

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

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Introduction

While the scale of displacement in Ukraine has decreased compared with the first years of the full-scale invasion, returns continue to take place to areas within reach of the front line¹. Decisions to return often reflect an interplay of economic pressure during displacement, access to housing, family and care responsibilities, attachment to home, and access to familiar services. Understanding these factors and how they interact is important for humanitarian actors seeking to support people displacing from, returning to or remaining in areas where security risks persist.

In July 2026, REACH, in partnership with the NGO The Tenth of April, conducted a qualitative assessment to provide an understanding of why people return to unsafe areas of Khersonska Oblast, defined as within 0 to 30 kilometres of the front line, and the challenges they face upon returning. Data collection comprised 30 semi-structured interviews with returnees in Kherson city and in four rural settlements: Kyselivka, Posad-Pokrovske, Blahodatne and Klapaya. Interview data were analysed thematically. The assessment aims to inform targeting and response strategies for organisations engaged in return, reintegration and protection programming in the oblast and in other communities along the front line.

The assessment sought to answer three main research questions: *What factors shaped respondents' decisions to return to unsafe frontline areas of Khersonska Oblast, and how did their experiences during displacement influence these decisions? How did security considerations influence these decisions, alongside family, economic, housing and service considerations? And what did respondents face after return, including unmet needs, and under what conditions would they consider displacing again?*

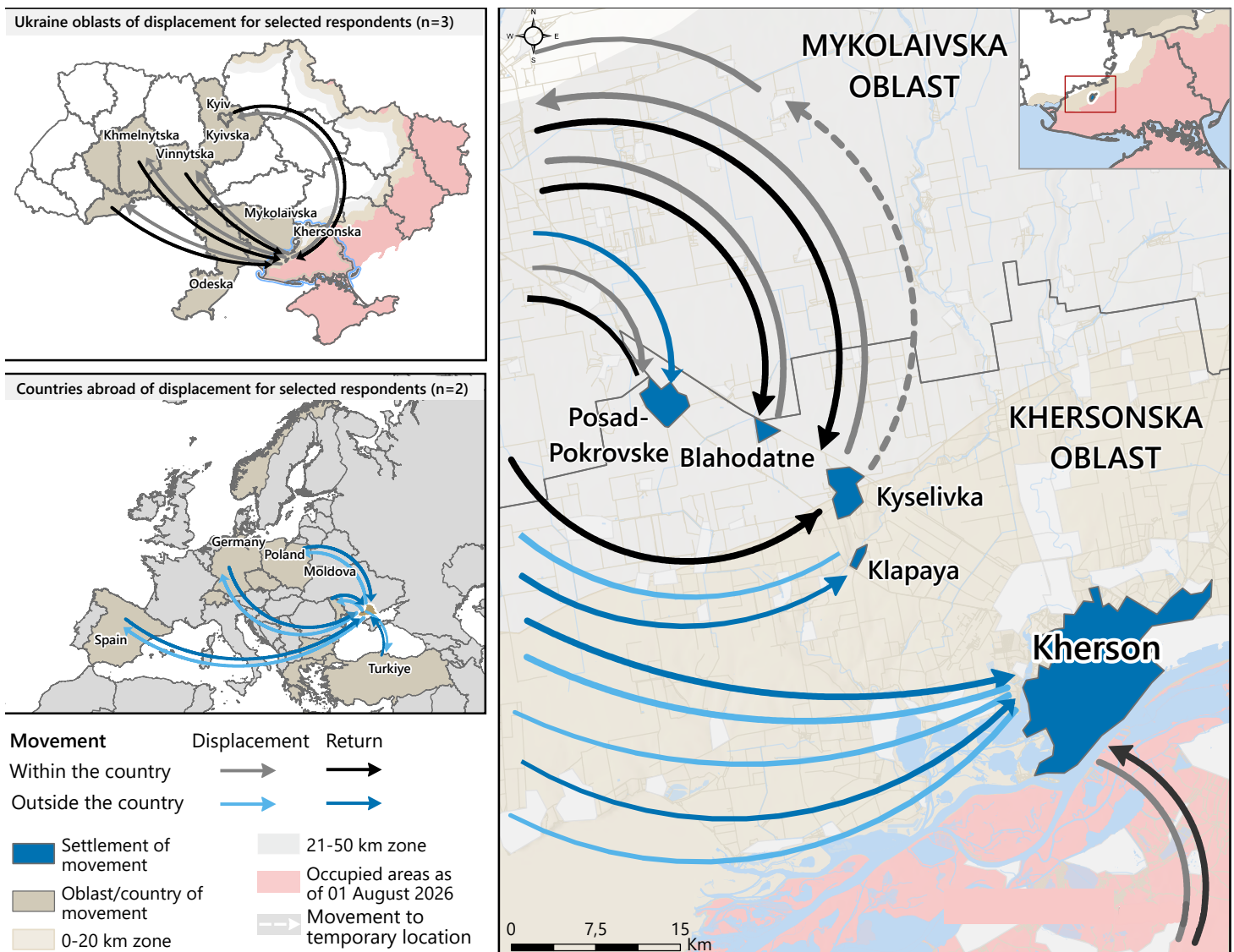
Key Findings

- **Return decisions had multiple drivers, with relational and emotional considerations mentioned most often.** Emotional attachment to home (24/30) and family reasons, including reunification and care for relatives (19/30), were the drivers most frequently cited by respondents, followed by economic considerations (15/30) and property or land (14/30), such as returning to an owned home or continuing to work the land. Access to services and perceived security were mentioned less often. Most respondents described a combination of factors rather than a single reason for return.
- **Economic pressure during displacement shaped return decisions, particularly among respondents with more recent recorded displacement episodes.** Respondents whose recorded displacement began in 2024–2026 more often cited rent, living costs and depleted savings as reasons they could not remain displaced (7/12, compared with 2/18 displaced in 2022). Respondents whose recorded displacement began in 2022² more often reported finding work or receiving internally displaced person (IDP) payments during displacement. For respondents who returned to their own homes, return removed rental costs but did not end financial pressure: several still faced unemployment, repair needs and utility costs after return.
- **Displacement and return patterns differed between respondents in Kherson city and in rural settlements.** Compared with respondents in Kherson city, rural respondents had more often been displaced in 2022 (13/15, compared with 5/15) and within Ukraine (12/15, compared with 5/15), and all six respondents who described a planned return lived in rural settlements. Respondents in Kherson city had more often been displaced between 2024 and 2026 and abroad, sometimes for only a few months, and more often described the cost of displacement as a reason they could not remain displaced (7/15, compared with 2/15). Because settlement type, timing of displacement and place of displacement overlap closely, these differences cannot be attributed to any single characteristic.
- **Improved security was rarely cited as a reason for return.** Six respondents (6/30) mentioned security, referring either to greater danger in their place of displacement or to specific local conditions at home, such as relative calm or the demining of fields. Four respondents said security did not influence their return decision. Several respondents reported that security had deteriorated since their return but had nevertheless remained. When discussing what would prompt them to leave again, respondents most often named a serious deterioration in security.

• **After return, respondents reported reconnecting with family and community, but more than half (16/30) also reported unmet needs, most often related to income and livelihoods, housing repairs, healthcare, utility costs and children's education.** Many of these needs appeared to continue from displacement, compounded by insecurity and damage in frontline areas and by savings depleted while away, rather than being created by return itself.

