



Assessing housing inequality trends in Switzerland: where do we stand in comparison to Europe?

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Received: 14 October 2025 – Revised: 11 August 2026 – Accepted: 17 August 2026 – Published: 11 September 2026

Abstract. Rising housing costs and a shortage of affordable housing are growing concerns all over Europe. This paper examines the housing crisis through the broader concept of housing inequality, focusing on disparities in housing costs, overcrowding, and housing quality in Switzerland. We situate the development of housing inequalities in Switzerland within the broader landscape of housing in Europe. Drawing on EU-SILC data, we disentangle differences between tenure types and income quintiles in housing outcomes. While average housing costs have remained stable over the past two decades and housing quality remains high by European standards, significant inequalities persist. Despite the apparent stability in national indicators, public concerns about a housing crisis have intensified. We argue that this discrepancy can be explained by the local nature of the housing crisis, which is not reflected in aggregate data, and the fact that people entering the housing market or those in need of a change in their housing situation are most affected due to the only moderate tenant protection.

1 Introduction

Over the last decade, evidence of a global housing crisis has triggered a growing interest in its causes and its differential consequences on people's well-being. While policy and academic debates have long primarily focused on housing unaffordability, an increasing number of publications focus on the broader concept of housing inequality by underlining the need to address the differential impact of the global housing crisis on different groups of people (CEB, 2018; James et al., 2024; Tayefi Nasrabadi et al., 2024).

Housing inequality is a complex topic as it can be both the cause and the consequence of income and wealth inequalities. James et al. (2024) define housing inequality as “the unequal distribution of housing opportunities and resources [...] based on households' socio-economic conditions and demographic characteristics”. We adopt an operational definition of housing inequality referring to unequal outcomes in terms of *affordability*, *accessibility*, *quality of housing*, and *security of tenure* (Arbaci et al., 2026).

As residential choices are shaped by constraints – financial resources, social networks, availability, etc. (Karlen et al., 2022; Rérat, 2020) – those with less resources often have to accept a dwelling that does not satisfy the full bundle of their

needs and preferences regarding size, location, price, and other qualities. A lack of adequate housing has spillover effects that exacerbate other inequalities, leading to poor socio-economic outcomes, which can result – among others – in an impediment to intergenerational mobility (CEB, 2018). Accordingly, even though housing inequalities are clearly associated with wealth and income inequalities, they address issues that go beyond affordability that are embedded in specific housing regimes, socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Precisely because of the embeddedness of housing inequality in housing and planning policies, market dynamics, and socio-demographic developments, Tayefi Nasrabadi et al. (2024) identify the need for comparative studies looking at housing inequality across different housing regimes, providing a better understanding of the links between aspects of policy and market (de)regulation, and housing inequality. This article aims at placing the development of housing inequalities in Switzerland within the wider European context by addressing the following research questions: What are the housing inequality trends in Switzerland? How do housing outcomes compare with other European countries? We focus our quantitative analysis on inequalities in the affordability and quality of housing, guided by a multidimensional

conceptual framework of housing inequality and a thorough analysis of the Swiss housing system – integrating policies, tenancy law, market dynamics, and current debates. After a discussion of these results, we conclude by summarizing the trends in housing inequality development in Switzerland within the broader European context and outline policy implications.

2 Conceptual framework: four dimensions of housing inequality

Housing inequalities can broadly be defined with reference to four dimensions: *affordability*, *accessibility*, *quality of housing* (which covers qualities of the dwelling itself – daylight, heating, sanitary installations, mould, available floor space, etc. – and extend to neighbourhood qualities like noise, pollution, violence, crime, and access to amenities), and *security of tenure* (Arbaci et al., 2026). Typically, inequalities are discussed in relation to households' economic situation, ethnicity and race, tenure status, and location (James et al., 2024).

Affordability is at the core of related debates (Haffner and Hulse, 2021). There are several approaches to measuring housing affordability, each with pros and cons, but they all share considerations of income, housing costs, and some minimal standard of housing consumption (Galster and Lee, 2021). While affordability research usually focuses on attractive metropolitan regions (Haffner and Hulse, 2021), research from the US shows that not only increasing rents in tight, high-demand housing markets but also decreasing incomes in shrinking cities create an increase in the financial burden of housing costs (Seymour et al., 2020). Housing costs have been found to account for a larger and increasing proportion of household income for lower-income households versus higher-income households, for tenants versus homeowners, and for urban versus more rural contexts in many European countries (Acolin and Reina, 2022; Dewilde, 2018). As Haffner and Hulse (2021) show, affordability problems are not only connected to financial stress, poverty, and overcrowding but also to (i) wealth accumulation, with property owners – homeowners and landlords – accruing wealth thanks to the influx of capital into residential real estate (Wetzstein, 2017); (ii) difficulties in housing access for younger generations, depending increasingly on intergenerational transfers of property and wealth (Eurofound, 2023; Filandri and Bertolini, 2016; Tayefi Nasrabadi et al., 2024); and (iii) spatial inequality, with lower-income households being priced out of more central urban areas, thus bearing the costs of longer commuting distance and worse access to urban amenities (Bricocoli and Peverini, 2024).

Access to housing can be constrained by a lack of affordability, but there are other dimensions of access to housing that relate to the allocation of housing and are broader than the ability and willingness to pay (Wolfgring and Peverini, 2024). Eligibility criteria and allocation procedures of so-

cial or cooperative housing, information asymmetries, lack of social capital, language barriers, and discriminatory practices may render housing inaccessible even though it is affordable. Research shows that poor and marginalized population groups face difficulties in accessing affordable housing due to intransparency in allocation processes and long waiting lists in the social housing sector (Herrault, 2024; Wolfgring and Peverini, 2024), or because language barriers and a lack of social capital complicate access to social housing and less profit-oriented rental submarkets (Aigner, 2019). For example, the share of migrants in housing cooperatives is significantly lower than the overall percentage of migrants in the city of Zurich (Duyne Barenstein and Koch, 2020; WBG Zürich, 2021), hinting at information asymmetries and allocation processes that tend to work in favour of more established residents. Several studies show unequal access to the rental market and to mortgages due to racial, ethnic, and migratory discrimination (for Switzerland: Auer et al., 2019; Grotti et al., 2024; Lukes et al., 2019; Meloni and Debrunner, 2026).

An affordability problem means that some households cannot live in housing conditions that fulfil minimal standards of *housing quality*. We focus on the quality of a dwelling and overcrowding, i.e. when the number of residents exceeds the number of rooms considered adequate (Eurostat, 2021). While earlier work assumed overcrowding to be rooted in cultural preferences, later work stressed that minority households' choices are significantly constrained through unequal access and affordability of housing (Coulter, 2025), and that overcrowding is associated with the degree of urbanization (Hick et al., 2022). However, there is clearly a trade-off between living space per capita and central, more expensive areas (Jansen, 2020). Overcrowding and housing of low structural quality lead to stress and poor mental health (Galster and Lee, 2021). Moreover, low housing quality in the form of poor insulation and heating contributes to energy poverty (Bardazzi et al., 2021; Chen and Feng, 2022; Riva et al., 2021). In extreme cases, substandard housing – overcrowding, darkness, leaks/dampness, and lack of basic sanitation facilities – is studied under the term of (severe) housing deprivation (Hick et al., 2022). Research found higher risks of housing deprivation among vulnerable groups – young people, people with disabilities, migrants from new EU countries, and one-person households – and in thinly populated areas (Grotti et al., 2024; Hick et al., 2022).

Security of tenure is discussed as a dimension of housing inequality mostly in relation to differences between homeowners and tenants (Fenelon and Mawhorter, 2021), and with regard to tenant protection potentially differing between countries and different types of tenants (e.g. long-term vs short-term rentals; Debrunner et al., 2025; Kettunen and Ruonavaara, 2021). Housing security is a pressing issue for tenants facing increasing rents and (threats of) eviction (Dimitrakou, 2025; Gehrig, 2024; Raymond et al., 2016). Research from Switzerland shows that lower-income house-

holds are more exposed to this risk (Kauer et al., 2026). Housing security is also discussed with regard to homeowners who – due to joblessness or low pension incomes – might have difficulties in keeping up with mortgage payments, property taxes, and saving for refurbishment and maintenance (Fenelon and Mawhorter, 2021).

A wide range of publications focus on factors that have enhanced housing inequality over the last decades, especially housing affordability. At a macro level, the commodification and global financialization of housing is considered one of the main trends that have led to hiking housing prices in many parts of the world (Aalbers, 2017; Wetstein, 2017), besides other, more local, factors such as urban restructuring, local employment opportunities, and demographic trends (Haffner and Hulse, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Nelson et al., 2024). In specific countries and contexts, it is recognized that housing inequalities have increased as a consequence of the gradual withdrawal of the state from the housing sector, the privatization of the social housing stock, and the deregulation of the private rental market (Arbaci, 2019; Dewilde and De Decker, 2016; Herrault, 2024).

In Switzerland, there is evidence that housing inequalities are growing as a consequence of multiple factors (Auer et al., 2019; Dimitrakou, 2025; Gehriger, 2024; Kauer et al., 2026). However, so far, housing challenges have not been discussed with explicit reference to the concept of housing inequalities and by covering more than one related dimension. We seek to fill this gap by focusing on affordability and housing quality (quality of the dwelling, per capita living space, and overcrowding) as access and security of tenure cannot directly be examined with the available data. We discuss inequalities by tenure status, income, and degree of urbanization – a choice informed by the literature – which identifies these as key determinants of housing inequality.

