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Corresponding address:
Nowy Świat 67, room 110
00-927 Warszawa
Tel./fax 0-22 826-66-52
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Yoan Molinero-Gerbeau[1]

ORCID: 0000-0002-9808-1106
Instituto Universitario de Estudios sobre Migraciones (IUEM), Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Spain

Takahiko Ueno

ORCID: 0000-0003-4200-749X
Department of Comparative Study of Cultures, Tsuru University, Japan

Haruna Fukasawa

ORCID: 0000-0001-7147-0737
Faculty of Business and Commerce, Keio University, Japan

The triple-win illusion: temporary migration and cheap labour in Japanese and Spanish agriculture

Abstract

This article examines how state-managed temporary migration schemes in agriculture serve the structural imperative to secure cheap and controllable labour in core economies. Using a comparative case study of Spain and Japan within a world-ecology framework and the Most Different Systems Design approach in comparative politics, this analysis

[1] **Corresponding author:** Yoan Molinero-Gerbeau, Instituto Universitario de Estudios sobre Migraciones (IUEM), Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Rey Francisco 4, 28008, Madrid, Spain; email: ymolinero@comillas.edu

examines how distinct demographic trajectories, agrarian structures, and migration regimes nonetheless converge around similar logics of labour cheapening, mobility control, and socio-legal stratification. The study combines secondary literature, legal and policy documents, and statistical data to reconstruct the historical evolution, institutional design and social effects of Japan's TITP/SSW schemes and Spain's GECCO programme. The analysis shows that the celebrated "triple-win" framing functions primarily as a legitimising discourse: it presents highly asymmetric arrangements as mutually beneficial while masking their role in sustaining exploitative agricultural labour regimes. Despite divergent narratives and policy architectures, both cases generate temporary, segmented and politically manageable migrant workforces. The article concludes that agricultural migration policies in the global core are best understood as nationally specific articulations of a shared structural logic rooted in contemporary agro-capitalism.

Keywords: world-ecology, temporary migration programmes, agricultural labour, triple-win discourse, Spain and Japan

Introduction

Contemporary agri-food systems across the global core have become increasingly dependent on migrant labour (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a). Structural demographic transformations – most notably population ageing, rural depopulation, and the declining attractiveness of agricultural work among native workers – have intersected with major shifts in agricultural production, including industrialisation, flexibilisation, and spatial concentration of farming (López-Sala, 2016a). Together, these dynamics have generated a sustained and structural demand for a foreign workforce willing and able to perform arduous, low-paid, and highly seasonal tasks essential to maintaining food production at low cost (Molinero-Gerbeau & Avallone, 2016). This reliance on migrant labour is neither marginal nor temporary but a defining feature of contemporary agro-capitalist accumulation. In this context, the world-ecology perspective offers a useful lens to understand how the production of cheap food is structurally linked to the mobilisation of cheap labour (Moore, 2015), situating agricultural migration not as a peripheral phenomenon but as a central mechanism for sustaining the wider dynamics of capitalist accumulation (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2023).

While these structural pressures are broadly shared, states have developed markedly different strategies to secure agricultural labour. Some rely on the free circulation of workers within regional blocs, others tolerate various forms of irregularity, and many have institutionalised tightly controlled channels designed to recruit, discipline, and reproduce a compliant workforce (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2025). Among these instruments, temporary migration programmes (TMPs) have gained singular prominence. TMPs are typically defined by strict temporariness and non-convertibility of permits, limited or no family reunification rights, employer-specific contracts tying legal status to one workplace, and recruitment mechanisms often embedded in bilateral agreements. Although their institutional forms vary, they share a common normative framing. Positioned as embodiments of "safe, orderly and regular

migration", in line with the principles set out in the Global Compact for Migration (Pécoud, 2021) and thus aligning with the dominant global migration norm, they have been promoted as co-development tools (Macías Llaga et al., 2016). Central to this discourse is the celebrated "triple-win" formula, which promises simultaneous benefits for countries of origin, countries of destination and migrants themselves (Castles & Ozkul, 2014).

However, extensive research shows that the triple-win narrative functions less as an empirical description than as a legitimising slogan (Bauböck & Ruhs, 2022). Rather than serving all actors equitably, TMPs tend to prioritise the needs of employers and destination states by ensuring predictable inflows of low-cost, easily replaceable labour while tightly regulating migrant workers' rights, autonomy, and mobility. Far from advancing development objectives, such schemes often reinforce dependency, constrain worker agency and compress labour costs to the maximum, facilitating the reproduction of global agri-food value chains (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2025). From a world-ecology standpoint, this tension is not incidental: the triple-win narrative operates as an ideological device that obscures the structural function of TMPs within the broader dynamics of cheap food and cheap labour (Molinero-Gerbeau & Avallone, 2016). What remains less explicit in much of this debate is how this legitimising language travels across markedly different national settings, enabling programmes with distinct designs to converge on similar effects in agriculture: temporariness, segmentation, and political manageability.

This article contributes to this line of research by examining two highly disparate case studies – Spain and Japan – that share neither regional context nor key structural conditions. Precisely because of their profound geographical, demographic, economic, migratory, and agricultural differences, these cases offer an illuminating basis allowing to understand how temporary migration programmes, when we abstract from their specific design features, contextual configurations, operational dynamics and the discourses mobilised by the actors who promote them, reveal a common underlying function: the use of the triple-win narrative to legitimise a single core objective, namely, securing a workforce that is readily available, tightly subject to employer control, and kept at low cost. Empirically, the article advances the debate by placing Spain and Japan in a single comparative frame – a pairing rarely examined in research on agricultural labour migration.

Analysing Spain and Japan side by side is, therefore, analytically fruitful. Their structural dissimilarities make them maximally different cases, allowing us to observe how the same normative slogan – the triple win – can be mobilised to legitimise policy instruments that share a common structural function: ensuring the supply of inexpensive and politically manageable migrant labour for agricultural capital. This comparison thus allows us to assess how TMPs contribute to the dynamics of labour cheapening, mobility control and socio-legal stratification that underpin the agricultural sector in both countries. More broadly, by situating this comparison within the world-ecology framework (Moore, 2015), the article seeks to contribute to critical debates on the triple-win narrative, revealing how its rhetorical power masks the structural extraction of value that sustains contemporary agro-capitalism.

Building on these insights, the article pursues three objectives. First, it situates the Spanish and Japanese agricultural labour regimes within world-ecology, showing how their respective TMPs contribute to the production of cheap food and cheap labour as systemic requirements of capitalist accumulation. Second, it examines the political and institutional trajectories through which each state has operationalised and justified the triple-win discourse. Third, it compares the lived realities generated by these programmes, assessing their implications for migrant rights, employer power and labour market restructuring.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical approach, grounding the analysis in world-ecology and critical research on migration, labour, and agri-food systems. Subsequent sections present the Spanish and Japanese cases, examining both the historical evolution and the contemporary functioning of their respective programmes. The final section returns to the implications of this comparison for how temporary migration is legitimised and organised in core agri-food systems.

To situate this comparison, the following section outlines the structural and conceptual foundations of our argument, drawing on world-ecology and critical analyses of temporary migration to explain why securing cheap labour is indispensable for contemporary agricultural production.

Structural dynamics of migrant labour in the reproduction of agro-capitalism

The growing reliance on migrant labour in contemporary agriculture responds to a structural requirement of capitalist accumulation (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a). Capitalism depends on the continuous access to low-cost labour, food, energy, and raw materials, whose cheap reproduction underpins expansive accumulation cycles (Moore, 2015). Within this configuration, food plays a decisive role because it sets the lower bound of the cost of reproducing labour power: when food prices increase, wages must rise to secure social reproduction; when food remains cheap, wages can be contained without destabilising that reproduction (Moore, 2010). Keeping food inexpensive is therefore not a contingent preference but a systemic necessity, and the deployment of cheap, flexible migrant labour in agriculture is a central mechanism for achieving this objective (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2023).

Agriculture, therefore, plays a structurally indispensable role within the capitalist world-ecology: it is the sector responsible for producing the cheap food that underpins the global wage relation. Historically, different phases of capitalist accumulation relied on agrarian revolutions, colonial expansion, or technological innovations to secure cheap food (Moore, 2010). In the contemporary period, however, no new agricultural revolution has supplied a comparable leap in productivity (Patel, 2013). As a consequence, the systemic reproduction of cheap food increasingly rests on the massive exploitation of migrant labour in agricultural enclaves of the global core. Migrant workers have become essential for sustaining agro-capitalist accumulation by enabling food prices to remain low despite the structural forces that would otherwise drive them upwards (Molinero-Gerbeau & Avallone, 2016).

The comparison developed in this article makes this relationship visible by following, in each case, the concrete ways agricultural production is rendered viable under cost pressure. On the one hand, the analysis traces how agrarian restructuring, market positioning and policy priorities (e.g., export orientation, price competition, and "competitiveness" imperatives) intensify the drive to contain production costs. On the other hand, it examines how this pressure is managed through state-regulated labour programmes, the recruitment infrastructures that discipline workers, and the documented expansion of migrant incorporation in agriculture through policy sources and available statistics.

These dynamics do not operate in the abstract; they intersect with long-term demographic and socio-economic shifts that reshape both labour supply and the political management of farm work in core economies. This structural dependency converges with demographic and socio-economic shifts in high-income countries. Ageing populations, rural depopulation, and the declining attractiveness of agricultural work have drastically reduced the availability of local labour. As a result, states and employers across diverse contexts such as Canada, Spain, Japan, Australia, and Poland (see: Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a; Matuszczyk, 2024) have increasingly turned to migrant workers, who often accept demanding conditions due to wage differentials, precarious residence status or limited alternatives. This has generated a process of "migrantisation", whereby migrants become a distinct and subordinated segment of the labour force structurally necessary for maintaining low production costs.

To ensure the availability and compliance of this labour force, states have developed different political-legal mechanisms, ranging from formal temporary migration programmes to tolerated irregularity or employer-driven recruitment systems. While these instruments vary in design, they serve a common purpose: guaranteeing a stable supply of cheap, flexible and easily disciplined workers, constraining worker agency and compressing labour costs. Core countries combine these strategies, adapting them to their historical trajectories and sectoral needs (Molinero-Gerbeau & Avallone, 2016).

Among the diverse mechanisms employed to secure this workforce, regular channels – particularly temporary migration programmes (TMPs) – occupy a central place. These schemes are promoted by states not only because they ensure a predictable and legally controlled inflow of workers but also because they align seamlessly with contemporary migration governance norms, particularly, the Global Compact for Migration. TMPs embody a model of mobility that is temporary, non-settling, and explicitly utilitarian: migrants are admitted solely to meet predefined labour shortages, remain tied to specific employers and sectors, and are obligated to return once their contracts expire. This architecture allows states to present themselves as managing migration responsibly – reducing irregularity, retaining full control over admission, and avoiding long-term incorporation – while offering employers a workforce whose legal status is conditional and therefore highly compliant (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2025).

Central to the political appeal of these programmes is the celebrated "triple-win" formula (Castles & Ozkul, 2014). This narrative presents TMPs as instruments capable of generating mutual benefits for all actors involved: destination states efficiently fill labour shortages, origin states receive remittances and skills transfers, and migrants

gain temporary access to foreign labour markets and higher wages. Framed as a form of managed mobility that is orderly, temporary, and development-friendly, the triple win has become a powerful legitimising discourse in global migration politics. However, the academic literature has widely criticised this slogan for its reductionism and normativity (Money, 2025). Rather than offering an accurate description of how TMPs operate in practice, the triple-win narrative obscures the structural function these programmes fulfil: securing a cheap, flexible and tightly subordinated labour force whose position is shaped more by the needs of agro-capitalist production than by the developmental ambitions it ostensibly promotes.

The relevance of this critique becomes particularly clear when examining how states operationalise TMPs in practice. In Spain and Japan, the triple-win logic has been institutionalised through distinct mechanisms: the recruitment-at-source scheme (Gestión Colectiva de Contrataciones en Origen – GECCO), and in Japan, the long-standing Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), later complemented by the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) system. Although these instruments differ markedly in their design, genealogy, and political justification, they converge around the same structural imperative outlined above. Both regimes employ the triple-win discourse to legitimise programmes that, in practice, ensure the availability of a workforce that is cheap, disposable, and legally constrained.

Comparing Spain and Japan thus allows us to extend and refine this line of inquiry. Their profound contextual differences – historical, demographic, economic, migratory, and agricultural – make them maximally distinct cases. Precisely because they share neither institutional legacies nor socio-political environments, the fact that both have deployed TMPs guided by similar structural logics reinforces the argument that temporary migration programmes respond to deeper systemic imperatives rather than to context-specific needs. This comparison highlights how, beneath divergent narratives and institutional architectures, TMPs in both countries fulfil the same core function within the capitalist world-ecology: guaranteeing cheap and controlled labour for the sustained production of cheap food.

Methodology

This research employs a comparative case study approach, utilising the Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) framework (Caramani, 2008). It examines how migrant workers are incorporated into the agricultural sectors of Spain and Japan, specifically through temporary migration programmes (TMPs). The objective is to analyse whether programmes developed in two maximally different contexts respond to a common underlying logic – namely, the structural requirement for cheap and subordinated labour identified in the world-ecology framework – and to contrast this with the legitimising discourses articulated through the triple-win narrative.

Following Lijphart's (1975) formulation, the comparative method tests whether empirical relationships between variables persist across contrasting contexts by maximising variation in control variables while maintaining similarity in the independent variable. MDSD, therefore, selects cases that differ substantially in dimensions such as

economic structure, demographic composition, political institutions, geographical position, and cultural configurations, yet display convergence in the factors most relevant to the hypothesis.

In this study, the independent variable is the systemic need for cheap labour in the agricultural sectors of core economies. The hypothesis proposes that, despite profound contextual differences between Spain and Japan, both countries develop TMPs that operationalise similar underlying logics, even if their institutional designs diverge.

The construction of the cases involves examining the historical evolution, institutional design, operational functioning, and social consequences of Spain's GECCO programme and Japan's Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) and Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) scheme. To this end, the study draws on secondary literature, legal documents, policy reports, and statistical data. This material allows us to reconstruct a detailed picture of the contemporary configuration of TMPs in each setting and to analyse their implications for migrants, employers, and the broader agri-food system. Together, these sources support an empirically grounded assessment of whether the apparent divergence between the two regimes masks a shared structural function aligned with the systemic need for cheap labour.

The comparison focuses on two analytical dimensions. The first comprises contextual factors, including demographic developments such as population ageing and rural exodus, as well as productive structures that shape labour demand in each country's primary sector. The second concerns migration policies, defined here as the specific channels through which states regulate the entry, employment conditions, and mobility of migrant agricultural workers. By examining how these dimensions interact in the Spanish and Japanese cases, the analysis interrogates the extent to which the triple-win discourse functions as a legitimising device that conceals structurally exploitative labour arrangements.

A methodological limitation of this study relates to language. While all three authors are fluent in Spanish, the Spanish member of the team does not speak Japanese and, therefore, has limited direct access to Japanese-language academic literature and policy documents. However, this limitation is intrinsic to the challenge of comparing two highly heterogeneous contexts that have rarely been analysed jointly. The collaborative nature of the research team, which includes scholars with expertise on both countries, mitigates this constraint. Continuous discussions within the broader research project framework have ensured alignment of analytical objectives, contextual accuracy, and conceptual coherence. Rather than weakening the analysis, the binational composition of the team strengthens the comparative perspective by enabling a dialogue between insider and outsider viewpoints and by making explicit the epistemological difficulty of bridging distinct migration, labour, and agricultural regimes.

The second limitation concerns the nature of the empirical base. The article relies primarily on secondary scholarship, legal and policy documents, and statistical data. This supports a robust reconstruction of programme design, trajectories, and aggregate effects, but it also means that the analysis cannot capture in the same depth the micro-dynamics through which these regimes are enacted and contested on the ground – such as everyday workplace practices, informal negotiations, enforcement gaps, union

strategies, or the lived experience of mobility restrictions, debt, and dependency across different sites and seasons. While we draw on existing qualitative research and documented cases where available, future work could strengthen and refine these claims through primary fieldwork, including interviews with workers, employers, unions and policymakers, and/or multi-sited ethnographic research in key agricultural enclaves and recruitment settings.

Overall, the methodological strategy is designed to test whether Spain and Japan, despite their radical differences, converge around the same structural logics identified in the theoretical framework. By tracing how TMPs operate in practice and assessing their social effects, the comparison evaluates whether both cases substantiate the argument that temporary migration policies in the global core serve the systemic production of cheap labour rather than the mutual gains celebrated through the triple-win narrative.

To contextualise how these structural imperatives operate in practice, the analysis begins by examining the demographic and productive transformations shaping labour demand in both countries. Understanding these contextual dynamics is essential for assessing how Spain and Japan have come to rely on temporary migration programmes as a central mechanism for securing cheap and compliant agricultural labour.

Demographic shifts and agricultural transformation in Spain and Japan

Although Spain and Japan differ profoundly in their political, economic, and institutional configurations, both countries face structural pressures that make agriculture increasingly dependent on migrant labour. As outlined in the theoretical framework, the combination of demographic decline, rural depopulation, and labour-intensive agricultural systems has created persistent labour shortages that cannot be met domestically. These convergent pressures form the structural backdrop against which temporary migration programmes have become central mechanisms for securing cheap and flexible labour in both countries.

Japan's demographic and agrarian transformations illustrate the depth and persistence of labour shortages in its primary sector. With one of the world's oldest populations – 28.7% aged 65 or older in 2020, projected to rise to 38.7% by 2050 – the demographic crisis is particularly acute in rural areas (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2022). The average age of agricultural workers reached 67 in 2022, and more than half of full-time farmers are now over 70 years old (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2023, p. 12). This ageing field population is compounded by a long-standing rural exodus: since the 1960s, younger generations have migrated to urban centres in search of higher wages and improved living standards, leaving behind communities struggling to maintain economic activity and productive capacity (Matanle & Rausch, 2011).

Japan's agricultural structure further intensifies these pressures. Farming is dominated by small, family-run holdings – more than 80% of farms operate on just 2.2 hectares on average – characterised by limited mechanisation, relatively low

productivity, and a strong reliance on supplementary non-agricultural income (OECD, 2022, p. 34). Government support, while extensive, has often reinforced these inefficiencies and has not resolved the succession crisis: many farms lack younger heirs, jeopardising the sector's long-term viability (Fuhrmann-Aoyagi et al., 2024).

Between 1990 and 2020, the number of agricultural workers decreased by half, from 2.2 million to 1.1 million, despite policy efforts to attract younger workers (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2023, p. 18). Agriculture remains unattractive to the majority due to low wages, physically demanding conditions, and limited prospects. These converging demographic and structural pressures have generated what Chiavacci (2025) terms a "dam break", prompting a significant shift in Japan's traditionally restrictive stance on immigration. As a result, programmes such as the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) and, more recently, the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) scheme have become essential tools for supplying the agricultural sector with a cheap and controllable labour force.

Spain faces similar demographic challenges, albeit shaped by different historical processes and agrarian structures. Like Japan, it is classified as a "super-aged" society, with over 21% of its population aged 65 or older (World Bank, 2025). This demographic burden is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where the agricultural workforce is ageing according to the most recent agrarian census; the average age of farm managers is 61.4, and two-thirds are above 55 (INE, 2020).

Three macrostructural transformations underpin Spain's reliance on migrant agricultural labour. First, Spain's accession to the European Union (EU) accelerated internal migration from rural areas to urban centres, further depleting the agricultural labour pool. Second, the European division of labour consolidated Spain's role as a major producer of fruit and vegetables for European markets, driving a rapid expansion of labour-intensive agricultural production. Third, the period coincided with Spain's transition from a country of emigration to one of immigration, creating a large supply of foreign workers who entered sectors – including agriculture – increasingly avoided by native workers due to low wages and demanding conditions (López-Sala, 2016b).

Unlike Japan's fragmented smallholder system, Spain's agricultural transformation since the 1990s has led to the development of extensive agro-industrial enclaves dominated by large companies operating under intensive production regimes. These enclaves rely on greenhouse agriculture, agrochemical inputs, and labour-intensive Fordist methods, all geared towards export markets (De Castro et al., 2017). Within this model, different production logics coexist: continuous-production enclaves offer year-round employment and require a relatively stable labour force, whereas seasonal enclaves – such as those producing berries or melons – depend heavily on mobile, short-term workers who can respond to highly concentrated harvest periods.

Despite these structural differences, both types of enclaves share a core: they rely on a cheap, flexible, and easily renewable labour force. This dependence has shaped the development of migration policies, with temporary migration programmes emerging as key instruments for managing labour supply in a way that satisfies both agricultural employers and the state's regulatory objectives (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2025).

To understand how these structural pressures translate into concrete labour–migration regimes, the following section examines the policies through which Japan and Spain have incorporated migrant workers into their agricultural sectors. The analysis follows a common analytical structure for both countries, ensuring the case comparison: (1) the historical evolution and institutional trajectory of temporary migration programmes; (2) their legislative foundations and operational functioning; (3) the narratives and legitimising discourses that frame them; and (4) their social implications for workers and agricultural labour markets.

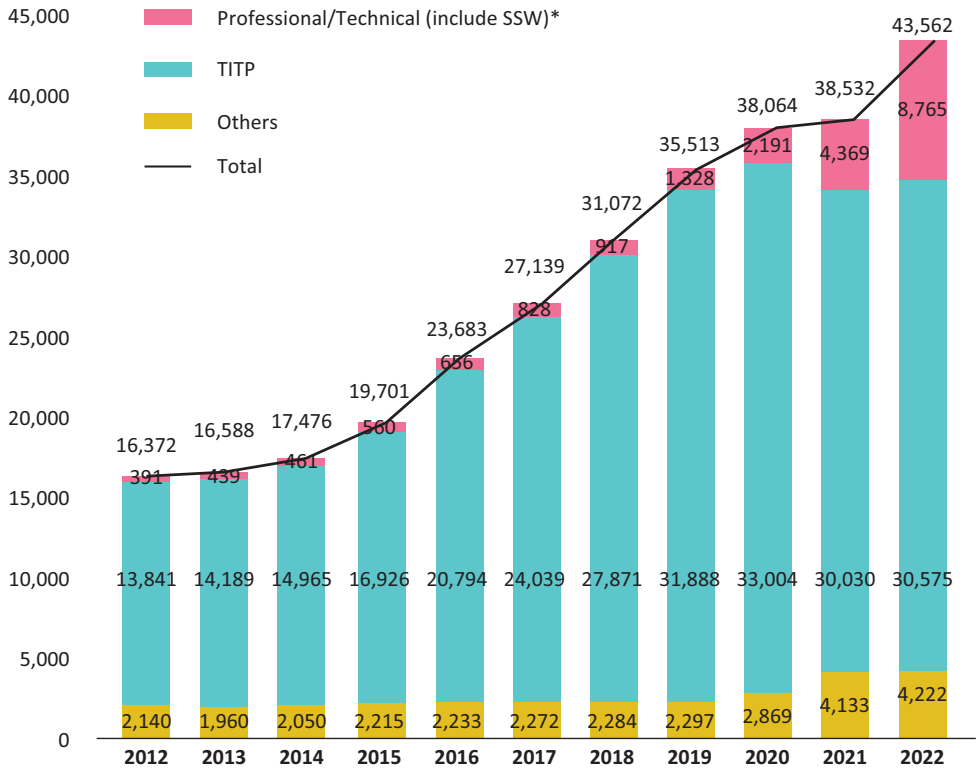
Migration policies in Japan and Spain: historical trajectories and institutional designs

Japan and Spain have developed distinct migration policy architectures to address labour shortages in their agricultural sectors. Despite their profound demographic, political and institutional differences, both countries have progressively institutionalised temporary migration programmes (TMPs) as central mechanisms for ensuring the availability of a cheap, flexible, and easily regulated workforce. Following the analytical structure outlined above, this section examines each case in a comparable manner, beginning with Japan.

