FOSTERED
LOCKED AWAY
FORGOTTEN?

The history and stories of compulsory social measures in Switzerland

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Dear visitors

In the *Fostered. Locked away. Forgotten?* exhibition, you will encounter a dark chapter in Switzerland's history, that of compulsory social measures and fostering. For decades, the fates of those affected remained invisible. But the injustice and suffering endured by countless children, women and men is real and still felt to this day. Their stories are told in this national touring exhibition (part of the federal programme "Remembering for Tomorrow") and are brought to life through the voices of those affected. Many have found the courage to share their painful memories with us – they urge us to listen, to understand and to take responsibility. Their openness and strength are moving.

Extensive scientific inquiry over the past few decades has helped us understand the reasons for this injustice and suffering. The exhibition shows how the authorities enforced the prevailing values of the time, disenfranchised some people and marginalised others. But it also sheds light on the political process of reappraisal that has taken place over recent decades. It provides an important space for us to question how we live together: How do we want to treat each other? How tolerant is our society? And how can our constitutional state continue to develop?

We cannot undo the suffering. But we can listen, acknowledge and learn. The responsibility for this lies with us all – not only with the state, but with society as a whole and with each individual. This exhibition is an invitation to engage in dialogue, to reflect, to remember and to work together to create a society that values diversity and respects the dignity and right to self-determination of every human being.

I would like to thank all those affected for their courage and commitment: without them, the important process of remembrance and reparation – and this exhibition – would not have been possible. I would like to thank the creators of the exhibition, as well as the museums and institutions involved, for their contribution to a lively and critical examination of our history. And I would like to thank each and every one of you. By visiting the exhibition, you are continuing this process of remembrance and helping raise awareness!

Beat Jans,
Federal Councillor

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They were humiliated, beaten and exploited. They had to work, obey and remain silent. They were separated from their families, denied education and deprived of their rights.

They were labelled “immoral”, “work-shy”, “illegitimate” or “lunatic” but often were only poor, single parents, born out of wedlock, suffering from psychiatric illnesses or simply different.

They were sexually abused, pressured into abortion or sterilisation, forced to give up their children and used for drug trials. They were controlled instead of protected, shamed instead of supported. Their freedom, dignity and voice were taken away from them.

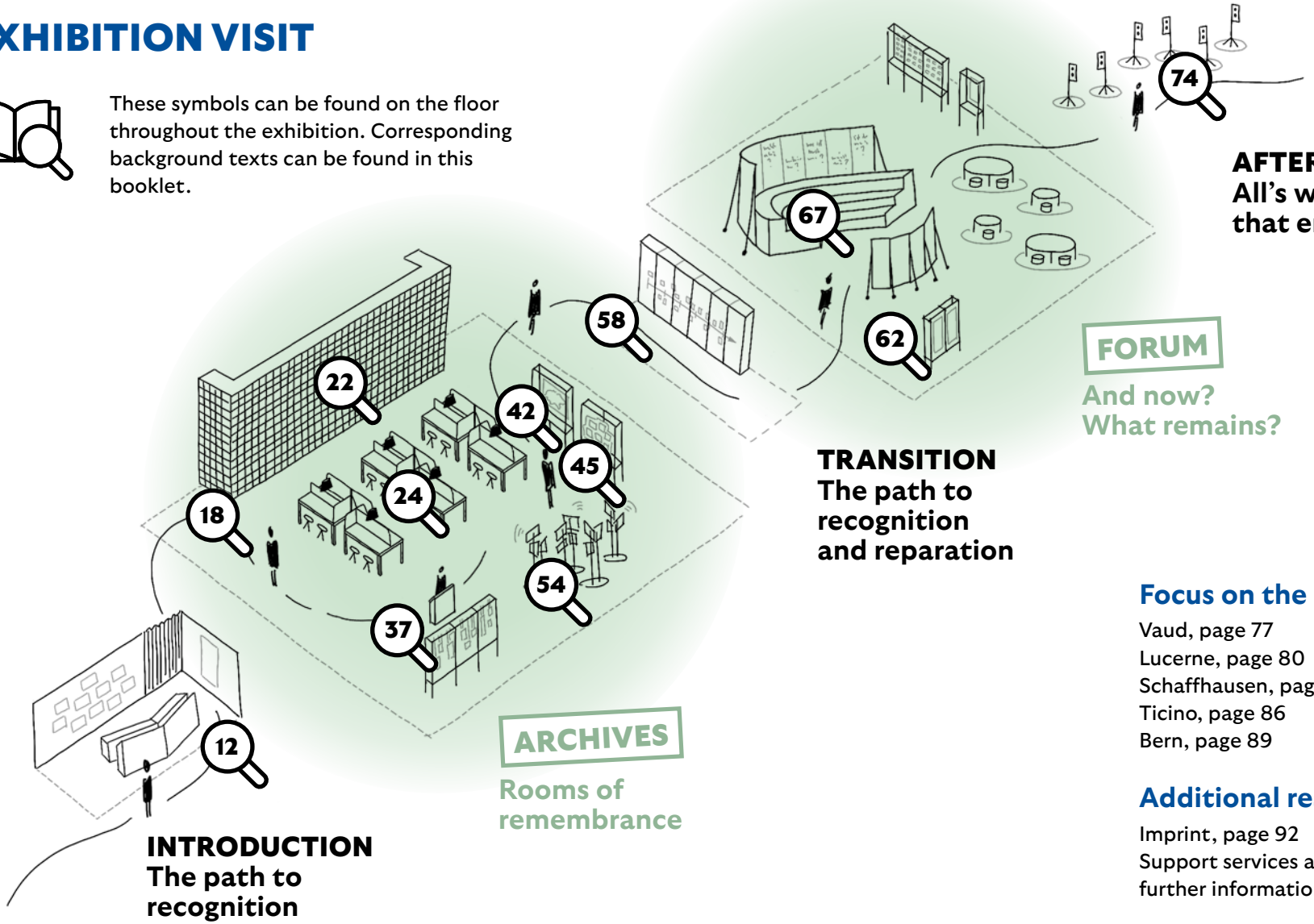
Well into the 20th century, the state violated the fundamental rights of hundreds of thousands of individuals in the name of welfare. This history and the life stories of those affected were long concealed and suppressed by authorities, politicians, the public and even by the victims themselves, out of shame, guilt and fear.

It was only when the Federal Council officially recognised this injustice in the early 21st century that a process of public and political reappraisal began, one that continues to this day. The *Fostered. Locked Away. Forgotten?* exhibition is part of this process. It presents the history of compulsory social measures and the long path to recognition and reparation that was initiated by the very people affected.

The “Archives” shed a harsh light on this dark chapter in Swiss social history, providing insight into the lives of those affected and the social environment that made this injustice possible. The “Forum” draws parallels with the present and asks what can we learn from this history. Is it possible to make reparation for past injustices? And how can we build a society that protects without violating human dignity?

EXHIBITION VISIT

These symbols can be found on the floor throughout the exhibition. Corresponding background texts can be found in this booklet.



AFTERMATH
All's well that ends well?

FORUM
And now?
What remains?

TRANSITION
The path to recognition and reparation

ARCHIVES
Rooms of remembrance

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INTRODUCTION
The path to recognition

The exhibition opens with the people who were affected by compulsory social measures and who fought back. It is their testimonies that led to the official acknowledgement and reparation of the injustice. A video montage compiled from historical television footage presents important milestones and moments.

Those affected tell of arbitrary treatment by the authorities, violence and humiliation, exclusion and exploitation. They broke the silence with autobiographies, interviews and public campaigns. Their voices were finally heard in the early 21st century, thanks to the support of media and cultural figures, historians and politicians. Public pressure led to official recognition of the injustices committed in the name of social welfare.

In 2010, Federal Councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf apologised to individuals who had been "placed in administrative detention"; in 2013, on behalf of the federal government, Simonetta Sommaruga extended the apology to all victims. This marked the beginning of a comprehensive political and academic reappraisal.

In 2014, the Reparation Initiative called for financial compensation for all those affected. In response, a law came into force in 2017 providing for a solidarity contribution of 25,000 Swiss francs per victim.

"My publisher told me that we can't publish this, no one would believe us. The story doesn't fit with Switzerland's idyllic image."

Arthur "Turi" Honegger (1924–2017), an illegitimate child, was sent to a foster family and later held in a correctional labour facility until he came of age. He published his experiences in 1974 in *The Finishers*. The book was an early indictment of administrative detention and official arbitrariness, persecution and discrimination.

“This belongs in the Swiss history books. What Switzerland did to us Yenish people is a crime.”

Uschi Waser (born 1952) was one of those affected by the Pro Juventute “Children of the Open Road” project. As president of the Naschet Jenische (“Stand up, Yenish!”) Foundation, she is committed to seeking reparation for the injustice and promoting the rights of the Yenish in Switzerland.

“I was locked up in Hindelbank women’s prison for 19 months, just because I didn’t want to live the way the powerful people in this country said I should.”

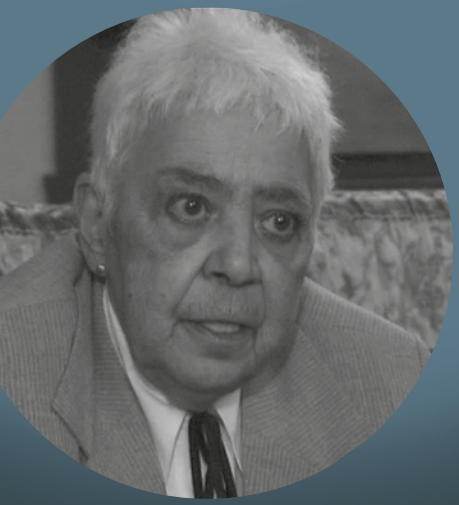
Mariella Mehr (1947–2022) was a Yenish woman affected by the Pro Juventute “Children of the Open Road” project. This activist and eloquent writer fought throughout her life for recognition and reparation of the injustice.

“I was told that I was not normal and nor was my unborn child. It would be better to get rid of it.”