• **Return may be temporary, with intentions to stay often conditional on security and family circumstances.** Of the 18 respondents who intended to remain in their settlement, 13 named a condition under which they would leave again. Across the sample, ten said they would leave if security worsened significantly and three only if their home were destroyed; others tied the decision to their children's safety or to older relatives who would not leave. Where respondents considered where they would go, they mostly named nearby cities, such as Mykolaiv or Odesa, rather than a return abroad. Three respondents had already been displaced and returned more than once, indicating that for some, return is part of cyclical movement rather than a final decision.

• **Evacuation and relocation support that addresses both the journey to safety and the conditions needed to sustain displacement could make leaving more viable and reduce pressure to return to unsafe areas.** Respondents' accounts highlight the importance of keeping families together, supporting children and older relatives, and accessing suitable accommodation and care at the destination. Where feasible, safe relocation options close to home could also reflect respondents' stated preferences. Experiences of brief or repeated displacement point to the value of flexible support that accommodates further movement and the possibility of return when conditions allow. Addressing these practical concerns could make evacuation a more viable option for households considering leaving should security conditions deteriorate again.



Map 1: Displacement and Return Movements of Respondents

Context Description: Returns in Ukraine and Khersonska Oblast

Return movements in Ukraine have slowed relative to the first years of the full-scale invasion but continue to represent an important component of the country's displacement dynamics. Based on data from April to June 2026, IOM estimated that 4.1 million people had returned to their place of origin, including approximately 1.1 million who returned from abroad³. While most large-scale return movements were completed in the first two years of the full-scale war, more recent movements have continued at a slower rate and have become increasingly characterised by intra-oblast rather than cross-border or inter-oblast movement.⁴

A particularly significant concern is the phenomenon of returns to unsafe areas. According to REACH's December 2024 analysis, returns within 30 kilometres of the front line or the border with the Russian Federation had accounted for roughly one-third of all IDP returns since February 2022, corresponding to an estimated 1.6 million people¹. At the planning level, the 2026 HNRP identifies premature returns to unsafe areas as a protection risk and a negative coping mechanism among people in prolonged displacement.⁵

Specific displacement from Khersonska Oblast has been large-scale and has continued since 2022. The initial large-scale displacement took place during the occupation of much of the oblast, including Kherson city, by the Russian Federation and the fighting that followed in 2022. In December 2022, IOM identified Khersonska Oblast as the place of origin of 12% of the estimated 5.9 million people internally displaced across Ukraine despite the Oblast representing only around 2.4%⁶ of the estimated population in 2022. While displacement from Khersonska Oblast peaked in 2022, it has continued since: in June and July 2025, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported displacement from high-risk areas and reinforced mandatory evacuation orders for 44 locations on the right bank of the Dnieper River in Khersonska Oblast⁷.

Active hostilities, temporary occupation by the Russian Federation and long-range attacks have produced a high-risk security situation in Khersonska Oblast, with damaging effects on the civilian population. Since late 2022, when Ukrainian forces regained control of Kherson city and the surrounding area on the right (western) bank of the Dnieper River, the front line in the oblast has remained largely static along the river.⁸ Because of the geographic nature of the front line in this Oblast, Kherson city and other right-bank settlements lie within range of artillery and short-range drones, while still being heavily populated. Since July 2024, drone operators on the opposite bank have systematically struck civilians outdoors, on foot and using transport, as well as ambulances and emergency services.⁸ According to ACLED, most attacks on civilians recorded in Ukraine in 2023 and 2024 occurred in the Government-controlled part of Khersonska Oblast on the right bank of the river, and the number of these attacks increased by a third in 2024, with drones becoming the weapon of choice⁹. In 2025, drone attacks on civilians exceeded all other types of attacks on civilians for the first time, and were predominantly documented in Khersonska Oblast¹⁰.

The pattern has continued in 2026: in August 2026, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine recorded 25 civilians killed and 334 injured in Kherson city, more civilians injured than in any other city it listed for that month.¹¹

Prolonged hostilities have also left lasting contamination and damage. The UN Mine Action Service identifies the Kherson and Mykolaiv regions, together with Kharkiv and Donetsk, as having the highest levels of explosive ordnance (EO) contamination in Ukraine. Yet a respondent from Blahodatne said that, "no matter how they welcomed us or how hospitable they were, we still wanted to return home".

Existing research on returns to frontline areas in Ukraine points to a wider set of considerations than improved security. Earlier assessments identify family reunification; housing and economic pressures during displacement; the ability to return to an owned home; and perceptions of security among the considerations shaping return decisions. In REACH's 2024 analysis of returnee households within 30 kilometres of the front line or the border with the Russian Federation, 40% reported family reunification and 29% reported improved security as reasons for return, while recent returnees to this area more often reported accommodation challenges (31%) and economic challenges (30%)¹ in their location of displacement. Qualitative assessments in this series in Sumska and Zaporizka Oblasts found that economic, family and emotional considerations outweighed ongoing security risks for most respondents¹².

While displacement from Khersonska Oblast peaked in 2022, it has continued with later escalations, and people continue to return to areas close to the front line. These areas remain exposed to shelling, drone attacks and explosive ordnance, and humanitarian planning identifies people living close to the front line, including in Khersonska Oblast, as having the most severe needs in Ukraine.¹³ This assessment provides further qualitative evidence on how returnees experience return to these areas of Khersonska Oblast and the conditions they face afterwards.

How displacement and return decisions were made

Displacement

Most respondents were displaced in response to occupation, fighting or shelling, but the timing and other circumstances of displacement differed markedly across the sample. Eighteen respondents had a recorded displacement start in 2022, during the occupation of the oblast and the fighting that followed. Their accounts describe tanks passing through villages, weeks spent in basements under occupation and shelling that cut off electricity. A respondent from Kyselivka left in April 2022 after almost 40 days in a basement with other families, and a respondent from Posad-Pokrovske left in March 2022 only once the family learned that the road to Mykolaiv was clear, as they had been told that cars were being fired on.

"Tanks were coming through so much that I thought the village would be completely destroyed in the next few days. And so we urgently decided to leave with the family."

– Returnee from Kyselivka
(displaced in Mykolaivska Oblast and Kyiv)

The other 12 respondents had a recorded displacement start between 2024 and 2026, in most cases following a local escalation. A respondent from Kherson city left in January 2026 after a week of heavy shelling near her house; another left for Odesa five or six days after heavy shelling in early October 2025; and a respondent from Kyselivka left in summer 2025 after drone attacks intensified on the Mykolaiv–Kherson highway, which she used to travel to work. In one account, the respondent's own house was hit:

"More than a year ago, in May 2025, after shelling at my house, when two windows and the roof fell in on me, I packed my things and went to my relatives abroad."

– Returnee from Kherson city
(displaced in Czechia)

While most displacement was driven by immediate physical threat, a smaller subset of respondents (3/30) displaced primarily due to economic pressures or specific family obligations. These included economic migration abroad due to a collapse in local livelihoods, travel to provide family care (such as assisting relatives abroad after childbirth), or temporary relocations tied to existing professional responsibilities.

"We left on 10 January because it was clear there was simply nothing to do in Kherson. And we needed to earn money, so the decision to leave wasn't so much because we were refugees, but rather because the idea was to earn money and bring it back to Ukraine"

– Returnee from Kherson city
(displaced in Germany)

Half of the respondents described organising their own displacement, travelling by private car, minibuss or public transport, often with relatives. Others (9/30) relied on volunteers or organised evacuation: a respondent from Kherson city contacted the local council and left on an evacuation bus, and a family from Blahodatne left with a group of 63 residents through a corridor arranged by the local military administration.