3 Characteristics of the Swiss housing system

3.1 Housing policy in Switzerland

Switzerland is a small country with a population of about 9 million people, with over 8 out of 10 inhabitants living in areas classified as urban. It is the country in Europe with the lowest rate of homeownership (Eurostat, 2026a). A total of 61.0 % of the dwellings are being rented out, and only 35.8 % are occupied by their owners¹ (3.2 % of dwellings are provided on other terms, e.g. as employee accommodation; BFS, 2025a). In cities, this percentage is significantly lower; in Zurich, for example, only 8 % of all dwellings are owner occupied (Stadt Zürich, 2026). Whereas privately

owned detached single-family houses is the typology that prevails in peri-urban and rural areas, most rental housing in urban areas is found in apartment buildings. Overall, the Swiss rental housing stock is primarily owned by private individuals (45 %) but increasingly² by companies (43 %; BFS, 2026a). Non-profit housing, provided primarily by housing cooperatives, only plays a marginal role at the national level, with 9 % of rental dwellings owned by housing cooperatives and 4 % by the public sector (BFS, 2026a).

Swiss housing policy is embedded within a federalist state consisting of three levels of governance: the Confederation, 26 cantons, and 2121 municipalities. The federalist state adheres to the principle of subsidiarity: higher levels of government only intervene when issues cannot be effectively dealt with at lower levels, granting a high degree of autonomy to municipalities and cantons. Federal legislation can be subject to referenda by voters or cantons. These structural conditions prevent the implementation of urban demands for a more redistributive housing policy (Lawson, 2009).

Swiss housing policy remained remarkably stable, albeit weak, over the last decades (Cuennet et al., 2002:23; Lawson, 2009:53; Müller, 2021). It has not seen any substantive path changes since the 1950s. While some decommodification policies were introduced during the two world wars, the construction of new housing was quickly liberalized after the Second World War. Tenant protection and rent control in the existing building stock was partly deregulated, and there was a general return to a housing system with strong corporatist structures that gives priority to the private housing and construction industry (Müller, 2021:111). The marginal role of public and non-profit housing can be attributed to the fact that many of the processes associated, in an international context, with the neoliberalization of housing in the 1970s and 1980s could already be observed in Switzerland in the 1950s (Müller, 2021).

Swiss housing policies focus on two distinct areas: the regulation of tenancy matters, and the promotion of housing construction and homeownership (Cuennet et al., 2002). While legislation regarding tenancy is national, the promotion and support to housing construction is considered a shared responsibility of all three layers of government. Financial support to the supply of housing in the form of loans or grants has been only sporadic and limited (Lawson, 2009). In 2003, the federal government replaced the initial law passed in 1974 by the “Housing Support Act”, with the aim of supporting the housing supply for low-income households and to foster access to homeownership. The Act details three financial instruments to attain these goals: direct support to non-profit housing organizations, direct support to owner-occupied housing, and indirect support to non-profit housing organizations through loans and guarantees. How-

¹Most owners buy their property with a mortgage in Switzerland. Despite the low homeownership rate, Switzerland ranks among the countries with the highest mortgage debt as a share of GDP. This is attributed to high real estate prices, fiscal advantages, and the general availability of mortgages, although relatively strict eligibility requirements apply (Fahrlander, 2020).

²In 2003, only 29.7 % of the rental housing stock was owned by companies (BFS, 2007). This increase is mirrored by a decrease in ownership by individuals (56.3 % in 2003).

ever, the same year the Housing Support Act was approved by the parliament, direct support was suspended following the federal budget relief programme and, ever since, only the indirect support measures have been in place at the federal level.

At the cantonal level, housing policies are very limited. In fact, only nine out of 26 cantons have adopted a legal framework to support the construction of affordable non-profit housing.

In the absence of encompassing federal or cantonal housing policies, the main political level in the domain of housing has historically been, and continues to be, the municipality. Most larger cities in Switzerland primarily rely on housing cooperatives for the provision of affordable housing with public housing playing a minor role. In fact, even though public housing schemes exist in most cities, they play a tangible role only in the city of Zurich. A significant degree of variation in the type and degree of support provided to housing can be noted across the country's major cities. Several cities offer financial support to access land, leases of public land, and technical assistance for the development of new projects.

3.2 Swiss tenancy law

Switzerland has a second-generation moderate rental regulation (Bodmer, 2023; Kettunen and Ruonavaara, 2021), aiming at restricting rent increases and preventing excessive initial rents. Landlords are allowed to increase rents in the case of rising costs, i.e. in the case of increased operating and maintenance costs, or changes in the reference interest rate.³ In the case of renovations that enhance the value of the property (i.e. those that go beyond measures that simply maintain the housing standard), 50 %–70 % of the investment costs can be transferred to tenants. For asking rents, the Swiss tenancy law only prohibits rents that generate excessive returns. Because the threshold for excessive returns is not defined, the legal situation remains unclear and, while addressed in part by Federal Court rulings, is yet to be fully clarified through an ordinance (BWO, 2026). With regard to the end of a rental agreement, the tenancy law stipulates that contracts can be cancelled on a 3 months' notice by landlords without any reasons (Debrunner, 2024). Cancellations can be contested by tenants, and the law defines a number of cases in which cancellations are deemed abusive (e.g. when used to enforce a rent increase). This is an important feature of the Swiss tenancy law that also applies to rent increases: while the law regulates rental contracts, there are no control mechanisms, and it is the tenants' responsibility to check the legality of initial rents, rent increases, and cancellations, and for contesting

them in court. Significant knowledge and financial resources are required for this (Debrunner et al., 2025). The Swiss tenants' union's most important activity – besides campaigning for more tenant protection – is offering legal advice in matters of tenancy law.

3.3 Current housing issues and challenges

Currently, the main concerns in housing debates in Switzerland's main cities are affordability, "renovictions", and the housing shortage. In the last years, the vacancy rate has dropped to an average of 1.08 % and continues to be much lower in certain regions (e.g. as low as 0.07 % in Zurich) in 2024 (BFS, 2025b). Since 2000, rents have increased by 30 % and house prices by 80 % (BWO, 2023). The weak support to non-profit housing at the national level, along with limited tenant protection, has led in many places to a housing crisis. Concurrently, public perceptions of the housing crisis in Switzerland have intensified, as reflected by growing media coverage, popular initiatives, parliamentary debates, and even mass demonstrations (Manz, 2025; SDA, 2026).

This growing concern has been driven by several interrelated factors. Switzerland has seen a relatively steady population growth in the last three decades. Starting from close to 7 million inhabitants in 1990, Switzerland now has a population of roughly 9.1 million (as of December 2025; BFS, 2026b). This, along with the trend towards smaller households, leads to a growing housing demand. Additionally, the Swiss Spatial Planning Act strictly limits the amount of buildable land by promoting densification, and financialized actors have become increasingly active in the Swiss housing market.

In large cities (and increasingly also smaller cities), financialized actors like pension funds, banks, insurances, and real estate companies are pushing renovations and demolitions. The housing crisis is also affecting tourist regions, where affluent households seeking secondary homes price out the local population (ARE, BWO, and SECO, et al., 2024). In both cases, the increasing demand for investment opportunities in real estate fuels a loss of affordable housing. Research indicates that financial interests largely drive urban densification in Switzerland as there is no legislation at the national level to prevent the displacement and social exclusion of tenants resulting from extensive renovations or demolition and total reconstruction in the course of densification (Debrunner, 2024). There is clear evidence that renovations with cancellation of rental contracts and total reconstructions lead to the displacement of lower-income residents, along with vulnerable groups such as single-parent households and people without Swiss citizenship (Kauer et al., 2025; Kaufmann et al., 2023).

These dynamics have contributed to the steady shrinking of affordable housing, raising concerns among residents and prompting calls for more inclusive and sustainable housing policies, or more construction activity and less regulation,

³Since 2008, the reference interest rate, defined based on the average mortgage rates of Swiss banks, has been updated quarterly by the Federal Office for Housing (Bundesamt für Wohnungswesen, BWO), and landlords are allowed to increase rents according to this rate even in the case of fixed or no mortgages.

depending on the political orientation. Cities such as Zurich, Basel, and Bern are committed to building more non-profit housing (Koch, 2021), but, due to a lack of buildable land and high land prices, also cooperatives are demolishing and rebuilding, resulting in increasing rents in the non-profit sector, too. On a national level, these debates have not entailed any changes to the regulatory framework of rental housing, but some initiatives promoting tenants' rights have led to stricter regulation at cantonal level, and laws on housing protection have been adopted by the cantons of Basel-Stadt, Geneva, and Vaud. They provide a stronger protection from evictions and unproportional rent increases due to refurbishments or demolitions.

4 Data and methods

To study trends in housing inequality, we draw on EU-SILC data, i.e. the survey on income and living conditions that is carried out in the EU and other European countries, including Switzerland. SILC annually surveys 8000 households across Switzerland, which corresponds to roughly 18 000 people. The survey contains questions on topics such as health, quality of life, childcare, and housing conditions. Survey data for Switzerland are available from 2007 and were analysed up to 2024, the most recent year with available data at the time. However, some variables have been introduced later or were discontinued in 2021, which is why the range of years analysed varies.

We chose SILC as it provides microdata that are not available in register data, e.g. housing quality, total housing costs, and disposable income. Additionally, as SILC is carried out across European countries, using these data allows us to put Swiss results into a broader European perspective using Eurostat and OECD databases. SILC data allow us to assess housing inequalities through descriptive bivariate analysis, exploring relations between variables of interest (housing cost burden, overcrowding) and income quintiles or tenure status.

Survey data that rely on self-reported information tend to be less accurate than register data due to recall problems, social desirability, and non-response bias. Additionally, SILC data also have their specific shortcomings. While income variables refer to the previous year, housing costs are calculated based on the current year. In case of, e.g., rent increases or fluctuations in income, this might not give an accurate representation of housing affordability. Furthermore, housing costs cannot be divided into "actual" housing costs (rent, mortgage payments, maintenance, etc.) and housing energy costs, making a quantitative investigation of energy poverty impossible. Also, SILC data remain superficial in several domains: variables on housing quality do not contain information on, e.g., the *degree* to which households are unable to keep their house warm or the *severity* of leaks. Most impor-

tantly, it has been pointed out that items might have different interpretations across countries (Haffner, 2015).

