

Because events can only occur within certain intervals (i.e., between December 31 of year t and December 31 of year $t+1$), we use event history models applied to interval-censored survival time data using the `icenReg` package in R. In contrast to continuous survival time data, we define a time interval within which the event is known to have occurred. The lower and upper intervals correspond to the last time the person was observed in a collective centre and the first time the person was in private accommodation, respectively. First, Kaplan–Meier survival curves are used to estimate the (median) time spent in collective centres. These curves describe the proportion of individuals who did not experience a transition to private housing over time. Second, using a Cox proportional hazard model, we examine the association between individual and contextual factors and the speed of access to private housing. These models are well suited to deal with right-censored trajectories—a common experience among asylum migrants for whom rejection of an asylum application can lead to forced departure.

Missing values are an important limitation of these analyses: approximately one-third of the trajectories have at least one missing value on housing type (Table A.2 for details on missing values). In most cases, we could impute plausible values based on the following assumptions. First, individuals for whom the first housing type was missing and who arrived at the end of the year (i.e., between September and December) were assigned to the collective centre category. This situation applied to half of the missing values (14% of the study population), likely due to registration delays. Second, individuals for whom the first type of housing was missing and the second type of housing was collective were categorized as living in a collective centre the first year (2.6%). Additional analysis confirmed that moves to collective centres after being lodged in private housing are very uncommon. Third, individuals for whom the first type of housing was missing and the second type of housing was private were assumed to have spent half the duration of the first observation year in collective housing and the other half in private housing (5.1%). The sensitivity analysis in Table A.3. shows the results for the subset of trajectories without missing values; the results are consistent with those that include trajectories with imputed values. Finally, trajectories that had two consecutive missing values were dropped from the analyses (7% of the study population).

3.3. Variables

The dependent variable is the type of housing, which is available on a yearly basis. “Collective accommodation” refers mainly to “ordinary” cantonal centres but may also include other types of collective accommodations, e.g., detention centres for the purpose of removal or underground shelters that have sometimes been opened in an emergency to alleviate the lack of accommodation (ECRE 2015). In turn, “private housing” can cover a variety of situations, including subsidized and nonsubsidized housing, shared apartments between unrelated refugees, and (rare) cases of people living with “host families”.⁸

Most explanatory variables are measured on December 31 of the first year following arrival (i.e., when people are first observed in the data). Individual characteristics include age at arrival, gender, marital status at arrival, citizenship, and residence permit. Family composition at arrival and whether individuals are accompanied by their spouses or child(ren) is unknown. Marital status is used as an indicator of family configuration, although we expect women to be more often accompanied by their families than men. Because we expect group size to matter in the housing allocation process, we group nationalities into five categories according to their respective share in the asylum migrant population: Eritreans, Syrians, Afghans, other large groups (Sri Lanka, Iraq, Somalia, China/Tibet, Turkey, Iran, Nigeria, and Ethiopia), and other small groups.

Information on the residence permit is only available on a yearly basis. As a result, the order of events (i.e., permit changes and housing transitions) is not easily determined. More importantly, asylum migrants who obtained a B permit during the first year were excluded from the analysis. Including the residence permit as a time-varying covariate would, therefore, result in biased estimates, i.e., the effect of the N permit would be overestimated and that of the B permit underestimated. Instead, we considered the legal pathway (which permits the person has obtained at the end of the trajectory). Thus, we assessed the *reciprocal* influence of (or association between) permits and housing trajectories, although, theoretically, legal status is more likely to influence the housing trajectory than the other way around. We considered three distinct legal pathways: asylum seekers (N permit), provisionally admitted (F permit), and recognized refugees (B permit⁹). Contextual variables included the cohort (year) of arrival and the canton to which the asylum migrant was first assigned.

⁸ This last case mainly concerns unaccompanied children who are not taken into account in our analyses.

⁹ Permit B trajectories do not exclusively include people recognized as refugees. Some people who were initially granted a subsidiary protection may later receive a B permit if they can demonstrate that they are sufficiently integrated.

