BACKGROUND PAPER

Drinking water access in public spaces

Status: 18th November 2025

Parched in Public:

Why we need more public drinking fountains

Access to public drinking fountains in Germany is critical for environmental, health, and social benefits. The environmental impact of bottled water is significant, with over 8 billion liters of water packaged in single-use plastics in 2022. Increased availability of drinking fountains can reduce plastic waste and greenhouse gas emissions. From a health perspective, public fountains are essential for heat protection, particularly for vulnerable groups like children and the elderly. Currently, Germany has between 1,500 to 2,000 public fountains, with urban areas benefiting more than rural spaces, leaving many elderly residents underserved.

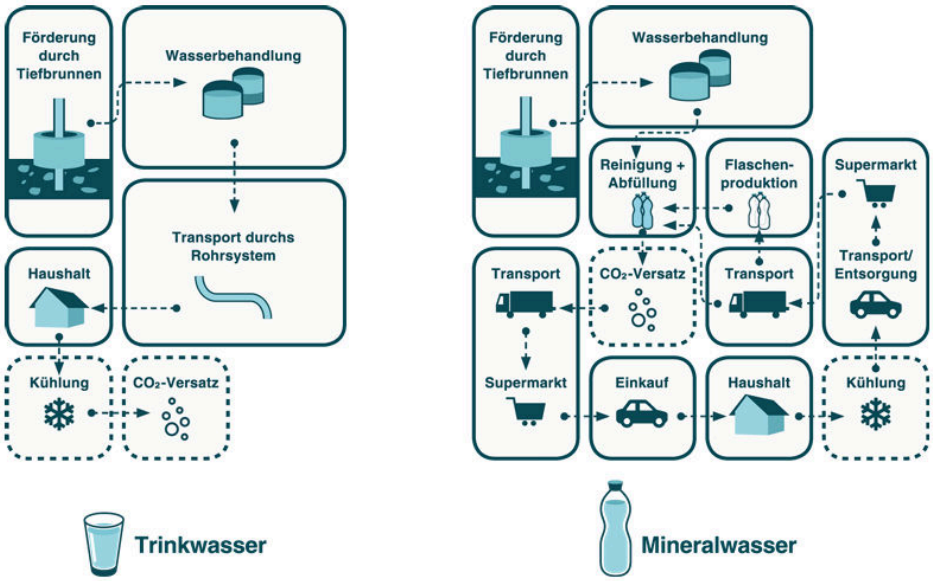
Internationally, cities. such as Vienna and Zurich showcase effective models for fountain implementation, emphasizing comprehensive planning and maintenance. Legal frameworks are evolving, with the EU Drinking Water Directive requiring better access to water in public spaces. Initiatives advocating for free tap water in various establishments further support this vision, underscoring the need for collaborative efforts among stakeholders, including local governments and communities, to enhance public water accessibility

Benefits of public water fountains

There are a number of reasons why we need (more) public water drinking fountains.[1]

Environmental benefits

For 2022 the environment agency of Germany (Umweltbundesamt) still counted over 8 million liters of water to be packed in disposable packaging.[2] Having more drinking fountains in Germany will help to reduce the amount of plastic waste which results in less greenhouse gas emissions as well as pollutants and microplastics. If more people had the opportunity to refill their water bottles at drinking fountains, they would take advantage of this free, refreshing option instead of resorting to buying plastic bottles from supermarkets. It would open up significant potential for reducing emissions that are harmful to health, the environment, and the climate throughout the entire life cycle of plastic bottles – from production and transport to shops to their ultimately far too rapid disposal, often at the expense of our environment.[3]



Picture 1: Life cycle comparison of tap water vs. bottled water (a tip: tap, 2020)

[1] For simplicity, we use the term “public drinking fountain” to refer to all places where people can access drinking water freely. This includes both indoor and outdoor drinking fountains, as well as refill stations.
[2] Umweltbundesamt (2025): Bundesweite Erhebung von Daten zum Verbrauch von Getränken in Mehrweggetränkeverpackungen - Bezugsjahr 2022
[3] More on the life cycle assessment of tap water vs. bottled water see: Christoph Meili;Niels Jungbluth;Savian Scanu;Nadia Malinverno (2023) Ökobilanz von Trinkwasser und Mineralwasser in Deutschland. or GUT Certifizierungsgesellschaft für Managementsysteme mbH (2020): Vergleich des CO_2-Fußabdrucks von Mineral- und Trinkwasser

Health benefits

The rise in temperatures in Europe caused by climate change requires the implementation of heat protection measures to ensure the health of residents and prevent heat-related problems such as dehydration or heatstroke, not only but especially among children, pregnant persons, the elderly, and people with chronic illnesses. Therefore, installing drinking fountains in public space is an essential element of heat protection that brings significant health benefits.[4]