Our intention is to "make do with what we have" (Haffner, 2015) and provide a broad analysis of housing inequalities in Switzerland on which future research may build, exploring more specific research questions with other data to overcome these shortcomings. The comparison with other European countries should be interpreted with caution but nevertheless provides an important point of reference.

Key variables used in this paper are *housing costs*; *disposable income*; *overcrowded household*; the *(in)ability to keep one's house warm*; and the *absence/presence of leaking roofs, damp walls, floors, etc.* The variable *housing costs* refers to the total monthly costs associated with housing, meaning rent and utilities (water, electricity, gas, heating) for tenants, along with mortgage interest payments, structural insurance, costs for maintenance and repairs, and taxes for homeowners. *Disposable income* includes the sum of gross incomes, social insurance benefits, allowances, and incomes on capital (from which taxes, inter-household cash transfers, and social insurance contributions are deducted as a sum of personal incomes/transfers of all household members and at the household level). The variable *overcrowded household* measures whether a household has fewer than the number of rooms considered adequate at its disposal. To have an adequate number of rooms, a dwelling needs "one room for the household, per couple, for each adult single person, per pair of single people of the same gender aged 12–17, for each single person aged 12–17 and not included in the previous category, and per pair of children under 12" (Eurostat, 2023). The two variables *(in)ability to keep one's house warm* and *absence/presence of leaking roofs, damp walls, floors, etc.* capture answers about whether households are able to keep their house warm, and whether they live in a dwelling with a leaking roof, or damp or rot in window frames, floors, or walls.

We use weighted household data (vs individual data). While the initially drawn stratified sample is representative of the Swiss population, households and individuals differ in their probability of responding. Households resembling non-responding households are attributed higher weights, and households that are more likely to respond, lower weights (the same applies to individuals). In a last step, weights are calibrated so that socio-economic characteristics of the weighted sample and the Swiss population correspond (FSO, 2024).

5 Contextualizing housing inequalities in Switzerland and figures on housing inequality

5.1 Housing costs

Figure 1 depicts the development of real house prices, rent prices, and wages in Switzerland between 1990 and 2023. The prices and wages are indexed, with 2000 as the base

year (2000 = 100). The real house prices index is derived by dividing nominal house prices by the consumers' expenditure deflator; it therefore indicates the degree to which house prices have shifted in comparison to overall price changes in the general economy (OECD, 2024). During the 1990s, houses in Switzerland became cheaper compared to other goods, but real house prices have increased ever since the turn of the century. The increase in rent prices has been more moderate but also steadier: there was no dip in rent prices in the 1990s. While wages have been steadily growing in the period covered by Fig. 1, this growth has been outpaced by the increase in house prices and rent prices. This diverging development of house prices and rents compared to incomes poses problems for affordability. Renting is becoming increasingly constraining from a financial point of view. Given the drastically increasing house prices, it is not only a lack of equity that restricts access to homeownership (banks provide a loan-to-value ratio of 80 %, meaning that 20 % of the house price must be covered by a down payment). As the conditions for mortgages require that mortgage costs, utility costs, and amortization do not exceed one-third of your income, they are becoming less accessible to households with lower and middle incomes.

If we put this in European comparison and compare Switzerland to its neighbouring countries and the Netherlands (which also has a high share of tenants), we can see that in Switzerland, rents have indeed not risen as sharply as in other countries (by 11 % since 2015 vs Austria where rents have risen by more than 40 % since 2015 and Germany (15 %); see Fig. 2a). However, compared to the same countries, house prices in Switzerland have risen relatively strongly (see Fig. 2b). Moreover, the fall in prices after 2022 seen in the other countries could not be observed in Switzerland.

An important housing affordability indicator is the share of housing costs in disposable income.⁴ As can be seen in Fig. 3, this share differs considerably between tenure types. For homeowners with mortgages, it was 24 % of their disposable income in 2010 and it has decreased since then, reaching 18 % in 2022 (Fig. 3). This was likely due to the low interest rates, although they have risen again after 2022. For tenants,

however, the share of housing costs is close to or above 30 % and shows a slightly rising tendency over the last years. The financial burden is, unsurprisingly, heavier for tenants renting at market rate than for those renting at a reduced rate from the non-profit housing sector.

On average, the financial burden of housing is higher in more densely populated areas⁵ (Fig. 4). However, across all degrees of urbanization, tenants have a significantly higher housing cost burden than owners (both outright and mortgaged), and, as renting is more common in urban than in more peripheral contexts (see Sect. 3.1), this drives up the average. Housing affordability is therefore foremost a problem of tenants and, in absolute numbers, more widespread in urban contexts. Part of this pattern reflects income-based selection: strict mortgage lending criteria limit access to homeownership for lower-income households, making homeownership more common among higher-income households, which tend to have a lower share of housing costs in disposable income.

When looking at the share of housing costs in disposable incomes by income quintiles, housing inequality is even more evident (Fig. 5). There is a clear gradient from the bottom to the top quintile, with the share of housing costs becoming smaller for higher quintiles. It is striking, however, that for the bottom quintile, the financial housing burden is markedly higher (almost 20 percentage points in each year) than for the second quintile, with almost or above 50 % in all years.

In the European context, Switzerland's share of households with housing cost overburden – meaning households where the total housing costs take up more than 40 % of the disposable income – is fifth highest in Europe (Fig. 6). For a comparatively large share, the cost of housing is therefore a real financial strain. It should be mentioned that housing costs in Switzerland are twice as high as in EU countries on average (Eurostat, 2023). Similarly to Norway and Denmark, the high share of households with housing cost overburden is not associated with a high share of people living in overcrowded homes (see Sect. 5.2).

5.2 Per capita living space and overcrowding

In Switzerland, floor space used per capita has increased from 34 m² in 1980 to 46.5 m² in 2023 (BFS, 2024a; Karlen et al., 2022). Accordingly, the average number of persons per

⁴The ratio of housing costs to gross income is also commonly used as an indicator of affordability, e.g. by OECD (2021). As the housing component is lower (no energy costs) and the income is higher (for the average household, gross income is higher than disposable income), this indicator yields lower ratios than the one we use here (total housing cost including energy divided by disposable income). We rely on the indicator using disposable income (instead of gross income) because it captures a household's financial situation more accurately by deducting taxes and adding social contributions. Moreover, the same indicator is used to calculate the rate of households with housing cost overburden (see below), meaning households for which housing costs take more than the – somewhat arbitrarily set – threshold of 40 % of their disposable income, as defined by Eurostat (2026b) and OECD (2021).

⁵In the SILC data, the degree of urbanization is given by the DE-GURBA typology. It divides local area units in densely populated areas, intermediate areas, and thinly populated areas. Densely populated areas have a population density of more than 1500 inhabitants per km² and a population of at least 50 000 people. Intermediate areas have a population density of more than 300 inhabitants per km² and a population of at least 5000 people, all other areas are defined as "thinly populated" (BFS, 2024b). In Switzerland, 34 % of the population live in densely populated areas, 50 % in intermediate areas, and 16 % in thinly populated areas (BFS, 2026a, c).

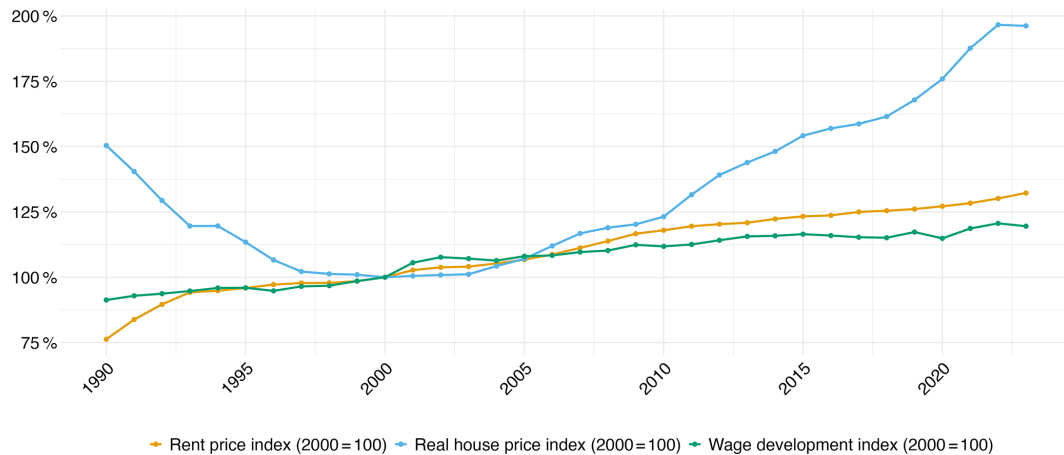


Figure 1. Development of real house price, rent prices, and wages, 1990–2023. 2000 = 100. Source: OECD.