Displacement also split households. Nine respondents described family separation during displacement. In some cases, part of the household stayed behind, as for a respondent from Kherson city whose three relatives remained at home while she went to Norway with her child. In others, relatives were displaced to different places: a respondent from Posad-Pokrovske stayed with her parents in Ternopil'ska Oblast before moving alone to Odesa, and a respondent's mother and younger son, who were at a health resort when the full-scale invasion began, were sent on to Germany, where the respondent later joined them.

Return

Almost all respondents had returned between December 2025 and July 2026 (29/30), but the length of displacement preceding return differed between rural and urban respondents. Rural respondents had mostly been displaced in 2022 and spent three to four years away before returning between December 2025 and April 2026;

for them, displacement was a prolonged stay that ended when conditions at home allowed return or when resources in displacement ran out. By contrast, seven respondents, six of them from Kherson city, left between October 2025 and February 2026 and returned one to six months later; for them, displacement was a short response to a period of escalation rather than a prolonged stay elsewhere.

"More psychological, because we were already tired of sitting there for 4.5 years and hoped that we needed to return. We waited for a good time that the war would end soon, but it did not, and we returned in April '26."

– Returnee from Blahodatne
(displaced within Ukraine)

Most respondents described their return as intended to be long-term: 18 said they intended to remain in their settlement, while the other 12 either named conditions under which they would leave again (8) or did not express a clear view (4). However, return was not always a single movement. Three respondents, all of whom returned to Kherson city, had been displaced, returned and displaced again before their most recent return: an older woman had moved three times between Kherson and her granddaughter's home in Chişinău; a second woman had returned from Odesa before a longer stay in Germany; and a third had moved between Athens, Kyiv and Kherson over four years. Six respondents described visits home, by themselves or a household member, before returning to live. One older respondent, who returned from Kyiv'ska Oblast at the end of March 2026 to stop the pipes in her house from freezing, said she might go back to Kyiv'ska Oblast if the war did not end by winter, indicating a possible seasonal movement.

Eleven respondents described where they obtained information when deciding whether to return, and in most of these accounts it came from neighbours, friends, relatives or a spouse who had stayed in, or returned to, the settlement. Contacts reported whether homes were intact; shops, markets and pharmacies were open; and whether the situation was calm enough to return. A respondent from Kyselivka called friends who "said it was possible", and returned; a respondent from Blahodatne described neighbours who "sent videos" of what was happening to the family's home. More broadly, 12 respondents described regular contact with their settlement of origin during displacement, and two also followed local Telegram channels to track where attacks had taken place.

The timing of displacement, the place of displacement and the settlement of return overlap closely in the sample. Of the 18 respondents first recorded as displaced in 2022, 13 returned to rural settlements and 13 had been displaced within Ukraine. Of the 12 displaced between 2024 and 2026, 10 returned to Kherson city and eight had been displaced abroad. Differences between rural and urban respondents described in this brief therefore also reflect differences in when and where respondents were displaced, and cannot be attributed to settlement type alone.

"Well, a neighbour rang and said, 'Come back, we're still here, the markets are open, everything's the same.' And that somehow encouraged us to come back – there are pharmacies, the shops are open."

– Returnee from Kherson city
(displaced in Kyiv)

In three rural households, a husband who had stayed at home or returned first acted as the main source of information. In Blahodatne, a respondent's husband "checked and considered whether it was safe enough"; in Kyselivka, another respondent's husband reported that the route was "already covered with these [anti-FPV] nets"; and a third respondent from Kyselivka said her husband came "to scout, to see what the situation was like here, because we work the land." In these households, information was gathered by a family member on site rather than from public sources. Apart from the two respondents who followed local Telegram channels, references to official information were limited: one respondent from Posad-Pokrovske received official messages through Viber and Telegram inviting returnees to register for assistance, and a respondent from Kyselivka mentioned possible contact with the village head or local authorities.

Some information gathered or received by respondents discouraged return. Friends made during displacement asked a family from Blahodatne to come back to their place of displacement and stay with them so as not to expose themselves to danger, and relatives of a respondent from Kyselivka told her that it "was still dangerous to return". Informal information from the place of return also was at times discouraging. Several respondents reported that the situation had deteriorated after they came back, as well: a respondent from Posad-Pokrovske said she slept better at home than in Odesa during the first months, but that drones had recently started to hit the village, while a respondent from Kherson city said that in her four months back "it's become more dangerous".

These findings suggest that return decisions rested largely on trusted personal networks that reported on immediate conditions, such as the state of the home, local services and recent attacks. This may indicate that information on security, services and assistance is likely to reach potential returnees through relatives and neighbours more often than through official channels.

This information seeking behaviour from respondents reflects that the timing of return depended on whether practical conditions allowed it. Of the ten respondents who characterised the timing of their return: six described it as planned and five as sudden, with one account containing elements of both. All six planned returns were to rural settlements, while three of the five sudden returns were to Kherson city.

Planned returns typically followed a period in which a household member prepared the home or confirmed that it could be used. They were more often made by respondents who had an income during displacement: four of the six had worked while displaced, and only one

described the cost of displacement as a reason she could not remain. For some rural households that depended on land, return also depended on demining. In Blahodatne, a respondent's husband returned first to clear mines from the yard, which had been mined while occupying forces were living there, and the rest of the family followed two weeks later.

"When my husband found out that the demining certificates had already been signed, we decided to return."

– Returnee from Kyselivka
(displaced in Odesa and Cherkaska Oblasts)

In Posad-Pokrovske, one respondent "did a bit of renovation and then moved", and another arranged a connection to the water supply, a shower and a toilet in a temporary cottage at her own expense before returning. Other preparations concerned the place of displacement: a respondent returning from Poland first had to "finish up at work there" and collect her belongings, and a respondent from Kyselivka accepted an online job before leaving Kyiv.

Sudden returns were usually triggered by an event in the family or by a multi-dimensional exhaustion with displacement, rather than by a change in security conditions at home. A respondent from Kherson city returned from Germany after the death of her grandfather to organise the funeral and begin inheritance proceedings, describing it as "an emergency return" with "no preparations whatsoever". A respondent from Kyselivka returned after her father had a heart attack. An older respondent returned to Kherson city from Kyivska Oblast in winter because the water and heating systems in her house were still running, and she feared the pipes would freeze and burst. Another respondent, returning to Kherson city from Odesa, described several pressures at once: rent and utilities in Odesa that exceeded her pension, continuing payments for her home in Kherson, and homesickness. She said she had "simply had enough" of displacement.

Planned and sudden returns shared common features: in both, a pressure in displacement and a condition at home combined to set the timing. Sudden returns often marked a tipping point after a longer build-up: the respondent returning from Odesa had been paying rent that exceeded her pension while her own home stood empty in Kherson, and a family in Norway returned when their savings had run out and their passports were about to expire. Planned returns, in turn, were also prompted by pressure in displacement and home conditions: a respondent from Kyselivka planned her return from Bulgaria "when it became clear that savings were running out", after her husband reported that the route was "more or less calm".

These findings suggest that the timing of return was set by the point at which a push factor in displacement, such as rising costs or depleted savings, coincided with a pull factor or condition at home, such as a family emergency, a usable house, demined land or a family member already at home who could prepare for the household's return. Rural households more often had both the time and a household member at home to prepare, while returns to Kherson city

were more often made at short notice, consistent with the shorter displacement of many city respondents.

