

# PROTECTION NEEDS OF CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR CAREGIVERS DISPLACED FROM UKRAINE TO POLAND

JUNE 2023

## ABOUT

As of May 2023, the war in Ukraine which escalated on 24 February 2022 has displaced more than 8.2 million people out of Ukraine across Europe.<sup>1</sup> Many of them settled in neighbouring countries, including Poland. Most of the refugees in Poland\*, about 86% as of early May 2023,<sup>2</sup> are women and children. Humanitarian and government actors require more robust information on the protection needs and risks that Ukrainian families with children face in Poland. There is a lack of evidence, particularly from children themselves. IMPACT Initiatives, in partnership with Save the Children International (SCI), conducted a mixed-method child protection (CP) needs assessment in Poland between November 2022 and April 2023. This included child consultations, focus group discussions (FGDs) with caregivers and host community members, key informant interviews (KIIs) with service providers in relevant sectors, as well as a two-round phone survey with caregivers. The research tools were developed together with SCI. The project is funded by Global Affairs Canada, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and SCI.

## KEY FINDINGS

- The most reported **well-being and safety risks** for Ukrainian refugee children in Poland were **psychosocial issues**, as well as **psychological violence**.
- Children highlighted **family and friends** as their most trusted **protective factors**.
- **Host state institutions**, especially police, and **community organisations** were the most important **protective factors** reported by **caregivers**.
- Children, caregivers, and service providers stressed the **need** for better access to **health services** for refugee households, especially by reducing the cost barrier and long wait time.
- **Another priority need** reported by children and caregivers was access to a better variety and less expensive **extra-curricular activities**.

\*The term "refugee" is used generically, to refer to all persons who were displaced abroad from Ukraine because of the war since 2022.

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## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative data was collected between December 2022 and February 2023 in Warsaw and Krakow. Participants were purposively sampled. In total, IMPACT conducted 26 consultations with 192 refugee children and adolescents at child-friendly spaces provided by Save the Children Poland and partners. The groups were separated by age (8-11, 12-14, 15-17 years) and gender (female, male). Moreover, nine gender-separated FGDs with 61 caregivers and three FGDs with 13 host community members were organized. Finally, IMPACT conducted 18 KIIs with government and non-government representatives from child protection, healthcare, and education sectors.

This was complemented by quantitative CP data from Poland collected as part of a monthly regional, longitudinal phone survey with several thousand refugees from Ukraine residing in Europe. Sampling was done in partnership with UNHCR at border crossings, transit sites, and reception centres in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova. Respondents were also sampled through an invitation via social media. The first survey round was conducted with 1,180 refugee child caregivers in Poland between November and December 2022, and the second round was conducted with 1,172 caregivers between March and April 2023.

Given the convenience and purposive sampling methods, findings from this study are not generalisable but indicative of the situation of children and child caregivers displaced from Ukraine to Poland. For more details on the methodology, please contact [ukraine.refugee-survey@impact-initiatives.org](mailto:ukraine.refugee-survey@impact-initiatives.org).

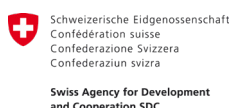
## CONTEXT

Since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, Poland has welcomed the largest share of refugees among the countries implementing the Ukraine Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP). As of late May 2023, over 11.7 million refugees from Ukraine had entered Poland,<sup>3</sup> out of which over 1.6 million had registered for a PESEL national identification number which grants refugees access to services under Temporary Protection (TP).<sup>4</sup> In March 2023, registration for PESEL became mandatory within 30 days of arriving in Poland, but is deactivated in case a refugee leaves the country for over 30 days.<sup>5</sup> With the PESEL status, refugees are entitled to access public healthcare, enrol children in schools, open a bank account, as well as a one-time payment of 300 PLN\* and family allowance. The family allowance is a monthly payment of 500 PLN\* for each minor in the household.