Social benefits

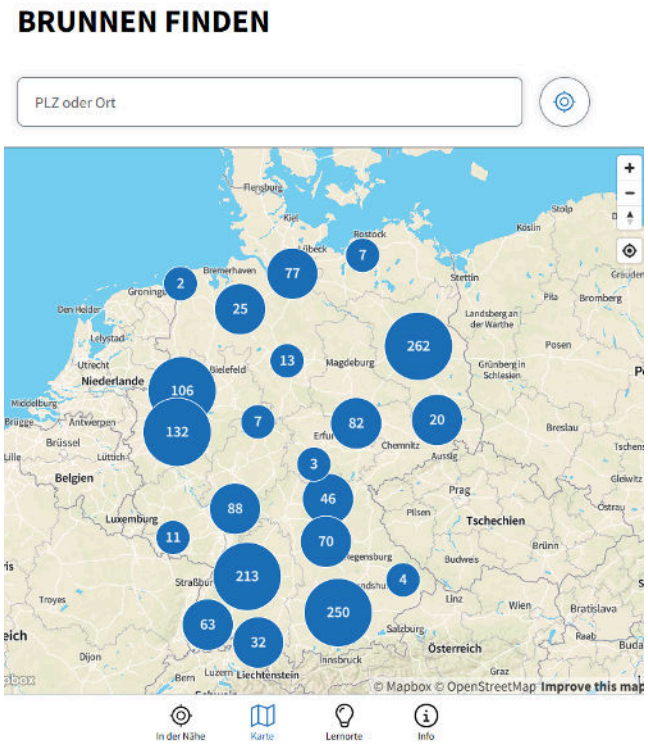
Public drinking fountains that are easily and freely accessible also have the added benefit of allowing access to groups of people who might not have regular access to clean water, such as the homeless.[5]

Current situation in Germany

Public outdoor drinking fountains

The current number of public drinking fountains in Germany is so far not centrally recorded. Estimates range from 1,500 to 2,000 across the whole country.
The web service or app "Trinkwasser-unterwegs", of the German Association of Energy and Water Industries (Bundesverband der Energie- und Wasserwirtschaft - BdEW) lists around 1,416 public drinking fountains.[6]

But it seems that drinking fountains are distributed unevenly across the country, with differences between federal states and between urban and rural areas.
On average, the population in rural areas is much older than in urban areas.



Picture 2: Screenshot from "trinkwasser-unterwegs.de"

[4] Robert Koch Institut: Gesundheitliche Auswirkungen von Hitze
[5] Ärztekammer Berlin: Gefahr durch Hitze: Schutzmaßnahmen für obdachlose Menschen in Berlin
[6] https://www.trinkwasser-unterwegs.de/

However, there also seem to be far more drinking fountains in urban areas. This means that a significant proportion of elderly people do not have adequate access to public drinking water, despite being one of the most vulnerable groups.

Drinking fountains in public buildings and schools

Public buildings, especially schools, often have no drinking fountains. But there are various initiatives installing drinking fountains or dispensers. Berlin for example has installed 495 drinking water dispensers in primary and special schools as part of the "Drinking Water Dispensers at Primary Schools" programme[7], promoting better nutrition for children. Each school must have at least one dispenser, and students are not charged.

Refill stations

Since 2017, the Refill Germany movement has encouraged tap water consumption to reduce plastic waste. The goal is to create a network of refill stations. There are currently around 8,000 throughout the country.A refill sticker in a shop window or on the door of an establishment (such as a youth club) indicates that you can fill your water bottle with tap water there for free.[8]

Picture 3: Example of a refill station (Refill Deutschland)

Administrative background and responsibilities for drinking fountains

The owner or operator of drinking fountains is responsible for their operation and ensuring compliance with the relevant requirements according to the Drinking Water Ordinance (TrinkwV). In the case of public water fountains, this responsibility usually falls to the local authority. Key duties include planning, constructing and operating the facilities in accordance with established guidelines, as well as reporting and taking action as required. Operators must also regularly test the drinking water in accordance with the legal requirements. The Health Department is responsible for monitoring these tests and ensuring that the operator fulfils their obligations.[9] Specific responsibilities for public drinking fountains are often not clearly defined. Initiatives to install drinking fountains often originate with the environmental agency and climate

[7] Berliner Wasserbetriebe: Klassenziel erreicht: knapp 500 Trinkwasserspender an Grundschulen
[8] https://refill-deutschland.de/
[9] Bund-Länder-Arbeitsgruppe „Kleinanlagen“ / Umweltbundesamt Berlin / Bad Elster (2021): Empfehlungen zur Überwachung von Trinkwasserbrunnen - Leitfaden für Gesundheitsämter

protection department, while the urban planning office, parks department and/or civil engineering office are responsible for the technical execution. In rare cases, there may be a dedicated fountain department or a designated contact at the local water supplier.[10]

