

Returns to unsafe frontline areas: exploring the drivers of return and the experiences of returnees in Sumska Oblast

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Introduction

The current context of returns to and in Ukraine, and particularly returns to unsafe areas, presents a complex humanitarian challenge. Despite ongoing hostilities and significant security risks, 4.2 million of individuals were estimated to have returned to their areas of origin or habitual residence in Ukraine as of May 2026, representing 14% of the population living in Government-controlled areas¹. A substantial proportion of these movements involves returns to frontline communities and border areas, where active conflict continues to disrupt essential services and threaten physical safety. Understanding the dynamics that drive unsafe returns is critical, as they often result from a complex interplay of reasons including economic exhaustion, housing accessibility, socio-emotional attachments and livelihood restoration.

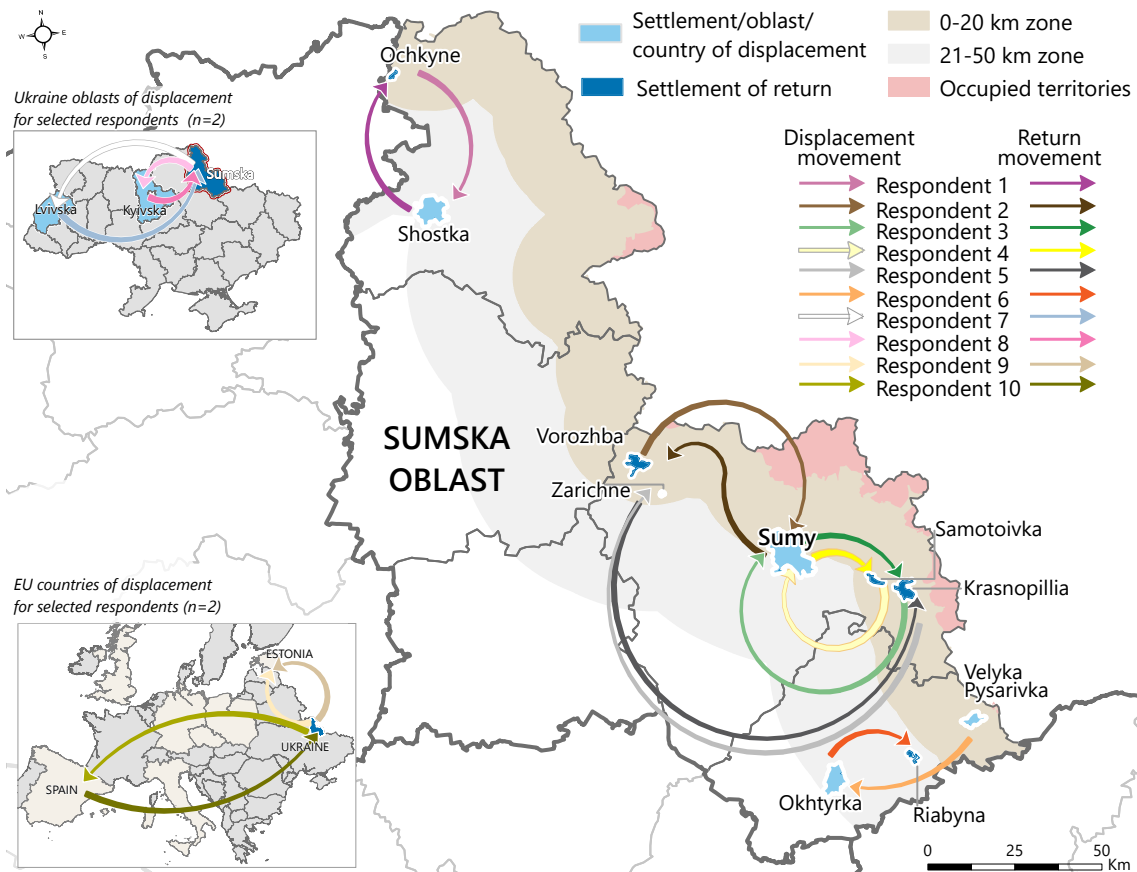
Between June and July 2026, REACH conducted a qualitative assessment to provide strategic and operational decision-makers with a nuanced understanding of why people return to high-risk areas in Sumska Oblast and the challenges they face upon returning. By examining the specific push and pull factors influencing these movements, the report aims to inform humanitarian programming, targeting, and response strategies for implementing partners and organizations involved in evacuations, frontline assistance, and protection programming.

The assessment seeks to answer three main research questions: *What are the primary factors driving displaced individuals to return to unsafe areas in Sumska Oblast? How do returnees navigate the security, economic, and infrastructural challenges present in their home communities after return? And what are the most pressing unmet needs and support priorities of this population?*

Key Findings

- **Financial hardship in displacement, driven primarily by rental costs, was the most significant push factor for return.** The vast majority of respondents (26/29) reported that the cost of living in displacement locations was unsustainable. Conversely, owning property in Sumska Oblast functioned as a powerful economic safety net and pull factor, eliminating a burdensome largest expenditure incurred during displacement.
- **Access to known healthcare and education services strongly pulled families back to their home communities.** Respondents frequently cited trusted family doctors and the desire for children to attend in-person schooling as decisive pull factors, often contrasting this with language barriers and confusing administrative processes experienced in areas of displacement.
- **Security conditions upon return had not improved, yet these risks were consistently outweighed by economic and personal considerations.** While almost all respondents (26/29) reported ongoing threats from artillery shelling or FPV (First Person View) drones, the economic and personal benefits of returning outweighed the ongoing security risks. Often the decision to return was driven by the expectation of a better quality of life at home, despite chronic security risks.
- **Post-return challenges were dominated by winterisation needs, utility disruptions, and chronic psychological stress.** Respondents reported that the instability of electricity supply (23/29) and the lack of centralised gas for heating (10/29) create severe daily hardships. Furthermore, all respondents reported experiencing chronic stress, anxiety, or social isolation, highlighting a critical gap in psychosocial support.
- **Returnees expressed resistance to future evacuation, posing operational challenges for humanitarian actors.** A notable proportion of respondents (9/29) indicated a firm commitment to remaining in their communities. This fatigue with displacement suggests that future evacuation efforts may face significant resistance.

Map 1: Selected respondents' displacement and return movements (10/29)



Context Description: Returnees in Ukraine and Sumsk Oblast

Since the onset of full-scale hostilities in February 2022, displacement patterns in Ukraine have been characterised by significant complexity and fluidity, with large-scale displacement accompanied by substantial return flows. Throughout 2026, displacement trends remained stable, with 3.9 million IDPs recorded across Ukraine in July 2026². Similarly, return flows have stabilized: most large-scale return movements were completed by 2024. Recent returns continued at a smaller rate and were mostly characterized by intra-oblast movements and seasonal or cyclical returns, mostly concentrated around urban centres³.