Most refugees from Ukraine reside in the Mazowieckie, Dolnoslaskie, Slaskie, Wielkopolskie provinces (voivodships),<sup>6</sup> particularly in the cities of Warsaw, Wroclaw, Krakow and Poznan.<sup>7</sup> The large majority of refugees live in rented accommodations, while some are hosted and about 80,000 live in collective shelters.<sup>8</sup> Under a law passed in March 2022,<sup>9</sup> people who have taken refugees into their homes have been entitled to daily payments of 40 PLN\*. In April 2022, the government estimated that 600,000 Ukrainians were benefiting from the payments.<sup>10</sup> Starting 1 March 2023, refugees who were in Poland for more than 120 days and resided in collective shelters were obliged to pay for 50% of their accommodation costs. On 1 June, the share increased to 75% for those who have been in the country for over 180 days.<sup>11</sup> Among others, households including pregnant women, single caregivers with more than two children, and households including infants were exempted from the new rule.

\*As of 31 May, 1 PLN was equivalent to 0.22 EUR and 0.24 USD.

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**SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS**

This section reports on the demographic characteristics of the households included in the quantitative component of the assessment in Poland (i.e., caregiver survey). Out of the 1,180 respondents in late 2022, and the 1,172 in early 2023, 97% were women (across both data collection rounds). The larger share of women reflects the gender distribution of adult Ukrainian refugees in Poland (around 75% female).<sup>12</sup> This slight over-representation of women in the sample could be due to a larger share of female caregivers in the refugee population.<sup>13</sup>

Half of the respondents were aged between 31 and 40 years old (55% in late 2022 / 54% in early 2023). 41 to 50 year-olds accounted for about a quarter of respondents (25% / 26%), followed by 18 to 30 year-olds (13% / 12%). More than half of the respondents had received university education (59% / 61%), while about a third had completed technical or vocational schooling (29% / 28%).

In both survey rounds, the respondents interviewed reported having on average 3.3 members in their household. This is slightly higher than the 2.6 average in Ukraine before the invasion, as reported by the Ukrainian government,<sup>14</sup> which could be because mostly families with children fled Ukraine. The share of households that reported they had 2 members remained constant, at 29% across both rounds, while more than a third counted three members (35% / 36%). Households of four members counted for about a fifth (20% / 19%), and those with more members for 16% across both rounds. The distribution by age and gender of household members (see figure 1) largely mirrors that of PESEL holders.<sup>15</sup>

Due to the CP focus of the assessment, the subset of this survey only included households with minors. Households which included infants and toddlers aged between 0 and 2 years old made up for 18% of surveyed

households in late 2022, and 17% in early 2023. The majority of households reported including children between 3 and 12 years old (77% across both rounds), while more than a third (37% / 39%) included adolescents aged 13 to 17 years old.

**Figure 1: Average % of female and male household members per age group (early 2023)**

Female	Age	Male
3%	65+	1%
39%	18 - 64	6%
7%	13 - 17	7%
12%	6 - 12	12%
4%	3 - 5	4%
3%	0 - 2	2%

The survey highlights the presence of vulnerable groups among the displaced population. Their share among household members remained constant across the two survey rounds - which makes sense as most respondents remained the same and these characteristics are not likely to be subject to change in the short- and mid-term. Half of the surveyed households reported having a single caregiver (53% in late 2022 / 51% in early 2023). The number of households that reported including a person living with disability remained constant across the two rounds (16% / 17%). Moreover, in late 2022, 7% of the surveyed households included pregnant or breastfeeding women (6% in early 2023). Very few respondents reported caring for separated children (3% / 2%).

**RISK FACTORS**

The main reported risk factors for the safety and well-being of Ukrainian refugee children, adolescents\* and caregivers in Poland were largely consistent across qualitative and quantitative interviews.

Across all types of respondents, psycho-social factors were the most prominent in

\*'Adolescents' refers to children between 15-17 years old. Unless the age range is specified, 'children' is used to refer to children between 0-17 years old.

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their effects on the well-being of children and adolescents. Children explained that they most worried about family and friends in Ukraine. In the survey, caregivers reported the same concerns being prevalent among their children (see figure 2). Further, some KIs highlighted that separation from family members was a particular concern for the emotional well-being of the children, reporting noticing significant behavioural changes. Not having enough friends around or feeling lonely was another concern mentioned by many of the children, most prevalently by younger children (aged 8-11 years old).

Some children shared that they had a conflictual relationship or limited trust in their caregivers. Children in some groups also mentioned they noticed their caregivers were more stressed, often noting this was because of the war or the current financial situation. 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. Children in several consultations also complained about their caregivers spending limited time with them

because of their employment. Further, CP service providers reported concerns regarding domestic violence and verbal abuse towards minors.