Bernadette Gächter (1954–2022) was forcibly sterilised and had to abort her child. She told her story in her 2006 book *Widerspenstig (Unruly)*. In 2012, she and others affected were awarded the Prix Courage by *Beobachter* magazine for their commitment to seeking recognition of the injustice.

“If the authorities do not apologise, it will pave the way for the next arbitrary action by the authorities.”

Ursula Biondi (born 1949) was “subject to administrative detention” in Hindelbank women’s prison because she was pregnant out of wedlock. A true pioneer, she has been campaigning for many years for the rehabilitation of people who were formerly subject to administrative detention and reparation for the injustices committed.



“I hate this country so much. What they did to me! I will not rest until Switzerland apologises to me.”

Louisette Buchard-Molteni (1933–2004) was one of the first people in French-speaking Switzerland to draw attention to the injustices committed by children’s homes and institutions. With a protest on a construction crane (1982), hunger strikes, an art exhibition and her 1995 autobiography *Around Switzerland in a Cage*, she fought tirelessly for the reappraisal of compulsory social measures.

ARCHIVES

Rooms of remembrance

The centrepiece of the “Archives” is a memorial consisting of a thousand drawers, with each drawer representing the story of one of those affected. These stories were kept secret for many years, and no one wanted to hear them.

The social context of the time supported a welfare practice that systematically violated fundamental rights until the late 20th century, giving rise to countless institutions and compulsory measures. The measures were based on a multitude of laws with vague terms that allowed arbitrary decisions.

Those who were poor were particularly at risk: poverty was not seen as a social problem, but as a personal failure.

STORIES FROM THE ARCHIVES
There are many of us

Hundreds of thousands of people in Switzerland were victims of compulsory social measures during the 20th century, but their stories remained hidden for many years. A memorial comprising a thousand drawers pays tribute to them.

Most of the drawers are closed, anonymous and labeled with a stigma. They represent the untold stories of people who have passed away and of those who, out of shame, remain silent to this day.

One hundred drawers are open and bear the name of a person affected. They offer an insight into the injustices suffered – revealing files, photos, personal documents and application forms for the solidarity contribution.

For many, the first encounter with these files was a harrowing experience. Suddenly, they saw their lives from the perspective of those in power, the perpetrators. They could see – in black and white, and in official language – how they had been devalued and stigmatised behind their backs. Yet these same files also provide proof of the injustices committed against them.

Under the 2017 federal law, victims receive a solidarity contribution of 25,000 Swiss francs and facilitated access to their files.

By the end of 2025, around 12,000 people had received the solidarity contribution, and with it, official recognition of the injustice they suffered.

The following individuals offer an insight into their files in the exhibition:

Aeby Nicole, b. 1953 in Fribourg
Bachofner Mario, b. 1959 in Locarno (TI)
Balsiger Patrick, b. 1963 in Bern
Beck Yolande Paulette, b. 1942 in Lausanne (VD)
Bernard Jean-Paul, b. 1963 in Seine-St-Denis (F)
Bianchi Bruno*, b. 1948 (TI)
Biondi Ursula, b. 1949 in Zurich
Birchler MarieLies, b. 1950 in Zurich
Blarasin Lotti, b. 1941 in Bern
Blum Dora, b. 1947 in Hemmental (SH)
Bornand Raymonde, b. 1933 in Geneva
Bremer Ernst, b. 1956 in Schaffhausen
Brunner Rita, b. 1966 in Zurich
Burrin-Tercier Marie-Thérèse, b. 1940 in Le Châtelard (FR)
Cattin Michel, b. 1950 in Neuchâtel
Cevey Margueritte, b. 1937 in Lausanne (VD)
Chambovay Monique, b. 1946 in Geneva
Chapuisat Henriette, b. 1956 in Lausanne (VD)
Christen Markus, b. 1954 in Chur (GR)
Debetaz Christian, b. 1959 in Lausanne (VD)
Demont Claude André, b. 1942 in Lausanne (VD)
Devecchi Sergio, b. 1947 in Lugano (TI)
Ding Marie-Rose, b. 1961 in Sierre (VS)
Dorothea*, b. 1958
Emmisberger Walter, b. 1956 in Tobel (TG)
Frei Irma, b. 1941 in Schaffhausen
Frieden Fabienne, b. 1964 in La Chaux-de-Fonds (NE)
Gäggeler Kurt, b. 1951 in Bern
Galli Rosa*, b. 1952 (TI)

Gantert Erika, b. 1947 in Schaffhausen
Gloor Viola, b. 1961 in Lucerne
Goldmann Gabriela, b. 1959 in Schaffhausen
Gottet Michael, b. 1964 in Zurich
Grassi Letizia, b. 1961 in Viganello (TI)
Gremion Liliane, b. 1948 in Buchs (SG)
Gruber Ursulina, b. 1957 in Zurich
Gurtner Karin, b. 1959 in Basel
Handschin Claude, b. 1936 in Geneva
Hatt Gisela, b. 1946 in Schaffhausen
Holl Roland, b. 1959 in Menziken (AG)
Jäggi Christina, b. 1957 in Recherswil (SO)
Jost Andreas, b. 1961 in Basel
Kreienbühl Beat, b. 1952 in Emmen (LU)
Kräuchi Heinz, b. 1963 in Bern
Kräuchi Pia, b. 1966 in Bern
Kretonic David, b. 1972 in Geneva
Krubally Claudia, b. 1953 in St. Gallen
Lilili*, b. 1957
Ludwig Andrea, b. 1962 in Appenzell
Maibach Markus, b. 1959 in Burgdorf (BE)
Martin Karl Markus, b. 1960 in Basel
Meylan Alain, b. 1956 in Geneva
Meylan-Meister Elisabeth, b. 1952 in Renens (VD)
Michel Siegfried, b. 1946 in Agra (TI)
Montandon Caroline, b. 1972 in Fribourg
Mora Giovanni Luigi, b. 1948 in Locarno (TI)
Mora Vincenzo, b. 1950 in Roveredo (TI)
Müller Markus, b. 1966 in Gächlingen (SH)
Müller Patrik, b. 1971 in Schaffhausen
Neugebauer Andreas, b. 1964 in Bern
Oliboni Carlo, b. 1950 in Lugano (TI)
Piguet Michèle, b. 1953 in Geneva

Pittet Daniel, b. 1959 in Geneva
Pittet-Reynaud Nicolas, b. 1962 in Geneva
Pollux*, b. 1963
Ragusa Antonio, b. 1964 in Basel
Reymond Claude-Alain, b. 1961 in Neuchâtel
Rod Daniel, b. 1957 in Zurich
Rohr-Steinmann Theresa, b. 1946 in Wauwil (LU)
Rubli Rudolf, b. 1940 in Zurich
Rüedi Roland, b. 1945 in Herisau (AR)
Russenberger-Merlo Nicole, b. 1972 in Schaffhausen
Ryter Alfred, b. 1940 in Frutigen (BE)
Saffore Jean-Robert, b. 1963 in Fribourg
Schafer Astrid, b. 1953 in Fribourg
Schafer Jean-Marc, b. 1954 in Fribourg
Schenker Nelly, b. 1941 in Fribourg
Schmidt Daniella, b. 1944 in Mendrisio
Schmutz Gérald, b. 1965 in Fribourg
Stalder Samuel, b. 1963 in Thun (BE)
Tomasini Fausto, b. 1947 in Lugano (TI)
Trachsel-Wullschläger Anita, b. 1960 in Ringgenberg (BE)
Tschannen Benjamin, b. 1970 in Solothurn
Tschannen Christian, b. 1971 in Solothurn
Venturelli Yvonne, b. 1950 in Lugano (TI)
Walther Markus, b. 1974 in Zug
Waser Uschi, b. 1952 in Rüti (ZH)
Weber-Broillet Anita, b. 1947 in Billens (FR)
Weilenmann Miranda Ginevra Astrea, b. 1962 in Winterthur (ZH)
Wicki Ariane Françoise, b. 1943 in Fribourg
Wiederkehr Pia, b. 1946
Wirz Rösli, b. 1943 in Basel
Wittwer Ronald, b. 1957 in Tavannes (BE)
Wyder Sylvana, b. 1958 in Zurich
Zwahlen Willy, b. 1964 in Bern

Stigma, shame and guilt

Those affected often report feelings of shame and guilt. Many were stigmatised even as children and ostracised because of their supposed inferiority. Later, they were marginalised because they had been “subject to administrative detention” or “placed in care”. They could not shake off the label. The stigma remained.

