Assessment Report

IS RETURNING HOME SAFE?

CHILDREN RETURNING TO FRONTLINE AREAS OF UKRAINE

JANUARY 2026
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Data collection was conducted by Middle East Consulting Solutions-MECS. This report reflects the findings of the survey and the views, experiences, and observations shared by respondents at the time of data collection. These do not represent the official position of Save the Children. Any value judgements are those of the respondents. The report aims to reflect realities on the ground and does not intend to reinforce or perpetuate stereotypes.

Photo on the cover: Katya Moskalyuk/Save the Children. Tymofii's* amily returned to their home in the Mykolaiv region after fleeing to Poland.

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Acronyms

CFS	Child-Friendly Spaces
CNAP	Centre for Administrative Services
CP	Child Protection
CPIMS+	Child Protection Information Management System
ERW	Explosive Remnants of War
FPV	First Person View (drones)
HLP	Housing, Land, and Property
HNRP	Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
KII	Key Informant Interview
MECS	Middle East Consulting Solutions
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MRE	Mine Risk Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PFA	Psychological First Aid
SCI	Save the Children
UAH	Ukrainian Hryvnia
UXO	Unexploded Ordnance

LIST OF FIGURES

PROJECT SUMMARY

Type of study	Needs Assessment
Name of the project	Is Returning Home Safe? Children Returning to Frontline Areas of Ukraine
Project Start and End dates	October 2025 – January 2026
Project duration	Three months
Project locations:	Kharkiv, Sumy, Donetsk, and Kherson regions
Thematic areas	Families with children who have returned to frontline areas following displacement
Sub themes	Education, Protection
Donor	Save the Children International
Overall objective of the project	Needs and reasons behind return movements to frontline areas from areas of displacement/Push and Pull factors

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

As the full-scale war of Ukraine transitioned through late 2024 and into 2025, the humanitarian community began observing a complex and counter-intuitive demographic phenomenon: a high influx of returns of families with children to areas of active hostilities, with CPIMS+ monitoring having identified a growing number of households migrating toward frontline areas, especially Kharkiv, Donetsk, Kherson, and Sumy oblasts. This trend contradicts the standard logic of conflict migration: instead of populations moving away from danger as would be normally expected, families are entering communities characterised by volatility, a lack of safety and security, as well as infrastructural and essential service gaps.

Rather than being a choice rooted in optimism or an improved sense of security, the decision to return often appears to be a symptom of "socio-economic expulsion" from safer regions. Data indicates that these movements are primarily driven by poor living conditions in displacement settings, severe financial hardship, and seasonal requirements such as agriculture and property maintenance. For many families, the risk of poverty and destitution in displacement has become less bearable than the likelihood of physical harm in their home community. Some families return shortly after receiving evacuation-related support, highlighting the cyclical and desperate nature of displacement. While return may offer a perception of normalcy, access to Housing, Land, and Property (HLP), or basic livelihood opportunities, it exposes families, *and particularly children*, to renewed and acute vulnerabilities.

The security situation along Ukraine's frontline remains highly volatile, with frequent combat clashes, drone strikes, and shelling affecting both military and civilian areas. Despite these clear dangers, the 'waiting for evacuation' strategy is no longer sufficient to address the reality on the ground. Children in these returning families face heightened vulnerabilities, with coping mechanisms that are often underdeveloped or exhausted.

The return process precipitates a cascade of specific protection risks:

- **Physical Threat**: Increased exposure to life-threatening safety risks, including artillery shelling, mines, and armed presence.
- **Educational Disruption**: Loss of access to quality education, particularly where schools are damaged, closed, or deemed unsafe, forcing education underground or onto unreliable digital platforms.
- **Psychosocial Distress**: Significant stress, anxiety, and fear resulting from prolonged exposure to conflict (such as frequent air alerts) and instability.
- **Social Isolation**: Disruption of peer relationships as children leave behind friends and safe environments where they may have resided for several years.
- **Service Gaps**: Limited access to child protection services, recreational activities, and safe, child-friendly adapted spaces.

In regions like Kharkiv and Sumy, local social services report that children are often hidden at home to avoid forced evacuations. In addition, reports from frontline regions show increasing parental refusal to evacuate children, despite ongoing shelling and drone attacks, heightening their exposure to life-threatening risks. These patterns make it extremely challenging for social services and humanitarian actors to track needs and provide timely interventions.

The lack of systematic tracking and limited communication channels restricts broader understanding of children's experiences.

➢ See **Annex I – Secondary Data Review** for a detailed background and contextual overview.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF STUDY

SCOPE

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, vulnerabilities, and coping strategies of children who have returned, either temporarily or for longer periods, to live in frontline communities in Ukraine following displacement. By examining the factors driving family returns, the emotional and psychosocial impact on children, and their access to essential services and support networks, the research aims to inform and strengthen Save the Children's programming. The findings will support the development of targeted interventions that address the unique needs of this highly vulnerable group and enhance protection and resilience in war-affected areas.

The main objectives of the study are:

- ✓ *Objective 1*. Identify the **reasons behind return movements** to frontline areas from areas of displacement and explore **push and pull factors** influencing movement decisions of families with children.
- ✓ *Objective 2*. Capture the **emotional and psychosocial experiences** of both displaced and returnee children.
- ✓ *Objective 3*. Understand the **coping strategies** of displaced and returnee boys and girls, including those related to **social integration and** access to quality **education,** child **protection services** and/or any other **support networks**.

STAKEHOLDERS AND AUDIENCE

The primary intended audience of this assessment is internal, and it includes Save the Children's technical advisors and thematic programme managers in the Ukraine response programme, who will use the findings to inform needed adjustments in program design, refine beneficiary selection criteria, and consider adapted actions for returnee children in frontline areas if needed. The assessment also targets the broader Child Protection community within the humanitarian response in Ukraine, offering evidence to guide coordinated protection efforts and service delivery, particularly as funding and programming is fast reducing across 'safer' regions in Western and Central Ukraine.

Externally, the findings will also be shared with key donors to support fundraising efforts for tailored interventions, and with advocacy partners and system-strengthening actors, including government stakeholders and child protection networks, to promote policy and operational changes that better address the needs of children returning to high-risk zones.

Simultaneously, and equally importantly, findings will also be used to advocate for increased donor and international community support to displaced persons in Western and Central Ukraine.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

STUDY APPROACH AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS

This study adopted a mixed methods design, combining a thorough secondary data review with primary data collection through interviews. The secondary data review included in-depth information from various sources including sectoral protection reports, government statistics, and relevant assessments conducted by Save the Children, MECS, and other humanitarian actors.

Primary data was gathered through quantitative and semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders, including:

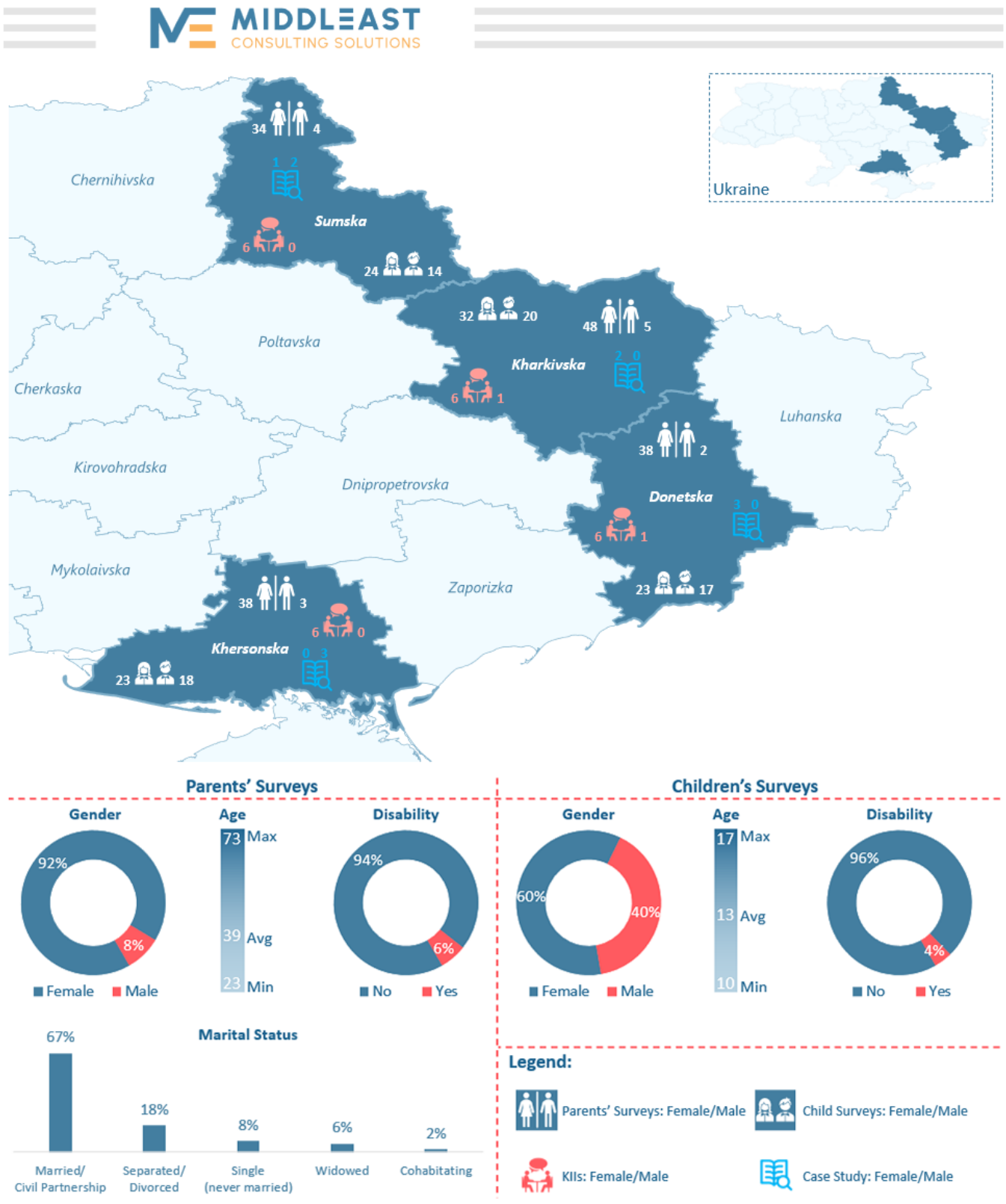
- Local and regional social service providers for children
- NGO staff and humanitarian actors involved in child protection and displacement response
- Social workers and case management teams
- Caregivers and families who have returned to frontline areas from displacement
- Children from returnee families, using age-appropriate and child-sensitive interview techniques

Sampling was purposive, targeting families with children who have returned to frontline areas following displacement. Participants were selected from among the children and families participating in CP programming run by Save the Children and their partner organisations in the aforementioned oblasts, along with other sources identified during the course of the research, ensuring relevance and access to current information.

Given the cyclical and temporary nature of many returns, the sampling approach was adapted to account for mobile households and short-term returnees, to capture a more accurate picture of children's lived experiences. The sample sizes were set based on SCI's requirements and considering timeframe and resource constraints.

- **Secondary Data Review:** MECS completed a secondary data review utilising open-source information and publications made available by reputable agencies. SDR findings are available in *Annex I*.
- **Key Informant Interviews (*26 KIIs*):** Conducted with a purposively selected range of stakeholders including local and regional children's service providers, local authority representatives (including Education Departments), NGO staff and humanitarian actors involved in Education, CP, and displacement response, as well as social workers, MHPSS specialists, and legal experts. A total of 24 females and 2 males participated. Per oblast, the total number of interviews were as follows: Donetska 7, Kharkivska 7, Khersonska 6, and Sumska 6.
- **Caregiver Interviews (*172 surveys*):** Semi-structured interviews with returnee parents/caregivers to explore return motivations, challenges, and children's wellbeing. Targets achieved were as follows: Kharkivska: 53, Khersonska: 41, Donetska: 40, and Sumska: 38. On the whole, a total of 92% were female, and 8% were male.
- **Child Interviews (*171 surveys*):** Conducted using trauma-informed, age-appropriate, child-friendly tools to understand experiences, coping strategies, and access to support. The interviews engaged children of the targeted families, provided they were of a minimum age of 10 years old. Respondents were 60% girls and 40% boys.
- **Field Notes and Observations:** Collected by MECS field researchers and SCI social worker/case management teams during data collection to supplement interview data.

- **Case Studies:** A total of 11 case studies were conducted with the aim of garnering a detailed understanding of return movements and experiences from the perspectives of both caregivers and children. Participants were identified through the course of primary data collection, in consultation with SCI, and included 6 girls and 4 boys aged 9 to 16 years old from all 4 targeted oblasts. Case studies are available as an annex to this report.



CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

During the data collection phase, the research team navigated several challenges, primarily associated with the volatile security environment, disruptions to critical infrastructure, and the sensitive nature of the research topic.

Logistical and Infrastructural Challenges

- **Timeline Extensions:** Frequent power outages resulted in the data collection process taking 1.5 to 2 times longer than originally projected.
- **Adaptive Scheduling:** To accommodate respondent availability during limited power windows, surveys were often conducted at irregular hours, including weekends and late-night sessions (extending to 22:00 upon respondent requests).
- **Connectivity Solutions:** In Kharkivska, Sumska, and Khersonska, the research team frequently pivoted from digital platforms to telephone interviews to bypass internet connectivity issues. Approximately one-third of KIIs required multiple rescheduling attempts due to unexpected power cuts.

Stakeholder Engagement and Field Access

Securing KIIs was challenging due to the high-stress environment in frontline regions, with a significant portion of the initial contact list being unavailable or declining participation. This required MECS' activation of alternative recruitment networks.

- **Donetska:** This region presented the highest barrier to access. It was not feasible to ensure participation of local authorities due to ongoing mandatory evacuations and high safety concerns. As an alternative, MECS relied on its own NGO and social work networks to reach out to stakeholders, though securing a dedicated Child Protection sectoral representative in this specific location did not prove feasible.
- **Khersonska:** Despite heavy shelling and infrastructure failures, individual surveys in this oblast were efficiently completed. While official authority engagement was low (with 2 out of 6 contacts participating), the team successfully met targets by combining SCI-provided contacts with own wider civil society networks.
- **Sumska and Kharkivska:** Challenges in these regions were driven primarily by extreme respondent workload and scheduling conflicts rather than refusals. This required scheduling interviews during holiday periods and over-inviting respondents to compensate for potential attrition.

Sampling and Operational Constraints

- **Coordination and Sampling Balance:** Primary data collection involved parallel streams between MECS enumerators and SCI/IP case workers. Due to the fluid nature of field operations, exact survey quotas fluctuated, resulting in some minor variances in the final sample distribution across target oblasts despite efforts to ensure uniformity.
- **Targeting Adult Male Respondents**: The sample exhibits a gender imbalance favouring female respondents, a systemic challenge consistent with data collection efforts across Ukraine. Intensified mobilisation measures have created a widespread reluctance among adult males to engage with external enumerators or disclose their location, limiting the feasibility of achieving a statistically equal gender split despite targeted outreach attempts.
- **Age-Related Safeguarding Protocols:** Due to SCI's requirement of mobilising a specific toolkit with age-appropriate data collection methods for children age 9 and below, and the time constraints which rendered this unfeasible, direct data collection was ultimately restricted to children aged 10 and older. This resulted in having to exclude some previously identified households with younger children (ages 7–9). Analytically, this also represents a limitation, as the specific experiences of early school-age children are less represented in the primary data than those of adolescents.