Both children and caregivers mentioned different forms of violence as one of the most important well-being concerns they faced. While reporting that, overall, they felt safe in Poland, most of the groups of children and caregivers mentioned instances of verbal violence from some members of the host community and almost half of the groups also mentioned cases of physical violence. Younger children also recounted instances of bullying from children, particularly in Polish schools\*, or xenophobic reactions from adults, usually in public spaces or transportation.

The reports of children and adolescents further show that they are aware and concerned about their family's situation. Some mentioned their families could neither afford access to certain services nor to food in sufficient quantity or quality. Children in several groups also talked about difficulties in finding accommodation, or that they had to change accommodation repeatedly. They often explained that accommodation was expensive or that hosts avoided renting to refugees because of their lack of financial stability. Some KIs also highlighted that the difficulty of finding longer-term housing was a significant risk factor for children, as it created an unstable environment for them. This seems especially concerning, as children, caregivers and KIs reported that it was particularly difficult for families with children to find accommodation. Few service providers further expressed concern regarding the situation of households residing in collective shelters who would not be able to contribute to their accommodation costs, which they were obligated to do based on the government's recent policy changes.

**Figure 2: Main safety and well-being risks for children and adolescents, as reported by caregivers** ▼



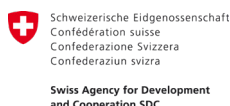
"No concerns" were reported by 48% of caregivers across both data collection rounds.

\*'Physical health' was not included as an option during the first survey round, but was subsequently added due to some respondents mentioning it as a concern.

\*At the moment of the consultations, none of the children attended Polish school. Their testimonies are based on previous experience or the experience of friends or classmates.

▼ Respondents could select multiple responses.

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## PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors have been greatly affected by the displacement, with both children and caregivers having lost their main social support system. The consultations with children in Poland showed that despite worrying about family and friends in Ukraine and often lacking friends in Poland, they overwhelmingly saw family and friends as their main protective factors. Both children and adolescents often mentioned that the first persons they would ask for help would be their parents, particularly their mothers, followed by siblings and friends. Children and adolescents also explained they enjoyed engaging in leisure activities with their families, such as visiting museums and being in nature.

**"If I have a problem, I talk to my mom or to my best friend. I talk to my dog too!" - Girl, 12-14 years old**

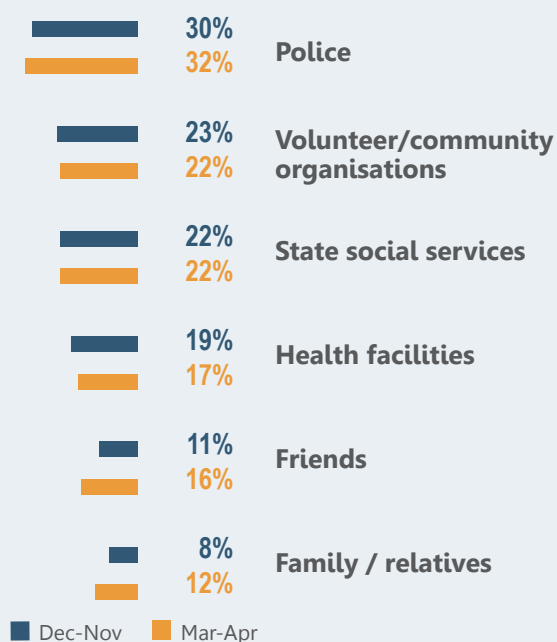
Family and friends were not among the top 3 key protective factor mentioned by caregivers - neither during FGDs nor the survey (see figure 3). One explanation for the lack of importance of family as protection factor for caregivers could be that, due to the prohibition of men

to leave Ukraine in the context of the general mobilization, most women with children come to Poland without their partner. Therefore, their family support network abroad is weaker than prior to their displacement.

Social cohesion emerged as another significant protective factor. Most children and caregivers reported they felt safe in Poland and that they felt their local communities were overall supportive of them being there. Some of the children also said that they were helped by locals or being comfortable with asking any adult for help. Overall, having local social ties was seen as important by both children and caregivers.