Households often did not return together, and in several households men returned first. Eight respondents described living apart from at least one household member after return. In four rural households, a husband, in some cases with an adult son, returned first to clean or secure the home and the rest of the family followed. In Kyselivka, a respondent's husband and son "cleaned up and washed everything" before she and her daughter came; another respondent from Kyselivka said, "My husband returned first, and then later I returned as well."

Similarly to gender, age appeared to affect return decisions. The timing of children's return was tied to their education: some children returned only after finishing their studies, one returned earlier than her mother to rejoin her own school, and others remained elsewhere to attend school. For example, a respondent from a rural settlement returned with her youngest daughter, while her son attended school in Odesa with his father and her eldest daughter lived in Bulgaria.

Family members did not always agree on the timing or safety of return. In five accounts, relatives discouraged return or urged the respondent to leave again. In four of these, older respondents aged between 67 and 78 described objections from adult children or grandchildren. The daughter and granddaughter of a respondent returning to Kherson city from Chişinău told her: "Mum, you're asking to get yourself killed, you're not thinking about us." A respondent from Blahodatne said her children told her not to go, "but I really wanted to return". An older couple displaced to Türkiye cancelled a planned return on the day the Kakhovka dam was destroyed because their children objected, and returned only in 2026. A respondent in Kherson city said her grandson, who had tried to stop her from leaving Kyiv, was now calling for her to go back. All five respondents nonetheless returned.

Care responsibilities, typically for older relatives, linked return decision to the needs of family members at home. Twelve respondents described caregiving responsibilities as a motivating factor for return. Several returned to care for older or ill relatives who remained. A respondent returned to Kherson city from Odesa partly for her husband's parents, who "didn't want to leave", explaining: "they're both 84. I need to look after them as well." A respondent from Kyselivka returned after her father's heart attack, and a respondent from Kherson city returned from Czechia when an older relative's condition worsened and her husband was no longer able to manage her care alone. Care could also keep respondents in displacement: after a first visit home, a respondent from Kyselivka went back to Chernivtsi because of the security situation and because family members needed continuous medical treatment there.

Displacement marked separation for some families, which return did not alleviate. Eight respondents described living apart from at least one household member after return, seven of them in rural settlements, where children were studying or living in other oblasts or abroad

and some respondents now lived alone. Return brought respondents closer to some relatives while others remained elsewhere.

"I want to see my family, to have everyone in town together. But as it is, everyone's scattered all over the place; you don't see each other for two or three years."

– Returnee from Posad-Pokrovske
(displaced within Ukraine)

Thirteen respondents described receiving financial support from family members, mostly during displacement and in some cases also after return, such as adult children paying rent and utility bills for an older parent, or parents sending money to a daughter with young children.

Economic and housing factors

Economic and housing considerations operated both as push factors from displacement and as pull factors towards their settlements of origin, but their weight differed sharply between respondents. Half of the respondents (15/30) gave economic or financial reasons for return and 14 cited property or land. For some, the cost of displacement had become unsustainable; for others, a job or an owned home made return the more workable option. In most accounts these considerations combined with family and emotional reasons rather than acting alone.

Housing and Cost of Living

The cost of displacement was described as a push factor mainly by respondents in this sample who had been displaced more recently and who had limited or no income. Nineteen respondents paid for accommodation during displacement, and 15 described financial pressure from the cost of living there more generally, including 11 of those paying for accommodation. Nine described this pressure as a reason they could not remain displaced: seven of the 12 respondents displaced between 2024 and 2026, compared with two of the 18 displaced in 2022. For people on fixed incomes, rent alone could exceed income. One respondent spent "more than half of [her] salary" on housing and utilities in Spain, and a respondent from Kyselivka described having to furnish an empty rented flat "completely from scratch".

Respondents who described economic pressure as a reason for return had funded displacement from savings or pensions rather than from work or IDP payments. Of the nine respondents who described economic pressure as a reason for return, six relied on savings and three on pensions; one of them had also worked during displacement but returned after losing her accommodation. A family from Kyselivka returned when their savings were running out and their IDP housing assistance had been cut, so they could no longer pay the rent. By contrast, respondents displaced in 2022 more often reported finding work during displacement (11/18, compared with 1/12) and receiving IDP payments (7/18, compared with none of the 12), although reliance on savings was similar in both groups (8/18 and 7/12).

Return relieved the financial pressure of displacement for respondents with a home to return to, particularly the cost of rent. The respondent returning from Odesa, who had been paying for her home in Kherson as well as her rented flat in Odesa, said she would “save 8,000 UAH every month by staying at home”, and a respondent from Posad-Pokrovske noted that, without rent, “that money can be used for other needs”.

Nonetheless, financial pressure continued after return, particularly for utilities. Heating, utilities and repairs remained significant costs, and one older respondent noted that pensioners were particularly ill-equipped to cover them:

“Pensioners everywhere are struggling with utility bills and gas. Because to heat a house like this, you need 4,000 hryvnias, but my pension is only 3,400.”

– Returnee from Kherson city
(displaced in Moldova)

She described paying for utilities as a priority over food: “Even if it means going hungry, you have to pay the utility bills.”

The ability to absorb these costs may depend on the financial situation in displacement. Respondents who had used their savings while displaced returned with little capacity to absorb additional costs after return.

Reliance on coping strategies to cover essential costs, including utilities, is supported by the 2026 REACH Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) in Khersonska Oblast. In the oblast, 68% of households used livelihood coping strategies to meet essential needs, including 33% who used crisis strategies and 5% who used emergency strategies. Among households asked about their reasons for using these strategies, the most commonly reported were to cover health expenses (44%) and to buy food (40%), followed by access to essential dwelling services such as electricity and energy (20%) and rent or adequate shelter (12%). Among households with at least one adult aged 60 or over, 63% used livelihood coping strategies, including 34% who used crisis strategies, compared with 75% and 31% of households in which all adults were younger than 60. Overall, 46% of households had spent or exhausted their savings to meet essential needs, and the share among returnee households was similar (47%).¹⁴ Together with respondents’ accounts, these figures suggest that households in the oblast meet essential costs, such as food, utilities and healthcare, by drawing down savings and assets, which leaves them with less capacity to absorb new shocks.

Hosted and Government-provided accommodation reduced costs but was often unstable or of low quality, and poor or insecure accommodation compounded economic push factors. Half of the respondents (14/30) were hosted by family or friends during displacement, and eight lived in Government-provided accommodation, such as reception centres, dormitories or social housing. These arrangements removed or reduced rent, but depended on the continued capacity of hosts or on the rules of a programme. Six respondents described a lack of space or privacy, and several lost accommodation at short notice: a family from Kyselivka lived rent-free with friends in Bolhrad for two months until the owners’ mother returned from abroad, and then had to move on to rented housing

in Uman. A respondent from Kherson city spent her first weeks in Norway in a reception-centre room of about five square metres with a shared kitchen and bathroom, and two respondents in Germany described living in tents in winter, after which one moved to a hall of residence where black mould kept appearing. A respondent from Blahodatne described hosts who were “very focused on money, saving”, to the point that “you could bathe only once a week”, and said she was treated “like a hired worker”. Even where conditions were good, the lack of privacy and autonomy made hosting difficult to sustain over time.

“In general, all basic needs could be met. The house was spacious, but psychologically it was difficult to adapt to other people’s routines... Still, it is better when everyone lives in their own house.”

