

SUMMARY

EXPERIENCES, NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND CAREGIVERS DISPLACED FROM UKRAINE - SEPTEMBER 2023

IMPACT Initiatives and Save the Children International (SCI) conducted a mixed-method child protection (CP) and Cash assessment between November 2022 and April 2023 to better understand the needs and experiences of the refugee children and their caregivers in Europe.* As part of its ongoing regional longitudinal phone survey, IMPACT conducted 15,229 interviews with Ukrainian refugees living in 24 European countries. Complementary to the survey, IMPACT conducted qualitative consultations with 307 children aged between 8 and 17 years old, focus group discussions (FGDs) with 115 child caregivers and 33 host community members, as well as 34 individual key informant interviews (KIIs) with service providers in the CP, education and health sectors in Poland and Romania.

Key Takeaways

The assessment demonstrates that refugee children and caregivers from Ukraine feel generally safe in their host countries and enjoy, for the most part, access to a range of services. Yet many continue to face significant challenges as result of their displacement.

Well-being and safety concerns

"I am worried whether we will be able to return to Ukraine to my dad and my kitten." - Girl, 8-11, Romania

During the consultations in Poland and Romania, children said that they were most worried about missing their family, friends or pets left behind in Ukraine. They also expressed concerns about not knowing the local language of the host country and about experiencing xenophobic remarks and bullying in their host location. Particularly younger children reported bullying and xenophobic remarks, both by other children and by adults, and instances of physical bullying were

* The research was funded by SCI, Global Affairs Canada, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

mostly mentioned by young boys in Romania. Loneliness seemed to be most prevalent among adolescents in Romania and younger children in Poland. Similarly, caregivers across the 24 countries reported in the survey that children were most negatively affected by worries about the future (17%), not having enough friends around them (13%), not knowing the local language (13%), and missing friends and family in Ukraine (9%).

Protective factors

Children in Poland and Romania highlighted family, in particular mothers, and friends as their most trusted adults for seeking support. In both countries, some of the younger children stated they had no one they trusted to reach out to or help them in case they had a problem, and some said that they would instead solve problems by themselves. Caregivers, on the other hand, reported in the regional survey that they especially trusted host-government institutions, such as police (32%) and state social services (25%), and volunteer/community organisations (24%).

“In Poland, my relationship with my mother is better than it was in Ukraine. The war changed my parents. They listen to me now.” - Girl, 12-14, Poland

CP needs and service access

In the consultations in Poland and Romania, children reported that better access to extra-curricular activities, especially sports, and more leisure time were their main needs. In both countries, adolescents often highlighted their independence and that they would reach out to the relevant service providers, such as healthcare practitioners or teachers, for their respective needs. In Poland, children also stressed the need for better access to Polish language classes, while children in Romania urged for more in-person education. Similarly, caregivers reported in the survey that children most urgently needed access to extra-curricular activities (17%), healthcare services (14%) and education and childcare (9%) – despite an increase in children’s access to these services between the survey rounds.

Although psycho-social concerns negatively affected children’s and caregivers’ wellbeing, the survey and consultations demonstrate that only a few children and caregivers sought out access to MHPSS services. Particularly adolescent girls explained they wanted to talk to a psychologist, but that they did not know how to contact one, or that their parents disapproved.

Language-, cost-, and information barriers, as well as long waiting times and availability of staff were the key obstacles to accessing services, according to caregivers and service providers in survey and qualitative interviews. Adolescents in Poland explained that their school schedule specifically conflicted with extra-curricular activities, and service providers in Romania highlighted that adolescents had more difficulties accessing extra-curricular activities because less programs were directed towards them.

Integration and movement intentions

87% of caregivers in the regional survey reported that they planned to stay in their current location in the short-term, mainly for security reasons (31%) and due to better access to education (27%), employment opportunities (24%) and accommodation (23%). Qualitative interviews with caregivers in Poland and Romania show that most families plan on returning to Ukraine once the security situation allows. **Refugees and host communities in both countries explained during the qualitative interviews that knowing the local language was both the most important facilitator of and barrier to integration.** Despite this, only 32% of caregiver survey respondents across the 24 countries reported attending local language classes. **Enrolment in local schools and joint activities with local children were seen as other important facilitators.** Host community members mentioned the unclear intentions of refugees to return or to stay in the mid- and long term as a barrier to integration.

“We really need jobs for half a day or part-time jobs because everyone has children, and usually everyone here is alone, with no one to help. For example, I am alone here with two children. I can't leave them alone, and there are many people like me here.” - Female caregiver, Romania

Financial situation

In Czech Republic (58%), Poland (54%), and Slovakia (51%) most refugees were working either in the host country or remotely in Ukraine or other countries, compared to Germany (16%), where households were largely dependent on government assistance.