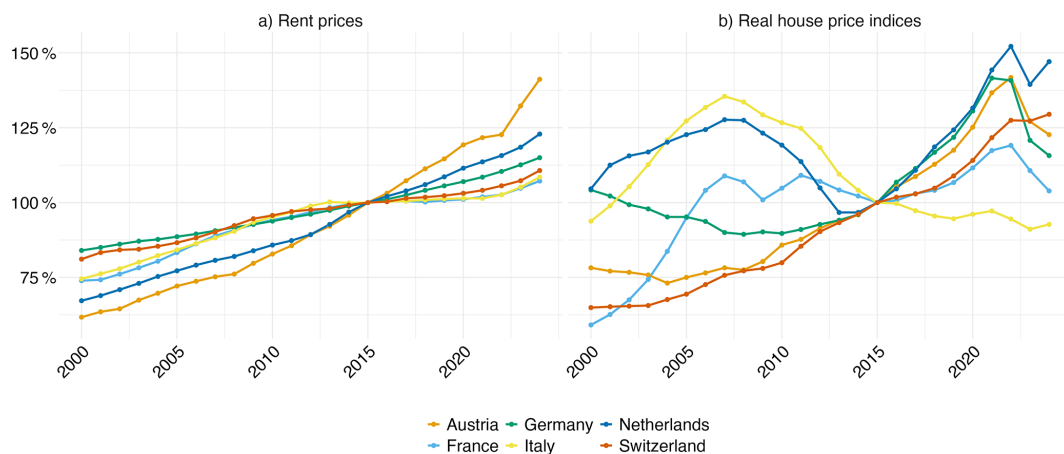


Figure 2. Evolution of (a) rents and (b) real house prices in Switzerland's neighbouring countries and the Netherlands (because of its similar tenure structure), 2000–2024. 2015 = 100. Source: OECD.

room in an apartment also decreased, even if only slightly in the period between 2007 and 2024 (Fig. 7). For dwellings with five or fewer rooms, the number of persons per room is about 0.6 in recent years; for dwellings with six or more rooms, it was slightly below 0.5.⁶ The average dwelling is thus occupied by fewer people than it has rooms.

However, focusing on the increasing amount of space for the average individual or the average number of persons per room conceals the fact that space is not equally distributed between households. There are households which cannot afford apartments that provide one or more rooms to each household member. In Switzerland, overall, the share of overcrowded households amounts to 6.1 % in 2024. This percentage slightly fluctuated in the period 2010–2024, not showing a clear trend. There are substantial differences in the share

⁶Dwellings with six or more rooms are grouped together in SILC. The number of persons per room is calculated assuming six rooms. This overestimates persons per room when dwellings have more than six rooms.

of overcrowding depending on the degree of urbanization, however (Fig. 8). In densely populated areas, the share is markedly higher than in intermediate and thinly populated areas. This tendency seems to have become more marked from 2012 onwards, where the share of overcrowding in densely populated areas is more than twice as high as in thinly populated areas. This presumably reflects higher housing costs in cities, resulting in reduced access to and affordability of larger, more adequate dwellings, particularly for lower-income households. It may also indicate a preference for living in an urban environment for which people are willing to compromise on living space (Jansen, 2020).

Overcrowding is also clearly related to income, as can be seen in Fig. 9. In households of the lowest-income quintile, overcrowding is much more common than in the other quintiles, closely followed by the second quintile. In these quintiles, overcrowding has increased markedly between 2022 and 2024.

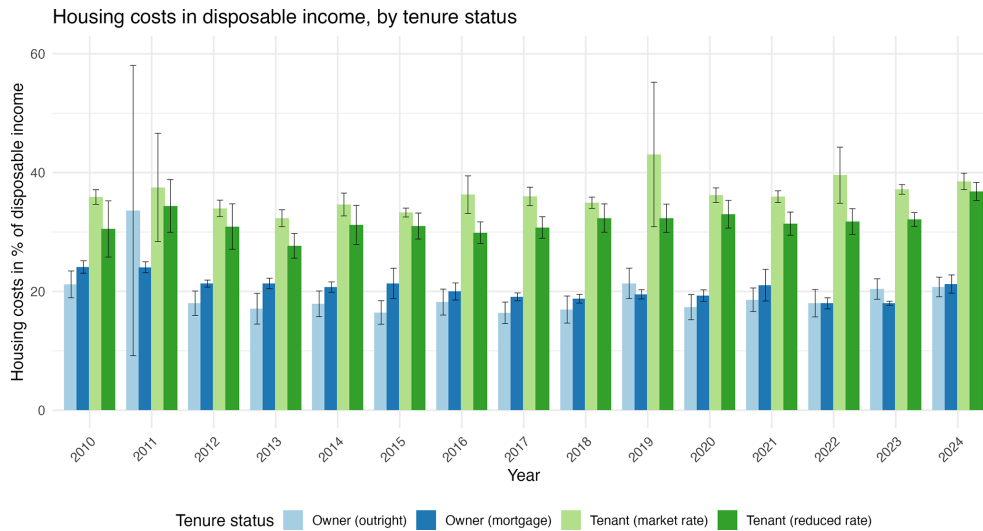


Figure 3. Average share of housing costs in total disposable income by tenure status, 2010–2024. Error bars: 95 % confidence interval (CI). Source: SILC. Median values can be found in Appendix A.

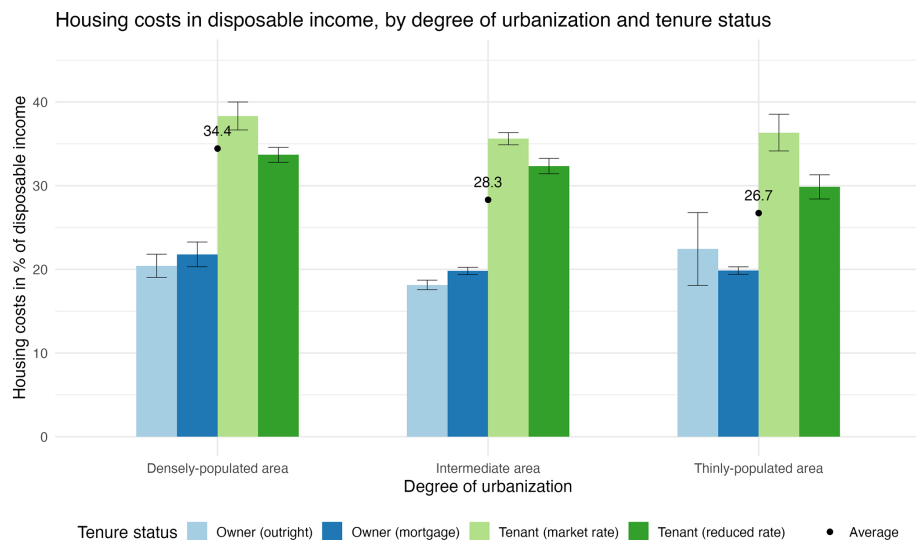


Figure 4. Average share of housing costs in total disposable income by tenure status and degree of urbanization. Pooled data 2010–2024. Error bars: 95 % CI. Source: SILC.

Interestingly, according to data from the Federal Statistical Office (FSO), the number of apartments with more than one person per room has not increased in core cities and their agglomerations (Fig. 10). Even in Geneva and Zurich, the two largest cities with an acute housing crisis, the share of overcrowded apartments has only increased slightly (Zurich) or even decreased (Geneva) in the last years. Geneva is an outlier, with a share that is considerably higher than the second-placed cities. The historically tight housing market (Felder and Pattaroni, 2024) is characterized by strong international labour market pressure, land scarcity, and planning constraints, leading to high rents and low vacancy rates that make upsizing more difficult than in other cities.

The share of people living in overcrowded homes is low in Switzerland (7.0 %) compared to other European countries (Fig. 11). The average for countries of the European Union is 16.8 %, and as high as 11.4 % and 14.5 % in countries such as Germany and Austria, respectively, which have a tenure structure similar to Switzerland.

5.3 Housing quality: (in)ability to keep house warm, leaking roof, damp walls, etc.

In Switzerland, the quality of housing is generally high, also in the private rental market, which is attributed to high construction quality standards and favourable conditions for in-

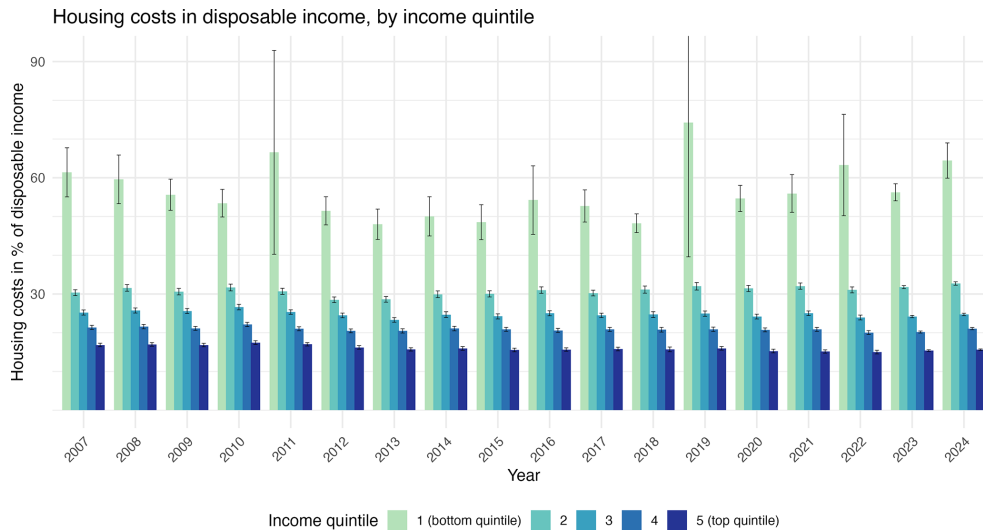


Figure 5. Average share of housing costs in total disposable income by income quintiles (based on equivalized disposable income), 2007–2024. Error bars: 95 % CI. Source: SILC. Median values can be found in Appendix A and income brackets of quintiles in Appendix B.

