

Cross-border commuters: numbers and structure

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The most tangible expression of the trinational economy is the daily movement of cross-border commuters, known in Switzerland as *Grenzgänger* and in France as *frontaliers*. According to the statistics of the Federal Statistical Office, the number of foreign cross-border commuters working in Switzerland has risen steadily since the entry into force of the free movement of persons, passing the level of 400,000 in the early 2020s. North-western Switzerland is, after the Lake Geneva region and Ticino, one of the three main areas of employment for such workers.¹

In Basel-Stadt the cross-border commuters account for a share of employment that ranks among the highest of the Swiss cantons. Their number has been of the order of 35,000 to 40,000 in recent years, with a further 20,000 or more working in Basel-Landschaft and a significant number in the Fricktal area of Aargau.² The origin of these workers has shifted over time. In the 1990s commuters from Alsace formed the majority, whereas commuters resident in Germany have since become the larger group in Basel-Stadt, according to the statistical series. Part of the explanation lies in the decline of German language skills among younger Alsatians, a subject that Part J examines in the context of language and identity. The rise of the German group also reflects the growth of the district of Lörrach and the attractiveness of Basel employers to qualified workers from southern Baden.³

The cross-border commuters work in every sector. In the life sciences they occupy positions from production and laboratory work to research and management, as Part G has described. The hospitals of Basel, among them the University Hospital, depend on nurses and doctors resident in Germany and France. Retail, logistics, construction, cleaning and catering would scarcely function without them.⁴ A distinctive group consists of Swiss nationals who live across the border, mainly in Germany, because housing is cheaper there, and who commute to Basel. Under Swiss

statistical definitions these persons are not counted as foreign cross-border commuters, although they raise similar questions of taxation and social security.

The movement also runs in the opposite direction, although on a much smaller scale. A number of Swiss residents work in Germany or France, for example at the research and production sites of the life sciences groups in Grenzach-Wyhlen and Hunningue, or in the retail and service sector of the border towns. A practitioner advising a cross-border commuter must therefore begin by establishing the precise facts: the state of residence, the state of employment, the nationality, the frequency of return to the residence and the distribution of working days among the states. These facts determine which of the several overlapping regimes applies.

1 Notes

1. Federal Statistical Office, Grenzgängerstatistik (GGS), quarterly releases. On the total number of foreign cross-border commuters in Switzerland and its distribution by major region, see the latest release. Figures to be verified. ↩
2. Federal Statistical Office, Grenzgängerstatistik, data for the cantons of Basel-Stadt, Basel-Landschaft and Aargau, and the publications of the Statistisches Amt Basel-Stadt. The figures given in the text are approximations. Figures to be verified. ↩
3. On the changing composition of cross-border commuters to Basel by country of residence and the role of language skills, see the publications of the Statistisches Amt Basel-Stadt and of INSEE Grand Est on frontaliers. Figures to be verified. See also Part J on language and identity in the trinational region. ↩
4. On the sectoral distribution of cross-border commuters in north-western Switzerland, see the Federal Statistical Office, Grenzgängerstatistik, by economic sector, and the reports of the Observatory of the Upper Rhine labour market. Figures to be verified. See also Part G, Chapter I. ↩

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