

Unsafe returns: what makes refugees return to Ukraine and settle in the frontline areas of the country?

Longitudinal Survey of Ukrainian Returnees, Round 28 – August 2024

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

1

Over three years of conflict, many surveyed refugees have returned to Ukraine, with a striking proportion settling in the frontline areas. Within the IMPACT longitudinal study monitoring the situation of Ukrainian refugees, as of August 2024, among all surveyed returnees to Ukraine, 27% have settled in frontline areas, usually in their original settlements or within the same oblast. Notably, 5% of returnees now reside in frontline areas where active hostilities are occurring on the ground.

2

Family reunification was reported as the main reason for return, particularly among respondents who returned from abroad to frontline areas of Ukraine (52%). The majority (71%) of respondents in frontline areas, who experienced family separation, were able to reunite with their family members upon return, particularly with partners (82%) and parents (73%), driven by emotional reasons or caregiving needs. However, returning closer to the frontline also led to separations: 8% of these respondents left their mostly adult children abroad, making up 60% of all family separations that occurred upon returning to frontline areas.

3

Employment stood at 62% among respondents, who returned to frontline areas, and remained an important driver for staying, with many regaining their pre-displacement roles. Though broader challenges related to childcare and local labour conditions persist. Unlike refugees abroad, who often face professional downgrading, returnees to frontline areas have largely maintained employment profiles aligned with their qualifications. However, managerial roles among this group have declined from 12% to 7%, and 29% of former sales and service workers remain unemployed, reflecting possible disruptions in local labour markets near the frontline. In these areas, schools mostly operate online due to safety concerns, additionally limiting work opportunities for parents and, especially, single caregivers households (HH with one adult and one or more children aged up to 18), who emphasise the need for offline schooling, childcare support, or flexible working arrangements to mitigate this barrier.

4

Over the past year, the livelihood situation has worsened for all returnees to Ukraine, with those returning to frontline areas have been one of the hardest hit. Half (50%) of all surveyed returnees to Ukraine have adopted coping mechanisms, and 23% have reduced food consumption due to insufficient income – figures that have steadily risen to these levels during 2023-2024. Still, refugees returning to frontline areas were more likely to report reducing their spending on essential items due to insufficient income (55%) compared to those returning to safer areas (47%) and had higher self-reported acute needs (57% compared to 46%).

5

Worsening safety conditions over 2024, drive growing uncertainty among movement intentions of respondents, who returned to frontline areas. Since late 2023, improved safety has been cited far less frequently as a reason for returning (dropping to 5%), while socioeconomic factors - such as access to medical services (13%), education (10%), and financial strain abroad (9%) - have become increasingly significant. Simultaneously, uncertainty about staying has risen sharply, increasing to 30% by August 2024 from 19% in February, reflecting the persistent instability of safety conditions. These findings underscore the urgent need for improved safety measures and infrastructure to stabilise returnees' living conditions and ensure sustainable reintegration.

ABOUT LONGITUDINAL STUDY

Since the end of February 2022, IMPACT Initiatives has been conducting a monthly survey of people who fled the escalation of hostilities in Ukraine to understand their mobility patterns, needs, integration trajectories, and intentions to return, and how these change over time. Respondents were first interviewed after they crossed the border out of Ukraine from 28 February onwards in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova at border crossings, transit sites, and reception centres, in partnership with UNHCR and have since been followed up by IMPACT's team, which conducts monthly phone interviews with the same pool of respondents. From October 2022 onwards, we began to diversify sources of consent and have complemented the

existing sample through Viber, Facebook, and Kyivstar dissemination campaigns. **Given the non-random sampling strategy, the results are not statistically representative and must be interpreted as indicative.**

The data collection for Round 28 and the development of this situational overview were funded by the International Federation of Red Cross, the British and Danish Red Cross Societies. This brief was also prepared in close collaboration with the Ukrainian Red Cross Society.



Shaping practices
Influencing policies
Impacting lives

ABOUT THIS SITUATION OVERVIEW

Since the mass cross-border displacement of Ukrainians following the full-scale invasion in 2022, returns have been observed, with the highest peak in the second half of 2022.¹ By August 2024, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated² that approximately 4.4 million people had returned to their habitual residences in Ukraine, with 24% of these returnees coming from abroad. While returns were more frequent to the central and western regions, returns to areas near the frontline—regions severely affected by the ongoing conflict, were also observed. The decision to return to high-risk areas highlights the complex interplay of motivations and challenges faced by returnees. Among those surveyed by IOM, 5%—estimated to be around 201,000 individuals—reported considering re-displacement, with the proportion rising to 11%

in Donetsk Oblast, one of the regions with the most active hostilities. This reflects the volatile situation in these areas, where the lack of safety, inadequate infrastructure and limited access to services make resettlement uncertain or temporary.

Given that the ongoing conflict, humanitarian response actors actively supporting Ukrainian refugees at the regional level do not support returns to Ukraine,³ but people continue to return despite the risks. Understanding those who do return to such areas is important to support the prevention of unsafe returns and the provision of assistance to those who need it. Studying their livelihoods, perceptions, and intentions—particularly in frontline areas—provides insights into their situation and mobility trends and aims to inform the humanitarian response, reducing the risks of premature or unsustainable returns.

This report aims to inform regional and Ukrainian humanitarian responses by providing an in-depth analysis of returnees to frontline areas, focusing on their experiences, motivations for returning, and reintegration challenges. It offers a demographic and geographic overview, examines family separation and reunification patterns, and analyses return reasons alongside adaptation needs. The report also explores current movement intentions and concludes with a livelihood overview, including a case study on how IDP allowance reduction (referred to hereafter as IDP cuts⁴) may drive returns to frontline areas in Ukraine.

Since this report focuses specifically on people who have returned from abroad to the most unsafe areas of Ukraine, a clear classification of territories was needed. It was decided to group the sample based on the Ministry of Reintegration's instruction "On Approval of the List of Territories in which Military Operations are (were) Conducted or Temporarily Occupied by the Russian Federation",⁵ first published on 22.12.2022 and updated on 17 August 2024. **Territories, which were classified as currently having "possible active hostilities", "active hostilities" or "are occupied" here are understood as such with the highest security risk and named "frontline areas", the rest of the territories of Ukraine are referred to as "safer areas". The same approach was used to classify territories of the area of origin, disregarding the history of hostilities.** Therefore, in the Longitudinal Study sample, "frontline areas" comprise large parts of Kharkivska, Mykolaivska, Zaporizka, Donetsk, Sumska, Khersonska, Dnipropetrovska and Chernihivska oblasts.⁶ Lastly, this survey purposefully does not include people who are, as of data collection, located in territories which are classified as "occupied" due to safety and ethical reasons.

As of Round 28, 38% of the sample of returnees to Ukraine comprised individuals originally displaced from frontline areas who became refugees at some point after February 2022. Of these, 70% (27% of the total sample) returned to frontline areas, in the majority of cases returning to their home settlements (referred to hereafter as **returnees to frontline areas**). The remaining 30% (12% of the total sample) settled as IDPs in safer areas of the country (referred to hereafter as **IDPs to safer areas**). The remainder of the sample consisted of individuals who originated from and settled in non-frontline areas (referred to hereafter as **returnees to safer areas**).