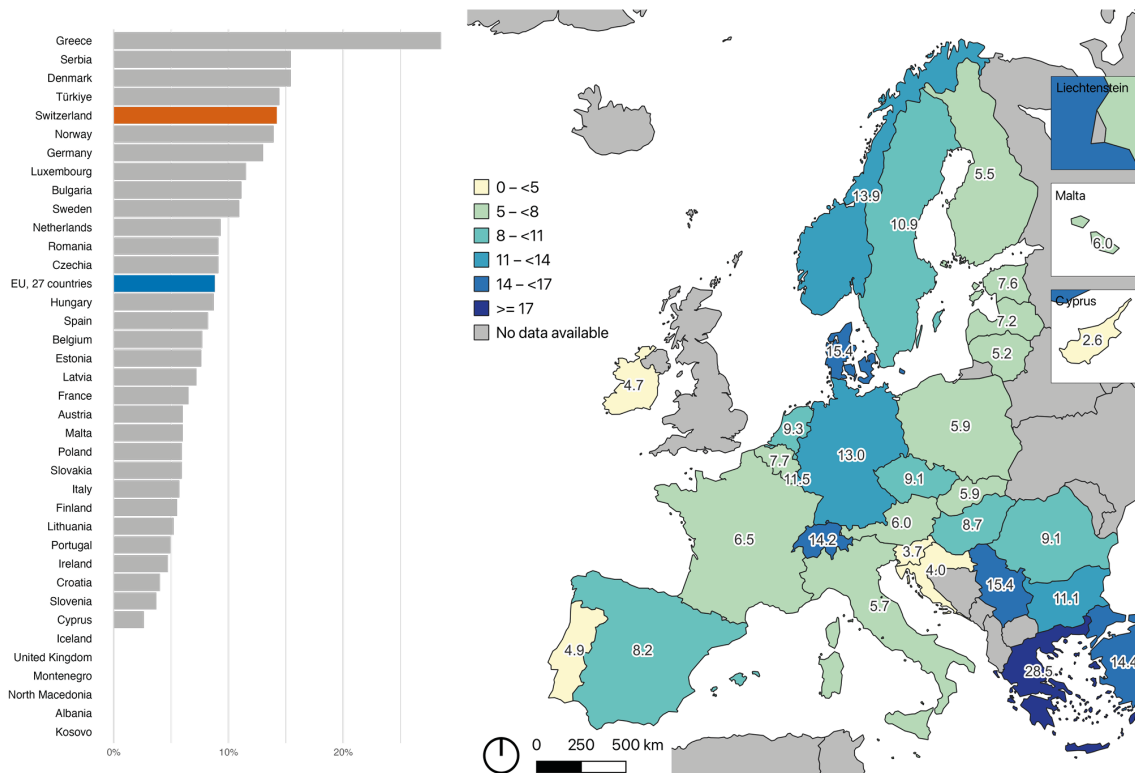


Figure 6. People living in households with housing cost overburden, in per cent, 2023. Source: Eurostat (ilc_lvho07a).

vestments in rental property, with maintenance and renovation costs being deductible from tax (Bourassa and Hoesli, 2010; BWO, 2005). Accordingly, the share of households that are unable to keep their house warm (for financial reasons and/or because of poor insulation/construction, not for technical reasons) is below 1 % (Fig. 12). While the share is

generally highest for the bottom quintile, in many years there is no clear gradient from second to the fifth quintile. Nevertheless, the connection to income seems to have become stronger in the most recent year for which data are available (Fig. 12). Recent increases in energy prices following

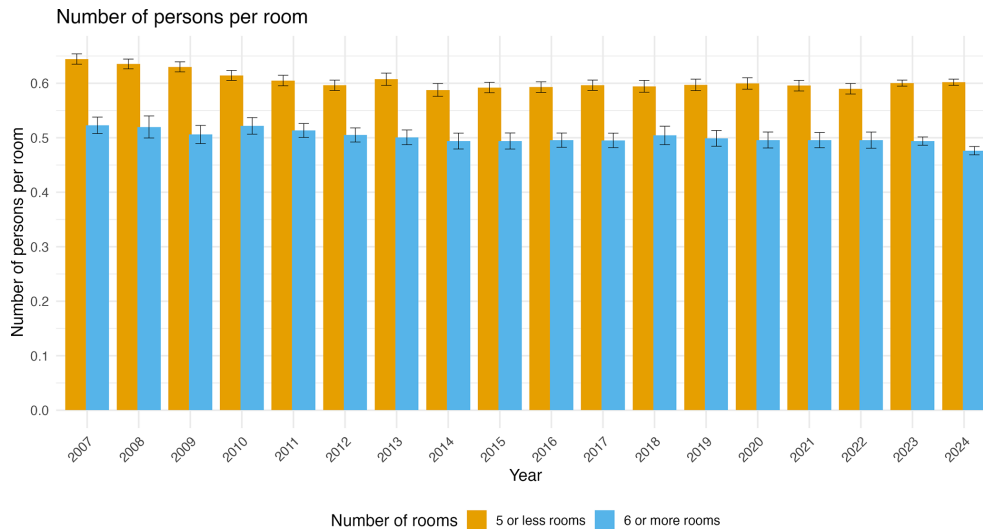


Figure 7. Number of persons per room, 2007–2024. Error bars: 95 % CI. Source: SILC.

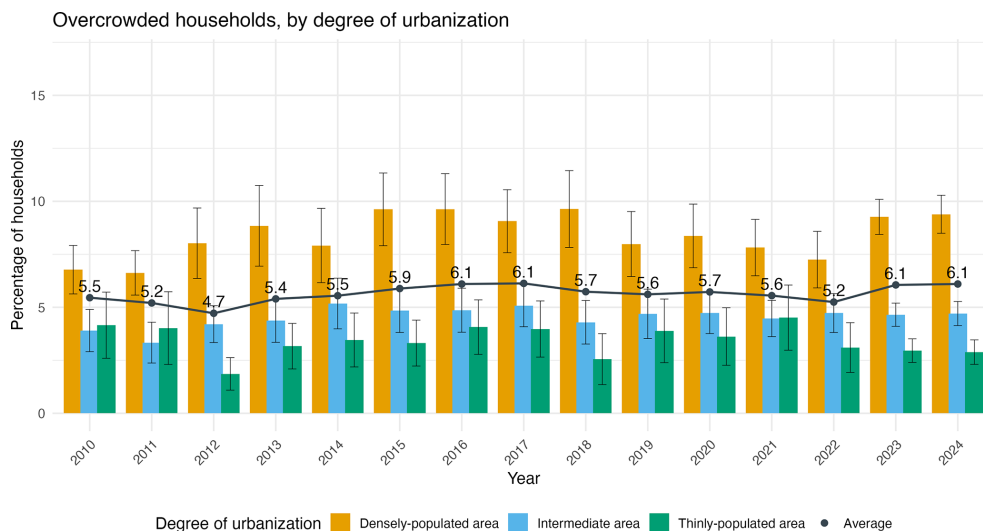


Figure 8. Share of overcrowded households, 2010–2024. Error bars: 95 % CI. Source: SILC.

the Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022 have accentuated this trend.

Significantly more households are affected by problems caused by leaking roofs; damp walls, floors, or foundations; or rot in window frames – roughly 10 % on average (Fig. 13). This seems like a large percentage given the overall high living conditions in Switzerland. Unlike other surveys, SILC does not distinguish between leak, damp, and rot, nor does it ask about the severity of the issue(s) (Thomson et al., 2017). To date, no other data or studies with a more detailed perspective on this indicator are available for Switzerland. Problems with leak/damp/rot across all income quintiles have slightly increased in the last years (from 7.5 % in 2007 to 11.2 % in 2023), with fewer households struggling with damp inside their house the higher the income quintile.

In a European comparison of housing quality, Switzerland stands out as the country with the lowest share of people unable to keep their home adequately warm (Fig. 14). When it comes to a leaking roof; damp walls, floors, or foundation; or rot in window frames or floors, Switzerland lags behind some of the other European countries, with a higher proportion of households affected by these issues (Fig. 15).

Generally, housing quality in Switzerland is high by European standards. Very few households report being unable to keep their homes adequately warm, and this issue shows little connection with income. However, problems such as leaking roofs and dampness are somewhat more common and tend to affect lower-income households more frequently. In a broader European perspective, Switzerland performs well in terms of housing quality and overcrowding.

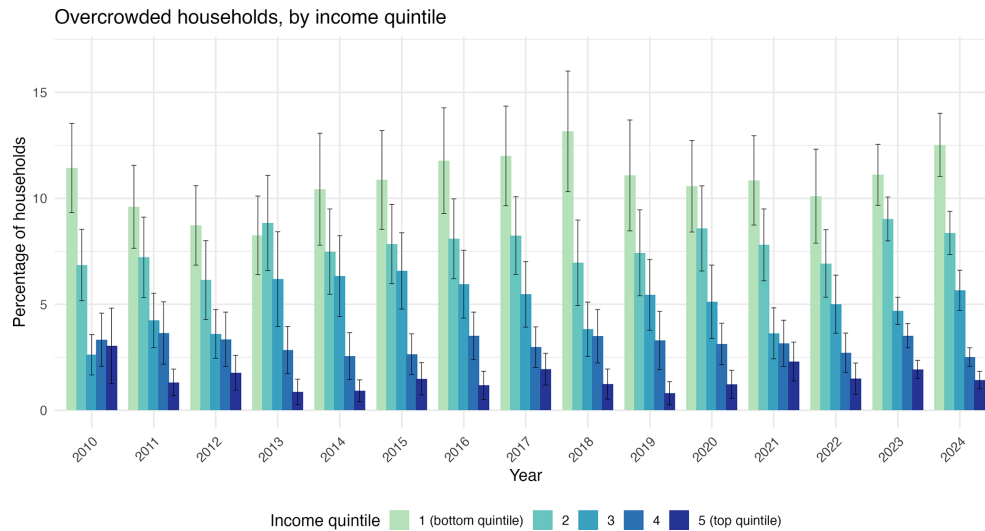


Figure 9. Share of overcrowded households by income quintiles (based on equivalized disposable income), 2010–2024. Error bars: 95 % CI. Source: SILC.