KEY FINDINGS

I. DRIVERS BEHIND RETURN MOVEMENTS

Factors Influencing Frontline Area Movements of Families with Children

While return movements are increasingly observed over the past year, data from key informants (KIs) shows that trends are inconsistent and heavily dictated by sub-regional security levels as well as seasonal factors.

Returning family profiles are primarily dictated by regional security levels and economic necessity, resulting in two distinct patterns: "pendulum/seasonal migration" for short-term tasks (land cultivation, property checks, document processing, and retrieving household assets) and long-term returns driven by financial exhaustion in displacement, the inability to afford rent/utilities in safe regions, lack of employment in displacement, and ownership of intact housing in the home community.

The return of families with children to frontline areas from areas of displacement is driven primarily by a combination of economic exhaustion and a powerful, often irrational, psychological pull toward home. Across all four regions – Donetska, Kharkivska, Khersonska, and Sumska – the dominant theme is the failure of the displacement experience to provide a sustainable alternative to life in a war zone and that economic hardship in displacement is the primary driver for return. Respondents consistently cite the inability to afford high rent prices and the lack of employment opportunities in safer regions ("areas of displacement") as the critical "push" factors forcing families back to high-risk zones. A secondary, yet powerful driver is social isolation and stigma experienced in displacement. Many returnees reported feeling unwelcome or socially excluded in host communities (often cited as Western or Central Ukraine).

The need to protect physical assets, maintain property, ensure food security through subsistence farming (in rural communities) and the promise of more accessible humanitarian aid in frontline zones act as significant pull factors.

Emotional attachment to "home" and family unity are also significant "pull" factors. Families often return to reunite with husbands or elderly parents who refused to evacuate. As one Donetska Local Authority KI explained, "*Members of the family who never left (the elderly or those with disabilities) often become an anchor that forces people to return*."

While security risks remain high, some respondents noted that families perceive home as "emotionally safer," where a Donetska lawyer noted that "*At home, they feel more confident because they are in their native environment*."

Generally, many returns are long-term due to economic failure in displacement, but there is a distinct pattern of short-term returns to check on property or harvest crops, particularly noted in areas like Khersonska and Sumska. However, according to some KIs, the return trend recently appears to be stalling or reversing in Donetska and parts of Kharkivska oblasts.

Worth mentioning is that while most KIs see returns as an economic necessity, a Donetska Local Authority KI presented a contrasting view, noting that in her specific department, they see more families leaving rather than returning, or that those who remain never left in the first place. She argued that "*Children have no place in frontline territories. The best support would be the provision of high-quality housing in safe regions*."

Oblast	Overview of Return Trends
Donetska	Returns were frequently reported to be long-term, especially due to the fact that families have run out of funds to pay rent in safe regions. However, KIs note a rising trend of short-term visits specifically to retrieve furniture, appliances, and belongings as the security situation deteriorates. While the significant return wave with stable long-term stays observed in 2023–2024 has largely ceased, the trend in 2025 changed, and data from early 2025 onwards, combined with several KI reports, suggests a shift toward evacuation rather than returns as the frontline approaches or due to winter conditions. The returns which occurred earlier were primarily short-term. The "high cost of rent and lack of employment in the new location" were the primary factors behind long-term returns. Families who fled early in the war have exhausted their savings and find themselves unable to compete in the rental markets of safer cities like Kyiv or Lviv. A Donetska Lawyer KI confirmed this, stating, "*Families return home for a long term due to a lack of funds to pay for rented housing in other regions. [...] Social stigmatisation of individuals from the Donetsk region (for example, accusations that the war started because of them) are key reasons for return.*"
Khersonska	Return durations are strictly divided by security zones: a clear distinction was made between "zones of possible combat," where housing is intact and returns are steady, and "active combat zones," which experience unstable "pendulum migration" with families practicing short-term returns to repair damaged roofs or gardens before fleeing again during escalations. KIs mentioned families moving back and forth depending on the intensity of shelling. A specific profile includes families who returned briefly from distant areas of Ukraine or abroad to benefit from humanitarian aid or specific government payouts (e.g. 19,400 UAH) without the intention of staying. An NGO representative added that the duration of displacement varies, but "*many stay as close to home as possible to monitor their property, only moving further away if their homes are completely destroyed,*" while a CP Specialist highlighted that many households continue returning despite having been evacuated multiple times.
Sumska	Returns are less of a "steady trend" and more of a series of isolated "individual cases." One NGO representative suggested a split where approximately 50% of returns are long-term, while the other half are short-term visits lasting only a few days to a few weeks. For instance, specific communities reported mass long-term returns starting in October 2024, motivated by the need to survive on subsistence farming and household livestock. In other areas, returns are strictly short-term (weeks to a month) for property maintenance or to visit elderly relatives who refused to evacuate. Families often return to reclaim their lives after the initial shock of evacuation. "*The primary driver here is a weariness of displacement: they are tired of shelters, they want to return to their lives - home.*"
Kharkivska	Returns are heavily influenced by the perceived stabilisation of the city versus the surrounding areas and by "*the high cost of living and employment problems in areas of displacement*." KIs describe a fragmented profile where some families return long-term, while others engage in seasonal "pendulum migration." Mass returns are noted in the Izium raion, while returns to the Kupiansk raion are minimal due to destruction and mandatory evacuations. While one psychologist noted a significant increase in the influx of returnees over the last six months, a Regional Donetska/Kharkivska Border Regional Coordinator flagged a "*moderately growing trend toward evacuation in areas closer to the active combat lines*." Returns to areas closer to the frontlines in this region are frequently short-term, either seasonal (from spring and until the cold sets in) for land cultivation or motivated by administrative requirements, such as property checks/maintenance and renewing documents. Some families return for longer periods but remain highly mobile, leaving again when shelling intensity increases. Overall, the data indicates that the "steady return" observed in previous periods has transitioned into a pattern of high-mobility fluctuation linked to safety risks and economic survival.

"Despite the fact that some families have been repeatedly evacuated, they continue to return to frontline areas. This is because the lack of financial prospects and the fear of poverty in safer areas makes the risks of the frontline seem manageable by comparison. However, drone threats are emerging as a psychological breaking point that makes even the comfort of home feel lethal."

- KI, CP Specialist, Khersonska

Social Connections and Community Dynamics

In displacement, social connections were frequently described as "fragile" or "hostile." Families often felt isolated, perceiving host communities as indifferent or even actively resentful. A Donetska lawyer explained that families often mentioned "*social stigmatisation, where residents from the East (Donetsk, Kherson) were accused of being responsible for the conflict; that the war started because of them.*" Another Donetska KI noted that "*the community does not view displaced persons positively; there is condemnation, especially because of language issues.*" This social isolation was rated by respondents as a primary push factor driving families back to the frontline.

Upon return, the restoration of social networks is viewed as the most significant benefit. Neighbours and extended family form a "*tight, united safety net which is vital for survival.*" For children, the primary positive coping strategy is the simple presence of "*friends and grandmothers*" and the comfort of being in their own homes.

"Stayers" versus "Returnees"

However, this renewed cohesion and sense of unity sits alongside the existing collective trauma and social friction. A Sumska CP specialist noted that while social connections are vital, there are still cases of social isolation upon return. The community composition has often changed, and a gap in understanding exists between those who stayed and those who fled.

Kharkivska and Khersonska KIs reported that returnees may face "non-acceptance" and judgement from neighbours who endured the occupation or constant shelling, leading to a difficult adaptation period. Families returning from safer areas must "learn from scratch" how to react to air raids and immediate shelling threats – skills that the "stayers" have long since normalised.

Furthermore, children frequently find that their original social circles have completely dissolved due to migration. This stress of relocation and the sudden shift in living conditions often manifests physically, with KIs noting that children frequently fall ill immediately upon return.

The Influence of Needs on Return Decisions

Property Maintenance and Food Security

In rural areas of Khersonska and Sumska oblasts, the "garden and plot" are central to survival. A Sumska social worker explained that families return because "*here is our farm, and we can actually survive on self-sufficiency.*" The ability to produce food (vegetables, poultry) provides a safety net unavailable in urban displacement settings. A Kharkivska psychologist echoed this sentiment, noting that "*at home, it is much easier because there is a household orchard or garden.*" For many, this is existential; as the social worker warned, "*if you do not plant a garden now, there will be nothing to eat in winter,*" describing the household plot as the only reliable source of nutrition.

Furthermore, the fear of losing property to looting or squatting is a major driver. A Khersonska KI reported that "*looting has unfortunately become systemic... as soon as a family is evacuated, their housing is pulled apart* ***immediately***." Consequently, families return to "*save what has been acquired over the years.*" In Donetska, an NGO representative considered property maintenance an extremely important factor, noting that "*utilities are charged even if no one lives in the building.*" This creates a financial burden that, for many, can only be managed by being physically present.

The Influence of Humanitarian Aid

"*We are not needed there [in displacement], nobody gives us anything*."

- Khersonska KI, quoting returnees

Interestingly, humanitarian aid was reported to flow more freely to frontline areas than to the "quiet areas" of displacement, acting as a significant pull factor. A Sumska Child Services representative admitted that "*in frontline communities, humanitarian aid is provided stably, unlike in rear communities and displacement hubs*." Families find that while they are merely "one of many" in a large city, they are prioritised in their home villages. A Khersonska KI noted that residents felt unwanted in areas of displacement, comparing the "pack of barley once a quarter" received in host communities to the robust support in their home settlements. A Donetska NGO representative observed that "*humanitarian aid allows people who are left with nothing to feel protected*," and a Kharkivska social service provider explained that the "*reduction of humanitarian aid in areas of displacement actively pushes people back, many of whom survive exclusively through that*."

While the scope and adequacy of humanitarian aid available to IDPs may depend on location and often be limited in practice, IDPs technically have access to a broader spectrum of assistance than returnees. Given that IDP support is cast as a strategic priority in the HNRP, IDPs are often prioritised for housing solutions, whereas returnees are frequently expected to manage the repair of their own damaged property with minimal state support. Returning home significantly impacts a family's financial eligibility, primarily through the automatic cessation of state-mandated internal displacement benefits. It is crucial to note that "returnee" is not a legally defined status in Ukrainian legislation; consequently, these families often lack rights to the additional or specialised state services available to IDPs. While a Khersonska KI mentioned specific one-time grants for returnees (e.g. 30,000 UAH per child), they noted that these require a complex application and interview process in Kyiv.

Eligibility for NGO-led aid varies based on specific donor requirements (some programmes exclusively target IDPs, while others focus on returnees) and specific vulnerability categories (large families, disabilities, low income) rather than displacement status alone. However, aid access is highly region-specific and, in some areas, returnees are excluded from distribution lists. A Kharkivska psychologist stated that humanitarian aid is "unfortunately not distributed to returnees" in her area, a finding confirmed by a social worker in Sumska. In contrast, KIs in Khersonska and Donetska reported that at the municipal and hromada levels, authorities typically provide basic humanitarian aid (food, hygiene kits) to all residents in need, regardless of their movement history. KIs in Sumska and Donetska described returning home as a "financial penalty"; families lose the only reliable cash flow they possessed (IDP payments) and are often removed from NGO priority lists, severely limiting their ability to purchase food and fuel.

Drivers of Displacement and Return

Return drivers for families are primarily economic, largely dictated by the failure of the displacement ecosystem rather than an improvement in frontline security. Many families have become psychologically accustomed to shelling or perceive the frontline as "predictable" danger, which is preferred in comparison to the "unpredictable" financial ruin of displacement. However, some do return under the false impression that the situation has stabilised, only to evacuate again during escalations.

On the whole, KIs considered the return trend to be an *economic calculation of survival*, where almost all (24 of 25) identified the high costs of living and employment challenges in displacement areas as the highest priority drivers for return. Families are effectively forced back to the frontlines because the "rear" areas have failed to provide a sustainable social and financial safety net.

➢ *Primary Push Factors*

According to KIs, the key push factors driving people away from their displacement communities were:

- **Financial and Employment Barriers in Displacement:** High rental prices in safe regions (ranging from 7,000 to 15,000 UAH) are cited as the most significant driver. Families often lack the income to cover rent and utilities simultaneously. In host communities, displaced adults face severe difficulty finding work that matches their qualifications, forcing them into low-skilled, low-paid roles. Furthermore, due to being away from their communities and support networks, the lack of alternate carers for children results in unemployment. The inability to generate income leads to the rapid depletion of savings, which is compounded by cuts in humanitarian assistance and IDP social payments in safer areas.
- **Socio-Emotional Drivers:** Families, particularly children, face stigma, regional discrimination, and bullying in schools in Central and Western Ukraine. Bullying is a specific driver for families returning so children can be "among their own."

Challenges in displacement often act as push factors which can encourage families to turn their sights back towards home.

Based on a majority of caregiver responses (*Figure 1 below*), the primary challenges in displacement were associated with **socio-emotional factors**: missing home and community came in first at 74% of the entire sample, and was followed by children feeling unhappy, stressed, or lonely (45%), as well as feeling unwelcome or excluded by local communities (30%). Some respondents also mentioned the desire for family reunification under "other" issues. This not only demonstrates the critical role that socio-emotional drivers play in return movements, but also validates KI statements around the topic.

Practical challenges also included:

- **Economic hardship**: High cost of housing/rent (55%), employment and income generation difficulties (55%), followed by humanitarian aid reductions or lack of availability (25%) and loss of IDP allowances or support (11%). While these issues were reported across all assessed oblasts, they were most pronounced in Kharkivska.
- **Service access difficulties**: Poor quality of available housing and accommodation (28%, disproportionately high in Donetska), difficulties accessing schools for children (18%, mostly in Kharkivska), and a general lack of access to essential services (17%, most notably in Kharkivska and Donetska).

On the significant variations for return drivers:

Poor Quality of Housing: IDPs from Donetska often exhibit lower employment rates and higher reliance on state benefits than other groups, forcing them into free or low-cost accommodation like collective sites and transit centres. These sites are frequently repurposed schools or dormitories that lack privacy, adequate WASH facilities, and accessibility for the elderly or persons with disabilities. For instance, Dnipropetrovska is the largest recipient of IDPs from Donetska. In cities like Dnipro and Zhovti Vody, collective sites operate at or near capacity. Consequently, many displaced persons are pushed into informal rental arrangements often shared, substandard housing without legal contracts or basic amenities.

Reduced or Unavailable Humanitarian Aid: Humanitarian assistance has been reduced and deprioritised across multiple oblasts. While in 2025 this was a significant drop the trend towards a decrease was reported in Kharkivska already in 2024. The higher variation most probably also stems from the fact that intra-oblast returns are more prevalent here, with much of displacement in Kharkivska happening within the region's boundaries as families prefer to stay closer to their home. For instance, a large share of returnees (31%) in Kharkivska have move back to their current communities from adjoining hromadas.

In Sumska, the negligible influence of aid reductions on return decisions stems from a baseline scarcity of assistance within the region and the timing of 2024 displacement surges coinciding with donor funding cliffs. This scarcity is not primarily driven by relocation to deprioritised western and central regions, but rather by the prevalence of intra-oblast displacement; populations largely remain within Sumska, where aid coverage is inconsistent.

