

# Humanitarian Needs in Occupied Areas: What do we know and what can we do?

September 2025 | Ukraine

## Overview of the brief

An [estimated](#) three to five million persons live in occupied areas of Ukraine, with [previous assessments](#) highlighting high level of needs. However, the lack of access makes it difficult to collect information and support residents of occupied areas. Through the Area of Knowledge (AoK) approach<sup>1</sup>, it is possible to collect some information on humanitarian needs to ensure the needs of residents in occupied areas are properly documented, and to inform a possible future response. This brief summarizes existing evidences of humanitarian needs in occupied areas as of August 2025, based on the limited data available. For the purpose of this brief, REACH defines occupied areas as Russian-occupied areas of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine after February 24, 2022. **All data included in this brief is indicative only.**

## I. What are the most critical needs in occupied areas? Actionable data for advocacy and programmes

**Persistent unmet humanitarian needs have been consistently reported in occupied areas** ([January 2025, HSM](#)), but limited accessibility by humanitarian actors restricts their scope of action ([April 2025, OCHA](#)). Still, existing data can already inform advocacy and certain programmes to ensure that people living in occupied areas are also supported. REACH identified three main challenges faced by residents of occupied areas:

### 1.1. The unaffordability of goods and services

**While most food and non-food items (NFIs) were reportedly available in stores, they were often unaffordable** for many residents of occupied areas. The high prices of items in markets were frequently reported as a barrier to access food (42% for food items, 49% for NFIs) (June 2025, HSM), and 42% of customers reported that prices increased in the past month (December 2024, JMML).

**This is especially challenging as access to livelihoods was reportedly limited in occupied areas:** in 38% of settlements, residents could not access livelihoods at all, with residents having enough money to cover all their basic needs in only 3% of settlements. Similarly in 13% of assessed settlements, key informants reported residents could not meet any of their needs due to a lack of money (2025, WFP FIOA MSNA). This led to frequent reports of residents resorting to subsistence farming to mitigate their food needs: while purchasing food in markets was still the most common source of food (reported in 75% of settlements), in many settlements residents also reportedly resorted to subsistence farming (67%) (2025, WFP FIOA MSNA) - despite protection needs coming from mine/UXO contamination of agricultural land.

### 1.2. Protection and legal needs

**Residents of occupied areas face a wide range of security challenges, with some unique to occupied areas** Some protection concerns were shared with Governmental Controlled Areas, although reported with a lower prevalence, such as missile attacks (51% of assessed settlements) and exposure to armed violence/shelling (44%) (June 2025, HSM OA). **Other protection and housing, land and property concerns were uniquely prevalent in occupied areas:** notably, key informants reported residents were concerned that housing and/or land is used for military purposes in 62% of assessed settlements, property are unlawfully occupied by others (42%), looting of private property (35%) and social tensions in the community (27%) (June 2025, HSM OA). The frequent reports of military objects being present among or near civilians, which were confirmed in Lysychansk by another REACH assessment (December 2024, DIA), suggests that residents are exposed to additional protection risks if not sufficiently mitigated by strict adherence to International Humanitarian Law.

**Other assessments noted the widespread presence of mines/UXOs** in communities (78% of assessed settlements), (2025, WFP FIOA MSNA). In addition to protection risks, the presence of landmines/UXOs can exacerbate challenges related to livelihoods (agricultural lands contaminated by UXOs) and access to services (too dangerous to travel to facilities). However, the presence of landmines/UXO was reported as a safety concern in only 30% of settlements (December 2025, HSM OA), possibly reflecting a higher level of mine education after three years of war, or that households have learned to cope with them regardless of the protection risks associated.

## HUMANITARIAN NEEDS IN OCCUPIED AREAS

### 1.3. The inaccessibility of services: reported concerns on the “passportization” issue

As noted in previous REACH assessments (May 2024, [ABA](#)), during occupation Russian-provided services are enforced over Ukrainian ones. In addition to longer-term challenges such as broken supply chains, this creates new challenges for residents, further reducing their access to services:

- **Almost no residents of occupied areas can access the Ukrainian banking system**, and therefore receive benefits from the Government of Ukraine; with the shift of currency often resulting in additional costs for residents (commissions and unfavourable exchange rates, June 2025, HSM). Similarly, access to Ukrainian media is nearly impossible<sup>2</sup>.
- **Access to basic services, such as healthcare, was reportedly conditioned on having a Russian passport**: the lack of Russian passports was reported as a challenge in 7% of settlements where residents could not access sufficient healthcare (June 2025, HSM).
- Other qualitative assessments from REACH noted that while residents of occupied areas reportedly require Russian passports to access services, some **key informants mentioned they are also concerned by the perception that doing so could make them eligible for conscription by Russia**. When asked about protection concerns specific to men, key informants in 30% of occupied settlements reported residents are concerned about the threat of conscription (June 2025, HSM OA), which would be a violation of International Humanitarian Law (Art. 51, [IV Geneva Convention](#)).