4. Results

Table 1 describes the number of person-days (time at risk) and transitions to private housing (event) by individual characteristics. Men account for the largest share of person-days (73%), and the transition rate to private housing is lower for men than for women. The age structure is considerably young, with one-fifth of the individuals aged 35 years or older. The differences in transition rates are relatively small across age groups; in general, the older the individuals are, the higher the transition rate will be. Most asylum migrants are single on arrival (73%), a quarter are married, and only 3% are divorced or widowed. Married individuals have the highest transition rate, followed by divorced/widowed individuals and singles. Eritreans are the most represented group (30%), followed by Afghans (16%) and Syrians (13%). Other large nationality groups account for a quarter of the time at risk, and other less represented nationalities account for 16%. Syrians have the highest transition rate, and other small groups have the lowest. As with many countries, Switzerland received an increased number of asylum applications in 2015. This cohort accounted for 37% of the time at risk.

	Person-days	%	Event	Rate
Gender				
Men	18619766	72.6	23055	0.0012
Women	7033251	27.4	13629	0.0019
Age group				
18-24	11477490	44.7	14571	0.0013
25-34	8920990	34.8	13320	0.0015
35-44	3525957	13.7	5746	0.0016
45-54	1112911	4.3	1887	0.0017
55+	615669	2.4	1160	0.0019
Marital status				
single	18783548	73.2	23692	0.0013
married	5991755	23.4	11757	0.0020
separated	877712	3.4	1235	0.0014
Citizenship				
Eritrea	7585952	29.6	11400	0.0015
Syria	3205669	12.5	6975	0.0022
Afghanistan	4163021	16.2	5807	0.0014
Other large groups	6605597	25.7	8857	0.0013
Other small groups	4092777	16.0	3645	0.0009
Cohort (year of arrival)				
2012	3982933	15.5	5066	0.0013
2013	2297852	9.0	3521	0.0015
2014	4304745	16.8	7429	0.0017
2015	9463911	36.9	13494	0.0014
2016	2948692	11.5	3689	0.0013
2017	1619842	6.3	2206	0.0014
2018	1035042	4.0	1279	0.0012

Table 1: Number of person-days and housing transitions by individual and contextual characteristics, asylum migrants aged 18 or older in Switzerland (2012-2019). Note: Authors' own calculation. The number of person-days is the exact number of days for individuals who emigrate, die or are right-censored on December 31, 2019; for those experiencing a transition, the event is assumed to have occurred in the middle of the interval. Source: Swiss population register.

Kaplan–Meier estimates (Figure 2) show the proportion of asylum migrants who live in a collective centre over time (from arrival and over the first eight years). Individuals are observed for a minimum of one day and a maximum of 2922 days. After one year in Switzerland, 42% had not yet experienced a transition to private housing; this proportion

was 23% after 2 years and 7% after 3 years. The median time spent in a collective centre is 318 days. Overall, 72% of asylum seekers and refugees who were registered in Switzerland between 2012 and 2019 experienced a transition to private housing (Table A.1.). Right-censoring covers a large share of the trajectories: 21% left the country during the observation period—most often due to referral to the end of the procedure—and 7% were still sheltered in a collective accommodation at the end of the observation period.