Lack of Access to Essential Services and Difficulty for Children to Access School: Returnees to Donetska and Kharkivska primarily displace to hubs that are either overwhelmed (Dnipropetrovska) or actively targeted (Kharkiv), making the "host" environment actively inhospitable regarding services.

The same explanation is valid for the higher variation relating to the push factor of 'Difficulty for children to access schools' reported by returnees in Kharkivska.

Conscription of Males Resulting in Separation: The higher level of impact from this factor reported by returnees in Sumska can be explained by a more protracted displacement in the East and South. This means the trauma of separation is a current, primary stressor for Sumska returnees, whereas for returnees to other regions, long-term economic exhaustion has become the dominant driver over time. Sumska saw a 300% increase in displacement events in late 2024 due to cross-border incursions and cyclical mandatory evacuations (2024–2025) specifically targeting families with children from the 5km and 10km border zones. These often compel women and children to evacuate to transit hubs like Sumy City, while men remain behind due to martial law restrictions, asset protection, or fear of conscription at checkpoints.

Distribution of humanitarian aid to internally displaced people and other vulnerable groups in the Mykolaiv region. Artem Rybakov/Save the Children

Figure 1 - Key challenges encountered in displacement (source: caregivers)

	Donetska (n=40)	Kharkivska (n=53)	Khersonska (n=41)	Sumska (n=38)	Grand Total
We missed our home and community	73%	72%	76%	76%	74%
High cost of housing/rent	43%	68%	51%	55%	55%
Difficulty finding work or earning money	50%	68%	51%	45%	55%
My child(ren) feeling unhappy, stressed, or lonely	50%	45%	44%	39%	45%
Feeling unwelcome/excluded by the local community	33%	28%	29%	29%	30%
Poor quality of housing	70%	19%	15%	13%	28%
Humanitarian aid was reduced, stopped, or not available	20%	49%	22%	0%	25%
Difficulty for my child(ren) to access school	13%	34%	10%	11%	18%
Lack of access to essential services	20%	28%	10%	8%	17%
Loss of IDP allowances/support	15%	17%	5%	5%	11%
Conscription of males resulting in separation	8%	4%	7%	24%	10%
Conscription of males affecting employment	8%	6%	0%	3%	4%
Other	5%	2%	2%	3%	3%
We did not face significant challenges	3%	2%	5%	13%	5%

➢ *Primary Pull Factors*

According to KIs, the key pull factors drawing households to return to their locations of origin were:

Food Security and Subsistence: Many families ensure food security through subsistence farming, and therefore return to tend to their own land, gardens, and livestock. In home communities, families can survive on low "live money" because they do not pay rent and rely on homegrown food and local humanitarian distributions, something which is impossible in urban rental apartments.

Property Protection and Maintenance: Families return to prevent their homes from being stripped of belongings (furniture, appliances) or falling victim to squatting. Returns are also often prompted by the need to repair roofs and windows to prevent structural decay from dampness and frost before winter.

Socio-Emotional Drivers and Caregiving Responsibilities: A powerful emotional attachment to the home region and a desire to reunite families separated by evacuation is also one of the notable pull factors. Families return to care for elderly or disabled relatives who refused to evacuate, as well as pets and livestock that could not be taken to displacement sites.

When asked to rank specific factors by their impact on return decisions, findings from KIIs were as follows:

Rank	Factor	Details
1	High Cost of Living; Employment Challenges	This is the primary driver cited across all 24 interviews. Displaced families face exorbitant rental prices in safe regions, often ranging from 7,000 to 15,000 UAH, which consumes entire household incomes or savings. Families with small children, pets, or elderly members are frequently refused housing. Combined with the inability to find work in host communities, families choose the risk of shelling over the certainty of financial ruin.
2	Feelings of Social Isolation; Desire to be Home	Returnees report systemic bullying of children in schools in Central and Western Ukraine, where they are sometimes accused of "giving up" their territory. Language barriers, the need for a familiar environment, psychological "non-acceptance," and regional stigma all create a sense of being "strangers" in their own country. Returning to their own communities restores a sense of dignity, even under the threat of danger.
3	Humanitarian Assistance Reduction in Displacement	There is an inequality of aid distribution between "rear" and "frontline" areas. KIs highlighted that while aid is concentrated in frontline zones, families in displacement receive support either infrequently (e.g. once a quarter) or not at all. The loss of IDP status payments upon return is a known risk, yet the immediate availability of food, hygiene, and fuel kits in home communities acts as a significant pull factor for the most vulnerable.
4	Need to Protect/Repair Property, Tend to Gardens	Preventing looting and ensuring food security through subsistence farming. "Systemic looting" is reported; homes left empty are often stripped of furniture and appliances. Furthermore, for rural families, a garden and own produce are a "survival factor" – with many unable to afford buying food in urban markets. Many return briefly for maintenance/repairs before winter to prevent structural rot/damage.
5	Caregiving Responsibilities	This centres primarily around elderly relatives refusing evacuation and the inability to relocate livestock/pets. Many families are "anchored" by non-mobile elderly parents who refuse to leave their homes. Additionally, displacement sites (rented apartments or hostels) rarely allow pets or livestock, forcing owners of cats, dogs, or farm animals to return to care for them. While this factor acts as a strong factor preventing people from leaving, it is less often the reason they do return after successfully displacing. **Note**: While this was considered the least critical factor on the whole, it was reported to rank as a priority for some households.

Caregiver responses (*Figure 2 below*) strongly suggest that families are making a conscious decision to return to high-risk environments, prioritising a sense of belonging and home ownership over physical safety. The most dominant pull factors across all surveyed regions were rooted in identity and family unity. The highest rated reason for return across all oblasts, at 73%, was that "*This is our home; we have a right to be here.*" This is closely coupled with the influence of children on the return process; 64% cited their child's desire to come home or reunite with friends as a primary driver, indicating the potential prioritisation of their children's emotional stability and desire for social reconnection over the immediate threats of the conflict zone.

Furthermore, family reunification and care responsibilities remain an important pull factor: 62% returned because their "family and relatives are here," 27% due to care or support responsibilities (such as older or ill relatives who had not evacuated), and 9% to reunite with males who stayed behind due to conscription-related reasons.

Beyond socio-emotional pull factors, the drive to protect physical property emerges next, where over half of all respondents (52%) stated they returned to "check on, protect, or repair" their housing, reflecting the fear of losing one's only capital or assets. Subsistence livelihoods also play a distinct role, with 27% of caregivers returning to tend to gardens or farmland. This factor is

notably less relevant in the industrial zones of Donetska (10%) but acts as a significant driver in Kharkivska (36%) and Sumska (32%), where food security is closely tied to domestic agriculture.

Economic exhaustion in displacement is another critical factor forcing families back to dangerous areas where they can at least avoid the burden of rent. Across all oblasts, 37% returned because they "ran out of money or savings." This appears most acute in Donetska, where over half the respondents cited financial depletion as a primary reason for return, suggesting that in this active combat zone, return are often less of a choice and more of a financial necessity. While 17% mentioned the availability of humanitarian aid as a factor, it remains secondary to asset protection and identity. Similarly, the closure of temporary housing in displacement areas played a minor role overall (6%), indicating that the depletion of personal savings is a more common driver than the physical loss of shelter in host communities.

On the whole, in alignment with data from other sources, these responses provide strong evidence that families are returning despite a clear awareness of the lack of safety, particularly in the most volatile regions. This "safety paradox" is most visible in Donetska, where only 23% of respondents felt the "security situation had improved *enough*" to justify return. Yet, this region saw high return rates driven by home ownership (78%), with data likely reflecting trends from 2023-2024, and child preference (75%). Worth mentioning is that respondents in Sumska (66%) and Khersonska (56%) were more likely to cite improvements in security, suggesting that returns to these areas might be based on a more optimistic assessment of risk compared to the fatalistic necessity observed in Donetska.

Figure 2 - Primary reasons behind decision to return (source: caregivers)

	Donetska (n=40)	Kharkivska (n=53)	Khersonska (n=41)	Sumska (n=38)	**Grand Total**
This is our home; we have a right to be here	78%	74%	80%	61%	**73%**
My child(ren) wanted to come home/be with friends, family	75%	72%	59%	47%	**64%**
Our family or relatives are here	40%	77%	59%	66%	**62%**
To check on/protect, repair, or maintain our apartment/house	73%	49%	54%	32%	**52%**
We felt the security situation here had improved enough	23%	49%	56%	66%	**48%**
We ran out of money or savings	53%	36%	24%	37%	**37%**
To tend to our garden or farmland	10%	36%	29%	32%	**27%**
Family care or support responsibilities	20%	26%	24%	37%	**27%**
Cultural motivations	20%	26%	22%	8%	**20%**
We heard that humanitarian aid was available here	20%	19%	22%	8%	**17%**
Government HLP restoration incentives	15%	11%	20%	8%	**13%**
Conscription of males (reunification)	5%	4%	5%	24%	**9%**
The temporary housing/shelter we were in closed	10%	8%	2%	3%	**6%**
Conscription of males (fear)	10%	4%	0%	0%	**3%**
Other	3%	2%	5%	5%	**3%**

PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF RETURN

"*Expectations in communities of return are partially justified thanks to the reduction or elimination of rental costs, [but] the greatest difficulties are related to safety – shelling remains regular*."

- KI, Local Authority Representative, Donetska

Return Expectations versus Reality: KIs in Khersonska and Kharkivska report that when families return, their expectations are generally either only partially met or worse than anticipated. The perceived benefits of returning are largely intangible – psychological comfort, social reintegration, moral relief of being in a familiar environment, and the restoration of a sense of agency – though there are clear economic benefits in the cessation of rental payments. Even living in damaged homes is seen as preferable to paying for housing elsewhere. However, these benefits are often offset by the harsh reality of war. KIs further flagged that while returnees were able to avoid expenditures on accommodation, high food prices and a lack of "live money" often counteracted the savings made on rent.

Economic Relief: The most immediate benefit is financial; as repeatedly mentioned by KIs, families stop paying 7,000–15,000 UAH for a one-room apartment. A Sumska child services representative reported that expectations of return are partially met by the "reduction in rental costs." A Khersonska CP expert agreed, noting that "*at home, they do not have to pay their last [penny] for rent*."

Psychological and Social Benefits: Psychological comfort and the restoration of social status are also among major perceived benefits. In displacement, many felt like "second-class citizens" or "strangers," whereas returning restores their sense of belonging. The most cited benefit is the relief of being "among their own." Families value the ability to rely on their social networks, and this "*familiar environment among friends, relatives, and close people*" was particularly important for children, according to a Sumska KI.

"*In the village, it is almost impossible to "fall out of sight" – everyone is in full view… Returning here, they return to their native element – to parents, godparents, friends, and neighbours… This helps families and children integrate back faster*."

- KI, Child Protection Expert, Khersonska

Perceived Safety versus Real Danger: A frequently repeated statement concerns the "false sense of security" found at home. Many return under the impression that the situation has "calmed down," only to encounter constant sirens, regular shelling, and a pervasive threat of FPV drones. The hope for a gradual return to normal life is hindered by damaged housing, lack of heating, and unstable utilities (water, gas, electricity, internet). This disillusionment occurs because families often maintain an "idealised picture" of their community that does not match the current reality of ruined infrastructure and depopulated streets. A Kharkivska crisis manager noted that "*At home, stress is supposedly easier to overcome due to a false sense of security in the native home*." Families feel they can "read" the danger better in a familiar place; they know the sounds of the artillery and the location of the nearest cellar. As a Khersonska CP actor pointed out, returnees often perceive the shelling at home as "more predictable" than the random missile strikes in rear cities like Kryvyi Rih.

When asked about potential benefits experienced since returning, caregivers cited several: being in our own home (89%), being near our family, friends, community, and support networks (77%), the children seem happier or calmer (68%), lower cost of living (66%), and being able to work (62%). This was followed by being able to receive humanitarian (37%, lowest in Sumska) or government (19%, more pronounced in Khersonska, almost negligible in Donetska) assistance.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: PERCEPTIONS OF ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL SERVICES

The experience of accessing services is a significant, albeit negative, driver of return. Families frequently describe services in host communities as "formal," bureaucratic, and lacking in empathy. A Khersonska CP actor in noted that children in foster care and those deprived of parental care felt a profound lack of support in displacement, perceiving that they "*are not needed by anyone.*" This sense of alienation is compounded by a "hidden" existence; a Kharkivska KI observed that many displaced families live in host communities for extended periods without officially registering, effectively remaining under the radar of social, medical, and educational systems.

Upon return, however, the expectation of a restored "pre-war" life is met with a harsh reality; a Sumska KI described the "*discrepancy between imagination and reality, where the hope for normalcy is shattered by the total collapse of local infrastructure*." Many return to homes that are destroyed or partially damaged, requiring urgent repairs to roofs or windows before winter. This isolation is physical as well as structural; public transport and logistics have largely collapsed, leaving families in remote villages physically cut off from pharmacies, medical specialists, and administrative hubs.

These infrastructural failures create a domino effect on child development and family livelihoods. Frequent and prolonged outages of electricity, water, gas, and internet are standard, which directly hinders children's ability to participate in required online schooling. Because ground-level schools are often prohibited for safety, children are confined to digital platforms, leading not only to significant learning losses, but also to the regression of social skills, an issue which has been a critical focus area for education, CP, and MH stakeholders and caregivers alike.

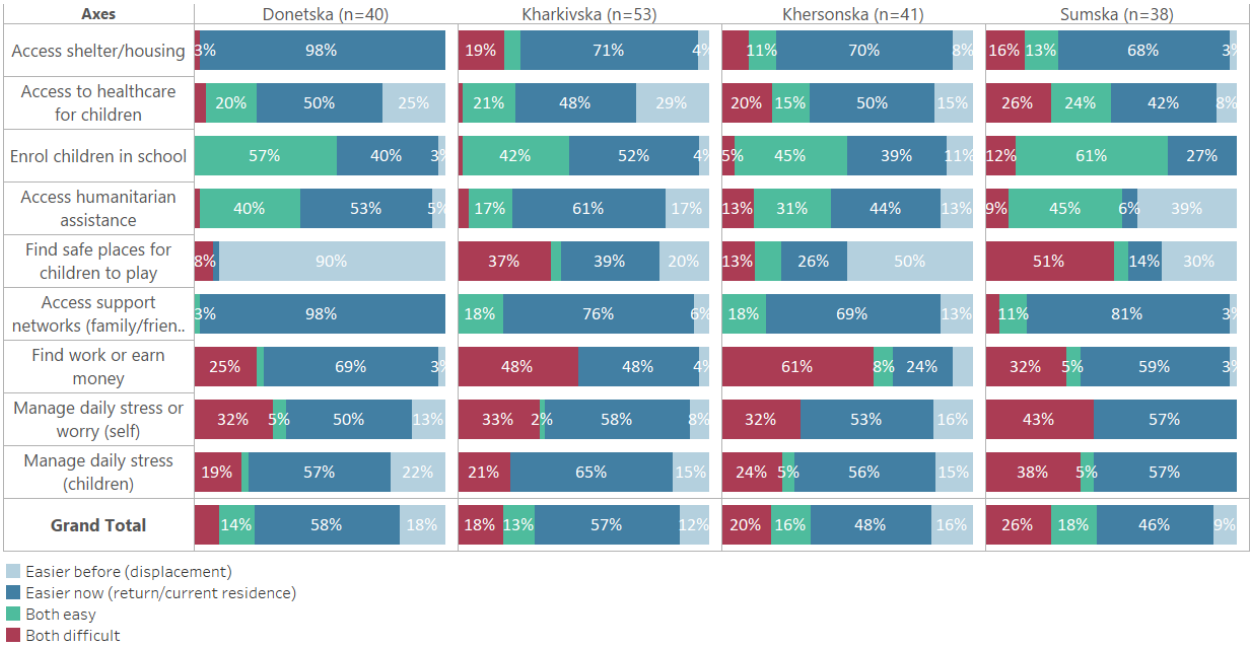
This educational void further creates a specific socio-economic trap: the lack of functioning schools and kindergartens prevents parents – particularly women, as the primary caregivers – from seeking employment, as children cannot be left unattended in dangerous zones. Furthermore, socialisation is severely restricted, with most community hubs and sports clubs closed or limited to groups of no more than five children.