A particularly significant concern within the broader returns landscape is the phenomenon of return to unsafe zones, areas in close proximity to active frontlines or ongoing hostilities. The 2024 REACH Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) revealed that 34% of all sampled resided in areas within 30 kilometres of the front line and/or border with the Russian Federation⁴. More recently, the IOM General Population Survey Round 23 estimated that approximately 1.55 million returnees currently reside in frontline raions where active hostilities are ongoing. Returnees living in unsafe areas are mostly located in Kharkivska, Khersonska, Chernihivska and Sumsk Oblasts.

Sumsk Oblast represents one of the most acutely affected regions in terms of both ongoing security risks and the scale of return movements. Returnees constitute approximately 15% of the current population of Sumsk Oblast⁵. A further

11% of the oblast's population are intra-oblast IDPs, **accounting for 83% of all hosted IDPs in the region**. The oblast displays the highest level of recent returns among all oblasts, with 15% of returnees having returned within the past three months as of April 2026. Additionally, among IDPs originating from frontline raions, Sumsk Oblast recorded the second-highest return rate at 33% among frontline oblasts⁶. These figures collectively position Sumsk Oblast as a critical context for understanding the dynamics and risks associated with return under conditions of active conflict.

The literature identifies a range of factors that motivate individuals to return to unsafe areas. Security improvements can act as a primary driver of return decisions⁷. Additionally, according to REACH data, family reunification was cited as a primary motivation by 40% of returnees, reflecting the importance of social and familial ties in driving return decisions even in the absence of adequate safety conditions⁸. Housing and economic challenges encountered during the displacement period also emerge as significant push factors, with many displaced individuals facing precarious living conditions, limited livelihood opportunities, and financial strain⁹.

Against this backdrop, the humanitarian response as outlined in the 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) explicitly identifies returns to unsafe areas as a matter of significant protection concern within the

broader humanitarian response framework in Ukraine¹⁰. The document frames such returns in two distinct but related ways: first, as a direct protection risk in their own right, given the exposure of returnees to ongoing physical dangers including shelling, landmine contamination, and the destruction of critical infrastructure; and second, as a negative coping strategy that may result from the cumulative pressures and hardships of the displacement period, whereby individuals return not out of genuine choice or improved conditions, but as a response to the unsustainability of their displacement situation.

Information Sources shaping the Decision to Return

In making a decision to return, respondents frequently reported relying on informal information channels. Respondents commonly described sustained contact with friends, relatives or neighbors at home throughout displacement, who served as a trusted and consistent source of information on local conditions: *"We had friends and acquaintances left here with whom we were in constant contact. And so, we were constantly receiving updates on what was happening here"* (female respondent from Sumy, returned from Ivano-Frankivska).

Beyond personal networks, several respondents in frontline hromadas described relying on Telegram channels and local administration updates as a formal complement to word-of-mouth information, particularly for tracking day-to-day security conditions. One respondent described this as a routine practice: *"We have a group in Krasnopillia, and we were monitoring where everything was flying... this is normal information from the Telegram channel and our local administration."* For at least one respondent, this kind of monitoring directly informed the return itself: a woman from Krasnopillia described watching local channels for confirmation that others were returning safely before making the same decision.

The degree of advance planning involved in the return itself varied considerably across respondents, ranging from thoughtfully organised moves to sudden departures. Several respondents described arranging logistics and, in some cases, employment before departure. One respondent from Sumy explained that she began job-hunting as soon as her travel dates were confirmed, and by the time she got back home, she had already secured a job. A respondent from Myropillia described a similarly deliberate process, having accepted a financially satisfying offer in advance of the move. Other respondents described their return as considerably more improvised, made on short notice in response to changing circumstances. One respondent from Bilopillia characterised her return as unplanned: *"The return was spontaneous. We travelled to Lviv by bus, and from Lviv my husband came to collect us."*

Another respondent from Krasnopillia described a return undertaken collectively with friends and neighbours during a brief lull in hostilities.



Photo 1: A colleague from REACH's partner Unity and Strength conducting an interview in Sumy Oblast amid power cuts resulting from an intensification of attacks in June 2026

Economic and Housing Drivers of Return

Economic and housing considerations emerged as among the most significant drivers of return to Sumy Oblast, operating simultaneously as push factors from places of displacement and as pull factors towards places of origin. Analysed through a push-and-pull framework, the financial pressures accumulated during displacement on the one hand, and the tangible economic assets awaiting returnees at home on the other, together help explain why many individuals and households ultimately chose to return despite prevailing security concerns.

The sustained cost of living in displacement constituted one of the most consistently cited push factors across the research. The vast majority of respondents (26/29) reported that rental costs at the location of displacement — whether within Ukraine or abroad — placed considerable and, over time, unsustainable strain on household finances. For most respondents, displacement meant moving from a home they owned in Sumy Oblast, where they had no rental costs, to rented accommodation in urban centres, creating a significant new expense. **Government of Ukraine IDP benefits, where received, provided only partial mitigation.** Several respondents (12/29) acknowledged receiving some form of financial assistance, yet characterised it as insufficient to cover the full cost of renting accommodation, particularly in larger urban centres. As these costs accumulated, many described a gradual depletion of personal savings (9/29) as the primary mechanism through which financial hardship intensified, with rental payments consuming the largest share of monthly expenditure.

"It's purely a financial issue, because it's become difficult to pay the rent and utility bills. [...] My salary is less than the cost of living. My rent was higher than my salary. [...] It's difficult without financial assistance. It's not easy to find work at the moment, and even if you do find a job, it's on the minimum wage. You can only get by on the minimum wage if you live at home. There's no way you can afford to rent elsewhere."

– Returnee from Vorozhba
(displaced internally)

Refugees who had relocated abroad faced a structurally similar, though contextually distinct, set of pressures.

Whilst some benefited from temporary protection schemes that included housing support in host countries, several reported that such provisions were time-limited, and the transition to market-rate accommodation proved financially untenable. The convergence of high rental costs and limited income thus functioned as a shared push factor across both IDP (17/29) and refugee (9/29) populations, even as the specific mechanisms differed.

Poorer housing conditions during displacement also emerged as an important driver of returns. A notable portion of respondents (12/29) described a deterioration in living conditions compared with their homes of origin,

often citing overcrowding, lack of privacy, or uncertainty about the duration of stay. The social and psychological challenges associated with relying on relatives or friends for accommodation further compounded this issue, particularly when displacement lasted longer than originally anticipated.