## II. Do we have a full picture of needs?

### 2.1. Limitations and accuracy of data

Due to reported restrictions on communication and on movement in occupied areas, it is difficult to get information from occupied areas without relying on the Area of Knowledge (AoK) approach. **Despite its limitations, a validation study has confirmed that the AoK approach is successful at comparing humanitarian needs across areas, though the accuracy varies by sector and indicator and depends on the extent of settlements covered.**

To further understand the accuracy of findings for occupied areas, REACH compared data from different assessments conducted through different means to see if they diverge, and which indicators are reliable:

- **JMMI OA assesses the availability of items in markets while HSM OA assesses the proportion of settlements where access to food is limited in occupied areas.** In December 2024, 48/50 customers surveyed reported the full availability of food items in stores (JMMI OA). This is slightly different from HSM OA, where key informants (KIs) in 16/49 settlements reported limited availability of items. However, the lower availability of food items in Zaporizka was recorded in both JMMI and HSM, hinting that **while the exact prevalence of needs may differ based on the geographical focus and methodology of the assessment, broader patterns of needs** (such as which locations are in need or the severity of needs) **are accurately reflected in current assessments.**
- **HSM OA R19 and WFP FIOA MSNA both assessed multisectoral needs in October 2024 in occupied areas.** Taking as an example access to water: in WFP FIOA MSNA, there were no reported challenges accessing drinking water in 39% of assessed settlements, compared to no disruption to the provision of water being reported in 43% of settlements assessed by HSM. Similarly, key informants in WFP FIOA MSNA reported frequent challenges or no access at all in 20% of settlements, compared to KIs in 19% of settlements in HSM OA reporting disruption of water most of the time every day or all the time in their settlement. While they use different methodologies, **findings are similar and can therefore be assumed to be accurate.**

- **Remote sensing was used to assess the level of damage to housing and civilian infrastructure in Lysychansk (December 2024, DIA). The findings generally aligned with reports from key informants from this settlement**, giving confidence in their reports.
- Additional qualitative interviews from REACH also confirmed that key informants generally agreed that the situation in their settlement was similar to neighboring settlements, hinting that **needs may generally be similar in settlements close to each others.**

### 2.2. Humanitarian data gaps in occupied areas

Several data gaps remain for occupied areas: **first, the demographics of occupied areas have changed since the start of the full scale invasion**, with large displacement having occurred - and possibly still occurring: as of October 2024, around half of assessed settlements (48%) reportedly lost the majority of their pre-2022 population, with in many settlements KIs reporting the presence of IDPs (54%) or returnees (30%). **Without recent updates to the demographic profile of occupied settlements, it is difficult to estimate the number of people in need, or which vulnerable population groups are present.**

Similarly, **settlements assessed by HSM OA were mostly smaller** (in June 2025, 40% were under 1000 people, and 35% were between 1000 and 5000), **making it difficult to generalize findings to most residents of occupied areas.**

Finally, **protection concerns are likely underreported due to their sensitivity** and the reported fear of reprisal when discussing these concerns.


**Some key informants from the “area of knowledge” approach lack awareness of vulnerable groups.** For example, in 43% of settlements key informants reported not knowing what specific protection challenges women and girls were facing in occupied areas (June 2025, HSM OA). Similarly, key informants in contact with families without children in occupied areas were unable to estimate what challenges children face or their needs regarding education.

**Therefore, existing data is likely insufficient to understand the needs of the most vulnerable people in occupied areas, or those who have no contacts with people living in government-controlled areas.**

## To go further

REACH monitors and frequently reports on humanitarian needs in occupied areas as part of its other research cycles. Sensitive assessments can be accessed by sending a request to [impact.ukraine@impact-initiatives.org](mailto:impact.ukraine@impact-initiatives.org). Partners interested in REACH work on occupied areas and response planning after occupation can consult:

### Social cohesion in regained and occupied areas



**Overview of social cohesion in areas formerly or currently occupied by Russia**

January-March 2024 | Ukraine

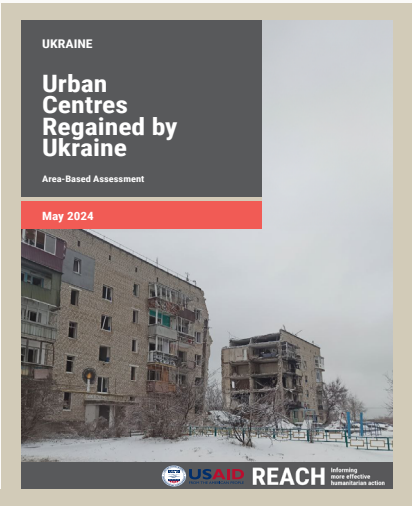
Between December 2023 and March 2024, REACH conducted assessments to understand how social changed in Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion in areas experiencing (at the time of data formerly experienced occupation. Findings from areas regained by Ukraine and from occupied areas analysed in a restricted report available upon request. This two-pager goes over the methodology as the report.