Ultimately, the returnee experience is defined by a loss of safety nets. By leaving displacement, families regain a sense of belonging but lose their legal status as IDPs and the associated targeted assistance. They are left to navigate a landscape where, often, employment is non-existent, utilities are intermittent, and socialisation for children is restricted to small groups or online platforms due to security protocols. The trade-off was described as families "*exchanging the feeling of being second-class citizens in safety for the autonomy of home, but at the cost of essential services and physical security*."

Assessing responses of caregivers across the various axes in all four oblasts, on the whole, it appears that foundational stability (especially accessing housing and social connections) is easier in communities of return. On the other hand, physical safety and economic viability depict specific nuances per region.

Perceptions of axes which are more attainable in return are access to shelter and the restoration of support networks. Across all regions, the vast majority could more easily access housing in their current return locations compared to displacement, recorded at an overwhelming 98% in Donetska. Similarly, reconnecting with family and friends was considered drastically easier upon return, again peaking in Donetska at 98% and remaining high in Sumska (81%) and Kharkivska (76%). This reinforces the qualitative findings that the "pull" of home is rooted in the recovery of social capital/support networks and property ownership.

Figure 3 - Comparative experiences accessing specific activities (source: caregivers)



However, this ease of access does not extend to child safety or employment, where significant struggles persist:

- **Safe Places to Play:** In Donetska (90%) followed by Khersonska (50%), caregivers reported that finding safe places for children to play was easier in displacement, pointing to the chronic lack of safety in their regions of return. In Sumska (51%) and Kharkivska (37%) the relative majority felt that this was a difficult feat in both displacement and return.
- **Economic Viability:** Employment experiences were a clear reflection of the current realities, with the data points clustering around two key responses: on one hand, a portion of caregivers felt that finding employment and generating income was difficult regardless of their location, and on the other, they felt that it was easier in their locations of return. Qualitatively, KIs explain this division by the specific nature of the frontline economy: official employment is scarce and mostly limited to the service sector or critical infrastructure repair, creating a "huge demand for manual labour" – for example, men in Khersonska are "*constantly involved in repair work in the energy sector*." Agricultural livelihoods/subsistence farming, though common, were considered precarious due to critical water shortages impacting irrigation (Khersonska) or disrupted markets and resource scarcity making efforts economically unjustified (Kharkivska), often leaving families entirely reliant on pensions and humanitarian aid.
- **Managing Daily Stress**: Interestingly, this axis, for both adults and children, is frequently cited by at least half the sample as easier in communities of return across all regions. This suggests that despite the kinetic danger, the psychological comfort of being in one's own home and among familiar community networks alleviates the daily stress burden more effectively than the safety of displacement.

CAREGIVER COPING STRATEGIES

From "Waiting" to "Survival"

The transition from displacement to return drastically transforms the manner in which families manage risk: in displacement, coping was largely characterised by "waiting" and adaptation to a "temporary" life. While some families did attempt to integrate into local clubs, many resorted to negative strategies such as social isolation, avoiding contact, and constantly staying home. The primary focus was managing financial stress and securing shelter, often at the cost of social integration.

Following return, coping strategies shift from placing life "on hold" and long-term planning to immediate survival. While these strategies become more "active," they are also more dangerous, defined by a reliance on community bonds, humanitarian infrastructure, and a psychological "habituation" to danger.

Positive Strategies

Community Mobilisation and Mutual Aid: A key positive strategy described by KIs was the strengthening of community bonds. High levels of mutual support and self-organisation were reported as evident across all regions. Caregivers frequently engage in collective volunteerism, such as weaving camouflage nets or baking bread. A Khersonska KI noted that people in villages unite and engage in volunteer initiatives such as weaving camouflage nets or baking bread, which provide both a sense of purpose and emotional relief. A Kharkivska KI observed that "mutual aid between neighbours" has become a primary survival mechanism.

Focus on the Household and Routine: Families often cope by focusing on "controllable aspects of life," such as arranging the home, creating safety plans, and even going on trips, to distract from the uncontrollable nature of the war. Parents stabilise their mental state by concentrating on tangible tasks: repairing damaged housing, tending gardens for food security, and creating domestic routines. A Kharkivska KI also highlighted efforts to "*restore daily routine for the sake of the children*," while maintaining "*open communication about fears and safety risks*."

Parental Resilience: There is a noted trend of parents seeking psychosocial support through NGOs and participating in retraining programmes to acquire new skills. Maintaining open, age-appropriate dialogues with children regarding security risks was also cited as a key protective strategy.

Negative Strategies

Substance Use and Domestic Tension: Alcohol consumption was frequently cited as a pervasive negative coping mechanism among adults across all regions. Multiple KIs noted an increase in alcohol use as a way to "numb" constant fear and mask chronic stress caused by shelling and unemployment. This behaviour, coupled with emotional burnout, was noted to "*frequently manifest as increased family tension, irritability, and a rise in domestic violence*."

Normalisation of Risk and Fatalism: A dangerous psychological shift is the adoption of "living for today," which involves ignoring or downplaying security risks. A Sumska CP actor warned that "*our habit of ignoring air raid alerts and FPV drone threats can be very insidious*," while a Donetska local authority representative remarked, "*I have not met people who have a strategy. They just live one day at a time.*" Additionally, some parents ignore their own emotional needs, believing that total self-sacrifice – "*One must hold on for the sake of the children*." – is necessary, leading to severe burnout.

Avoidance of Professional Support: Despite the availability of services, cultural stigma around MH support remains a barrier. Many caregivers refuse professional psychological interventions, relying instead on the misuse of non-prescribed sedatives, antidepressants, or neuroleptics to manage their distress.

II. CHILDREN'S PSYCHOSOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

PERCEPTIONS OF WELLBEING AND SAFETY

In displacement, KIs believed the primary threat to children's wellbeing was social rather than physical, explaining that children frequently reported feeling "guilty for leaving home" and struggled with a sense of not belonging. Although physically safe, their emotional security was undermined by isolation, bullying, and the stress of their parents. Respondents noted that children's wellbeing was significantly eroded by hostility, stigmatisation, and marginalisation in host communities.

Upon return, this dynamic flips: despite the fact that the physical threat becomes acute, psychological comfort and confidence often tend to be restored. A Donetska KI noted that children feel more confident because they are "*in their native environment... in their own house, near friends*." However, this sense of safety was widely described as "*a dangerous illusion, a false sense of security stemming from the relief of returning to familiar surroundings*." Additionally, despite the immediate relief of being home, some KIs explained that many children exhibit signs of chronic anxiety, sleep disturbances (night terrors, enuresis), and regressive behaviours due to the relentless proximity of combat.

Specific, targeted threats also pose a flagrant risk to civilians' – and especially children's – safety: as a Khersonska CP actor noted, "*They consciously direct drones at children. It is not war; it is conscious entertainment by killing peaceful people*."

CHILDREN'S FRIEND AND PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS

"When children return, they are expecting and looking forward to reuniting with the friends they left behind. It is a truly painful moment for them when they find out that most have left."

- KI, Social Worker, Khersonska

Displacement and return have effectively shattered traditional peer networks. Instead of re-entering a familiar social circle, the child enters a "fragmented collective," requiring a process of repeated and exhausting socialisation.

Adolescents appear to be the most vulnerable to this network loss. Some KIs noted that teens are "more isolated" and often refuse to attend group activities due to a fear of judgement or bullying – "*I don't want to be laughed at again*." Consequently, peer support networks for returnee teens are often dysfunctional or non-existent, frequently replaced by the digital withdrawal described previously. One psychologist emphasised that for this demographic, the most critical form of support is simply "regular safe meetings."

In Donetska, an NGO worker noted that for those whose networks *did* survive, the presence of "friends and grandmothers" serves as a powerful, positive coping strategy, highlighting the protective value of even small remnants of the original social fabric.

"Here" versus "There"

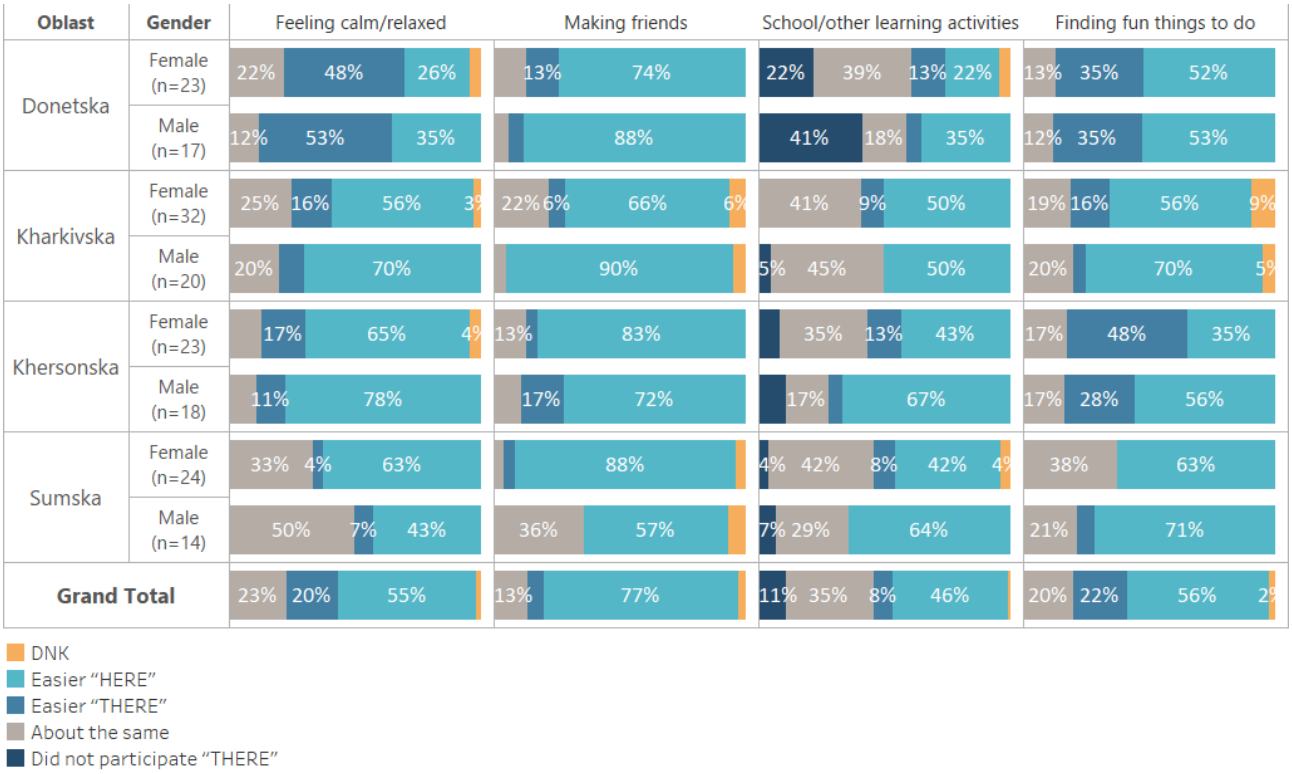
An analysis of children's reported experiences after returning to their home communities reveals a significant improvement in social and emotional ease compared to those during displacement, substantiating KI reports that despite the extreme challenges encountered in frontline areas, psychosocial wellbeing does improve following return.

A clear majority of children reported that making friends (77%) was easier in their current locations of return ("here"). Additionally, over half the sample also confirmed that finding fun things to do (56%) and generally feeling calm and relaxed (55%) were both easier "here." However, in the latter case, one clear discrepancy emerged: children in Donetska were notably

more likely to feel relaxed in their previous locations of displacement. This sentiment reflects the objective reality of the security environment, as the persistent threat of active military incursions and frontline proximity into the oblast directly undermines the psychological stability children typically associate with being home.

Responses regarding school and other learning activities presents a more complex image: while 46% of the total sample find learning easier "here", a substantial 35% reported that the ease of accessing education is "about the same" in return and displacement. Additionally, around 11% were not engaged in schooling in their locations of displacement, reinforcing the "waiting" state discussed by KIs.

Figure 4 - Ease of activities in return and displacement (source: children)



CHILDREN'S SHIFTING STRESSORS AND CHILD PROTECTION RISKS

Stressors in Displacement

- **Socio-Emotional Stress**: The vast majority of caregivers (85%) said their children's primary concern was missing home, and this was followed by their persistent fears over the safety of family members, friends, and/or animals who had stayed behind (50%).
- **Social Exclusion:** KIs reported that feelings of being "unwanted" or a "second-class citizen" were prevalent; additionally, Russian-speaking children and returnees from specific regions tended to face social stigmatisation and bullying in host communities. This was confirmed by 36% of caregivers (all oblasts, but particularly noteworthy in Kharkivska) who considered bullying and/or the inability to make friends a key stressor impacting their children.
- **Institutional Formality:** KIs explained that families often reported receiving more "formal" and less empathetic treatment from services in host regions compared to their home communities.
- **Economic Strain:** According to KIs, the high cost of rent and the struggle to find employment were the dominant anxieties for caregivers, which had significant impacts on children.

Stressors in Return

- **Security Threats:** KIs reported the constant threat to personal safety as the primary stressor manifesting in relentless shelling, missile strikes, and pervasive FPV drone threats. Caregivers echoed this, noting that children's key concerns were the safety of their family members (60%) and their own safety (58%).
- **Isolation:** According to KIs, the lack of internet represents a "loss of the only communication channel with the outside world," while the lack of physical contact with peers drives anxiety and depression. Caregivers also highlighted feelings of loneliness and disconnectedness from friends (28%) as a challenge, followed by feeling bored and having nothing to do (22%), and being unable to leave the house or yard due to ERW risks (15%).
- **Parental Anxiety:** KIs flagged that children absorb the exhaustion and aggression of their parents. The loss of IDP payments upon return, coupled with a lack of local jobs, creates an atmosphere of acute financial anxiety which children can "intensely feel."
- **Other Issues:** In addition to the above, some caregivers also noted that their children appeared to feel stressed about school-related issues (26%), as well as the possibility of having to move again (8%).

