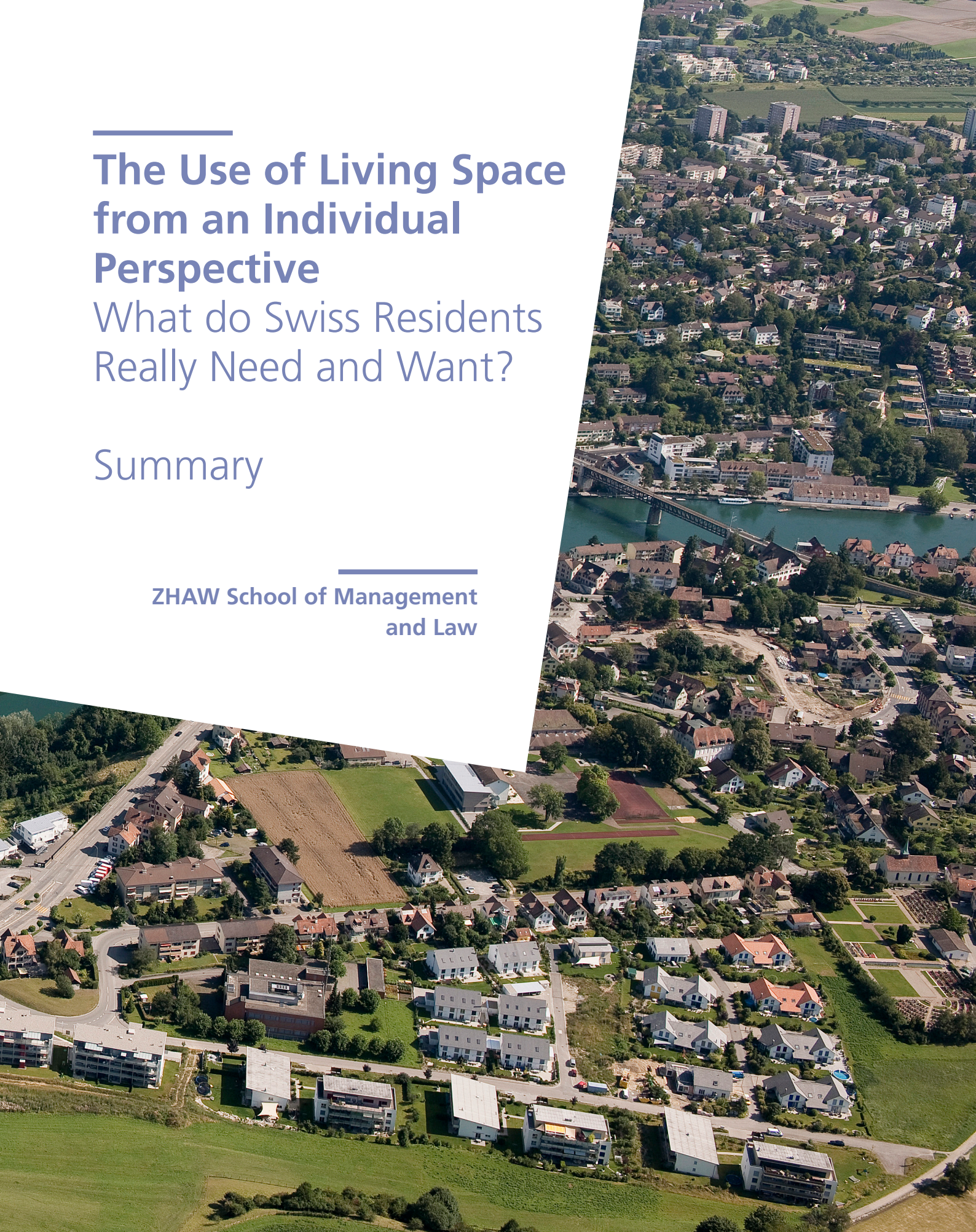

The Use of Living Space from an Individual Perspective

What do Swiss Residents
Really Need and Want?

Summary

ZHAW School of Management
and Law



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Editor

Federal Office for Housing FOH
Hallwylstrasse 4, 3003 Bern
Tel. +41 58 480 91 11
info@bwo.admin.ch, www.bwo.admin.ch

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Project Support

ChristophENZler, Federal Office for Housing (FOH)
Olivier Feller, Fédération Romande Immobilière (FRI)
Adrian Spiess, Hauseigentümerverband Schweiz (HEV)
Chiara Quarella, Raiffeisen Schweiz
Nicole Horak, Raiffeisen Schweiz

Authors

ZHAW Zürcher Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften
School of Management and Law
Abteilung Banking, Finance, Insurance
Institut für Wealth & Asset Management
Postfach
8401 Winterthur

Selina Lehner (selina.lehner@zhaw.ch)
Holger Hohgardt (holger.hohgardt@zhaw.ch)
Benedikt Umbricht

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This summary of the report is available in German, French, Italian and English. The complete report is available in German.