Japan

Japan provides a particularly revealing illustration of how a state that has historically rejected the admission of foreign workers has gradually come to rely on migrant labour as a structural component of its agricultural sector. Since the 1960s, the Japanese government has upheld a political stance based on the exclusion of foreign labour recruitment, a position rooted in ethno-nationalist understandings of social cohesion and a preference for national workers. Only one early exception existed: a small seasonal worker programme in Okinawa – then transitioning from U.S. administration to Japanese sovereignty – which, between 1972 and 1977, temporarily employed South Korean workers in the pineapple and sugar industries (Hiraoka, 1992). Beyond this exceptional case, Japan's migration policy remained officially closed for decades. However, the deepening demographic crisis, rural depopulation, and structural inefficiencies in agriculture progressively undermined the viability of a nationally sourced labour force. By the early 2000s, labour shortages had become so acute that the agricultural sector increasingly turned to foreign workers through two structured migration channels: the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) and, more recently, the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) visa. Both programmes now function as essential sources of agricultural labour (Miyairi, 2022).

Figure 1. Number of Foreign Workers in the Japanese Agricultural Sector (Total, TITP, SSW, 2012–2022)



Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2023.

The TITP, introduced to agriculture in 1992, was officially framed as a skills-transfer initiative designed to support development in sending countries by allowing foreign nationals to train in Japanese companies. In practice, the programme quickly evolved into a mechanism through which employers could access a cheap and highly controllable workforce. Over the years, the TITP expanded in scope and duration, allowing interns to remain in Japan for up to five years through a progression from TITP1 to TITP2 and TITP3. Participation increased steadily: in 2022, there were more than 320,000 interns across various sectors, with around 9% working in agriculture and predominantly originating from Southeast Asia (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2022). A series of legislative reforms – most notably the 2009 revision of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act and the 2017 Technical Intern Training Act – sought to improve oversight, recognising interns as workers subject to labour law after an initial training period and creating the Organisation for Technical Intern Training (OTIT) to supervise the system. Yet, these reforms did not address the structural vulnerabilities. TITP interns often face high recruitment debts, unpaid

wages, long working hours, confiscation of passports, and limited mobility, outcomes that contradict the programme's developmental rhetoric and expose its function as a labour-supply device rather than a genuine training scheme (Liu-Farrer, 2020).

Table 1. Total number of foreign workers in the Japanese agricultural workforce (2015–2022)

Year	Foreign Workers
2015	19,776
2016	23,776
2017	27,248
2018	31,072
2019	35,513
2020	38,064
2021	38,532
2022	43,562

Source: Survey on the Employment Situation of Foreign Workers (2023) (*before 2017 includes the forestry sector).

Table 2. Nationality of TITP workers in the agricultural sector, Japan (2022)

Country	Number of Workers
Vietnam	15,631
China	7,765
Philippines	5,169
Indonesia	6,320
Cambodia	3,083
Thailand	1,912
Myanmar	1,175
Others	2,103

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2023.

In 2019, the Japanese government introduced the SSW visa, marking a significant shift in migration policy. Unlike the TITP, which relied on an ambiguous discourse of training and technical cooperation, the SSW programme openly acknowledged the need to recruit foreign workers to fill labour shortages. The SSW offers two visa categories: SSW1, which allows stays of up to five years in sectors such as agriculture, and SSW2, which, in select sectors, permits long-term residence and potential pathways to permanent residency (Maclachlan & Shimizu, 2022). SSW workers enjoy greater autonomy than TITP interns, including the ability to change employers within the same industry. By 2023, more than 200,000 SSW workers were employed in Japan; around 23,000 of them (11%) worked in agriculture, largely from Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Notably, over 70% of agricultural SSW workers previously

participated in the TITP, revealing how the two systems operate in a sequential and complementary fashion rather than as separate pathways.

Table 3. Number of SSW1 and SSW2 workers in the agricultural sector (2019–2023)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
SSW1	292	2,387	6,232	16,459	23,861
SSW2	–	–	–	–	21

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2024.

Table 4. Nationality of SSW1 and SSW2 workers in the agricultural sector (2023)

Country	Number of Workers	%
Vietnam	8,002	33.5
Indonesia	6,743	28.3
Philippines	2,495	10.5
Cambodia	2,294	9.6
China	2,009	8.4
Thailand	905	3.8
Nepal	563	2.4
Myanmar	437	1.8
Others	413	1.7
Total	23,861	100

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2024.

Despite these reforms, Japan has continued to maintain the public rhetoric that its migration programmes are not immigration schemes. Official terminology, such as "skills transfer". "international cooperation", or "human resource development", has long been used to present foreign workers not as labourers but as temporary trainees, thereby mitigating anti-immigration sentiments and justifying a migration regime designed to deliver a cheap and tightly regulated workforce. The celebrated triple-win discourse – proclaiming mutual benefits for workers, sending countries and Japan – has played a crucial legitimising role in this process, enabling the state to reconcile the growing structural dependence on foreign labour with an official stance that rejects immigration (Gunji, 2021).

The introduction of the Training-based Employment System (TES) in 2024 ostensibly shifts the policy frame from "training" to "securing human resources". However, this transition risks remaining cosmetic. Crucially, strictly controlled mobility – a defining feature of unfree labour – persists. While the new system nominally permits job transfers (*tenseki*) after one to two years, strict prerequisites regarding Japanese language proficiency and the practical difficulty of finding new sponsors in rural areas effectively bind workers to their initial employers. Thus, the TES likely preserves the structural vulnerability inherent in the TITP, prioritising employer retention over genuine worker autonomy.

These developments reveal a clear trajectory. Japan's agricultural labour regime has progressively shifted from a formal rejection of immigration towards an institutional architecture that depends on foreign workers, while simultaneously deploying legitimising narratives that obscure this dependence. The system's successive iterations – Trainee visas, TITP, SSW, and now TES – have varied in their discursive framing but converged around the same function: ensuring the availability of cheap, flexible, and politically manageable labour essential to sustaining agricultural production under the structural pressures described in the world-ecology framework. Whether future economic growth in origin countries or domestic political pressures will reshape Japan's reliance on these programmes remains uncertain. What is evident is that the legitimacy of the system continues to depend heavily on narratives such as the triple win, which reconcile the state's ideological reluctance to recognise immigration with its material need for foreign labour.

Building on this structural reading, the social effects generated by Japan's agricultural migration regime further reveal how its programmes operate in practice. Beneath the rhetoric of cooperation and mutual benefit, the TITP, SSW, and emerging TES systems produce a labour force whose vulnerability is embedded within the very architecture of these schemes. Migrant workers frequently enter Japan through costly recruitment channels that generate significant debt, binding them to employers and limiting their capacity to contest exploitative conditions. Once in the workplace, restrictions on job mobility, bureaucratic dependence on supervising organisations, and linguistic barriers reinforce a regime of subordination that normalises long hours, low wages, and limited protections. Reports of harassment, wage theft and excessive control over daily life illustrate how the system cultivates the docility and disposability of workers while maintaining the appearance of regulated, development-oriented migration. For some migrants, the only escape from these constraints is to abandon the formal programme and seek irregular employment, where returns may be higher but legal vulnerability increases (Sunai, 2024). Taken together, these dynamics underscore the structural contradiction at the heart of Japan's model: programmes framed as vehicles of skills transfer and triple-win development systematically generate conditions of precarity and dependence that sustain the agricultural sector's need for cheap and tightly regulated labour.

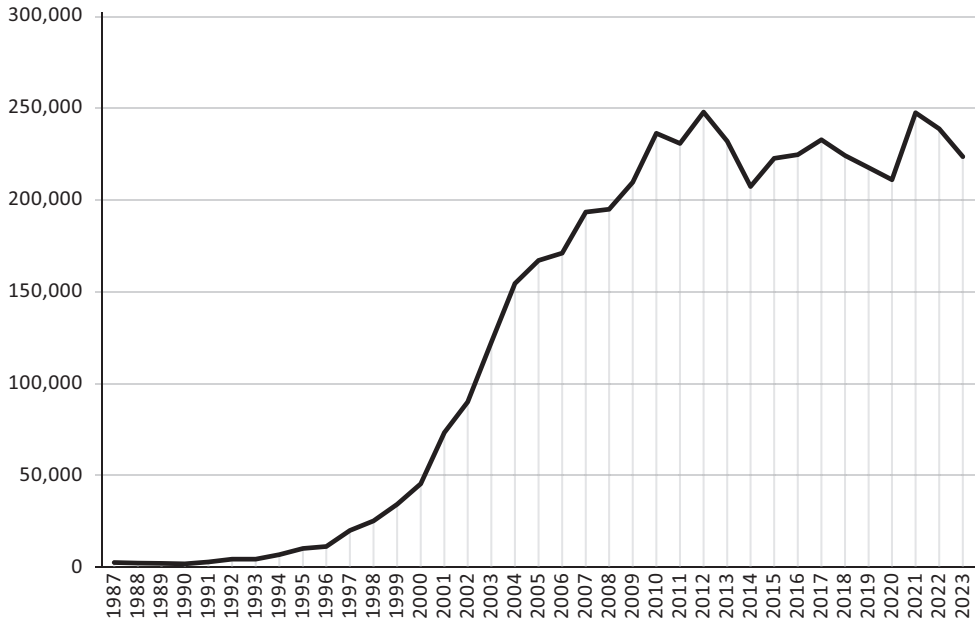
While the Japanese case illustrates how demographic decline, agricultural restructuring, and state-managed migration channels converge to produce a highly controlled and structurally subordinated foreign workforce, Spain presents a markedly different historical and institutional trajectory. Yet, as in Japan, the agricultural sector's reliance on migrant labour has been shaped by comparable pressures arising from the need to sustain low-cost food production within the broader dynamics of agro-capitalism. Examining the Spanish case through the same analytical lens makes it possible to identify how divergent political economies, legal frameworks, and agricultural models nonetheless generate migration regimes that fulfil equivalent structural functions. It is to this second case that the analysis now turns.

Spain

Spain presents an agricultural migration trajectory markedly different from Japan's, yet shaped by analogous structural pressures arising from the need to sustain cheap food production within a global ecological framework. The Spanish agricultural sector has relied on three complementary channels to secure migrant labour: (1) the employment of irregular migrants, (2) recruitment through EU free mobility, and (3) GECCO, the state-led temporary migration programme. GECCO is the functionally comparable scheme to the Japanese programmes. Although other channels significantly shape labour supply, their logic and operation differ substantially from temporary migration programmes and therefore fall outside the analytical scope of this section. However, a holistic picture of the migrantisation phenomenon (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a) is needed to understand how GECCO is situated within the Spanish framework.

The historical evolution of migrant incorporation in Spanish agriculture illustrates how structural transformations created an acute dependence on foreign labour. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the expansion of agro-industrial enclaves – particularly in Andalusia, Catalonia, and Murcia – coincided with rural depopulation and internal migration to cities, drastically reducing the availability of local agricultural labour. As production intensified, especially in export-oriented horticulture, the number of migrants employed in agriculture grew exponentially, reaching, as shown in Figure 2, almost 250,000 active workers in 2021, approximately one quarter of the sector's labour force.

Figure 2. Active workers of foreign origin in the Spanish agricultural sector during the period 1987–2023



Source: Labour Force Survey (EPA).

This labour demand was initially met through a model based on tolerated irregularity, a state-mediated form of deregulation that differs notably from the Japanese context (Avallone, 2017). Whereas Japan's insular geography and strict border regimes make irregular entry and employment rare, Spain experienced widespread recruitment of irregular migrants throughout the 1990s. Employers operating in isolated agricultural enclaves could easily conceal undeclared work, and the absence of effective enforcement made irregular hiring a low-risk, low-cost strategy. Although the number has decreased over time, estimates suggest that around 9% of all agricultural migrants were still irregular by 2020, though (Fanjul & Gálvez-Iniesta, 2020). Irregular workers were useful but not ideal: their limited returnability, higher likelihood of protest, and the existence of periodic regularisations (such as *arraigo*) made them insufficiently controllable. This very instability prompted agricultural employers – particularly in Huelva and Lleida – to demand a more orderly mechanism for securing a disciplined seasonal workforce, paving the way for the creation of GECCO (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020b).

GECCO was created at the end of the 1990s, inspired by Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) (Hennebry & Preibisch 2012) and sharing features with other global TMPs such as New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and Australia's Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a). From the outset, the programme reproduced the defining characteristics of temporary migration: short-term employment (up to 9 months), compulsory return, employer-specific contracts, prohibition of family reunification, and the possibility of circularity through repeat recruitment. These features mirror the conditionality and mobility restrictions of Japan's TITP and SSW, though Spain's emphasis on strict seasonality differentiates GECCO from the more continuous labour incorporation permitted under Japan's SSW2. GECCO's application quickly concentrated in seasonal monoculture enclaves – particularly Huelva (strawberry production) and Lleida (pome fruit) – where short, intensive harvest cycles made a tightly regulated seasonal workforce particularly attractive (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020b).

During its initial expansion (1999–2008), GECCO evolved rapidly. Pilot collaborations with various origin countries yielded uneven results, but the programme grew substantially in Huelva and Lleida, initially recruiting workers from Poland and Eastern Europe. After these countries joined the EU in 2004, recruitment shifted toward Romania and Morocco. The magnitude and composition of the flows during this phase are reflected in the following recruitment data:

Table 5. Temporary worker recruitment through GECCO in Huelva province (up to 2007/2008)

Countries	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008
Bulgaria	0	0	0	508	604	941	3,021	4,656
Colombia	0	149	177	105	82	8	22	11
Ecuador	0	0	15	8	64	26	12	14
Philippines	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	270
Morocco	198	336	95	620	1,094	2,330	5,277	13,600
Poland	540	4,954	7,535	8,506	7,361	9,796	0	0
Romania	0	970	4,178	10,589	13,186	19,153	20,710	20,634
Senegal	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	749
Ukraine	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	557
TOTAL	738	6,409	12,000	20,336	22,391	32,254	29,042	40,491

Source: Macías Llaga et al. (2016).

The 2008 financial crisis, which hit Spain harder than Japan, transformed this trajectory. Unemployment soared, and the government drastically reduced GECCO quotas, attempting to redirect unemployed Spaniards into the agricultural sector. However, poor working conditions discouraged domestic workers from entering the sector. Employers responded by recruiting Romanians – now EU citizens free from third-country migration controls – through private mechanisms that imitated GECCO's structure but operated outside state sponsorship (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2018). As a result, official GECCO numbers dropped sharply while Romanian employment surged, as shown below:

Table 6. Hiring Romanian workers in Huelva and number of GECCO authorisations during the period 2009–2016

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Contracts to Romanian workers	28,703	34,309	36,520	31,470	31,980	45,863	50,422	49,982
GECCO contracts	5,450	5,300	5,044	3,261	2,963	2,834	2,767	5,562

Sources: Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal (SEPE) (2024) and Subdirección General de Gestión y Coordinación de Flujos Migratorios (2023).

After the crisis, the programme entered a phase of "reactivation" (2017–present). GECCO no longer regained its pre-2008 scale but stabilised as a key mechanism for Huelva's agricultural sector. Two developments characterised this period. First, recruitment concentrated almost exclusively in Morocco, increasing vulnerability to geopolitical tensions and border closures, a fragility exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic when travel restrictions disrupted labour arrivals. Second, the government initiated pilot tests with Honduras, Ecuador and Senegal to diversify origin countries. Recruitment data for this period reflect these changes:

Table 7. Total number of GECCO authorisations and breakdown by nationality of participants during the period 2017–2022

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Colombia	657	854	851	398	780	862
Ecuador	–	–	–	–	221	143
Honduras	–	–	–	–	241	633
Morocco	16,876	16,447	18,088	14,639	13,123	16,786
Senegal	10	–	48	–	–	141
TOTAL	17,543	17,301	18,987	15,037	14,365	18,565

Source: Subdirección General de Gestión y Coordinación de Flujos Migratorios (2023).

Although GECCO workers make up only about 6% of Spain's agricultural labour force, and EU free mobility (especially Romanian and Bulgarian workers) supplies a much larger share, GECCO's analytical significance outweighs its statistical weight: it functions as a normative anchor, setting benchmarks for labour disciplining, cost suppression, and flexible subordination that shape conditions even for formally deregulated EU-mobile workers. Juxtaposing GECCO with Japan's TITP/SSW schemes, which together provide almost all foreign labour in Japanese agriculture, thus reveals a convergence in the political ideal of agricultural labour explicitly sought by the state, despite the differing quantitative reliance on these specific programmes. Their weight in the sector is shown below.

Table 8. Number of registered contracts in agriculture in Spain per nationality in 2022

Country	Number of Registered Contracts
Morocco	396,367
Romania	211,918
Senegal	82,931
Mali	74,209
Ecuador	29,812
Bulgaria	29,576
Pakistan	25,947
Algeria	24,083
Gambia	19,155
Bolivia	14,796
National Total	2,246,236

Source: Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal (SEPE) (2024).

The discursive framing surrounding GECCO strongly parallels Japan's legitimising narratives. Spanish authorities and employers have consistently presented GECCO as a model of orderly, cooperative, and mutually beneficial migration, highlighting its

contribution to development in origin countries and portraying its circular structure as preventing settlement while meeting labour needs (López-Sala, 2016a; Macías Llaga et al., 2016). This rhetoric aligns with global triple-win logics and closely resembles Japan's emphasis on "international cooperation", "skills transfer", and "manageable migration". Yet, as in the Japanese case, the contrast between discourse and lived reality is stark.

The social implications of GECCO reveal a system that, despite its developmental veneer, embeds workers in structures of dependence, subordination, and vulnerability. Recruitment in origin prioritises workers – particularly women – perceived as "returnable" and compliant. Once in Spain, many face isolated rural housing, limited mobility, linguistic barriers, and patriarchal oversight that restrict daily autonomy. Reports (see: Ruiz-Ramírez et al., 2024) have documented excessive working hours, wage theft, degrading living conditions, and intimidation practices linking future recruitment to silence and acquiescence. Workers have also denounced sexual harassment, racialised treatment, and the use of deportability as a form of discipline. As in Japan, some workers view GECCO as an important income opportunity, yet this does not negate the structural contradiction inherent to the programme: a scheme celebrated as co-developmental and mutually beneficial consistently produces exploitable labour under conditions that sustain agricultural competitiveness through cost compression. The parallels with the Japanese case highlight how, despite different institutional pathways and geopolitical contexts, temporary migration programmes in both countries ultimately fulfil the same structural function within contemporary agro-capitalism: securing a cheap, flexible, and politically manageable workforce under a legitimising discourse of win-win cooperation.

Taken together, the Japanese and Spanish cases reveal how two agricultural systems, shaped by profoundly different histories, institutions, and demographic trajectories, have nonetheless converged on structurally (but not superficially) similar mechanisms for securing migrant labour. Each has developed a distinct set of temporary migration programmes, embedded in specific political economies and legitimised through context-dependent narratives, yet both ultimately reproduce a workforce that is temporary, segmented, and tightly regulated. These convergences invite a comparative discussion that moves beyond the particularities of each regime to interrogate how temporary migration programmes operate within the broader dynamics of world-ecology. By placing both cases in dialogue, the following section examines the logics, functions and effects that underpin their apparent similarities, highlighting the role of the triple-win narrative as a shared legitimising device and exploring the implications of these findings for the global organisation of agro-capitalist production.

The "triple-win" paradigm: a critical examination through the Japanese and Spanish cases

The comparative analysis of Japan and Spain reveals that, despite their radically different institutional architectures, demographic trajectories, and migration regimes,

both countries have constructed temporary migration systems that respond to the same underlying structural necessity: securing a cheap, disciplined, and disposable labour force to sustain agro-industrial production. The MDSD approach applied here – comparing two cases that diverge across almost every conventional variable but share a similar position within global economic hierarchies – reveals that what appear as national specificities are largely cosmetic adaptations to a common structural imperative embedded in the capitalist world-ecology. Once these contextual and discursive layers are stripped away, a striking convergence emerges: both countries organise migration around the same material logic, while legitimising it through analogous normative repertoires rooted in the triple-win paradigm.

This convergence reinforces the broader argument that contemporary states in the global core face a systemic need to guarantee the production of cheap food, a requirement central to sustaining the cheap labour on which capitalist accumulation depends (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2023). Japan and Spain exemplify how demographic ageing, rural depopulation and the declining attractiveness of agricultural work intersect with agro-industrial restructuring to create chronic labour shortages that cannot be resolved domestically. The result is a structural reliance on foreign workers, irrespective of political ideology, migration tradition or cultural self-perceptions regarding immigration.

It is within this shared structural necessity that the triple-win discourse acquires its political function. The concept now constitutes the hegemonic normative language of global migration governance (Pécoud, 2021). In a constructivist sense, it operates as an international behavioural script (Winston, 2023) promoted by intergovernmental organisations and codified in frameworks such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. Both Japan and Spain align themselves with this global norm: in Japan, through narratives of "skills transfer", "international cooperation", and advancement of partner countries; in Spain, through the rhetoric of "co-development", "orderly migration", and agricultural "essentiality". Despite their different vocabularies, both sets of narratives frame temporary migration as generating simultaneous benefits for migrants, origin states, and destination states, presenting the programmes as consensual, developmental, and socially harmonious. Crucially, these narratives help neutralise anti-immigration sensitivities and present foreign labour recruitment as responsible statecraft rather than an economically driven necessity (Pécoud, 2015).

Yet the comparative analysis exposes the profound limitations of this discourse. The triple-win does not originate or guide these schemes; rather, it is mobilised after the fact to legitimise policy choices shaped by the material demand for cheap labour. In both Japan and Spain, temporary migration programmes are best understood not as developmental tools but as instruments of migratory utilitarianism, in Sayad's (2004) sense: mechanisms that reduce migrants to labour units whose legitimacy derives exclusively from their productive utility. Japan's TITP, for example, is officially framed as a skills-training mechanism, but its deployment in labour-intensive agricultural tasks reveals the emptiness of this justification. Fruit picking, greenhouse work or vegetable sorting do not generate transferable skills that would enable developmental returns in origin countries. A similar contradiction is visible in the Spanish GECCO programme, where discourses of co-development (Macías Llaga et al., 2016) sit uneasily alongside

the reality of repetitive, low-skilled seasonal tasks that provide little beyond temporary income.

The developmental claims associated with triple-win programmes do not withstand empirical scrutiny. Their size, temporality, and low wage levels make it impossible for them to generate substantial socio-economic transformations in their countries of origin. GECCO is the only programme with a strictly circular structure, and even there, the impact is limited to modest remittances. TITP and SSW flows are larger, but their remittance potential is constrained by high indebtedness, low wages and controlled mobility. Ultimately, migrants may experience micro-level benefits, but these are insufficient to produce the structural developmental outcomes implied by the triple-win narrative.

A materialist reading clarifies who truly benefits. The greatest gains accrue to destination-country agricultural sectors and the businesses that rely on seasonal and low-skilled labour to maintain profitability in competitive global markets. The state also benefits by securing food production, supporting export sectors, and avoiding the social costs of permanent immigration. For migrants and sending countries, however, benefits remain partial and precarious. The paradox is clear: for a genuine triple-win outcome to exist, workers would need higher wages, stronger labour rights and greater autonomy. Yet granting these improvements would undermine the very purpose of these schemes – namely, to provide employers with a cheap, tightly regulated and politically manageable workforce.

At the same time, convergence in outcomes should not obscure meaningful divergences in how each regime produces discipline and "manageability." First, the two systems are embedded in different broader labour supply ecologies. In Spain, GECCO operates alongside EU free mobility and a historically significant (if shifting) presence of irregularised labour; this plurality gives employers alternative recruitment channels and makes GECCO function as a selective, state-backed mechanism geared to "returnability" and benchmark-setting. In Japan, by contrast, the relative marginality of irregular entry and the long-standing political refusal of "immigration" concentrate dependence on formal schemes (TITP/SSW and successor reforms), making the programme architecture itself the principal route through which agriculture secures foreign labour.

Second, the institutional idioms of temporariness differ in ways that shape workers' trajectories. GECCO is explicitly seasonal and circular, with tight coupling between short contracts, mandatory return, and repeat recruitment; control is exercised through selection at origin and the conditional promise of being "called back". Japan's TITP normalises longer stays under a training rationale and channels workers through supervising organisations, while SSW partially relaxes job mobility and, in limited form, introduces the possibility of longer-term residence in certain tracks. These differences matter analytically because they generate distinct forms of dependency: Spain foregrounds circularity and deportability through return requirements; Japan foregrounds debt-financed recruitment, institutional brokerage, and the practical constraints that limit mobility even when nominally permitted.