Figure 5 - Children's current primary concerns – in return (source: children)

	Donetska		Kharkivska		Khersonska		Sumska		Grand Total
	Female (n=23)	Male (n=17)	Female (n=32)	Male (n=20)	Female (n=23)	Male (n=18)	Female (n=24)	Male (n=14)	
My family being okay	74%	82%	75%	40%	74%	72%	71%	50%	68%
My schoolwork	17%	6%	59%	10%	57%	33%	58%	36%	37%
About friendship	0%	18%	44%	65%	35%	44%	33%	36%	35%
Being bored or having nothing to do	26%	41%	25%	10%	17%	39%	21%	0%	23%
Things happening in my community	30%	29%	9%	0%	4%	17%	25%	14%	16%
I don't really have worries right now	9%	0%	3%	15%	13%	11%	0%	7%	7%
I don't want to say	0%	0%	6%	5%	13%	0%	8%	29%	7%

When asked what topics were currently occupying their minds, on average, children selected two different areas of concern (between 1 to 5). The overwhelming priority across all regions and genders was the wellbeing of their family members (68%). This concern was particularly acute in Donetska (at 82% for boys and 74% for girls, coupled with the highest recorded concerns associated with "things happening in my community" compared to the other assessed oblasts). Academic and social pressures came next, with 37% of children thinking about schoolwork, and 35% about friendships.

Some notable discrepancies emerge at the gender level: across all oblasts, girls expressed notably higher levels of concern about schoolwork than boys did (particularly pronounced in Kharkivska at 59% of girls versus 10% of boys), while boys appeared to be more preoccupied with friendships (also notably in Kharkivska at 65% of boys versus 44% of girls, and Donetska at 18% of boys and none of the girls).

Of note is that 16% selected "things happening in my community" – likely referring to instability and insecurity. This issue was relatively highest in Donetska, suggesting that local context significantly influences the cognitive load and types of worries children carry.

Key Child Protection Risks

- **Infrastructure Failure (24 of 25 KIs):** Returnees face chronic utility outages and a total absence of offline education or medical specialists.
- **Explosive Remnants of War (17 of 25 KIs):** Children are at a high, lethal risk of encountering and/or picking up UXOs and remote-delivered mines in yards and playgrounds.
- **Domestic Violence and Neglect (13 of 25 KIs):** KIs noted an increase in parental alcohol abuse and domestic violence as negative coping mechanisms. Furthermore, parents focused on physical survival may unintentionally neglect their children's emotional needs or supervision, leaving them exposed to danger.
- **Habituation to Danger (11 of 25 KIs):** Children are exhibiting a dangerous "normalisation" of war and increasing associated risky behaviour (previously explained).

Vulnerability Profiles

KI reports indicate that vulnerability is non-uniform across returnee populations, with certain groups facing systemic exclusion:

Children with Disabilities

Critically underserved; existing "safe locations" and underground shelters often lack mandatory reasonable accommodations. Exacerbated by collapsed medical and logistical support.

Preschoolers (Ages 3–5)

Exist in a service vacuum: kindergartens remain closed, and online education models are developmentally inappropriate.

Adolescents

Represent a high-risk group due to low risk perception and extreme social isolation. Most CFS target younger children, leading teens into digital withdrawal; exposure to kinetic threats.

Children in Remote/Rural Villages

Physically isolated by the collapse of public transport, rendering district-based medical, educational, psychological, and recreational services inaccessible.

Institutional Care Leavers

"Official" decreases in numbers of children in institutional care often mislead; they reflect children turning 18 and leaving institutional care rather than successful family placements. Often face abrupt support drops; lack of social accompaniment or transition networks.

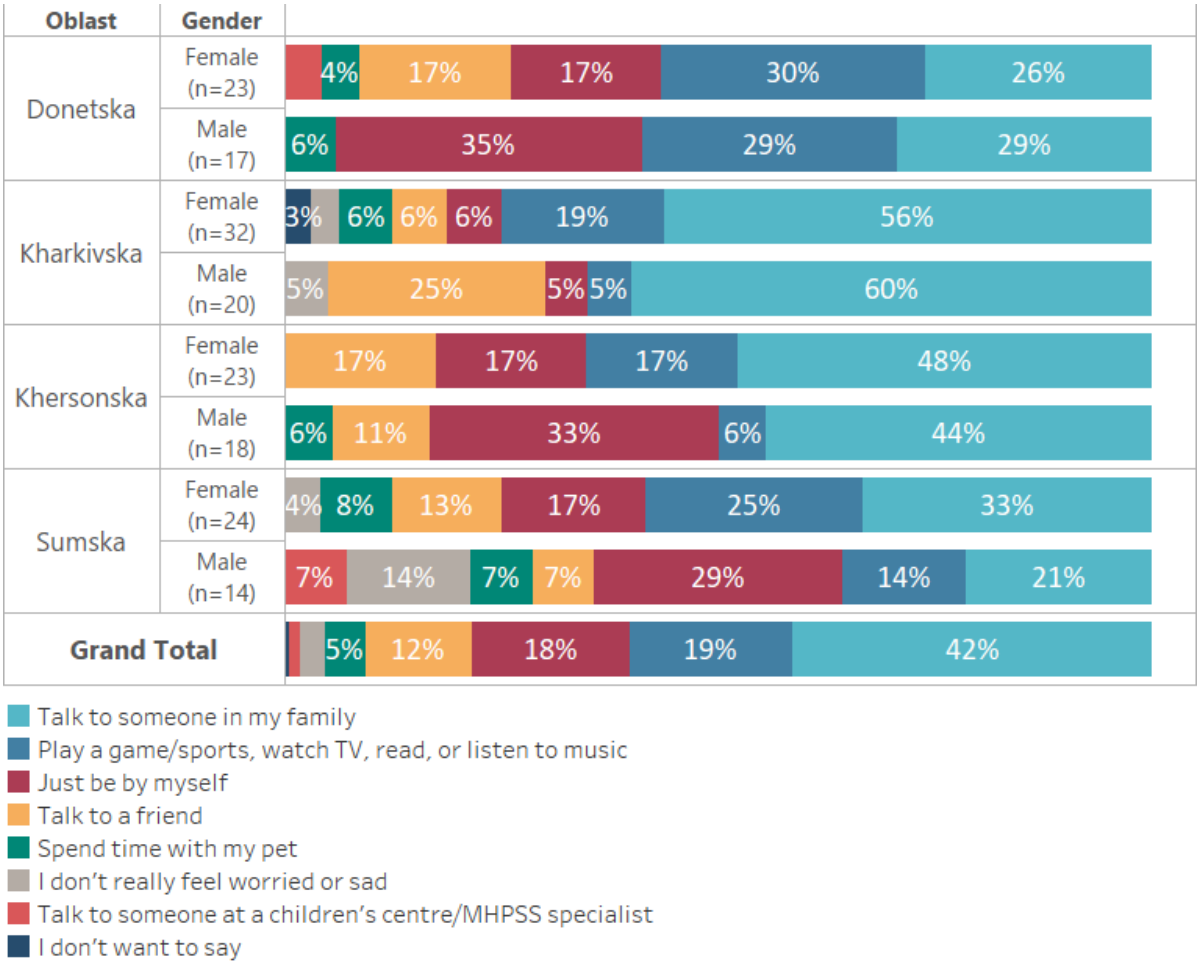
III. UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S COPING STRATEGIES AND ACCESS TO SUPPORT

CHILDREN'S COPING STRATEGIES: DISPLACEMENT AND RETURN

When experiencing emotional distress, the most prevalent coping strategy among children is speaking to someone in their family (42%). Engagement in recreational or solitary distractions served as a secondary tier of coping, with 19% opting to play a game/sports, watch TV, read, or listen to music, and 18% preferring to be take some time alone. To a lesser extent, peer-to-peer support was recorded among 12%, while 5% reported spending time with their pets.

Only 3% (or 5 respondents) from Sumska and Kharkivska "did not really feel worried or sad."

Figure 6 - Primary coping behaviours adopted during emotional distress (source: children)



Caregivers' observations of their children's coping strategies largely aligned with the children's self-reports, which they reported as follows: they talk to me or another family member (78%), they focus on an activity (58%), they talk to their friends (55%), they spend time with a pet (43%), they ask for a hug or physical comfort (35%), they prefer to be alone for a while (24%), or they talk to a psychologist or social worker (19%) or a teacher (11%). A minimal 3% noted that their children (both girls and boys) did not share their feelings.

According to KIs, children's coping strategies vary significantly by age and environment, and they exhibit a range of mechanisms that often mirror their parents' stress. These behaviours

generally manifest as either a hyper-adaptation to the "new normal" of war, or a profound psychological withdrawal.

Positive Coping Strategies

Peer Socialisation and Structured Activity: Children actively seek out remaining friends, or – especially when friends have moved – new peer groups as a primary emotional anchor. Participation in sports, creative clubs (such as art therapy and handicrafts), and "Underground Schools" not only provides an important distraction from the war, but it also restores a sense of normalcy, healthy structure, and routine in their lives.

Household Focus and Agency: Similarly to adults' coping strategies, assisting with household chores or gardening provides children with a functional role. By focusing on a controlled environment, they regain a sense of agency that is otherwise lost in the context of the broader conflict.

Negative Coping Strategies

Normalisation of Risk and Gamification: Children in frontline areas often adopt a "fatalistic play" approach, treating explosions or sirens as background noise or even a game to mitigate immediate terror. A Kharkivska social service provider noted that "*children can begin to perceive explosions as a game, and this is how they adapt.*" ***While this may appear to be a positive adaptation, psychologists view it as a risky form of "desensitisation" and a normalisation of violence that leads to the loss of natural self-preservation instincts, such as children filming incoming drones rather than seeking cover***. On the other hand, a Donetska KI noted that children demonstrate a high level of "crisis literacy" understanding the risks and the "algorithm of actions" required in various emergency situations.

Digital Withdrawal: The most pervasive strategy is an escape into "online worlds." Children immerse themselves in virtual environments and social media to avoid the reality of isolation and the danger of the frontline. A Kharkivska social service provider noted that children "*spend too much time in the information world and this is bad... they have lost the habit of live communication.*" This digital immersion serves as both a way to stay connected to distant friends and a "numbing" mechanism to block out the reality of sirens and explosions.

Recreational Access and Availability

Children reported an average of 2.5 primary locations (1 to 5) in which they spent time or played with friends. Based on their responses, domestic environments remain the primary site for socialisation across all four regions, with 72% of children overall playing at their own homes. This trend emerges most in Kharkivska (97% of girls, 85% of boys) and Donetska (76% boys, 61% girls), pointing to a significant lack of safe public alternatives and a heightened preference for indoor activity. Interestingly, Khersonska displays the most significant gender disparities, as 74% of girls play at home compared to only 44% of boys, which may indicate restricted mobility, or even specific protection concerns for girls in that region.

Figure 7 - Children's primary play locations (source: children)

	Donetska		Kharkivska		Khersonska		Sumska		Grand Total
	Female (n=23)	Male (n=17)	Female (n=32)	Male (n=20)	Female (n=23)	Male (n=18)	Female (n=24)	Male (n=14)	
At my home	61%	76%	97%	85%	74%	44%	63%	57%	72%
Outside near our homes	48%	59%	38%	50%	61%	50%	50%	79%	52%
Online	43%	47%	44%	40%	70%	50%	54%	79%	52%
At a friend's home	17%	18%	44%	45%	52%	33%	46%	36%	37%
At a park, playground, or sports field	30%	24%	22%	30%	30%	50%	29%	29%	30%
I don't really play with friends	0%	0%	3%	0%	4%	11%	8%	0%	4%
I don't want to say	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	0%	1%

While playing *outdoors near the home* and *online* are equally prevalent (52% each), the digital sphere shows high engagement in Khersonska and Sumska, and boys in Sumska are the most digitally active at 79%.

Unsurprisingly, considering the looming threats in frontline areas, *public spaces* (parks, playgrounds, fields) were the least cited venues (30%) across the sample, but boys in Khersonska (50%) utilised them at a much higher rate than their peers elsewhere.

Figure 8 - Key features considered when selecting play venues (source: children)

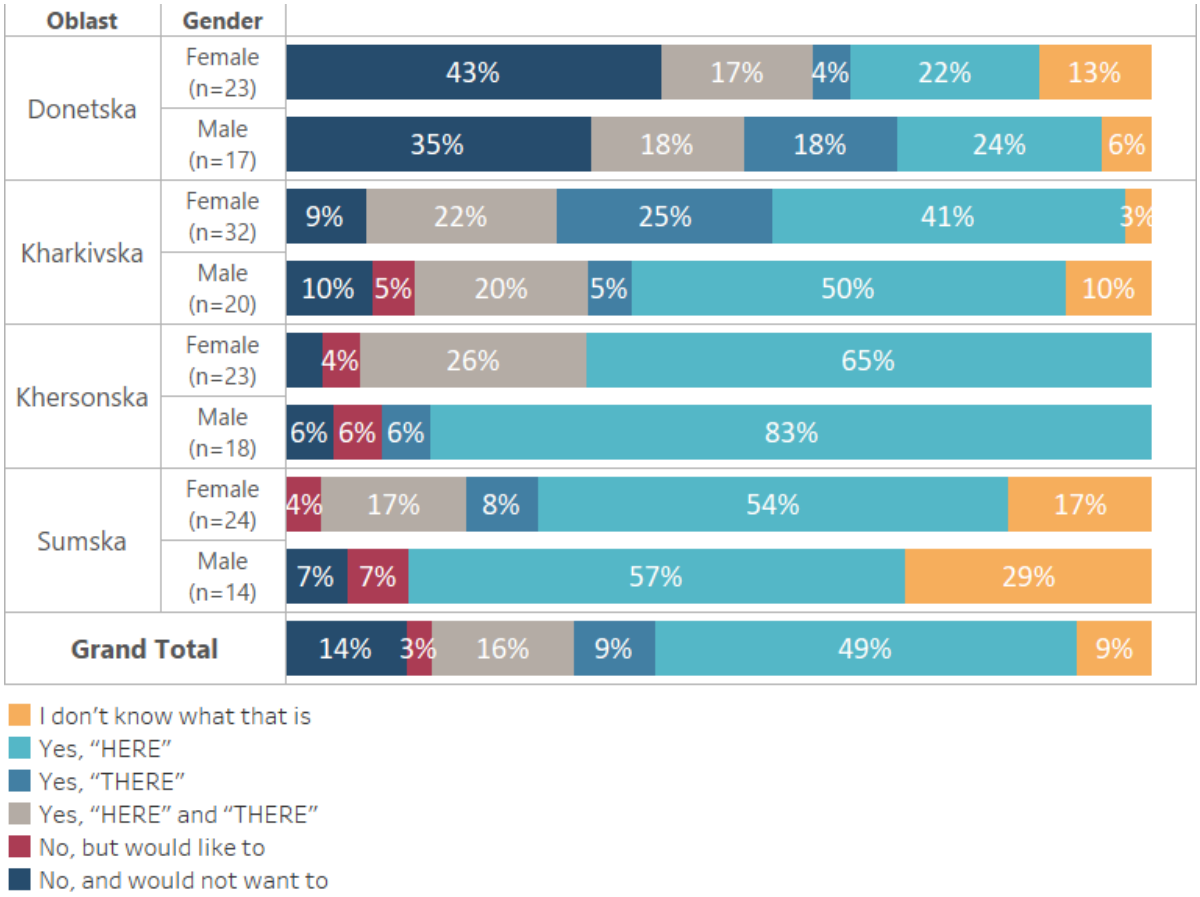
	Donetska		Kharkivska		Khersonska		Sumska		Grand Total
	Female (n=23)	Male (n=17)	Female (n=32)	Male (n=20)	Female (n=23)	Male (n=18)	Female (n=24)	Male (n=14)	
That my friends are there	35%	71%	69%	75%	78%	72%	58%	57%	64%
That it is fun	26%	18%	41%	40%	70%	61%	50%	64%	46%
That it is quiet or calm	65%	47%	34%	15%	35%	17%	21%	14%	32%
That grown-ups are nearby	17%	53%	38%	25%	4%	11%	17%	7%	22%
I don't really choose	0%	0%	6%	0%	13%	11%	17%	0%	6%
Other	0%	0%	0%	5%	0%	17%	0%	0%	2%
DNK	0%	6%	3%	0%	0%	0%	4%	7%	2%

Selecting spaces for playing appeared to be mainly driven by social engagement, with 64% of children prioritising the presence of their friends above other factors. While the recreational value of a location ("that it is fun") remains a significant motivator for children with an average age of 12.3 years old, there is a notable shift towards seeking "quiet or calm" environments as the average age moves up (approximately 13 years old). On the other hand, the importance of "having adults nearby" is more common among younger age groups averaging 11.7 years. A limited 6% said they did not choose, and those were almost exclusively girls. Finally, "other"

responses came from 12- to 13-year-old boys, who specifically prioritised having *no adults* nearby.