The report reflects the views of the authors, which do not necessarily correspond to those of the commissioning parties.

Cover Image

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MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

How do the Swiss population utilize their living space, and where are they prepared to make sacrifices?

The "Home for Life?" (*Zuhause fürs Leben?*) study found that a house move is often associated with changes in needs and the desire for more living space. It turns out that this expansion phase frequently goes hand in hand with the (pre-)family phase, as additional space is needed for children, among other things. However, it is unclear exactly how this extra space is used.

Regarding **room utilization**, the rooms in a house or apartment can be assigned to various functions and categorized depending on hygiene, well-being, or affluence.

- **Hygiene** covers basic life requirements such as eating and sleeping. The rooms intended for this purpose are indispensable and in daily use. They include the living room, dining room (or kitchen/diner), and bedroom. These three rooms appear to be standard in any apartment.
- **Well-being** adds to the comfort of the home. Respondents named the guest room and children's room as examples. As the number of rooms increases, an office, in particular, becomes an essential requirement and is then classified under hygiene.
- Fewer than 15 percent of all respondents cited a dressing room or playroom as part of their home. Such rooms are based on **affluence** since not every household can afford or wants these.

However, the three rooms categorized under well-being – the guest room, children's room, and office – have their own characteristics. In principle, dispensability and frequency of use are reflected in the subdivision of these categories. An exception is the **guest room**, which is subjectively and objectively the most likely to be dispensed with, although categorized under well-being.

The use or dispensability of the **children's room** is strongly oriented toward the family phases of life. If children still live at home, their rooms are widespread, frequently used, and indispensable (hygiene). Once the children have moved out, these rooms lose this status, and these so-called "empty nests" become guest rooms.

The availability of an **office** or study within the home is increasingly seen as a necessity (hygiene). Looking ahead, 61 percent of all respondents would like a dedicated workspace within their own four walls, a development probably influenced by the working-from-home trend. Empty nesters (those whose children have left home) are prepared to accept a reduction in children's and guest rooms, but only to a lesser extent in the case of an office, which retains its dominance even after retirement.

When it comes to **secondary rooms**, a cellar and garage are just as important as the bedroom or living room are as **primary rooms**. Storage space in the form of a "box room" is becoming increasingly important, especially for people preparing to move house or expecting to have more children.

Is there a willingness to compromise?

The ideal scenario can only be achieved to a limited extent through the housing market – especially given the housing shortage. It is currently unclear how flexible the respondents are in their search for accommodation. For example, are they prepared to demonstrate **flexibility** regarding the number of rooms or housing costs?

People willing to move were asked to what extent they were prepared to deviate from their desired location. Of those willing to relocate, the greatest inflexibility was shown concerning the following two factors:

- **Number of rooms:** 42 percent of those willing to move do not want to deviate from their original plans. Those whose families are not yet complete are more likely to want to increase their living space when moving and are also more willing to compromise. However, if the children have already moved out, every second person willing to move would like to downsize their living space. With increasing age, however, the willingness to compromise also decreases – 52 percent of empty nesters are not prepared to sacrifice another room.
- **Monthly housing costs:** 32 percent do not want to deviate from their budget and are not prepared to pay more toward monthly housing costs than initially

planned. Again, the willingness to compromise decreases with increasing age. At 48 percent, the empty nesters are the least willing to compromise. Although around half of the empty nesters willing to move would also like to downsize, 56 percent expect their monthly housing costs to increase.

Willingness to compromise is highest concerning the **form of housing or property type**. The desire for property ownership or even a detached house decreases with age. Empty nesters are least likely to want either, while people who would like to have another child are most likely to want their own property or a detached house. Empty nesters, however, are most open to the idea of their own small house.

Willingness to compromise is also broadly reflected in the **search criteria**. Three factors are significant when looking for a new home – price (monthly housing costs, purchase price), situation/location, and the number of rooms. Two-thirds cite price and situation/location as their top three search criteria, while one in two cited the number of rooms. In contrast, the size of cellars or storage rooms comes much lower down the list, with 84 percent rating this among the bottom three considerations.