Set against these push dynamics, the prospect of returning to owned property in Sumska Oblast functioned as a powerful and cross-cutting pull factor for the vast majority of respondents (25/29). Prior to the full-scale invasion, approximately 95 percent of the population resided in private/owned accommodation¹¹. In a country where the estimated poverty rate stands at 36.9%¹² and where one-quarter of households earned a monthly per capita income below the average cost of a food basket,¹³ owning a house functioned as one of the few safety nets preventing households from falling into poverty.

For the majority of respondents, **returning home** meant returning to a property they owned outright, thereby eliminating a large expenditure incurred during displacement and substantially improving household financial stability. Property ownership was a notable cross-cutting theme across demographic groups: older returnees, working-age adults, and single-person households alike cited property ownership as a foundational rationale for return, suggesting that the financial benefits of returning to one's own home were widely shared across the sample.

Employment Opportunities and Livelihoods Restoration

Employment dynamics functioned both as a barrier to integration in host communities and as an incentive to return home.

Alongside housing costs, the inability to secure stable and adequate employment during displacement constituted a significant push factor. Some respondents (7/29) reported difficulty finding work that matched their skills or prior employment, which reduced their household income throughout the displacement period. For IDPs **relocating** within Ukraine, competition in urban labour markets produced limited employment opportunities, and several described periods of prolonged unemployment or underemployment.

For refugees displaced abroad, language barriers introduced an additional and often substantial obstacle to labour market integration. Respondents who had displaced to countries such as Italy and Germany (2/29) explicitly cited the language barrier as a reason they could only access informal, low-paid, or precarious work. This linguistic dimension of economic marginalisation was notably absent from the IDP experience, representing a meaningful point of divergence between the two populations in terms of the economic push factors driving return.

Women, who constituted the majority of the displaced population, faced compounded barriers to employment. Care responsibilities for children or elderly dependants limited the hours available for paid work, whilst the absence of established social networks in places of displacement

"Of course, there was a language barrier, and I'd never had to communicate with Italians before. The language was completely foreign to me, but my knowledge of English helped with communication in certain situations... we were invited to work for other employers as well, but the language barrier still got in the way."

– Returnee from Sumy
(displaced to Italy)

reduced access to informal employment channels.

The prospect of returning to familiar labour markets and established livelihood strategies functioned as a meaningful pull factor. A significant number of respondents (12/29) reported finding or resuming employment upon return, which had a tangible positive impact on their household's financial situation. Respondents' familiarity with the local job market, together with fewer language and administrative barriers, made it easier for them to find work or return to previous jobs after coming home.

Of particular significance in the Sumska Oblast context was the role of subsistence agriculture and household vegetable gardens as a livelihood strategy upon return. Across the research, references to gardens, farms, and agricultural plots were among the most recurrent economic themes, mentioned by the vast majority of respondents (22/29). For many rural returnees, the household vegetable garden represented a tangible economic asset that helped substantially reduce food expenditure and supplementing

keeping small livestock, and preserving food for winter months could meaningfully offset the costs of living in a context where income was limited or coming from unstable sources.

group specifically, as these are usually small groups with their own particular requirements."

The evidence suggests that maternal and child healthcare needs may heighten the importance of healthcare access within return decision-making. During pregnancy and early

Government assistance, administrative and social services

The majority of respondents (27 of 29) described their decision to register as an IDP or a refugee while displaced. For many, registration was described as straightforward: one respondent from Mogrytsia recalled that authorities *"sorted out all our [IDP] paperwork in literally half an hour, and there were no problems at all."*

Registration did not necessarily result in access to financial assistance. A respondent from Vorozhba explained that despite applying for IDP status, she was not eligible for IDP benefits because she was employed and earned above the minimum wage. For other respondents, delays and administrative setbacks compounded existing difficulties during displacement.

"I had problems with payments when I needed to wait. I re-applied for IDP status after six months. At first I was refused, then I was still granted IDP status, but none of the landlords of the apartment we lived in wanted to wait until the payment arrived... they all refused: 'Please move out.' Where to go? Well, to where you were born, where you lived your life."

– Returnee from Yastrubynye
(had been displaced to Czech Republic)

Few respondents (8 of 29) chose not to register for assistance. Their reasons included the perceived time and effort required, the relatively limited value of the payments, and the belief that other households were in greater need. A respondent from Samotoivka explained that he and his family did not apply for IDP payments because *"you have to queue everywhere, and it all takes so much time"* and the payments on offer did not justify the effort.

Two respondents, both from Ochkyrno and both conducting cyclical returns, reported retaining IDP status without having formally de-registered upon return to their settlement of origin. Both households relied on IDP payments to supplement limited pensions and cover the recurring costs of travel between their place of displacement and settlement of origin.

In contrast to these barriers, several respondents cited the relative ease of accessing Ukrainian administrative services upon return, particularly through the state's digital platform Diia, as a positive and stabilising element of the return experience. One respondent from Sumy described the process of obtaining identification documents for her children entirely online through 'Diia' *"without major obstacles."* Another respondent similarly shared that she had not needed to visit an Administrative Services Centre (TSNAP – ЦНАП) in person because her documents remained accessible online.

childhood, respondents appeared to place more value on continuity of care and trusted healthcare providers, even when other factors such as security conditions remained uncertain or adverse.

The accessibility of Ukraine's administrative infrastructure appeared to function as a particularly strong pull factor for those with a refugee experience.

Returnees from abroad described comparable processes in countries of displacement as confusing or unwelcoming, due to language barriers, unfamiliar procedures, and, in some cases, a perception that institutions had become less welcoming towards Ukrainians over time. A respondent from Bilopillia who had displaced to Poland explained: *"At first we felt the helping hand of Poland. And then, at some point, everyone became more unwelcoming. In all the institutions I felt it — the views on us weren't like that anymore"*

While administrative continuity was generally described positively, access to public services after return varied considerably by location.

Respondents interviewed in Sumy city described largely functioning essential services. One respondent listed *"Water supply, gas supply, electricity and drainage — everything works,"* while another noted that shops, banks and pharmacies remained accessible. Cultural and community life was also cited as a marker of normalcy.

By contrast, respondents in rural and more exposed settlements described a starkly different picture. Respondents from Krasnopillia, Bilopillia, Vorozhba, and Ochkyrno reported closures, reduced service availability, damaged infrastructure, and disruptions to transport and communications. In Krasnopillia, one respondent reported that *"There were only two shops operating at the moment, nothing else. Everything else has been shut down and has moved to Sumy,"* and that internet and mobile connectivity had been cut for two months. In Bilopillia, a respondent described the collapse of financial services: *"Pharmacies are closing. Shops are closing. It is very difficult with bank cards — there is nowhere to withdraw money. Banks have not been working for a year,"* requiring her to travel to Sumy by train to access services.

