

Paradise lost? New trends in
Crime and Migration in Switzerland

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper updates a review of research on crime among migrants in Switzerland, published in 1997.

Methodology/approach: Review of national survey data and statistics published since 1997.

Findings: Recent statistics as well as surveys (of victimization and self-reported delinquency) show disproportionate levels of offending among migrants. Data from victimization surveys further show that victims do not report offences more often to the police whenever they suspect the offender being a foreign national. Self-report surveys show that delinquent involvement is, particularly for violent offences, higher among migrant youths than among Swiss-born juveniles. According to comparative international survey data, offending among migrant youths from Balkan countries is far more common in Switzerland than among adolescents living in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Implications: The conditions of socialization within the immigration context may be more important than cultural factors.

Originality: Combining statistics, victimization surveys and self-report studies at the national level, with survey data from areas where migrants come from.

Research paper.

Keywords: Switzerland, migrants, violence, juvenile delinquency, victims (decision to report offences to the police), police.

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Switzerland as a significant case study

Located amidst the European continent, Switzerland is one of Europe's relatively small nations, slightly larger than Belgium and the Netherlands in surface but, with approximately 7.5 million, about half the Dutch population. Migration to Switzerland started earlier than anywhere else in Europe, with an early peak during the years preceding World War I, and with substantial migration resuming immediately after World War II. Today, nearly one in four residents is having a foreign passport, and about two in five residents have been foreign-born. Among juveniles attending school, the proportion of students whose parents were both Swiss-born is, according to the area where the school is located, no more than 50 to 60 percent on average, but often below 10 percent.

Switzerland is, therefore, an interesting case to study the impact of migration on crime and criminal justice because (1) the size of the migrant population is larger than anywhere else in Europe (with the exception of tiny countries like Luxembourg), (2) the migrant population is relatively varied and shows somewhat different patterns of adaptation, and (3) the long tradition of migration allows to see changes in relation to crime and criminal justice over time.

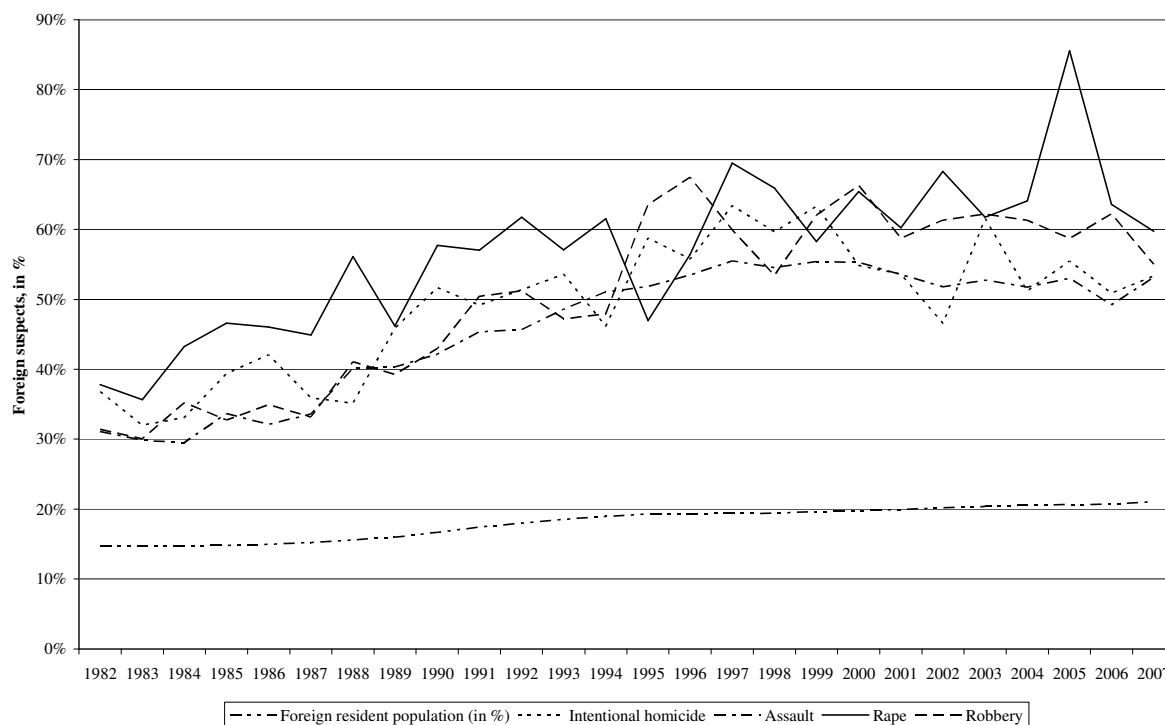
Over many decades, immigrants were not overrepresented in official crime data. Several studies summarized in Killias (1997) found migrants to be not disproportionately involved in statistics of police-recorded crime or of convictions. Before the 1980, it even seemed that migrants' share in statistics was lower than their proportion in the general population, particularly if sex and age were taken into account. Gradually, that peaceful picture changed, and in 1988 the conviction rate of foreigners reached approximately twice the level of Swiss residents among the younger age-brackets (Killias 1997). Although the increasing share of foreign nationals who came to the country primarily to commit crimes (and who disappeared immediately afterwards) was, to some extent, responsible for this change (Bauhofer 1993), there remains no doubt that a change occurred after 1980.