Polish state institutions and community organisations were the most important protective factors highlighted by caregivers in the survey (see figure 3). A third of survey respondents reported police as being one of their most trusted factors in their host country. Children's testimonies were more ambiguous, with some mentioning that they trusted the police and some viewing them as unhelpful. Finally, caregivers explained that schools were an important protective factor for the minors in their care.

**Figure 3: Main trusted protective factors reported by caregivers in host country<sup>▼</sup>**



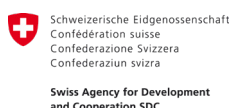
## ACCESS TO SERVICES AND UNMET NEEDS

Children, caregivers and service providers all noted that refugees had access to a diversity of services in Poland, which largely mirrored the results of the survey (see figure 4). The qualitative interviews provided additional details regarding the barriers to services that children and caregivers faced.

Many of the children reported having accessed healthcare services and dental care. However, most noted that they had to wait long for appointments and that some healthcare services were very expensive for their household, particularly dental care. Some children reported that because of these barriers, either

<sup>▼</sup> Respondents could select multiple responses.

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they or their family had to go back to Ukraine to receive treatment. This mirrored the survey results, as about a quarter of the respondents who reported wanting to return to Ukraine the following month did so with the intention to access medical treatment (23% in late 2022 / 21% in early 2023). Moreover, children often mentioned that their families were self-medicating, especially in less severe cases such as flues, but also when they considered the treatment received in Poland to be ineffective. Caregivers and service providers also noted that it was often difficult for refugees to navigate the Polish healthcare system due to its differences compared to the Ukrainian system.

**"I spend all my time in school. I like studying at this school a lot!" - Boy, 8-11 years old**

All children reported attending schools in Ukrainian language in Poland - the schools operated by SCI's partner NGOs facilitating the consultations. Some of the young children mentioned that they had previously attended Polish schools, or that they had friends who had. While young children often mentioned that they had left Polish schools because of the language barrier or because they were bullied, the few adolescents who reported having attended them recounted having positive experiences. Further, older children (12-17) who learned in the second shift in

Ukrainian schools (ending around 6-7 P.M.) often complained that the class schedule prevented them from being able to have other activities, as they overlapped.

Children and adolescents reported that increased access to extracurricular activities was overall one of their main needs. They expressed missing a range of activities which they used to do in Ukraine, such as football or tennis, or dance, ballet or arts. Many young children said that apart from school, they spent their time on their phones or computers. Children and caregivers also mentioned different barriers to accessing extracurricular activities: mainly those of the high cost of attending existing classes and the limited availability or lack of such classes. Some children also noted that the language barrier was an issue, or that they didn't have access to professional training in their respective sport. Few children also explained

**Figure 5: Main reported barriers to accessing services**▼

Barrier	Nov-Dec	Mar-Apr
Long waiting time	41%	41%
Cost of services	38%	40%
Unavailability of staff	23%	37%
Language barrier	15%	14%
Logistics to attend facilities (transportation)	14%	10%
Information barrier (lack of information, cultural difference)	13%	11%

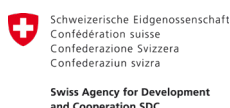
**Figure 4: Services with most reported attempted access**

Services	% of caregivers that reported they/their children tried accessing this service		% of caregivers that reported they/their children accessed and afforded this service*	
	Nov-Dec	Mar-Apr	Nov-Dec	Mar-Apr
Schools / Universities	64%	66%	94%	98%
Physical health services	58%	70%	81%	89%
Extra-curricular activities	29%	37%	73%	82%
Childcare	23%	26%	77%	84%
Government social services	14%	19%	93%	95%
Emergency health services	13%	13%	83%	83%
MHPSS	6%	8%	86%	86%
Non-government social services	3%	5%	88%	87%

\*Of those caregivers that reported trying to access the service.

▼ Respondents could select multiple responses.

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that they couldn't go to classes because their caregivers weren't able to accompany them there.

Both children (except for some adolescent girls) and caregivers did not report access to mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS) services as priority need. This is despite some older children having reported feeling anxious about their experiences during the war or their displacement, and a few mentioned that they had also lost weight due to stress. One explanation could be low awareness, or the stigma related to accessing mental health services.\* Additionally, MHPSS was among the services children and caregivers least tried to access (see figure 4). There seemed to be a different sense of urgency/prioritisation among service providers compared to the children and caregivers themselves, as most KIs across all sectors emphasized the refugees' need for better access to MHPSS, and some highlighted the need for such services to be available in Ukrainian or translated.