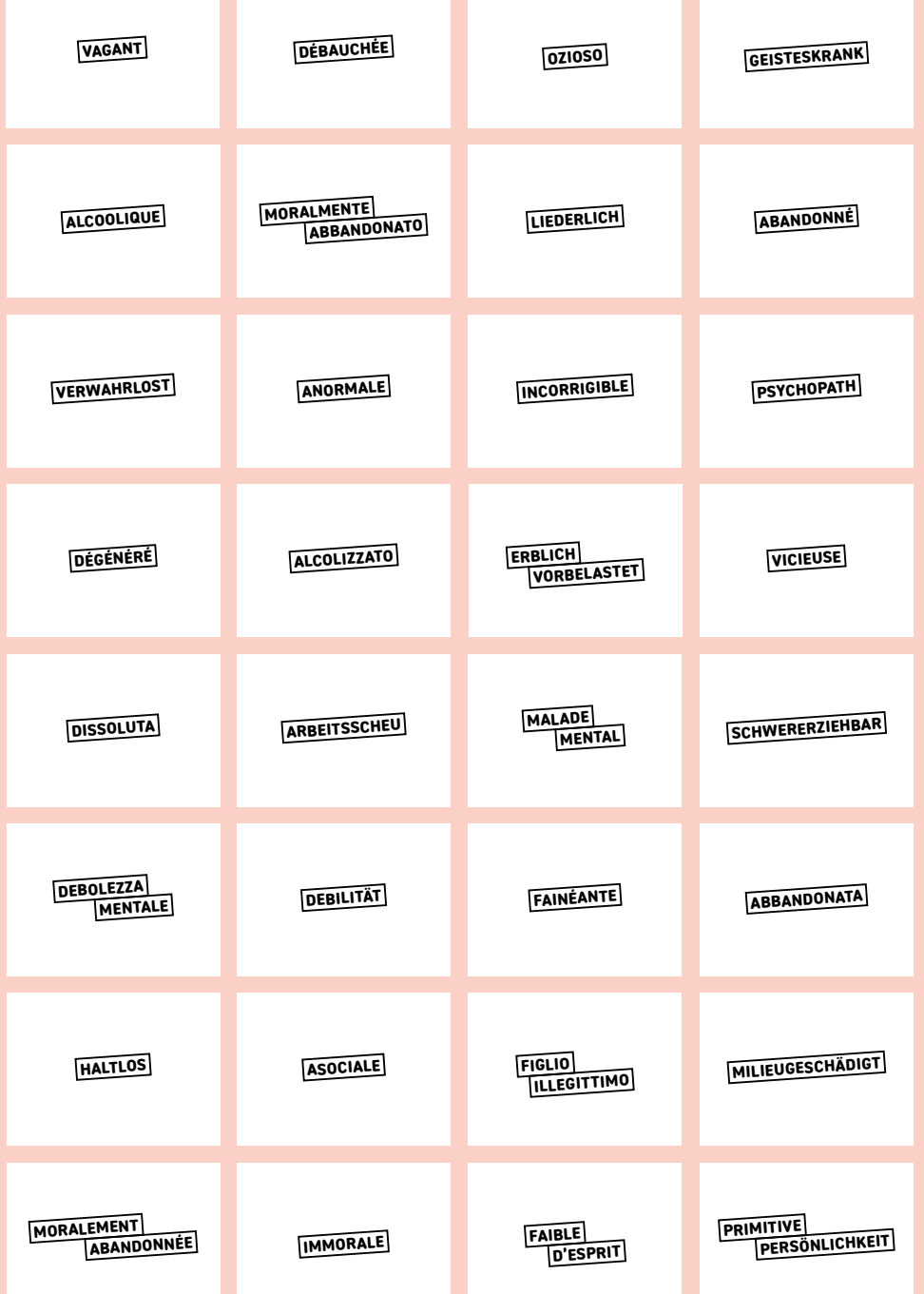
Social workers, doctors and teachers, but also neighbours and supervisors, described those affected using terms such as “anti-social”, “work-shy” or “immoral”. These labels stigmatised them and those close to them. They were branded and marginalised. Time and again, those affected would hear and were made to feel that they were worthless, good for nothing.

Official files and administrative documents turned these stigmas into established facts, and society saw this as confirmation of its views. Some of those affected internalised the stigmatisation, believing what they had been told. This led to reduced self-esteem.

The stigmatisation continued after the fostering or once individuals had left institutions. Many of those affected report that they felt ashamed of their supposed inferiority throughout their lives. This made it difficult for them to start a family and enjoy success in their careers.

For decades, many chose to keep silent – out of shame, but also out of fear of being marginalised again.

These terms appear in official files, psychological assessments and legal texts. →



LIFE STORIES
Fostered. Locked away – and forgotten?

Twelve people tell their stories through files and photographs. Why were they subjected to compulsory social measures and what was the context? What was the official justification? How did those affected experience this period? What traces did the intervention leave in their lives?

If those affected had not come forward with their life stories and if the media had not reported them, the history of compulsory social measures would not have been so thoroughly investigated. Many of those affected are still fighting for recognition of the injustice they suffered.

Their stories reveal the contradictory intertwining of welfare and coercion. Young women who had children out of wedlock were placed in "administrative detention", or sometimes even in prison. Psychiatrists ran drug trials on foster children. Children born out of wedlock were placed in foster care and forced into indentured servitude. Yenish children were forcibly assimilated: they were torn from their culture and re-educated by foster families and institutions.

"After running away from home several times and having become pregnant out of wedlock, the guardianship authority decided to send me to a 'specialized closed educational home'. It was never agreed that I should be placed in a women's prison."

URSULA BIONDI
*1949 in Zürich

In 1966, at the age of seventeen, Ursula Biondi was placed in "administrative detention" in the Hindelbank correctional facility, even though she had committed no crime. The guardianship authority took this "educational measure" because she was a minor and had become pregnant out of wedlock. After the birth, an attempt was made to take her child away from her. By publishing her story in the book *Born in Zurich* (2002) and through numerous media appearances, she has made a significant contribution to starting the process of reparation for the injustice. In 2011, Biondi, along with other affected individuals, founded the RAVIA association (Rehabilitation of Persons Placed into Administrative Detention). Her commitment has earned her numerous awards and recognition. Furthermore, it led to an official apology from the Confederation, a law for the rehabilitation of those involved and the work of historical remembrance.

“They tested drugs on me when I was a child. I had to swallow tons of pills until I vomited. I was force-fed like a goose.”

WALTER EMMISBERGER
*1956 in Tobel (TG)

Walter Emmisberger was born as an illegitimate child in Tobel prison (TG). His mother had probably been placed in “administrative detention” for becoming pregnant out of wedlock. Shortly after his birth, Emmisberger was taken away from his mother. He was first placed in a children’s home, then in foster care from the age of six. At the age of eleven, while confined at the psychiatric clinic in Münsterlingen (TG), Emmisberger was subjected to drug tests.

Emmisberger has contributed significantly to advancing the process of public reparation for this injustice. Thanks to his commitment, since 2025 victims of drug tests in the canton of Thurgau have received 25,000 Swiss francs in compensation.

“I was taken from my mother because I was Yenish. The words of the head of Pro Juventute’s ‘Children of the Open Road’ project were clear: ‘We must at all costs prevent another offshoot of vagrancy from seeing the light of day via an illegitimate child.”

USCHI WASER
*1952 in Rüti (ZH)

Uschi Waser is Yenish. As a newborn she was targeted by Pro Juventute’s “Children of the Open Road” project. She was taken from her mother and placed twenty-six times in nine different cantons before the age of fourteen. During those years, she suffered violence and exclusion. Since the 1990s, she has been president of the Naschet Jenische Foundation, which works to rehabilitate the Yenish. In 2025, a federal legal opinion recognised that “from today’s perspective, the persecution of the Swiss Yenish community is a crime against humanity.” This was a significant milestone for Waser. Now she is asking that the injustice committed against the Yenish be given a separate chapter in the work of remembrance on compulsory social measures.

In 2026, her book *Reden, um nicht zu ersticken* (Speaking, so as not to suffocate) was published.

"When I left Dietfurt at the age of twenty, I promised myself that no one around me would ever know or learn how horrible my childhood and adolescence had been. Besides, in the 1960s, I would never have found work if I had told people that I had grown up in a home and been detained for three years."

IRMA FREI
*1941 in Schaffhausen

Irma Frei was placed in care several times after her parents' divorce. While living in a girls' home, she was forced into indentured servitude in the spinning mill of arms manufacturer Emil Bührle in Dietfurt (SG). She finally spoke out about it at the age of eighty, after reading an article on the subject in the *Beobachter* magazine. Today, Frei is the media face of the work of remembrance related to forced labour. She took to the stage to share her story in a production of *William Tell* at the Schauspielhaus in Zurich.

"As a child, I lived with my mother in a cellar. My mother had nothing. My grandmother always told me, 'There's nothing here for you!' The priest then persuaded my grandmother to give me away."

NELLY SCHENKER
*1941 in Fribourg

Nelly Schenker was the illegitimate child of a single mother. She spent her first year of life in extreme poverty, before being placed several times in foster homes in French-speaking Switzerland, including the Bon Pasteur Institute in Lully (FR). There, she was subject to violence and isolation, forced into indentured servitude and denied an education. She remained under guardianship for many years as an adult, was forcibly committed to a psychiatric clinic and at times lived in tents with her family due to a lack of funds. Today, she is an artist and advocates for the international movement "ATD Fourth World". In 2014, she wrote her autobiography, *A Long, Long Wait for Just a Little Something*.

"As a seven-and-a-half-year-old, I had to replace a farmhand. I was always working and always hungry. They gave me far too little to eat. I never once ate with them at the table. They rarely beat me, but when they did, they beat me hard."

ALFRED RYTER
*1940 in Frutigen (BE)

When Alfred Ryter was seven years old, his mother fell ill and had to go to a sanatorium. His father was unable to look after their five children on his own, so Alfred and his two brothers were taken away from their parents and sent to work as farmhands. At the age of seven and a half, he was expected to work as hard as an adult farmhand. His foster parents abused and neglected him, and he still suffers from the health consequences to this day. In 2020, his story was turned into a documentary film *(Verdinger)*. Alfred Ryter has been involved in the reappraisal process for this injustice, including through the association "Verdingkinder suchen ihre Spur". He took part in the round table on the reappraisal of compulsory social measures.

"There were about eleven of us women in the same dormitory. The windows were barred. All the women there were pregnant out of wedlock and before the birth had signed a document saying they would give up their children for adoption. I said: 'I'm not doing that. I want this child; it belongs to me. I'm not signing!'"

THERESA ROHR-STEINMANN
*1946 in Wauwil (LU)

Theresa Rohr-Steinmann has survived many types of compulsory social measures. She was put into care, placed in children's homes and foster families, and admitted to a psychiatric ward, where she was forcibly treated with medication. When she later became pregnant out of wedlock, officials attempted to take her child away from her.

She was born into poverty, and her mother died when she was two years old. At the age of eight, she and her siblings were placed in care – each child in a different location. She was only reunited with her eldest maternal half-sister thirty-five years later. Three of her siblings took their own lives.

In 2004, she founded the association "Verdingkinder suchen ihre Spur", together with other survivors. Today, she serves on a federal advisory committee. Her biography, *Trotz dem Leben* (In Spite of Life) was published in 2024.

“I watched as my mother packed my suitcase and said: ‘They’re taking you to a good place.’ It broke my heart, and I wondered: ‘Where are they taking me? What are they going to do with me? What will become of me?’ I hadn’t expected this. I was happy with my family.”