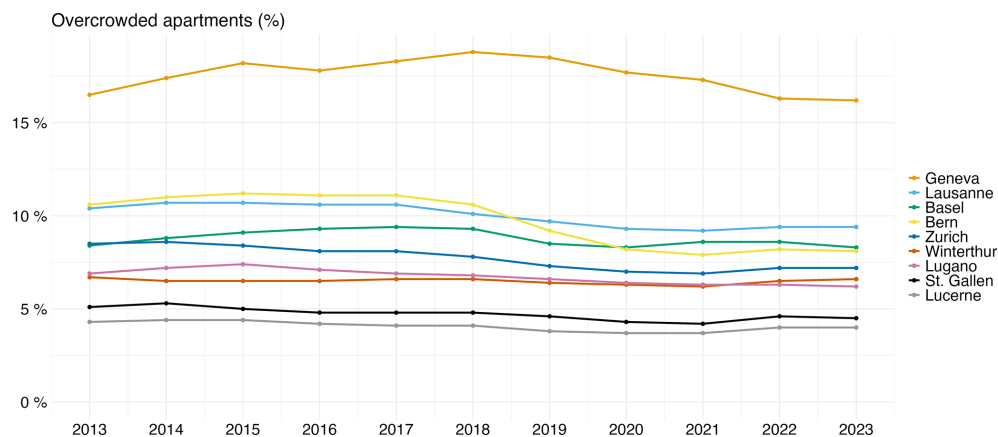


Figure 10. Share of overcrowded apartments in core cities, 2013–2023. Data: FSO.

The results of the analysis of housing inequalities in Switzerland and their contextualization within Europe show that there is a considerable inequality between tenants and homeowners, and across the income distribution in the financial burden of housing. Homeowners and higher-income households spend a considerably smaller share of their disposable income on housing. There is no significant increase in the average shares of housing costs in disposable income, and we also have no clear indication of a widening gap between the share that the bottom and the top quintiles pay for housing. Still, the share of the population experiencing housing cost overburden⁷ is the fifth highest in Europe, suggesting a relatively high financial inequality. Overall, overcrowding is more common in densely populated areas and among households of lower-income quintiles. Also here, there is no

clear trend over the period for which we analysed data, and the overcrowding rate is low compared to other European countries. Considering the quality of housing, it should be noted that the share of households unable to keep their house warm is very low and also does not show a clear connection to income. Problems with damp are more common and have slightly increased in the last years, whereas we did not find such a trend with keeping one's house warm. Housing quality as measured by these two indicators is generally high in Switzerland by European standards, although problems such as leaking roofs and dampness are somewhat more prevalent than the inability to keep one's house warm.

6 Discussion and conclusion

This article set out to study housing inequality trends in Switzerland, with the aim of placing this development within

⁷Meaning people living in households for whom the total housing costs take up more than 40 % of their disposable income.

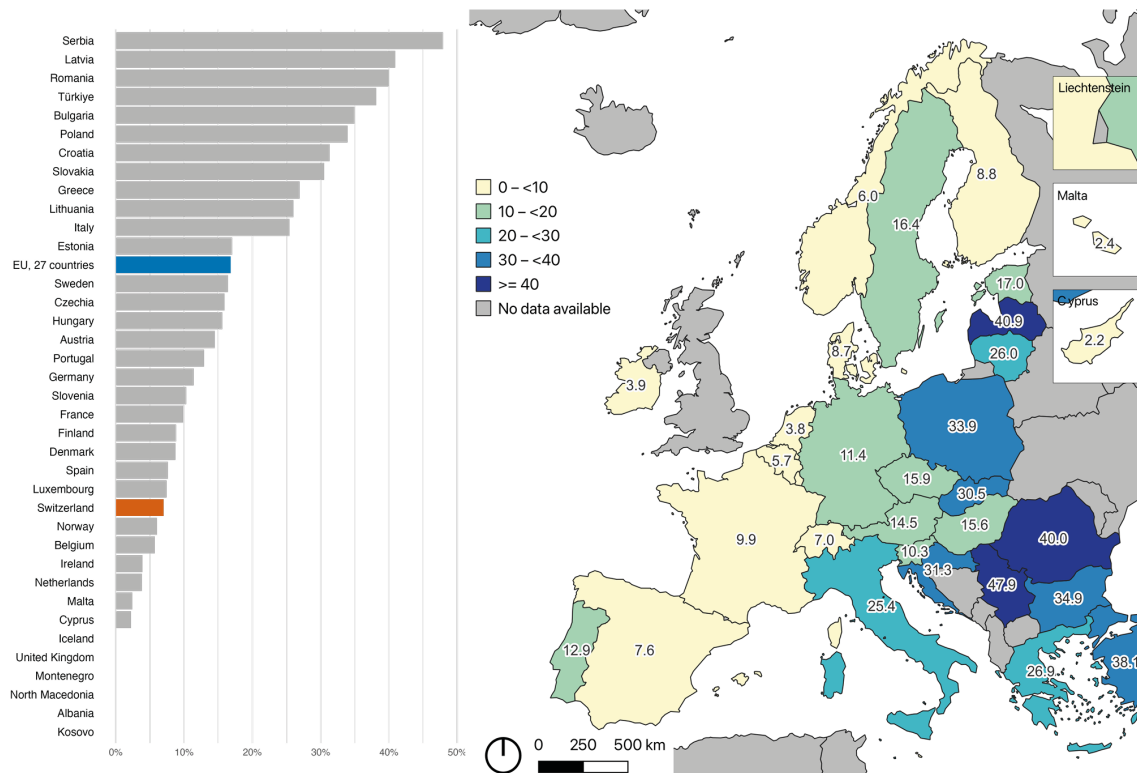


Figure 11. Share of people living in overcrowded homes, in per cent, 2023. Source: Eurostat (ilc_lvho05a).

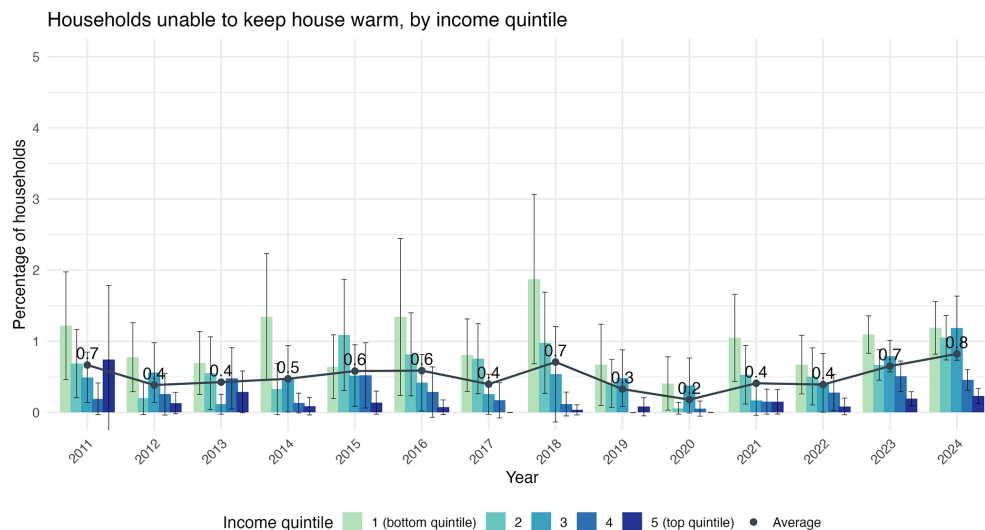


Figure 12. Share of households that are unable to keep their house warm, by income quintiles (based on equivalized disposable income), 2011–2024. Error bars: 95 % CI. Source: SILC.

a wider context of housing inequalities in European countries. We examined indicators of affordability and housing quality (by tenure status, income quintiles, and degree of urbanization), revealing a differentiated but relatively stable picture at the national level. First, although average shares of housing costs in disposable income have not increased sig-

nificantly over the past two decades, there remains a marked inequality in the financial burden of housing – particularly between households of the lowest-income quintile and the rest of the population. Second, overcrowding is especially prevalent among households of the lower-income quintiles, indicating substantial inequality in the amount of living space

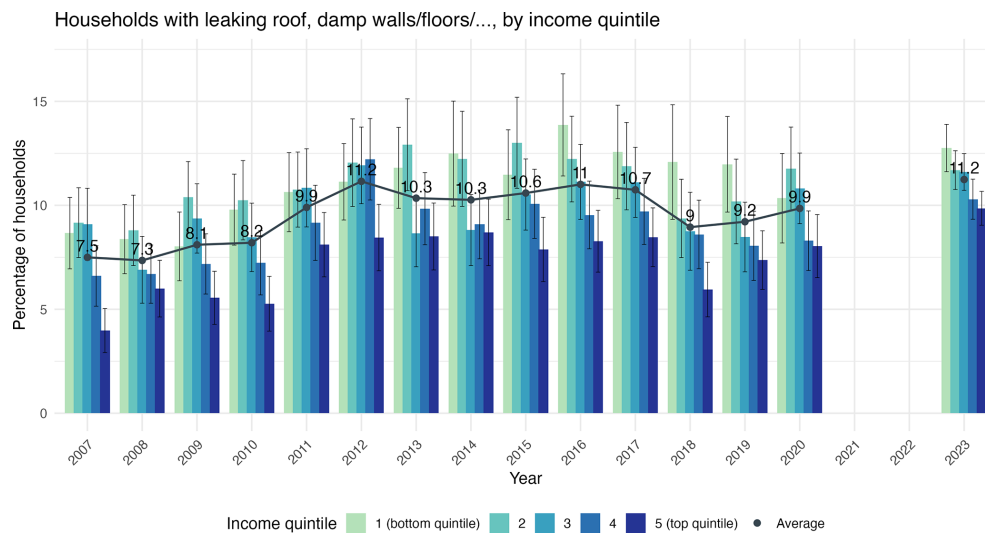


Figure 13. Share of households encountering problems with leaking roofs, damp walls or floors, etc., by income quintiles (based on equivalized disposable income), 2007–2020, 2023. Variable not available in 2021/2022. Error bars: 95 % CI. Source: SILC.