Third, the political work performed by the triple-win discourse is context-specific. In Japan, it has been central to reconciling labour importation with an official stance

that rejects immigration, channelling admission through the language of "training," "cooperation", and "human resource development". In Spain, where immigration is not denied in the same way, the discourse serves a different purpose: it helps stabilise a selective and externally managed seasonal channel amid public controversy over labour conditions, while signalling "orderly migration" to European and domestic audiences.

This contradiction lies at the heart of both the Japanese and Spanish models. Their differences – whether framed as skills transfer, co-development, essentiality or international cooperation – constitute what can be described as "policy folklore": nationally specific discursive veneers that obscure the fundamental structural equivalence between the two systems. When analysed through the lens of world-ecology and comparative political economy, the programmes in both countries reveal an almost identical functional logic. Temporary migration is not designed to generate mutual benefit but to sustain agro-capitalism's demand for cheap food and cheap labour. The triple-win narrative, therefore, operates less as a description of reality than as an ideological device that legitimises restrictive mobility regimes and masks the exploitative dynamics they reproduce. Unless this discourse is critically dismantled, the exploitation inherent in these programmes is likely to persist as a defining feature rather than an unintended consequence of contemporary agricultural labour regimes.

Conclusions

This article has shown that, despite their institutional, historical and cultural divergences, Japan and Spain have developed agricultural migration regimes that converge around a shared structural function: securing a cheap, flexible, and politically manageable labour force to sustain agro-industrial production. By analysing two maximally different cases through a world-ecology lens, the article contributes to a growing body of scholarship showing that temporary migration programmes in the global core are less the product of national specificities than the expression of a broader systemic logic rooted in the capitalist imperative to maintain cheap food and cheap labour. What appear as distinct policy trajectories or culturally grounded narratives are, in material terms, variations of a common organisational grammar.

The comparative evidence underscores that the triple-win narrative – whether articulated through Japan's language of skills transfer and international cooperation or Spain's vocabulary of co-development and orderly migration – functions primarily as a legitimising device. Far from guiding policy design, these discourses serve to reconcile the political contradictions of importing foreign labour while denying the permanence of migration, presenting temporary schemes as mutually beneficial when their foundational purpose is to guarantee labour cost compression. The analysis of TITP, SSW, and GECCO illustrates that, beneath their discursive veneers, these programmes reproduce structurally similar configurations of precarity, dependency and restricted mobility that underpin agro-capitalist accumulation. In this sense, the triple win is often framed in the register of social policy – a moral language of fairness, mutual benefit, and "responsible" governance – yet in practice, it functions largely as

a legitimising slogan. If the benchmark is shifted from administrative "orderliness" to the kinds of protections that social policy is meant to secure, the limitations of the triple win become clearer. As Matuszczyk and Duszczyk (2018) argue, a social-policy perspective on labour migration foregrounds labour-market security – encompassing the predictability of employment and income, as well as protection against avoidable risks – rather than merely regulating cross-border mobility. Similarly, research on migrants' exposure to unemployment and welfare gaps in "sub-protective" regimes demonstrates how outcomes depend on the institutional configurations of labour markets and social protection, rather than the voluntaristic language of "choice" and mutual benefit (Valadas et al., 2018). From this angle, the triple-win would only warrant a social-policy status if programme design were assessed – and re-engineered – against concrete improvements in migrants' life chances and enforceable rights, rather than against employers' labour-supply needs and the state's legitimacy claims.

By bringing these two cases into dialogue, the article reveals that their differences are largely superficial – policy "folklore" shaped by domestic political constraints, administrative traditions, and geopolitical considerations – while their underlying logic is fundamentally aligned. This insight strengthens the argument that agricultural migration cannot be fully understood through national migration frameworks alone. Instead, it must be situated within the global dynamics that bind the production of cheap food to the mobilisation of cheap labour, and which push states, regardless of ideology or geography, to construct migration regimes that prioritise economic utility over worker rights. Precisely because the structural mandate is cheap food, any attempt to reframe TMPs as genuine social policy will run into a built-in contradiction: measures that would make programmes socially protective – higher wages, effective freedom to change employers, enforceable housing standards, access to complaint mechanisms without retaliation, and meaningful pathways to secure residence – tend to raise labour costs and weaken employer control. The point is not that reform is impossible, but that the "triple-win" cannot become social policy without redistributing power and costs within agri-food systems.

The analysis also suggests that the triple-win discourse should not be understood as purely top-down. While states and international organisations supply its language, other actors receive and rework it in practice. Employers often employ a triple-win rhetoric strategically to present recruitment as both ethical and necessary, even when their competitive position depends on cost compression. Local authorities may mobilise the same vocabulary to justify seasonal governance arrangements (housing, transport, policing) that keep harvest systems running while containing social conflict. For migrants, however, the triple win is rarely a framework they actively mobilise or a language that features prominently in their own imaginings. Its relevance is more indirect: by dressing recruitment in the idiom of "orderly" mobility, training, and mutual benefit, the discourse can confer a veneer of legitimacy and even social prestige on participation, making programmes appear safer, more reputable, or more future-oriented than informal alternatives. Yet this attractiveness does not imply ownership of the narrative; migrants may enter primarily for pragmatic reasons and then confront, in practice, the gap between the official moral framing and the constraints and asymmetries embedded in the programmes. Attending to these receptions does not

redeem the discourse, but it clarifies how its moral appeal helps stabilise regimes that are experienced, negotiated, and sometimes resisted on the ground.

These findings open several avenues for future research. First, further comparative work is needed to examine how temporary migration programmes in other core agricultural economies respond to the same structural imperatives while adopting distinct normative vocabularies. Second, more attention should be devoted to understanding the political implications of positive migration narratives – such as the triple win – in sustaining exploitative labour conditions by masking the structural asymmetries on which agricultural production depends. Third, in an international context increasingly marked by restrictive migration agendas – as suggested by recent developments in Japan and the growing possibility of similar shifts in Spain – it is necessary to investigate whether the triple-win narrative will continue to function as a legitimising shield or whether states will move toward more overtly control-oriented discourses that leave exploitation less concealed but no less central to agricultural labour regimes.

A cautious way to think beyond critique is to ask what alternative arrangements would look like if temporary migration were treated not only as labour-market management but as social policy. At minimum, this would imply de-linking residence from a single employer, strengthening collective representation and enforcement capacity in agricultural enclaves, ensuring rights to organise and access remedies without jeopardising re-hire, and setting binding standards for recruitment fees, transport and housing – so that "orderly migration" is measured in lived security rather than administrative compliance. More ambitious alternatives would require shifting costs away from workers and onto value-chain actors through mechanisms such as sectoral wage floors that reflect social reproduction, joint liability across contractors and lead firms, and procurement rules that internalise decent-labour costs.

At the same time, the structural barriers are substantial. Retail price competition, fragmented subcontracting, and the political preference for "non-settling" labour all incentivise employers and states to preserve a disposable workforce. Under these conditions, the triple-win persists precisely because it offers a morally resonant vocabulary that can be invoked without confronting the distributional conflict implied by genuine social policy. Making that conflict visible – between cheap food as a systemic imperative and migrant protection as social policy – clarifies what is politically at stake in contemporary agricultural migration governance.

Ultimately, dismantling the legitimising power of the triple-win paradigm is essential for moving toward labour regimes that acknowledge, rather than conceal, the centrality of migrant workers in sustaining global food systems. Without confronting the structural drivers that generate demand for cheap labour, reforms will remain partial, and exploitation is likely to persist as an entrenched feature of contemporary agro-capitalism. The Japanese and Spanish cases remind us that meaningful change requires not only policy adjustments but a critical rethinking of the economic model that makes such programmes indispensable.

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Musa Yavuz Alptekin[1]

ORCID: 0000-0002-6221-7913
Department of Sociology, Karadeniz Technical University, Trabzon, Turkey
Department of Sociology, Journalism and Mass Communications University, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

From labour migration to lobbying: the formation of the Turkish diaspora in Germany in six stages

Abstract

In this study, focusing on the concept of diaspora, the transformation of the Turkish population in Germany over 65 years has been analysed. The process, which began with guest labour, has changed and evolved approximately in ten-year intervals, eventually reaching the point of forming a diaspora. Initially, the Turkish community in Germany included merely labour immigrants or guest workers; however, over time, the character of emigration evolved and changed. It was no longer only labour migration, but also international migration, migration as the Other (nationalism), and finally, in the sixth stage, migration as actors of the diaspora. This study, supplemented by Turkish and foreign diaspora research as well as general literature, concludes that the Turks in Germany have evolved from a labour community 65 years ago into a social, economic, cultural, and political entity that has changed, developed, and strengthened. They have reached a position where they can engage in lobbying and ultimately form a diaspora.

Keywords: immigration, diaspora, Turks in Germany, from guest worker to lobbyist, immigrant associations

[1] **Corresponding author:** Musa Yavuz Alptekin, Department of Sociology, Karadeniz Technical University, Trabzon, Turkey, Farabi Street, 61080, Trabzon, Turkey; email: m.yavuz-alptekin@ktu.edu.tr

Introduction

The labour agreement signed on October 30, 1961, between Turkey and Germany is now over 65 years old, and very few of those who went to Germany as workers under this agreement remain with us today. To illustrate the length of time that has passed, it should be noted that the children of those workers from that era are now elderly and retired, while the grandchildren of those workers represent the third generation as adults in middle age. While the labour agreement has made many people happy over more than half a century, it has turned into a bittersweet joy for many others. On the other hand, it has also angered or worried some, particularly, Neo-Nazis and German nationalists.

The long-term and transformative process that began in 1961 with migration from Turkey to Germany, can be analysed in various ways. First and foremost, this migration was not merely a case of labour and workforce migration. Although it began as such, it neither remained that way nor continued uniformly. Over time, it diversified, branched out, and evolved. It is important to note that in 1961 the process of *economic migration* began. Subsequently, the character of migration changed and transformed approximately every decade. For instance, in the 1970s, with the integration of workers' families, a new *social migration* process was initiated. This was followed by *political migrations* with the 1980 military coup. People sought refuge not in just any country but specifically in Germany because, as with family reunification, they had relatives or at least acquaintances there. They went to Germany seeking their help. In the 1990s, a fourth type of migration emerged, which was *security-related migration*. For the same reason, many headed to Germany again. Finally, from the 2000s onwards, *student migration* as a fifth type and *brain drain* as a sixth type of migration also largely directed themselves toward Germany. Over these 65 years, with six different types of migration, Turkish people have travelled to Germany. Among those who went, came, and returned, nearly three million Turkish citizens started living in Germany. Although the process was initiated and triggered by labour migration, it did not remain limited to this aspect for either the Turks or the Germans. It changed, transformed, and has evolved today into a point where it has either voluntarily or involuntarily formed a diaspora.

In this study, the migration of Turks to Germany has been divided into six stages based on labour migration and analysed in six categories according to their functions. These stages, in chronological order, are as follows: the *guest worker* period (1961–1974), the *labour migration* period (1974–1983), the *international migration* period (1983–1989), the *marginalised migration period in the face of Rising Nationalism* (1989–1993), the *marginalised migration through violence* period (1993–2010), and finally, the *intellectual exclusion and diaspora formation* period (2010–2024).[2]

[2] Although this study is based on a literature review, the social events and processes observed by the author during a year-long fieldwork in the cities of Essen and Duisburg, along with the information, documents, and experiences acquired, have enabled the author to formulate generalisations about these stages and phases that have not yet been covered in the literature.

Immigrant associations

Immigrant associations can be defined as non-profit organisations established by immigrants that operate at all stages of migration and aim primarily to serve the immigrant community. It is stated in the literature that as long as the majority and importance of immigrants in the organisation persist, the organisation will remain an immigrant organisation. That is, if immigrants make up the majority of the members and hold a significant presence in the management board, the organisation continues to be considered an immigrant organisation (Babis, 2016). Of course, it should also be added that the agenda and activities of the association should predominantly focus on issues and activities related to immigrants.

Immigrant organisations exist are diversified. Basch (1987) divides immigrant organisations into nine categories: 1) charities, 2) sports and social clubs, 3) welfare organisations, 4) professional associations, 5) educational and cultural clubs, 6) political clubs, 7) performing arts cultural clubs, 8) women's groups, 9) umbrella organisations. Moya (2005), on the other hand, categorises organisations into six distinct headings: 1) secret, 2) credit, 3) mutual aid associations, 4) religious, 5) homeland, 6) political groups. In contrast to Basch and Moya, Layton-Henry (1990) classifies immigrant organisations based on their primary orientation, identifying three specific types related to:

1. The homeland
2. The new country
3. Both countries.

Immigrant associations are non-profit civil society organisations. Non-profit organisations play a significant role in providing social services, legal advocacy, and policy advocacy to immigrant communities, as well as enriching their religious, cultural, and recreational activities. Academics working on immigrant associations have started to notice how community-based organisations, especially in the US and Europe since the 1960s, sometimes function like a "shadow state" through bilateral agreements with governments or local authorities, or provide security net services through private funding (Bloemraad et al., 2022).

Religious differences between immigrant groups and the host country's population lead to the establishment of religious institutions where religious ceremonies for immigrants are held (Moya, 2005; Rex, 1987). A good example of this is Muslim new arrivals in Christian countries; for instance, the 40 mosques established by Turkish immigrants in Berlin (Gitmez & Wildert, 1987) and 38 mosques serving a Pakistani population of 45,000 in Birmingham, United Kingdom (Layton-Henry, 1990, 94–96). According to research by DeSantis and Benkin (1980), religious organisations played a central role in the initial settlement of Lithuanian Jews and Christians in Chicago. The prevalence of religious associations can also be seen as reflecting the importance of religion in the group identity of immigrants (Moya, 1998).

Harris (1998) and Moya (2005) have raised the issue of whether religious associations should be considered real voluntary associations. The reason for this is the "restrictions and prohibitions" on the actions of members. According to them, this situation differs from the operating system of secular organisations. In secular

associations, volunteering is essential, whereas it is thought that this principle is limited in religious organisations. In this case, although religious associations are immigrant organisations, it is not very possible to regard them as true Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

The role of immigrant associations in the formation of diaspora has always been a subject of interest. According to academics and researchers who have studied this issue, immigrant associations have formed alliances with local political parties and commercial unions, which has promoted citizenship duties, rights, and achievements in various areas, especially voting rights. They have mobilised the community to support or oppose various policies, ranging from immigration laws to native language classes, and ethnic culinary habits (Schneider, 2001; Marinari, 2020).

Immigration's institutionalisation: diaspora

The term "diaspora" has Greek origins *diasperien*, which is derived from dia- meaning "through" or "across," and *sperien* meaning "to scatter" or "to sow". The Greeks initially used the term "diaspora" to refer to migration, colonisation, and colonies. The concept of diaspora gained a new semantic meaning when the Romans used it in 586 BCE to refer to the Hebrews following the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple walls. In modern times, based on this historical context, the term has become a permanent concept used to describe people who have "lost their homeland and are subjected to ethnic violence" (Gilroy, 1994; Clifford, 1994).

The systematic definition of the diaspora concept emerged in the 1990s. Leading experts in the field, such as William Safran (1991, 83–84), Stuart Hall (1994), James Clifford (1994, 1997), and Robin Cohen (1996, 514), have explained the origins of diaspora within the framework of three to six similar fundamental characteristics. These characteristics can be summarised as follows:

1. Dispersal from the centre country to peripheral countries due to abnormal (traumatic) reasons.
2. The belief that genuine acceptance will not be achieved in the host country.
3. The formation of a strong social group or ethnic consciousness and a sense of shared destiny.
4. The preservation of homeland-centred social relations and cultural traits.
5. Close relations and solidarity with other compatriots dispersed from the same centre.
6. The maintenance and glorification of the homeland idea and the idealisation of returning to the homeland.

Among these six prerequisites identified for the diaspora, the second characteristic is the most prominent and strongly applicable to Turks in Germany. The formation of a diaspora status for a migrant community depends on the framing of the other characteristics and the substantiation of this characteristic. The rest will depend on the transformation of static conditions into dynamic ones over time.

First phase: 1961–1974 "guest worker"

On October 30, 1961, a labour agreement was signed between Turkey and Germany. Although the term "Guest Worker" (*Gastarbeiter*) is mentioned in the text of this agreement, it is clear that this term lacks a legal basis and does not have legal applications; it is essentially a political concept. No country would bring people from another country to work in the most physically demanding, arduous, dangerous, and low-prestige jobs with low wages, and then, after achieving the required productivity, simply say, "We are done with you, you may leave now". Such a practice has no place in the democratic world or modern law. Therefore, it is a misguided approach to assume that the concept of "guest worker" implies that Turks in Germany should return when their "time is up" and that this is the natural course of events. The term "guest worker" is a political concept and appears to have been used in the media to reassure the German society of that time.

During this period, German political parties, politicians, and elites addressed their economic problems with Turkish labour and aimed to reassure the public with the concept of "Gastarbeiter", achieving their goals for 20–30 years. However, after such a period of time, it became clear that the political promises had no legal foundation, leading to what could be described as "murmurings" among particularly nationalistic segments of the German population. Castles and Miller (2008, 100) make an interesting observation on this issue: "German policies envisioned migrant workers as temporary labour units that could be hired, utilized, and dismissed at the employers' discretion". However, even if they are migrants, fulfilling people's legal rights may not be as easy as creating political concepts. The "guest worker Turks" in Germany are a practical manifestation of this difficulty.

From the early 19th century, the British transported tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of Chinese labourers to their colony, Malaysia, to work in tin mines. These workers did not return to China; instead, they became permanent residents of Malaysia and, with 24% of the population, now control more than half of the contemporary Malaysian economy of 28 million (for detailed information, see: Alptekin, 2015). In contrast, for the past 30–40 years in Germany, a 3% migrant population has stirred significant controversy among Neo-Nazis and German nationalist groups. Moreover, this 3% migrant population has, in a sense, "paid its dues" and deserves gratitude and recognition. Yet, the reality is quite the opposite. In such an environment, it is inconceivable to imagine Turks in Germany having a quarter of the population or managing roughly half of the economy as is the case in Malaysia. It is clear that the German state and German democracy have much to learn from the hospitality shown in Malaysia. In this sense, Western modernity and democracy can be said to lag behind even traditional Eastern practices.

Second phase: 1973–1983 "labour migration"

By the 12th year of labour migration to Germany, on November 23, 1973, Germany enacted the *Anwerbestopp* law, signalling the halt of labour recruitment from countries

outside the European Community. With this law, the German government required Turks to choose between returning to their home country or staying permanently in Germany (Piest, 2000, cited in Adıgüzel 2004, 91). After this date, the number of Turkish workers coming to Germany decreased sharply: from 9,412 during the six years between 1974 and 1980 to just 674 during the nine years between 1981 and 1990 (Yılmaz, 2023). This indicates a significant halt in Germany's recruitment of workers from Turkey. Another implication of this law was the end of the "guest worker" era and the beginning of the "labour migration" era for Turks in Germany. Consequently, while the number of Turkish workers in Germany remained stable from this point on, the population continued to grow due to family reunification. Indeed, this period also marked a transition from a Turkish labour population in Germany to a Turkish community with diversified and completed social components.

Third Phase: 1983–1989 "international migration"

At the end of 1973, the German government not only halted the recruitment of workers from outside the European Community but also, 10 years later in 1983, introduced the Return Promotion Law (*Rückkehrförderungsgesetz*). This law officially offered 10,500 Marks to workers who agreed to return to their home country and was implemented for 11 months. This measure was the result of a socio-political demand and created a chain reaction, leading to a negative social wave. For instance, writings such as "Türken raus" (Turks out) began to appear on the walls of neighbourhoods with a Turkish presence (Danış et al., 2021, 14). Due to that some Turks started to consider and ultimately decided to migrate. With the introduction of compensations, early retirement payments, and similar incentives, this promotion program, which could amount to up to 30–40 thousand Marks, resulted in the definitive return of about 300,000 Turkish and a total of 500,000 foreign nationals from Germany to their home countries (Abadan-Unat, 2015; Toksöz, 2006; Ersun et al., 1996; for detailed discussion, see: Doğan, 2001). The enactment and application of this law mark the transition from the second phase to the third phase for Turks in Germany starting in 1983, moving from the *labour migration* phase to the *international migration* phase.

The first generation of Turks who went to Germany referred to themselves as "Gurbetçi" (a term meaning an expatriate or someone living away from their homeland), while the German press and government described foreign workers as "Gastarbeiter" (guest workers) until the 1980s. The relatives they left behind in Turkey labelled them as "Almancı" (a term for someone who is associated with Germany). As the return of foreign workers, particularly Turkish workers, to their home countries was delayed, the term "Mitarbeiter" (colleague) was adopted when it became clear that they would stay in Germany permanently. After the reunification of East and West Germany, Turks were referred to as "Ausländer" (foreigners) by some segments of the German population. Subsequently, some Germans used the term "Migranten" (migrants) for Turks, while others preferred "Deutscher mit Migrationshintergrund" (German with a migration background). Finally, a very small number of Germans used

the term "Mitbürger" (fellow citizens) for Turks who had obtained citizenship (Başkurt, 2009, 84; Akkaya, 2006, 29). The lack of a standardised term for Turks reflects the various naming conventions that emerged during different periods and among different political groups. Additionally, the terminology has shown dynamism based on the changing economic, social, and cultural capital of both Turks and Germans.

This third phase, known as *international migration*, represents the third stage experienced by Turks who initially went to Germany as *guest workers*, following the labour migration phase. Unlike the previous stages, it did not last long. The term that perhaps best characterises the social situation of Turks in Germany during this period is "discontinuity" in the context of change and transformation. Local, national, international, and global developments have affected the situation of Turks in Germany, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, but always strongly. Indeed, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked the beginning of a new political and social era, not only for global, European, and German politics but also for the Turkish community in Germany.

Fourth phase: 1989–1993 "the Otherness of rising German nationalism"

Like many forms of nationalism, contemporary German nationalism has gained momentum through the concept of the "Other". While nationalism globally often defines itself in opposition to an "Other", in German society, this dynamic is particularly pronounced and concrete. Germany is considered one of the countries with high levels of homogeneity, similar to Iceland, Japan, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark (Benedikter, 2014). Although long-standing social and cultural homogeneity can be seen as an advantage for states, in the age of global migrations, it can also provide a cultural basis for xenophobia. When evaluated over time, the homogeneity that was once an advantage in pre-modern eras has become a disadvantage in the modern world, where migration and migrants are a global reality. This cultural heritage can contribute to the development of negative contemporary nationalism. Thus, for contemporary (post-World War II) German nationalism, the "Other" it defines itself against is generally foreigners, but specifically and predominantly Turks.

The fall of the Berlin Wall facilitated the reunification of two distinct worlds, with far-reaching social implications beyond the mere removal of a physical barrier spanning 155 kilometres. However, once the physical barrier was removed, the transition was not seamless. Forty-five years of social, economic, cultural, and political differences required time to address the issue. These differences have not yet been fully resolved. The disparities between East and West Germany have produced more problems than initially anticipated. In fact, the East German society has often blamed migrants, specifically Turks, for their comparatively lower share of development, economic growth, welfare, globalisation, democracy, and high living standards compared to West Germany. Governments and bureaucracies that failed to establish a balanced social welfare system seemed to welcome this tendency, as it masked their failures. It was never genuinely criticised or judged at the level of intellectuals and policymakers.

Governments, bureaucrats, and administrative elites that brought in "guest workers" to meet the demands of industrialists, businessmen, and economic leaders in the 1960s, instead of taking responsibility for the issues their policies created, chose to remain silent as society targeted the same migrants. Foreigners, migrants, and "Others" have consistently served as scapegoats for governments, managers, and elites throughout history. Machiavellian pragmatism continues to prevail in contemporary governance and management practices. Simultaneously, the media, which is the tool of these hegemonic groups, continues to stigmatise immigrants, leading to the reproduction, distribution and strengthening of othering (Kehya, 2022).