– Returnee from Kyselivka
(displaced in Bulgaria)

However, free or subsidised housing did not by itself keep respondents in displacement. One rural respondent was given a house free of charge by the local administration in her place of displacement, which also offered her son a school place and her a job. She returned once her job at home was restored to a full-time salary and organisations began rebuilding the family’s damaged house, which required a family member to be present. A family supported by the Norwegian government returned when their savings had run out and their passports were about to expire, concluding that conditions “turned out to be better at home”. More broadly, five of the eight respondents in Government-provided accommodation gave an economic reason for return, in three cases a job at home.

The prospect of returning to an owned home was a frequently cited pull factor (14/30), both as a way to stop paying rent and due to responsibilities. Respondents returned to stop pipes from freezing, to prevent looting, to look after pets or a garden, and to settle an inheritance. For several, ownership mattered even where the home had been damaged.

“Well, first of all, it’s my own home. Secondly, I don’t have to pay for a flat or a house. It’s my own four walls. Because there’s nowhere else in Ukraine where I can stay with someone or live. You need money for that. But this house is mine. Yes, it’s been destroyed. We’re trying to repair it, but it’s still my own home.”

– Returnee from Kherson city
(displaced in Norway)

In rural settlements, land and gardens were part of the household economy. Ten respondents referred to a garden or farm in their settlement of origin, nine of them in rural settlements. A respondent from Posad-Pokrovske contrasted a flat on the fifth floor, where “you can’t grow anything yourself, not even a tomato”, with growing her own vegetables at home, and a family from Kyselivka returned to continue working rented land with their own equipment: “We had to continue working; that’s our main income.” For some rural households, the use of fields also depended on demining, and one rural respondent described losing a large area of sown crops and the family business when the family left.

Employment

Some respondents (10/30) found economic relief on return by resuming or finding work, but for others (10/30) unemployment continued after return.

Twelve respondents described being unable to find work during displacement, five of them abroad and seven within Ukraine. Those displaced abroad most often cited legal and language barriers: a respondent in Norway could not work until she had completed an integration programme that “takes up to one and a half years”, and a respondent in Poland said she “didn’t have any documents... to work with”. Ten respondents, nine of whom had been displaced abroad, described a language barrier. Where work was found, it was often below the respondent’s qualifications. A respondent in Germany said that without the language “the only jobs you can do are as a cleaner or in a warehouse”, and a respondent in Czechia found that her Ukrainian qualifications “were not needed by anyone there”. Within Ukraine, respondents more often found work (8/17, compared with 4/13 abroad), although frequently informal: the husband and adult son of a respondent from Blahodatne worked unofficially in Vinnytska Oblast, and another respondent from Blahodatne picked berries in the fields. Both respondents later returned to jobs they had held before displacement.

Six respondents explicitly linked their return to a job offer, reinstatement in a previous job or the knowledge that work would be available at home.

One rural respondent returned when her post was restored to a full-time salary and she was asked to return to her workplace. A respondent from Kyselivka said, “Perhaps if there hadn’t been work here, then maybe there would have been a different decision.” Another described:

“I was offered a job here. I hoped that I would finally be able to earn money. That was the first catalyst. The second was that my mother-in-law’s condition kept getting worse. My husband said we either had to bring her to live with us or help look after her, because sometimes she is in a very serious state for two or three days at a time. And thirdly, my own savings had run out. So, three-in-one.”

– Returnee from Kherson city
(displaced in Czechia)

Return did not guarantee employment. Nineteen respondents described their employment situation after return, and about half of them (10/19) reported having no work; others found or improved work, most often by returning to a job they had held before displacement.

Older respondents were the least likely to find work, both in displacement and after return. None of the seven respondents aged 60 or over found work during displacement, and only two reported an improved household income after return, through their own work or a relative’s. Most relied on pensions (5/7) and on support from relatives (5/7). Access to work also differed by settlement: rural respondents more often reported work both during displacement (10/15, compared with 2/15 in Kherson city) and after return (7/15, compared with 3/15).

Insecurity, the loss of former workplaces and depleted savings limited economic recovery after return,

especially in Kherson city. One respondent’s former workplace, a shopping centre, “no longer exists”, and another said she could not find a job “because it’s too dangerous”. Half of the respondents (15/30) had relied on savings during displacement, which reduced their economic resilience on return in a way that employment would not immediately resolve; a respondent now living on savings in Kherson city said they were “bound to run out eventually”.

Financial situation upon return

Financial conditions after return were mixed, and for many respondents, return did not end financial pressure.

Six respondents described an improved financial situation after return, for example, because they no longer paid rent or because a household member had found work. An older respondent in Kherson city said things had “become a bit easier” since her daughter started working, and a respondent returning from Odesa said that she now had “some extra money left over”. By contrast, 12 respondents described financial precarity after return, linked to rising prices, the end of IDP payments and the absence of work. A respondent returning from Germany said her situation had “got worse; I’m not working”, and a respondent from Blahodatne said it had “slightly worsened” because her IDP payments had stopped. Others described little change: “It hasn’t improved, nor has it got worse.”

Returning to an owned home removed rent but brought other costs, particularly repairs and utilities.

Ten respondents reported damage to their housing after return, including six of the 14 who cited property as a reason for return. Damage to housing is unlikely to be specific to returnees, but four of these ten respondents had also relied on savings during displacement, which may leave them less able to pay for repairs. A respondent from Kherson city returned to a flat without windows; an older respondent lives in her son’s house, where the roof has been broken for three years and plastic sheeting has twice been fitted at her own expense; and a rural family lives in a summer kitchen and a temporary cottage because their house was destroyed by a shell. Repair and compensation depended on documentation: another rural respondent said her house did not qualify for restoration because there were “no documents for this house”, and a respondent from Kherson city was afraid to travel to her former district to register her damaged property.

Older respondents living on pensions described the least room to absorb these costs.

Five of the seven respondents aged 60 or over relied on pensions, and five relied on support from relatives. An older respondent returning to Kherson city found “the fridge’s empty, the cupboard’s empty” and needed to stock up again, while another expected to “restructure my payments” for utilities, adding that “the children will help out somehow”.

Together with the savings drawn down during displacement, these accounts indicate that return shifted household expenditure from rent to repairs, heating and restocking, and that many households returned with little financial cushion against a further shock, including renewed displacement.

Access to Services

Access to services was less often a direct reason for return than family, economic or housing considerations, but it shaped both the difficulty of displacement and the conditions post-return. Seven respondents, five of whom had been displaced abroad, cited access to services as a reason for return. Their reasons concerned continuity of care, cost and eligibility for payments and services where they were registered, rather than better quality.

Access to administrative services

Access to government services was not explicitly referenced as a push or pull factor; nonetheless, it influenced the conditions respondents encountered in displacement and after return. In one case, documents set the timing of return: a family in Norway returned when their passports were about to expire and could not be renewed there.

Among respondents displaced within Ukraine, most described registering as IDPs quickly, but difficulties arose when payments were stopped or documents had to be obtained in person. A respondent from Kyselivka received an IDP certificate at the Administrative Services Centre “as soon as we arrived”, and a respondent from Blahodatne registered “immediately”. By contrast, a respondent displaced to Odesa had IDP payments stopped because of registration as a sole trader, and had to travel back to Kherson for paper copies of documents after being sent “from one office to another”. An older respondent in Odesa queued at an IDP centre for four days before travelling to the town of Dobroslav to reach a pension fund office.