CARLO OLIBONI
*1950 in Lugano (TI)

Carlo Oliboni was born into a poor family with ten children. As with many other children from Ticino living in poverty, the authorities placed him in a home run by a Catholic order. He spent his childhood and teenage years at the Santa Maria di Pollegio home with his brothers Bruno and Antonio. But he lost contact with his other siblings; he felt lonely. He was ”nobody’s child”.

In his book *In the Name of Divine Providence* (2020), he describes the abuse and violence he experienced.

“So I ran away again. And they sent me to Mendrisio. Then came the diagnosis: ‘Psychopathic personality disorder in an oligophrenic patient.’ In other words: I was crazy. […] When they put me in there, they tied my wrists and ankles. I couldn’t move at all.”

DANIELLA SCHMIDT
*1944 in Mendrisio (TI)

Daniella Schmidt was born out of wedlock in Mendrisio in 1944. The guardianship authority placed her in the Culla San Marco infant home in Bellinzona. This was followed by several placements – including with a foster family who abused her and in the Good Shepherd home in Altstätten, known for its particularly strict regime.

After repeated attempts to run away, she was admitted to the neuropsychiatric clinic in Mendrisio at the age of sixteen, even though she was not mentally ill. In despair, she attempted to take her own life. After she was discharged, she married as quickly as possible to prevent her child from being deemed “illegitimate” and taken away from her.

Today, she is committed to furthering the reappraisal of compulsory welfare measures.

"My mother didn't want to see. It was impossible. I couldn't tell her. And when we think about families today, does anyone say anything? Everyone keeps their mouth shut! We're so broken, we're so embarrassed by what's happening to us."

DANIEL PITTET
*1959 in Geneva

Daniel Pittet was born into a poor family of five children. After his father was committed to a psychiatric hospital, his mother shifted with her children to his grandmother's house in Romont, and then moved to Fribourg. When he was eleven, his grandmother suffered a stroke, and his mother had to give up her job. She fell into a severe depression. The children were then placed separately in foster families and children's homes.

Pittet was placed with a total of sixteen different families. He was the victim of repeated sexual abuse at the hands of a priest. Poverty, his mother's illness, forced placements, and abuse profoundly affected his life and led him to undergo psychological treatment for many years.

In 2017, he told his story in the book *My Father, I Forgive You*. Pittet is considered a leading voice in the fight against sexual abuse in the church and in society at large. He is committed to breaking the silence.

"We are not responsible for what we experience as children. We must not hold on to anger and hatred. We must have the strength to forgive. I believe that this is the only way to move forward. We must love life, we must love people. We must keep telling ourselves that not everyone is like those we have known, who hurt us."

ALAIN MEYLAN
*1956 in Geneva

After Alain Meylan's birth, the authorities took him away from his parents. From a very young age, he was placed on a farm where he was exploited, treated like a slave and abused.

Despite this difficult childhood, he managed to build a new life with his own family. Today, he is involved in the international movement "ATD Fourth World" for child protection and against poverty. He has participated in debates on compulsory social measures. He tells his story in the book *Broken Childhoods, Lives Turned Upside-Down*.

"When I was at the children's home, people would say: 'Look at her, she's stupid, she's poor.' I said: 'I'll show you, I'm not stupid and poor.'"

RAYMONDE BORNAND
*1933 in Geneva

Raymonde Bornand was taken away from her parents at an early age and admitted to a children's hospital in a serious condition. Her chances of survival were slim. She survived thanks to the dedication of a nurse and a sanatorium director.

Once she had recovered, she was placed in a home for so-called "retarded" children and then enrolled in school for the first time at age ten. A foster family living on a farm in Commugny offered her a real home.

But Raymonde wanted to become independent: at eighteen, she applied for teacher training, which she successfully completed. She then worked in Lausanne and Geneva, among other places. Despite all the hardships she experienced as a child, she was able to live independently. The time spent with her foster family in Commugny still remains a "beautiful story" for her.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK
Between protection and discrimination

In 20th-century Switzerland, fundamental rights were systematically violated in the name of welfare. Vague terms in cantonal laws and a lack of legal redress allowed arbitrary state action. Many of those affected could not defend themselves against these violations. Since then and in line with international agreements, Switzerland has amended its legal framework to take human rights into account.

The Swiss Civil Code (CC) of 1912 standardised family and guardianship law throughout Switzerland. "At risk" children and adults were to be protected by the state. The CC reflected the bourgeois ideal of the family: marriage as the goal, with the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the homemaker. The cantons were responsible for implementing the CC.

Authorities created cantonal laws with vague, moralising terms and classified people with labels such as "neglected", "dissolute" or "at risk". Those who differed from the social norm were targeted: men who were unable or chose not to work or who were habitual drinkers; women with children born out of wedlock; people who were poor or headstrong; illegitimate or "difficult" children.

Deprivation of liberty was possible without a court ruling and for an indefinite period. The procedures were not transparent. Local councils and guardianship authorities made decisions without listening to those affected. This is why it is referred to as “administrative detention”. This arbitrary practice violated fundamental rights, such as the right to personal freedom, equality before the law and a fair hearing.

“The law became an instrument that was open to debate and used for stigmatising and marginalising people in society. This was done under the pretext of reintegrating those affected back into society.”

Martin Lengwiler, historian, member of the Independent Expert Commission (IEC) on “Administrative Detention”

This welfare practice was contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which Switzerland signed in 1974. With the revision of the CC in 1981, the controversial article was replaced with a clause on protective custody. The cantonal laws were abolished and the rights of those affected better protected. The comprehensively revised Child and Adult Protection Law of 2013 led to the standardisation and professionalisation of procedures. Rights to participate for those affected were strengthened, and the cantons were required to set up professional and interdisciplinary child and adult protection authorities.

International Labour Organization
1930

Art. 1

1. Each Member of the International Labour Organisation which ratifies this Convention undertakes to suppress the use of forced or compulsory labour in all its forms within the shortest possible period.

Art. 2

1. For the purposes of this Convention the term “forced or compulsory labour” shall mean all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.

The Convention prohibits forced labour. It obliges member states to eliminate it completely.

Convention on Human Rights
1950

Art. 5.1

(1) Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person.

No one shall be deprived of his liberty save in the following cases and in accordance with a procedure prescribed by law :

(*e*) the lawful detention of persons for the prevention of the spreading of infectious diseases, of persons of unsound mind, alcoholics or drug addicts or vagrants ;

Art. 5.2

(2) Everyone who is arrested shall be informed promptly, in a language which he understands, of the reasons for his arrest and of any charge against him.

Art. 5.4

(4) Everyone who is deprived of his liberty by arrest or detention shall be entitled to take proceedings by which the lawfulness of his detention shall be decided speedily by a court and his release ordered if the detention is not lawful.

The European Convention on Human Rights guarantees fundamental human rights. Switzerland's welfare practices were in conflict with some human rights. Switzerland had to adapt its laws to take human rights into account.

The year 1981 is regarded as a turning point for compulsory social measures. This is both correct and incorrect. What changed in 1981, and what stayed the same?

In 1981, the Swiss Civil Code (CC) was amended: the articles that had allowed for the administrative detention of adults were abolished and replaced by protective custody. For the first time, those affected were granted the right to challenge the measure in court.

This is why 1981 is regarded as a watershed. It forms the basis for the Federal Act on Compulsory Social Measures and Placements prior to 1981 (CSMPA): only those affected by compulsory social measures before this date are entitled to the solidarity contribution of 25,000 Swiss francs.

For children and adolescents, the change had already begun earlier: the revision of the CC in 1976–78, for example, introduced the equal treatment of children born in or out of wedlock. With the Foster Care Ordinance, the obligation to authorise and supervise foster families was introduced at a federal level. However, responsibility for extra-familial placements remained with local guardianship authorities, which in many places were staffed by people with insufficient training. It was not until the Child and Adult Protection Law was comprehensively revised in 2013 that decisive reforms took place in this domain.

Moreover, authorities, institutions and attitudes changed only slowly. This is why many of those affected do not perceive 1981 as a turning point; for them, stigmatisation and social control continued.

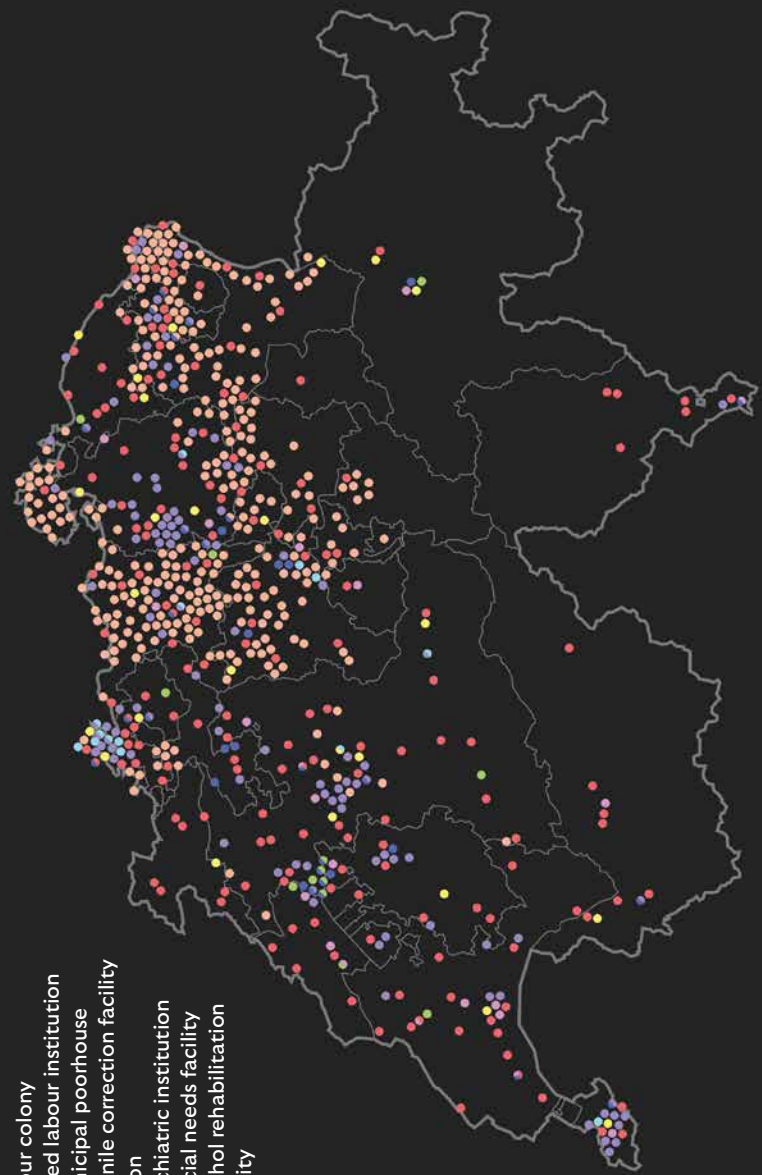
INSTITUTIONS
Places where compulsory social measures were enforced

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Switzerland was dotted with hundreds of institutions and children's homes. These state, private and church-run institutions served to educate, discipline and care for both children and adults.