Due to these profound impacts and analyses, a few intellectuals and thinkers in Germany opposed the reunification of East and West Germany with such writers as Günter Grass and academics and philosophers as Jürgen Habermas among them. Their primary concern was that the traces of the Berlin Wall, as previously mentioned, would not be erased quickly and that the peace and prosperity achieved would be lost (Abadan-Unat, 2015, 269). Indeed, the 35-year period that has elapsed has vindicated these few intellectuals and thinkers. The reunification, carried out with the apparent aim of projecting an image of a "united, large, and powerful Germany" and gaining psychological superiority, has never truly resolved the real problems it created. The costs have been levied on foreigners, migrants, Muslims, and ultimately, Turks. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent reunification of the two Germanys, there has been a rise in exclusionary and negative nationalism in Germany. Hate speech against foreigners has increased, and physical attacks and acts of violence against migrants, particularly Turks, have become more frequent and severe than ever before.

Fifth phase: 1993–2010 "Solingen massacre and exclusionary migration through violence"

In the years following the reunification of East and West Germany, nationalism rose noticeably, but this was not the only development. Acts of violence, murders, and arson targeting foreigners, migrants, and specifically Turks became increasingly prominent, with the 1993 Solingen massacre marking a significant turning point. In Germany, one can talk about a pre-Solingen and post-Solingen era for migrants. However, the organised and planned attacks triggered by racist and xenophobic groups had clear precursors before Solingen. In 1992, the home of the Arslan family in Mölln was set on fire, resulting in the deaths of three people. About a year later, the Solingen massacre, which can be seen as a significant turning point, the home of the Genç family was torched, resulting in the deaths of five Turks. The largest arson attack occurred in 2008, when an arson fire in Ludwigshafen claimed the lives of nine Turks. These mentioned incidents represent the most significant and organised attacks after the reunification. According to official records from Turkey, between 1988 and 2012, a total of 24 Turks lost their lives due to racist attacks in Germany (Grand National Assembly of Turkey [TBMM] 2012, cited in Kahraman, 2018).

According to a more comprehensive official record, as of 2019, there have been 100 physical attacks against Turks in Germany. These attacks include 41 on mosques, 24 on

individuals, 20 on shops, four on vehicles, three on associations, three on cemeteries, three on residences, one on diplomatic missions and one on educational institutions (YTB, 2020, 16). Additionally, there have been 83 recorded instances of hate speech and verbal threats against Turks up to that year. Among these incidents, the Solingen massacre stands out as particularly significant and represents a turning point. Following this organised and planned attack, which resulted in substantial loss of lives, a strong public awareness emerged within the Turkish community in Germany. Turks came to realise that they could not exist as individuals in this country but needed to act collectively. However, they struggled to define exactly what this collective action should look like. The counteraction, driven by the intensity of the violence, led to the development of a more security-oriented reflex. While collective consciousness supported this reflex, an intellectual response, by its nature and in an analytical sense, was similarly triggered by the situation.

Sixth phase: 2010–2024 "Thilo Sarrazin and the emergence of diaspora reflexes against intellectual exclusion"

In 2010, Thilo Sarrazin (2010), a board member of the German central bank, published a book titled *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany Does Away with Itself). Over the past 14 years, it has gone through more than 20 editions and has consistently ranked among the bestsellers. Moreover, it has become the greatest bestseller in Germany since World War II. The main theme of this book is Germany's immigration policy and, in this context, the presence of Turks in the country. Sarrazin argues in his book that the Turkish presence in Germany poses a significant threat to the country's existence and its healthy development.

Thilo Sarrazin's book and ideas have been referenced in nearly every report, study, and news article about Turks published after 2010. In the report titled "Turkish-German relations: Yesterday, today, and tomorrow on the 50th anniversary of Turkish migration to Germany", published by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, it is emphasised that discussions centred around Sarrazin's views on the presence of Turks have disturbed the Turkish community. According to this research, 38% of academics and students living in Germany and educated there have begun to consider returning to Turkey (Soysal, 2011, 93–94). Of course, not all individuals with this mindset will realise this intention, and perhaps only a few will be able to act on it. The crucial point is not the actual return of migrants to their country of origin, but rather the perception of discomfort and unrest experienced by migrants in the host country. This sense of discomfort and unrest can provide the necessary psychological conditions for a migrant group in a country to form a diaspora. Even half of a 38% educated and skilled immigrant population could potentially provide the leadership and organisation required to form a diaspora. The situation of Turks in Germany after Sarrazin's publication precisely indicates this dynamic. Moreover, when we look at the issue from the perspective of television and cinema, according to a study, the representational tendencies in visual culture regarding immigrants are dominant as rule breakers, criminals, those who are reluctant and resistant to integration in Germany, and

perpetrators of their own archaic traditions, devoid of their socio-economic and political dimensions (Kehya, 2025, 4).

According to research conducted by SEK-POL and the Data4U Initiative, 62% of Turks living in Germany who followed the Sarrazin debate perceive these discussions as a personal insult or attack. Additionally, 66.6% of the Turkish participants in the same research indicated dissatisfaction with how the German media handled the debate (Data4U, 2010). These findings reveal that two-thirds of Turks in Germany have been negatively affected by the Sarrazin case and view themselves as members of an excluded community. In such a process, an immigrant may come to the conclusion that they can no longer exist individually in the host country. For the average member of this community, the most logical and practical outcome of this collective psychology is to organise and act as a community. When it comes to immigrants, the host country's official institutions prefer individuals to act independently. However, paradoxically, the immigrant community is often pushed by conservative segments of the host country to come together as a community, form civil society organisations, establish associations, and act collectively. In this sense, internal dynamics encourage individual action, while external dynamics often compel collective action. Similarly, official bodies encourage individual behaviour, while social dynamics push towards communal behaviour.

In the September 5, 2010, issue of Hürriyet newspaper, an article titled "Germany stands by its Turks" reported that although German authorities and intellectuals reacted to Thilo Sarrazin and expressed support for Turks, the widespread popularity of Sarrazin's book indicated that it deeply hurt immigrants, especially young Turks who considered themselves integrated. According to the report, Turkish youth in Germany felt that "no matter what I do, German society does not see me as one of their own". The article concluded: "The support Sarrazin received from the grassroots has rekindled feelings of exclusion among immigrants and somewhat hindered the integration process" (Özcan, 2010). This observation is particularly noteworthy. The support for Sarrazin has generated a sense of exclusion within the Turkish community. Indeed, research by Hoffman, Makovsky, and Werz (2020, 17) found that Turks in Germany felt the most excluded compared to participants from France, Austria, and the Netherlands. Such a social psychology and environment could motivate a migrant community to make a decision and take action towards becoming a diaspora.

A migrant community may show a will to establish a diaspora under two conditions. The first occurs when the community feels wronged in their country of origin. In such cases, they form a diaspora in their new location as a response to the injustices they experienced at home. The second situation arises when migrants face injustices, discrimination, and exclusion in their new country. In this case, they may also develop a will to establish a diaspora as a reaction to new environment. Examples of the first type include Palestinians, Crimean Tatars, and Meskhetian Turks, who created diasporas due to their experiences in their countries of origin. The second type includes Turks in Germany, Indians dispersed across various countries, and similar migrant workers. The first group represents *victim diasporas*, while the second group represents *labour diasporas* (Cohen, 1997, 179). Host countries generally view and sometimes positively engage with the first type of diaspora, often seeing it as a tool for international relations.

Conversely, the second type is more positively regarded and supported by the country of origin, which seeks to use this diaspora for its own political and strategic purposes.

These data indicate that a migrant group in a country has moved beyond the stages of guest work, guest worker status, migration, and even international migration, and has become a significantly distanced and marginalised community. For Turks in Germany, this transition has been fully realised. A migrant community in such a situation has two options: gradually withdraw from the host country or remain in the country but resolve to establish a diaspora and act collectively rather than individually. Turks in Germany tested the first option between 2007 and 2013, when the Turkish economy was relatively strong, and applied it on a micro level. However, the majority chose to stay in Germany. During this period, the proportion of Turks returning to Turkey was very small, and a significant number of those who returned eventually came back to Germany (Karaca & Yurttaş, 2021, 1766; Küçük & Karaca, 2022; Suğanlı, 2003, 25). Scientific studies on return migration from the 1960s to 2007 have shown that those who returned to Turkey faced various problems, similar to those who stayed in Germany (Alptekin, 2019). Therefore, the decision of Turks in Germany to remain and resolve to establish a diaspora, particularly after the Sarrazin controversy that erupted in 2010, was well-founded. This determination is backed by 50 years of challenging experience and a development trajectory spanning six stages.

In this context, becoming a diaspora is neither a positive nor a negative situation but rather a necessity. The decision or feeling of being compelled to form a diaspora is not objective but rather subjective. Similarly, this communal determination and will are not endogenous but rather exogenous. There is no objective, clear, and defined prerequisites for forming a diaspora. This state of determination and will is more about social psychological conditions and represents a social equation reestablished in each unique host and migrant community context. Each culture, education level, and social and economic capital level will manifest this equation in different ways.

Today's Turkish residents in Germany view their ancestors—those who came to Germany two or three generations ago—as having endured extremely harsh conditions and being subjected to demanding and often exploitative labour, leading to a life marked by chronic illnesses and an early death (Kartal & Alptekin, 2015, 599; Suğanlı, 2003, 27). These experiences have led the current generation of Turks in Germany to feel that the country owes them a debt. They argue that their fathers and grandfathers were subjected to difficult working conditions and left to their fate. A community with such sentiments may be less inclined to integrate into the host society or to make sacrifices for the country. This feeling of injustice and neglect can contribute to higher rates of unemployment benefits among Turks in Germany compared to the general population.

Civil society organisations as carriers of diasporas and the anatomy of Turkish associations in Germany

Civil society organisations are systems that aim to protect individuals from state and private sector institutions, which, due to their size, often make direct interaction

with individuals difficult. These organisations replace the mechanical solidarity of traditional communities in urbanised, industrialised societies where divisions of labour, professions, and certain levels of education are established.

When thinking about organised societies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or associations come to mind. The concept of association involves a demographic that has realised it cannot sustain its individuality, identity, and socio-cultural values by living solely on an individual level. This demographic decides to live collectively and with community awareness, engages in solidarity at an advanced and intellectual level, and demonstrates a will to live not only biologically but also sociologically. Beyond that, it entails a determination to establish a "strategic national sociology" suitable for the place and time conditions of the "foreign land" in which they live.

According to average sources, there are approximately 2,000 to 4,000 Turkish associations in Germany (Koç, 2012). Despite Turks representing 20% of the foreign/immigrant population in Germany (Destatis, 2015), they own 60% of the associations established by foreigners (Hunger, 2005). This ratio indicates that Turks are the most willing and capable group among foreigners in Germany to form a diaspora. A significant portion of Turkish associations in Germany consists of mosque associations, with some sources citing this figure as 20% (Hunger, 2005). This might lead to the assumption that mosque associations are passive and incapable of engaging in civil society activities. However, two important points should not be overlooked.

Firstly, mosque associations in Germany differ from those in Turkey. They often function more as cultural and youth centres, offering a range of services including sports activities. Secondly, while mosque associations were very active during the initial wave of migration, many of the newly established associations in recent years are more secular, intellectual, and advanced, and are better suited for establishing a diaspora. Therefore, Turks in Germany are now primarily establishing associations focused on education, culture, arts, health, women, media, business, professional organisations, and lobbying, rather than just mosque associations, regional associations, and charities targeting lower socioeconomic groups.[3]

As the focus of new-generation associations shifts away from traditional forms, the organised society in Germany is rapidly evolving towards a diaspora model from the perspective of Turks. Turkish Germans are transitioning from a traditional, religious social structure to a modern and secular form of solidarity. This process does not occur as a direct transition from the first to the second form but involves an intermediate phase of individualisation, cosmopolitanism, dispersion, and fragmentation. Research shows that approximately two-thirds of Turks in Germany are members of at least one association and thus participate in activities, pay dues, or are in some way affiliated (TAM, 2005). Another institutional study estimates this number to be 300,000 (Religionswissenschaftlicher Medien- und Informationsdienst e.V. [REMID], n.d.). While the first figure might seem exaggerated, the second might be slightly

[3] The author's field research in Germany included direct contact with associations in Duisburg. One of the associations the author interacted with and met the administrators of is named explicitly as the "Lobby Association".

underestimated. On the other hand, viewing membership as a measure of affiliation and normal dues payment rather than active participation (Kocagöz, 2018) is more realistic. Thus, averaging the two estimates, it can be said that approximately 1 million out of the 2.7 million Turkish-origin population in Germany are members of Turkish associations, meaning they are "affiliated" with Turkish NGOs. While it is difficult to provide an exact number for active participation, it can be stated that a small portion of the affiliated population is actively involved, and this is potentially sufficient for leadership, representation, and organisation.

Discussion

What quantitative and qualitative characteristics are necessary for a migrant community to establish a diaspora in a country? While there is no definitive and clear answer to this question, studies on diaspora communities can provide some insights. For example, how important is population size in forming a diaspora? Data from various levels suggests that the population size does play a significant role. The case of Armenians in France is illustrative in this regard. According to Yepremyan and Tavitian (2017), there are only 500,000 Armenians living in France, yet France is known to have the second strongest Armenian diaspora following the United States. This data suggests that the Turkish community in Germany may have an excess rather than a deficiency in population size needed to form a diaspora in this country. Thus, moving from the idea that the Turkish community in Germany has sufficient population size, it is useful to examine their adequacy in other areas.

As expected, after ensuring sufficient population size to form a diaspora, the next criteria to be examined are qualitative aspects and organisational level. In terms of qualitative factors, key indicators include education level, professions, and economic power. Sources have noted that the Turkish community in Germany has achieved relatively high success in education (Acar, 2018). The Turks in Germany also appear to have made considerable progress in acquiring professions. According to the research by Şen, Ulusoy, and Şentürk (2007, 44), Turkish entrepreneurs in Germany have an average age of 37.2, an average residency duration of 24.5 years, with 24.6% being women, 46.5% holding German citizenship, and, most importantly, 70% possessing a professional diploma. These data can be considered a noteworthy development and progress for a community that initially went to a country as "workers". The same research (2007, 19) also found that the average net monthly household income for Turks in Germany is 1950 Euros, which is a significant and relatively high amount.

For migrants, another critical factor in forming a diaspora in the host country is the establishment of associations and engagement in civil society activities. Several studies have been conducted on this topic (Adıgüzel, 2004; Ertürk, 2012; Kocagöz, 2018; Alptekin, 2024). It has been observed that Turks, who initially focused on creating religious-ideological associations, mosques, and hometown associations as extensions of Turkey during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, began to establish more independent and context-specific associations from the 1990s onward. These new associations focus

on education, culture, health, art, sports, women's issues, professions, and direct lobbying. In the first 30 years, Turks engaged in conservative actions primarily aimed at preserving their religion and culture. Over the subsequent 30 years, they shifted their focus to contemporary social issues and began forming civil society organisations (CSOs) with various social functions. This qualitative transformation has enabled Turks in Germany to raise their demands more effectively with local and national governments and even to exert pressure on institutions and governments on certain issues.

When all data is comprehensively evaluated, it can be concluded that Turks in Germany have developed the quantitative and qualitative characteristics necessary to form a diaspora in the country. Although the level of influence may vary, it can be said that Turks have indeed established a diaspora in Germany, whose existence can be acknowledged.

Conclusion

Approximately half of the 6 million Turkish nationals living abroad reside in Germany, with the rest dispersed across many other countries. Therefore, the largest and most substantial Turkish population is in Germany. It represents not only the most significant demographic group but also the strongest economic segment among the Turks living abroad. In addition to the demographic and economic factors previously discussed, social development and social capital should also be considered the third dimension. In terms of organisational and lobbying activities, Turks in Germany represent the most dynamic diaspora population abroad. Given this information, it can be asserted that if Turks living abroad cannot establish a diaspora in Germany, they are unlikely to succeed in any other country. Indeed, after 65 years and at the end of the sixth phase, Turks in Germany have managed to form a diaspora organisation, albeit in a nascent state. This includes lobbying associations, politicians and bureaucrats in government positions, economically influential industrialists and businessmen, well-known public figures, internationally renowned scientists, and highly educated elites.

The phase of *guest worker* migration, which began in 1961, transitioned into the *labour migration* phase in 1974. From this point onward, the German government officially halted the recruitment of guest workers. Subsequently, family reunification led to the migration of workers' families to Germany. In 1983, the introduction of the Incentive for Return Act marked the beginning of a third phase, which can be described as *international migration* for Turks in Germany. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany led to a rise in German nationalism, positioning Turks in the fourth phase as the *Other of German nationalism*. During this period, ideological and fanatical exclusion and targeting of Turks became prevalent. This phase transitioned into the fifth phase of *exclusion through physical violence*, marked by the 1993 Solingen massacre, where Turks faced exclusion and othering through physical attacks. Finally, with the publication of Thilo Sarrazin's book from 2010, intellectual exclusion against Turks emerged. Over the past 14 years, Turks in Germany have

entered the sixth phase, which can be termed as the *emergence phase of the Turkish diaspora* in Germany. In this phase, Turks have engaged in lobbying through civil society organisations and similar formations to respond to this latest form of exclusion. Each phase represents a significant transformation in legal, social, cultural, and civil society aspects of life.

In diaspora theories, the precondition of "believing that one will never be fully accepted in the host country" has become highly relevant for Turks in Germany. This relevance did not emerge overnight but is the result of a process that has unfolded over time. The study outlines this process in six phases, with the rise of nationalism following the reunification of Germany, the Solingen massacre, and the publication and widespread sale of Thilo Sarrazin's book being identified as the three most significant developments. As a result of these events and after a 60-year process, Turks in Germany have come to the conclusion that they will never be fully accepted by Germans. This realisation has led them to return from a period of "potentially" individual living to an organised and collective living style. However, this return to collective life is not the same as it was in earlier periods. Initially, community life was characterised by traditional communal living; after phases of individualisation, atomisation, and cosmopolitan living, the reformation into a collective was driven not by external force but by an intellectual, rational, and modern community formation through NGOs. This final formation has laid the foundation for the diaspora.

As previously mentioned, for Turks in Germany, creating a diaspora has become a necessity rather than a choice. Economic, social, and political conditions over the past thirty to 40 years have made this necessary. The ability of Turks in Germany to establish a diaspora can serve as a valuable example and model for other migrant worker communities. Peaceful diasporas have always maintained a positive image worldwide. As a labour diaspora that has reached this point despite challenging conditions, Turks have much to contribute to this image. There is a significant global effort to address the issues faced by migrants and to develop sustainable solutions. The Turkish labour diaspora in Germany has the potential to offer various contributions to this effort.

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Fahri Bajgora[1]

ORCID: 0009-0000-6852-7659
Social and Behavioral Sciences, European University of Tirana, Albania

Push factors behind the migration wave in the Western Balkan countries

Abstract

This study examines the push factors causing labour force emigration from the six Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, based on a comprehensive dataset of 6,000 observations from the Balkan Barometer. The analysis uses logistic regression models (Ordinary Least Squares–OLS Robust–Fixed Effects–Random Effects) to understand how socioeconomic and political factors impact emigration. The model examines the dependent variable, migration (Yes/No), against independent variables that include employment status, economic situation, belief in the justice system, political situation, education system, and public services. The findings confirm that of the push factors, unemployment and economic situation are the leading factors with log-odds coefficients between -0.79 to -0.85 and -0.39 to -0.42, respectively, followed by weak institutional values and political instability (coefficients ranged between -0.16 to -0.38). ANOVA analysis discovered that the emigration rates differed between countries, with Montenegro and Serbia having higher rates (0.22 and 0.21) than Albania and North Macedonia (0.15 and 0.16). This research supports the hypothesis that socioeconomic and political factors are significant drivers of migration pressure. From a policy perspective, job creation and improved living standards with strong governance

[1] **Corresponding author:** Fahri Bajgora, Social and Behavioral Sciences, European University of Tirana, Bulevardi "Gjergj Fishta", Nd.70, H.1, Unit Nr.7, 1023, Tirana, Albania; email: fahribajgora@gmail.com

will help lessen the pressure to emigrate. This study adds to the migration literature by providing a nuance, region-specific context and illustrates the importance of interventions that are place-based solutions that address the root causes of migration in the Western Balkans.

Keywords: Western Balkans, governance, push factors, political stability, migration

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the countries in the Western Balkans region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) have faced considerable migration of labour force due to a variety of socioeconomics and political factors. In general, the focus of this paper is to analyse the distinct forces that are driving this migration wave, particularly the interaction between economic decline and political instability. Whereas labour migration in more developed economies is often driven by opportunity-seeking behaviour, migration in many Western Balkan countries is primarily a reaction of the underlying structural issues faced by these transitional economies. In particular, labour migration from the region has been driven by high unemployment, low living standards, and political issues that create distrust in public institutions.

The labour market in the Western Balkans, on the one hand, has faced high unemployment and limited job creation and, on the other hand, workers are faced with low paying jobs that do not pay for basic living needs (Vladi & Hysa, 2019; Jusufi & Ukaj, 2020). With these push factors, it is no surprise that so many people seek better opportunities abroad. On top of the economic push factors, political issues such as weak government, high levels of corruption, etc., have driven an even more difficult economic situation. While economic push factors have been well-analysed in developing countries (Baumann et al., 2015; Kilic et al., 2019), to our knowledge, very few have examined the political factors specifically in the Western Balkans, even less if there is interaction with their impact on the decision to migrate. The goal of this study is to add to the existing body of knowledge on social and political push factors and their respective combined role in migration from the countries of the Western Balkans region dealing with post-conflict conflict situations, and their role in ongoing processes of globalisation.

The Fourier Series method is employed in this study to capture periodic trends in migration patterns, complementing the primary regression models (OLS, OLS Robust, Fixed Effects, and Random Effects). By modelling temporal fluctuations in migration flows, this approach accounts for cyclical socioeconomic or political events that may influence emigration decisions across the Western Balkans over time. This method enhances the robustness of our analysis by addressing time-series dynamics that standard regression models may not fully capture, providing a more comprehensive understanding of migration drivers in the region.

Research questions of this paper are:

I. To what extent do socioeconomic factors, specifically employment status and perceived economic situation, influence the decision to migrate in the Western Balkan countries?

II. How do political and institutional factors, including belief in the justice system, perceptions of the political situation, quality of the educational system, and public services, contribute to migration decisions in the Western Balkans?

These questions are explored through two central hypotheses:

H1: Unemployment and poor perceived economic conditions significantly increase the likelihood of migration in the Western Balkan countries.

H2: Weak belief in the justice system, negative perceptions of the political situation, and poor quality of educational systems and public services significantly increase the likelihood of migration in the Western Balkans.

In order to assess these hypotheses, the research uses a large secondary dataset from the Balkan Barometer, containing 6,000 observations (1,000 observations per country). This longitudinal dataset facilitates an analysis of migration over time in six Western Balkan countries. The analytic framework with the econometric techniques Fourier Series, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS), OLS Robust, Fixed Effects (FE), and Random Effects (RE) provides a solid examination of the drivers of migration. Data creation for this study utilised the Balkan Barometer, as well as secondary indicators from the World Bank. Building on existing methodologies and applying a larger, more comprehensive and representative dataset provides additional empirical contributions to the migration drivers in the Western Balkans.

The data and implications of this research are significant and relevant for evidence-based policy. Knowing and understanding the push factors for emigration can guide governments in the Western Balkans to create measures to respond to emigration with policies like sustainable job developments, wage increases and governance and rule of law reform. This paper also contributes to the migration literature and policy, giving insight to the implications from a region-specific context in light of the unique push and pull factors that underpin migration from former communist migration countries during transition where economic and political factors are combined. This paper provides a foundation that will allow for future research to explore more of the drivers of migration and the associated implications of sustainable development in the Western Balkans.

2. Literature review

The issue of labour migration in the Western Balkans has received increased attention in academic literature in recent years as it has critical economic, social and political implications. This review aims to provide an overview of some of the primary literature relevant to the push factors inducing departure from the region, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The literature demonstrates a complex mixture of socio-economic and political factors that induce migration from the region, with unemployment, low wages, and

poor governance consistently ranked as the most severe push factors. This review includes the examination of both economic and political factors leading to understanding the migration process in the Western Balkans and allows the present author to identify gaps that the review can address.