These empirical facts are challenging because (1) they do not confirm that, under all circumstances, migrants have higher official offending rates; (2) they contradict the view that higher crime rates among immigrants are "obviously" due to discrimination (i.e. differential reporting by victims, unequal police reactions and discrimination within the criminal justice system) – except if one wants to assume that the Swiss of 1970 were more tolerant towards migrants than those in recent years. All data on attitudes towards migrants point, however, to the opposite hypothesis. In order to see what happened, we shall first look at recent police data and then turn to survey trends.

Recent trends in offences known to the police

Switzerland has statistics on major offences known to the police since 1982. Figure 1 presents the trends of proportion of foreigners among offenders (suspects) known to the police for all major violent crimes.

Figure 1: *Foreign nationals as suspects of offences known to the police, in percent of all suspects, 1982-2007 (Source: Federal Office of Police, www.fedpol.ch).*



As Figure 1 reveals, the proportion of offenders of foreign nationality has continuously increased over the years, although the increase has levelled off after 1999 and remained stable over the last decade. This is true for intentional homicide, robbery, rape and assault. The proportion of foreign suspects oscillates now at around 50 to 60 percent, compared to 20 to 40 percent twenty years ago. At all times, the proportion of foreign subjects was higher than their share in the general population, but, as Figure 1 illustrates, that disproportion tended to grow over the last 25 years. Obviously, this comparison does not take into account the unequal sex and age distribution of Swiss and foreign residents, but even after such adjustments, the problem in official statistics remains large and, over the entire period, growing.

In recent years, an increasing flow of asylum-seekers, particularly from countries of Western Africa, attracted considerable attention in the media. A study on the extent of the problem conducted on behalf of the Swiss Parliament by Schenker, Herrmann & Killias (2004) showed that, in the cantons of Zurich and Geneva where the study was conducted among all male asylum-seekers arrived in 2001 and 2002, as well as on all known illegal residents, around 30 percent are known to the police for common offences (i.e. without offences related to their status of immigrants) after the first year of residence. This proportion is far higher than even among a young male population. Particularly disproportionate was the involvement of this group in drug dealing offences. Interestingly, most offenders came into contact with the police within the first months of their presence in the country, and not, as popular ideas suggest, after some time, i.e. once their limited chances and resources within the country may produce frustration and “bring” them into crime. As already Eisner, Niggli & Manzoni (1998) suggested in a similar study, a substantial number of asylum-seekers may come to the country in the search for criminal opportunities, particularly in the trade with illegal substances. The size of the problem seems to have substantially increased since that earlier study. It is also considerably more important than in the Netherlands (van der Leun 2003). This suggests that different cohorts of asylum-seekers may differ in their motivation to migrate, and, concomitantly, that more recent cohorts may include far lower proportions of offenders.