**"I used to do horse riding, but there is no such thing here. I loved it very much!" - Girl, 12-14 years old**

Generally, caregivers often reported that they lacked information on how to access services or on their right to do so. Some also highlighted they lacked information on the conditions of their status in Poland and how leaving the country temporarily would affect it.

KIs reported that the main factor which influenced access to services was the financial situation of the family, mainly affecting the extent to which people accessed accommodation and healthcare. This mirrored the cost barriers reported by children and caregivers. Some service providers further reported that ethnicity is another significant factor, explaining that Roma refugees were sometimes discriminated, and had less access

to education or other state services. Some service providers in healthcare and education also reported that children with disabilities had less access to services.

## INTEGRATION

Children, caregivers and host community members reported that, overall, the relationship between Poles and Ukrainians was good. Most children and caregivers mentioned that they felt welcomed and supported by most Poles. Similarly, host community members described diverse initiatives in support of refugees, such as supporting arriving refugees with transportation or food or establishing art workshops for refugee children. They also contextualized the relation between the two communities, emphasising historical ties, but also the wave of immigration from Ukraine following 2014, which helped familiarise the Polish community with Ukrainians. Host community members and service providers noted integration was easier for children, stressing that enrolment in Polish schools was the most significant facilitator.


Despite most survey respondents reporting they knew a fair amount of Polish (36% fair and 9% good or very good) in early 2023, during FGDs, caregivers and host community members noted that the language barrier was the main obstacle to integration. This may be explained by the fact that a more advanced level of Polish may be needed to have better access to employment or services, further facilitating integration. Moreover, despite the language barrier being seen as the major obstacle, 79% of survey respondents reported they were not attending Polish language classes in early 2023. This mirrors reports from caregivers in FGDs, who expressed they would like to have access to more free Polish classes.

\*As reported by service providers in the Ukraine response context in Romania.

▼ Respondents could select multiple responses.

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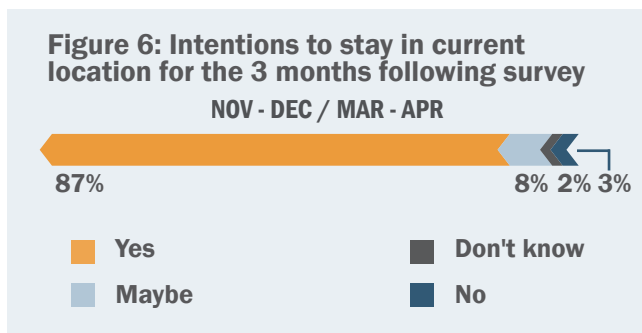
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**INTENTIONS TO RETURN**

The large majority of survey respondents reported wanting to stay in their current location in the short-term. This is despite that some caregivers in the FGDs reported being unsure about their plans to integrate or wanting to return to Ukraine when the situation stabilized. During consultations, many young children expressed that they missed Ukraine and that they would like to return, while some older children (12-17) said they would prefer remaining in Poland. They explained that this was because they had more opportunities or more freedom in Poland. Across both survey rounds, 87% of caregivers reported wanting to remain in their current location in the following three months. Integration in the education and employment sectors appears to be a pull-factor of significance, comparable to that of the lack of safety in Ukraine as push-factor, as the three reported main reasons for staying were education (28% in late 2022 / 29% in early 2023), employment (26% / 27%) and the security and safety situation in Ukraine (24% / 28%).



Most survey respondents reported not wanting to return to Ukraine in the following month following (89% across both data collection rounds), mainly because of the security situation in Ukraine (80% / 74%). In line with the findings above, work and education obligations were the second most reported reason for not returning to Ukraine during the following month, and increased in importance over time (13% / 27%).

