

Halbgefängenschaft Winterthur – Switzerland

Introduction

Halbgefängenschaft Winterthur (HG Winterthur) is a semi-detention facility located in the city of Winterthur, in the canton of Zürich. Founded in 1993, it operates under the supervision of the *Amt für Justizvollzug* within the *Direktion der Justiz und des Innern des Kantons Zürich* (DJI). Its mission is to enable residents to maintain their professional, educational, and social environments while serving their sentence.

The facility functions according to the semi-detention concept, which allows residents to work, study, or train during the day while spending their nights and leisure time within the institution. HG Winterthur operates similarly to the *Etablissement du Simplon* in Lausanne, facing comparable challenges arising from the expansion of electronic monitoring (EM) and the introduction of open normal execution (NV), although the two facilities are not formally connected.

Scale

HG Winterthur has a total capacity of twenty-five residents, both men and women. The facility previously accommodated thirty-three, but this number was reduced to provide each resident with an individual room.

RESCALED-principles in practice:

- Small-scale
- Differentiation
- Community-integration

Differentiation

Target group

HG Winterthur accommodates residents under several regimes, both adult men and women. Young adults may also be accepted when a juvenile sentence extends beyond their eighteenth birthday, although the differing needs of these groups can make management more complex.

Semi-detention (*Halbgefängenschaft*, SD) applies to persons sentenced to a maximum of twelve months or to those who have already served part of their sentence elsewhere. The number of semi-detention residents has declined in recent years due to the expansion of electronic monitoring, which now covers both

suspended and unconditional sentences of up to one year. However, semi-detention remains essential for individuals without stable housing, for cases in which cohabitants object to EM, or when offences such as domestic violence make EM unsuitable. It also serves as an option for those who have violated EM conditions and are placed at HG Winterthur rather than being returned directly to closed custody.

Since 2024, the facility has increased the number of residents under open normal execution (*Normalvollzug offen, NV*), a form of detention that has required the creation of internal daytime activities. Ten places are currently reserved for NV, marking a shift from earlier years when most of the residents worked externally. Additionally, individuals under external work arrangements (*Arbeitsexternat, AEX*) are accepted, typically near the end of their sentences once they have secured employment outside the facility.

Forms of security

Security at HG Winterthur combines relational, procedural, and static measures. Relationships between staff and residents are based on trust, communication, and mutual respect, reflecting the facility's open and rehabilitative character. The atmosphere is informal and non-restrictive, and the entrance area functions like a reception with an open door during the day, where visitors must register upon arrival. Residents are not searched or scanned when entering or leaving. The property is fenced but retains an open character consistent with the semi-detention model.

Departures and returns are recorded manually each time residents leave or enter the facility. Alcohol and drug controls are conducted irregularly, including random urine or alcohol breath tests. Mobile phones are permitted during several hours every day and are stored in lockers at night. The staff team consists of two social workers and six guards. An external security guard remains awake at night, while a staff member sleeps on-site to ensure continuous supervision.

Security is primarily ensured through relational engagement and procedural routines rather than restrictive static measures. Clear communication, respect, and predictable daily structures form the foundation of safety and order.

Activities

Each resident follows an individual execution plan (*Vollzugsplan*), developed by staff and approved by the referring authority. Coordination with probation officers (*Bewährungshilfe*) and cantonal justice services ensures compliance with *SCEPP* standards.

All residents are required to engage in a meaningful activity, such as employment, training, or participation in an unemployment programme. Residents employed outside the facility may work in any sector, including night shifts, and are permitted to remain outside the facility for up to fourteen hours per day. Residents in semi-detention and AEX are required to make a financial contribution of twenty-two Swiss francs per day. Residents who are unable to afford this amount may request a reduction, which may be granted either partially or fully, down to a minimum of one Swiss franc per day, depending on the individual's income and financial situation.

For residents under open normal execution, internal work activities are organised within the facility and may include work in the basement workshop, the garden, the kitchen, cleaning duties, or tasks related to the maintenance of the building. Activities include woodworking, creative projects, model building, and other operational tasks. Weekly shopping is organised with staff participation.

Meals are prepared by a neighbouring retirement home. Residents in open detention collect their meals and eat together, while others inform staff if they wish to eat food they have purchased themselves in their rooms. There is no formal programme of group activities; however, residents are encouraged to take initiative. For example, a former resident recently organised a first-aid workshop for others.

.Community integration

Location and architecture

HG Winterthur is located in a quiet residential neighbourhood in the city of Winterthur. The building, an older structure resembling a youth hostel, is modest but functional, with communal spaces that encourage informal social contact. Residents may personalise their rooms, although most keep them simple.

The basement includes a recreation area with a pool table, table football, a renovated workshop for internal work sessions, a small fitness room, and laundry facilities. The ground floor contains the offices, reception area, a shared kitchen, and a dining room. Women are accommodated separately in three rooms with a private entrance, their own lounge where smoking is permitted, and a shared bathroom.

The first and second floors house male residents, each in an individual room equipped with two beds, two cupboards, and a sink. Twenty residents share two showers and two toilets, while two rooms with private bathrooms are reserved for long-term residents.

Outdoor spaces include a garden with a large chessboard, table football and ping-pong tables, and a barbecue area used for informal gatherings. These facilities support a relaxed and community-oriented atmosphere.

Interaction with the community

HG Winterthur maintains a discreet yet positive relationship with the surrounding neighbourhood. Although its correctional purpose is not widely known, community relations have evolved favourably. An open day held in 2024 received positive feedback and increased public understanding of the facility's social role. An exhibition entitled *"Half-prison: half-caught or half-free?"* presented the history of the institution and featured testimonials from residents and staff, reinforcing its commitment to transparency and dialogue.

Residents stay socially connected through employment, education, family visits, and routine outings such as shopping or medical appointments. External professionals — including probation officers, social workers, and therapists — visit regularly for meetings and follow-up. Partnerships with local organisations support work placements, healthcare access, and therapeutic services.

To ensure a more comfortable environment, the director encourages that visits involving children take place at the neighbouring retirement home rather than inside the facility. This practice promotes a more natural and less restrictive setting for family contact.

Halbgefängenschaft Winterthur

Founded: 1993

Capacity: 25

Autonomy level: High level
of autonomy

Nearest city: Winterthur
(Switzerland)

Nature of interaction:
Visited by RESCALED
(10-04-25)

Publicity / Read more

- About Halbgefängenschaft Winterthur at the official website of the Canton of Zürich:
Kanton Zürich – Direktion der Justiz und des Innern. (n.d.). *Halbgefängenschaft Winterthur*. Retrieved March 6th, 2025, from <https://www.zh.ch/de/direktion-der-justiz-und-des-innern/justizvollzug-wiedereingliederung/vollzugseinrichtungen-zuerich/halbgefängenschaft-winterthur.html>
- Article about Halbgefängenschaft Winterthur and the impact of electronic monitoring on semi-detention placements:
Tages-Anzeiger. (2024, March 15). *Halbgefängenschaft in Winterthur: Wegen der Fussfessel leert sich die Villa Rosa*. Retrieved March 6th, 2025, from

<https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/halbgefangenschaft-in-winterthur-wegen-der-fussfessel-leert-sich-de-villa-rosa-415553429380>