Among respondents displaced abroad (13/30), experiences of legal status ranged from quick registration to prolonged uncertainty. Ten respondents discussed registering for protection status abroad. A respondent in Switzerland received protection status “on the third day” after arriving, and a respondent in Greece received protection status and health insurance after being placed in a reception camp. In Spain, by contrast, a respondent described a process that required visits to “so many offices” and annual renewal. Two older respondents lacked secure status: one registered in Moldova only after overstaying by three months, for fear of deportation, and an older couple in Türkiye lived there without legal status and went “into hiding” after being warned of possible checks. After return, four respondents described a need for legal help, including with documents for property compensation and utility debts.

Access to education

Children’s education was a reason to return for some families and a reason to delay return for others. Seventeen respondents discussed children’s education: 13 in relation to displacement and ten after return, six of whom discussed both. For some families, completing Ukrainian education was a reason to return: a respondent returning from Norway could not see how her child would sit the Year 11 national test abroad, and a respondent in Switzerland returned so that her daughter could enrol at a Ukrainian university rather than wait one or two years

to reach the required level of German. A daughter from Kyselivka returned before her mother because she wanted to be with her teachers and friends. For others, schooling delayed return: a family from Kyselivka did not return after de-occupation because of the children’s education. During displacement, several families kept children enrolled in Ukrainian schools online, sometimes paying for tutors.

However, the limited availability of in-person schooling and childcare after return constrained both children’s learning and parents’ ability to work. After return, in-person schooling remained limited. Respondents in Posad-Pokrovske and parts of Kherson city said schools were not open in-person, and in Blahodatne primary classes were held partly online. One respondent’s son stayed in Odesa with his father to attend school, so that return reunited one part of the household while separating another. For a mother in Posad-Pokrovske, access to school and nursery determined where the family could settle: “If it were just medical care, no, but school and nursery – you need those.” Without nursery places, two mothers in Posad-Pokrovske could not look for work.

Access to healthcare

Healthcare drew respondents home mainly through trust in known doctors and the cost of care abroad, while access after return was constrained by staff shortages and unsafe travel. Twenty-three respondents discussed healthcare during displacement and 20 after return.

Experiences in displacement were mixed. Some respondents abroad described paid consultations, language barriers and restrictions linked to their legal status: a respondent in Chişinău paid the equivalent of UAH 1,800 to see a doctor before she registered for protection status in Moldova, and an older couple in Türkiye, both with chronic conditions, could not obtain treatment because they had no legal status there. Others described free insurance, dental care and glasses in Switzerland, or free treatment for IDPs at a private clinic in Vinnytska Oblast. Within Ukraine, respondents generally described healthcare as accessible.

Where healthcare pulled respondents home, it was through continuity of treatment and trust in familiar doctors, particularly for people with serious or chronic conditions. An older respondent from Kherson city described the standard of medical care in Moldova as “very poor”, and a respondent returning from Norway listed “medical care, education and documents” among the things that were “better here, much better”.

“Because I’m such a high-risk patient – [I have a serious illness and a disability] – my doctors are here; I trust them, and they’ve been treating me for many years.”

*– Returnee from Kherson city
(displaced abroad)*

Familiarity with services did not always guarantee access. In Kherson city, respondents described “very, very few doctors”, waits of six months for a specialist check-up and uncertainty over whether to take a relative to hospital in Kherson or Mykolaiv. In rural settlements, primary care was often provided through a family doctor visiting once

a week, mobile pharmacies and visiting specialists, but specialist care required travel.

"We have a pharmacy at the outpatient clinic and the family doctor comes once a week, a therapist who provides timely medical care. Then other organisations come every two weeks."

– Returnee from Blahodatne
(displaced within Ukraine)

However, after return, respondents were not always able to access the healthcare networks they had left. As travel to Kherson city had become too dangerous, rural respondents went to Mykolaiv instead. A respondent from Posad-Pokrovske said the family drives to Mykolaiv or Kherson in their own vehicle when urgent care is needed. Here they no longer had established relationships: one respondent from Kyselivka said doctors in Mykolaiv were "not very willing to accept us", while a local doctor told her to go to Kherson because her medical declaration was registered there. These accounts indicate that the trusted services that pulled respondents home were, in practice, often located in a city that had become difficult to reach.

Mobility and transport

Insecurity restricted everyday movement, especially in Kherson city. Nine respondents, seven of them in Kherson city, described restrictions on moving around their settlement. Respondents in the city avoided public transport because of drone attacks, took taxis to medical appointments or avoided churches and crowded places.

"Well, it's very dangerous with public transport, because of the way it is shelled and how many people have been killed. To travel around the city by public transport, you'd have to be... a kamikaze. Yes, a kamikaze, a very brave person."

– Returnee from Kherson city
(displaced in Germany)

In rural settlements, respondents described a social bus running twice a week, no public transport at all in Posad-Pokrovske, and the need to travel to Mykolaiv instead of Kherson for household, legal and medical matters. A rural respondent who uses crutches cannot travel to Kherson and finds it "very difficult... to sort out my affairs in Mykolaiv".

Personal and relational factors

Relational and emotional considerations were the most frequently cited reasons for return (24/30). Nineteen gave a family reason and 16 described emotional attachment to their place of origin. Because attachment was so widespread, and almost all respondents (29/30) had been born in or had long lived in their settlement, it explains why respondents returned home rather than elsewhere once return became necessary or possible more than why they returned when they did; the timing of return was more often set by the economic, family and practical factors described above.

Attachment to home

Respondents described attachment to home through long-standing investments in their property (14/30 cited property or land as a reason for return), gardens

and homesteads (10/30) and familiar neighbourhood networks (7/30). Several respondents contrasted material comfort in displacement with a sense of freedom at home: a respondent returning from Germany said that "you don't really live there, you just exist there".

"Firstly, it's my own decision – that's the most important thing... despite all that, it's easier to breathe."

– Returnee from Kherson city
(displaced in Germany)

For some respondents (3/30), attachment to home was expressed alongside a clear awareness of risk. A respondent from Kherson city described feeling "much more at ease" at home "despite the constant, systematic threat from shelling, drones and ongoing remote-controlled mining", and a respondent from Kyselivka said that "even though the war continues, home somehow warms you". A respondent from Blahodatne said that even if "only part of the house remains" she would still return.

"I returned here as if to home. I returned here to my own land. I exhaled here, knowing I was home."

– Returnee from a rural settlement
(displaced abroad)

Family reasons

Family reasons (19/30) extended beyond the care responsibilities that shaped the timing of return, and included reunification with a spouse, proximity to relatives in danger and requests from parents. Several women returned to rejoin a husband who had remained at home; a respondent from Kyselivka, displaced in Bulgaria, returned because of "the depletion of savings and the desire to live in my own house next to my husband, because a family should be together". **This pattern reflects both the composition of the sample (29 of 30 respondents were women) and the fact that, in these households, men had remained at home or returned first.** For others, proximity mattered in itself. One respondent whose father remained in the temporarily occupied part of the oblast wanted to be close enough "to react and go immediately", hoping to bring her parents out once the occupation ends.

"My parents asked me to come home here. 'Why are you sitting there? Come home; we're not well enough to do anything here. It's better to do something there – like rebuilding your own home – than to live there and pay for someone else's accommodation.'"