Correctional and labour institutions were intended to set "at risk" or "neglected" people on the "right" path by temporarily excluding them from society. Admission was often linked to compulsory labour, which was justified on educational or punitive grounds. Discipline and work were seen as means of reform, but they also served to finance the institutions.

Many children's homes and educational institutions were underfunded and barely supervised. Poorly trained staff often acted according to rigid moral standards, which served to encourage abuse. Tens of thousands of young people and adults were also subject to administrative detention for indefinite periods without a court ruling and without having committed any crime.

Gradually, as values changed, the institutions were renamed. Poorhouses disappeared, alcohol rehabilitation centres became addiction treatment facilities, and children's homes became supervised residential groups. But the disappearance of these old, coercive institutions did not prevent other forms of control and constraint from arising.



Map of Switzerland showing 648 institutions in which young people and adults were "administratively detained" (1933–1980).
Source: Independent Expert Commission (IEC) Administrative Detention, 2019.

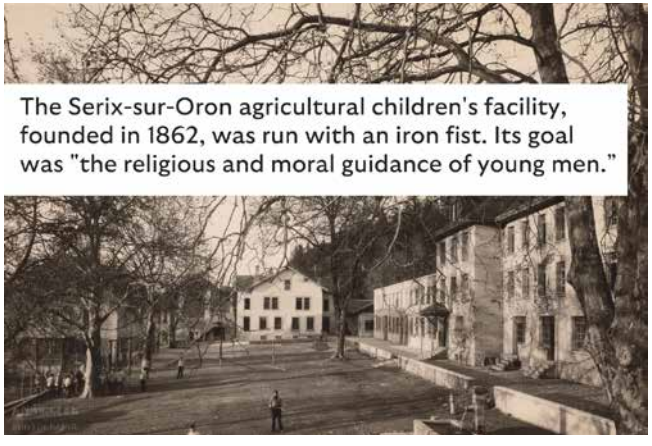
MEASURES
Forms of compulsory social measures

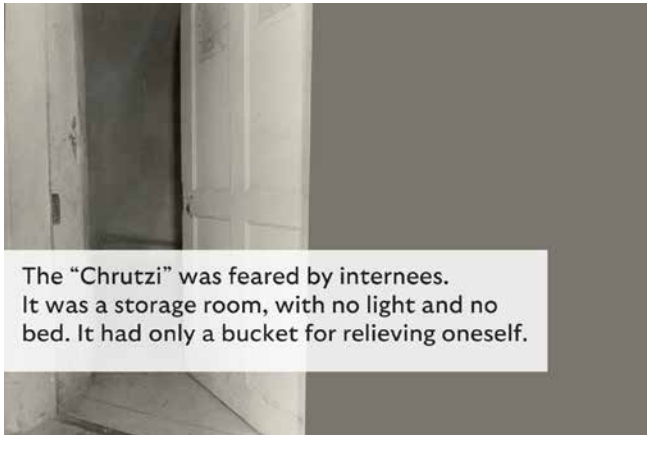
Compulsory social measures took many forms: “administrative detention”, removal of children from their parents, fostering in foster families and homes, admission to institutions or psychiatric hospitals, sterilisation, compulsory abortion and compulsory medication. The photo galleries provide an insight into this “array of measures”.

“BE QUIET! BE TIDY + PERSEVERE!”
Young women at work in the Lärchenheim institution (AR), 1970

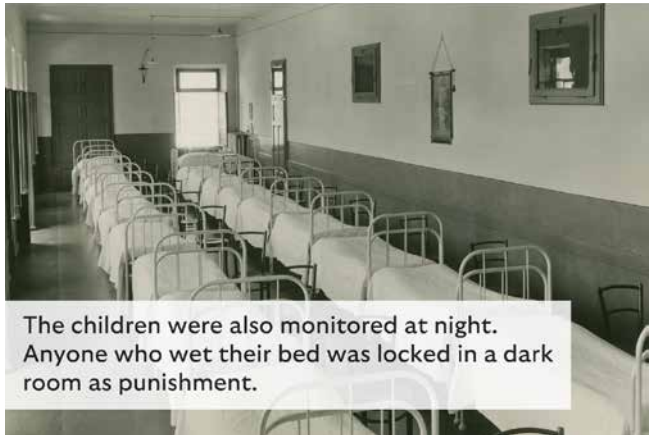
Extra-familial placement in institutions
More than 100,000 children and adolescents, considered at risk, neglected or morally abandoned, were placed in homes and institutions. But instead of receiving protection and support, they were often beaten and subjected to violence and abuse. In many cases, state supervision failed.

Exterior view of Serix-sur-Oron, ca. 1940–1960





Detention room in the cloister of the Rathausen home, 1949



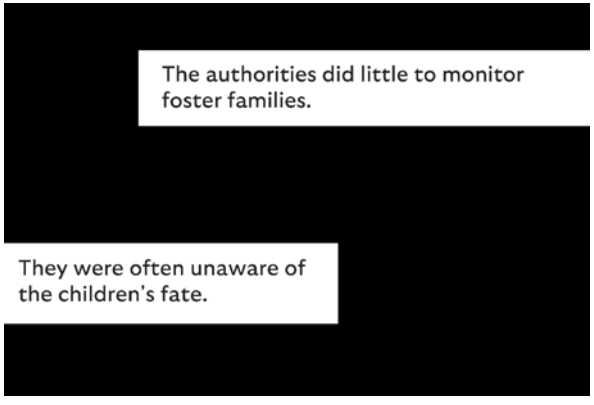
Dormitory at the von Mentlen Institute, before 1960

Extra-familial placement on farms
Tens of thousands of children and adolescents were placed on farms until the 1970s. They had to work for free as part of these "forced placements".

Supervision by the authorities was lax. Many children were exploited or were victims of violence and sexual abuse.

"Chrigel", a foster child in Upper Aargau, 1944

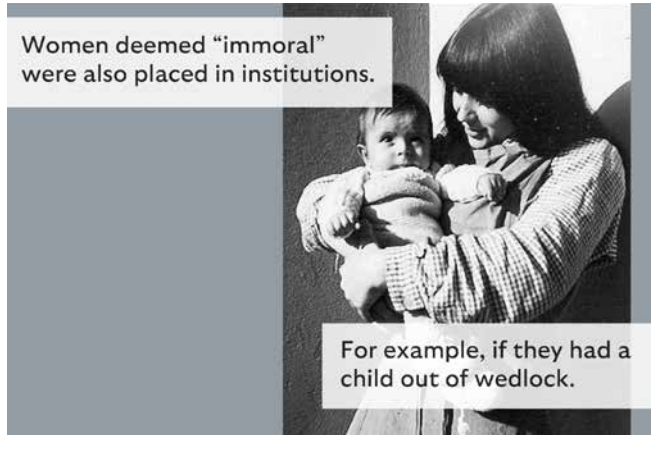
Extra-familial placement in foster homes
Tens of thousands of children and adolescents grew up in foster care. They were often beaten and abused.



Aerial view of Bellechasse (FR) ca. 1956–1972

Ad prior to the vote on the Zurich Assistance Act, 1925

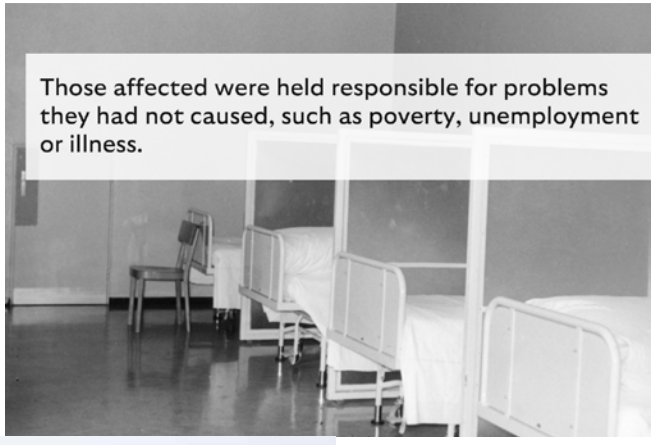
Administrative placement
Up until 1981, the authorities interned at least 60,000 adolescents and adults without trial. Although these individuals had not committed any crime, they were placed in "administrative detention".



Ursula Biondi with her son, 1967

Psychiatric hospitals and drug trials
The authorities also admitted adults, children and adolescents whose behavior was deemed atypical into psychiatric hospitals.

Up until the 1980s, patients were subjected to problematic drug trials, most often in psychiatric hospitals. Since psychiatrists collaborated with pharmaceutical companies, they tested unapproved drugs on patients without their consent.



Treatment room at Cery Hospital (VD), 1972

Coloured test substances in tin boxes, late 1960s

Delivery room in Belfond (JU/BE), undated photograph

Child removal and forced adoption
Up until the 1970s, thousands of single mothers were forced to give up their children after birth. Unmarried women were considered a threat to moral order.

Mothers had to consent to extra-familial placement or forced adoption and had no further contact with their children.

Abortion and sterilisation
Up until the 1970s, the authorities forced several thousand individuals, mainly women, to undergo sterilisation. Often, those affected had already had an abortion.