This longitudinal survey report centres on the experiences of returnees to frontline areas. While the analysis primarily focuses on this group, supporting data and visualisations are included to facilitate potential comparisons with other sub-samples of IDPs to safer areas and returnees to safer areas. Additionally, where relevant, information on the overall returnee sample in Ukraine and the broader refugee sample (as of Round 27) is included. For the Methodology overview see Annex 1.

1. World Health Organization, 'Despite ongoing war and lack of access to care, many refugees return to Ukraine', August 2022

2. IOM, 'Ukraine Returns Report, General Population Survey Round 17', August 2024

3. UNHCR, "UNHCR Position on Voluntary Return to Ukraine", June 2023

4. IDP cuts, as referenced here and throughout the text, refer to changes in the social benefit payment system for internally displaced persons in Ukraine, implemented in March 2024 by resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine dated 26 January 2024, No. 94 on Certain Issues of Social Support for Internally Displaced Persons and Other Vulnerable Categories of Individuals. These changes introduced specific eligibility criteria required to qualify for IDP payments and, as a result, cut significantly the number of receivers of such payments, [English translation] THE CABINET OF MINISTERS OF UKRAINE, 'Some considerations of social support for internally displaced persons and other vulnerable groups', January 2024

5. [English translation] Ministry of reintegration of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, 'Resolution No. 1668/39004', December 2022

6. For more detailed information on locations see the interactive map [here](#), Ministry of Reintegration



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GLOSSARY

Frontline areas in Ukraine are understood in this survey as territories of all hromadas of Ukraine, which have the status of “active hostilities”, “possible active hostilities” or “occupied” by instruction of the Ministry of Reintegration On Approval of the List of Territories in which Military Operations are (were) Conducted or Temporarily Occupied by the Russian Federation, first published in 22.12.2022, updated as of 17 August 2024.

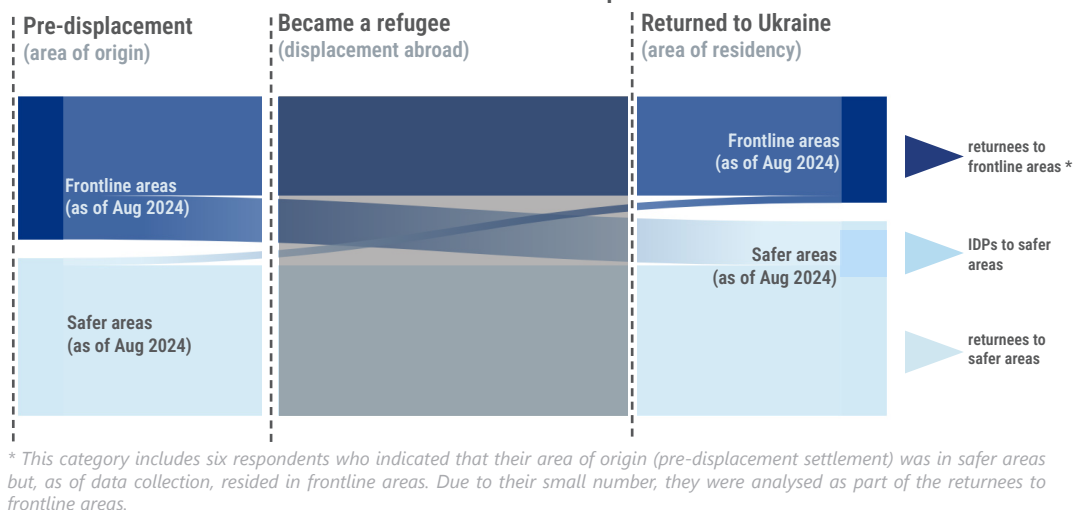
Safer areas of Ukraine are understood as those territories of hromadas, which do not have a status of “possible active hostilities”, “active hostilities” or “occupied” by instruction of the Ministry of Reintegration On Approval of the List of Territories in which Military Operations are (were) Conducted or Temporarily Occupied by the Russian Federation, first published in 22.12.2022, updated as of 17 August 2024.

Schematic illustration of respondents' displacement histories in correspondence with the sub-samples

Returnee to frontline area - a refugee who returned to Ukraine and resettled in their original or another settlement within frontline areas.

IDP to safer area - a refugee originally displaced from frontline areas who returned to Ukraine but chose to resettle in safer areas of the country.

Returnee to safer area - a refugee originally displaced from safer areas who returned to Ukraine and resettled in their original or another settlement within safer areas.



PROFILE OF THE REFUGEES RETURNING TO UKRAINE'S FRONTLINE AREAS

Often returning to their original settlements, returnees to frontline areas tend to be slightly older, with pre-retirement and retirement-age individuals frequently living alone. Their households also tend to have fewer children upon return, with many leaving them abroad, particularly adult children aged 18 and above, when returning to frontline areas. Nevertheless, these respondents were often motivated to return by family reunification, which usually occurred with partners and parents, and partly explains the lower percentage of single caregivers⁷ compared to IDPs to safer areas.

Table 1. Main socio-demographic characteristics of returnees to frontline areas compared to respondents with other displacement statuses

		Returnees to frontline areas	IDPs in safer areas (from frontline)	Returnees in safer areas (from safer areas)	TOTAL Returnees to Ukraine	TOTAL Refugees
RETURNED HOME		86%	0%	92%	79%	0%
SINGLE CAREGIVERS ⁷		18%	30%	16%	18%	30%
DISABILITY PRESENCE IN HH		17%	17%	18%	18%	22%
AGE	18 - 40 y. o.	45%	55%	55%	53%	49%
	41 + y. o.	55%	45%	45%	47%	51%
NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN HH	1-2	53%	59%	58%	57%	56%
	0	43%	36%	36%	38%	35%
	3 and more	4%	5%	6%	5%	9%
PRE-RETIREMENT AND RETIREMENT AGE RESPONDENTS (51-64+ y. o.)	HH size more than 1	65%	72%	64%	65%	63%
	one-person HH	35%	28%	36%	35%	37%
FAMILY SEPARATION/ REUNIFICATION	managed to reunify	82%	41%	95%	86%	8%
	ever separated	67%	59%	65%	65%	52%
HOSTILITIES STATUS IN SETTLEMENT OF ORIGIN	None	0%	24%	100%	62%	55%
	Possible active	89%	49%	0%	30%	29%
	Occupied	3%	32%	0%	5%	5%
	Active	8%	18%	0%	4%	11%
n=		578	248	1307	2154	3346

7. In this report, a single-caregiver household is defined as a household with one adult (more than 18 years) and one or more children (underage).

DEMOGRAPHY AND HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

As of Round 28, surveyed returnees to frontline areas were predominantly women (97%). They were mostly aged between 41–64 years old (49%) and 31–40 years old (33%), while the remainder were either 18–30 years old (12%) or 65 years old and above (6%). The average household size of respondents upon their return was 2.67.⁸ Notably, nearly a quarter (23%) of all surveyed households in the frontline areas consisted of 4 or more people. Still, most frequently households consisted of two persons (32%) or three persons (27%), with only 18% being single-person households. However, the likelihood that the respondent lived alone increased with age: 35% for those aged 51–64 and 49% for those aged 65 and above.