Although no systematic study has been conducted on this issue since 2004, the far lower attention this problem receives in the media recently suggests that changes have occurred in this area, perhaps also in response to a new asylum law that narrowed the scope for entry into the country for persons with less evident political motivations. An interesting feature of the study by Schenker, Herrmann & Killias (2004) were the (qualitative) interviews conducted with asylum-seekers living in shelters in Geneva and in Zurich. They illustrated that the dimensions of the crime problem among asylum-seekers was fairly well seen by (in their majority) non-criminal residents of these shelters. They also experienced unusually high rates of victimization (probably by fellow-residents), and many expressed frustration about “soft” police responses in this particular area. This illustrates how “soft” approaches may, ultimately and unintentionally, weaken the position of those who live in proximity with offenders, particularly if this proximity is, as in the case of asylum-seekers living in shelters, imposed rather than deliberately chosen.

Recent trends in victimization surveys

Switzerland is among the few European countries that have conducted regularly national crime victimization surveys over more than two decades (Killias, Haymoz & Lamon 2007). Along with the American national crime victimization survey and the British Crime Survey, these surveys have always collected data on offender’s characteristics as perceived by the victims of personal crime. Among these characteristics has always been the offender’s presumptive origin (Swiss vs. “foreign”), an additional question asking the victim what made him/her reach that conclusion. In more than 53 percent of all cases, the victim made his/her judgement on the grounds of the offender’s accent – a highly distinctive personal characteristic on the European continent. In less than 10 percent did the victim not feel in a situation to describe the offender’s origin, the proportion of “missing” identification of the offender’s origin decreasing over time. Thus, the proportion of offenders with “unknown” origin is considerably lower than in American research where minority status (i.e. racial identity) is assessed on the base of physical characteristics. Table 1 gives the details regarding the proportion the victims of personal crime described as being of foreign origin. Of course, these data and those in the following Tables refer to a sociological concept of “foreign” rather than to a legal characteristic (i.e. the actual passport).

Table 1: *Origin of suspects, according to offender characteristics as described by victims of personal crime during interviews (offences experienced over the last five years, in %, national crime victimization surveys of 1998, 2000 and 2005). Source: Killias, Haymoz & Lamon (2007, 45).*

<i>The offender was...</i>	Robbery/Mugging			Sexual Assault			Assault / Threat		
	1993–97 N=63	1995–99 N=98	2000–04 N=108	1993–97 N=82	1995–99 N=148	2000–04 N=245	1993–97 N=102	1995–99 N=413	2000–04 N=404
Swiss	14.3%	15.3%	13.9%	40.2%	39.9%	38.5%	64.7%****	32.9%	35.1%
Foreign-born	68.2%	63.3%	62%	40.2%**	52.0%	53.7%	18.6%****	54.5%	51.2%
Both (mixed groups)	0.0%****	9.2%	9.3%	1.2%	0.7%	2.4%	3.9%***	3.9%	9.4%***
Does not know	17.5%	11.2%	14.8%	18.3%***	7.4%	5.4%	12.7%***	8.7%	4.2%***

*** difference between 1995–99 and 2000–04 (p<.01)
 ** difference between 1993–97 and 2000–04 (p<.05)
 *** difference between 1993–97 and 2000–04 (p<.01)
 **** difference between 1993–97 and 2000–04 (p<.001)

These data show that the proportion of foreign nationals is, according to victims’ accounts, fairly well in line with offender characteristics according to police statistics (Figure 1). It also

seems that the proportion of foreign-born offenders increased according to surveys over time, as it did according to police data. This is even more evident if comparable data of the 1987 survey are considered when foreign offenders made up, according to police statistics and survey data, between one third and one half of all offenders (Killias 1997). In sum, there is no indication that statistics of police-recorded crime are to any significant extent “exaggerating” the problem, even if one has to take into account that the match of survey and statistical categories of offences is far from being perfect. Survey measures of sexual assault include, for example, behaviours that may be “offending” rather than “criminal”, such as different forms of harassment, and the survey measure of assault includes threats, whereas statistics include only cases of “bodily injury”. It is also true that mixed groups (“gangs”?) with offenders of different ethnic origin are becoming increasingly common in Switzerland, according to both police and survey data.