Regarding participation in "a CFS or a special centre where children can go to play, learn, and talk to people who know how to help them," a majority (74%) confirmed attendance (*Figure 9*). Engagement was distributed as follows: 49% visited such centres in their location of return only, 9% in their location of displacement only, and 16% in both locations. While 3% of children had never accessed these spaces but expressed an interest in doing so, 14% had neither attended nor wished to. Worth mentioning is that the latter group tended to consist of a slightly older group of children, with an average age of 14.6 years.

Figure 9 - CFS attendance in displacement and return (source: children)



KIs noted that Safe Spaces for children exist, but those are geographically inconsistent, often clandestine, and heavily reliant on non-governmental infrastructure. NGOs frequently fill the gap where state infrastructure is destroyed or deemed unsafe, providing spaces for art therapy, board games, and psychological relief. Organisations like Save the Children, UNICEF, and the Red Cross were listed as key facilitators of clubs for logic games, English language learning, and traditional crafts (e.g. making *motanka* dolls). Additionally, Digital Learning Centres provide both technical equipment for education and a rare opportunity for physical peer interaction in a supervised setting.

However, access to recreation is severely restricted by the security situation and proximity to the frontline. In "red zones," outdoor play was merely described as "*lethal – due to shelling and FPV drones*." To prevent targeting, the locations and times of activities are often not publicised; families find them through word of mouth, closed Telegram chats, or school-based messenger groups. Even where hubs exist, a total lack of public transport often prevents children from remote villages from reaching them. Furthermore, out of safety concerns, many caregivers refuse to let children attend offline sessions – even in safe locations.

Oblast	Breakdown of Recreational Access
Donetska	Official policy prohibits mass gatherings of children. However, a limited number of NGO-run CFS) operate in areas like Kramatorsk. These spaces utilise a "team of qualified specialists" (tutors, facilitators, psychologists, and social educators) to provide educational and psychological services. To mitigate security risks, group sizes are frequently restricted to no more than five children.
Kharkivska	Socialisation hubs are concentrated in raion centres but are virtually non-existent in frontline villages. High-security environments like the metro system, school bomb shelters, and "Points of Invincibility" serve as primary venues. The "Metro schools" and underground hubs are considered the "gold standard," offering dual-purpose spaces for education and socialisation (with specifically equipped leisure zones and resource rooms). Although numerous community centres exist, their use depends entirely on the daily security situation and parents' willingness to commute during high-risk periods.
Khersonska	Provision is highly uneven. While children in some communities like Myroliubivka and Nadezhdivka engage in creativity and teamwork activities, many villages have no safe places at all. In areas like Bilozerka, extreme drone and artillery threats prevent operation in any open spaces. Active facilities are often built directly into shelters, such as the planned hub in Pravdyne. Outdoor sports fields exist but are rarely used due to the risk of aerial strikes. As one CP actor noted, "*Children here cannot be let out into the street*."
Sumska	Safe spaces are increasing in "rear" communities like Shostka and Hlukhiv, where bomb shelters are utilised on a scheduled basis for children's activities. NGOs provide structured CFS environments, and local dance and sports collectives have adapted by moving all interactions into shelters. Child protection services also report the establishment of "child corners" inside settlement council buildings.

Primary Risks in "Unstructured" Play Areas

When children are not in controlled environments, they face severe risks in unstructured play areas, primarily categorised by direct kinetic threats, explosive remnants of war (ERW), and environmental hazards.

Direct Kinetic Threats: Physical safety is compromised by constant shelling, missile strikes, and aerial attacks that occur while children are outdoors or in transit. In specific frontline zones like Khersonska, there is disturbing evidence of "*operators deliberately targeting children with drones despite clear visibility*." Furthermore, prolonged exposure to conflict has caused dangerous desensitisation, leading children to ignore air raid sirens or engage in high-risk activities instead of seeking cover.

Explosive Remnants of War: The risk of picking up unknown objects is a constant fear. Children are exposed to unexploded ordnance (UXO) and disguised or remote-delivered mines (e.g. petal mines), and their natural curiosity often leads them to handle or even bring home dangerous ammunition fragments.

> *"It is impossible to explain all the nuances of safe behaviour to a child when the very nature of childhood requires movement and games on the street."*
>
> - KI, CP Specialist, Khersonska

Supervision and Infrastructure Gaps: Adult supervision is frequently compromised as caregivers are forced to prioritise family survival tasks, leaving children unattended in hazardous environments. Infrastructure deficits exacerbate these risks, as children often lack access to nearby, well-marked shelters, causing confusion during sudden escalations. Additionally, environmental threats have emerged from the mass abandonment of domestic animals during displacement. Left behind without food, vaccinations, or care, these animals may

exhibit defensive behaviours or carry diseases such as rabies, creating potential safety risks for children who encounter them.

Access to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

Access to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) in displacement and return zones is described by KIs as fragmented and insufficient. While services exist, they are primarily provided by local and international NGOs and mobile teams rather than established state institutions, which have largely relocated from high-risk areas.

Service Availability and Sufficiency

Specialised state Child Protection (CP) and MHPSS institutions have largely withdrawn from frontline areas. Consequently, local provision is dependent on a patchwork of NGOs, mobile brigades, and remaining municipal social services. Current interventions largely focus on **psychosocial relief** (CFS, creative clubs, "Underground Schools," art therapy…) designed to provide distraction and restore peer socialisation.

For more acute needs, mobile multidisciplinary teams provide crisis counselling and psychological first aid (PFA) directly in de-occupied and frontline communities. However, in high-risk zones, support is frequently restricted to online or telephone counselling due to security barriers – a modality which practitioners emphasise is significantly less effective for building therapeutic trust.

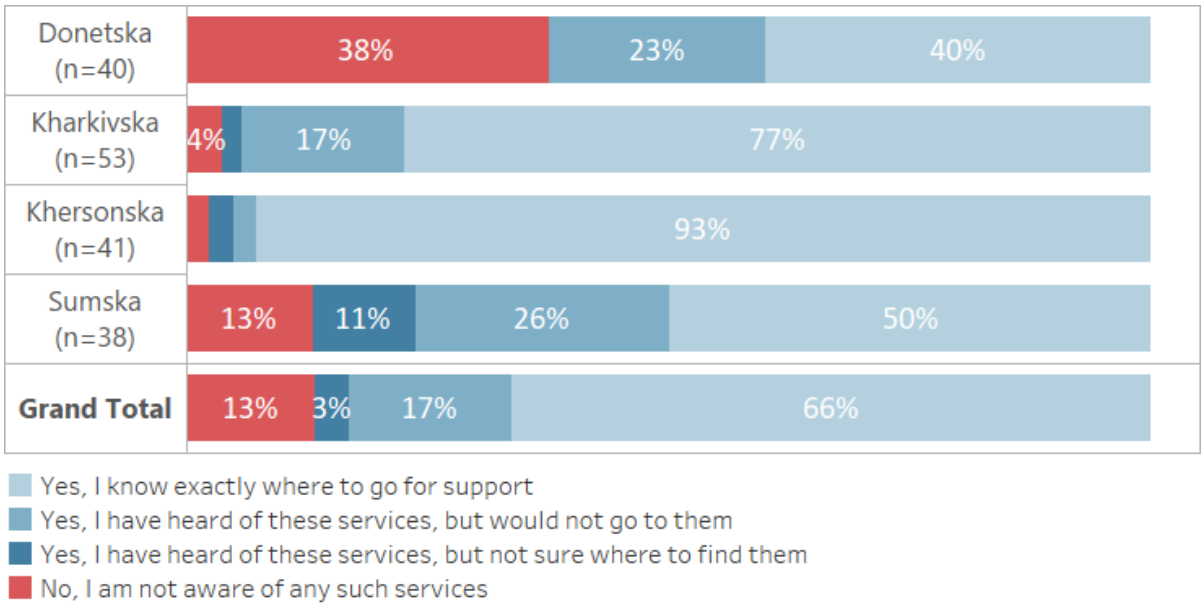
"My team has reached critical physical and mental exhaustion. This state of chronic overload, stress, and sleep deprivation makes it very difficult for us to focus. Sometimes, we find ourselves unable to even formulate simple sentences."

- KI, CP Stakeholder, Khersonska

KIs were in full consensus that the current services are insufficient to meet the depth of trauma and the scale of children's needs:

- Many humanitarian initiatives were criticised for being **non-systemic** or **focused on "unique beneficiary" counts** (e.g. one-off recreational events) rather than offering the stable, long-term therapeutic support required for chronic war trauma.
- Security protocols, such as **bans on mass gatherings** or limits of five children per room, fundamentally restrict the reach of physical programmes.
- There is an acute deficit of **qualified psychologists and social workers** willing to operate under constant shelling. Those who remain are facing **critical levels of burnout**.

Figure 10 - Awareness of available MHPSS support (source: caregivers)



Caregivers were mostly aware of where they could go for MHPSS services (83%). However, 17% of those added that while they knew of these services, they would not go to them (*see Barriers to Accessing Support section below*). A minimal 3% knew that such services existed but were uncertain how to access them (mainly Sumska), while 13% had no knowledge of this type of service (mainly Donetska).

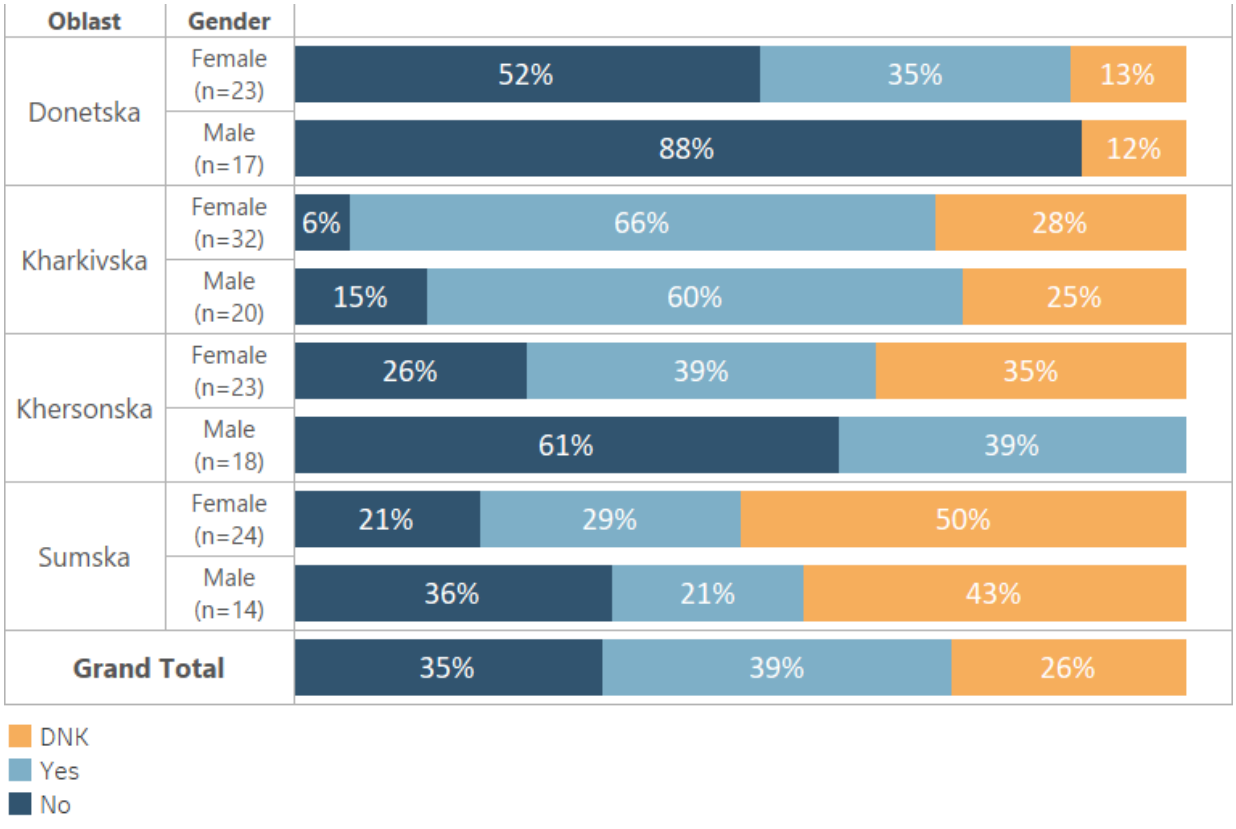
When asked whether they believed their children needed such types of support as a result of displacement, responses mainly leaned towards confirmation, where 42% said yes (68% Khersonska, 42% Kharkivska, 37% Sumska, and 20% Donetska). Additionally, 34% reported being uncertain. This group was asked whether they had been able to get the needed support for their children, and positively, 58% confirmed (majority in Khersonska and Kharkivska). However, 33% noted that they never tried to get any support, while 3% affirmed they needed it but were unable to get it. The remaining 6% preferred not to respond.

On the other hand, 21% denied that their children needed MHPSS (33% of Donetska respondents, 21% Sumska, 17% Khersonska, and 15% Kharkivska), and the remaining 3% preferred not to answer. This group was asked to share the main reasons for not obtaining this support. The primary response was that they were not in need of such support, mainly because they were able to deal with their issues and overcome them (57%). To a lesser extent, other reasons included being too busy with prioritising other survival needs (19%), lack of trust in such services (17%), concerns over what others would think (12%), and being unaware of "*where to go and who to ask*" (10%).

*"Actually, we did not apply for psychosocial support **specifically because** of displacement: reunification with the family [in our community of return] is the best type of psycho-emotional support one can get."*

- Mother, 37 years old, Sumska

Figure 11 - Availability of "non-family adult support" (source: children)



Children were asked whether they had a trusted grown-up outside their family (teacher, helper at a centre, psychologist) to whom they could disclose major worries, responses revealed that 61% of the total sample lacked a clear support system, either reporting a total absence of a trusted figure (35%) or expressing uncertainty (26%). This may be due to a general distrust of

"outsiders," MHPSS/CP service quality gaps, in addition to rapport and trust-building challenges – especially when attempted through an online format.

While 39% did confirm the presence of a supportive adult, significant gaps were identified in Donetska and Khersonska.