During qualitative interviews, caregivers in Poland and Romania explained that a **lack of appropriate childcare options and the language barrier were significant obstacles that would prevent them from finding employment.** The assessment also shows that refugees spent most (44%) of their monthly expenses on food and beverages. **Only in Poland, households spent more**

than a quarter of their expenses on rent. The cost burden of paying for accommodation was also highlighted by service providers during the qualitative interviews in Poland.

Recommendations

Given the challenges children from Ukraine and their families face, governments, the European Union (EU), civil society and humanitarian organisations can take several steps to improve their lives. Importantly, all those providing care, services or making decisions related to children from Ukraine should give them the space to express their opinions on matters that concern them and take their opinions into account when taking decisions.

To host country governments:

Generally:

- Ensure child participation and consultation in the design, development and implementation of national-level policies related to Ukrainian refugees.
- Include civil society and local authorities in the programming and monitoring of the national response to displacement from Ukraine.
- Make sure that refugees have access to social protection and CP systems and are aware of their rights and entitlements on an equal footing with the national population.
- Make sure that the refugee population has access to information on the available forms of legal protection (asylum or Temporary Protection*) and can access them as well as legal assistance.
- Ensure service providers, especially health care services, are aware of relevant procedures, policies, and laws in support of refugees and their rights and entitlements.
- Make sure that services are inclusive of persons with disabilities and children with high support needs.
- Ensure an environment where refugees feel welcome and where social inclusion and cohesion are promoted through campaigns, awareness, messaging, targeted events and initiatives in coordination with civil society organizations and humanitarian actors.

Specifically:

- Subsidize and increase access to a wider range of extra-curricular activities and to specialized healthcare, including Mental Health and Psycho-social Support (MHPSS) services and dental care, for low-income households, so that no child is left behind.
- Increase refugees' awareness about physical healthcare and MHPSS services available, when and how to access them.

* Under the EU's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)

- Subsidize and increase access to childcare, especially for single caregivers, to reduce barriers to employment and reduce stress.
- Provide sports, music and other recreational activities for refugee children, integrated with local children. Tailor those activities, so that they are age and gender- appropriate and inclusive and meet the needs and priorities of children.
- Increase access to and awareness of local language courses for refugee children and their caregivers, as well as other preparatory classes for students entering the local education system.
- Enable the integration of Ukrainian children into local schools by expanding school capacity, training teachers, hiring additional support staff, and providing language support for the children.
- In Poland specifically, decrease financial barriers to accommodation for refugees with children.
- Improve labour market access and income from work for people with disabilities.

To the EU:

- Commit to provide protection to all refugees who fled the conflict in Ukraine, without discrimination, for as long as hostilities are ongoing in the country and until it is safe to return by extending the application of the TPD to March 2025, or providing international protection as appropriate. Authorities should start considering how to guarantee access to international protection without delay in case the hostilities will continue beyond the timeframe of application of the TPD, in order to avoid any gaps in enjoying residence permits, access to education, health and other services.
- Ensure that the European Child Guarantee national action plans include children from Ukraine, specifically in the areas of education, housing, and mental health support. EU Member States should make adjustments to plans to ensure this, if they have already been submitted.
- Continue to provide financial support to EU Member States for expansion of school capacity, healthcare access and childcare. Moreover, the allocation of EU funding for the Ukraine response should remain conditional on fulfilment of the criterion of distributing 30% of funding to civil society organisations and local authorities for cohesion and AMIF funds.
- Systematically gather country-specific data on reception and support provided to refugees and on the use of related funds.

To civil society organisations and other humanitarian actors:

- Systematize children's participation through the creation of online and offline spaces at all levels for children's meaningful, safe and sustained participation in program design and implementation.

- Strengthen family and communities' ability to respond to the mental health and psychosocial needs of children and increase access and availability of focused, non-specialised MHPSS services.
- Ensure Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) programs are tailored to support specific income gaps, such as Cash for Rent, Cash for Protection, Cash for Education etc.
- Ensure the availability of age and gender appropriate recreational activities to support psychosocial wellbeing and community integration of Ukrainian refugees.

Inherent value of children's consultations

Beyond the value of the assessment's findings on CP needs and the financial situation of Ukrainian refugees in host countries, the inherent value of direct consultations as a method of assessing children's and adolescents' needs was illustrated by the young participants' urge to express their concerns and work on solutions together with peers and adults.