In Vorozhba, a respondent noted the closure of the local post office due to insecurity: *"it's closing because the security situation has deteriorated and there are no deliveries... post vans can't reach Vorozhba as they're coming under fire."* Another respondent from Ochkyrno noted that essential services had disappeared entirely upon return, including medical care and village council. In the absence of functioning institutions, residents of Ochkyrno rely on informal community networks for basic coordination and safety, including word-of-mouth warnings and news about humanitarian deliveries passed between neighbours: *"Whenever someone turns up, the word gets round straight away. Word of mouth works."*

Respondents did not necessarily return because services were more accessible in their habitual place of residence; in

some cases, they returned to areas where service provision was considerably more limited than in displacement. However, familiarity with local institutions, procedures, and

Education

Education was an important consideration driving return decisions for some households with children.

Respondents' decisions reflected not only the availability of schooling in displacement and upon return, but also concerns about continuity of education, children's socialisation, access to specialised services, and the financial and practical implications of different schooling arrangements.

Respondents displaced abroad generally described maintaining their children's connection to Ukrainian schooling wherever possible, even while formally present in a foreign education system. One respondent, displaced to the Czechia, explained that her sons *"continued their studies online at their native school in Sumy"* throughout their time abroad and did not attend a Czech school. Where children did enrol in local schools abroad, respondents described the administrative process as manageable. A respondent displaced to Spain reported that *"there were no problems at all"* enrolling her children.

For some refugee households, maintaining Ukrainian online education required resources that were not readily available: one respondent in Poland described her son studying *"online on his phone,"* because the household had no access to a laptop. Another respondent displaced to Italy described the strain of supporting her children's remote schooling within a single mixed-household apartment housing three adults and seven children.

Respondents displaced within Ukraine report varying experience of education continuity.

One respondent displaced to Ivano-Frankivka kept her children of different ages in remote schooling at their Sumy school rather than transferring, while explicitly noting the barrier to enrolling her youngest child in an offline nursery: *"As for state nurseries, there aren't as many of them... and it's harder to get a place there."* By contrast, a respondent displaced to Cherkaska described a more stable experience, with her daughter attending a full-time day school with *"no problems... children socialise, go for walks, play, use the library and the canteen."*

For some respondents with an IDP status, administrative rules governing benefits created a direct link between education and the decision to return.

A respondent who had relocated to Dnipropetrovska Oblast described being denied IDP status there specifically because her children remained enrolled online at their school in Sumy oblast, forcing a choice between benefits and continuity of schooling: *"I was told that at the moment this is not allowed by law: either the children study in Dnipropetrovsk region, or the children do not receive IDP... We returned to Sumy, re-applied here, and finally they agreed on payments for us."*

For several respondents, the prospect of resuming face-to-face schooling was a decisive pull factor.

One respondent stated this directly: *"That also prompted us to return, so that my child could attend school in person rather*

informal support networks often made these constraints easier to navigate, even if it did not offset the underlying service gaps.

than studying remotely." This preference reflected a broader dissatisfaction among respondents with the limitations of online learning, which several associated with reduced interactions with peers. One respondent, reflecting on her son's schooling during displacement, observed that *"remote communication does not give such a positive effect... people communicate directly, children among themselves, they develop better,"* while another stated that her children's socialisation *"isn't quite as it should be"* due to a lack of in-person teaching.

The expectation of improved education and socialisation was not always fully realised after return.

Continued insecurity and the limited availability of adequate shelters meant that many children in Sumy city continued to rely partly or entirely on online education. One respondent explained that: *"in Sumy, pupils... would meet in the basements once a week; the rest of the time was spent on online learning."* Several respondents in Sumy city described full-time, face-to-face schooling options as severely limited: *"There are very few schools that teach in person. If they do, it's only once a week, once a month, or two or three times a week."* One respondent noted that *"in our city, such institutions can be counted on the fingers, probably on one hand."*

The lack of adequate shelters in schools and nurseries was also raised as a specific unmet need.

One respondent explained that although Sumy has "a large number of pre-school establishments," many "[do not] have sufficient funds to quickly build large bomb shelters," calling for support to help nurseries and schools provide safe, adequately equipped spaces for children. Limited access to full-day, in-person education also affected household livelihoods. Where children attended school remotely or only for short periods, parents could face difficulties returning to work because they needed to supervise them during the day.

Where respondents did manage to secure a rare shelter-equipped school offering a full daily curriculum, the effect was described as stabilising for the family. One respondent explained that once her children had in-person lessons from 8.30 am to 3 pm, safe in a shelter and provided with meals, she felt confident enough in their safety to return to full-time work herself.

Higher education

For households with members of university age, education emerges as a distinct and, in some cases, decisive pull factor for return.

One respondent from Bilopillia described relocating specifically so that her son could take up a place at a state university after he declined to continue his schooling abroad: *"My son didn't want to go to a Polish school. He said he wouldn't stay and would go to Ukraine. He has now entered Sumy State University."* She and her son subsequently moved to Sumy and now rent an apartment there for this purpose.

Financial considerations, particularly the availability of state-funded (“budget”) university places and scholarships, reinforced this preference towards completing higher education in Ukraine. A respondent in Sumy explained that her son’s field of study effectively required returning home, since equivalent options abroad were unaffordable: *“My son is a humanities student, so technical universities did not suit him. A paid university is an expensive education there... my son entered the university in our hometown.”*

A young male respondent returning from Poland similarly described being accepted into a state-funded university:

“I’d just finished school then, and it was summer. I was preparing for my exams... I went back to Sumy and sat the [National Multisubject Test] there... I enrolled at university, and there I was accepted onto a state-funded place and received a scholarship. And that, in fact, was a boost to the family budget as well.”

Personal and social drivers of return

Beyond the material considerations, respondents consistently described a set of personal, relational and emotional factors shaping their decisions to leave, remain, or return to Sumska Oblast.

Family separation

Family separation was one of the most consistently reported sources of hardship during displacement, with respondents’ households frequently split across multiple locations due to several reasons. Overall, family separation was conceptualized both as a hardship experience during displacement and a pull factor towards return. In several cases across the sample, the latter was closely connected to employment, care responsibility, and unwillingness of relatives to leave.

Commonly, male household members of conscription age would stay behind due border-crossing restrictions and fear of mobilization. Several returnees from abroad explicitly named reunification with a partner as a significant driver: *“What prompted me was that my husband was still here. I didn’t even consider the option of living abroad without him. I was going to my husband, I was going home... it was about being reunited with my family. None of us saw it any other way.”* One respondent from Peremoha returned from Vinnytsia to Sumy to be with her partner and get married, citing her relationship as a major source of support she lacked during displacement.