The gender-age distribution of household members shows that, at the household level, the sub-sample was mostly comprised of working-age¹⁰ women (42%) and children (30%). Another 18% were working-age men, and 10% were older people aged 65 years and above. Overall, among households

Vulnerable groups among returnees to frontline areas

18% of all surveyed households were composed of one adult (more than 18 years) and one or more children (underage)(referred to hereafter as single caregivers)

17% included people with disabilities⁹ in their household

35% of all respondents aged 51 and above were living alone (*in one-person households*)

of surveyed returnees to frontline areas, 43% did not have any children. Of the remainder (57%), the majority (66%) had one child in their household, 27% had two children, and 7% had three or four children.

Table 2. Gender-age distribution of returnee to frontline areas respondents' HH members compared to respondents with other displacement statuses

HH MEMBERS' GENDER-AGE DISTRIBUTION	Returnees to frontline areas	IDPs in safer areas	Returnees to safer areas	TOTAL Returnees to Ukraine	TOTAL Refugees
GIRLS 0-5 Y.O.	3%	3%	4%	4%	4%
BOYS 0-5 Y.O.	3%	5%	4%	4%	5%
GIRLS 6-12 Y.O.	8%	9%	8%	8%	9%
BOYS 6-12 Y.O.	4%	11%	9%	9%	10%
GIRLS 13-17 Y.O.	5%	4%	5%	5%	6%
BOYS 13-17 Y.O.	8%	5%	4%	4%	6%
MEN 18-64 Y.O.	18%	13%	20%	19%	13%
WOMEN 18-64 Y.O.	42%	42%	38%	40%	42%
MEN 65+ Y.O.	3%	3%	2%	2%	2%
WOMEN 65+ Y.O.	7%	6%	5%	5%	5%
n=	1543	682	3382	6166	9242

RETURN DATE

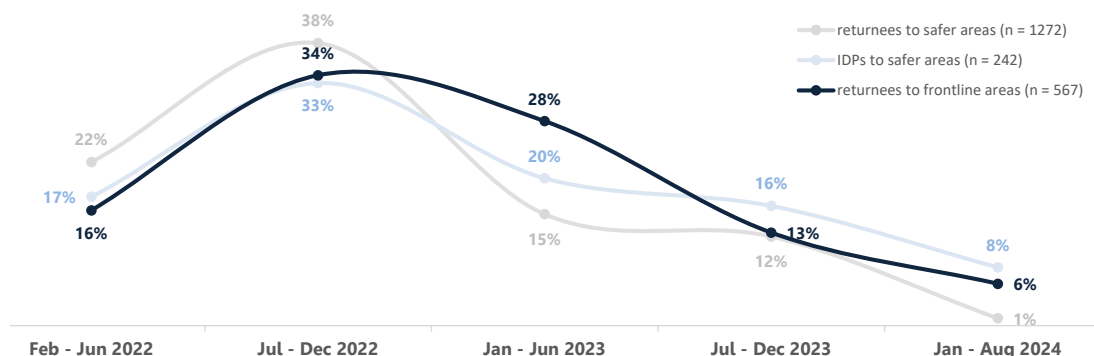
Half (50%) of the surveyed returnees to frontline areas returned from abroad during 2022, with most of them returning between July and December 2022 (Figure 1). Another 41% returned in 2023, while only 6% returned in 2024 prior to data collection.

8. Household-level information in this report is described as of upon return and comprises people with different displacement statuses including non-displaced persons, with whom respondents reunited upon return

9. The Washington Group, The self-reported disability was measured using the Washington Group short set of questions. Further guidance on the Washington Group short set is available [here](#), October 2022

10. For the purposes of this situation overview, 'working age' is defined as 18-64 years old.

Figure 1. Return date distribution of returnee to frontline areas respondents compared to respondents with other displacement statuses

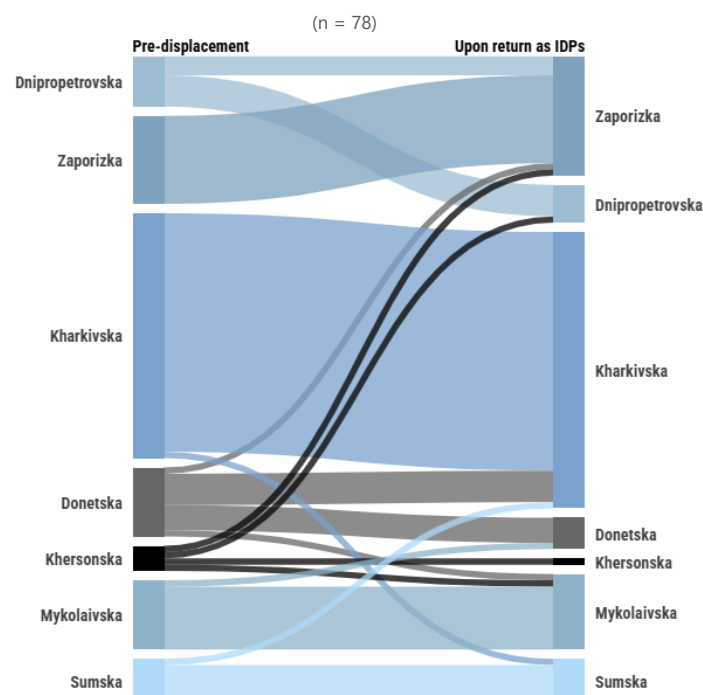


GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

Among surveyed returnees to frontline areas, the majority (87%) returned to their settlement of origin,¹¹ while only 14% settled elsewhere as IDPs. Most of them were originally from Kharkivska (37%), Mykolaivska (25%), and Zaporizka (13%) oblasts, which were also the most common destinations upon return from abroad (38%, 25%, and 14%, respectively). Overall, only 5% of the sub-sample were living in hromadas with ongoing active hostilities, while the remainder resided

in hromadas with no active fighting, but where the risk of ongoing hostilities was high (classified as "possible active hostilities").

Figure 2. Alluvial plot of IDPs' in frontline areas movements by their oblast of origin and current oblast



For those returnees to frontline areas who didn't settle in their home settlement - IDPs (78 people), there were notably more individuals originated from Donetsk, Khersonska and Luhanska oblasts than those who were residing there as of August 2024 (see Figure 2). Further the Figure 2 shows that many surveyed returnees to frontline areas, who were not living at home, were residing within the same oblast as their oblast of origin. Among the hromadas of origin for IDPs in frontline areas, 20% were occupied as of data collection, and 27% had active hostilities. However, only 10% of these respondents were living in hromadas with active hostilities.¹² This indicates that many IDPs likely resettled close to their home settlements, where the safety situation was marginally better.

FAMILY SEPARATION AND REUNIFICATION

Of all surveyed returnees to frontline areas, 64% experienced family separation due to displacement. Of those, 55% reported that separation occurred when they crossed the border to flee the country, meaning that some pre-displacement household members stayed behind either in their home settlement or elsewhere in Ukraine. Meanwhile, 12% indicated that the separation occurred upon their return to Ukraine, with

some family members remaining abroad in the host country. Among those who reported family separation during their displacement experience, the majority (71%) had managed to reunify with at least some of their pre-2022 household members.

11. The settlement of origin understood in this survey as a settlement, where respondent was residing prior the first displacement related to the full-scale invasion.

