

Futurium

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Switzerland: Europe's largest cross-border labour market

Switzerland stands out as the country with the highest number of incoming cross-border workers in Europe. In 2023, around 374,000 employees worked in Switzerland while residing in a neighbouring country, corresponding to 7.6% of total employment.

The largest group comes from France, with more than 200,000 cross-border workers. A further 90,000 employees reside in Italy, while around 64,000 live in Germany and 8,000 in Austria.

The regional dimension of this phenomenon is particularly striking. In 2023, incoming cross-border workers accounted for more than 30% of total employment in the NUTS 3 regions of Ticino, Geneva, and Jura, reflecting their close integration with neighbouring labour markets in Italy and France. The regions around Basel, bordering both France and Germany, recorded shares of around 20%, while Neuchâtel, Vaud, and Schaffhausen all exceeded 10%.

A long-established statistical system

Cross-border commuting is a major feature of the Swiss labour market and is well captured in the country's administrative systems. The Swiss Federal Statistical Office (FSO) already produces official quarterly statistics on cross-border workers based on a dedicated administrative framework.

The available data are exceptionally detailed. In addition to country of residence, work location, citizenship and sex, Switzerland can provide:

- ◆ Work location at LAU level
- ◆ Age breakdowns
- ◆ Postcode-level information on place of residence

- ◆ Quarterly data
- ◆ Time series dating back to 2002

The statistics are primarily based on the register of holders of the Swiss G permit, which is required for foreign nationals living abroad and working in Switzerland.


A lesson on the strengths and limits of administrative data

The Swiss case illustrates both the strengths and limitations of administrative data. Thanks to the permit system, Switzerland is able to produce highly detailed and reliable statistics on foreign cross-border workers with relatively limited effort.

At the same time, the statistics do not capture one specific group: Swiss citizens who live abroad and work in Switzerland. Because they do not require a cross-border work permit, they are not included in the underlying administrative register and cannot currently be identified through the existing system.

This highlights an important lesson for future European data collection. Administrative data are shaped by national legislation and administrative procedures. As a result, even high-quality administrative sources may not fully cover the target population required for international comparisons.

The Swiss experience demonstrates the value of building on existing administrative systems, while also underlining the importance of clearly documenting country-specific limitations in the metadata to ensure transparency and comparability.

 For more information on the project, please contact: crossborderdata@cbs.nl