Economic necessity also split households, where one partner remained behind to retain employment or continue the family business while the rest of the family relocated. One respondent explained that her husband, a farmer whose entire livelihood was tied to a farm in Sumy region, could not accompany her: *“My husband lives partly in the village, because he is a farmer, and his entire farm is in the village in Sumy region... We went with the child because my husband is unable to travel.”* Another respondent described a comparable arrangement during the initial evacuation, in which her husband remained in the city to continue working while she and the children moved temporarily to

Across healthcare, education, social and general administrative services, respondents consistently indicated access to familiar institutions as a central reason for return, distinguishing this from the frequently distrusted or difficult-to-navigate systems encountered during displacement.

At the same time, this preference for home-based services coexists with substantial gaps in service provision upon return, such as shortages of shelter-equipped schools and hospitals operating over capacity and under direct security. This mismatch is particularly evident for residents who returned to rural settlements, where pharmacies, banks, secondary healthcare, and in-person schooling services had ceased to function altogether, in contrast to a comparatively more stable, though still constrained, picture in Sumy city itself.

a family allotment: *“My husband stayed in the city of Sumy, he was working at the hospital.”* For some households, this separation was later resolved specifically once the remaining partner’s economic situation stabilised at home: one respondent explained that she returned to the city only once her *“husband started reviving his business,”* having rebuilt small greenhouses on family land.

A further pattern involved separations from older relatives or relatives with disabilities or limited mobility who were unable, or refused, to evacuate. One respondent described leaving both her mother and mother-in-law behind in Bilopillia, both of whom had disabilities, because they were categorically opposed to leaving. Another respondent’s decision to return closer to the settlement of origin was shaped by an elderly grandmother who had refused to leave a settlement that had become dangerous.

For some respondents, the psychological discomfort of being separated from family members was an explicit driver of return: *“To be safe somehow, while my family is in danger here — that also somehow constantly depressed me”* (female respondent from Sumy displaced in the Czechia). A respondent from Tokari shared that a sense of longing for her family outweighed security considerations in the decision to return: *“I’d rather be here in this [unsafe] situation than far away, without my home, without my loved one and without my family.”*

Rootedness

Alongside family reunification, respondents described a distinct sense of attachment and belonging to their settlement of origin. Notably, most respondents (22/29)

had lived in their settlement of origin for most or all of their lives, or had strong family ties to the area, such as having had a child born there.

Attachment feelings were particularly explicit for respondents born in the settlements to which they returned. One respondent who returned to Ochkynto despite high security concerns and a lack of working infrastructure in the village is a self-described “patriot” of his village: *“I’m 65 years old. I’ve lived in the village of Ochkynto for 60 of those years... I was born there, yes. My father, mother, and grandfather are buried there.”* Other respondents used language reflecting deep attachment when describing their settlements of origin: *“For us, this is our haven, where we live, our beloved Krasnopillia.”*

For some respondents, rootedness extended beyond origin to encompass places they had adopted as home over time. One respondent, who had lived in her community for over a decade without being born there, explained: *“Everyone already considered me a local, and I felt like one too. It became like my own village to me.”* Another, originally from Poltavaska Oblast, described a comparable process through which Sumy had gradually become her home.

Rootedness in some cases extended to a specific social role or function within the community. One respondent from Tokari, who had led a local choir prior to displacement, cited the resumption of this role as a factor in her return. A similar pattern was reported by a respondent from Mogrytsia, who had organised cultural activities in her community before displacement and resumed them after returning: *“We had nowhere to get together with the women to organise concerts. Now we do.”* For these respondents, return enabled them to resume social roles that contributed to their sense of identity and belonging within the community.

Construction of a home or its long-term ownership emerged as another frequently reported dimension of attachment. Several respondents described having built their homes personally, often over an extended period: *“We built the house for ourselves, for our children, for our grandchildren.”* Some respondents described their house in distinctly affectionate terms: *“This home was built with my*

whole life invested in it — my soul and my heart, in every stone, in every path I laid with my own hands”. Ongoing maintenance and improvement of the house was also cited as evidence of this attachment.

For other respondents, the acquisition of a house was described as the outcome of sustained effort. One respondent from Sumy explained that buying a flat was a long-term family goal, and it was an important factor in deciding to return to Sumy: *“We have our own flat. We bought it ourselves, saved up for it, and worked towards our goal. Both before the war and now, we continue to live in our own home.”* A respondent from Ryabyna described a more gradual process of acquisition, transitioning from collective to private ownership over time: *“The collective farm had given it to us, and then over the years we bought it out and it became our own.”* In several cases, houses had been acquired through direct inheritance and carried generational importance to the family.

Attachment to land was reported as another form of rootedness, particularly among respondents who continued to cultivate crops or care for livestock. This pattern was most pronounced among respondents who reported cyclical travel between their settlement of origin and a secondary place of residence, rather than permanent return. Two respondents from Ochkynto, a settlement with severely degraded infrastructure and an active security threat, described continuing to travel back specifically to maintain land and livestock.

These accounts suggest that personal factors were closely intertwined with material and economic considerations. Attachment to a self-built or long-held home, for instance, was rarely described in purely sentimental terms: respondents who owned property in Sumska Oblast often referenced the economic burden of renting housing during displacement, while also describing that same property as an object of personal investment and affection. Land, similarly, functions as both a source of emotional continuity and of practical subsistence, with respondents cultivating vegetable gardens both to offset living costs and, as some described directly, to preserve “a sense of belonging” to a place they could otherwise not live in permanently.

Influence of the Perceived Security Threats

Security risks remained an important consideration throughout the decision-making process. The findings from this study suggested that returns to frontline areas did not necessarily follow an improvement in security conditions.

Some respondents (3/29) explicitly stated that the security situation had not improved, and the vast majority (26/29) reported ongoing threats from artillery shelling and aerial strikes upon return. This contrasts with findings from the 2024 and 2025 MSNA, in which 49%¹⁴ and 42%¹⁵ of interviewed returnees respectively reported that an improvement in the security situation had contributed to their decision to return.

The nature and severity of the risks faced following return differed considerably by location. In Bilopillia, the dominant threats described by respondents were FPV drones targeting moving objects. Drone presence altered the nature of everyday life, forcing residents to minimise leaving their homes, moving cautiously between points of cover, avoiding open ground, and limiting travel to periods perceived as lower risk.

“We are now walking from tree to tree in Bilopillia, running. Running to the store, thank God, the store is not far away. Running — we stocked up — running home... [the drones] just follow, they just don’t let us live peacefully.”