A further check on whether police statistics give an “exaggerated” picture is to see whether victims report offences more regularly to the police whenever they suspect the offender to be of foreign background. As is turned out in all models of multivariate logistic regression analysis, perceived ethnic (national) origin of an offender has no significant impact on the victim’s decision to report an offence to the police (Killias, Haymoz & Lamon 2007, 67-69). The odds ratios are, for robbery as well as for other violent offences, close to 1.0 – or even negative, suggesting that Swiss offenders tend to be reported to the police slightly more often (perhaps because victims can more easily hope to “gain” something from a Swiss offender).

Interestingly, foreign residents were not particularly exposed to risks of victimization when compared to Swiss nationals. Again, this matches what has been observed in 1997, since the crime victimization surveys of the 1980’ies did not show any disproportionate victimization rates among foreign respondents. Given the frequent problems in insufficient coverage of minorities in survey research, it is noteworthy that, in the survey sweeps of 1998, 2000 and 2005, a perfect match of foreign and Swiss respondents has been achieved (Killias, Haymoz & Lamon 2007, 159).

Table 2: *Origin of victims of personal crime (five year prevalence rates offences, per 1000 respondents, national crime victimization surveys of 2000 and 2005) Source: Killias, Haymoz & Lamon (2007, 38).*

<i>National origin of victim</i>	<i>Swiss</i>		<i>foreign</i>	
	1995–99	2000–04	1995–99	2000–04
Robbery / mugging	15	23	12	11
Sexual assault (female victims))	53	60	47	60
Sexual assault (male victims)	/	11	/	14
Assault / threats	76	79	59	38

As one can see, Swiss residents are more often victimized than foreigners living in Switzerland, with the exception of sexual assault where the differences are negligible, however. As already observed, this finding is challenging given the frequently observed disproportionate victimization rates among minorities in many countries. Although immigrants tend to be increasingly concentrated in some less favourite neighbourhoods, the idea expressed in 1997 that victimization rates will continue to increase disproportionately has not really materialized. One reason may be that concentration in bad neighbourhoods is still less pronounced, and that such neighbourhoods may continue being less “bad” in relative

terms than in other countries. As already observed in 1997, racist verbal or physical assault are exceptional, according to older and recent victimization surveys. Arson and other attacks on shelters of asylum seekers that regularly made the press during the early 1990ies have almost disappeared. This may be an indirect result of increased efforts on the side of the police to control racist attacks, but also of policies developed over the years to curb illegal immigration.

Finally, safety in the streets is very comparable for foreign and Swiss nationals, a situation that obviously did not change since 1997. Interestingly, foreign residents in Switzerland continue, as already observed in 1997, to express more positive views about the Swiss police than Swiss residents. Probably an important cause may be “downgrading”, many immigrants coming from areas where abusive, corrupt or otherwise incorrect police behaviour may be frequent. Dissatisfaction with the way the police deal with crime seems to be more frequent among long-standing immigrants, although the reason may be that these often older immigrants are dissatisfied with what they see as a “too soft” approach in dealing with street crime in their areas. Our interviews conducted in 2004 with residents of asylum shelters showed, among those not involved in criminal activities, rather similar feelings of frustration (Schenker, Herrmann & Killias 2004). Interesting is also what Swiss and foreign respondents in the most recent crime victimization survey had to say about police attitudes towards immigrants. Whenever respondents felt that the police do not treat everybody the same way, they most often said that the police treat foreign citizens less fairly. Interestingly, however, the Swiss more often felt this to be the case than foreign respondents (44 vs. 37 percent).