– Returnee from Posad-Pokrovske
(displaced within Ukraine)

Attachment to community and broader social ties

Community and social ties were a further reason for return (7/30), often expressed as a wish to be among people who knew them. An older respondent in Kherson city wanted "to be closer to my neighbours", describing her neighbourhood as a place where "the people are like family". Another respondent said that, although her sons were not in Kherson, "my connections are here, my friends, my circle", and a respondent from Posad-Pokrovske returned partly because "everyone was coming back... I was the only one left there [in displacement]".

Social isolation during displacement was an important push factor (11/30). Respondents spoke of loneliness, of feeling “like guests” and of being unable to build a life. A family from Kyselivka described having “lived on our suitcases the whole time with the hope that tomorrow we would return”, and several respondents said they made little effort to form new friendships because they planned to go home. Others described a loss of role: a respondent in Switzerland said that “you’re a nobody there [in displacement], nobody knows your name”

“It was enough for me. Enough. It was just lonely, sad, lonely, and stifling. I cried every day. I cried every day. I want to go home.”

– Returnee from Kherson city
(displaced in Kyivska Oblast)

Reception in displacement varied, and positive reception did not prevent return. Ten respondents described a positive reception, including hosts who brought food and communities of other displaced people from Khersonska Oblast in their place of displacement. Others described hostility, both abroad and within Ukraine: a respondent displaced to Ivano-Frankivska Oblast said that hosts “considered that we were to blame for the war starting. For us, that was very painful”. Yet a respondent from Blahodatne said that, “no matter how they welcomed us or how hospitable they were, we still wanted to return home”, and a respondent returning from Germany said that “you don’t really live there, you just exist there”.

Return restored familiar surroundings, but not always the community respondents had left; as with healthcare networks, the networks respondents returned to had partly changed. Respondents described neighbourhood committees, churches, libraries and volunteer activities that supported daily life, and a respondent in Kherson city described her colleagues as a team with whom “we live like one family”. At the same time, several said that families with children had left and that those remaining were mostly older people.

“Families with children mostly left, and those who remained are elderly residents. Mostly.”

– Returnee from Blahodatne
(displaced within Ukraine)

Some returnees (2/30) also met hostility from those who had stayed: a respondent from Kyselivka said that at first some neighbours said “we ran away like rats and now returned”, although relations improved as she re-integrated. A respondent in Kherson city said that some residents “don’t understand why we left”.

Security factors and coping with continued risk

Security considerations

Improved security was rarely a reason for return; for most respondents, security was a condition of life after return rather than a push or pull factor. Fourteen respondents discussed the security situation after return. Respondents in Kherson city described drones, artillery and guided aerial bombs, a neighbourhood where “shells are constantly flying past”, and a teenage boy in one respondent’s neighbourhood injured by shrapnel when a drone dropped its payload. An older respondent said that

“they’re still shelling just as much as before”, and another had expected fewer drones but found “it turned out to be a bit the opposite”. Risk also took other forms: an older respondent was burgled on her second or third day back. For several respondents, danger was accepted as the price of other priorities.

“A sense of danger. A constant sense of danger. But life circumstances and family demand something else.”

– Returnee from Kherson city
(displaced in Czechia)

Six respondents cited security as a reason for return, and in each case the judgement was relative to conditions in displacement. Sixteen respondents discussed their safety during displacement. Some had felt safe there for the first time – a respondent in Czechia said she was “completely psychologically safe” – but others had been displaced to cities that were themselves under attack, including Kyiv, Odesa and Kryvyi Rih. A respondent from Kherson city returned from Kyiv during heavy shelling there, reasoning that it was “actually even scarier there than it is here”, and a respondent from Posad-Pokrovske found that Odesa “was being bombed more”. Two others judged that the situation at home was calm enough at the time they returned, and two referred to a specific local change, such as the demining of fields or protective netting over the highway. Familiarity with local threats also shaped how respondents weighed the two: a respondent from Kherson city said that after years of shelling “you can tell just by the sound where it’s flying, where it’ll land”. Four respondents, all in rural settlements, said that security did not influence their decision; a respondent from Blahodatne explained that “nobody guarantees safety” anywhere.

“No. It’s actually become even more dangerous here in Kherson. Well, as I’m saying. There’s still that factor of homesickness. I just can’t. I can’t... I even went to Poland, to that safe place. And I can’t stand it for more than three weeks”

– Returnee from Kherson city
(displaced in Odesa)

Coping strategies towards insecurity

Respondents described several strategies for coping with continued risk (16/30), ten of them in Kherson city. Strategies included sheltering in cellars or bathrooms, following alerts and local information channels, keeping supplies and a generator, avoiding public transport and crowded places, and attending mine-safety and first-aid sessions. A respondent in Kherson city described following “certain rules” – listening, looking around and avoiding exposed areas such as the waterfront. Where shelters were lacking, coping was limited: a respondent from Posad-Pokrovske said her family hides “under the duvet” because the cellar had been buried under rubble.

Several respondents described becoming used to distant explosions, but not to nearby ones; a respondent from Kherson city said that when “you are now in the epicenter of the shelling, you can’t get used to it”. For others, coping meant living without planning ahead: “We live one day at a time, we don’t plan.” Family, neighbours and work also helped respondents cope: a respondent in Kherson city said that her “social circle, family, work” gave her “strength and encouragement”.

Unmet needs upon return

More than half of the respondents reported unmet needs after return (16/30), and many of these needs were the same as those they had faced in displacement.

The most commonly reported needs related to income and stable work, housing repairs and healthcare, followed by utility costs and access to education for their children. A respondent from Kherson city summarised her needs as “housing, repairs, income, employment and healthcare”. These were largely the same constraints respondents had described in displacement, including limited work, housing and access to care, which suggests that return changed where needs were met rather than whether they were met.

Needs were broadly similar in Kherson city and rural settlements. Respondents in both described repairs, access to doctors and finding work. In Kherson city, repairs were often needed repeatedly: one respondent needed to repair her home “because of the constant shelling and the constant new damage”. In rural settlements, respondents more often mentioned preparing homes for winter and travelling to Mykolaiv for specialist care. In Kyselivka, visiting doctors and legal and psychological consultations provided “an opportunity to receive some services on the spot”.

Humanitarian assistance helped with immediate needs but did not resolve these needs entirely. Fifteen respondents reported receiving assistance after return, including food parcels, a one-off cash payment of UAH 10,800, money for firewood and fuel, support with heating and utility costs, and roofing materials from foreign donors to rebuild a damaged house. Ten of these 15 respondents also reported unmet needs.

Six respondents asked for financial assistance, most often to pay for repairs, heating, medicines or accumulated debts; an older respondent from Kherson city described “a huge, long-standing debt for gas”. Four respondents described a need for legal help, and others asked for psychosocial activities: one respondent described how a psychologist and group activities helped her to be distracted “from thoughts about my son’s safety” and about her own.

“I need material, financial support. But this does not depend on me, it depends on the state how much it will provide me assistance. To provide a house reconstruction, compensation for damaged property.”

– Returnee from Blahodatne
(displaced within Ukraine)

Returnee and non-displaced needs

Respondents were divided on whether their needs differed from those of residents who had never left (5/30 saw a difference, 7/30 did not). Those who saw a difference mostly pointed to the consequences of having been away, such as the extent of damage to their homes and the cost of restarting agriculture:

“Of course, my needs are big. Well, if I have agriculture then my needs are large, I need to feed it... [my livestock] I need more because I need to rebuild everything. I have a goal, some objective.”