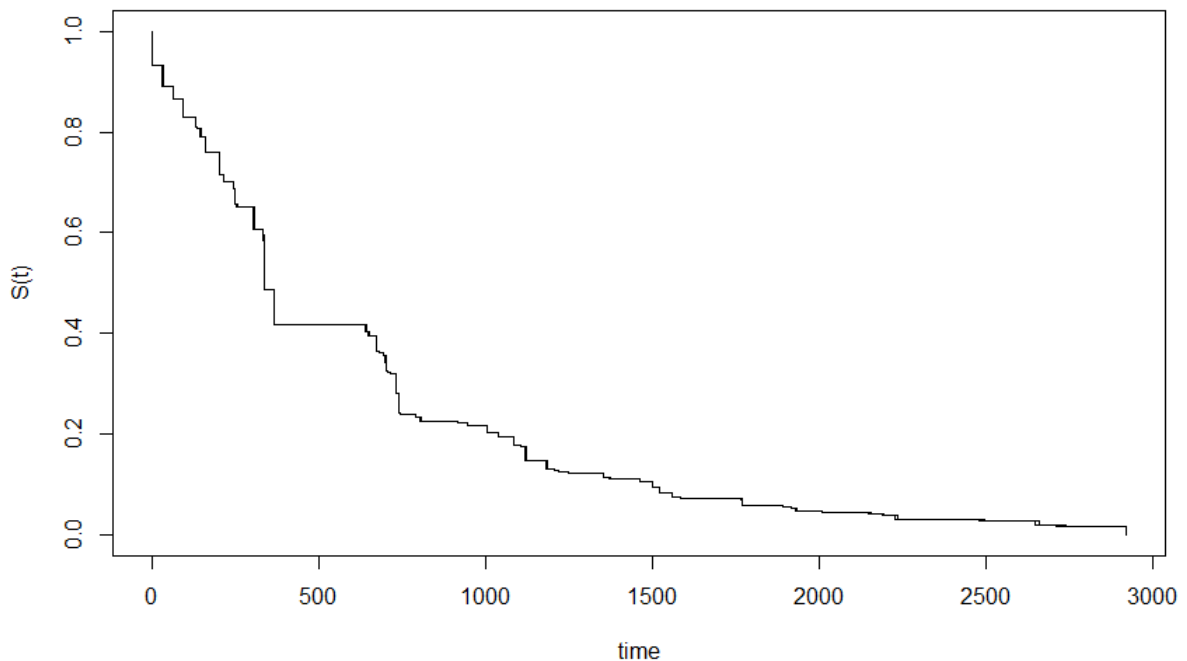


Figure 2: Kaplan–Meier survival estimate for the transition to private housing among asylum migrants over 18 years of age in Switzerland from 2012-2019. Note: Time (in days) since arrival in Switzerland. Source: Swiss population register.

Table 2 presents the results of the Cox proportional hazard models and shows variations in the time to transition to private housing as a function of individual and contextual characteristics. Model 1 presents results for individual characteristics only; Model 2 adds contextual variables. Women move into private housing more quickly than men, with a 40% higher hazard ratio. This aligns with the expectation that women are favoured when a place in private housing becomes available. The older a person is, the greater their chances will be of obtaining private housing.

Compared to singles, married individuals experience a faster transition to private housing. Separated and widowed individuals, in contrast, wait longer. However, the association between marital status and the speed of access to private housing differs by gender (Table A.4): single women access private housing 1.5 times faster than single men. In fact, the speed of access to private housing for single women is comparable to

that of married men. Marital status is a proxy for family configuration, and whether the person is accompanied by their spouse and chil(dren) is unknown. It is more common for men (single or married) to undertake asylum migration on their own and then to bring their families from abroad. In contrast, married women are generally accompanied by their families. Thus, marital status is a better reflection of family composition for women than for men. Group size also matters in housing allocation processes: Syrians make a faster transition to private housing, with a 30% higher hazard ratio; all other large groups have similar transition rates. Only asylum migrants that belong to less represented nationality groups wait longer to access private housing (although the differences are small).

The association between legal status and the speed of access to private housing reflects the permit hierarchy: the hazard ratios are the highest among recognized refugees (B permit), followed by those who obtained a provisional admission (F permit) and those for whom the decision was still pending at the end of observation (N permit). We reiterate that the permit is measured a posteriori and must be interpreted with caution. Overall, hazard ratios for individual characteristics are almost identical between Model 1 and Model 2, suggesting that, despite the quasi-autonomous management of refugee housing by the cantons, priority rules covering access to private housing apply across the country.

	Model 1 (H.R.)		Model 2 (H.R.)	
Gender				
Men (Ref.)	1,00		1,00	
Women	1,41	***	1,42	***
Age				
18-24 (Ref.)	1,00		1,00	
25-34	1,07	***	1,10	***
35-44	1,12	***	1,15	***
45-54	1,11	***	1,15	***
55+	1,20	***	1,25	***
Marital status				
Single (Ref.)	1,00		1,00	
Married	1,33		1,35	***
Separated/Divorced	0,90		0,88	***
Citizenship				
Eritrea (Ref.)	1,00		1,00	
Syria	1,28	***	1,34	***
Afghanistan	1,00		1,03	
Other large groups	1,03	**	1,08	***
Other small groups	0,90	***	0,95	*
Residence permit				
Asylum seekers (N permit) (Ref.)	1,00		1,00	
Provisionally admitted (F permit)	1,55	***	1,56	***
Recognized refugees (B permit)	1,87	***	1,94	***
Cohort (year of arrival)				
2012 (Ref.)			1,00	
2013			1,07	**
2014			1,16	***
2015			1,02	
2016			0,93	**
2017				0,98
2018				0,94
Canton fixed effects			Yes	
N Subject	50,871		50,871	

Table 2: Cox model with interval-censored data for the transition to private housing among asylum migrants over 18 years of age in Switzerland from 2012-2019. Note: H.R. = Hazard Ratio; * p < 0.05; **

p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001; Source: Swiss population register.