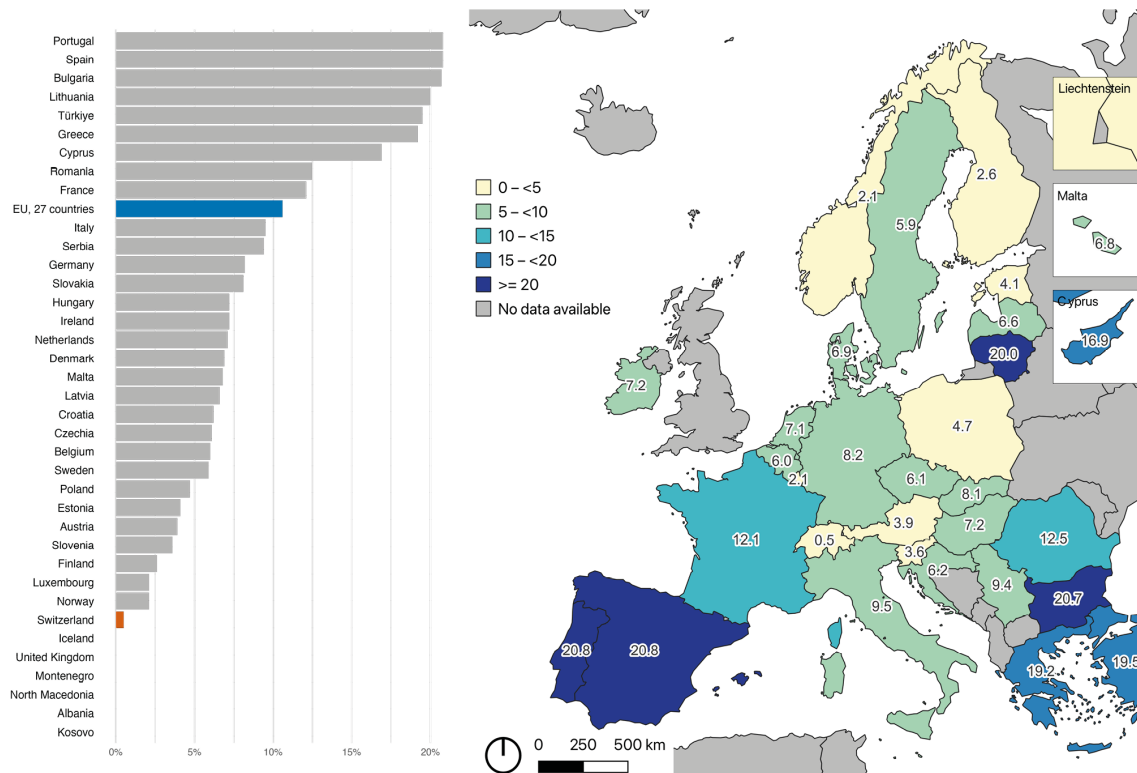


Figure 14. Share of people unable to keep their home adequately warm, 2023. Source: Eurostat (ilc_mdcs01).

available per person. Third, housing quality in Switzerland is generally high by European standards. Very few households report being unable to keep their homes adequately warm, although this share is rising since the Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022, which has affected energy prices. However, problems such as leaking roofs and dampness are somewhat

more common and tend to affect lower-income households more frequently.

In a broader European perspective, Switzerland performs well in terms of housing quality and overcrowding, but the share of the population experiencing housing cost overburden is fifth highest in Europe, suggesting that the financial

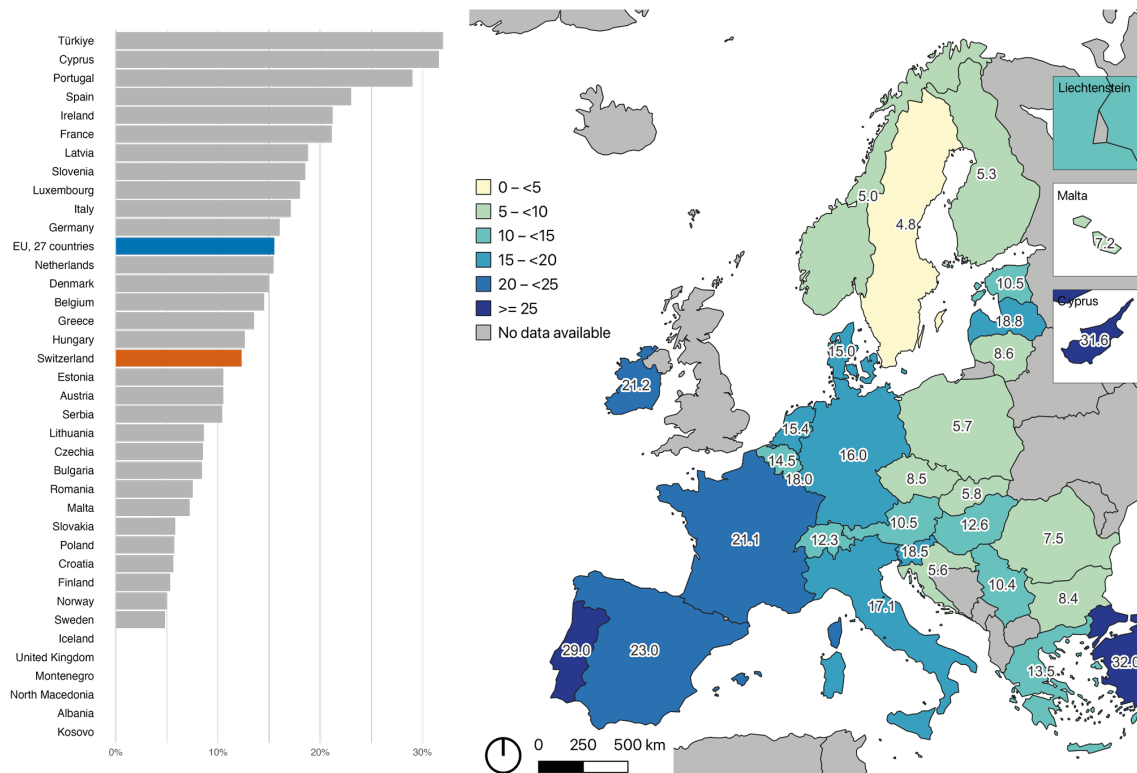


Figure 15. Share of people living in a dwelling with a leaking roof; damp walls, floors, or foundation; or rot in window frames or floors, 2023. Source: Eurostat (ilc_mdho01).

strain of housing costs is particularly high in the lowest quintile. The finding of a relatively persistent income inequality in housing cost burden in Switzerland is concurrent with recent findings across nine European countries showing that the income gradient in housing affordability has generally intensified between 2005 and 2020 but is less steep and has increased less in Switzerland, Austria, and France compared to the UK, Norway, Italy, Spain, Hungary, and Poland (Marcińczak et al., 2025).

While key indicators such as housing cost shares and housing quality have remained relatively stable over time, public concern about a housing crisis has grown significantly. This discrepancy between measured stability and perceived crisis raises important questions. First, it should be mentioned that the data used here do not cover the last year (2025), and some indicators are only available until 2020. Second, due to the Swiss rent regulations (Debrunner et al., 2025; Kettunen and Ruonavaara, 2021), existing tenants are somewhat protected from rent increases, so the housing shortage as well as rent hikes following demolitions or extensive renovations affect primarily people newly entering the market (see also Meloni and Debrunner, 2026) or those in need of a change in their housing situation (because of events within their own life course or because of evictions). As a result, the effects of rising rents appear in the data only with a time lag. Most importantly, the housing crisis is very local (albeit spreading),

and locally increasing inequalities might not be discernible in national averages.

An additional explanation for the apparent disconnect between measured stability and perceived crisis lies in the nature of the housing system itself, which has remained relatively constant – also in its processes of generating housing inequality. In the 21st century, no changes in housing policies that would have alleviated or deepened housing inequality have been introduced at the national level. The current tenancy law dates from the 1990s, and multiple attempts to revise the law have failed (Rohrbach, 2014). Also, because of neoliberalization processes “avant la lettre” (Müller, 2021), there have been no further liberalization processes as, for example, in France and England, where a marketization and privatization of social housing has resulted in a situation where access to social housing for lowest-income households is becoming increasingly difficult (Furman and Hadjri, 2025; Herrault, 2024). However, it should be kept in mind that, historically, only a minor share of dwellings in Switzerland are public and non-profit housing (see Sect. 3.1), so there was hardly any social housing that could substantially be cut. Against the backdrop of a weak but stable national housing policy, it is also not surprising that recent initiatives in parliament from the left and the tenants’ union calling for stricter enforcement of rent regulation or more transparency when setting rents in new contracts to strengthen tenants’ rights

have all been dismissed (Duyne Barenstein et al., 2025). Right-wing members of parliament, the construction sector, and the homeowners' association, however, are strongly lobbying for less regulation in the housing sector. Switzerland thus shows a housing system that relies primarily on the regulated provision of housing through the private market and only to a small extent on public and non-profit provision. Like other corporatist systems (e.g. France and Austria), it has preserved a certain degree of decommodification in the housing system through rent regulation and tenant protection, with tenure structure and tenancy law undergoing only limited changes over the past decades (Arbaci et al., 2026).