12. This survey purposefully does not include people who returned and as of data collection located in territories which are classified as "occupied" due to safety and ethical reasons

Figure 3. The experience of family separation* of returnees to frontline areas with their pre-displacement HH members due to displacement

For returnees to frontline areas, most reunifications likely occurred upon coming back (see Figure 4). Respondents most frequently reunited with partners (82% of those initially separated from partners). Notably, 8% of all returnee respondents to frontline areas were separated from children who stayed in the host country, accounting for 60% of all family separations linked to return. Separation from children primarily involved those aged 18 years or older (there were only 10 reported cases of separation from respondents involving children under 18).

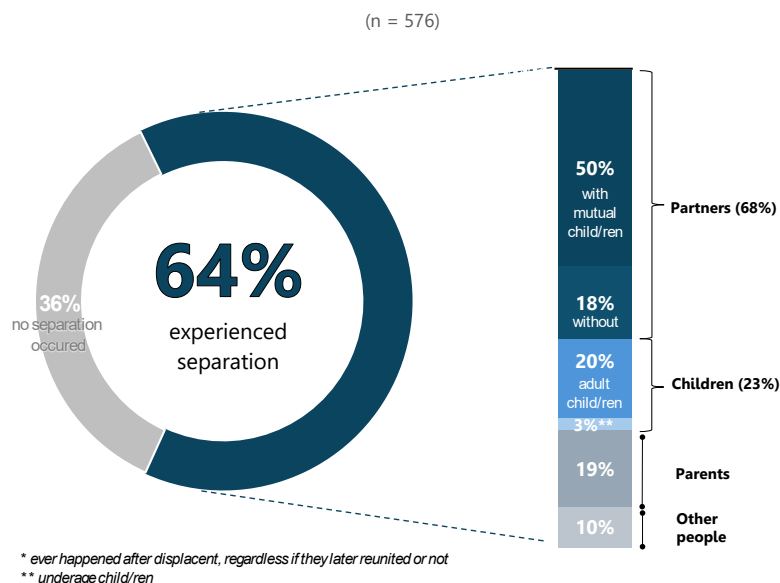
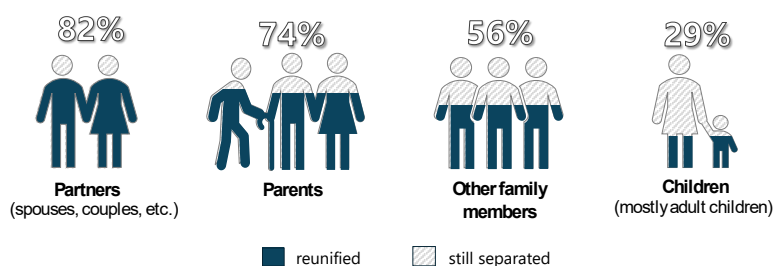


Figure 4. Reunification with at least one pre-displacement HH member after return to frontline areas



My daughter has turned 18 and now she is able to stay in Germany on her own without me, so I returned home to the job I had before the war."

Respondent from Kharkiv

REASONS AND AFTERMATH OF THE RETURN TO FRONTLINE AREAS

Returns to frontline areas were shaped by a blend of emotional motivations, practical needs, and evolving risks. Family reunification remained a central reason, with many returning to rejoin partners and to care for older relatives. Improved safety in late 2022 and early 2023 prompted many returns as well, but deteriorating security in late 2023 and 2024 shifted the context. Socioeconomic pressures, such as the need for employment, education, and medical care, became stronger drivers for return, leading to heightened specific needs upon return, such as improving safety measures and infrastructure in respondents' settlements. While ties to housing, family, and employment continued to ground returnees in these areas, worsening safety conditions had fueled growing uncertainty about staying, reflecting the difficult trade-offs between necessity and risk of rebuilding their lives in frontline areas.

SELF-REPORTED REASONS FOR RETURNING

Most respondents who returned to frontline areas reported that they did so for personal and emotional reasons, such as reunifying with family (52%) and feeling homesick while abroad (38%). The next most commonly named factors were related to employment: 13% were pushed from abroad due to inability to secure employment and 12% were returning

to continue their pre-displacement jobs. Some other push factors were also named by respondents: inability to find accommodation elsewhere (9%), access to medical care (7%) and having no funds to stay abroad (4%).

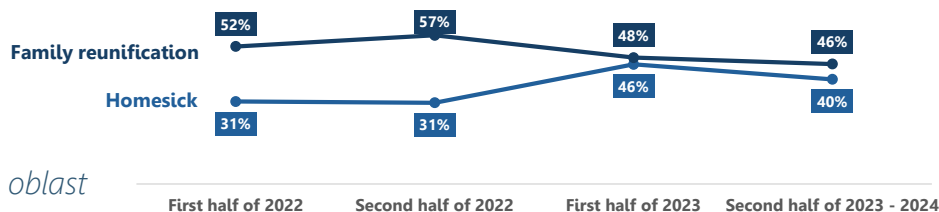
Table 3. Self-reported reasons for returning by surveyed returnees to frontline areas compared to respondents with other displacement statuses

SELF-REPORTED RETURN REASONS	Returnees to frontline areas	IDPs in safer areas (from frontline)	Returnees in safer areas	TOTAL Returnees to Ukraine
DESIRE TO REUNITE WITH FAMILY	52%	43%	50%	49%
HOMESICK	38%	21%	37%	35%
RETURNED TO PRE-DISPLACEMENT JOB	12%	6%	16%	13%
PERCEPTION OF SAFETY	9%	8%	14%	12%
NO EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES ELSEWHERE	13%	15%	9%	11%
NO AFFORDABLE ACCOMMODATIONS ELSEWHERE	9%	15%	7%	9%
TO ATTEND EDUCATION/SCHOOL IN UKRAINE	5%	8%	8%	7%
ACCESS TO MEDICAL TREATMENTS AND SUPPLIES	7%	7%	5%	6%
COULDN'T HAVE FOUND FUNDS TO STAY ABROAD	4%	5%	4%	4%
TEMPORARY VISIT (IN PREVIOUS LOCATION)	2%	1%	3%	3%
VIEW CONDITION OF HOME	5%	1%	2%	2%
OBTAIN/ RETRIEVE DOCUMENTATION	1%	4%	2%	2%
TEMPORARY VISIT (IN CURRENT LOCATION)	0%	1%	1%	1%
TELEWORKING ARRANGEMENT DISCONTINUED	1%	1%	1%	1%
SUPPORT FAMILY MEMBERS TO EVACUATE	0%	1%	1%	1%
OTHER	6%	8%	8%	7%
n =	576	248	1303	2148

When examining the reasons for returning in relation to dates of return (Figure 5), homesickness was a more common motivation among those returning to the frontline areas in 2023 and 2024. In contrast, family reunification was cited more frequently by respondents who returned in 2022. As shown in the "Family separation and reunification" chapter,

for surveyed returnees to frontline areas, family reunification often meant rejoining their partners. However, many also mentioned the need to care for older family members or those with health issues. This practical necessity likely contributed to the higher percentage of returns driven by family reunification in 2022.

Figure 5. How the proportion of the top two reasons for return changed in relation to the date of return of the respondents residing in the frontline areas



I returned to take care of my elderly mother, who had a stroke recently.