Data on self-reported delinquency

When the former paper was prepared on this subject (Killias 1997), self-report studies were not particularly developed. They were local in scope, or had a limited sample of no more than 1'000 respondents (as Killias, Villettaz & Rabasa 1994), i.e. too few to draw valid conclusion on offending among juveniles with a history of migration. In the mean-time, a national survey has been conducted on some 3'600 students attending grades 7 to 9 (i.e. aged between 13 and 16). This study allows, for the first time at the national level, to draw valid conclusions about the extent of self-reported offending among youths of Swiss and foreign background. In this context, “foreign” means having been born abroad, or having parents who both were born abroad. Given the size of the immigrant population from former Yugoslavia, we have grouped the migrant youths into two groups, namely those coming from Balkan countries (including a few Turks) and those coming from any other country (mostly Italy and Germany, but also from Latin-American, African and Asian countries). Table 3 gives the rates of self-reported offending for these three categories.

Table 3: Self-reported offending among Swiss and migrant juveniles from Balkan and other countries, grades 7 to 9, 2006 (Source: unpublished data from the Swiss ISRD-2 study, Killias et al, forthcoming)

Offence	Swiss juveniles (N=2067)	Juveniles from Balkan countries (N=357)	Juveniles from other countries (N=415)
assault	0.7	3.2□	1.5
mugging	0.8	2.3	1.0
robbery	0.6	1.8	1.0
Theft of bicycles and motorcycles	3.1	5.8□	3.9
Shoplifting	8.3	6.1	9.2♦
Selling of drugs	2.4	1.6	3.3
Group fights	6.1	16.0□□□	11.5***

Rates based on weighted data. Significance tests based on unweighted data.

Difference between juveniles of Swiss and Balkan background: □ $p \leq 0.05$, □□ $p \leq 0.01$, □□□ $p \leq 0.001$

Difference between juveniles of Swiss and other foreign background: • $p \leq 0.05$, •• $p \leq 0.01$, ••• $p \leq 0.001$

Difference between juveniles of Balkan and other backgrounds: ♦ $p \leq 0.05$, ♦♦ $p \leq 0.01$, ♦♦♦ $p \leq 0.001$

As Table 3 shows, juveniles of Swiss background usually have lower rates of self-reported offending, except in connection with shoplifting and drug selling where their rates are higher than among migrants from any of the Balkan countries, but still lower than those among migrants from any other country. This finding is backed by several surveys conducted over recent years in local areas, such as Zurich (Eisner, Manzoni & Ribeaud 2000, Ribeaud & Eisner 2008) that all found higher rates among young migrants compared to juveniles of Swiss background.

This finding is more or less in line with results of similar studies in many Western countries. More challenging is, however, what has been found in connection with a parallel study in Bosnia-Herzegovina that used the same questionnaire and methodology. Table 4 gives the results of that study for Bosnian juveniles and all students interviewed in Switzerland in comparison. Given that grade 9 is not compulsory in Bosnia-Herzegovina, only grades 7 and 8 are included in this analysis.

Table 4: Self-reported delinquency among juveniles in Switzerland (all backgrounds combined) and in Bosnia-Herzegovina, grades 7 and 8, 2006. Source: unpublished data of the Swiss and the Bosnian ISRD-2 studies: Killias et al., forthcoming, and Budlimic, Maljević & Muratbegović, forthcoming.

Offence	Juveniles in Switzerland (weighted) (N=2477)	Juveniles in Bosnia-Herzegovina (unweighted) (N=1756)
assault	1.0	0.9
mugging	1.1	0.4**
robbery	0.9	0.9
Theft of bicycles and motorcycles	3.2	0.4***
Shoplifting	8.9	1.8***
Selling of drugs	1.9	0.2***
Group fights	8.0	11.1**

The Swiss data are weighted, but significance tests were performed using unweighted data.

Difference between juveniles in Switzerland and in Bosnia-Herzegovina: * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$

As Table 4 shows, self-reported offending is, generally speaking, far more common in Switzerland than in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is particularly true for property and drug offences. Even rates of violence are somewhat comparable, only group fights being more common among Bosnian juveniles. It is particularly interesting to compare the rates in Bosnia-Herzegovina with those among juveniles from Balkan countries in Switzerland in Table 3. The far higher rates among juveniles from the Balkan in Switzerland are, in view of the low rates in Bosnia-Herzegovina, hard to explain in terms of cultural patterns, as many observers continue to think. Indeed, there is not much room for the idea that higher rates of violence observed among migrant youths in Switzerland (as in probably most other continental countries) is due to the importation of a “culture of violence”. Rather, it is the way how juveniles are being socialized in the host country that may play an important role in the genesis of the problem.