**Key takeaways**

**Overview of social cohesion in areas regained by Ukraine**

- While in a majority of FGDs, participants reported that **horizontal social relations improved in the start of the full-scale invasion**, it is **mitigated by reports of increased polarization** in the with some people being closer together and some further apart. A wide variety of contributing f from displacement status to perceived attitude during occupation.
- Humanitarian assistance was reported as a major factor contributing to horizontal social to eligibility criteria perceived as being unfair or too narrow and lack of clarity on how assist might indicate a need for further community engagement from humanitarian actors to explain h criteria are set.**
- Vertical social relations varied considerably across settlements**, with trust in local authorities to their perceived behaviour and public statements during and after occupation being the main **Inclusion in the restoration process, clear communication and avoiding stigmatizing group**

### Urban Centres Regained by Ukraine - report




**Urban Centres Regained by Ukraine**

Area-Based Assessment

May 2024

US AID REACH Informing more effective humanitarian action

### Evolution of Needs in Occupied Areas - report



**REACH HSM: Evolution of humanitarian needs in occupied areas (July-October 2024)**

January 2025 | Ukraine

**KEY MESSAGES**

- Between July and October 2024, the proportion of settlements with reported 'high' or above levels humanitarian need grew from 37% to 42% of the settlements. The needs appeared particularly acute the front line, where the proportion of settlements with reported 'high' or above levels of overall human 60% in October.
- The most frequently reported unmet priority needs remained consistent, including lack of/insuffi adequate healthcare, communication means, and income or money. A notable rise in cold-season-n needs was observed, particularly in frontline settlements. KIs increasingly highlighted insufficient heating the settlements in July to 17% in October) and a lack of non-food items (7% to 15%). Similarly, KIs in 37 within 30 km of the front line reported insufficient access to suitable living spaces in October 2024, which to heightened vulnerability of residents in occupied areas during the winter season.
- Findings highlight: **considerable challenges in accessing financial resources and findings in occupied with access to Ukrainian banking systems consistently reported as a concern in an average of 86% of the same time, access to Russian banking services showed improvement, with KIs in 43% of the settlements to Russian online banking for most of the residents, and KIs in 57% reporting access to the use of Russia payments by October.**

**CONTEXT & RATIONALE**

The humanitarian situation in the occupied areas of Ukraine remains a matter of grave concern, as 1 these areas, encompassing at least 1.5 million people in need (according to the 2024 Humanitarian Needs Plan), continues to face challenges in relation to meeting their essential needs.

In addition, **access barriers to these territories persevered throughout 2024**, which along with the **lack of information**, have created a complex environment where the delivery of life-saving aid remains a sign.

REACH's Humanitarian Situation Monitoring (HSM) aims to address the information gap by providing up t sectoral information on the community-level needs of those living in occupied areas. This situation overv developments in settlements in the occupied areas of Ukraine from July 2024 (Round 17) to Octob- 19). Whilst sampling changed from round to round, the current brief incorporates data from 139 se

## Methodology and limitations

This analysis is based on data collected in previous assessments conducted by REACH: the **Humanitarian Situation Monitoring (HSM, June 2025)**, which collects data on community needs in 139 occupied settlements through the Area of Knowledge (AoK) approach; **qualitative rounds of HSM (February 2025)**, which complements regular rounds of HSM through qualitative interviews with people who recently left occupied areas; the **Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMIMI, December 2024)**, which collects data on market access and prices of products at the hromada level in occupied areas through interviews with customers and retailers; and the **Damage Impact Analysis in Lysychansk (DIA, December 2024)**, which uses remote sensing to estimate the level of damage to housing and infrastructures in occupied settlements. It also relies on secondary data sources, such as **World Food Programme Multisectoral needs assessment in frontline and occupied area in Ukraine (WFP FIOA MSNA, 2025)**, which collected data at the settlement-level on multisectoral needs in occupied areas. For all these assessments, data is indicative only.

## Endnotes

1 The "Area of Knowledge" (AoK) is an approach developed by REACH to fill information gaps in inaccessible areas. AoK entails interviewing key informants (KIs) about humanitarian conditions in a community (typically a settlement) which they have declared to have recent knowledge of. These KIs can include current residents of the areas of interest or people who have recently visited or have recently been displaced from these areas and are interviewed in their areas of displacement. For more on the AoK approach, please refer to: [the AoK method for Humanitarian Situation Monitoring](#), September 2023.

2 Restriction on information and telecommunication is detrimental to the protection of residents in occupied areas: a [research](#) by the Centre for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) in Ukraine highlighted how access to information is essential for civilians' self-protection.

If you have questions on this brief, or would like to request additional information on REACH's work in occupied areas, please contact: [maxence.martin@impact-initiatives.org](mailto:maxence.martin@impact-initiatives.org)

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