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Police target begging

The Swiss capital Bern has become a magnet for organised begging, with beggars being drafted in from eastern Europe to work the streets, city police have warned.

The authorities say that disabled people and children, who attract more sympathy, are being used by gangs to earn money - in some cases up to SFr500 each per day. In response, they have launched a pilot programme, named Agora, to crack down on the organised gangs targeting the city.

The organised begging bands from eastern Europe are usually made up of 10-18 people, working in rotation. Invalids and children are shared out in the different bands.

Begging in Bern is not illegal but foreigners are required to have the means to support themselves when they enter the country, which means they can be fined for begging. Other Swiss cities, such as Zurich and Basel ban begging outright. The groups come mainly from Romania and Bulgaria.

Since the Schengen free movement of people agreement between Switzerland and the EU came into force on June 1, 2009, Romanian and Bulgarian citizens, like other EU citizens, are able to travel to and work in Switzerland.

Police say there are two different methods at work with the groups - freelance and controlled.

Under the freelance system, people pay a fee for a day trip organised by middlemen. The organisers transport the would-be beggars to a city, provide them with a map of the best begging locations and arrange to collect them at the end of the day. In principle, once the fee is paid these day-trippers can keep the proceeds of their efforts.

The second method involves much tighter control of the individuals doing the begging, with "runners" making continuous collections of the proceeds. The beggars are used on a daily basis for weeks or months. Beggars accompanied by children and maimed or disabled beggars are the most lucrative for the gang bosses.

A small number of Geneva police recently took the law into their own hands, writing the word "beggar" in the passports of mainly Roma people they caught begging.

The practice, described by the authorities as "totally illegal and totally unacceptable", has now stopped and police officers may face sanctions. The city authorities have agreed to foot the bill for replacement documents.

from swissinfo

Five thousand firms expected to go bankrupt

The number of businesses to go bankrupt annually in Switzerland will likely exceed 5,000 for the first time, the Swiss Association of Creditors, Creditreform, warned on Friday.

The global economic crisis claimed 393 companies in Switzerland in August alone, a 44 per cent rise over the same period last year. From January to August, 3,429 companies went bankrupt. Personal bankruptcies have increased by 7.2 per cent, to 3,837. They are expected to reach

6,000 by the end of the year.

The economic landscape for Switzerland's businesses varied greatly according to region. Bankruptcies have increased by 64.5 per cent in Italian-speaking Ticino, a canton that is sensitive to cyclical fluctuations. Canton Zurich's bankruptcies increased by 36.2 per cent. Northwestern Switzerland has been least affected, with its bankruptcies increasing by 12.1 per cent, followed by canton Bern, with 12.7 per cent.

from swissinfo

Spending on gambling reaches record level

The Swiss spent a record SFr2.85 billion on lotteries and gambling last year, according to figures published by the Federal Justice Office.

After a slight decline in 2007, last year's figure showed an increase of SFr50 million compared with 2006.

In 2008, an average of SFr370 per capita was spent on lotteries and bets, an increase of SFr10 compared with the previous year.

The record figures at Swiss lotteries also help the cantons, with SFr535 million flowing into the coffers of various organisations, including those connected with sport.

In Switzerland around 126,000 people gamble excessively, according to a study presented by the federal commission on casinos.

from swissinfo

Swine flu pandemic expected by autumn

A global swine flu pandemic is likely to reach Switzerland by the end of the year with up to 1.5 million people - a quarter of the work force - expected to be infected.

The Federal Health Office said it had struck a deal with two international pharmaceutical companies for 13 million doses of vaccine to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

"Our aim is to protect risk groups, notably babies, pregnant women, the elderly and people suffering from pulmonary deficiencies," said Thomas Zeltner, director of the Federal Health Office.

He called on hospitals and cantonal authorities to prepare for a pandemic and urged the population to observe basic hygiene rules.

from swissinfo