Sterilisation could not be performed without the women's consent, but the pressure was such that they often had no other choice.

Cover of the book
Widerspenstig, 2006

"Communiqués from the Organisation", 1940

"Children of the Open Road" project
The Yenish and Sinti communities were particularly affected by compulsory social measures due to their origins and way of life.

They were forcibly placed in institutions, forbidden to marry and sterilised under duress. Their children were placed in foster families or institutions.

RESISTANCE
Voices that broke the silence

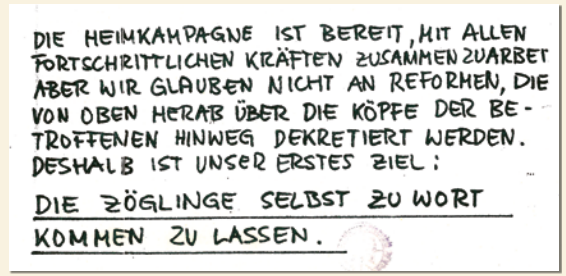
From the early 20th century, authoritarian practices in social welfare and the institutions that enforced them were the subject of fierce criticism. Those affected, the media and citizens repeatedly condemned placement in institutions and compulsory social measures. It took a long time for their voices to be heard.

Early criticism
The author Carl Albert Loosli was one of the first to voice criticism. In two of his books, he denounced the institutional system and criticised detention without a court ruling.

Carl Albert Loosli,
Life in an Institution
1924

Administrative Justice and Swiss Concentration Camps
1939

Heimkampagne
From the 1970s onwards, condemnation of reform schools and correctional labour institutions grew. New movements such as the "Heimkampagne" criticised the poor conditions in these establishments. They called for total reform.


DIE HEIMKAMPAGNE IST BEREIT, MIT ALLEN FORTSCHRITTLICHEN KRÄFTEN ZUSAMMEN ZU ARBEI ABER WIR GLAUBEN NICHT AN REFORMEN, DIE VON OBEN HERAB ÜBER DIE KÖPFE DER BE-TROFFENEN HINWEG DEKRETIERT WERDEN. DESHALB IST UNSER ERSTES ZIEL:
DIE ZÖGLINGE SELBST ZU WORT KOMMEN ZU LASSEN.

Working documents of the Zürcher Heimkampagne association, 1972, volume 1
Swiss Social Archives, Zurich

Criticism of the "Children of the Open Road" project
An article published in *Beobachter* in 1972 brought to light the removal of children as part of the "Children of the Open Road" project, sparking a wave of outrage across Switzerland. The project was discontinued in 1973 under pressure from the public.

"Traveller mothers speak out"
Beobachter, 15.04.1972

The path to recognition and remembrance
Remembrance efforts shifted into high gear in the 2000s. With the support of the media, historians and politicians, more and more people affected by the issue decided to speak out, demanding recognition and “reparation”.

The fight for recognition of injustices suffered: Ursula Biondi, alongside Rita Schreier and Regina Schluep (from left to right).

“What they did to us!”
Beobachter, 29.09.2008

HINDELBANK

«Was die mit uns gemacht haben!»

Drei Frauen suchen Wiedergutmachung. Als junge Mädchen wurden sie ohne Gerichtsurteil zur Erziehung in die Strafanstalt Hindelbank eingewiesen. Jahrzehnte später kehren sie dorthin zurück. Mit einem Ziel: «Es soll wenigstens mal jemand sagen, dass das falsch war.»

Le calvaire caché des orphelins suisses

«Ils nous ont volé notre enfance»

“The hidden ordeal of Swiss orphans”
Le Matin, 27.06.1999

Guido Fluri launches the “Reparation Initiative” with those affected and a representative committee.

Lanciata l’iniziativa che chiede un indennizzo

le vittime di collocamento coatto ancora in vita

Le scuse non bastano

“Apologies are not enough”
La Regione Ticino,
01.04.2014

TRANSITION
The path to recognition and reparation

The injustices of compulsory social measures remained hidden for many years. It was not until the 2000s that the experiences of those affected came to the public's attention, triggering a social and political debate that continues to this day.

The path to reparation has not been easy. It began with research, which received little attention, and testimonies by those affected, passed on by the media, cultural figures and politicians. From 2000 onwards, there was widespread debate on the subject.

Initially the focus was on specific groups of victims. In 1986, *Beobachter* magazine reported on the Pro Juventute "Children of the Open Road" project, which led to an apology by Federal Councillor Alphons Egli in 1987. Subsequently, the issue dropped off the political radar for many years, even though "contract children" and "subject to administrative detention" appeared repeatedly in the media. In 2010, Federal Councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf apologised to those who had been subject to administrative detention, and in 2013, Federal Councillor Simonetta Sommaruga made a second apology to all those affected by compulsory social measures and fostering.

Research helped to further the process of reparation. From 2014 to 2019, the Independent Expert Commission (IEC) on Administrative Detention, appointed by the Federal Council, carried out its inquiry. In 2017, the Federal Act on Compulsory Social Measures and Placements prior to 1981 came into force.

The National Research Programme "Welfare and Coercion" (NRP 76) ran from 2017 to 2024. It concluded that although the legislative basis had improved, the compulsory social measures continue to have an impact on those affected, and even on their descendants. The research programme also highlighted that in several areas there was room for improvement at an institutional level. Now it is time to address the present – and to pose the question of what needs to change to prevent injustice from happening again.

Supporters of the Reparation Initiative in front of the Federal Palace. Keystone / Peter Klaunzer

A law for solidarity contributions and research into injustice

In 2016, Parliament passed the Federal Act on Compulsory Social Measures and Placements prior to 1981. It acknowledges the injustice suffered by victims, provides for scientific inquiry into the injustice and grants a solidarity contribution.

In 2014, a committee submitted a popular initiative calling for reparation for indentured children and victims of compulsory social measures. Among other things, it called for the creation of a fund of 500 million Swiss francs for the victims. One of the initiators was entrepreneur Guido Fluri, who was placed into care as a child.

The Federal Council and Parliament rejected the initiative and presented a counterproposal in the form of the Federal Act on Compulsory Social Measures and Placements prior to 1981 (CSMPA). The committee then withdrew its initiative. The law provides for a solidarity contribution of 25,000 Swiss francs per victim. By the end of July 2025, around 280 million Swiss francs had been paid to victims.

The law provides for the scientific inquiry into the injustices, as well as measures for raising public awareness. It also offers support for those affected through cantonal contact points and provides a legal framework for access to files.

The term “compulsory social measures” (CSM) is a neologism coined by federal lawyers. It summarises the various forms of injustice that were committed and for which all victims receive the same level of compensation.

FORUM

And now? What remains?

Throughout the 20th century, hundreds of thousands of people were victim of compulsory social measures and extra-familial placement. Many experienced neglect, abuse and exclusion. The National Research Programme “Welfare and Coercion” (NRP 76) reveals that the effects of this history continue to be felt today.

Can reparation ever be made for this injustice, and if so, how? What lessons from history can we apply to the present and the future? How can we build a society that protects without violating human dignity?

FINDINGS FROM NATIONAL RESEARCH PROJECTS

IEC on Administrative Detention (2019), NRP 76 “Welfare and Coercion” (2024)

Fundamental rights did not apply equally to everyone

Until 1981, laws permitted detention without trial. Anyone deemed “work-shy” or “debauched”, for example, could be imprisoned.

Welfare was the guardian of traditional gender roles

In the name of “moral order”, the welfare system enforced traditional gender roles. Men came under scrutiny by the authorities if they did not work or if they drank. Women were targeted if they had sexual relationships outside of marriage or became pregnant out of wedlock.

Idealization of the “perfect family”

In the past, children from families affected by poverty or considered “dysfunctional” were often placed in foster care, and unmarried mothers were pressured to give their children up for adoption. Today, the opposite is often evident: authorities cling to the ideal of the birth family for too long, even when the child’s well-being suffers as a result.

Science in the service of exclusion

Psychiatrists, doctors and educators supported official interventions and provided scientific legitimacy to moral judgments. This is still a complex issue today: receiving a diagnosis can result in access to aid but also in stigmatisation. Problems that may actually stem from social factors are often attributed to the child.

Violence was not uncommon

Physical and sexual violence was widespread in detention institutions and could be perpetrated by staff or other residents. Oversight by regulatory authorities was inadequate. There is documented evidence that children in foster care died as a result of violence or suicide.

Cutting costs at the expense of the most vulnerable

Cost cutting took precedence over the well-being of those affected. Children were put to work on farms, and institutions cut back on staff. Even today, municipalities that have to pay for placements themselves are less likely to instigate them.

Welfare exacerbated inequality rather than overcoming it

Measures taken in the name of welfare were intended to solve social problems, but instead they reinforced inequality and exclusion: once someone came under the scrutiny of the authorities, they remained there. The risk of poverty also remained high for those affected, and for their descendants.

Lifelong consequences

Those placed in foster care as children are more likely than others to suffer from stress and illness, even in old age. Most suffered from anxiety or trauma disorders throughout their lives and to a greater degree than people who grew up with their parents.

What parents experience is passed on to their children

Trauma is passed down through generations unknowingly. The children of those affected experienced emotional coldness, taboos, and a sense of not belonging — even though they had not lived through any of the measures themselves.

Care and coercion – an unresolved contradiction

Those who need help must go through an official process and meet specific requirements. Those who do not cooperate risk more drastic measures and sanctions. Care and control remain closely intertwined in the Swiss social welfare system to this day.

Self-determination has been strengthened but not yet fully realized

In the past, those affected were treated as passive "objects of protection". The Child and Adult Protection Law of 2013 changed that, yet implementation is still a work in progress. Bureaucratic language is often impenetrable; those affected may have their say but are not always genuinely heard – professionals frequently have too little time.

Independent Expert Commission (IEC) on Administrative Detention (2019)

National research project (NRP 76), "Welfare and coercion" (2024)

ARENA
Welfare, coercion and state responsibility

Can injustice be redressed? What can we learn from the history of compulsory social measures? How can we build a society that protects without violating human dignity?

In this video installation portraying various perspectives, experts shed light on current challenges regarding the grey zone between welfare and coercion.