Legal efforts towards water accessibility in public spaces

In 2010 the United Nations had formally recognized that access to clean, safe, drinkable water is a human right.[11] Clean water and sanitation are also one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals from the 2030 Agenda, accepted by all UN Member States in 2015.[12]
The central legal act on the EU level for drinking water is the **Drinking Water Directive**.[13] Following its renewal in 2021, Article 16 of the directive states that Member States should take 'necessary measures' to improve or maintain access to water for all, with a particular focus on vulnerable individuals and marginalised groups. In order to promote the use of tap water for consumption, Member States are obliged to install outdoor and indoor facilities in public places, taking into account specific local conditions wherever possible. The inclusion of Article 16 in the renewed directive can be attributed to the first successful EU Citizens Initiative – Right2Water.[14]
The **Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation** refers to the Drinking Water Directive and states that Member States shall incentivise restaurants, canteens, bars, cafés and catering services to serve tap water to their customers, free of charge or for a low service fee, in reusable or refillable containers, as a waste prevention measure.[15]
According to German law, access to drinking water in public places is regulated by the **Water Resources Act**. This Act stipulates that drinking water must be supplied via the pipe network through indoor and outdoor facilities wherever this is technically possible and reasonable.[16]

Public drinking fountains in other countries

Other cities and countries are already on the right track to providing more drinking water in public places and implementing regulations to minimize waste. Here are some examples:

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[10] Steger, L. (2023). *Wasser ist (k)ein Luxusgut. Analysen und Empfehlungen zu Trinkbrunnen im urbanen öffentlichen Raum* [Diploma Thesis, Technische Universität Wien]. reposiTUm. https://doi.org/10.34726/hss.2023.112082
[11] United Nations (press release): UN united to make the right to water and sanitation legally binding
[12] United Nations: The 17 SDGs
[13] European Union: Directive (EU) 2020/2184 of the European Parliament and of the Council
[14] https://right2water.eu/
[15] European Union: Regulation (EU) 2025/40 of the European Parliament and of the Council
[16] Gesetze im Internet: Wasserhaushaltsgesetz - WHG

Vienna (Austria)

There are around 1,300 drinking fountains for approximately 3 million people in Vienna, with more in densely populated areas. Drinking fountains are incorporated into urban expansion and redesign projects that involve various stakeholders. The drinking fountains are managed by Wiener Wasser, the urban water supplier, which has established a clearly defined competence centre. Initial construction costs are covered by city district budgets, while maintenance is funded through a fee-based system incorporated into the water price. Drinking fountains owned by other municipal departments or the federal government are subject to agreements with Wiener Wasser. The city's public relations strategy for the public fountains includes an online map that is freely accessible, media relations, and a feedback platform that is available to the entire administration. There are also city tours that focus on drinking fountains.[17]

Zurich (Switzerland)

With over 1,200 drinking fountains, Zurich has one of the highest fountain densities of any city in the world. All of the fountains provide high-quality drinking water, with around 800 of them connected directly to the municipal water supply. The city's water comes mainly from Lake Zurich, with additional spring water sources. An extensive network spanning 150 kilometres supports regular consumption and emergency water supply. The city diligently maintains these fountains, ensuring they are clean and operational for public use and enhancing the overall quality of life in Zurich.[18]

France

In 2020, France passed an act of law against waste and for a circular economy (Anti-Gaspillage pour une Économie Circulaire)[19], with the goal of reducing the number of single use plastic products. As a part of this law from 1st January 2022, all public establishments must have at least one public drinking fountain where it is reasonably feasible to do so. Each venue must provide one drinking fountain for every 301 people, and an additional fountain for every subsequent 300 people. This requirement applies to various types of facilities, including public entertainment venues, sports halls, educational institutions, cultural establishments, administrative offices, and business premises.[20] Furthermore, restaurants and bars must

[17] Steger, L. (2023). *Wasser ist (k)ein Luxusgut. Analysen und Empfehlungen zu Trinkbrunnen im urbanen öffentlichen Raum* [Diploma Thesis, Technische Universität Wien]. reposiTUm. https://doi.org/10.34726/hss.2023.112082

[18] Stadt Zürich: Umwelt & Energie > Wasser > Trinkwasser > Brunnen

[19] Légifrance: LOI n° 2020-105 du 10 février 2020 relative à la lutte contre le gaspillage et à l'économie circulaire (1)

[20] Légifrance: Decree specifying the categories of establishments subject to this obligation and the terms and conditions

provide their customers with access to cool or room-temperature drinking water, and clearly indicate this on their menus.