Respondents from Slovyansk, Donetsk oblast

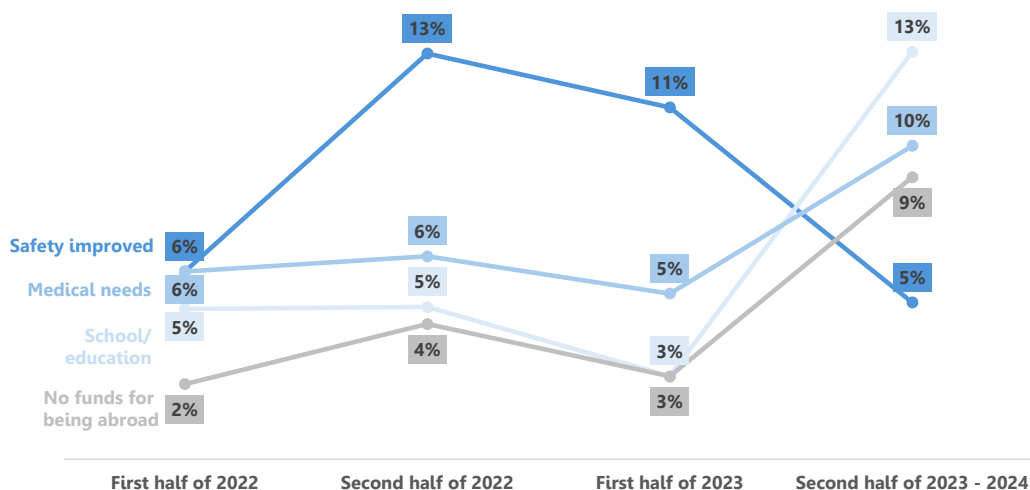
I have my family at home, my beloved husband, my elderly mother (72 years old) and mother-in-law (82 years old), who need to be taken care of. During the time we were in Poland my father-in-law died, so I could not stay there any longer and decided to return home.

Respondent from Zaporizhzhia

The reason related to improved safety was the most frequently mentioned by respondents who returned during the second half of 2022 and the first half of 2023 (11% and 13%, respectively). However, by the end of 2023 and in 2024, this reason declined significantly to 5%, likely

reflecting negative changes in the dynamics of the frontline.¹³ In contrast, individual reasons tied to socioeconomic (in)stability became more prominent among those returning in the latter half of 2023 and 2024 (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. The most frequently changed reasons for return in relation to the date of return of the respondents residing in the frontline areas



These reasons included the need for access to schools or other educational facilities (rising to 13%), access to medical care (rising to 10%), and the inability to sustain life abroad due to a lack of funds (rising to 9%). Returning to pre-displacement jobs was cited slightly more frequently by those who returned in 2022, averaging 15%, compared to an average of 10% among those who returned in 2023–2024. After returning to frontline areas, the majority of respondents (79%) reported having specific unmet needs related to

adapting to new conditions and challenges they had not encountered prior to displacement. The most commonly mentioned needs were food and basic necessities (30%), improving security measures in their settlements such as access to shelters and demining (23%), enhancing infrastructure like heating, electricity, and transportation (20%), better access to healthcare (15%), and assistance in finding employment (15%).

Table 4. Specific types of assistance needed for adaptation to new conditions upon return to Ukraine, as identified by surveyed returnees to frontline areas, compared to respondents with other displacement statuses

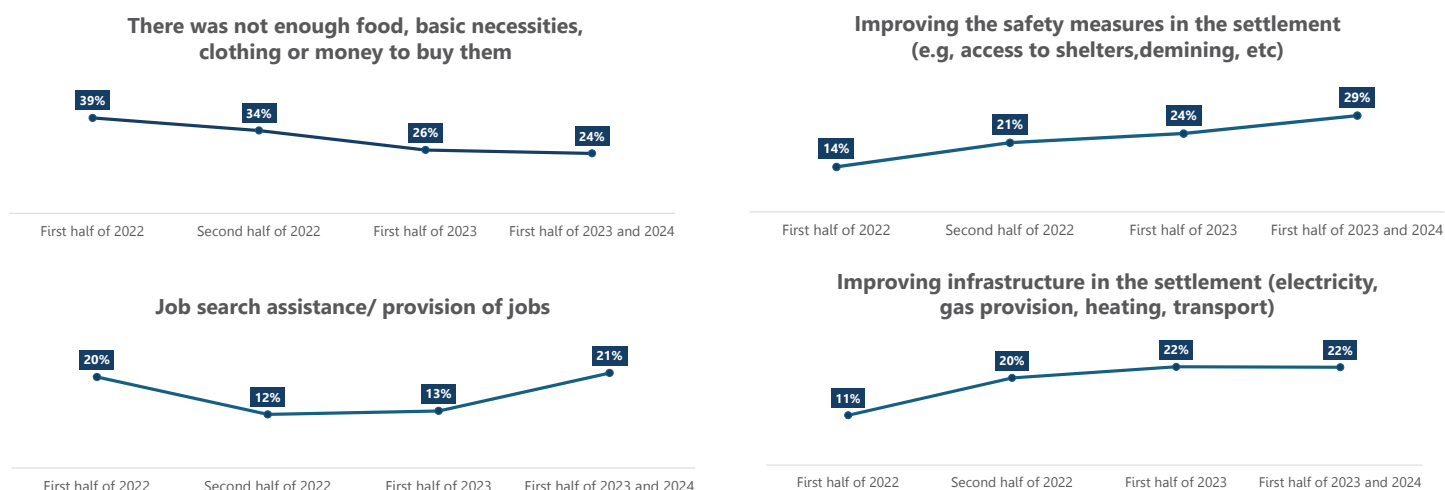
TYPE OF ASSISTANCE WAS NEEDED UPON RETURN	Returnees to frontline areas	IDPs in safer areas (from frontline)	Returnees to safer areas	TOTAL Returnees to Ukraine
NO ADDITIONAL SUPPORT OR ASSISTANCE WAS NEEDED	21%	10%	41%	32%
THERE WAS NOT ENOUGH FOOD OR BASIC NECESSITIES	30%	33%	19%	23%
IMPROVING THE SAFETY MEASURES IN THE SETTLEMENT (e.g., access to shelters, demining)	23%	8%	16%	17%
JOB SEARCH ASSISTANCE/PROVISION OF JOBS	15%	30%	11%	14%
HEALTHCARE SERVICES OR ITEMS	15%	10%	11%	12%
IMPROVING INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE SETTLEMENT (ELECTRICITY, GAS, PROVISION, HEATING, TRANSPORT)	20%	6%	9%	12%
HOUSING SUPPORT (SUPPORT IN FINDING HOUSING / PAYING RENT)	8%	47%	3%	10%
ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN	10%	8%	7%	8%
PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT	8%	8%	7%	7%
REBUILDING PROPERTY/DAMAGE REPAIR	9%	6%	2%	5%
REDUCING BUREAUCRATIC OBSTACLES	2%	6%	4%	3%
SUPPORT FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED BUSINESSES	3%	1%	3%	3%
ACCESS TO ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES	3%	2%	2%	2%
n =	578	248	1307	2154

13. ACLED, 'Ukraine: Mid-year metrics 2024', According to ACLED infographics, in 2024 number of battles in Ukraine increased and reached its all-time peak, May 2024

Specific adaptation needs varied depending on the respondents' return dates. Over time, newer returnees to frontline areas were less likely to report needing food, basic necessities. Instead, they increasingly highlighted the need for improved safety measures and infrastructure in their settlements (see Figure 7). Job search assistance was reported more frequently by surveyed returnees to frontline

areas, who returned either in the first half of 2022 (20%) or since the second half of 2023 (21%). This adaptation need showed an opposite return date distribution to the safety improvement self-reported reason for returning, indicating that those whose decisions were less influenced by safety considerations possibly faced greater challenges with economic reintegration.