Contextual effects are shown in Model 2 and Figure 3. Asylum migrants who sought protection in Switzerland before 2015 make a faster transition to private housing. As expected, the pace of access then slowed following the peak of arrival in 2015, although the differences before and after 2015 are relatively small. The results also show important variations in access to private housing depending on the canton to which applicants have been assigned (Figure 3). In the cantons of Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Neuchâtel, Ticino, Lucerne, Valais, St. Gallen, and Solothurn, asylum migrants access private housing at least twice as quickly as those in the canton of Zurich (the reference canton and the largest Swiss canton). In contrast, asylum seekers assigned to the cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden, Geneva and Nidwalden wait at least twice as long. Considering that refugees do not have a choice of where to live, local policies strongly influence the living conditions of this population, and their experiences may be random and uneven.

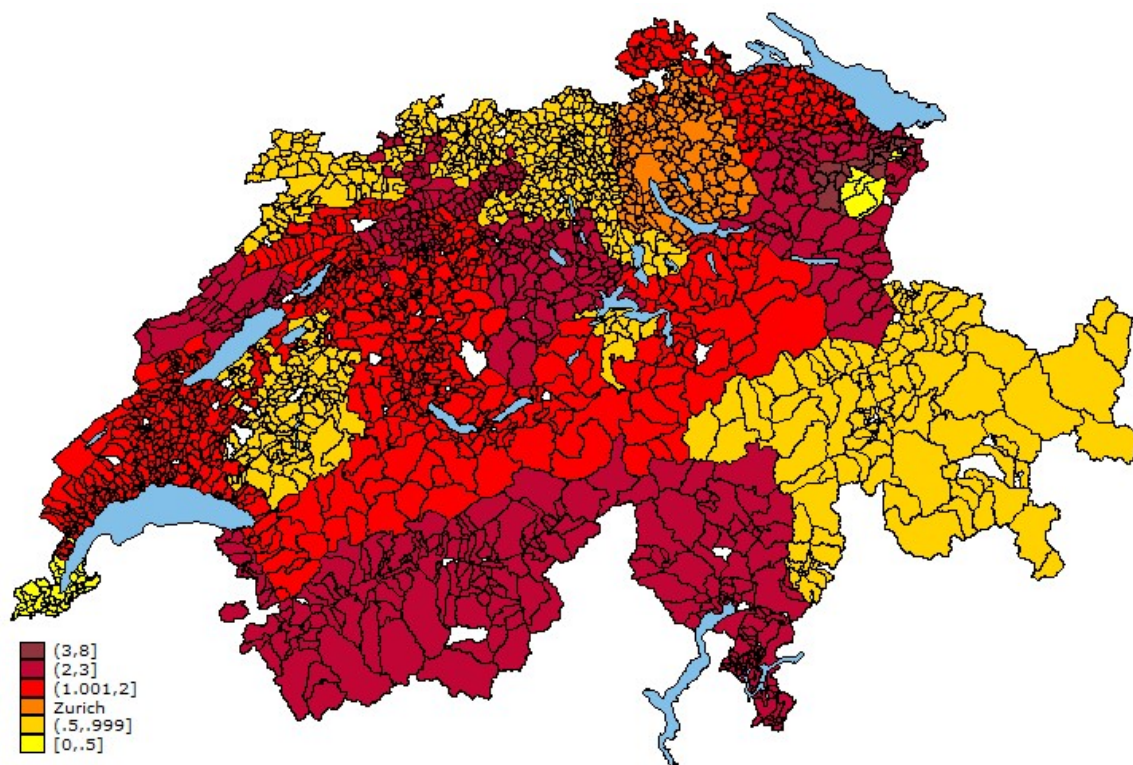


Figure 3: Cantonal differences in access to private housing among asylum migrants over 18 years of age in Switzerland from 2012-2019. Note: Hazard ratio at the cantonal level from Model 2 (Ref: Zurich). Source: Swiss population register.