Economic factors are expressed at length in the literature, particularly high unemployment and low living standards, as primary push factors for migration in the Western Balkans. Gara and Fetai (2024) conducted empirical results that show fluidity of migration as a function of the economy, specifically that high unemployment can lead to higher rates of migration from the Western Balkans. Their findings show that "a 1% increase in unemployment will yield a .08% increase in migration" (Gara & Fetai, 2024, 256). Authors, Malaj and de Rubertis (2016, 2017) demonstrate the gravity metrics of migration, indicating that pushes from the economy due to income and employment were factors moving people from the Western Balkans to richer destinations. It is not surprising that these arguments connect with earlier works by Bartlett (2009), as a comprehensive look at migration from the "super-periphery" within Europe explains the lack of economic, social, and political sectors that operate to marginalise the economy which leads to the migration of workers to pursue a better existence elsewhere in the global context.

Wage conditions and labour markets further increase immigration flows even further. Détang-Dessendre et al. (2004) examined the connection between migration and wage levels, stating that low wages in the home country entice workers to migrate to other places in search of better wages. Cattaneo (2004) examined migration patterns in the context of the Western Balkans, arguing strongly that wage and employment differentials affect migration, corroborating the Harris-Todaro model for expected wage gain as a driver for migration. The intention is to highlight the role of economic drivers incentivising migration patterns in environments with relatively weak structural labour markets, such as the Western Balkans region of Eastern Europe.

Beyond purely economic factors, political aspects differ significantly, and studies have found that corruption, weak state institutions, and political instability contribute to migration. Cooray and Schneider (2016) found that the more corrupt a country is, the more people are likely to migrate, especially for highly skilled workers, citing that individuals will leave their counties because they do not trust the institutions and see no advancement potential. Contrarily, Gara and Fetai (2024) conducted a regional study and found no statistically significant association between corruption and migration for the Western Balkans, prompting the continued examination of economic drivers as potentially more significant. More research is warranted to further determine the role of corruption in migration patterns, and in particular across cultures.

Governance and political stability are also two of the factors that impact migration flows. Zoppi (2019) reviewed migration flows from the Western Balkans to EU countries, claiming that political instability and a weak rule of law lead to an environment rife with uncertainty imposing conditions that encourage migration. Similarly, Pastore (2020) argued that the fluctuations of the political landscape and their impact on EU–Western Balkans relations influence migration by shaping perceptions of stability and opportunity. The findings of these studies indicate that political factors are not just secondary causes but act in conjunction with economic

conditions and aggravate push factors, especially with regard to states with fragile institutions that have undergone post conflict or post disturbance.

The skill composition of migrants has been a considerable topic of scholarship, especially with focus on brain drain. Leitner (2021) adopted a cohort approach to estimate net migration patterns in the Western Balkans from 2010 to 2019 that found that skilled workers are overrepresented in the emigration streams and that limited opportunities for professional development are a principal reason for migrating. Mara and Landesmann (2021) utilised a method of human capital to review migration and labour markets, ultimately concluding that skill loss causes a serious hindrance to economic development in the Western Balkans. Ströhm (2023) adds that brain drain leads to demographic decline creating a cycle that has great difficulty in escaping reduced economic capacity and heightened migration.

Areas of regional economic cooperation and integration have been highlighted as a potential mitigator for migration factors. Weiss (2020) conducted an evaluation of regional economic cooperation in the Western Balkans with suggestions for initiatives such as the Berlin Process to help develop jobs and reduce emigration through economic convergence to the EU. However, in a similar manner to other examinations of policies, the benefits of any initiative would be limited. King and Oruc (2020) also note ongoing tensions based on structural barriers in regard to bureaucratic inefficiencies and inconsistency in implementation of policy that challenges progress, stabalising migration.

Collectively, these studies highlight the need for coordinated policy interventions to address the original reasons for migration. Migration patterns are determined by parametric and policy factors. Kupiszewski et al. (2009) examined the context of labour migration patterns and policies in the Western Balkans in relation to post-conflict transition, with relationships with the EU having triggered mobility, increasing the emigration rate of migrants. Pastore (2020) also noted that EU migration policies have shaped the Western Balkans as a "corridor" in regard to the process of migration flows–resulting in both internal flows of migration and out. These studies make an important point that analysing migration factors has to take into consideration both parametric and policy factors.

The influence of push and pull factors is one of the most discussed phenomena in terms of migration. Baumann et al. (2015) developed a theoretical model which concluded that the absence of employment alone does not trigger migration unless there are also changes in expectations about the economic situation. Their analysis both obtained evidence from their investigation of the USA, which concluded that "unexpected shocks" of unemployment promote migration. It may be reasonable to suppose that in the case of the Western Balkans, where economic conditions are often volatile and unstable, Baumann and colleagues' (2015) model would also be applicable as they clearly suggest that migration is not driven by employment alone. Malaj and de Rubertis (2017) took the theoretical model forward by applying gravity models to show that destination countries' economic conditions married to push factors from the country-of-origin shape migration flows.

Demographic and social factors have also played a role in migratory trends. Declining demography in the Western Balkans is highlighted by Ströhm (2023) as an

important factor of ageing population and low births compounded labour shortages, creating conditions that incentivise young workers to emigrate. King and Oruc (2020) also noted the role of social networks and diaspora communities continue to motivate migration by reducing the risk and degrading the anticipated costs of moving home. The interplay between social, economic, and political push factors creates favourable conditions for mutual enforcement of migration flows within the region.

While a great deal of scholarly evidence exists, there are areas that require investigation in regards to migration drivers between political and economic factors in the Western Balkans. For instance, studies such as Gara and Fetai (2024) and Mara and Landesmann (2021) provide strong econometric analyses, although they diverge between key variables and timeframes which provides scope for greater exploration. In addition, Weiss (2020, 2021) examines the role of regional integration in the region and the relationship with migration, however, the scholar does not explore the implications. Based on highly researchable research questions, the use of large-scale data sets such as the Balkan Barometer provides an opportunity to both inter-examine traditional research pathways, while providing a better empirical basis for argument.

The literature indicates that migration in the Western Balkans occurs as a result of a complicated nexus of factors that span economic, political, and social conditions. Economic conditions remain at the forefront of migration with unemployment and low wages providing the basis for push factors. Political conditions remain political instability, corruption, and weak government practices which amplify pressures for emigration. The education and brain drain of highly skilled workers to the Western Europe and North America only augments the situation. Finally, the demographics of the region pose the problem of addressing labour shortages further complicating the migration dilemma to emigration. A clear path is required for the appropriate regional approach, as well as specificity–while also marrying research however, remains complicated. This chapter concludes with the need to look for specific direct drivers by integrating political and economic research, along with econometric models to identify some of the temporality of the apparent migration parameters and the internal complexities. The investigation will therefore use comprehensive data approaches, along with appropriate methodology to provide some conclusions into "push factors" into the recent migration wave in the Western Balkans.

3. Methodology

This investigation utilises a stringent empirical framework to identify the push factors of labour migration within the context of the six Western Balkan nations (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia). This investigation analyses secondary data from the Balkan Barometer, a dataset collected and curated by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), comprised of 6,000 observations. Each country has 1,000 observations, creating a balanced panel structure that enables robust statistical analysis of the six nations. This section describes the research design, outlining the data source, variable definitions, and econometric models employed to test the hypotheses.

The use of secondary data from the Balkan Barometer provides consistency and reliability, as all countries in the survey use standardised methodologies. The data is in panel format, allowing both cross-sectional and time series investigations that illustrate the dynamic change in migration and its determinants within the same respondents over time.

The regression models will be estimated using Stata software, and results from OLS, OLS Robust, Fixed Effects, and Random Effects specifications will be examined for assessing consistency and robustness. The incorporation of both socioeconomic variables and political variables is appropriate considering the objective of this research is to provide a comprehensive analysis of push factors of labour migration, filling a gap that previous research has often neglected, or solely focused on economic restrictions on migration. Aiming ultimately to provide empirical evidence, based on the extensive dataset from the Balkan Barometer and reliable econometric techniques, to better inform possible policy interventions to mitigate migration in the Western Balkans.

3.1. Data and variables

The dataset is derived from the Balkan Barometer, supplemented by RCC data, and includes individual-level responses from annual surveys conducted across the Western Balkan countries. The dependent variable, Migration (MIG), is a binary variable indicating whether an individual has migrated (Yes = 1, No = 0) during the study period. This variable captures the decision to emigrate, reflecting the outcome of interest in analysing push factors.

The independent variables are selected to capture both socioeconomic and political push factors influencing migration. These include: Employment status (EMP), a binary variable (Yes = 1, No = 0) indicating whether the respondent is employed. Unemployment is hypothesised to be a significant driver of migration, consistent with prior literature (Gara & Fetai, 2024). Economic situation (ECON), a categorical variable with three levels (Poor = 1, Average = 2, Very good = 3), reflecting the respondent's perception of their household's economic conditions. Poor economic situations are expected to increase migration propensity (Malaj & de Rubertis, 2016). Belief in the justice system (JUST), a categorical variable (Not at all = 1, Somewhat = 2, Believe very much = 3) measuring trust in the judicial system. Weak trust in justice systems is posited to contribute to emigration by signaling institutional deficiencies (Zoppi, 2019). Political situation (POL), a categorical variable (Bad = 1, Acceptable = 2, Good = 3) capturing perceptions of the country's political stability. Political instability is expected to exacerbate migration pressures (Pastore, 2020). Educational system (EDU), a categorical variable (Poor = 1, Average = 2, Very good = 3) assessing the perceived quality of the educational system. Poor educational systems may drive migration, particularly among skilled workers (Leitner, 2021). Public services (PUB), a categorical variable (Poor = 1, Average = 2, Very good = 3) evaluating the quality of public services, such as healthcare and infrastructure. Inadequate public services are hypothesised to encourage emigration (King & Oruc, 2020).

These variables are coded to facilitate econometric analysis, with categorical variables transformed into dummy variables where necessary to account for their ordinal nature in regression models.

Table 1. Study variables

Variable name	Abbreviation	Type	Description
Migration	MIG	Dependent (binary)	Indicates whether an individual migrated (Yes = 1, No = 0)
Employment status	EMP	Independent (binary)	Indicates whether the respondent is employed (Yes = 1, No = 0)
Economic situation	ECON	Independent (categorical)	Perceived household economic condition (Poor = 1, Average = 2, Very good = 3)
Belief in the justice system	JUST	Independent (categorical)	Trust in the judicial system (Not at all = 1, Somewhat = 2, Believe very much = 3)
Political situation	POL	Independent (categorical)	Perceived political stability (Bad = 1, Acceptable = 2, Good = 3)
Educational system	EDU	Independent (categorical)	Perceived quality of the educational system (Poor = 1, Average = 2, Very good = 3)
Public services	PUB	Independent (categorical)	Perceived quality of public services, e.g., healthcare, infrastructure (Poor = 1, Average = 2, Very good = 3)

3.2. Econometric models

To examine the relationship between the independent variables and migration, this study employs a suite of econometric models tailored to the panel data structure: Ordinary Least Squares (OLS), OLS Robust, Fixed Effects (FE), and Random Effects (RE). These models are chosen to ensure robust estimation while addressing potential issues such as heteroskedasticity, endogeneity, and unobserved heterogeneity. The baseline OLS model estimates the linear relationship between the dependent variable (MIG) and the independent variables. While simple, OLS assumes no unobserved heterogeneity across countries, which may limit its robustness in panel data settings. OLS Robust to address potential heteroskedasticity, the model incorporates robust standard errors, providing more reliable estimates in the presence of non-constant variance in the error terms. The FE model controls for time-invariant, country-specific unobserved factors (e.g., cultural or historical differences) by including country-specific intercepts. This approach is particularly suitable for capturing within-country variations over time. The RE model assumes that unobserved heterogeneity is uncorrelated with the independent variables, allowing for both within- and between-country variations. The choice between FE and RE models will be informed by the Hausman test to determine the appropriate specification (Wooldridge, 2010; Hausman, 1978; Li, 2017).

Given the binary nature of the dependent variable (MIG: Yes/No), a logistic regression framework is adopted for all models to account for the probabilistic nature of migration decisions. The general model specification is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Migration} = {} & B0 + B1\,(\textit{Employment}) + B2\,(\textit{Economic situation}) \\ & + B3\,(\textit{Belief in the justice system}) + B5\,(\textit{Political situation}) \\ & + B7\,(\textit{Educational system}) + B8\,(\textit{Public services}) + Ui\end{aligned}$$

To ensure model robustness, diagnostic tests will be conducted, including tests for multicollinearity (using variance inflation factors), goodness-of-fit measures (e.g., pseudo-R^2 for logistic models), and the Hausman test to choose between FE and RE specifications. The large sample size (6,000 observations) enhances the statistical power of the analysis, allowing for precise estimation of the effects of both socioeconomic and political factors.

4. Results and discussion

Table 2 contains descriptive statistics that provide a preliminary interpretation of the variables in the study on "Push factors behind the migration wave in the Western Balkan countries", utilising 6,000 observations from the Balkan Barometer dataset that encompasses Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The dependent variable, Migration (MIG), is binary (0 = No, 1 = Yes), and has a mean of 0.18, implying that 18% of respondents participated in migration during the time of the study, consistent with a large wave of emigration in the region (Gara & Fetai, 2024). The standard deviation of 0.38 suggested a moderate range of variability for individuals when it comes to deciding to migrate to better conditions. Among the independent variables, EMP is also binary (0 = No, 1 = Yes) with a mean of 0.62 indicating that 62% of respondents were employed and 38% were unemployed, which depicts the region's labour-market constriction. The independent variables that were categorical–ECON, JUST, POL, EDU, and PUB–were measured with a three-point scale (1 = Poor/Bad/Not at all, 2 = Acceptable/Average/Somewhat, 3 = Good/Very Good/Believe very much) and had means that ranged from 1.58 to 1.82. These values are all closer to the bottom of the scale than the top, signifying general negative attitudes held by respondents about the following: the economic situation, institutional trust, political situation, educational system, and public services are poor to acceptable, which align with the literature regarding the structural issues observed in the region of the Western Balkans (King & Oruc, 2020; Zoppi, 2019).

The standard deviation for the categorical variables was between 0.69 and 0.78 which suggests a moderate level of variability in the opinions respondents held across the collective sample, reflecting the variability in experiences within and across the six countries. Mean for Economic Situation was 1.65, and this suggests that most respondents viewed their household economic situation as closer to "Poor" rather than "Average", and it aligns with the marginalisation of economics in the region (Bartlett, 2009). The POL (mean = 1.58) was the lowest average for the dependent or

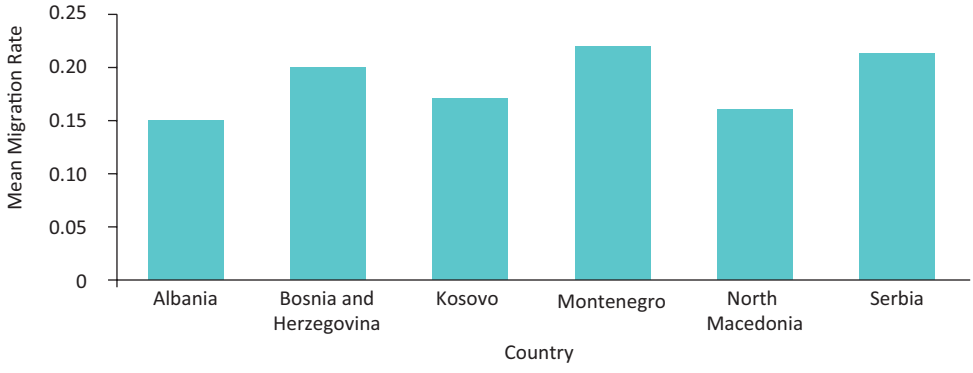
categorical variable, and highlighted a broader existence of political instability that is consistently studied as a result for migration (Pastore, 2020). Similarly, the EDU (mean = 1.82) and PUB (mean = 1.75) suggest general negative attitudes toward these situations and are potential push factors for emigration, particularly for skilled workers (Leitner, 2021). The binary nature of MIG and EMP and ordinal structure of the other variables support the use of logistic regression models in this study as these methods allow for the research to both manage the structure of the data while simultaneously being able to investigate the influence of socioeconomic and political push factors. In summary, while more work is to be done through logistic regression analysis, the descriptive statistics provide evidence to suggest that unemployment and negative attitudes about economic, political, and institutional situations will likely have a significant predictor of migration in the Western Balkans.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Migration (MIG)	6,000	0.18	0.38	0	1
Employment status (EMP)	6,000	0.62	0.49	0	1
Economic situation (ECON)	6,000	1.65	0.72	1	3
Belief in the justice system (JUST)	6,000	1.70	0.78	1	3
Political situation (POL)	6,000	1.58	0.69	1	3
Educational system (EDU)	6,000	1.82	0.75	1	3
Public services (PUB)	6,000	1.75	0.73	1	3

Figure 1 illustrates the variation in emigration rates across the six Western Balkan countries, highlighting significant differences identified in the ANOVA analysis. Montenegro and Serbia exhibit the highest mean migration rates (0.22 and 0.21), while Albania and North Macedonia show lower rates (0.15 and 0.16). This visual representation underscores the country-specific heterogeneity in migration patterns, which may be influenced by factors such as economic opportunities, governance quality, and diaspora networks, as discussed in the regression results.

Figure 1. Mean migration rate in the Western Balkan countries



The correlation analysis provided in Table 3 in the study "Push factors behind the migration wave in the Western Balkan countries" presents correlations between the dependent variable, MIG, and the independent variables: EMP, ECON, JUST, POL, EDU, and PUB among 6,000 observations from the Balkan Barometer dataset spanning six Western Balkan countries.

Pearson's *r* was used to compute the correlation coefficients in the table, which revealed negative associations between MIG and all independent variables, implying that generally worse conditions (e.g., unemployment, unfavourable economic or political perceptions) are associated with an increased likelihood of migration. The correlation of MIG and EMP (-0.32) was the strongest negative correlation for the independent variables, suggesting that unemployed respondents (who indicated EMP = 0) are the most likely to migrate, which aligns with previous findings that unemployment is a primary push factor for migration in the Western Balkans (Gara & Fetai, 2024; Malaj & de Rubertis, 2016). Economic Situation also provided a notable negative correlation (-0.28) with MIG, confirming that worse perceived economic conditions also increase migration likelihood, consistent with literature discussing economic marginalisation (Bartlett, 2009).

The political and institutional independent variables: JUST (-0.19), POL (-0.24), EDU (-0.17), and PUB (-0.21) all provide negative correlations with MIG as well, but the correlation coefficients were generally lower than EMP and ECON. Political and institutional independent variables' follow the suite of decreased trust in the justice system (JUST), negative beliefs about political stability (POL), and unfavourable evaluations of educational systems and public services, all suggest that they contribute to migration, albeit to a much lesser extent than the economic conditions or unemployment. POL (-0.24) is an especially applicable factor, which reaffirms the established understanding of political instability as a push factor in the Western Balkans (Pastore, 2020; Zoppi, 2019). EDU (-0.17) and JUST (-0.19) were weaker compared to political and economic conditions, suggesting that both play a much smaller role than economic drivers, but are still relevant.

The correlations of the independent variables with each other were moderate ranging from 0.12 (between EMP and EDU) to 0.41 (between EMP and ECON), but did not indicate significant multicollinearity that would limit the regression analysis. However, there were moderate positive correlations between the political and institutional variables, with a 0.31 correlation between JUST and POL, indicating that individual perspectives of governance, justice, and public services are related to one another in the context of problems with the governing institutions more throughout the region, that may create distrust of public institutions, justice, or public services in the Western Balkans.

The correlation results provide one level of understanding between migration and other factors that may contribute to or drive migration, but will be followed by another stage of regressions (OLS, OLS Robust, FE, and RE) to estimate causal effects. Overall, the results of the migration and independent variable prompt the hypotheses (H1) that unemployment and unfavourable economic conditions (H1), and negative underlying political-institutional factors (H2), are both drivers of migration from the Western Balkans. The lack of strong correlations between independent variables also

suggests that the models will be able to estimate the unique contribution of each independent variable without concerns of problems with multicollinearity. The prior literature states that economic and political circumstances interact with one another as push factors in the region (King & Oruc, 2020; Leitner, 2021), so it will be useful and necessary to leverage multivariate analysis to further assess the significance and magnitude of the independent variable effects.

Table 3. Correlation analysis

Variable	MIG	EMP	ECON	JUST	POL	EDU	PUB
MIG	1.00						
EMP	-0.32	1.00					
ECON	-0.28	0.41	1.00				
JUST	-0.19	0.15	0.22	1.00			
POL	-0.24	0.18	0.29	0.31	1.00		
EDU	-0.17	0.12	0.25	0.27	0.23	1.00	
PUB	-0.21	0.16	0.30	0.28	0.26	0.33	1.00

Table 4 presents a detailed empirical analysis of the push factors related to labour force migration across the Western Balkan countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, based on 6,000 observations from the Balkan Barometer. Utilising regression models, the analysis estimates the log-odds of migration (MIG, binary: 0 = No, 1 = Yes) as a function of EMP, ECON, JUST, POL, EDU, and PUB. The uniformly consistent coefficients across all four models reinforce the empirical evidence; the Hausman test ($p = 0.08$) clearly favours the RE model over the FE model, indicating that unobserved heterogeneity constructed in this study is not especially correlated with the independent variables. The Pseudo-R^2 values (0.62, 0.70, 0.74, and 0.62), indicating a good fit, explains a large portion of the variation of factor effects in determining migration.

The results confirms that EMP is the strongest predictor of migration across the four models, with coefficients ranging from -0.79 to -0.85 ($p < 0.01$) for all models. The negative employment coefficient highlights that being unemployed (EMP = 0) significantly increases the probability of migration. A 1-unit reduction in employment status (in terms of the transition from being employed to being unemployed) is associated with increasing the log-odds of migration by approximately 0.79–0.85. This corroborates previous research that has identified unemployment as a primary push factor in the Western Balkans (Gara & Fetai, 2024; Malaj & de Rubertis, 2016). In a similar fashion, ECON has a significant negative effect, as demonstrated by coefficients of -0.39 to -0.42 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that worse perceived economic situation (e.g., increase in unemployment from Average to Poor) has an increased likelihood to migrate of approximately 0.39 – 0.42 log-odds. These findings provide strong evidence for H1: that common migrants from the Western Balkans named unemployment and economic situation as the dominant push factors (Bartlett, 2009) of migration from the region.

Political and institutional factors also play an important role, which supports H2. The POL has a significant and negative effect, with a coefficient value of -0.35 to -0.38 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that perceptions of a worsening political situation (e.g., from Acceptable to Bad) increase the log-odds of migration about 0.35 to 0.38. This finding is similar to previous studies that have identified political instability as a push migration factor in the Western Balkans (Pastore, 2020; Zoppi, 2019). The JUST and PUB also have a significant negative effect, indicated by coefficient values of -0.22 to -0.25 ($p < 0.05$) and -0.27 to -0.29 ($p < 0.05$), respectively. In which, both lower belief in the justice system and lower-quality public services are found to be significant push factors that would increase migration likelihood. Finally, EDU also has a weaker, yet significant push factor, with coefficient values -0.16 to -0.18 ($p < 0.10$), indicated that perceptions of a poor educational system developed a propensity for skilled workers to migrate (Leitner, 2021).

The consistency of results in the OLS, OLS Robust, FE, and RE is a contributor to the validity of the regression results, as differences in coefficient values or the significance levels were minor across the models. The OLS Robust model, which corrects for heteroskedasticity, had smaller standard errors (e.g., 0.11 vs. 0.12) for the EMP variable, which details the reliability of the estimates. One contribution of the FE model is that it controls for the country-specific and unobserved heterogeneity effects, and thus consequently would reduce the coefficient of the EMP variable to -0.79 (from -0.85 in the OLS model), which suggests that the specific influences accounted for in each country (i.e., cultural or historical differences) influenced the estimates of migration. The initial RE model was the preferred model, based on the Hausman test, as it accurately captures the best portion of both within- and between-country variation as push factors. The constant term across all models was similarly significant (1.87 – 1.92, $p < 0.01$), which likely identifies a propensity to migrate based factors other than those in the model, such as research suggested social networks or the effect of a diaspora community existing in another region (King & Oruc, 2020).