Figure 7. The top four reported assistance needed right upon return related to adaptation to new conditions among returnees to frontline areas by the date of return



CERTAINTY OF STAYING RELATED TO CONDITIONS IN THE FRONTLINE AREAS

Most respondents across the entire returnee to Ukraine sample expressed confidence that they would remain in the same location for the next six months. This was also true for

returnees to frontline areas, with 70% indicating certainty, and even more so for IDPs to safer areas, where 81% expressed confidence in staying.

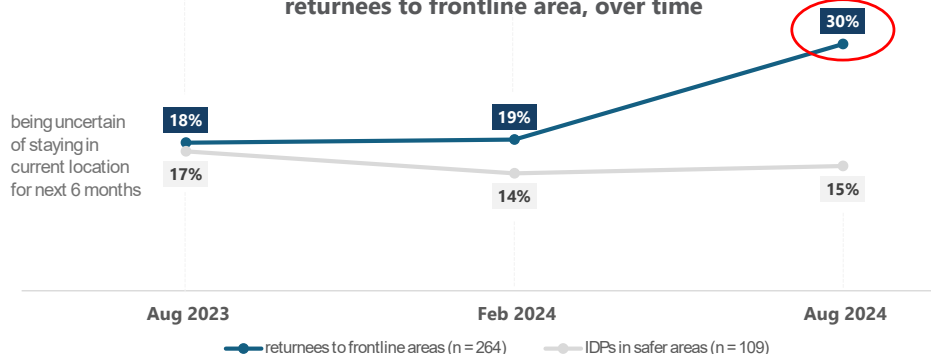
Table 5. Reasons of staying, among returnees to frontline areas who indicated certainty of staying in the same location for the next 6 months, compared to respondents with other displacement statuses

REASONS OF STAYING	Returnees to frontline areas	IDPs in safer areas (from frontline)	Returnees to safer areas	TOTAL Returnees to Ukraine
ACCOMMODATION	74%	57%	65%	66%
EMPLOYMENT	44%	49%	49%	48%
FAMILY REUNIFICATION	48%	20%	50%	46%
SECURITY AND SAFETY SITUATION IN UKRAINE	15%	52%	20%	23%
EDUCATION	13%	29%	24%	22%
MEDICAL TREATMENT	7%	3%	4%	5%
BENEFITS AND SUPPORT FROM NATIONAL AUTHORITIES	3%	10%	2%	3%
OTHER	7%	4%	7%	7%
n =	403	201	1085	1701

However, over the span of a year, surveyed returnees to frontline areas reported growing uncertainty about staying in the same location (see Figure 8). The proportion of respondents expressing uncertainty rose sharply from 19% in February 2024 to 30% in August 2024. This growth may be tied yet due to the escalation of events and changes on the

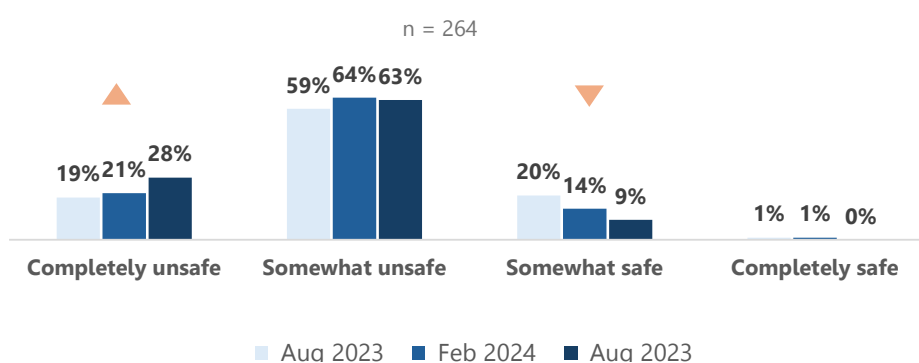
front line, which intensified in 2024. This trend suggests that while many returnees to frontline areas initially might seek autonomy in their decision to return and rebuild their lives, their circumstances remain highly influenced by fluctuating safety conditions, which exacerbate uncertainty.

Figure 8. Intentions to stay in current location of surveyed returnees to frontline area, over time



The main driver of uncertainty about staying in the same location was worsening safety conditions, with many respondents viewing their settlements as increasingly unsafe (see Figure 9). As a result, 70% of returnee to frontline areas respondents identified improved safety as the key condition for staying, including general security and specific measures like access to shelters. This underscores the growing importance of safety, especially after an initial period of adaptation following their return.

Figure 9. Surveyed returnees to frontline areas' safety perception change over time



SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION OF RETURNEES TO FRONTLINE AREAS

The socio-economic reality of returnees to frontline areas reflects their distinct position among displaced populations. These respondents rarely experienced professional downgrading, allowing them to maintain roles aligned with their skills — a contrast to the challenges faced abroad. Most also lived in their own housing, avoiding the rental expenses that burden IDPs to safer areas. However, these advantages often failed to translate into financial security, with 1 in 3 respondents reported household incomes of less than 100 EUR per person per month. This was further compounded by parents being overburdened with childcare responsibilities due to the prevalence of online schooling in frontline areas, which creates additional barriers to employment. These challenges were exacerbated by the broader economic crisis in Ukraine, where declining incomes and livelihoods deepened the vulnerabilities of all surveyed returnees to Ukraine.

ACCOMMODATION

Surveyed returnees to frontline areas were predominantly returning to their home settlements. As a result, the majority of all returning to frontline areas (81%) were residing in their own housing and did not have to strain their household income with rent payments, unlike most IDPs to safer areas of Ukraine. Among returnees to frontline areas, 83% were

paying only for utilities, 4% were not paying at all, and only 13% were paying full rent for rented apartments. In contrast, IDPs to safer areas were primarily living in rented apartments (74%), with an equal proportion (74%) paying the full cost of rent.

OCCUPATION & PROFESSIONS

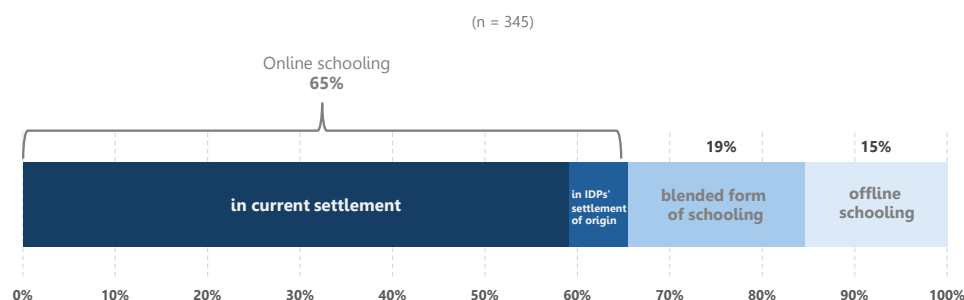
The employment level among working-age returnees to frontline areas stood at 62%, including remote workers, freelancers, and business owners. This was comparable to employment levels among IDPs to safer areas (63%) and returnees to safer areas (66%). However, returnees to frontline areas faced significant challenges with childcare, which could hinder their employment opportunities. The

majority (65%) of children in respondents' households from these areas were studying online¹⁴, a significantly higher rate compared to 33% among IDPs to safer areas and just 8% among returnees to safe areas. Security risks leading to a lack of offline schooling in frontline areas were frequently cited as barriers to employment, with some respondents unable to leave their children home alone to study online.