From a gender lens, the lack of a trusted adult was significantly more notable among boys across all assessed oblasts. This likely reflects the influence of social norms and the gender-based expectations of self-reliance, which often discourage males from seeking help: *vulnerability is a sign of weakness*. Accordingly, while MHPSS access is a challenge for all residents of frontline areas, boys and men likely face even greater barriers due to traditional standards of masculinity and "toughness."

Service Discovery and Referral Pathways

Service discovery in frontline regions relies heavily on informal networks rather than centralised structures. Word-of-mouth is cited as the most effective and trusted channel, particularly where official sources are viewed with suspicion. Information is primarily disseminated through city-specific Telegram chats, Facebook groups, and school-based messenger groups.

Teachers and school psychologists act as the primary "identifiers" of need, referring children to NGOs or mobile teams via school chats. Additionally, staff at Administrative Service Centres (CNAP) often monitor families during document processing, notifying Child Services if they suspect a family is struggling.

Barriers to Accessing MHPSS Support

Stigma and Cultural Resistance: Deep-seated cultural resistance remains a primary barrier to accessing MHPSS. A Khersonska CP actor emphasised "*the lack of a culture of turning to specialists*," with many parents failing to understand the value of preventative mental health support. A Donetska KI identified the "stigmatisation of psychological assistance" as a major obstacle, noting that caregivers often equate seeking help with being "crazy" or "sick." This stigma manifests in aggression when services are offered; parents tend to react with defensive comments such as, "*Am I insane? Why are you offering this to me?*"

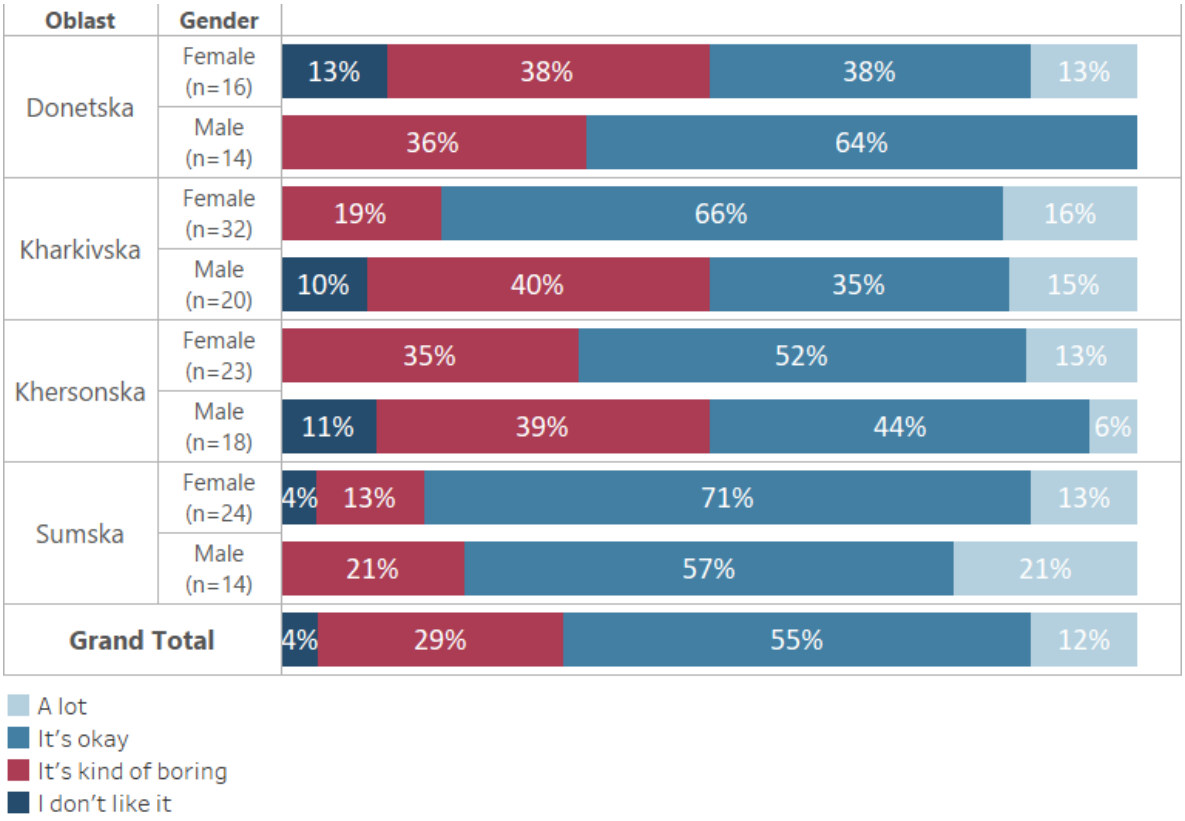
Logistical and Economic Barriers: Logistics and finances are also critical hindrances to accessing care, and are further exacerbated by the total collapse of public transport. This infrastructure failure physically isolates children in remote villages from specialised hubs located in district centres; in Khersonska, for instance, families are often forced to walk or hire expensive private transport in dangerous zones to reach help. These physical constraints are compounded by "time poverty," as families frequently prioritise immediate physical survival over mental health support. Additionally, working parents are often unable to access centres that operate only during standard business hours. Finally, while remote services are often the only option remaining, these are inaccessible to those facing chronic electricity and internet outages. Beyond access, effectiveness is a concern: specialists feel "*engaging a child through a screen is extremely difficult and yields minimal results compared to face-to-face contact*."

Security and Secrecy: Due to the threat of shelling and FPV drones, the physical locations and times of services are frequently kept private and shared only through closed groups. While necessary for safety, this secrecy creates a barrier to access, as families outside these closed digital loops often remain unaware that services exist.

Access to Education Services in Return

Generally, almost all interviewed children reported being in school, and the ten 16- to 17-year-olds who said "no" later explained that they had already completed school and were enrolled in technical institutes or university.

Figure 12 - Extent to which children are enjoying school (source: children)



Well over half the sample (67%) expressed a positive (12%) to moderate (55%) sentiment towards school.

The remaining one third leaned towards negative perceptions, citing the following primary reasons: disinteresting classes, schoolwork being too hard/easy, and teachers' or other children's behaviour being "not nice." Several expressed a dislike of the online modality, emphasising that they wanted to go to an in-person school.

From their part, while caregivers listed a range of challenges, they believed that the primary challenges to education access consisted of unstable internet connection for online classes (74%) – particularly critical given the vast majority reported children enrolled in mainly online schooling formats; safety concerns about going to an in-person school (69%); and infrastructural damage or closures of school buildings (61%). Other challenges included children's stress and demotivation, lack of quiet and safe spaces to study at home, lack of suitable devices for learning, and education personnel shortages.

KIs flagged that for returnee children, while legal access to education is rarely blocked by lack of registration, in reality, the intersections of safety risks and infrastructural failures prevent quality learning. It is crucial to note that the return to these high-risk zones is often driven by the failure of services in safer regions. In displacement, while children theoretically had access to offline schooling, engagement was frequently hindered by bullying and social stigma. A Khersonska NGO representative reported instances of children being bullied in host community schools, for example, "*You are from Kherson – you surrendered Ukraine.*" This stigmatisation led to children "closing themselves off" and refusing to attend school.

Technical and Infrastructural Issues: A critical barrier is the "hardware paradox" – while NGOs and schools sometimes provide laptops or tablets to children, the infrastructure to support them is absent. Chronic electricity and internet outages, triggered by shelling, frequently interrupt the educational process, rendering the devices useless.

"Lack of hardware remains a problem. However, even when devices are available, there is no light and children cannot connect to the internet."

- KIs, Donetska and Kharkivska

Additionally, even where educational hubs exist, a lack of transportation in rural areas prevents children from reaching them. Furthermore, where school shelters are available, they often lack proper ventilation and water supply, making long-term occupancy during alerts untenable.

Safety Constraints: Direct safety threats continue to prohibit ground-level schooling in most frontline zones, and even when a school has a functioning shelter, the facility often remains closed because the commute itself is too dangerous. A Khersonska CP actor noted that schools cannot be used if the route is under potential drone fire. This results in having to strictly constrain the educational process to "safe locations," or, more commonly, online platforms. Several KIs discussed the issue of families returning to find schools operating almost entirely online, a continuation of the "COVID format" which limits social interaction.

Institutional and Parental Challenges: A significant, often overlooked barrier is the breakdown of consistent learning structures, support systems, and regular instructional guidance. Educational engagement in return represents a significant drop in quality compared to the offline options available in displacement. The online format has "loosened" structure and healthy routines; while digital access is generally available, KIs complained of significant learning losses because "in-person communication can never be replaced."

Working parents are often unable to monitor their children's attendance, and schools reportedly overlook absences to maintain enrolment numbers. This is compounded by cases of diminished parental capacity, where families in difficult circumstances often struggle to ensure children are attending their online lessons.

Teacher Capacity; Human Resource Crisis: The system is also experiencing a significant human resources crisis which is severely affecting the quality of education available to returnees. Educational institutions are faced with a critical shortage of qualified and experienced teachers and specialists (psychologists, speech therapists) willing to work in these high-risk zones.

This challenge was somewhat reflected in children's responses when asked about the ease of obtaining help from a teacher when they did not understand subjects: while almost half (49%) confirmed that they could always get help, a significant 39% said they could to a limited (34%) or low (5%) extent. The remaining 12%, almost all of whom were enrolled in online learning, were unable to provide an assessment. Triangulated with KI reports, these findings confirm the educational system's capacity struggles. The high percentage of students reporting limited access suggests teacher overload, where the constraints of the online format – exacerbated by frequent air raid alerts and connectivity/electricity issues – prevent education personnel from being able to provide the necessary individualised attention to every student. It is likely that the volume of need, particularly when it comes to catch-up support, exceeds the bandwidth of the remaining teacher workforce.

Contextualising "Prolonged Remote Learning": One Education stakeholder explained that the concept of "prolonged remote learning" is being used as shorthand for a broader systemic failure to provide the resources required to mitigate the conditions and risks of wartime education. In reality, no meaningful adaptations have been made to the Ukrainian curriculum – which continues to go through a reform process – to suit the remote modality. Additionally, no guidance has been provided to teachers, leaving them insufficiently prepared to deliver the new curriculum remotely or to meet complex student needs, all while they themselves are impacted by war and displacement. As a result, students find it increasingly difficult to engage meaningfully with unadapted material.

Return Impacts on Educational Quality and Student Motivation

Impact on Educational Quality and Student Motivation

There is a consensus among respondents that "quality education" has become a primary casualty of the war. Returnee children exhibit what respondents describe as "colossal" learning losses, characterised by significant gaps in basic literacy and numeracy.

"These days, adolescents preparing for college often possess reading and writing skills comparable to primary school levels. Many are unable to construct complex sentences."

- KI, NGO Representative, Khersonska

The academic regression is attributed to a "lost generation" gap caused by the continuous reliance on online education since the 2020 pandemic, which has extended into the full-scale invasion. This "prolonged remote learning" – a symptom of the lack of adaptation to and mitigation of the various risks to education – has prevented the mastery of core competencies that are difficult, if not impossible, to acquire through a screen. While enrolment numbers remain technically high upon return, actual access is sporadic.

"The frequent lack of electricity complicates the process and has created a paradox – while high numbers of children are registered at schools, in practice, they are rarely present or engaged."

- KI, Local Authority Representative, Donetska

The Motivation Void

Chronic war-related stress has led to visible developmental setbacks. A Kharkivska psychologist reported "*night fears, night awakenings, enuresis, and regressive behaviour in younger children*." Simultaneously, a significant loss of learning motivation is observed; children frequently "shut down" during online lessons or struggle to see the purpose of education in such an unstable environment. Older children also often exhibit "educational apathy" and a decreased interest in learning and engagement, which a Kharkivska KI characterised as a "*blow to the future*."

On the whole, children's motivation is reported as critically low, described by many KIs as "fading" or completely "extinguished." The demotivating nature of routine remote learning in war conditions, combined with the absence of live peer interaction, has led to widespread apathy. A social worker in Donetska explained that "*because children are deprived of live communication, they stop seeing the point of school*."

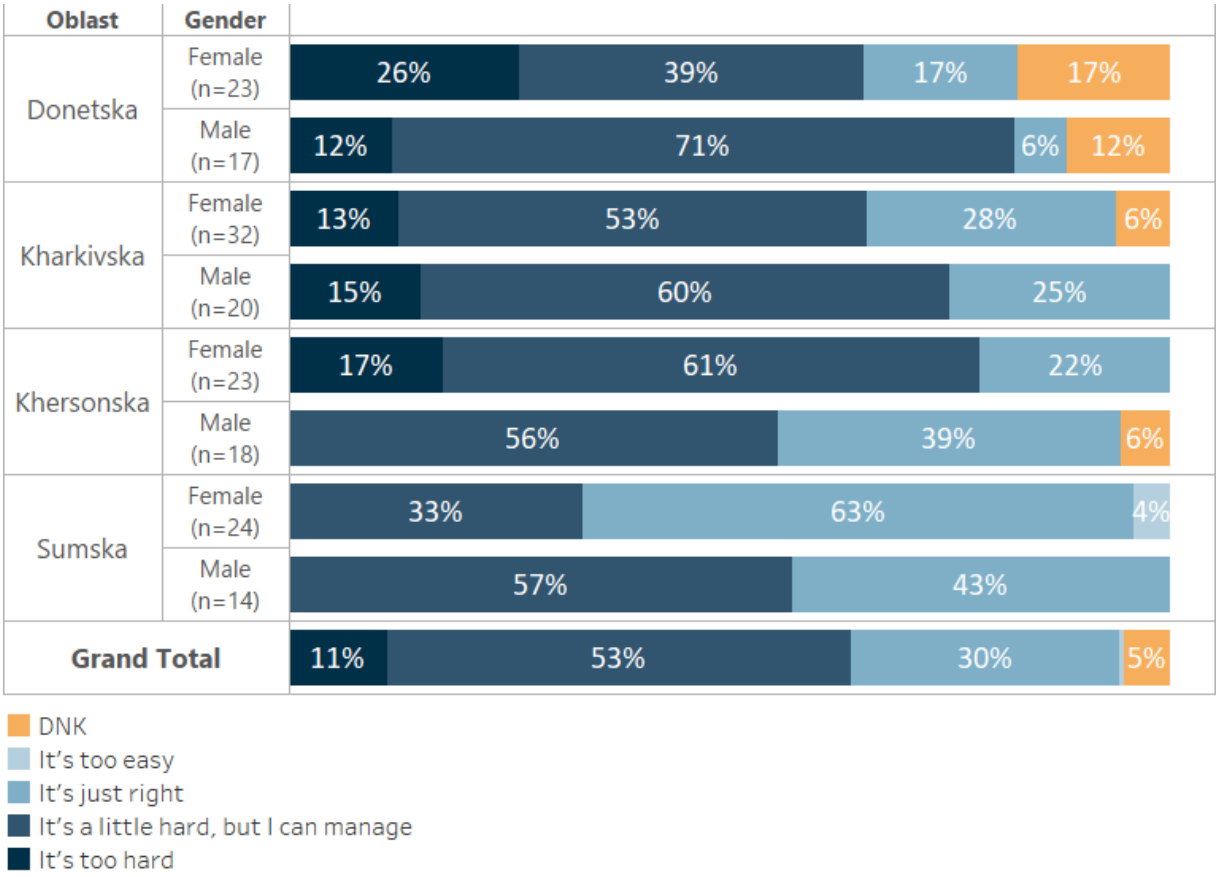
This apathy is compounded by a lack of belief in the future. Children struggling to understand what will happen next often feel that academic effort is futile. An education official in Kharkivska noted that "*turned-off screens inevitably affect the quality of educational achievements*." In many returnee households, education has slipped to a secondary priority, as families focus on immediate survival.