In conclusion, the analysis of the regression results suggests that both socioeconomic and political factors were significant and direct push factors for migration in the Western Balkans, with those related to the socioeconomics being the strongest areas of effect (i.e., unemployment and poor economic situation, and follow up with political instability and weak institutions). The analysis has provided empirical support regarding the investigation of the study hypotheses (while providing likeness to the literature which also supports push factors regarding, economic and political, in the Western Balkans (Gara & Fetai, 2024; Zoppi, 2019)). However, the results suggest that some policy intervention that attempts to develop jobs, improve economic situation, and improve about governance may help to reduce migration events from the Western Balkans. This offers the next levels of discussion in the following sections of the study.

Table 4. Summary results of the regression analysis

Variable	OLS	OLS Robust	Fixed Effects (FE)	Random Effects (RE)
Employment Status (EMP)	-0.85***	-0.85***	-0.79***	-0.82***
	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.13)	(0.12)
Economic Situation (ECON)	-0.42***	-0.42***	-0.39***	-0.40***
	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.09)
Belief in Justice System (JUST)	-0.25**	-0.25**	-0.22**	-0.23**
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.11)	(0.10)
Political Situation (POL)	-0.38***	-0.38***	-0.35***	-0.36***
	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.09)
Educational System (EDU)	-0.18*	-0.18*	-0.16*	-0.17*
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Public Services (PUB)	-0.29**	-0.29**	-0.27**	-0.28**
	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.10)
Constant	1.92***	1.92***	1.87***	1.90***
	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.16)	(0.15)
Observations	6,000	6,000	6,000	6,000
R^2	0.72	0.62	0.74	0.73
Hausman Test (p-value)	0.080			

The results of an ANOVA analysis assessing the presence of statistically significant differences in migration rates across the six countries of Western Balkan (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), with an observed value of 6,000 derived from the Balkan Barometer, are presented in Table 5. The mean migration statistics (i.e., mean migration rate) indicated an overall mean migration rate of 0.18. This means that 18% of respondents migrated during the time period measured, which is consistent with the region's considerable emigration statistics (Gara & Fetai, 2024). At the country specific-level, mean migration rates ranged from Albania being the lowest at 0.15 to Montenegro being the highest at 0.22. Bosnia and Herzegovina (0.20), Kosovo (0.17), and North Macedonia (0.16) fell in between these extremes, while Serbia was just slightly higher than mean migration rates in Bosnia and Herzegovina at 0.21. The F-statistic (12.45; $p<0.001$) indicates there are statistically significant differences in migration levels across the six countries, which suggests that countries tend to have different migration propensities based on certain country-level factors. Post-hoc tests indicated (i.e., Tukey's HSD, see results) that Montenegro and Serbia had higher mean migration rates than Albania and North Macedonia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo were somewhere in between these groups of countries). These patterns were likely determined by differences in economic conditions, political stability, and institutional quality, as previously indicated by both Pastore (2020) and Zoppi (2019).

Table 5. Statistically significant differences in migration by the Western Balkan countries

Country	Mean migration rate	F-Statistic	p-value
Albania	0.15		
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.20		
Kosovo	0.17		
Montenegro	0.22	12.45	<0.001
North Macedonia	0.16		
Serbia	0.21		
Overall	0.18		

The higher migration rates in Montenegro and Serbia attributed to their relatively more advanced integration into European labour markets and stronger diaspora networks, which facilitate emigration (King & Oruc, 2020). Albania and North Macedonia's lower migration rates could be linked to slightly better economic opportunities or stricter migration barriers, though still within the context of regional challenges (Bartlett, 2009). The significant F-statistic underscores the importance of considering country-level heterogeneity in migration studies, as structural and contextual differences–such as unemployment rates, governance quality, or historical migration patterns–play a critical role in shaping migration outcomes. These findings complement the regression results, which identified unemployment and poor economic and political conditions as key push factors, and suggest that policy interventions to reduce migration pressures may need to be tailored to country-specific contexts within the Western Balkans.

The ANOVA analysis revealed significant country-level variations in migration rates, with Montenegro and Serbia exhibiting higher rates (0.22 and 0.21, respectively) compared to Albania and North Macedonia (0.15 and 0.16). These differences may stem from country-specific factors. For instance, Montenegro and Serbia benefit from stronger diaspora networks and greater integration into European labour markets, facilitating emigration (King & Oruc, 2020). In contrast, Albania and North Macedonia may face stricter migration barriers or slightly better economic opportunities, reducing emigration pressures (Bartlett, 2009). To further explore these distinctive variations, regression coefficients for EMP and ECON were analysed separately for each country, revealing that unemployment has a stronger effect in Montenegro (-0.92) and Serbia (-0.88) compared to Albania (-0.76) and North Macedonia (-0.79). This suggests that labour market conditions are particularly critical in driving migration in Montenegro and Serbia, likely due to their advanced economic integration with the EU. These findings highlight the need for tailored policy interventions that address country-specific economic and institutional challenges.

5. Conclusions

This research has provided a thorough analysis of the socioeconomic and political factors influencing labour force migration in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, drawing on a sample size of 6,000 from the Balkan Barometer. From an empirical standpoint, the results support both hypotheses: unemployment and poor economic situations (H1) remain the primary push-factors influencing migration and political and institutional factors (H2) including lack of faith in the justice system, combined with negative perceptions of political stability, and educational systems and public services in general poor quality, play a significant role in the decisions to migrate. The regression models (OLS, OLS Robust, FE, and RE) revealed that unemployment and ECON have the strongest effects, with log odds coefficients that range from -0.79 (-0.85) for EMP and -0.39 (-0.42) for ECON. This suggests that unemployed individuals and those with a poor economic situation are much more likely to migrate (with large coefficients). These results correlate with the previous literature and studies that highlight economic marginalisation as a principal driver in the Western Balkans (Gara & Fetai, 2024; Malaj & de Rubertis, 2016). Political and institutional factors hold great importance as well, but the effects were not quite as strong. Negative perceptions of the POL and PUB increased the probability of migration, with coefficients of -0.35 and -0.38; and -0.27 and -0.29, respectively. While weak trust in the JUST and poor confidence for the EDU decreased the probability of migration slightly, with coefficients of -0.22 and -0.25; and -0.16 and -0.18, respectively. These results support studies that identify political instability and institutional weakness as driving factors of emigration, particularly in post-conflict and transitional contexts (Pastore, 2020; Zoppi, 2019). The ANOVA analysis also demonstrates significant country level variation, as Montenegro and Serbia had higher emigration rates (0.22 and 0.21) than Albania and North Macedonia (0.15 and 0.16). This indicates that country-specific factors, such as economic opportunities and diaspora networks, comprise migration trajectories (King & Oruc, 2020). The parallel nature of econometric models and the sizeable Pseudo-R^2 values (0.62–0.74) demonstrate confidence in findings and rationale for policy implications.

The findings have significant implications for policymakers in the Western Balkans. The most significant push factor is unemployment, meaning job creation and labour market reform are critical to improving emigration pressures. Small and medium enterprise (SME) investment, vocational training improvement, and foreign direct investment (FDI) attraction should be prioritised as these actions are critical to creating quality jobs and improving economic circumstances. These actions could improve economic circumstances and curb the high unemployment rate (38% in sample) ultimately impacting labour force retention. Moreover, economic perceptions were deemed significant, meaning policies to raise living standards, such as social safety nets, and affordable access to basic services could help mitigate the trend for individuals to seek greener pastures abroad (Bartlett, 2009). The considerable impact of political and institutional factors highlights the necessity for reforms in governance to ameliorate migration. Individuals emigrate due to an erosion of trust in institutions,

as existing levels of trust in the justice system and unreliable political stability aggravate migration (Cooray & Schneider, 2016). Therefore, to reestablish trust, it is essential to reinforce the rule of law, foster independence of the judiciary, and address corruption which will further establish stability in the environment so that individuals are incited to retrieve their allegiance. Likewise, improvements to the quality of public goods such as health care and infrastructure will help alleviate discontent and emigration. Investment in education is likewise crucial as the marginal, but significant, consequence of a bad education system suggests that specifically skilled workers may migrate according to limited opportunities to develop professionally (Leitner, 2021).

Different rates of emigration from states reinforce the need for states to take specific sets of policy action to deal with differences in migration rates. For example, Montenegro and Serbia have the highest migration rates, so the countries may be assisted through addressing the diaspora in their context to mitigate out-migration or promote return migration or circular migration through programs that provide incentives for skilled workers to return (King & Oruc, 2020). Conversely, Albania and North Macedonia, as the countries with least emigration, might prioritise economic development, as well, and address key institutional weaknesses to stop, or prevent, future emigration. Regionally, cooperative action, such as the Berlin Process, will allow incorporation of knowledge and coordinated policies for addressing the common drivers of migration suggested by Weiss (2020). Moreover, the findings carry implications for the European Union (EU), considering the Western Balkans' migration corridor status and their ambitions to eventually join the EU. The EU's own visa liberalisation and labour mobility policies have facilitated migration but have also contributed to the continued brain drain in the area (Kupiszewski et al., 2009). The EU could support the countries of Western Balkan by providing technical assistance and funding for economic/governance reforms that will address the root causes of emigration for these countries and support further integration. This support could include programming to improve educational systems and public services thereby alleviating the push factors identified in this study.

Future research could investigate whether this analysis could be extended to include more variables such as social networks, diaspora impacts, or gendered based, which may further explain migration. Longitudinal study with more detailed data would shed light on temporal variation in migration based on changes in policies or economic shocks. Qualitative studies would also provide valuable insights into individual motivations and experiences, especially about perceptions regarding the political, legal, and institutional landscape.

While the Balkan Barometer dataset provides robust and representative insights into migration drivers across the Western Balkans, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The dataset may not fully capture cultural factors, such as community ties or ethnic influences, which could also shape migration decisions. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported perceptions for variables like economic situation and trust in institutions may introduce response biases. Future research could incorporate qualitative methods or additional variables, such as social networks or cultural determinants, to provide a more holistic understanding of migration dynamics in the region.

This study presents strong evidence that socioeconomic and political factors drive migration in the Western Balkans with unemployment and poor economic conditions serving as the major push factors, with the secondary, being political instability and weak institutions. The implications of these findings cannot be understated as they demonstrate the urgent need for comprehensive policies to respond to labour market conditions, improve quality of life, and strengthen governance to reduce emigration pressures. By undertaking targeted reforms within the states of the Western Balkans and promoting regional and international cooperation this could assist these states in retaining their labour force to realise their economic potential, and establish sustained development in the region.

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Anish K.R.[1]

ORCID: 0000-0002-3445-564X
Department of Social Work, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, India

Elizabeth James

ORCID: 0009-0004-7100-5332
Department of Social Work, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, India

Jobin Jose

ORCID: 0000-0003-1596-733X
Marian College Kuttikkanam, India

Bibliometric insights into the challenges and needs of homeless persons with mental disorders

Abstract

This study presents a bibliometric analysis of scholarly literature on the challenges and needs of homeless persons with mental disorders. Utilising data from the Scopus database and analytical tools such as Biblioshiny, VOSviewer, and CiteSpace, the research maps global scientific output and intellectual structure in this interdisciplinary field. The analysis reveals steady growth in publications, with a significant rise after

[1] **Corresponding author:** Anish K.R., Department of Social Work, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Rajagiri PO, 683104, Kochi, India; email: anish@rajagiri.edu

2010, reflecting increasing academic interest in the intersection of homelessness and mental health. Leading contributors include researchers from the United States and Canada, with top journals such as Psychiatric Services and the Community Mental Health Journal serving as primary dissemination platforms. Co-citation and bibliographic coupling analyses reveal thematic cohesion centred on housing-first interventions, dual diagnosis, and integrated care models. Keyword co-occurrence and trend topic analyses highlight ongoing interest in trauma, substance use, and public health, while newer terms like COVID-19 and indigenous mental health signal responsive adaptation to contemporary challenges. Thematic mapping identifies underexplored areas such as incarceration, veterans, and youth mental health as emerging yet underdeveloped. The findings underscore the field's evolution from foundational to service-oriented research, with a growing focus on equity and recovery. Despite progress, gaps remain in digital health integration and cross-sectoral approaches. These insights inform future research directions and underscore the need for inclusive, policy-aligned strategies to support this vulnerable population.

Keywords: homeless, bibliometric analysis, Biblioshiny, Vosviewer, mental disorder

1. Introduction

Homelessness and mental disorder are two of the most pressing and complex public health issues confronting societies around the world (Okereke et al., 2023; Kerman & Stergiopoulos, 2024). Nearly one billion people around the world suffer from mental disorders ranging from addiction to schizophrenia (The Lancet Global Health, 2020). And the prevalence of mental disorders among persons experiencing homelessness has been reported to be 67%, with a lifetime prevalence of 77% (Barry et al., 2024). When they intersect, they create a highly vulnerable population that is often marginalised, stigmatised, and underserved (González-Sanguino et al., 2022; Martens, 2001). Homeless individuals with mental disorders experience a range of challenges that impact their access to healthcare, housing, social support, and basic human dignity (Pearson & Linz, 2011). These challenges are deeply rooted in systemic issues, including poverty, inadequate mental health infrastructure, societal neglect, and fragmented policy implementation (Grigg & Johnson, 2007; Narendorf, 2017).

One of the key challenges in this population is reduced mental health care access and continuity (Kuno et al., 2004). Homeless individuals often lack identification, health insurance, and stability, which hinders their access to consistent healthcare services (Chwastiak et al., 2012). Most have severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression, which, if left untreated, worsen functional impairment and reduce the chances of leaving homelessness (Okereke et al., 2023). The mobile nature of homelessness makes it even harder to perform outreach and long-term therapy, and it routinely leads to serial hospitalisation or jail incarceration instead of long-lasting mental health recovery (Nibin et al., 2021).

Social isolation and a lack of support relationships are another burden experienced in this population (Archard & Murphy, 2015; Rea, 2022). The absence of a support

network or family in the community renders them incapable of supporting themselves or accessing the resources available to them (Bell & Walsh, 2015). Most have histories of trauma, abuse, or chemical use, all serving to complicate mental illness (Archard & Murphy, 2015). These psychosocial stressors can cause and maintain homelessness (Rea, 2022). Discrimination and stigma from society in general, as well as service systems, further alienate these individuals, causing them to withdraw from the systems intended to assist them (Oudshoorn et al., 2021).

Meeting the needs of homeless individuals with mental disorders requires a multi-pronged approach that addresses not only clinical care but also social reintegration, housing stability, and income support (Kowaleski, 2013; White et al., 2024). There is an increasing recognition of the importance of trauma-informed and person-centred services (Ponnuchamy et al., 2024). Initiatives like the "Housing First" model, which provides permanent housing without preconditions, have shown promise in improving health outcomes and reducing costs (Zaykowski et al., 2016). However, scaling up such interventions requires substantial policy reforms, interdisciplinary collaboration, and, crucially, an evidence-based understanding of the evolving research landscape in this area (Fleisch & Kelly, 2014).

In recent decades, a growing volume of research has mapped the intersection between mental health and homelessness (Seager, 2011). Psychologists, psychiatrists, public health scholars, social workers, and urban specialists have examined various aspects of the topic, ranging from measures of prevalence and patterns of service utilisation to outcomes for models of intervention and systemic impediments (Marçal, 2016). This model prioritises the provision of necessities like shelter and stable housing before providing support services to achieve personal goals and well-being. Although interest in the topic continues to grow, research is often dispersed across disciplines, and fundamental patterns, trends, and conceptual frameworks within the area remain underexamined (Law et al., 2024). As public unease about mental health inequity and housing instability grows worldwide, a broad synthesis of research findings globally is needed to serve as a basis for informed policies and practices (Park et al., 2025; Sulkowski & Michael, 2014).

This study presents a bibliometric analysis of the scholarly literature related to the challenges and needs of homeless persons with mental disorders. By examining scientific publications indexed in the Scopus database, it aims to identify publication trends, influential authors, collaborative networks, core journals, and emerging themes in this interdisciplinary domain (Abas et al., 2023). The analysis focuses on literature published over the past three decades, reflecting both the historical development and current status of research (Agbo et al., 2021). The study has an international scope, drawing contributions from various countries, research institutions, and knowledge clusters, thereby providing a global perspective on this critical issue (Agac et al., 2023).

The bibliometric approach offers a valuable means of aggregating large datasets of literature in a systematic and organised manner (Bales et al., 2020). Unlike traditional narrative reviews, bibliometric analysis offers a macro-level study of knowledge production and dissemination (Alsharif et al., 2020). While tracing the pattern and dynamics of mental illness and homelessness research, this paper helps reveal key contributors, monitor research lacunas, and track scientific discourse changes over

time. Such data can be used to inform priorities in new research, policy discussions, and fundraising activities aimed at addressing the needs of this vulnerable population (Ali et al., 2022).

To conduct the bibliometric analysis, the study utilised three popular software programmes – Biblioshiny, VOSviewer, and CiteSpace – each introducing new features to the analytical procedure (John et al., 2024; Mathew et al., 2024). Biblioshiny, the web client for the R-language Bibliometrix package, provides convenient access to descriptive and inferential statistics at multiple levels (Fahamsyah et al., 2023; Komperda, 2017; Racine, 2012). It was applied to prepare performance analysis, compute annual growth in publication, identify leading journals, and examine author productivity (Thangavel & Chandra, 2023). Interactive dashboard and data visualisation options in Biblioshiny enabled an in-depth examination of thematic patterns and citation distributions (Waghmare, 2021).

VOSviewer and CiteSpace enhanced the analysis by supplying advanced visualisation and network mapping capabilities (Ding & Yang, 2022; Ye, 2018). VOSviewer was applied primarily to develop and interpret co-authorship, co-citation, and keyword co-occurrence networks. Its clustering feature revealed intellectual and social structures in the field (Kumar et al., 2024; Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). CiteSpace, on the other hand, played a crucial role in identifying emerging patterns, citation bursts, and thematic evolution (Ding & Yang, 2022; Li et al., 2022). Its timeline and dual-map overlay enabled temporal investigation of topic evolution and disciplinary connections (Yang et al., 2017; Xie & Li, 2020). Together, these applications created an effective system for discerning the quantitative impact and qualitative richness of the literature.

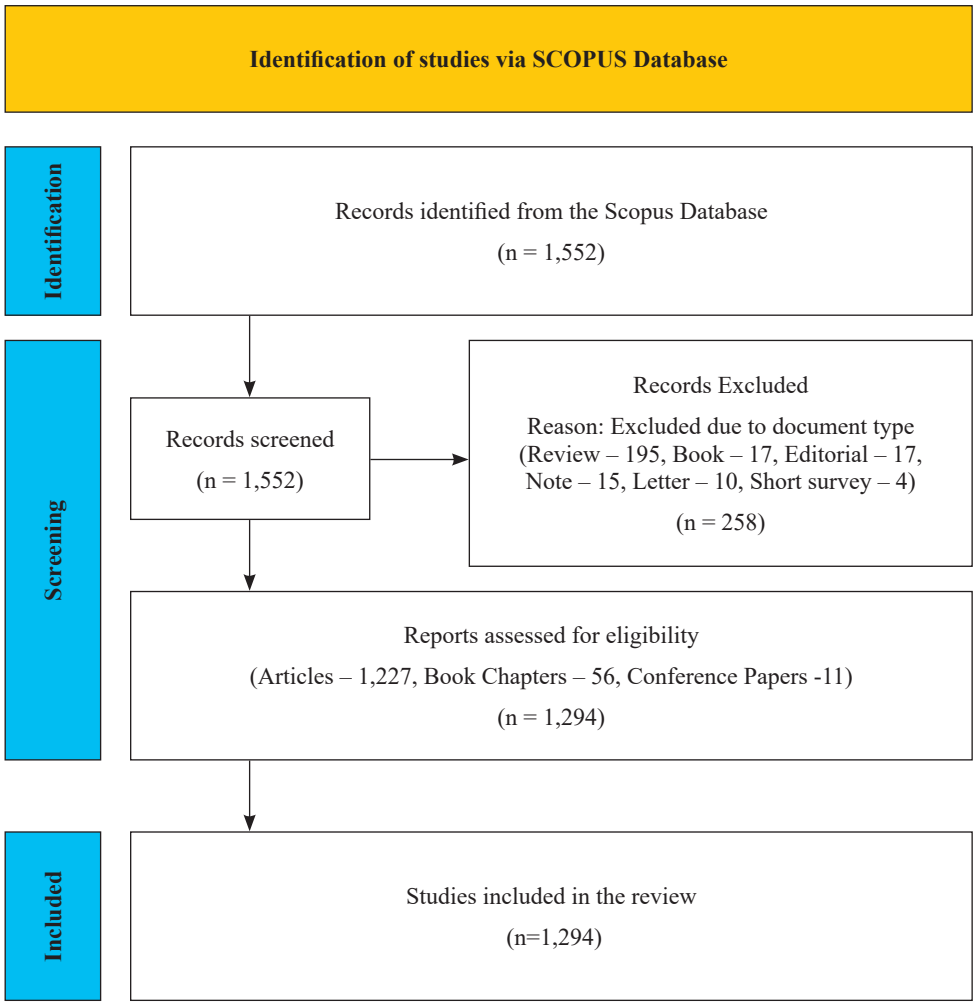
The key objective of this bibliometric study is to systematically chart and map global research output on the needs and challenges among homeless individuals afflicted with mental disorders. Specifically, the study aims to (a) identify productive authors, institutions, and countries that contribute to the literature; (b) determine key journals and citation behaviours; (c) portray networks of collaborations and co-citation structures; (d) examine thematic patterns and evolution in research topics; and (e) discern potential lacunae and avenues for new research in the literature. To achieve these goals, the study provides a clearer understanding of the scholarly terrain and offers input for evidence-informed interventions and policy decisions.

2. Materials and methods

We extracted the bibliometric dataset for this study from the Scopus database, widely acknowledged for its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed scientific publications (Gavel & Iselid, 2008; Harzing & Alakangas, 2016). Other databases like Web of Science and PubMed were also considered, but Scopus was prioritised for its comprehensive curation and to avoid duplication. This database is also compatible with the bibliometric analysis software used in this study and offers reliable metadata. We formulated a targeted search strategy using the (TITLE-ABS-KEY (“homeless”) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (“homelessness”) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (“unhoused”) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (“street dweller”) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (“mental illness”)

OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("mental disorder") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("psychiatric disorder") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("psychological disorder") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("needs") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("concerns") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("challenges")) to retrieve literature specifically focused on the homeless and mental disorder domain. This initial search yielded 1,552 records, comprising journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters. Non-analytical items, such as reviews, editorials, notes, letters, short surveys, and books, were excluded in an ongoing process of screening to maintain relevancy and data homogeneity. Though these items are valuable in synthesising knowledge, the variations in terms of peer-review status, citation patterns, and metadata structure can introduce inconsistency in network-based analyses. Following this refinement, 1,294 documents – comprising 1,227 journal articles, 11 conference proceedings, and 56 book chapters – remained to be made available for analysis, in line with the PRISMA protocol (Wang et al., 2014). The PRISMA protocol was applied to ensure methodological transparency and replicability throughout the selection process. Each stage – identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion – was carried out systematically and documented in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1). During screening, duplicates and non-analytical records were excluded, and only peer-reviewed documents directly addressing both homelessness and mental disorders were retained. This structured approach minimised bias, ensured data quality, and aligned the bibliometric dataset with PRISMA's evidence-based reporting standards. We further exported the cleaned data in CSV and RIS formats to enable in-depth analysis using Biblioshiny (Bibliometrix R package), VOSviewer, and CiteSpace (version 6.2, R3 Advanced). Each software package had a well-defined specific task in the process of bibliometrics in this study: Biblioshiny provided descriptive and trend analyses on publication counts, author productivity, and source impact; VOSviewer provided support in building networks to represent bibliographic couplings and visualisation of co-occurrence patterns in keywords; and CiteSpace provided support in detecting citation bursts and in tracing thematic shift through time.