1.

Can we make reparation for the injustice?

On compensation and apologies

By adopting the Federal Act on Compulsory Social Measures and Placements prior to 1981, the Swiss Parliament laid the legal foundation for the recognition of the injustice. The law came into force in 2017.

Is it possible to make reparation for injustice? What does the solidarity contribution of 25,000 Swiss francs mean for those affected? As a society, what can we learn from the history of compulsory social measures?

Guido Fluri, author of the "Reparation Initiative"
In 2014, this entrepreneur launched the Reparation Initiative, which led to the Act on Compulsory Social Measures and Placements prior to 1981. Deeply affected by his childhood, he is committed to fighting abuse and campaigning for reparation throughout Europe through the "Justice Initiative".

Andrea Abraham, head of the research project "From Generation to Generation"
As part of NRP 76 "Welfare and Coercion", Abraham led the project *From Generation to Generation*. She and her team examined how extra-familial placement affects subsequent generations. Abraham is a Professor of Social Work at the Bern University of Applied Sciences and Arts, specialising in child and family well-being.

Dominique Strebel, editor-in-chief of *Beobachter*
As a lawyer, journalist and editor at *Beobachter*, Dominique Strebel brought to light the injustice of compulsory social measures through a series of articles and the book *Weggesperrt* (2010), providing vital momentum for the process of reparation.

Susanne Kuster, deputy director of the Federal Office of Justice
As deputy director of the Federal Office of Justice (FOJ), Susanne Kuster is responsible for distributing solidarity contributions to victims of compulsory social measures and for the "Remembering for Tomorrow" project, which aims to promote reappraisal.

2.

What is best for the child?

When the state intervenes in families

Protecting children and young people is one of the tasks of the welfare state, especially when parents are unable to fulfil their responsibilities.

If a child is at risk, when can or must the state intervene? Who decides what is best for the child? What can we learn, in the context of the child protection authority today, from the history of compulsory social measures – and what have we already learned?

Miriam Halter, co-president of Careleaver Switzerland
Miriam Halter, who as a child was placed in children's homes and foster care, speaks from her own experience. In her role as president of Careleaver Switzerland, she is committed to ensuring that all members receive support during their transition to independence and that their requests are heard.

Gian Paolo Conelli, director of a foundation supporting children and young people
Since 2019, Gian Paolo Conelli has been head of the Amilcare Foundation in Ticino, which manages five residential facilities (care homes and flats) and a day centre for adolescents and young people in difficult circumstances. With a degree in social sciences and pedagogy, he boasts extensive experience in management and practical work with minors.

Manon Schick, director-general for the Children and Youth Authority (DGEJ), VD
Manon Schick has been head of the General Directorate for Children and Youth in the canton of Vaud since 2020. Along with more than 300 employees, she is responsible for protection, prevention and participation, and ensures the implementation of children's rights.

Christoph Häfeli, expert in child and adult protection law
Christoph Häfeli, a social worker and lawyer, has extensive experience in child and adult protection. He has contributed significantly to the development of new legislation, shaped teaching and research at the University of Applied Sciences in Lucerne and participated in the scientific inquiry into compulsory social measures within the framework of NRP 76.

3.

Who is responsible for my life?

Adult protection, between self-determination and coercion

In a free society, the right to self-determination applies. But alongside that, involuntary commitment for welfare purposes, seen as a last resort, allows for adults to be temporarily admitted to a psychiatric hospital for their own protection.

When people reach a crisis point, who decides what is best for them? Are there situations in which coercion is justified to protect an individual? What can we learn, in the context of the adult protection authority today, from the history of compulsory social measures – and what have we already learned?

andrea zwicknagl, expert by experience
andrea zwicknagl has herself experienced mental health crises and psychiatric coercion. She now draws on her experience of crisis, recovery and dealing with the psychiatric system in her work as a peer support worker to help those affected.

Alexia Stantzos, psychiatric nurse
As a nurse, Alexia Stantzos has extensive experience working with adults. She is an assistant to the head of care at the University Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Service (SUPEA), Department of Psychiatry at the CHUV. She faces the dilemma between protection, constraint and respect for freedom on a daily basis.

Karin Fischer, president of the Child and Adult Protection Authority, Winterthur-Andelfingen
Karin Fischer headed the Winterthur-Andelfingen Child and Adult Protection Authority from 2012 to 2026. She has been instrumental in establishing a professional service out of several different guardianship authorities. She ensures that at-risk children and adults in need receive protection and assistance.

Muriel Langenberger, director of Pro Mente Sana
Muriel Langenberger has been head of Pro Mente Sana since 2022. Her foundation represents the interests of people with mental health problems and advocates for their rights. She takes a critical view of involuntary commitment for welfare purposes, calls for greater participation and better legal protection, and pursues the vision of psychiatry without constraints.

AFTERMATH
All's well that ends well?

"You can't make up for what happened. But receiving official acknowledgement has helped restore my dignity."

"I hope that those affected will no longer feel ashamed by what happened to them."

"Money alone cannot make up for what was done to us as children. You can forgive people, but you can't forget."

"I still have nightmares, I'm in psychiatric care, and I've been taking medication every day for twenty-five years."

"25,000 francs is all well and good. But twenty years and three months of my life were stolen from me. Is that worth 25,000 francs?"

"We're a long way from having sorted everything out. A lifelong pension would be appropriate for those who are struggling financially."

"I always wanted the authorities to apologise to me. And it helped."

"It's good that they've apologised. But it's not enough."

"I'm doing well today. But I know of many others affected who are in a terrible state. Really terrible. And they are the ones we need to look after now. There aren't that many left, after all."

"More needs to be done. Before they all pass away."

"Don't leave anyone behind. No one. Whether rich or poor. Find a way together. Look ahead together, move forward."

"This story isn't over yet. It's only just beginning."

Statements from the twelve individuals featured in the exhibition.

FOCUS ON THE CANTONS
Vaud – Lucerne – Schaffhausen – Ticino – Bern

Compulsory social measures for poor or marginalised people were applied throughout Switzerland, but with regional variations. In Catholic cantons, convent sisters ran children's homes; in rural cantons, child fostering was particularly common, especially on farms; and in university cantons, measures were more legislated, and medical authorities played an important role in their implementation.

Vaud, Lucerne, Schaffhausen, Ticino and Bern: the exhibition highlights five cantons that represent Switzerland in terms of religious denominations, regions, languages and cultures. They are also the locations for the *Fostered. Locked Away. Forgotten?* touring exhibition.

Vaud

In this Protestant and university canton, compulsory social measures for adults and young people developed out of laws and special commissions. Issues of street prostitution and abandoned young people were particularly prominent in the canton of Vaud during the 1940s and 50s, when medical authorities played a major role.

Aerial view of the Cery Hospital in Prilly, postcard, ca. 1950–1960. Collection Musée Historique Lausanne

From the late 19th to the mid-20th century, the canton enacted several laws regulating compulsory social measures: in 1906, the Act on the Internment of Alcoholics; in 1928, the Mental Illness Act, which included forced sterilisation; in 1938, the new Social Welfare and Public Assistance Act; and in 1941, the 1939 Order on the Administrative Internment of Individuals Dangerous to Society became a law, specifically targeting prostitution and misconduct during World War II.

There were numerous institutions responsible for implementing these measures: the psychiatric hospital in Cery admitted psychiatric patients and performed sterilizations. The Colonie des Plaines de l'Orbe, then from 1932 onwards the Prés-Neufs correctional facility, took in men who had been admitted for alcoholism. Women, on the other hand, were placed in the prisons of Rolle or Bellechasse (FR).

Children were placed in institutions often run by local philanthropists with close ties to the medical community. The Vennes educational institution, reserved for young men whom the authorities wished to reform, applied a particularly strict regime, similar to the prison system.

There have been long-standing calls in the canton of Vaud for remembrance and reparation for the children who were placed in care. Louisette Buchard-Molteni's 1995 autobiographical account *Around Switzerland in a Cage* and the 2007 study *A Childhood Sacrificed*, which gives voice to children who were placed in care, raised public awareness.

At the political level, a 2013 postulate led to a cantonal solidarity contribution and an official apology in 2016.

Many of those targeted by these measures resisted through words, flight or legal action. Some people won their cases, while others testified in writing, leaving behind valuable records for research and raising awareness of the injustices and violence they experienced. Following in the footsteps of Louisette Buchard-Molteni, collective movements formed specifically around children in care.

Further information:
Louisette Buchard-Molteni: *Tour de Suisse en cage. L'enfance volée de Louisette,* 1995.
Geneviève Heller, Pierre Avvanzino, Cécile Lacharme: *Enfance sacrifiée. Témoignages d'enfants placés entre 1930 et 1970,* 2007.
Christel Gumy, Sybille Knecht, Ludovic Maugué, Noemi Dissler, Nicole Gönitzer, *Special Legislation? Legitimation and Delegitimation of Administrative Internment*, 2019.

Lucerne

In the 19th and 20th centuries, many children's homes for orphans, half-orphans, "illegitimate" children or "neglected" children were established in the Catholic canton of Lucerne. These soon came under criticism. In 2010, Lucerne was the first canton to investigate compulsory social measures and violence in children's homes.

The "Home for the Care and Education of Poor Children" in Rathausen was the largest home in the canton, with around 200 places. It was located in a former Cistercian convent.
Jean Pierre Grüter, SSBL Archives, 2015

Until the 20th century, people living in poverty were usually placed in homes and remote poorhouses, which also took in children. Lucerne had many homes, including larger institutions such as Rathausen, the children's home in Knutwil and specialised facilities, such as for the deaf in Hohenrain. Most of the homes were run by Catholic orders.

The care of children and young people in homes was regulated by laws on poverty, punishment, education and guardianship. Of central importance was the Introductory Act to the Civil Code, which came into force in 1911. Administrative detention was based, among other things, on the Correctional Labour Facilities Act of 1885 and the Poverty Act of 1935.

The canton was shaken early on by two scandals: in 1944, journalists uncovered abuses at the Sonnenberg boys' home near Kriens, and in 1949, the Rathausen home came under criticism for mistreating children. Despite subsequent reforms, many problems remained.