Several criticisms could be raised against these conclusions:

- (1) In Table 3, the category of juveniles from “Balkan countries” does not include only juveniles from Bosnia-Herzegovina. It could be that, for example, the high offending rates in this group is produced by juveniles from, say, Albania or Kosovo – a possibility that cannot be explored any further given the limited size of the samples involved. However, the fact that, in Table 3, juveniles from Balkan and other foreign countries do not differ much in terms of self-reported delinquency, does not suggest

that there might be important difference between the several Balkan nationalities that we missed by collapsing them into a larger category.

- (2) It could be that juveniles in Bosnia-Herzegovina are not as honest as juveniles in Switzerland in admitting to their offences. Such differential reporting styles have indeed been identified in the Netherlands by Junger (1990). The question, however, is why, if such a cultural response bias exists, Balkan juveniles living in Switzerland report more offences than Swiss respondents.

In sum, it seems plausible that the observed differences point to real differences in behaviour among students of similar cultural backgrounds, but growing up respectively as migrants abroad or in their home country. Preliminary results point to the possibility that structured leisure-time activities (“hobbies”) are far more common among Swiss compared to migrant youths, and that “hanging around in the streets” and other “risky” life-styles are more common among young people from Balkan and other countries of emigration (Markwalder, Lucia, Haymoz & Killias 2007).

The comparatively low rates of self-reported offending in Bosnia-Herzegovina do, in the light of earlier victimization surveys (Keller, Villettaz & Killias 2002), not come as a real surprise. Indeed, robbery, burglary and theft were found to be far less common in Bosnia-Herzegovina than in Switzerland during that survey conducted in 2001. The explanation suggested at that time, namely that cities in Bosnian-Herzegovina do not offer much night-time leisure activities, may indeed also explain lower offending rates among juveniles, particularly at a relatively young age (as in the present study). In addition to this, Bosnian families and neighbourhoods may control juveniles far more tightly than what young people may experience nowadays in Western Europe. Even Bosnian parents may feel helpless when confronted with the unlimited opportunities (including those to offend) their offspring is finding in any Western country.

Discussion

Switzerland’s history with “crime and migration” started with lower official offending (i.e. conviction) rates in the 1950ies and 1960ies. Then came a period when offending was relatively similar, followed by substantially higher rates of police-recorded crime committed by non-Swiss offenders. National crime victimization surveys conducted since 1984 showed, based on victims’ survey accounts of offender characteristics, rates of migrants that matched police statistics. Foreign suspects are not more likely to be reported to the police than Swiss suspects. Victimization rates, fear of crime and attitudes towards the police are very similar among Swiss and foreign survey respondents, with the exception that Swiss respondents are more critical towards the way the police deal with the crime problem. On the other hand, foreign respondents see the Swiss police as more fair, unbiased and unprejudiced towards migrants than Swiss respondents.

In sum, the picture of cohabitation of Swiss and minorities seems rather peaceful, perhaps with the exception of some peaks of offending (especially drug dealing) among some groups of asylum-seekers early in the current decade, and often expressed worries about violence among immigrant youths more recently. The results presented here suggest that patterns of migration may change over time and over space – people who migrate are not always the same, and they do so for very different reasons, sometimes including looking for criminal opportunities. In this case, good policy would be to address criminal opportunity structures that operate as a “pull factor”, for example by reducing criminal drug markets. As for

juveniles, the conditions of socialization may differ not only between native and immigrant youth, but also between migrants from a certain area and those who remained in the respective home countries. Migrants and their parents may be less prepared to deal with criminal opportunities that they were not familiar with, and they may be less familiar with “constructive” ways of structuring leisure-time of their offspring.

In conclusion, crime among migrants should, first of all, be addressed within the context of routine activities and criminal opportunity structures.

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