Figure 1. The PRISMA flow diagram is used to identify, screen, and include papers in the bibliometric analysis



3. Findings

3.1. Key information regarding the investigation

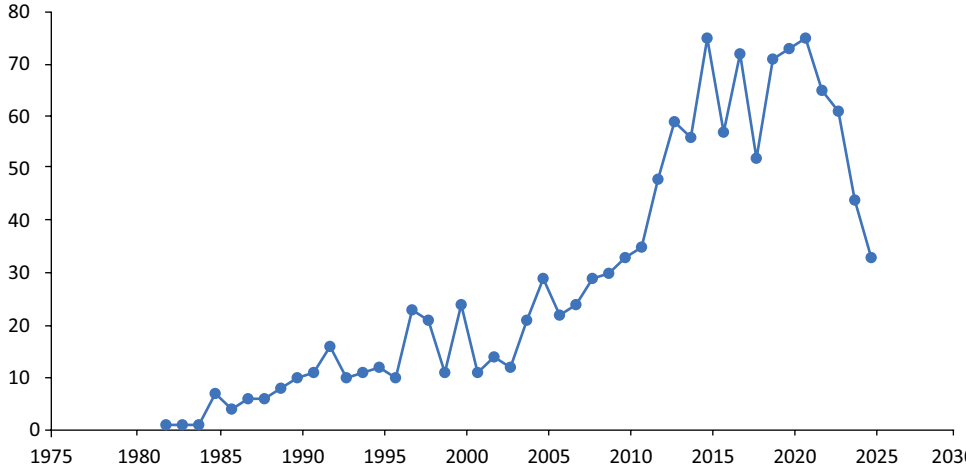
This bibliometric study covers the period from 1982 to 2025 and includes a total of 1,294 documents obtained from 543 journals, books, and conference proceedings addressing the challenges and needs of homeless individuals with mental disorders.

The field has exhibited a healthy annual growth rate of 8.47%, with an average document age of 12.6 years, indicating a sustained scholarly interest over time. Each document garners an average of 26.27 citations, indicating a moderate to high impact of the research output. The dataset contains a substantial number of references (44,510), and a rich conceptual landscape is evident from 3,335 keywords and 1,976 author-provided keywords. Authorship is collaborative in nature, with 4,366 authors contributing, and an average of 4.64 co-authors per document; however, only 7.34% involve international co-authorship. The publication types are dominated by journal articles (1,227), followed by a smaller number of book chapters (56) and conference papers (11), suggesting a strong preference for peer-reviewed dissemination.

3.2. Scientific output over the years

Figure 2 illustrates that the academic output on homelessness and mental disorders has exhibited a steady increase from 1982 to 2021, indicating a rising interest among scholars and policymakers. From a modest beginning with just one publication annually in the early 1980s, the field experienced a gradual rise in the 1990s and early 2000s. A significant surge is noticeable from 2012 onward, with peak publication years being 2015 and 2021, each recording 75 documents. This peak period (2013–2021) represents the most prolific phase of research activity, likely due to increased global attention to mental health, homelessness, and integrated care models. However, there is a visible decline in publication counts after 2021, with numbers dropping to 44 in 2024 and 33 in 2025 (partial year), which may reflect delays in indexing, post-pandemic research shifts, or saturation in certain research themes. Overall, the trend underscores a maturing yet dynamic field that continues to evolve in response to societal challenges.

Figure 2. Annual scientific production from 1982 to 2025



3.3. Top influential researchers

Table 1 lists the key influential researchers in this area to date, based on the number of publications they have produced. At 61 publications, the first is Vicky Stergiopoulos, exhibiting sustained, substantive impact in research topics such as Housing First, community mental health, and integration in care. Second is Stephen W. Hwang, with 47 articles, renowned for research at the intersection of homelessness, public health, and population health equity. Robert A. Rosenheck, with 37 publications, made seminal contributions in mental health policy, veterans' care, and service system studies. Other prominent names include Julian M. Somers, Patricia O'Campo, and Tim Aubry, all recognised for their contributions to evidence-informed interventions and social determinants of health. The appearances of Rosane Nisenbaum, Eric Latimer, Benjamin F. Henwood, and Akm Moniruzzaman on this list equally bear testament to this area's multidisciplinary and collaborative nature. Individually, this list provides evidence for an intellectual foundation that informs both scholarly debate and practical policy reform.

Table 1. Most relevant authors

Authors	Articles
Stergiopoulos, Vicky	61
Hwang, Stephen W.	47
Rosenheck, Robert A.	37
Somers, Julian M.	26
O'Campo, Patricia	22
Aubry, Tim	21
Nisenbaum, Rosane	21
Latimer, Eric	18
Henwood, Benjamin F.	17
Moniruzzaman, Akm	17

3.4. Prominent scientific journals

Table 2 illustrates the most influential journals that publish research in this field, highlighting its interdisciplinary nature. Psychiatric Services emerges as the leading outlet with 58 articles, emphasising the centrality of mental health systems, service delivery, and policy in addressing homelessness. The Community Mental Health Journal closely follows with 47 publications, reinforcing the importance of localised, community-based interventions. Journals such as the American Journal of Public Health and BMC Public Health (each featuring 18 articles) demonstrate the relevance of this topic within broader public health discourse, particularly concerning social determinants and population-level strategies. Health services and accessibility are further reflected through BMC Health Services Research (17 articles) and the Journal

of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved (16 articles), highlighting concerns around equity and vulnerable populations. The presence of psychiatric journals, such as the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, International Journal of Social Psychiatry, and American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, demonstrates a continued interest in the diagnostic, therapeutic, and psychosocial aspects. Additionally, the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health contributes an emerging perspective, linking environmental and public health dimensions to homelessness. Collectively, these journals highlight a multi-sectoral approach that encompasses psychiatry, public health, social work, and policy.

Table 2. Prominent scientific journals

Sources	Articles
Psychiatric Services	58
Community Mental Health Journal	47
American Journal of Public Health	18
BMC Public Health	18
BMC Health Services Research	17
Canadian Journal of Psychiatry	16
International Journal of Social Psychiatry	16
Journal of Health Care for The Poor and Underserved	16
American Journal of Orthopsychiatry	15
International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	15

3.5. Global research contributions by nation

Table 3 reveals the geographical distribution of research output on homelessness and mental disorders, with a clear dominance by high-income, English-speaking countries. The United States leads substantially with 681 publications, accounting for more than half of the total scientific output. This reflects the country's extensive research infrastructure, high rates of homelessness, and policy-driven interest in mental health services. Canada follows with 218 documents, which is significant given smaller population size, likely due to the country's influential research centres and its commitment to housing-first models. The United Kingdom and Australia, with 117 and 85 publications respectively, also contribute robustly, underlining their national policy concerns around homelessness and social care systems. Beyond these top contributors, countries like India (35 documents) are notable for representing research efforts from the Global South, although their representation is still limited compared to Western nations. France, Germany, and the Netherlands each contribute over 20 documents, reflecting growing European engagement with socio-psychiatric challenges. Spain and Ireland, although smaller in output, consistently participate in the discourse.

Table 3. Countries scientific productions

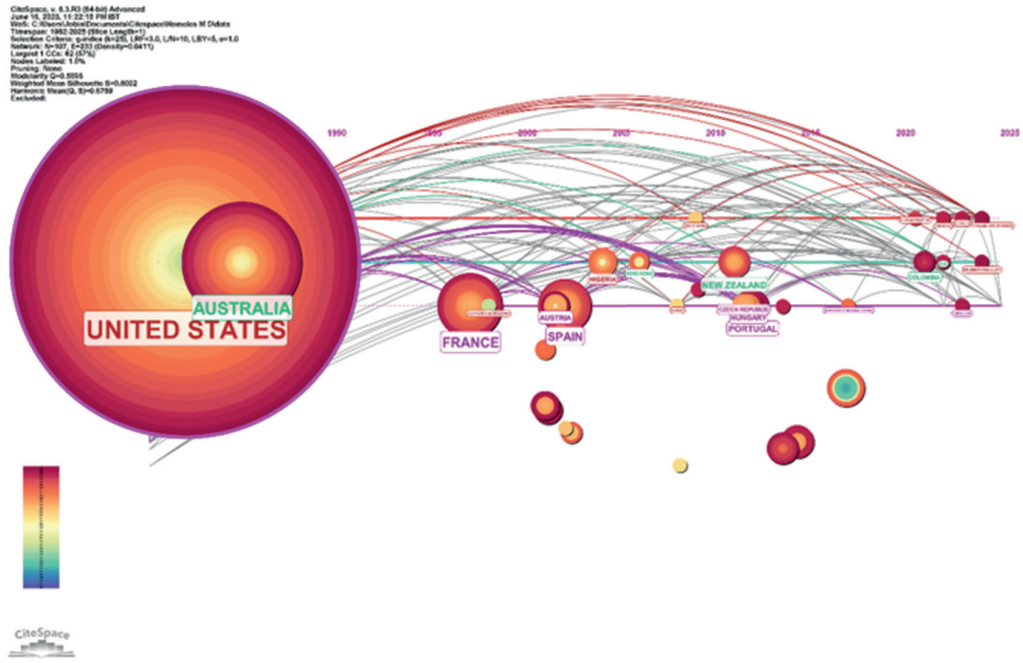
Country/Territory	Documents	Country/Territory	Documents
United States	681	France	31
Canada	218	Germany	31
United Kingdom	117	Netherlands	22
Australia	85	Spain	16
India	35	Ireland	15

3.6. Timezone network visualisation of countries' collaborations

Figure 3 presents a timeline network visualisation of international research collaborations, structured into three major clusters based on shared citation patterns. The largest cluster (Cluster #0: Controlled Trial) includes 29 countries and highlights widespread international collaboration, particularly across North America and Europe. The United States dominates this cluster with a remarkable 669 citations, followed by the United Kingdom (113), reflecting their long-standing leadership in mental health and homelessness research. This cluster focuses on clinical trials and service evaluations, with key studies such as the PROMO (Best Practice in Promoting Mental Health in Socially Marginalised People in Europe) and HOPE (National Institute for Health and Care Research Global Health Research Group on Homelessness and Mental Health in Africa) programmes targeting marginalised groups across multiple countries. The PROMO study, funded by the European Commission, was conducted across 14 European countries (Priebe et al., 2013). It aimed to evaluate mental health services – both generic (serving the general population) and group-specific (targeting socially marginalised groups) – in two highly deprived areas of each capital city. The presence of countries like Ireland, Denmark, and Brazil indicates broader engagement in comparative and cross-cultural research on service delivery for homeless persons with mental illness. On the other hand, the HOPE programmes are a more recent initiative being implemented in three African countries, namely Ethiopia, Ghana, and Kenya with the aim of improving outcomes through context-specific interventions and community rehabilitation strategies (Hanlon et al., 2025). The silhouette value of 0.71 suggests moderate thematic cohesion, largely driven by policy-focused, evidence-based approaches to intervention.

In contrast, Cluster #1 (mental illness) and Cluster #2 (PROMO Study) focus on more specialised or regional collaborations. Cluster #1, with 17 members, is led by Canada (217 citations) and Australia (83), and includes countries like India, New Zealand, and Switzerland. It explores psychiatric illness and homelessness in varied cultural contexts, including in China and rural communities. Meanwhile, Cluster #2 (16 members) is tightly focused on European policy and care practices, with key contributors like Germany, France, and the Netherlands. These countries are prominently featured in PROMO-related work, which assesses service accessibility and mental healthcare for marginalised populations across Europe. With the highest silhouette value (0.978), this cluster represents a highly cohesive and collaborative research agenda focused on harmonising healthcare policy and practice across European health systems.

Figure 3. Timeline Network visualisation of countries' collaborations



3.7. Network visualisation of co-citation of cited authors

Figure 4 presents a comprehensive co-citation analysis of cited authors, revealing 14 thematic clusters. The largest and most central cluster (Cluster #0: mental illness), comprising 171 members, forms the intellectual backbone of homelessness and mental health research. This cluster includes high-impact authors such as Hwang SW (192 citations), Tsemberis S (174), Padgett DK (118), Tsai J, and Rosenheck R, whose works have collectively shaped the field's evidence base on Housing First, service integration, and community-based interventions. Articles by Stergiopoulos, Hwang, and Kerman highlight themes like emergency department use and early support needs of mentally ill homeless individuals. With a high silhouette value (0.76), this cluster is both extensive and thematically cohesive, indicating a well-structured body of literature focused on mental illness, interventions for homelessness, and health service utilisation.

Cluster #1 (homeless women) is the second-largest group, with 145 members, and centres on gender-specific vulnerabilities and the prevalence of psychiatric disorders among homeless women. Influential authors include Koegel P (82 citations) and Kessler RC, with key works addressing substance use, trauma, and barriers to accessing care. The thematic scope of this cluster reflects early epidemiological studies that highlighted the unique needs of women within homeless populations. Although its silhouette value (0.693) is moderate, the consistent citation of works by Fischer, Susser,

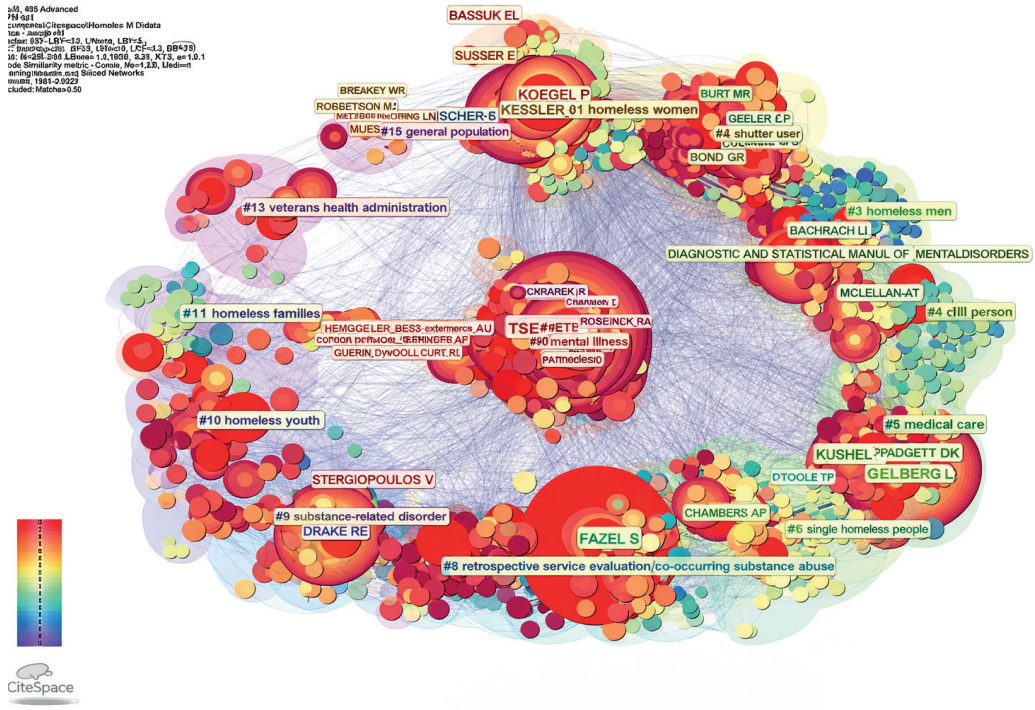
and North CS demonstrates that this cluster has contributed foundational knowledge to the discourse on intersectionality, gender, and mental health disparities.

The third-largest cluster (Cluster #2: shelter use), with 121 members, focuses on structural and policy-level factors influencing service use among homeless populations. Scholars like Culhane and Folsom are among the most cited, offering valuable insights into shelter systems, housing transitions, and the role of supportive services. Key citing articles examine digital health tools, shelter-based behavioural health care, and continuity of care. The cluster's silhouette value of 0.623 suggests that while thematically broad, it still retains sufficient coherence, particularly around institutional service delivery and administrative models of care.

Cluster #7 (co-occurring substance abuse) and Cluster #9 (substance-related disorders) explore the intersections of homelessness, addiction, incarceration, and community reentry. Notably, Fazel S (171 citations) in Cluster #7 and Drake RE (86 citations) in Cluster #9 are among the most cited authors in the entire network. Their work reveals the systemic entanglement of substance abuse, mental illness, and judicial involvement, especially among high-risk populations. With silhouette values of 0.895 and 0.801, respectively, these clusters demonstrate thematic depth and growing significance, particularly in light of dual diagnosis and public safety debates.

Lastly, smaller clusters such as Cluster #10 (homeless youth), Cluster #11 (homeless families), and Cluster #13 (health administration veterans) provide focused insights on specific subpopulations. For instance, youth-focused research by Henry M and Whitbeck LB centres on psychiatric care and life outcomes among homeless adolescents. Cluster #13, with authors like Zlotnick C, highlights the unique mental health needs of veterans, often shaped by trauma, PTSD, and systemic barriers within the Veterans Health Administration cluster. The high silhouette values (0.884 to 0.985) in these smaller clusters indicate well-defined and emergent thematic specialisations. Collectively, the co-citation network highlights a maturing field with distinct yet interconnected domains that drive scholarly inquiry and policy relevance.

Figure 4. Network visualisation of co-citation of cited authors



3.8. Network visualisation of co-citation of cited journals

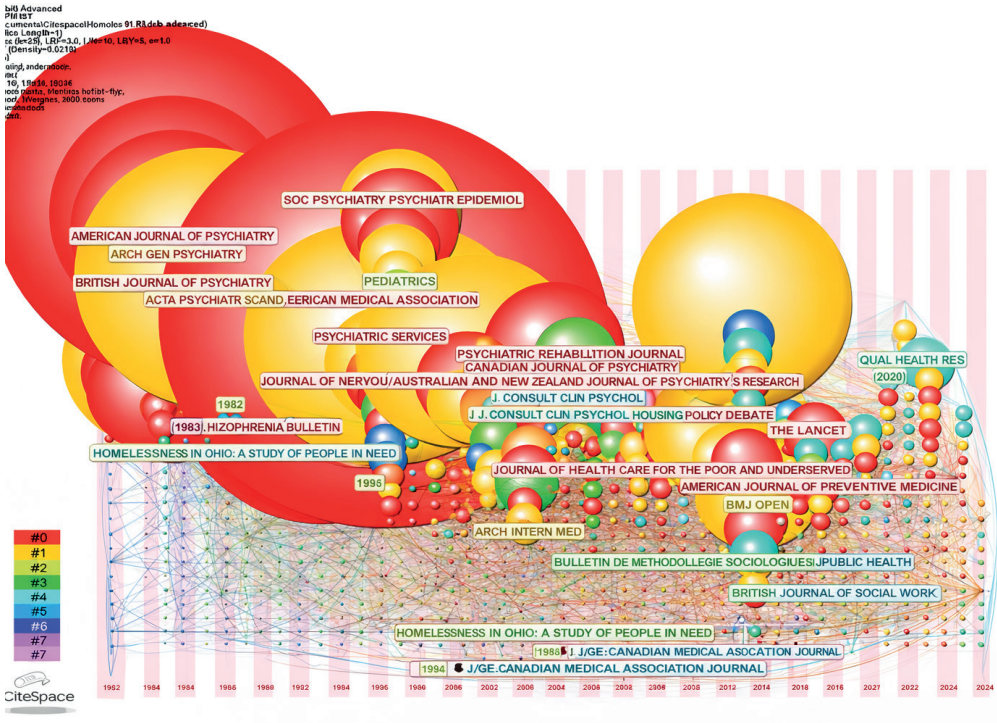
Figure 5 illustrates the network visualisation of co-cited journals, structured into nine thematic clusters. The largest cluster (Cluster #0: housing programme), comprising 223 members, represents the dominant scholarly discourse on housing interventions for persons experiencing homelessness and mental disorders. This cluster has strong roots in service-based and psychiatric care literature. The most cited journals here include Psychiatric Services (339 citations), American Journal of Public Health (277), and Archives of General Psychiatry (187), reflecting a policy-focused and mental health intervention lens. The frequently cited articles deal with community-based psychosocial interventions, recovery models, and housing-first frameworks. The high silhouette value (0.769) indicates a well-defined thematic boundary, showing this cluster's maturity and centrality in advancing research and service delivery models aimed at housing stabilisation and mental health recovery.

The second largest cluster (Cluster #1: systematic review), with 201 members, is centred around evidence synthesis and program evaluations. Journals like JAMA (203 citations), PLOS ONE (158), and The Lancet (149) dominate this space, underscoring the cluster's emphasis on high-impact, global evidence bases. Key articles in this cluster involve umbrella reviews, systematic assessments of health outcomes, and typologies of healthcare innovation. This cluster provides a strong methodological and empirical

foundation, aiding the development of standardised, scalable interventions for vulnerable groups. The thematic coherence (silhouette value: 0.76) and focus on evidence-based policymaking demonstrate its role in bridging research with clinical and public health practice.

Cluster #2 (ill person) and others, such as Cluster #4 (homeless adult) and Cluster #5 (new mendicancy), address more demographically and clinically nuanced aspects of homelessness. For instance, Cluster #2 (123 members) highlights psychiatric and epidemiological challenges faced by homeless individuals, with Paediatrics being the most cited journal, suggesting crossover with child and adolescent health issues. In contrast, Cluster #4 (65 members) emphasises indigenous perspectives and geospatial analyses, pointing to a growing interest in culturally responsive care. Meanwhile, Cluster #5 (60 members) revisits foundational literature, such as Baxter's "The New Mendicancy", reflecting on historical and identity-based framings of homelessness. These clusters, with their distinct citation patterns and thematic orientations, illustrate the expanding interdisciplinary scope of homelessness research – from general hospital settings and social policy to myth deconstruction and comparative frameworks.

Figure 5. Timezone Network visualisation of co-citation of cited journals



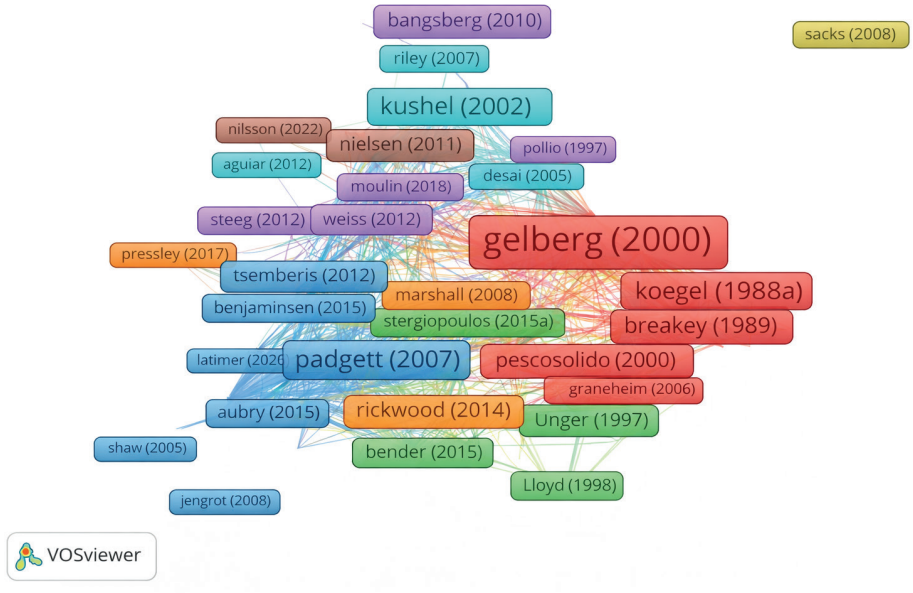
3.9. Network visualisation of bibliographic coupling of documents

Figure 6 displays a bibliographic coupling network based on 474 documents, each cited at least 20 times, out of a total of 1,294, forming a rich network of 439 documents grouped into 9 clusters. These clusters represent different thematic or conceptual strands within the literature on homelessness and mental disorders. At the core of Cluster #1 (red) lies Gelberg (2000), a highly cited and influential study, along with foundational works like Koegel (1988a) and Breakey (1989). These papers anchor much of the research concerning structural determinants of homelessness, healthcare access, and severe mental illness, reflecting this cluster's foundational and policy-oriented nature. The dense interlinkages in this group suggest a well-developed body of literature with strong internal cohesion and scholarly impact.