However, this path dependence of the Swiss housing system does not render it immune to the influence of other sectors, namely spatial planning and financial markets. Spatial planning policies limit the supply of buildable land and promote densification in existing settlements, thus providing incentives for demolition and total reconstruction in heated housing markets where neither greenfields nor brownfields are available for development. The financialization of real estate markets has increased enormously since the early 2000s (Theurillat et al., 2010). The share of units owned by private companies grew from 30 % of all rental units in 2003 to 43 % in 2025 (BFS, 2007, 2026a). It is well documented that among the private companies acting as landlords, there are players whose portfolios have the size of mid-sized cities (Young, 2019); and Blackrock, the world's largest asset manager, has multiplied its investments in Swiss real estate companies by a factor of 20 in the past two decades (Zeier, 2022). While institutional investment by pension funds, banks, insurance companies, and the like is still concentrated in the metropolitan cores, financialized actors are increasingly seeking investment opportunities outside the larger urban centres (Crevoisier et al., 2025). In many instances, they are maximizing their returns on investment by displacing incumbent tenants with new tenants paying higher rents through complete renovations or demolitions (Debrunner et al., 2024; Gehriger, 2024; Kauer et al., 2025; Kaufmann et al., 2023; Lutz et al., 2024), a trend that is not yet fully captured by the data used here. Through this form of "financialization 3.0" (Aalbers, 2026), they circumvent rent regulation in existing contracts and further commodify housing. As institutional investors primarily invest in apartment buildings (Crevoisier et al., 2025), they are driving up rents. Their high willingness to pay for land, however, indirectly also affects house prices, especially in areas where zoning regulations allow building additional or larger units.

We argue that there is a time lag between these structural changes in the housing market and their reflection in national indicators because households that do not (and are not forced to) move are somewhat protected from rent increases, which might result in these dynamics being reflected in national statistics only at a later stage. As population growth persists and financialization most probably intensifies – intersecting with densification policies and a tenancy law which make demolitions and extensive renovations profitable – it is likely that housing inequalities will become more pronounced in the future. Renovations are undoubtedly needed to maintain housing quality, improve it for the sizeable share of households encountering problems with leak/damp/rot, and not least reach the climate targets of the Paris Agreement (FOEN, 2026). However, there remains a fundamental tension between promoting renovations and the regulated but uncontrolled passing on of costs to tenants, which motivates many landlords in tight housing markets to renovate and subsequently increase rents to the maximum possible in the area (B,S,S and Basler & Hofmann AG, 2014). Also, ethnic and racial discrimination, despite not being captured by statistical data, is observed in the access to the housing market and reinforces existing inequalities (Auer et al., 2019; Meloni and Debrunner, 2026).

Based on these findings, we advocate for more fine-grained analyses of housing inequalities in Switzerland and also on different geographical scales. Moreover, research could contribute to the public debate by discussing policy options that could mitigate the risk of rising housing inequalities. By anticipating future developments and contributing to evidence-based policy-making, research can help to ensure that Switzerland's housing system remains socially inclusive and sustainable in the long term.

Appendix A

Table A1. Mean (*M*) and median (*Mdn*) values for housing costs as a share of disposable income, by tenure status and income quintiles, 2007/2010–2024. Source: SILC.

	2007		2008		2009		2010		2011		2012		2013		2014		2015	
	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>
Owner (outright)							21.2	14.5	33.6	13.2	18.0	10.8	17.1	11.6	17.9	11.4	16.5	10.7
Owner (mortgage)							24.1	19.4	24.1	19.4	21.3	17.5	21.3	17.2	20.7	16.6	21.3	16.1
Tenant (market rate)							35.9	30.2	37.5	27.8	34.0	28.1	32.3	27.0	34.6	28.6	33.3	29.0
Tenant (reduced rate)							30.5	23.0	34.4	26.6	30.9	25.0	27.7	23.3	31.2	26.4	31.0	25.9
1st quintile	61.4	43.2	59.6	42.0	55.6	44.1	53.4	43.4	66.6	42.5	51.5	43.2	48.0	39.8	50.1	39.9	48.5	41.0
2nd quintile	30.3	29.0	31.6	30.0	30.6	28.3	31.7	30.3	30.7	29.1	28.5	27.6	28.6	27.0	29.9	28.3	30.0	28.7
3rd quintile	25.2	24.1	25.7	24.7	25.6	24.5	26.6	25.5	25.3	24.3	24.5	23.5	23.3	22.3	24.7	23.5	24.2	23.0
4th quintile	21.4	20.2	21.6	20.8	21.1	20.4	22.1	21.1	21.0	20.3	20.5	19.8	20.5	19.7	21.1	20.1	20.9	19.8
5th quintile	16.8	16.3	17.0	16.2	16.8	16.1	17.5	17.0	17.0	16.2	16.2	15.3	15.7	14.9	15.9	15.0	15.5	14.6
Total	30.9	24.2	31.0	24.5	29.9	24.1	30.2	25.0	32.0	24.0	28.2	23.3	27.2	22.9	28.3	23.6	27.8	23.7

Table A1. Continued.

	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021		2022		2023		2024	
	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>
Owner (outright)	18.2	11.2	16.4	11.2	16.9	10.8	21.4	13.6	17.3	11.9	18.6	12.3	18.0	10.6	20.4	12.0	20.7	12.8
Owner (mortgage)	20.0	15.4	19.1	15.2	18.8	14.7	19.5	14.7	19.3	14.6	21.0	13.9	18.0	13.2	18.0	14.0	21.2	14.4
Tenant (market rate)	36.3	29.6	36.0	29.9	34.9	30.3	43.1	30.0	36.2	29.9	36.0	30.3	39.6	30.2	37.2	30.3	38.5	31.0
Tenant (reduced rate)	29.9	26.2	30.8	27.0	32.4	29.0	32.3	28.7	33.0	29.9	31.4	27.4	31.8	28.3	32.1	27.8	36.8	30.7
1st quintile	54.2	40.9	52.7	43.2	48.3	42.3	74.2	44.4	54.7	43.8	56.0	45.1	63.3	44.8	56.3	44.2	64.4	46.2
2nd quintile	31.0	29.8	30.2	29.1	31.1	29.7	32.0	30.2	31.4	30.5	32.0	30.4	31.1	29.9	31.8	30.8	32.7	31.8
3rd quintile	25.0	23.7	24.5	23.6	24.7	23.4	24.9	23.9	24.2	23.0	25.0	24.2	23.9	23.3	24.2	23.4	24.7	23.6
4th quintile	20.6	19.8	20.9	20.0	20.8	19.6	20.9	20.3	20.7	20.0	20.9	19.9	20.1	19.5	20.2	19.4	21.1	19.9
5th quintile	15.7	14.9	15.8	14.7	15.7	14.5	16.0	15.2	15.3	14.1	15.2	13.8	15.0	13.7	15.4	14.4	15.6	14.7
Total	29.3	23.8	28.8	23.9	28.1	23.8	33.5	24.5	29.2	24.0	29.8	24.4	30.6	23.8	29.5	24.1	31.6	24.6

Appendix B

Table B1. Income brackets of income quintiles, based on equivalized disposable income (CHF per year), 2007–2024. Source: SILC.

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
1st quintile	(0, 28 527]	(0, 29 081]	(0, 29 407]	(0, 30 103]	(0, 30 223]	(0, 30 760]	(0, 31 812]	(0, 30 979]	(0, 30 785]
2nd quintile	(28 527, 39 532]	(29 081, 39 973]	(29 407, 41 173]	(30 103, 41 147]	(30 223, 41 477]	(30 760, 42 690]	(31 812, 43 470]	(30 979, 41 853]	(30 785, 42 500]
3rd quintile	(39 532, 50 595]	(39 973, 51 304]	(41 173, 53 193]	(41 147, 53 025]	(41 477, 53 649]	(42 690, 54 915]	(43 470, 55 384]	(41 853, 53 523]	(42 500, 54 473]
4th quintile	(50 595, 67 446]	(51 304, 68 599]	(53 193, 71 699]	(53 025, 70 825]	(53 649, 71 176]	(54 915, 72 787]	(55 384, 72 955]	(53 523, 71 003]	(54 473, 71 299]
5th quintile	(67 446, 1 657 294]	(68 599, 1 478 047]	(71 699, 1 164 589]	(70 825, 1 627 047]	(71 176, 1 062 335]	(72 787, 596 972]	(72 955, 892 915]	(71 003, 64 0634]	(71 299, 955 591]

Table B1. Continued.

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
1st quintile	(0, 30 654]	(0, 30 768]	(0, 31 168]	(0, 30 223]	(0, 30 919]	(0, 31 071]	(0, 31 210]	(0, 31 242]	(0, 31 763]
2nd quintile	(30 654, 41 551]	(30 768, 42 184]	(31 168, 42 500]	(30 223, 41 520]	(30 919, 42 024]	(31 071, 41 638]	(31 210, 42 994]	(31 242, 43 176]	(31 763, 43 544]
3rd quintile	(41 551, 53 931]	(42 184, 53 950]	(42 500, 53 987]	(41 520, 54 040]	(42 024, 54 539]	(41 638, 54 833]	(42 994, 55 493]	(43 176, 56 126]	(43 544, 56 372]
4th quintile	(53 931, 70 357]	(53 950, 71 233]	(53 987, 72 415]	(54 040, 71 213]	(54 539, 73 463]	(54 833, 73 308]	(55 493, 74 774]	(56 126, 75 038]	(56 372, 75 553]
5th quintile	(70 357, 777 004]	(71 233, 1 252 445]	(72 415, 911 335]	(71 213, 1 396 525]	(73 463, 1 591 967]	(73 308, 1 248 592]	(74 774, 3 481 225]	(75 038, 1 618 454]	(75 553, 1 654 984]

Data availability. Due to contractual obligations, the data underlying this study cannot be made publicly available.

Author contributions. Conceptualization: HW and JDB. Data analysis: HW. Writing (original draft): HW and JDB. Writing (reviewing and editing): HW and JDB.

Competing interests. The contact author has declared that neither of the authors has any competing interests.

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Acknowledgements. This paper was developed in the framework of the Horizon EU project ReHousIn – “Contextualized pathways to reduce housing inequalities in the green and digital transition” (grant agreement no. 101132540). During the preparation of this work, ChatGPT was used to generate initial R code for analysis and visualization. The generated code was reviewed and modified.

Financial support. This research has been supported by Switzerland's State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (grant no. 23.00490) for the ETH Zurich team.

Review statement. This paper was edited by Nadine Marquardt and reviewed by two anonymous referees.

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