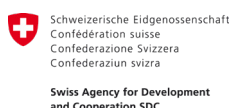
**Figure 7: Main reasons for wanting to stay in current location the 3 months following survey<sup>▼</sup>**

Reason	Nov-Dec	Mar-Apr
Education	28%	29%
Employment	26%	27%
Security and safety situation in Ukraine	24%	28%
Accommodation	16%	20%
Benefits and support from national government	7%	8%

Some young children reported they missed their family and home in Ukraine and said they wanted to return to Ukraine, mirroring the concerns expressed by caregivers in FGDs regarding the children in their care. Survey respondents also reported this as one of the main reasons for returning to Ukraine in the short or long-term. Of those who did want to return temporarily or long term (5% / 7%), more than half (54% across both rounds) explained they do so in order to reunite with family members. This was followed by the desire to access medical treatment (23% / 21%) and being homesick (19% / 20%).

<sup>▼</sup> Respondents could select multiple responses.

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## CONCLUSION

The Ukraine response has suffered from a lack of visibility of the voices of children throughout their journey. To address this data gap, IMPACT, in partnership with SCI, conducted a mixed-method CP needs assessment in Poland between November 2022 and April 2023.

The study found that most Ukrainian children and caregivers overall felt safe and welcomed in Poland. At the same time, children and adolescents were greatly affected by psychosocial issues resulting from the war and their displacement, as well as discrimination. They mainly expressed being worried about friends and family who remained in Ukraine. Most of the interviewed groups of children and caregivers also reported instances of discrimination, mobbing, and sometimes of physical violence.

Despite worries about family and friends, children and adolescents also highlighted these two as their main trusted protective factor. Caregivers especially trusted host government and community-based services.

The assessment also showed that despite having access to a diversity of services, families with children had difficulties accessing healthcare, accommodation and extra-curricular activities. Key barriers to accessing those services were related to long waiting time, high cost, lack of availability, lack of information, as well as language.


Beyond the value of the study's findings on CP needs of Ukrainian refugees in Poland, 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.

The following key recommendations for those supporting Ukrainian children and adolescents in Poland are based on the solutions suggested by children, caregivers and service providers:

1. Decrease financial and time constraints in accessing healthcare and extra-curricular activities;
2. Facilitate access to long-term accommodation for refugees with children;
3. Provide opportunities for a greater variety of extra-curricular activities;
4. Facilitate the change of the schedule of the second shift in Ukrainian-language schools so that children are able attend other activities;
5. Strengthen and expand MHPSS services with a focus on dealing with worries about the situation in Ukraine, relation to caregivers and general uncertainty in the children's life.

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## ENDNOTES

1 [Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation](#). UNHCR/Government. Accessed in early June 2023.

2 [Ukraine Situation: Regional Protection Profiling and Monitoring](#). UNHCR. Accessed in early June 2023.

3 [Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation](#). UNHCR/Government. Accessed in early June 2023.

4 [Ukraine Refugee Situation: Poland. Number of application for Temporary Protection \(PESEL\)](#). UNHCR / Polish Government. Accessed in early June 2023.

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6 [Ukraine Refugee Situation: Poland. Number of application for Temporary Protection \(PESEL\)](#). UNHCR / Polish Government. Accessed in early June 2023.

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13 [Ukraine Refugee Situation: Poland. Number of application for Temporary Protection \(PESEL\)](#). UNHCR / Polish Government. Accessed in early June 2023.

14 [2021 Social and Demographic Characteristics of Households of Ukraine](#). Government of Ukraine. 2021.

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## IMPACT INITIATIVES

IMPACT Initiatives is a leading Geneva-based think-and-do tank which aims to improve the impact of humanitarian, stabilisation and development action through data, partnerships and capacity building programmes.


Our mission is to shape practices and influence policies in humanitarian and development settings in order to positively impact individuals and communities. We, as a think and do-tank, enable better and more effective decision-making by generating and promoting knowledge, tools and best-practices for humanitarian and development stakeholders. We believe that by understanding settlements through the lens of community dynamics, governance structures and socio-economic relationships, we can positively impact the lives of people, improve communities' development pathways and contribute to a fairer world.

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Save the Children is an NGO that believes that every child deserves a future. In Europe and around the world, we work every day to give children a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and be protected from harm. When crisis strikes and children are most vulnerable, we are always among the first to respond and the last to leave. We ensure children's unique needs are met and their voices are heard. We deliver lasting results for millions of children, including those hardest to reach. We do whatever it takes for children – every day and in times of crisis – transforming their lives and the future we share.

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