– Returnee from Bilopillia
(had been displaced internally)

In Krasnopillia and Kindrativka, threats related to artillery shelling, aerial strikes, and mine contamination prevailed. A number of respondents reported mobility restrictions caused both by direct prohibitions on movement and by subjective risk assessments. One respondent from Kindrativka, for instance, noted that her husband did not return to their village of origin because drones had started targeting cars.

Despite the severity of these conditions, a significant portion of respondents (13/29) articulated a process of psychological adaptation to the constant threat. This adaptation allowed them to continue undertaking necessary daily activities, but it did not mean that they felt safe or that the psychological burden had disappeared.

Security incidents also affected respondents indirectly through disruptions to services and infrastructure, with shelling of energy substations leading to extended power cuts and the closure of institutions.

Within the returns push-and-pull analytical framework, insecurity in Sumska Oblast was an important factor discouraging return. For many respondents, however, this was outweighed by the push factors operating at locations of displacement: deteriorating financial circumstances, inadequate housing, and personal factors.

Return dynamics were further complicated by divergence in risk perception and tolerance among household members. In several cases (8/29), members of the same household made different movement decisions: some returned while others remained in displacement. These divergences frequently mapped onto age, gender, and livelihood considerations, reflecting the deeply individualised nature of risk calculus even within shared family units.



Photo 2: Damage to an apartment block in Sumska Oblast

"My husband came back first. I stayed with the children a bit longer — I wasn't ready."

– Returnee from Bilopillia
(had been displaced internally)

Cyclical returns refer to a pattern of repeated, non-permanent movement between a settlement of origin and another settlement within the region, in which an individual or household has not fully resettled at either location. In this study, four respondents conducted cyclical movement of this kind. All four were older adults with long-standing ties to their rural settlements, and in each case the primary purposes of travel were agricultural, such as tending vegetable gardens, maintaining livestock, and preventing property deterioration. Two of the respondents cited relying on these agricultural activities to sustain their lifestyle in the other settlements. The frequency of these visits ranged from once or twice a week to seasonal stays of several months.

After Return: Persistent Challenges and Unmet Needs

Although several factors encouraged people to return to Sumska Oblast, many continued to face significant challenges after returning. Whilst individual circumstances vary, several themes emerged across respondents, pointing to systemic gaps in living conditions and support. These challenges clustered around five interrelated areas: housing damage and access to compensation; disruptions to utilities and energy supply; financial and humanitarian assistance; psychosocial wellbeing; and children's education and socialisation needs.

Housing Damage and Access to Compensation

Housing damage represented one of the most immediate and pervasive challenges reported by returnees. Some respondents (5/29) described damage to their homes as an unresolved problem, ranging from minor structural damage requiring urgent repair to complete destruction.

In several cases, the damage itself was not the primary obstacle: respondents described significant barriers to accessing the state compensation and certificate system, particularly related to documentation requirements and the scope of damage recognised

for compensation.¹⁶ One respondent from Myropillia, whose house had been destroyed, described being unable to claim any support because the property had not been formally privatised in her name. This suggests that the current compensation framework may exclude households due to administrative documentation barriers. Another respondent from Bilopillia, whose property had sustained

damage to windows and roof, described abandoning the process altogether out of fear of incurring repeat damage before repairs could be completed: *“We haven’t applied yet, because it isn’t completely destroyed. But what’s the point of putting in windows there or repairing the roof? We repaired it ourselves and that’s that.”*

Disruption to Utilities and Energy Supply

Beyond damage challenges, disruptions to essential utilities emerged as another major concern after return, affecting access to gas, electricity, and water.

Disruption to utilities were described by respondents across both rural and urban areas, but were most prominent in rural hromadas. Several respondents described the absence of centralised gas supply and reliance on firewood as the primary heating source.

Availability and access to affordable firewood was a commonly reported seasonal problem, compounded by security-related restrictions on delivery to the most exposed locations.

Electricity outages were described as a compounding problem that disrupted water supply dependent on electric pumps and removed access to heating in flats reliant on electric boilers. Several respondents (8/29) cited access to power banks, EcoFlow units, and portable generators as a

“Help with firewood would be handy. Given the security situation, not everyone can come — for volunteers to bring firewood and all that.”

– Returnee from Krasnopillia
(had been displaced internally)

priority need. One respondent from Sumy explained the structural gap: *“Not every family has the means to provide for themselves with a generator — because we live in a flat — but rather with something that would provide at least a little more light and internet access, so that the children could continue their studies.”*

Several respondents highlighted the interdependency of these utility failures, noting that during winter periods, simultaneous disruption to electricity, gas and water supply created conditions that were difficult to manage, particularly for households with young children or elderly members.

Financial and Humanitarian Assistance

A number of respondents (7/29) reported receiving humanitarian aid during displacement, generally describing it as a valued but sometimes uneven form of support. The assistance helped some households meet immediate needs for food, hygiene items, and other essentials during the first stages of displacement, particularly where savings were limited or households had lost access to regular income. However, respondents also described this support as time-bound and insufficient to resolve the broader financial pressures associated with rent, utilities, childcare, and the loss of employment. Several respondents expressed discomfort at receiving aid they felt should go to others. One respondent who had found work while displaced in Italy explained that she had asked for Humanitarian assistance to be redirected to people with greater needs once her household was able to cover its basic costs. Humanitarian assistance was important in cushioning immediate hardship, but rarely enabled households to stabilise their situation over time. Returnees’ needs therefore extended beyond in-kind assistance to predictable and flexible financial support, particularly for households facing housing repairs, high utility costs, debt accumulated during displacement, or limited access to stable employment.

Upon return, community-based and charitable support continued to play a role for some respondents, particularly those without IDP status or those whose IDP payments had ended. One respondent in Vorozhba described declining IDP status upon return specifically to

preserve access to informal community assistance: *“When I returned to Vorozhba, I declined that status. That way, I can at least receive some food parcels from charitable organisations.”* This illustrates how some returnees navigated a fragmented support environment in which formal status, state payments, and access to local charitable support did not always align. A small number of respondents also directly identified food parcels, medicines, and hygiene kits as priority forms of assistance after return.

Other respondents highlighted the need for additional financial support after return (6/29). They referred both to general financial strain following displacement and return, and to gaps in state compensation mechanisms. In several cases, humanitarian cash assistance was implicitly positioned as a substitute for inaccessible or insufficient formal support, including compensation for damaged housing and interrupted IDP payments. For respondents who had moved to another settlement within the 30-kilometre zone, the insufficiency of IDP benefits relative to actual living costs was a recurring theme. This was particularly evident among respondents who had returned to Sumy city from abroad, where the cost of rent and utilities had often depleted household savings during displacement. As one respondent explained, *“Even financial assistance would probably be more helpful, to pay the rent or something like that. Because the state takes IDP benefits away one moment and gives them the next, and when you compare it to how much it costs to rent a flat, the IDP benefits aren’t nearly enough.”*

Psychosocial Wellbeing

Psychosocial distress was reported by a substantial share of respondents (7/29 explicitly, though the broader data suggest the experience is far more widespread), ranging from acute grief and bereavement to persistent anxiety, social isolation, and a generalised sense of uncertainty about the future. Chronic stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion stemmed from ongoing insecurity, grief, economic pressure, and the cumulative toll of displacement

"I can't be in the flat, I feel like I've been locked in four walls, some kind of claustrophobia starts."