The Returnee Curriculum Gap

Children returning from abroad face distinct hurdles regarding curriculum adaptation. KIs in Sumska noted a significant "gap" between foreign and Ukrainian systems, often resulting in a mismatch of performance evaluation grades and "fragmented knowledge." A specific challenge is the loss of language proficiency, with children who spent years abroad often finding it difficult to learn and participate effectively in the national curriculum, where Ukrainian is the language of instruction. That said, KIs explained that some families return specifically because they prefer the Ukrainian education system and the pedagogical approach of local teachers.

Ultimately, KIs believed the current system is struggling to adapt to "children of war." A Kharkivska education official suggested that the standard peacetime curriculum is no longer fit for purpose in frontline regions, arguing that teachers must fundamentally "*rethink the process of interaction to accommodate the unique psychological and educational deficits of this demographic*."

Figure 13 - Difficulty level of current schoolwork (source: children)



Student responses were illustrative of this reality: while 30% felt schoolwork difficulty levels were "just right" for them, over half (53%) reported some difficulty – albeit being able to manage, and 11% found it too hard.

Of the 27 children who had returned from abroad, the majority (74%) reported facing difficulties, confirming KI reports around curriculum adaptation difficulties.

Perceptions of Access to Rights-Based Services

An analysis of children's perceptions regarding the ease of access of essential services reveals that the **Right to Health** ("*I can easily reach a doctor or nurse if I feel sick*") is the most widely recognised available resource, at 75% across the sample, and notably high in Donetska.

This is followed by the **Right to Education** ("*I can easily access school or learning activities*"). While confirmed by well over half the sample across all locations, perceptions of facilitated access were completely absent in Donetska.

Rights associated with social and emotional wellbeing show more moderate levels of perceived ease: access to a safe place to play (**Right to Play and Association**) was confirmed by **34%** of children, while the **Right to Protection/PSS** (accessing a trusted adult to discuss worries) was noted by **31%**. Once again, across all oblasts except Kharkivska, boys tended to report lower levels of ease in accessing a trusted adult compared to their female counterparts.

Finally, recreational opportunities like clubs, activities, sports, or art (**Right to Recreation and Development**) were considered easy to find by under one third (29%) of the sample.

Despite these varied levels of access, only 6% of children felt that none of these essential services were easy to access, indicating that most children can identify at least one functional support pillar in their community.

Figure 14 - Perceived accessibility of rights-based activities and services (source: children)

	Donetska		Kharkivska		Khersonska		Sumska		Grand Total
	Female (n=23)	Male (n=17)	Female (n=32)	Male (n=20)	Female (n=23)	Male (n=18)	Female (n=24)	Male (n=14)	
Right to Health	91%	88%	75%	65%	57%	72%	75%	79%	75%
Right to Education	0%	0%	75%	55%	61%	67%	71%	64%	51%
Right to Play and Association	13%	18%	44%	40%	43%	50%	25%	36%	34%
Right to Protection/PSS	22%	6%	38%	45%	43%	11%	38%	36%	31%
Right to Recreation and Development	9%	24%	38%	30%	26%	22%	38%	43%	29%
None	0%	6%	9%	0%	9%	11%	8%	0%	6%
DNK	0%	6%	6%	15%	4%	0%	13%	14%	7%

Successful Intervention Models

Respondents identified several existing interventions that have proven effective in the current context:

- **Child-Friendly Spaces:** Cited as the most effective intervention, these are locations where children can play and socialise safely, often underground. A Donetska NGO representative noted that children "master skills in the process of play" and engage in art therapy, which aids emotional development.
- **Underground "Safety Islands":** Facilities such as the "Successful Woman" hub in Khersonska or Kharkiv's metro schools are described as a "breath of fresh air," providing dual-purpose spaces for education and safe socialisation.
- **Group Therapy over Individual Counselling:** Group therapy and socialisation activities are preferred over individual counselling, which can be stigmatising. For teenagers, instead of aiming to conduct clinical interventions, the most effective support is simply "regular safe meetings."

Children play at a Child Friendly Space, Mykolaiv, Ukraine. Maxym Fedyshyn/Save the Children

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

KEY INFORMANTS

KIs emphasised that families are returning to high-risk zones not out of optimism, but due to a combination of socio-economic expulsion from safe areas and a desperate desire for home. While return restores a sense of psychological ownership and social connection, it exposes children to lethal physical threats – specifically shelling, mines, and the targeted use of FPV drones. In light of this, stakeholders believe the humanitarian response must shift from a stance of passive observation to active, adapted intervention that acknowledges the presence of these children without normalising their peril. More specifically, they called for "administrative realism," where donors and authorities acknowledge the presence of returnee children in frontline areas rather than ignoring them through blanket prohibitions that fail to reflect wartime realities. They also noted that the focus should be on strengthening infrastructure, adapting education to a "frontline" context, and actively restoring the social fabric to support children living in chronic danger.

Protective Infrastructure and Safety

- **Prioritise Underground Construction:** Donors and authorities must fund the construction of "underground educational locations" and modular concrete shelters in village centres. These should serve as dual-purpose hubs for legal, medical, and psychosocial services, facilitating the transition from demotivating online-only formats to safe, live education and socialisation.
- **Shelter Upgrades; Accessibility:** Existing shelters must be upgraded with proper ventilation, heating, and water supply to allow for prolonged occupancy, group activities, and creative clubs. Where feasible, rebuilt shelters must include lifts and ramps to ensuring accessibility for children with disabilities.
- **Kinetic Safety Education:** Age-appropriate Mine Risk Education (MRE) for children and caregivers must be intensified and evolved to include specific behavioural protocols for FPV drone attacks, which represent a new and lethal threat to children in these zones. This must also be paired with i) first aid training for both children and caregivers, and ii) continuous demining of residential areas to ensure safe movement.

Educational Adaptation and Digital Equity

- **"Frontline Curriculum" and Learning Recovery:** To address the "colossal" gaps in literacy and numeracy, it is necessary to implement an adapted "children of war" curriculum. This should focus on catch-up learning and psychosocial stabilisation rather than standard academic metrics, and requires individualised diagnostics to assess regression, intensive, offline remedial programmes, and innovative pedagogical methods designed for students with significant academic regression (e.g. adolescents who have dropped to primary-school literacy levels).
- **Bridging the Digital Divide:** To solve the "hardware paradox," the systematic provision of laptops and tablets must be paired with energy solutions (Starlink, EcoFlow stations, power banks) to allow for online learning during chronic outages.
- **Offline Education Strategy:** The "Underground Strategy" should facilitate a return to offline or mixed-format education, which is critical for overcoming the motivation crisis and learning losses associated with long-term online schooling.

Restoring the Social Fabric and Psychosocial Support

- **Safe Socialisation Hubs:** The creation of secure physical spaces (CFS) where children can escape digital isolation and interact with peers is essential for emotional recovery. Respondents propose local interest clubs (e.g. sports, art therapy) that meet regularly in fortified spaces to facilitate social adaptation and provide a sense of "normalcy."

- **Family-Centric Mentorship:** Interventions should move beyond one-off crisis visits to a model of long-term family mentorship. Specialists should provide systemic guidance (for 3+ months) on administrative, social, and psychological issues to families living in chronic stress
- **Destigmatisation and Group Therapy:** Projects must specifically target the cultural stigma surrounding mental health to encourage parents – who are often a source of transmitted anxiety to children – to seek help before crises escalate. For adolescents, group therapy and socialisation activities are preferred over individual counselling; the most effective support is often simply "regular safe meetings."
- **Personnel and Mobile Multidisciplinary Teams:** There is an acute need for doctors, psychologists, and social workers in frontline zones. Incentivisation, especially but not limited to increasing wages, is necessary to attract qualified staff. Additionally, mobile multidisciplinary teams (psychologists, social workers, doctors, lawyers) should be deployed to remote communities where public transport has collapsed, ensuring access for isolated households.

Socio-Economic Support and Aid Equity

- **Equitable Aid Distribution; Winterisation:** Humanitarian aid must be egalitarian, extending support to all families in need regardless of whether they are IDPs, returnees, or "stayers." Essential provision must also include fuel (firewood, coal), warm clothing, and property repair grants for winter.
- **Financial Stabilisation:** Restore social benefits for returnees to prevent the economic destitution that drives families into high-risk coping strategies. Interventions should include "fast grants" for self-employment, professional retraining, and coverage for rent/daycare to ensure sustainable incomes.
- **Social Transport:** Restore "social bus" routes to end the "total isolation" of frontline villages, reconnecting them to medical and administrative hubs.

Protection Monitoring and Legislative Enforcement

- **Enforce Parental Responsibility:** Strengthen legal mechanisms to hold parents accountable for negligence or for keeping children in areas of direct combat. Respondents suggest moving beyond passive tracking to real-world enforcement, potentially including control mechanisms at entry points to high-risk zones to prevent the entry of minors.
- **Training for Identification:** Train educators and social workers to identify signs of sexual, psychological, and physical violence, as children often lack the vocabulary to articulate these abuses.
- **State Mechanisms for Removal:** Improve state infrastructure and legal pathways for removing children from high-risk domestic environments where they face neglect or violence, rather than prioritising family preservation at the cost of the child's safety.

CHILDREN

According to children, the most critical interventions that "would make life better" for them were establishing more safe places for them to play, such as parks and centres (74%).

This was followed by offering more fun activities to do with other children, in person (50%), improved schooling facilities, including more easily accessible help with learning when they face difficulties (33%), and having more specialised assistance to support through difficult periods and concerns (25%).

Figure 15 - Recommendations to enhance children's living conditions (source: children)

	Donetska		Kharkivska		Khersonska		Sumska		Grand Total
	Female (n=23)	Male (n=17)	Female (n=32)	Male (n=20)	Female (n=23)	Male (n=18)	Female (n=24)	Male (n=14)	
More safe places to play	78%	88%	50%	65%	78%	89%	79%	86%	74%
More fun activities to do with other children	26%	41%	44%	55%	70%	44%	58%	71%	50%
Better schools or more help with learning	4%	41%	38%	10%	52%	56%	29%	36%	33%
Special helpers for kids who feel sad or worried	39%	6%	31%	10%	30%	22%	29%	21%	25%
Something else	4%	6%	13%	0%	4%	6%	4%	7%	6%
DNK	4%	0%	9%	5%	0%	0%	17%	0%	5%

"Other" options were interestingly diverse: while some children wanted dance studios, an "improved pond for fishing and swimming," or travelling as an opportunity to change scenery, some wanted "to go to school offline all the time," or shelters for homeless animals, while others merely said they would want "peace" or "an end to the war."

"*If I found a magic wand and could make one thing better?*
I would cast a spell that creates a shield over the city to protect everyone from the missiles and threats."

- 11-year-old boy, Donetska

Children take part in a TeamUp session in Kherson region. Oleksandr Kornyakov /Save the Children

CAREGIVERS

When asked to prioritise necessary support, caregivers' responses, mobility intentions played a clear role. For families seeking to remain in displacement, the primary focus was on socio-economic integration, where securing livelihoods (78%), stable housing (74%), and humanitarian assistance (72%) were viewed as the critical pathways to self-reliance and community embedding. On the other hand, families intending to return to their areas of origin prioritised physical reconstruction and protection, focusing on restoring habitable shelter (81%) and establishing safe environments for children (78%), reflecting an immediate need to mitigate the physical dangers of the frontline.

Figure 16 - Priority support to families who wish to stay in displacement locations (source: caregivers)

	Donetska (n=40)	Kharkivska (n=53)	Khersonska (n=41)	Sumska (n=38)	Grand Total
Livelihoods and employment	60%	89%	68%	92%	78%
Stable/Affordable housing	98%	62%	59%	84%	74%
Humanitarian assistance	65%	81%	76%	61%	72%
Child integration support	63%	68%	56%	68%	64%
Reliable/Quality service access	45%	60%	39%	47%	49%
Social/Community cohesion	15%	58%	56%	61%	48%
Legal/Administrative support and assistance	13%	47%	34%	50%	37%
Other	0%	4%	5%	3%	3%

- **Livelihoods and Employment**: Job placement support, skills development/training to match local market needs, self-employment support.
- **Stable and Affordable Housing**: Access to secure/long-term rentals, social housing, stable collective centre operations.
- **Humanitarian Assistance**: More sustainable cash assistance, support/subsidies for rental costs, in-kind food/hygiene/winterisation assistance.
- **Child Integration Support**: Child-friendly spaces, extracurricular activities, better support within schools to help children better cope and make friends.
- **Reliable, Quality Service Access**: Easier child enrolment in schools, healthcare, availability of specialised services including MHPSS for children.
- **Social/Community Cohesion**: Programmes/activities to help families integrate into the host community, reduce social isolation, peer support networks for IDP caregivers and children.
- **Legal and Administrative Support and Assistance**: IDP registration, access to state benefits, resolution of legal/documentation issues.
- "**Other**" responses generally centred around an emphasis of there being no reason to stay in communities of displacement.

Figure 17 - Priority support to families who wish to return to areas of origin (source: caregivers)

	Donetska (n=40)	Kharkivska (n=53)	Khersonska (n=41)	Sumska (n=38)	Grand Total
Shelter	95%	68%	85%	82%	81%
Child Wellbeing	80%	75%	85%	71%	78%
Livelihoods	75%	53%	63%	84%	67%
Basic Needs	65%	57%	68%	58%	62%
Education Infrastructure	10%	74%	83%	71%	60%
Online Education	73%	42%	41%	39%	48%
Mental Health	38%	47%	51%	50%	47%
Psychosocial Support	20%	34%	51%	61%	41%
Education Quality	13%	43%	41%	39%	35%
Safety	13%	32%	17%	61%	30%
Cross-Cutting Disability Considerations	8%	28%	32%	37%	26%

- **Shelter**: Help with home repairs (windows, roofs) and basic utilities (water, electricity).
- **Child Wellbeing**: Establishing and equipping more safe places for children to play and relax, such as Child-Friendly Spaces.
- **Livelihoods**: Provide structure help for parents to secure employment and generate income to be able to meet their households' and children's needs.
- **Basic Needs**: Offer more consistent humanitarian aid and coverage such as cash assistance, food and hygiene kit distributions.
- **Education Infrastructure**: Enhancing the accessibility of physical infrastructure of educational facilities, including repairing damaged schools, and rehabilitating or adding bomb shelters.
- **Online Education**: Ensure the availability of better internet access and devices (laptops/tablets) for children to be able to engage in remote learning.
- **Mental Health**: More specialised access to qualified psychologists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists for children.
- **Psychosocial Support**: Non-specialised support and activities by social workers, facilitators, teachers, and pedagogical staff.
- **Education Quality**: Training teachers and support staff on how to better engage with, teach, and support children, especially those facing distress and those who have been following different educational curricula (in displacement, but especially abroad).
- **Safety**: Provide mine risk education coupled with clearing.
- **Cross-Cutting Disability Considerations**: Enhance accessibility to physical spaces or assistive technology for online access, train teachers and facilitators, recruit specialists who are trained in working with children with disabilities, and ensure that various essential services employ reasonable accommodations to make them accessible to persons with disabilities.