Schools are not working in Kharkiv, shelling and explosions are heard every day. In such settings, I can't get a job because I have to be close to my children. Thus, we live only on my husband's earnings and don't receive humanitarian aid. We really need offline schools for our children.

Respondent in Kharkiv

Figure 10. Schooling modalities children (aged from 6 to 17) attended in households of returnees to frontline areas



Most working returnees to frontline areas were employed as professionals or technical and associate professionals (47%) or in service and sales roles (20%). Clerical support workers made up 9% of the sample, while 8% were employed in elementary occupations. A similar employment pattern was observed among IDPs to safer areas and returnees to safer areas, where more respondents were employed as professionals than in elementary occupations. This differs from refugee respondents in the longitudinal study, who were more often employed in elementary roles, often due to professional downgrading among previously skilled workers.¹⁵

Employment remains one of the key factors influencing decisions to return, as well as motivations or uncertainties about staying in a current location (see "Self-reported reasons to return"). The contrast in professional roles between returnees and refugees underscores the job opportunities Ukraine can offer to former refugees, particularly in allowing them to maintain or return to their previous professional roles without experiencing the significant downgrading to lower-qualified jobs that many faced abroad. However, these opportunities do not necessarily lead to higher incomes, although they do provide access to work in familiar roles or occupations.

I came back [from Poland] to my children and mother, who stayed at home. I could not stand the harsh working conditions, I was working 12 to 17 hours a day."

Respondents from Peremoha village, Kharkivska oblast

Profession shifts and mismatches

In general, professional category shifts among returnees to frontline areas before the full-scale invasion and at the time of the survey were not particularly significant, with most categories showing changes of only $\pm 4\%$. However, managerial positions were less frequently occupied by returnees to frontline areas (7%) and IDPs to safer areas (7%) compared to returnees to safer areas (15%). This was notable given that, prior to the full-scale invasion, the

proportion of managers among employed individuals in these three sub-samples had been relatively similar (12%, 13%, and 14%, respectively). This indicated that returnees and IDPs from frontline areas faced greater barriers in re-establishing themselves in higher-tier professional roles, potentially reflecting reduced demand for managerial expertise in local labour markets destabilised by the conflict.

14. This percentage is directly caused by proximity to the frontline, as certain oblasts of Ukraine reserve the right to provide only online education due to security risks and lack of safety measures, Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. See the legislation on Ukrainian [here](#), January 2024

15. For more information on socio-economic situation of refugees in Poland please refer to IMPACT Initiatives, "Economic integration of Ukrainians in Poland by the end of 2023: insights and challenges", 2024.

Additionally, IDPs to safer areas had more frequently transitioned into sales and service-related jobs following displacement, with an increase of 9%. In contrast, this trend was less evident among returnees to frontline areas. Among unemployed respondents in frontline areas who had been

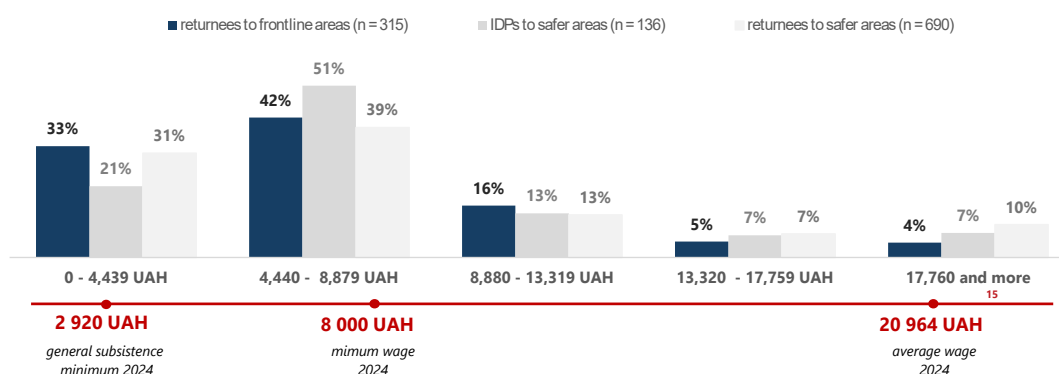
employed before 2022, a significant proportion (29%) had worked in service and sales roles. This highlighted the severe constraints of the labour market in frontline areas, presumably in retail, leisure and other service sectors that were heavily disrupted by the ongoing conflict.

INCOME

Among all returnees to Ukraine, most surveyed former refugees reported monthly household incomes of less than 200 EUR (8,879 UAH) per person (see Figure 11). A higher proportion of individuals with incomes in the lowest bracket (0–99 EUR/0–4,439 UAH) was observed among returnees to frontline areas (33%) and returnees to safer areas (31%)

compared to IDPs to safer areas (21%). This difference may be partially attributed to the IDP status itself as those people usually rent their housing and to stay in the safer area respondents by default have to obtain income sufficient enough to at least pay full rent.¹⁶

Figure 11. Monthly income per household member among returnees to frontline areas compared to other sub-samples of returnee to Ukraine respondents, UAH



Returnees to frontline areas (55%) and IDPs to safer areas (54%) reported slightly higher rates of compromising on their needs due to insufficient income compared to the rest of the sample (47%). A similar trend was observed regarding food consumption patterns, with 28% of returnees to frontline areas and 27% of IDPs to safer areas adjusting their food consumption due to low income, compared to 20% in other sub-samples. However, it is crucial to highlight that across the entire sample of returnees to Ukraine, even those considered less vulnerable, economic hardship remains a persistent issue. Half (50%) of all returnees to Ukraine reported using coping mechanisms such as reducing spending, and 23% of all respondents compromised on food purchases.

This underscores the widespread and deepening economic challenges faced by all returnees, regardless of geography or displacement status. It also points to the broader issue of rising poverty across Ukraine, compounding the long-term effects of the full-scale invasion and exposing vulnerabilities that affect even the relatively less disadvantaged groups.