– Returnee from Krasnopillia
(had been displaced internally)

and were described in various forms by the vast majority of respondents (26/29). People living alone and widowed individuals, in particular, reported pronounced feelings of isolation (16/29), having returned to communities where neighbours had not come back and social networks had fragmented.

Among elderly and respondents living alone, many accounts centred on loss and social isolation. One respondent from Mogrytsia, who lost her husband at the start of the full-scale invasion, described a prolonged period of apathy: *'When the war started, my husband died. I was left on my own. It was very hard for me: I didn't feel like doing anything, I didn't want to go anywhere.'*

Children's Education and Socialisation Needs

Several respondents (4/29) identified unmet needs related to the education, developmental activities, and socialisation of children, distinct from access to schooling. Beyond online-only schooling and the shortage of shelter-equipped schools, respondents identified an absence of safe spaces and structured activities outside of school hours, which some described as having a measurable impact on their children's psychological state.

One respondent from Sumy identified childcare during summer as an acute unmet need: the absence of safe, shelter-equipped spaces with meals provided during school holidays placed significant strain on dual-income households without extended family nearby.

"Any projects that are currently focused on children's development and socialisation will be beneficial in our city, as children are lacking this, as they are under constant stress. And if there were opportunities to take them away somewhere for a break, that would, of course, be very good too."

– Returnee from Sumy
(had been displaced internally)

Another respondent from Bezdryk described the same gap in terms of the physical infrastructure required to make socialisation and development safe: the need for community premises where children could meet, attend clubs, and interact with peers in a protected environment.

Differentiated Vulnerability of Returnees

Respondents provided mixed views on whether they had different needs from residents who had remained in their communities. Some emphasised that both groups faced the same underlying conditions, including similar financial pressures, utility disruptions, and security risks. Others highlighted meaningful differences placing returned in a more precarious position than those who had remained: due to the need to repair damaged housing, to re-establish social and employment ties, and to overcome

the financial consequences of the displacement period, including depletion of savings and accumulated debt.

Separately, several respondents noted social tension between those who left and those who stayed: the latter sometimes perceived the departure as unjustified, which created additional psychological discomfort for the returnees.

Addressing Post-Return Needs: Support Priorities

The profound challenges encountered upon return translate directly into acute humanitarian needs. Addressing these needs requires understanding not only what returnees lack, but also how their vulnerabilities may differ from those who never displaced.

Many returnees reported receiving limited humanitarian assistance following their return, and a significant proportion indicated that what was available was either insufficient to meet their needs or difficult to access due to prevailing security conditions. Checkpoints, restricted movement, and the suspension of some humanitarian operations in higher-risk areas meant that certain communities remained largely outside the reach of formal assistance. Additionally, some respondents were unaware of available programmes, whilst others had encountered administrative barriers in accessing them. Limitations

to access aid might also reflect existing humanitarian organizations' targeting criteria, which do not provide categorical assistance to returnees.

Across the respondent group, financial assistance featured in the narratives of the majority of those surveyed (19/29). The need for cash in places like Bilopillia was highly practical and linked to a non-functioning banking infrastructure, rather than just income levels.

Winterisation support (8/29) was mentioned as a priority need, specifically regarding solid fuel for heating and back-up electricity appliances, given the lack of gas supply and frequent power outages. Housing and infrastructure repair constituted a further frequently cited need, encompassing window and roof replacement, heating system restoration, and access to generators. Healthcare needs, including access to medicines, specialist

consultations, and mental health services, were raised by many respondents (3/29 explicitly, though the broader data suggest the need is more widespread), particularly among elderly returnees managing chronic conditions. Education support, including school rehabilitation, supplies, and transport for children, was identified by several caregivers as a priority.

Returnees' Attitudes towards Future Displacement

Most respondents did not report active plans to leave their current place of residence. However, only a minority (5/29) stated that they would remain regardless of circumstances. Many intended to remain unless the security situation worsened significantly or basic living conditions became unsustainable.

The most frequently cited trigger for renewed displacement would be a substantial worsening of the security situation. Many respondents said they had adapted to the current level of risk and were prepared to continue living with shelling, air-raid alerts, and general insecurity. However, many identified a threshold beyond which remaining would no longer be feasible. Examples included a ground offensive, occupation, a return to the level of violence experienced during earlier phases of the war, or mandatory evacuation orders.

In several interviews (13/29), respondents identified the collapse of essential infrastructure and services as another trigger for future displacement. Concerns related not only to physical insecurity but also to the ability to sustain everyday life and livelihoods. One respondent from Sumy noted that destruction of gas stations could make it impossible to continue operating a business, while another respondent from Bezdryk discussed the possibility of leaving during winter due to prolonged electricity outages experienced in previous years. These findings suggest that future displacement decisions may depend not only on military developments but also on the continued functioning of critical infrastructure and public services.

For some respondents (4/29), property represented a key factor anchoring them in place. Several older (3/29) respondents indicated that they would remain unless their homes were destroyed. Respondents from Ochkyrno, for example, explicitly stated that they would only stop making cyclical returns to their hometowns if their houses were destroyed.

Economic constraints also shaped attitudes towards future displacement. Several (3/29) respondents acknowledged that they might consider leaving if conditions worsened but did not believe that relocation was currently financially possible. One woman from Vorozhba acknowledged the risks around her while explaining that she could afford to move to safer areas.

Caregiving responsibilities and household composition were another important consideration. Several respondents explained that displacement decisions could not be made solely on the basis of security considerations because family members were unable or unwilling to move. On the contrary, others identified the safety and well-being of their children as the main factor that could eventually compel them to relocate.

A notable proportion of respondents expressed a strong commitment to remaining in Ukraine even if they were forced to relocate again. While some interviewees were open to moving elsewhere within the country, many explicitly rejected the possibility of renewed displacement abroad. Respondents who had previously lived as refugees frequently reflected on difficult experiences related to social integration, employment, language barriers, or separation from family members remaining in Ukraine. Several returnees with refugee experience indicated they would first consider another location within Ukraine before considering moving abroad again.