To what extent is there a willingness to downsize living space, and what needs to happen for downsizing to become a reality?

In theory, an expansion phase is followed by a consolidation phase. Despite the recognized potential for downsizing – particularly prevalent among the older generation – relocation mobility remains the lowest for this group.

Sixty-seven percent of all respondents consider their apartment/house size appropriate, while 20 percent find it too small and 13 percent too large. According to those surveyed, a surplus of two rooms (two more rooms than people in the household) seems to be the **ideal apartment/house size**. The willingness to move and, accordingly, feeling the need to move decreases with increasing room surplus. Therefore, the **pressure to move** is not so much caused by apartments that are too big as by apartments that are too small.

In addition to the absence of any pressure to move, there is also minimal social pressure. Only one in three people surveyed think that older couples or single people in larger apartments should sacrifice their extra space in favor of young families.

The **potential** for downsizing may be recognized **objectively** but it is perceived **subjectively** by respondents. In other words, those affected are aware of the huge demand for living space. Thirty-eight percent of empty nesters (with an average age of 65) have an excess of more than two rooms, and 26 percent feel that their home is too big.

Despite this, the **willingness to downsize** is generally low. Seventy percent of all respondents are not planning to downsize their living space, with around one in two respondents showing no desire to move and downsize. Only eleven percent are aiming to downsize, and even if the willingness to downsize is generally classified as low, this increases with age.

This is also reflected in **effective relocation behavior**: Around one in two people of retirement age who move reduce their living space. However, if this rate is compared with the relocation rate, the picture is less optimistic since only a minority moves in old age or is willing to move. A willingness to move is, therefore, a further barrier to downsizing.

When there is a willingness to downsize, a lack of financial incentive often prevents this from happening. This can also be seen in the most significant **selection criteria** if living space is to be reduced. A lower price and a suitable location are important for three-quarters of respondents when downsizing. Other criteria, such as furnishings, are usually less critical but can be significant depending on the circumstances.

Homeowners generally have more living space and more options for utilizing it. Accordingly, they have a greater potential for downsizing than rent-paying tenants. Despite this, the willingness among homeowners to downsize is only minimally greater, and their willingness to move is somewhat lower.

CONCLUSION & OUTLOOK



Individual space requirements



- Children's room becomes a guest room for “empty nesters”.
- The guest room is most likely to be dispensable.
- Many now view an office at home as essential.
- Storage space is essential for growing families.



Facilities should be located in the home wherever possible. For example, an external office is less attractive than an office within your four walls.



Communal yet private workspaces could be a viable option. For example, a coworking space within the development with smaller meeting places could be considered in place of an office.



Flexibility



- The Swiss population knows what it needs and can afford. People are least willing to compromise on the number of rooms and housing costs.
- The younger generation is more willing to compromise than the older generation regarding housing costs, number of rooms, and property type.



There is little room for maneuver concerning housing costs. The number of rooms is just as significant but could be supplemented by having new uses if necessary. Greater flexibility on the part of younger employees creates an opportunity for this.



In the long term, this flexibility and openness to new forms of living must be further promoted.



Downsizing



- The potential is broadly recognized.
- However, there is only a limited willingness to downsize.
- Willingness to relocate is an additional challenge.
- Homeowners are more difficult to persuade despite the greater potential.



A combination of willingness to relocate and downsizing is particularly challenging because they happen simultaneously. For homeowners, the third aggravating factor is the complex real-estate sales process.



- Existing/offered rents are often the subject of intense public debate. However, this measure only affects tenants – and could make homeownership even more attractive. Therefore, the effects and side effects need to be analyzed more closely.
- It is unclear which incentives would be most effective. Price seems to be a critical variable that cannot be disregarded.



A discussion of possible solutions will follow in the final study in this series.

Project Partners and Study Design

This study is one of a series. It was conducted by the ZHAW School of Management and Law and financed by the Federal Office for Housing, the Swiss Homeowners Association, the Fédération Romande Immobilière, and Raiffeisen Switzerland. One thousand and ninety-seven people from German-speaking and French-speaking Switzerland participated in this quantitative survey. It is representative of age, gender, home ownership/rental ratio, and regions (Italian-speaking Ticino was not included). These factors were ensured by means of quotas that correspond to the distribution of the Swiss population. Respondents were contacted by a market research company in February/March 2024.

Further information on the study series:

[Eigentum und Generationentransfer | ZHAW Zürcher Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften](#)