United States of America

Although there is no federal law mandating a minimum number of water fountains in each building, there are several federal and local regulations requiring drinking fountains in certain buildings. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires public buildings and commercial facilities to have accessible drinking fountains for individuals with disabilities.[21] Additionally, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards require employers to provide safe drinking water for their employees.[22]

As an US-American who has lived in Berlin this past summer, I was surprised that such a major German city did not have a lot of drinking fountains as I expected. In the USA there is a drinking fountain almost everywhere. So it came as a bit of a shock to me that such an advanced city, like Berlin, would not have that same amenities available for its citizens. On the days where it is high 80s and sometimes more than 90 degrees fahrenheit and seeing people sweating and exhausted from the heat, it seemed that having more drinking fountains would be extremely helpful to the public. There were also some days when I would be walking around exploring the city and would just want a sip of water but did not want to pay the expensive 3-4 euros for it. Water sustains human life and is extremely necessary for growth and well being. As such there needs to be more drinking fountains implemented throughout Germany.

Thoughts on the situation of drinking fountains in Germany by an intern who came to a tip: tap from the U.S.

More examples

In **Spain**, environmental law[23] specifically states that public spaces and buildings must make tap water more accessible. Restaurants and hotels must offer tap water free of charge and all food retailers must accept reusable containers if a customer requests that a food or drink be placed in one.
Or in the **UK**, establishments that serve alcohol must provide free tap water for customers. Schools are legally required to provide drinking water for pupils and employers must provide free drinking water in the workplace for all their employees.

[21] ADA Compliance Directory: Drinking Fountains and Water Coolers
[22] U.S. Department of Labor - Occupational Safety and Health Administration: 1915.88 - Sanitation
[23] Agencia Estatal Boletín Oficial del Estado: Ley 07/2022, de 8 de abril, de residuos y suelos contaminados para una economía circular.

Securing access, strengthening the future

In recent years, considerable progress has been made in establishing more public drinking fountains in Germany. However, heat stress and the environmental impact caused by the excessive use of (single-use) plastic bottles continue to increase, so more action is needed than ever before. Other cities and countries are demonstrating what can be achieved with the right responsibilities and regulations in place. We at a tip: tap have a clear vision: one drinking fountain per 1,000 inhabitants. To get closer to this goal, we need to join forces and get politicians, local government, planning administrators, water suppliers, and the public working together to meet the demand for public spaces that serve the common good. Free services such as refill stations, provided by civil society, are a valuable addition to the cause, and illustrate the widespread demand for easy, uncomplicated access to drinking water for everyone. Furthermore, we recommend that gastronomic establishments serve tap water free of charge or at a low cost, in order to support the path towards making our country more sustainable and heat-resilient.

How or where to find the next drinking fountain?

Here are some websites or apps that can help to locate the next possibility to get some tap water:

1. "Trinkwasser unterwegs" of the German Association of Energy and Water Industries (Bundesverband der Energie- und Wasserwirtschaft) lists around 1,400 official public drinking fountains.
2. "Watrify" is a non-commercial open data project created by Jan Schuhmacher from Karlsruhe. It displays all the available drinking water points in a given area on an interactive map. The data comes from OpenStreetMap (OSM) and official sources.
3. Refill stations but also drinking fountains can be found on the "Karte von Morgen", an interactive online platform for initiatives promoting change and for sustainable companies.
4. For France 22,000 fountains can be found on the "Water Points Map" of the project "Zero bouteille plastique" and "No plastic in my sea".
5. FreeTaps is a free, collaborative app developed by the non-profit organisation Eaupen. It helps you find the closest water point. It also enables you to reference a water point that is not on the map, and this will be added.

Further reading

- ***reposiTUm: Wasser ist (k)ein Luxusgut. Analysen und Empfehlungen zu Trinkbrunnen im urbanen öffentlichen Raum***
  → Masterthesis from Lotta Steger at the TU Wien.
- ***Untapped: Promoting tap water in Europe***
  → Report from Aqua Publica Europea on concrete actions by public water operators to foster confidence in tap water thus benefitting people and the planet.
- ***Which Countries and Cities Have the Most Water Fountains?***
  → UK Bathroom Warehouse QS Supplies obtained figures on public drinking fountains from the OpenStreetMap website and compared the number of public drinking fountains against local population numbers (per 100,000 people).

Picture references

- Picture 1:
  https://atiptap.org/files/studie_gutcert_pcf_wasser.pdf
- Picture 2:
  https://www.trinkwasser-unterwegs.de/
- Picture 3:
  https://refill-deutschland.de/