Finally, several respondents (5/29), expressed outright determination to stay despite ongoing insecurity. This was particularly evident among older respondents and those who had experienced multiple cycles of displacement and return. References to patriotism, attachment to home, exhaustion with repeated relocation, and commitment to rebuilding communities were common in the sample.

The findings suggest that respondents who have returned to unsafe areas are generally highly committed to remaining, but that this commitment is often conditional on the relatively stable security situation and the presence of housing and infrastructure. Given the extent to which financial and personal factors appear to shape return independently of security conditions, a persistent returnee population in frontline areas may remain a structural feature of the response, and future evacuation efforts may face greater resistance among households that have already absorbed the costs of previous displacements.

"Only an offensive — otherwise, we'll put up with it. If there's an offensive, then we'll have to leave, just as people have left the nearby villages close to the Russian border."

– Returnee from Tokari
(had been displaced to Lviv)

Conclusion

This qualitative assessment of drivers of unsafe returns in Sumska Oblast illustrated the complexities of moving back to a frontline region. For most respondents, high rental costs, financial pressure, and difficult living conditions pushed many IDPs and refugees to leave their **places of displacement**, while personal factors, access to own property, employment opportunities, familiar service providers, and established social and community ties encouraged return. As improvements in the security situation were only rarely cited as a reason for return (4/29), the study underscored how the decision to return to unsafe frontline areas ultimately comes down to a difficult compromise between physical safety and economic and psychosocial well-being.

Crucially, the assessment's findings challenged the framing of unsafe returns as purely negative or preventable coping strategies¹⁷. The accounts gathered here suggest a more nuanced picture where respondents describe return as a constrained but deliberate choice. Financial hardship, inadequate housing, separation from family members and social isolation far outweighed security concerns as a deterrent to return for the majority of respondents.

Upon returning, returnee households encountered a new set of challenges. While many of the needs described reflect longer-term recovery issues, respondents often articulated them as immediate needs. Requests for generators, firewood, financial support, and safe spaces for children indicated a continued need for short-term assistance to maintain basic living conditions. At the same time, difficulties with access to services and infrastructure point to underlying structural problems. Overall, findings suggest that returnees faced overlapping humanitarian and longer-term recovery needs, requiring continued short-term support alongside more sustained recovery assistance, which is however limited by the extent of safety risks in frontline and border settlements.

Despite these difficult conditions, most returnees express a firm intention to stay in their communities, noting they would only consider leaving again if the security situation drastically escalated or if the basic infrastructure was destroyed. These findings suggest that evacuation efforts are likely to face continued challenges, as many households may be reluctant to leave or may return even after evacuating, particularly in the absence of viable living conditions and support in displacement locations, further, it suggests that there will continue to be individuals residing in unsafe zones which require humanitarian assistance.

Endnotes

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Methodology Overview

This assessment employed a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences of returnees from Sumska Oblast who temporarily left the unsafe zone (defined as within 0 to 30 kilometres to the front line and border with the Russian Federation) and subsequently returned. Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between 18 June and 1 July 2026 with respondents from Bilopilska (Bilopillia, Peremoha, Vorozhba), Bezdrivska (Tokari, Bezdryk), Krasnopilska (Krasnopillia, Samotoivka), Myropilska (Myropillia), Khotynska (Kindrativka), Yunakivska (Mohrytsia), Znob-Novhorodska (Ochkyno), Kyrykivska (Riabyna), and Sumska (Sumy, Pischane) hromadas. The selection of settlements was informed by a literature review of return trends, operational feasibility, and the local partner's access considerations.

A total of 29 interviews were conducted. Follow-up interviews with 10 respondents were carried out between 8 and 13 July 2026 to clarify responses. All interviews were carried out face-to-face by REACH's partner organisation Unity and Strength. For respondents living in very close proximity to the front line and border, interviews were conducted in comparatively safer locations, including main urban areas, when respondents travelled to access markets or essential services.

All respondents provided informed consent prior to participation and were informed of the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw consent at any stage. Interview data were anonymised, stored securely, and accessed only by authorised research staff. Audio recordings were used exclusively for transcription and analysis and were deleted following the completion of data analysis.

Participants were identified through purposive sampling facilitated by the networks of Unity and Strength. An important selection criterion was recent return (defined as within the past 6 months), though the sample also included a few earlier returnees (4/29). The sample included five men and 24 women between 21 and 71 years old. Of the respondents, nine originated from urban settlements and 20 from rural settlements. The sample included households that had permanently returned (23/29), households engaging in cyclical or seasonal returns (4/29), and split households in which only some members had returned (2/29). Respondents also reflected a range of displacement experiences, including individuals who had retained or lost internally displaced person (IDP) status (13/29), individuals who had obtained refugee status (8/29), individuals who had held both IDP and refugee status (4/29), and individuals who had never formally registered as a displaced person (4/29).

Eighteen respondents permanently returned to their settlement of origin, while seven returned to another settlement within the unsafe zone. Out of those seven, six returned to Sumy instead of their village and one moved to another village within the oblast. Four respondents conduct cyclical travels to their settlements of origin, effectively living between their new places of residence and their hometowns.

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify common experiences, perceptions, and factors influencing decisions to return.

Limitations

- Findings are not statistically representative and should not be interpreted as representative of returnees' experience in Sumska Oblast or other frontline areas of Ukraine.
- Data is indicative of the situation at the time of data collection. Since most returns in the sample were completed in 2026, the responses reflect the most current security situation and frontline movements. As the security situation evolves, conditions influencing displacement and return decisions, as well as respondents' perceptions of safety, may change over time.
- Respondents were recruited through NGO and community contacts. As a result, the sample likely includes individuals who had previously interacted with, or were aware of, available services and assistance programmes. The findings may therefore not fully reflect the experiences of the most disadvantaged returnees.
- Due to security considerations, the research team was able to travel to a limited number of locations in Sumska Oblast. As a result, returnees currently residing in locations in extreme proximity to the frontline were not reached. Their experiences and motivations to return may differ from those captured in this assessment.
- Due to the sensitive nature of displacement and return experiences, some respondents may have been reluctant to discuss certain topics in full detail. As a result, protection risks, negative experiences and coping strategies implemented during displacement or upon return may be underreported in the findings.
- Some respondents may not have been aware of all programmes, services, or organisations operating in their hromadas. Consequently, the absence of references to a particular service or activity should not be interpreted as evidence that it was unavailable.

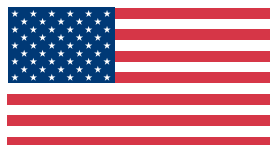
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REACH regularly assesses frontline areas. For additional information, please contact carla.curreli@impact-initiatives.org or yehor.pavlenko@reach-initiatives.org



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