Cluster #3 (blue) and Cluster #2 (green) also stand out. Cluster #3 is centred around scholars such as Padgett (2007), Tsemberis (2014), and Aubry (2016), who are prominent voices in the "Housing First" interventions and community-based treatment models. This cluster bridges practical intervention research and policy implementation studies. Cluster #2 includes work such as Unger (1998) which focus more on social support systems, rehabilitation, and service-user experiences, highlighting a psycho-social and recovery-oriented research strand. In contrast, Cluster #6 (cyan), as noted by Kushel (2002) and Desai (2005), focuses on medical comorbidities, primary care access, and the integration of mental and physical healthcare in homeless populations.

The presence of smaller or more peripheral clusters, such as Cluster #7 (orange), Cluster #8 (brown), and Cluster #9 (pink), indicates emerging or specialised areas, including trauma-informed care, veterans' health, or indigenous populations. Overall, the map shows a highly interconnected scholarly landscape with clear thematic concentrations. The clustering and citation density reflect the field's intellectual maturity, while the emergence of new clusters suggests ongoing diversification and the potential for future research integration across disciplines.

Figure 6. Network visualisation of citation of documents

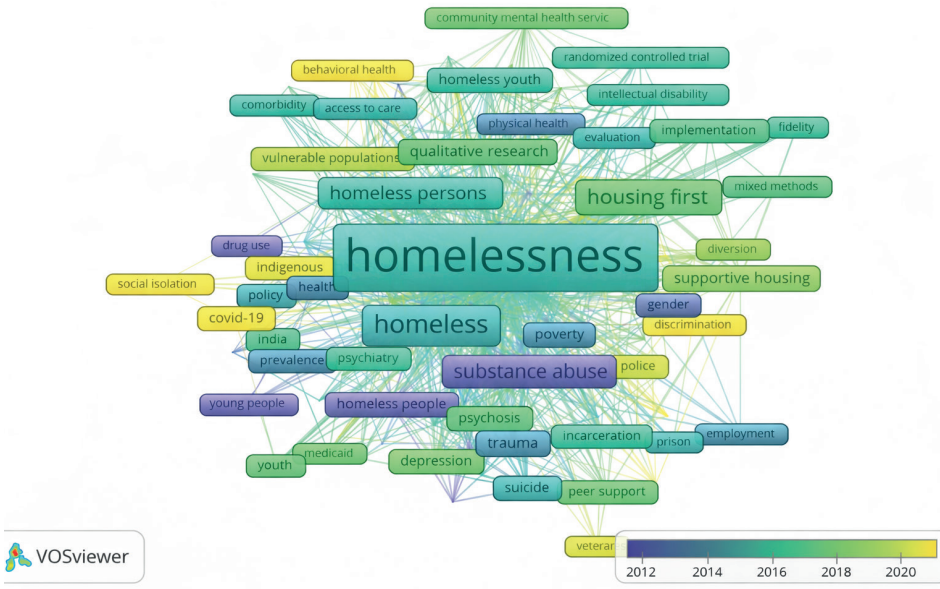


3.10. Network visualisation of co-occurrence of author keywords

Figure 7 displays an overlay visualisation of the co-occurrence of author keywords. Out of 1,976 total keywords, 122 met the minimum threshold of 5 occurrences, and the visualisation focuses on 28 keywords categorised into four thematic clusters. The size of each node represents the frequency of keyword usage (as confirmed in the accompanying table), while the colour gradient – ranging from blue (earlier average appearance) to yellow (more recent) – indicates the temporal evolution of research interests from 2012 to 2020. At the centre of the network lies the most dominant keyword, "homelessness" (315 occurrences), which is deeply connected to high-frequency terms like "mental illness" (152), "mental health" (144), and "homeless" (98). These core terms represent the central themes that structure the field, cutting across all clusters. Closely linked are intervention-focused terms such as "housing first", "substance abuse", "supportive housing", and "qualitative research", highlighting a strong research orientation toward policy, intervention models, and evidence-based approaches.

The overlay also indicates the evolving research directions. Yellow-coloured keywords such as "indigenous", "COVID-19", "discrimination", and "social isolation" reflect more recently emerging concerns, especially in the post-pandemic context and with growing attention to equity and marginalised populations. In contrast, blue-green terms such as "substance use", "housing first", and "mental illness" represent long-standing themes with well-established scholarly foundations. This co-occurrence map not only reveals the interconnectedness of research concepts but also tracks the temporal progression of thematic focus, suggesting a shift from clinical and housing-focused topics to broader social and structural determinants such as stigma, isolation, and access to care.

Figure 7. Co-occurrence of author keywords



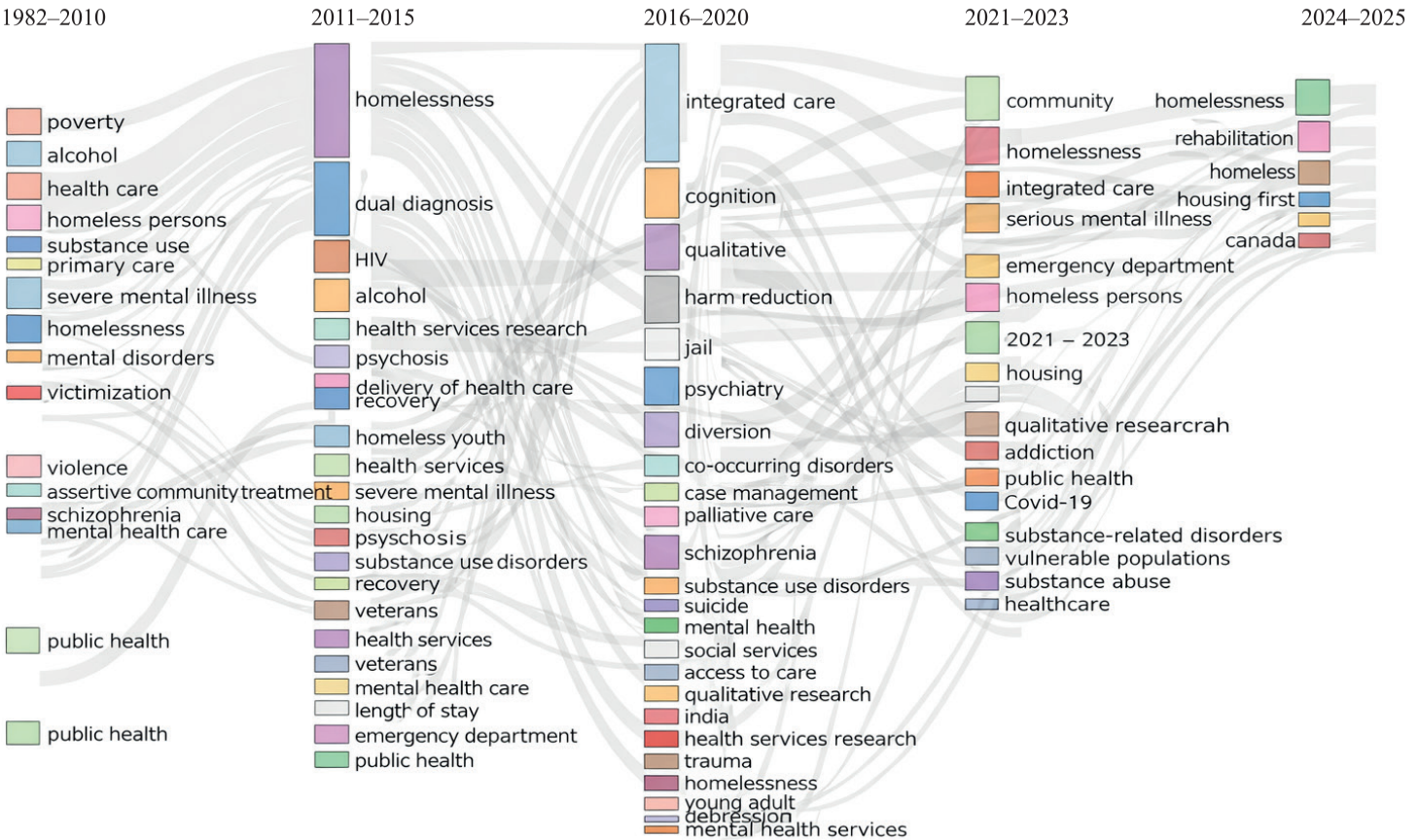
3.11. Thematic evolution

The thematic evolution map in Figure 8 illustrates the conceptual development and shifting research priorities in the study of homelessness and mental disorders across five distinct time periods. Between 1982 and 2010, the foundational focus revolved around key issues such as poverty, substance use, alcohol, mental disorders, and homeless persons, reflecting an initial attempt to define and understand the intersecting factors contributing to homelessness among individuals with psychiatric conditions. The presence of themes like violence, victimisation, and primary care suggests a concern with the broader societal and healthcare contexts affecting this population.

Between 2011 and 2020, the field underwent thematic consolidation and expansion. Core themes such as homelessness, dual diagnosis, and severe mental illness became more prominent, accompanied by a rise in health services research, case management, and qualitative research. This period marks a shift from mere identification of issues toward systemic and service-level investigations. Topics like harm reduction, housing, co-occurring disorders, and recovery began to gain traction, indicating a growing interest in integrative and rehabilitative models of care. The emergence of terms such as integrated care, cognition, palliative care, and trauma also signals increasing complexity and depth in addressing individual and structural needs.

In the most recent phases (2021–2025), the field continues to evolve in response to emerging global and local challenges. Topics such as community, rehabilitation, housing stability, and housing first dominate, reflecting a substantial shift toward person-centred, recovery-oriented, and policy-aligned interventions. The appearance of indigenous mental illness in Canada and the emergency department denotes geographical and service-context specificity. Meanwhile, COVID-19, addiction, vulnerable populations, and public health mark the impact of global health emergencies and renewed emphasis on equity and accessibility. The persistence of themes like qualitative research, depression, and substance-related disorders shows continuity, while newer themes point to a more inclusive, intersectional, and solution-driven research agenda.

Figure 8. Thematic evolution of research in homelessness and mental disorders

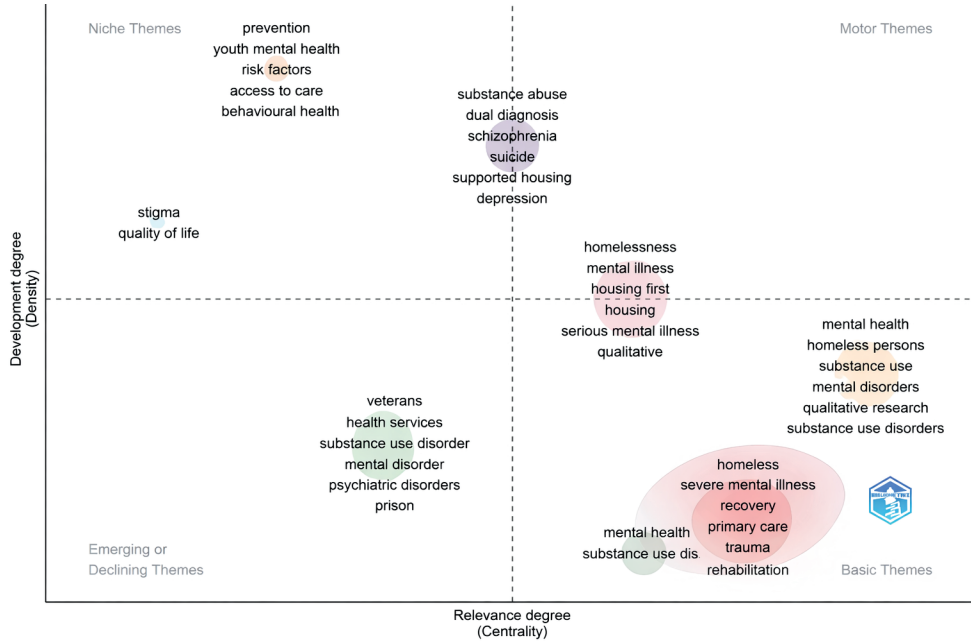


3.12. Thematic map

Figure 9 presents a thematic map that categorises key research themes on homelessness and mental disorders based on two dimensions: centrality (relevance to the field) and density (development of the theme). The four quadrants – motor themes, basic themes, niche themes, and emerging or declining themes – help in understanding how well-established or strategically important each theme is within the scholarly discourse. In the motor themes quadrant (upper-right), we observe that no themes currently dominate both in terms of centrality and development. This suggests that while many topics are actively researched and relevant, none are yet deeply entrenched as the undisputed driving forces of the field. Some themes, such as dual diagnosis, substance abuse, supported housing, schizophrenia, and depression, fall close to the vertical axis and show moderate development, indicating their growing influence but with room for further theoretical and practical consolidation.

The basic themes quadrant (lower-right) contains the most conceptually central but underdeveloped themes. Core concepts like mental health, homeless persons, substance use, qualitative research, and mental disorders appear here, signalling their foundational role in the literature. These topics are highly relevant but still evolving in complexity, suggesting opportunities for in-depth inquiry and framework development. This quadrant also encompasses themes such as trauma, recovery, and rehabilitation, highlighting their critical importance in intervention and policy research. In the emerging or declining themes quadrant (lower left), we see topics such as veterans, health services, psychiatric disorders, and prisons, which are less central and less developed. Their positioning implies either a declining interest or an emerging concern yet to be fully integrated into mainstream research. These may represent underexplored areas that require revitalisation or adaptation to current challenges. Conversely, the niche themes quadrant (upper left) features prevention, youth mental health, behavioural health, and risk factors, which are well-developed but currently peripheral. These specialised topics show internal coherence and could become more central if connected with broader research agendas. Overall, the thematic map provides a strategic snapshot of the intellectual landscape, highlighting areas where scholarship is concentrated, where further integration is needed, and where new research could be expanded or reoriented. It encourages researchers and policymakers to focus not only on prominent issues like mental health and housing but also to consider amplifying emerging concerns like trauma, prison, and youth mental health for a more holistic understanding and response.

Figure 9. Thematic visualisation of keywords



3.13. Trend topics

Figure 10 illustrates the evolution of key research topics related to homelessness and mental disorders over time, highlighting when specific terms first appeared and their frequency of use in scholarly literature. Early research from the 2000s concentrated on foundational issues such as dual diagnosis, co-occurring disorders, social support, alcohol, and substance abuse, indicating initial efforts to understand the complex, multifaceted nature of homelessness and mental health. By the early 2010s, interest expanded toward more nuanced concerns, including trauma, gender, schizophrenia, and recovery. At the same time, housing, housing first, and supported housing began to gain traction around 2015 as attention shifted toward intervention models and policy responses.

In the most recent years (2020–2025), the field has responded to new global and societal challenges. Terms such as COVID-19, stigma, and older adults have emerged, showing the field's adaptability in addressing contemporary health crises and demographic shifts. The strong presence of terms like substance-use disorders, qualitative research, rehabilitation, and primary care signals ongoing interest in comprehensive care strategies and evidence-based research methods. Notably, high-frequency terms such as mental health, homelessness, and serious mental illness remain dominant and consistently relevant, underscoring their centrality in the discourse. The diversity of topics and the steady growth in term frequency reflect a field that is both expanding and deepening, engaging with both persistent challenges and evolving contexts.

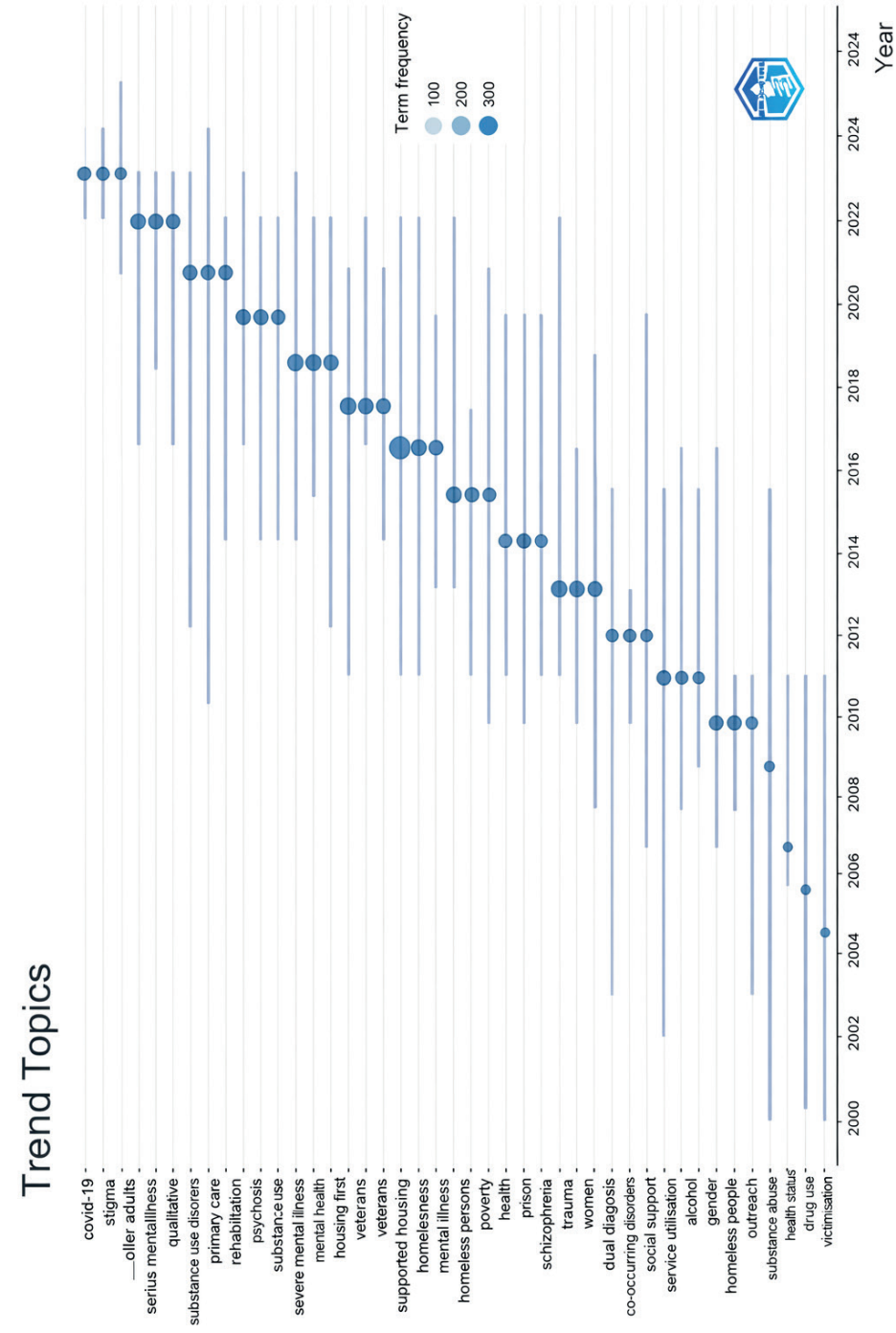


Figure 10. The evolution of trend topics in homeless persons with mental disorders

4. Discussions

Based on the bibliometric analysis of the literature concerning the challenges and needs of homeless persons with mental disorders, several critical insights have emerged across 12 key analyses. The field has experienced steady growth in scholarly interest, particularly after 2010, with a noticeable peak from 2015 to 2021. The research is characterised by a moderate citation impact and strong author collaboration, although international co-authorship remains limited. Influential authors such as Vicky Stergiopoulos and Stephen W. Hwang have shaped the discourse through extensive work on community mental health and policy-based interventions. Journals like Psychiatric Services and Community Mental Health Journal serve as major publishing outlets, indicating a strong health policy and clinical orientation within the field.

Geographically, research output is concentrated in high-income nations, particularly the United States and Canada, which dominate both in volume and influence. Collaborative networks are structured into thematic clusters – controlled trials, mental illness, and PROMO studies – each reflecting varying levels of engagement across continents. The United States and the United Kingdom are central to global partnerships, while European countries exhibit strong regional cohesion in policy-focused research. The co-citation of journals and authors reveals deeply embedded intellectual traditions focusing on housing-first approaches, dual diagnosis, and community-based psychiatric care. Clusters dedicated to women, veterans, youth, and indigenous populations suggest increasing specialisation and a move toward intersectional research lenses.

Bibliographic coupling and co-occurrence analysis discern a mature but vibrant intellectual landscape. Landmark pieces by Gelberg, Padgett, and Tsemberis underpin central and policy-focused research, whereas new themes such as trauma-informed care, COVID-19, and indigenous mental health designate reactive avenues in research. Evolution maps of themes demonstrate a transformation from simple awareness of mental illness and homelessness to multi-component, rich interventions such as recovery, integrated care, and public health responses. Furthermore, investigations in this realm have expanded to address system-level issues, including discrimination, service access, and equity. Ongoing studies are adding broader sociopolitical dimensions to these frameworks.

Thematic mappings and trend analysis further demonstrate the dynamic nature of the research. While core themes like “mental health”, “homelessness”, and “substance use” take central stage, new themes like “COVID-19”, “indigenous”, and “older adults” have emerged, indicating a shift towards demographic- and crisis-responsiveness in studies. Despite growth, other avenues lack sufficient inquiry, particularly those involving low-income countries, youth mental health, incarceration, and veterans. These represent rich soil for future research. Overall, the study provides an interpretive synthesis of the research literature, enabling more strategic, evidence-informed responses to the complex overlap between homelessness and mental illness.

5. Research gaps and practical implications

Insights from thematic evolution, thematic map, and trend topics reveal multiple research gaps in the fields of homelessness and mental disorders. Although the field has matured significantly – from early conceptualisations of substance abuse and psychiatric illness to policy-aligned themes like "housing first" and "rehabilitation" – certain critical areas remain underexplored. Notably, topics such as incarceration, veterans, and youth mental health appear in the "emerging or declining themes" quadrant, indicating limited integration into the core research narrative despite their high social relevance. Additionally, settings like prisons, emergency departments, and rural health systems are mentioned sporadically but have not developed into sustained research agendas. The thematic evolution also reflects minimal engagement with digital health, technology-enabled interventions, or social determinants of health beyond basic demographics – suggesting a need to align the field with broader public health and innovation trends.

From a practical standpoint, this thematic gap signals important directions for future scholarship and policy planning. First, the continued emphasis on qualitative research and recovery models in trend topics suggests that practitioners need richer, context-sensitive evidence to tailor services effectively. Interventions must be more inclusive of intersectional vulnerabilities, including race, gender identity, age, and indigenous status, which are only recently beginning to gain traction. Policymakers should also support research that deepens the integration of trauma-informed care, stigma reduction, and interdisciplinary frameworks, particularly in underdeveloped yet essential domains such as youth mental health and criminal justice reform. Overall, the bibliometric insights urge a shift from reactive to preventive, community-rooted, and equity-oriented approaches, ensuring that service design and research reflect the complexity and diversity of lived experiences among homeless individuals with mental disorders.

6. Conclusion

This bibliometric analysis offers a comprehensive overview of the evolving research landscape on the challenges and needs of homeless persons with mental disorders. The findings highlight a steady growth in scientific output, increased international collaboration, and a shift toward integrated, recovery-oriented care models. However, several thematic areas – such as youth mental health, incarceration, and digital health interventions – remain underexplored. To address these gaps, future research should prioritise longitudinal and intersectional studies that focus on marginalised subpopulations. It is recommended that policymakers foster interdisciplinary collaborations that bridge mental health, housing, and criminal justice systems. Additionally, funding should support digital health innovations and culturally sensitive interventions to improve service accessibility. Strengthening the empirical foundation in these areas will enable the development of more inclusive, effective, and sustainable solutions for this highly vulnerable group.

7. Limitations of this study

While this study offers a comprehensive overview of the scholarship on the intersection of homelessness and mental disorders, the limitations should also be acknowledged. The analysis is limited to peer-reviewed scientific publications from the Scopus database, which was selected for its rigorous curation, reliable metadata, and compatibility with bibliometric tools. Reviews, articles and non-research articles were excluded to maintain a uniform dataset for the analysis. Moreover, the focus on publication in English may have resulted in underrepresentation of research from non-English-speaking regions. Future research could expand the linguistic scope and database sources and complement the findings of this study.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare in writing this article.

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