5. Conclusion

This study is the first to produce quantitative insights into transitions between collective and private housing for complete cohorts of asylum migrants. Using the population register for Switzerland, we tracked the type of housing people live in over a period of up to eight years, starting from the deposition of an asylum claim. Previous studies have documented how the management of asylum procedures (e.g., dispersal policies, employment bans, length of procedures) affects different integration outcomes (Auer 2018; Hainmueller et al. 2016; Marbach et al. 2018). This study takes a complementary look by focusing on the logistics of housing attribution and different rationales governing these procedures.

We found that despite a quasi-autonomous management of refugee housing by regions (cantons), priority rules covering access to private housing apply across the country. When choosing between different profiles, women, older asylum migrants, married individuals, and members of larger national groups are favoured in access to private housing. The results are consistent with the expectation that collective centres are perceived as unfit environments for women and families, prompting more rapid placement of these groups in private housing. In addition, the belief that people from the same cultural background are better candidates to share a home may be one of the reasons why the largest national groups access private housing more quickly. Another reason may lie in the anticipation of recognition of refugee status (or subsidiary protection) for the most represented groups and, therefore, a favourable recommendation for transfer to private housing by the local authorities. Nevertheless, the time spent in collective centres largely depends on the region to which a claimant is assigned, indicating the very little agency asylum migrants have during their first years of residence.

There are several limitations that should be mentioned to properly assess the significance of the results. Information on residence permits allowing the identification of asylum migrants is only available annually, meaning that not all trajectories can be included. Those who promptly obtain refugee status are indistinguishable from other international migrants and are excluded from the analyses. This likely results in an overestimation of the time spent in collective centres—these cases are theoretically more likely to make a fast transition out of such centres. As a consequence, transition rates for individuals with a legal trajectory leading to a B permit (recognized refugee) are likely underestimated. Moreover, the population register contains a limited number of variables. Individual characteristics linked to integration outcomes, such as human capital, are not included, nor are other personal situations (e.g., (mental) health issues)

that could affect the time spent in collective centres. Another limitation concerns the type of moves considered. A move to private housing is considered an absorbing state, although a few trajectories (5%) include at least one move from private housing back to collective accommodation. This may be the case for people who have been transferred to a private home and are subsequently denied refugee status (or granted subsidiary protection). In addition, people may experience repeated transfers to different collective centres. This situation may have a significant impact on integration outcomes and that we did not cover in this single-event framework. Although documenting the specificities of more complex trajectories is beyond the scope of this study, it represents an important avenue for future research.

One must also consider that although a transfer to private accommodation is usually eagerly awaited, private housing reflects a variety of situations and may not be a desirable outcome for all. For instance, individuals placed in shared flats with strangers (although more intimate than large collective centres with dormitories) may not completely feel at home. Some private homes may also be located in remote areas where access to public transport or contact with the community network is limited. As long as asylum migrants cannot arrange their housing on their own, they will remain at risk of being placed in accommodations that are not suited to their needs. This is a significant issue, given that the search for housing can prove very challenging for asylum migrants, whether due to a reluctance of landlords to rent to this population (especially those with subsidiary protection) or because of a difficult integration into the labour market. Asylum migrants who succeed in finding employment often end up in the lower-paid sector of the labour market. As a result, when seeking an apartment, asylum migrants often find themselves at the bottom of the list of applicants. In tight, competitive housing markets, such as those in most Swiss cities, the chances of finding an apartment may be substantially reduced.

More generally, difficulties in accessing decent housing are another facet of asylum seekers' uncertainty regarding their right to stay in the territory (Bertrand 2019, 2020; de Coulon 2019; Gold 2019). A precarious, 'in-between' status is reflected in the near invisibility of asylum centres since they are located in anonymous buildings in the city (Alberti 2020), in isolated locations (Adam et al. 2020), or buried underground (Del Biaggio and Rey 2017). Where people live shapes their opportunities for economic and social inclusion or imposes barriers to these goals. Nevertheless, the residential instability and insecurity imposed on asylum migrants is often paradoxically at odds with the integration objectives expected of this population. The provision of appropriate

housing adapted to the needs and structure of this population could substantially alleviate the inclusion challenges they often experience.

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