Figure 12. Percentage of returnee to Ukraine respondents having unmet urgent needs over time

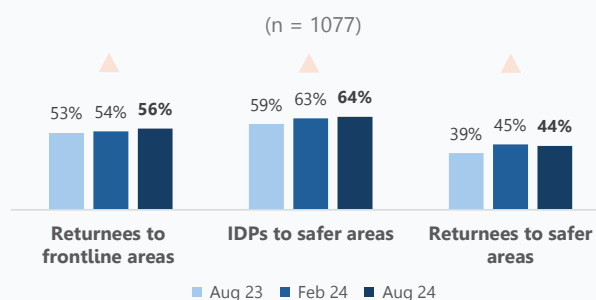
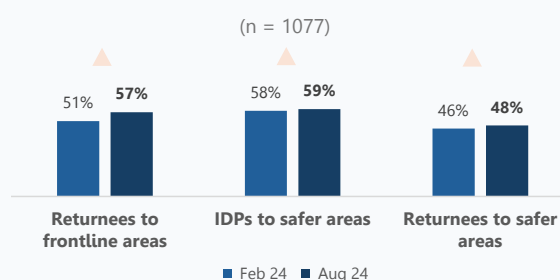


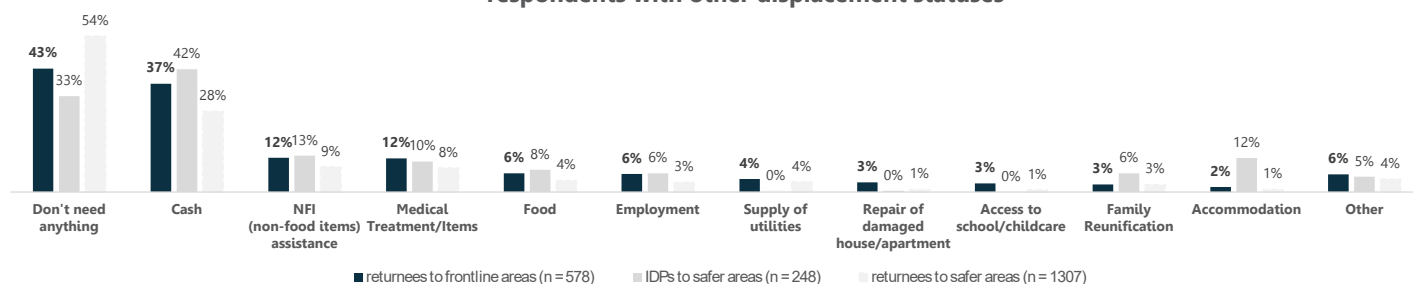
Figure 13. Percentage of returnee to Ukraine respondents using income coping strategies, over time



16. State Statistics of Ukraine, [Average Monthly Wage by Economic Activity, Q2 2024 \(up to June 2024\)](#). It is also important to note that the graph serves as a reference point and compares the average salary with the household income divided by each member, including children.

NEEDS & EXTERNAL ASSISTANCE

Figure 14. Unmet urgent needs among returnees to frontline areas, compared to respondents with other displacement statuses



As of August 2024, 47% of returnees to frontline areas reported having at least one unmet urgent need. The top three needs were cash (37%), non-food items (NFI) (12%), and medical treatment or supplies (12%) (see Figure 15). Notably, IDPs to safer areas more frequently reported unmet urgent needs (67%), despite receiving more assistance than returnees to frontline areas (50% compared to 24%). Among returnees to

frontline areas, the majority received assistance in the form of food (13%), cash (10%), NFI (5%), primarily from actors such as the government (44%), NGOs (34%), and international or religious organisations (20%). Conversely, IDPs to safer areas more commonly received cash assistance (46%) and, less frequently, food (8%), typically provided by the government (95%) and occasionally by religious institutions (5%).

SCOPE OF IDP PAYMENT CUTS IMPACTING SURVEYED RETURNING REFUGEES

Between February 2024 and August 2024, both sub-samples of returnees to frontline areas and IDPs to safer areas experienced a reduction in government cash assistance,

specifically IDP payments, with a 9 percentage point decrease for returnees to frontline areas and a 28 percentage point decrease for IDPs to safer areas.

SAMPLING

To examine whether these reductions influenced additional movements back to frontline areas, a maximised cohort sample was analysed, comprising 331 respondents, who were IDPs from frontline areas residing not at home in one of the rounds of the Longitudinal Study before the cuts (in February 2024, January 2024 or December 2023) and participated in any status and location once after the cuts (August/early September 2024, June 2024, April 2024, or July 2024).

Among these respondents, 33% lost their allowances, 36% continued to receive them, and 24% did not receive them at any point during the observation period. If compared to those respondents who kept receiving IDP payments, among those who lost the payments there were notably fewer households without children (41% compared to 26%) and households with people with disabilities (13% compared to 22%), and only slightly fewer single caregivers (26% compared to 33%). In both subsamples, one in four respondents reported having a household income between 0 and 99 EUR per person (24% among those who lost payments and 25% among those who are still receiving them) and an employment level was similar (61% and 65% respectively).

During the observation period, among those who stopped receiving state support from the government in the form of IDP allowances, 18% (20 respondents from 113) reported changing their location, compared to only 6% of those who continued receiving the payments. Of the 20 individuals who relocated, 15 returned to their home settlements in frontline areas, while only one person who continued receiving



By August, 48% (113 respondents) of IDPs from frontline areas, who received IDP payments before the payment policy change **stopped listing IDP payments among their top 3 income sources**

IDP payments did the same. Among the reasons cited for relocation, access to accommodation was the most common (10 individuals), and 2 respondents explicitly stated that the lack of benefits and support in their previous location prompted their migration.

The findings suggest a potential link between payment cuts and migration back to frontline areas, but some limitations must be noted. The analysis was based on a carefully selected cohort to focus on respondents directly relevant to the research question, ensuring the data was meaningful within this context. However, the sample's non-IDP-specific nature and small size limit its broader applicability. While a few cases showed clear causality — such as two respondents explicitly citing a lack of benefits and support as their reason for returning — these findings cannot support general conclusions. They should be seen as indicative. Further research with a larger and representative sample is needed to validate these observations and explore the broader impacts of payment cuts.

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1. METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

This report of the longitudinal survey focuses on a sub-sample of respondents who, as refugees, decided to return to Ukraine and settle in the frontline areas, **returnees to frontline areas** (n = 578). For the livelihood analysis, this sub-sample was primarily compared with respondents from frontline areas who had returned to Ukraine and settled as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in safer areas, **IDPs to safer areas** (n = 247) and the sub-sample of individuals who returned to and resided in safer areas of the country, **returnees to safer areas** (n = 1,301) (see *Glossary for detailed description of the sub-samples*). Additionally, the report includes comprehensive data tables providing key information on all relevant sub-samples of returnees to Ukraine (as of Round 28), compared to the refugee sample from Round 27 (n = 3,346).

Within this division of respondents according to their pre-displacement and current locations, three distinct sample types were used in the analysis. First, data as of Round 28, which describes the situation as of August 2024 and

retrospective data concerning returns. The second type is intended to illustrate the main indicators over time, using cohort data of all respondents participating in subsequent rounds of the longitudinal study within the same thematic sub-sample: Round 16 (August 2023), Round 22 (February 2024), and Round 28 (August 2024). The sample, thus, consists of respondents who stayed in the same location for the entire observation period and either returned to frontline areas (n = 264), or those from frontline areas who returned to Ukraine and became internally displaced persons (IDPs) in safer areas (n = 109), or others who returned and settled in safer areas (n = 704). Lastly, to study the influence of IDP cuts on further movements and returns to frontline areas, the sample was composed of 331 respondents from frontline areas, who were surveyed at least twice as part of the Longitudinal Study—once before the payment reduction as IDPs (in the period from December 2023 to February 2024) and once after in any displacement status (August/early September 2024, July 2024, June 2024 or April 2024).