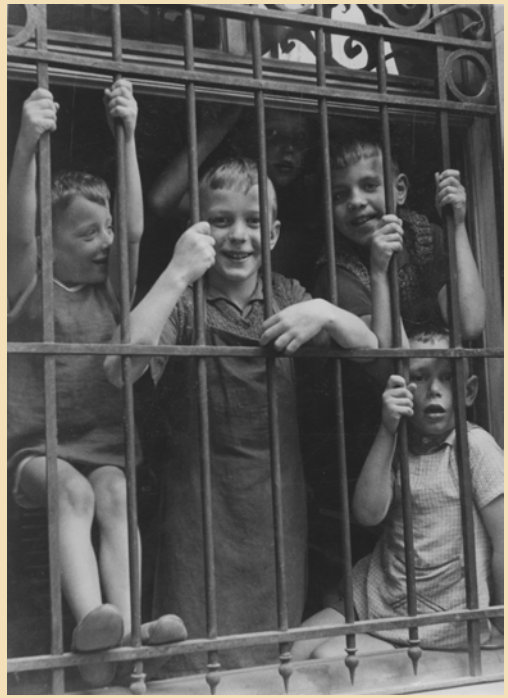
After revelations about abuses in church-run homes in Germany and Ireland, Catholic homes in Lucerne also came under scrutiny. In 2008, the Catholic Church in Lucerne expressed its regret, and in 2009 it erected a memorial in Rathausen. The documentary film *The Rathausen Children's Prison* triggered further reactions in 2010. Researchers investigated incidents in cantonal institutions. In 2011, the

government apologised to people who had been placed into care as children and funded further research. From 2025 to 2027, a research team commissioned by the city of Lucerne will investigate the development of welfare throughout the 20th century.

Further information:
Martina Akermann, Markus Furrer, Sabine Jenzer: *Children's homes in the canton of Lucerne,* 2012.
Markus Ries, Valentin Beck: *Behind walls. Welfare and violence in church-run educational institutions in the canton of Lucerne,* 2013.

Schaffhausen

The canton of Schaffhausen was representative of the Swiss average: indentured servitude was practised in rural areas, and there were also children's homes and a psychiatric clinic. Schaffhausen was one of the first cantons to begin the process of creating a cantonal solidarity contribution for those affected.



Children in the municipal orphanage, undated photograph. Schaffhausen Municipal Archives

Important institutions included the municipal orphanage, the Löhningen children's home, the Steig girls' institute, the Friedeck home for children and juveniles, the Pestalozzi-heim, the Breitenau psychiatric clinic and the Griesbach workhouse. Until the 1970s, Friedeck and the orphanage, in particular, had directors who were known to be violent.

The measures were based on the Schaffhausen Introductory Act to the Civil Code (1911), the School Act (1925), the Welfare Act (1933), the Alcoholics' Welfare Ordinance (1936) and a regulation on the municipal welfare commission (1936). These allowed, among other things, admissions on the grounds of "neglect" or "alcoholism".

As in other cantons, parents and relatives hardly ever used the legal redress available to them to defend themselves against extra-familial placement and administrative detention. There is no trace in Schaffhausen of any form of protest.

After the media and the public raised awareness of the issue, the Schaffhausen government inaugurated a memorial in Rauschengutpark on 15 June 2019, and an official apology was issued at the same time. In 2022, the study *Cared For* was published, which had been commissioned by the canton. The mutual assistance project *Round Table* was set up in 2023 and is supported by the Evangelical Reformed Church. Schaffhausen was one of the first cantons to develop a system for paying a cantonal solidarity contribution to those affected.

Further information:
Marlon Rusch: *Versorgt. 59 victims of compulsory social measures in the canton of Schaffhausen*, 2022.

Ticino

In the canton of Ticino, most minors who were removed from their families by decision of the authorities were placed in Catholic institutions. Psychiatric internments and administrative placements were largely unregulated, allowing for arbitrary interference in the lives of adults.

People interned at La Valletta “alcoholics institution” working in the wool and mattress workshop, 1937.
Gino Pedroli, Pellegrini Canevascini Foundation, Bellinzona

Legislative provisions left considerable discretion to the local and cantonal authorities responsible for deciding on compulsory social measures. Minors were removed from their families of origin in accordance with Article 284 of the Swiss Civil Code of 1907. Administrative placements were ordered by municipal executives on the basis of the 1903 Assistance Act and, from 1929 onwards, the Act on the Internment of Alcoholics and Vagrants.

Aid for “abandoned” children was traditionally provided by private and religious charities: most of the institutions were private and run by Catholic organisations, such as the von Mentlen Institute or the Culla San Marco home in Bellinzona. Adults and young adults were placed in the neuropsychiatric hospital in Mendrisio (for women) or the La Valletta alcoholics’ rehabilitation centre in Mendrisio (for men).

Criticism of compulsory social measures began to be voiced in the 20th century. From the 1950s to 60s, Giuseppe Bosia, the deputy director of the psychiatric hospital, tried in vain to reform the law on administrative placement, which he considered outdated and repressive. In the 1970s, the incompatibility of internment practices with Switzerland’s accession to the European Convention on Human Rights prompted some members of the cantonal legislature to call for an urgent review: the 1929 law was replaced by the innovative Law on Socio-Psychiatric Assistance (1983).

The scientific research commissioned by the State Archives in 2015 marked a turning point for historical and political

remembrance of this issue. At the same time, the testimonies collected in the RSI documentary *Born in the Shadows* broke a long period of silence and brought the issue to the forefront of public debate. In 2018, State Council President Manuele Bertoli issued an official apology on behalf of the authorities. A symbolic monument was erected near the State Archives. The 2023 University of Zurich report on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church led the apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Lugano to apologise for the abuses committed, including in institutions. The political agenda in Ticino is now being called upon to address issues related to welfare and the protection of rights of individuals, both minors and adults.

Further information:

Vanessa Bignasca, Nelly Valsangiacomo, Marco Poncioni: *Preliminary research on coercive measures for welfare purposes and out-of-home placement in the Canton of Ticino (1900–1981),* 2015.
Mira Ducommun: *Categorised, managed and placed. Out-of-home placement processes in the cantons of Bern and Ticino, 1960 to 1980,* 2025.
Loretta Seglias, Kevin Heiniger, Vanessa Bignasca et al., *Alltag unter Zwang. Zwischen Anstaltsinternierung und Entlassung (Everyday Life under Coercion)*, 2019.

Bern

The rural canton of Bern was characterised by a high number of children placed in service with farmers, and many homes and institutions, including those run by the state. People from all over Switzerland were interned here, including in the Hindelbank women's prison.

In the Hindelbank prison (BE), women considered "immoral" were re-educated through forced labour. They worked alongside convicted criminals, 1968.
ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive

The canton was a major centre for the extra-familial placement of children, both through indentured servitude and in its children's homes. It also had many administrative detention facilities, including the Hindelbank women's prison and the Witzwil correctional labour facility for men. Among the numerous educational institutions, the boys' home "Auf der Grube" was notorious. Women from all over Switzerland were placed in administrative detention in the Hindelbank women's prison.

The cantonal law introducing the Swiss Civil Code of 1911 played a fundamental role. Authorities also relied on laws relating to the establishment of cantonal workhouses (1884), poverty and settlement (1897), the poor police, detention centres and workhouses (1912), juvenile justice (1930), as well as the Ordinance on the Supervision of Children in Detention (1944), the Welfare Act (1961) and the Educational and Detention Measures Act (1965).

As early as 1836, Jeremias Gotthelf denounced the abuses of indentured servitude in his book *Farmers' Mirror*, and in 1924, the writer C. A. Loosli attacked children's homes in his book *Life in an Institution* for destroying the individuality of inmates. Subsequently, several press reports denounced the abuses in indentured servitude and children's homes. From the early 2000s onwards, many of those affected began to speak out about their experiences. Former inmates of the "Auf der Grube" boys' home contributed to the ongoing process of reappraisal.

Prompted by accounts of former contract children in the press, two members of the Grand Council called for an investigation into extra-familial placement in 2006. In 2011, researchers presented a study on extra-familial placement, and in 2013, a research paper on administrative detention in the canton of Bern was published. This research laid the foundation for further reappraisal. In 2023, the canton launched the decentralised remembrance project "ZEDER – Zeichen der Erinnerung" (Symbols of Remembrance). It includes a website, a poster exhibition and teaching materials for schools.

Further information:

Marco Leuenberger, Lea Mani, Simone Rudin, Loretta Seglias: *The authorities decide in the best interests of the child? Children placed in care in the canton of Bern 1912–1978,* 2011.
Tanja Rietmann: *"Liederlich" und "arbeitsscheu" (Debauched and work-shy). Administrative institutional care in the canton of Bern (1884–1981),* 2013.
Caroline Bühler, Heinz Kräuchi, Fredi Lerch: *Boys' home "Auf der Grube". 188 years of compulsory education, inside and outside perspectives,* 2022.

EXHIBITION

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erinnern für morgen
se souvenir pour l'avenir
ricordare per il domani

Support services for those affected and their families

The contact details for the cantonal contact points and archives can be found here.

Solidarity contribution

More information on the solidarity contribution for victims of compulsory social measures can be found here. The contact points offer support with submitting an application.

Glossary

A glossary and further information on this topic can be found in the Historical Dictionary of Switzerland.

Web platform “Remembering for Tomorrow”

Information and current events regarding the history of compulsory social measures and extra-familial placements as part of the “Remembering for Tomorrow” programme.

Learning App “Welfare and Coercion”

The web-based educational resource “Welfare and Coercion” is aimed at students from Year 7 onwards.

Further information about the exhibition

Exhibition venues

31 October 2025 – 15 March 2026
Musée Historique Lausanne

14 May – 23 October 2026
Museum Lucerne

4 December 2026 – 2 May 2027
Museum zu Allerheiligen Schaffhausen

4 June – 24 October 2027
Castelgrande Bellinzona

19 November 2027 – 13 February 2028
Kornhausforum Bern