– Returnee from Blahodatne
(displaced within Ukraine)

One respondent described the difference in terms of what displacement had cost her:

“Those who didn’t leave were under constant risk for longer, but they still had a stable daily life and work. And those who left had to spend their savings, lose their jobs, and look for them again.”

– Returnee from Kyselivka
(displaced in Bulgaria)

Another, from Kherson city, said that leaving had given her “an emotional break from it all. Unlike those people who are here all the time.”

Attitudes towards future displacement

Respondents who reflected on their decision generally did not regret returning, even where needs remained unmet. Twelve respondents explicitly said they did not regret their return, and nine of them also reported unmet needs. A respondent in Kherson city said that she “did not regret for a minute” returning, “despite the fact that drones are circling, missiles are flying”.

Respondents reported mixed attitudes towards future displacement, ranging from a firm intention to stay to clearly defined conditions for leaving again. Of these 18, 13 also named a condition under which they would leave again, while five named no such condition; three of these five were aged 75 or over. Of the other 12 respondents, eight named conditions for leaving without stating an intention to stay, and four did not express a clear view. Five expressed an intention to stay without naming any condition, including three aged 75 or over; an older couple in Kherson city had decided that “whatever happens, happens. We’re staying here anyway.”

The thresholds respondents named were concrete. Ten said they would leave if security worsened significantly, describing heavier shelling, a missile hitting their flat, injury to someone close, or a situation in which it became “simply impossible to go outside”. Three respondents in Kherson city named a renewed occupation of the city or an advance towards Mykolaiv, and three said they would leave only if their home were destroyed. Others linked leaving to the collapse of basic conditions.

“If there were heavy shelling – very heavy – and there were no communications, no food, no humanitarian aid, and very few people left here.”

– Returnee from Kherson city
(displaced in Norway)

Children and older relatives were among the main reasons respondents gave both for returning and for possibly leaving again. Two respondents with children named their children’s safety as the main reason they would leave again. A respondent from Posad-Pokrovske said, “if they start shelling us like that again, we’ll have to leave again. Because it’s impossible to stay there with a child,” and a respondent from Kyselivka said that her plans “depend more on the safety situation of the children and their development”. For respondents caring for older relatives, the threshold depended on others: a respondent from Posad-Pokrovske said she would not leave without her parents, who refused to discuss a plan to leave.

"I can't predict. I want to stay because my parents are here — they won't go anywhere — and it's my duty to care for them. They are over 80, so my duty is to be here while they are alive."

– Returnee from Kyselivka
(displaced in Mykolaivska Oblast and Kyiv)

Where respondents considered where they would go, they mostly named nearby cities rather than a return abroad. A respondent from Kherson city said that "the furthest I'm prepared to go is the neighbouring region of Mykolaiv", and another named Mykolaiv or Odesa.

Conclusion

This qualitative assessment of returns to unsafe frontline areas of Khersonska Oblast found that **return decisions were shaped by a combination of relational, economic and practical considerations, with improvements in security cited less often.** Attachment to home and family were the most frequently cited reasons for return and help explain why respondents returned home rather than elsewhere. The timing of return more often reflected pressures during displacement, such as depleted savings, the cost of rent and a lack of work, combined with conditions at home that made return feasible, such as a usable house, a job or a relative able to receive the household.

Reported return patterns differed between Kherson city and rural settlements. Rural respondents more often planned their return around demining, repairs and land, while respondents in Kherson city more often described displacement as having become unaffordable. Because the two groups also differed in when and where they had been displaced, these patterns cannot be attributed to settlement type alone.

Respondents' accounts pointed to persistent insecurity after return. Where security featured in return decisions, it was relative to danger elsewhere or to a specific local change. More than half of respondents (16/30) described ways of coping with continued risk, and several remained despite reporting that security had deteriorated since their return. Consistent with the Sumska and Zaporizka assessments in this series, return in this sample reflected a trade-off between continued physical risk and the relational, financial and psychosocial costs of remaining displaced.

Return eased some pressures of displacement but left other needs unresolved and brought additional challenges. Returning to an owned home removed rent but could bring repair, heating and documentation costs; employment was not always secured; and trusted services were often difficult to reach safely, even though familiar healthcare had drawn some respondents home. Some households remained divided across locations after return. More than half of respondents (16/30) reported unmet needs, including ten of the 15 who had received humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, nine of the 12 respondents who explicitly said they did not regret returning also reported unmet needs.

Finally, return did not necessarily mark the end of displacement. Most respondents who intended to stay named a condition under which they would leave again, most often a serious deterioration in security or the destruction of their home, and children's safety and care for older relatives also shaped these thresholds. Three respondents had already been displaced and returned more than once, and several had been displaced only briefly before returning. For humanitarian actors, these findings point to the relevance of assistance for people remaining in frontline settlements, and suggest that evacuation and relocation planning should consider family and care arrangements, nearby destinations and potentially repeated movement. Because the cost of rent, depleted savings and unstable accommodation made displacement difficult to sustain for several respondents, planning may also need to consider accommodation and ongoing costs after relocation, not only the journey to safety.

Endnotes

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Methodology Overview

This assessment used a qualitative approach to examine the experiences of respondents who returned to unsafe frontline areas of Kherson'ska Oblast (defined as within 0 to 30 kilometres of the front line) after a period of displacement. The assessment focused on Kherson city and four rural settlements: Kyselivka, Posad-Pokrovske, Blahodatne and Klapaya.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted by REACH's local partner, The Tenth of April. Locations were selected in consultation with partners and stakeholders, taking into account partner data on returns and the local security situation.

A total of 30 interviews were conducted between 8 and 24 July 2026. Interviews were carried out in person, with locations and data collection arrangements agreed in consideration of the security situation.

All respondents gave informed consent before participating, during which they were briefed on the purpose of the research and informed of their right to withdraw at any point. Data were anonymised, securely stored and accessible only to authorised research staff; audio recordings were used solely for transcription and analysis and deleted once analysis was complete.

Limitations

- This qualitative assessment offers in-depth, contextualised insight into return experiences in the assessed settlements; its findings are not statistically representative and should not be interpreted as representative of returnee experiences across Kherson'ska Oblast or other frontline areas of Ukraine more broadly.
- Findings reflect the situation at the time of data collection (July 2026). As the security situation in Kherson'ska Oblast continues to evolve, the conditions shaping displacement and return decisions, along with respondents' own perceptions of safety, may shift over time. Changes to national or international displacement and assistance policy may similarly affect the continued relevance of specific findings.
- Respondents were recruited through The Tenth of April's existing networks, meaning the sample is likely skewed toward individuals already connected to, or aware of, available services and assistance. The experiences of more isolated or harder-to-reach returnees may not be fully captured.
- With 29 of 30 respondents being women, findings disproportionately reflect women's experiences, and accounts of male household members, including husbands who stayed at home or returned first, are often second-hand.
- Given the sensitive nature of displacement and return experiences, some respondents may have been reluctant to discuss certain topics in full depth. Protection risks, negative experiences and coping strategies during displacement or upon return may consequently be underreported.

Respondents were identified through purposive sampling via The Tenth of April's existing networks and engagement with local stakeholders. The sample comprised 29 women and one man, ranging in age from 27 to 84, split evenly between urban and rural settlement types: 15 interviews were conducted in Kherson city and 15 in rural settlements (eight in Kyselivka, three in Posad-Pokrovske, three in Blahodatne and one in Klapaya). Seventeen respondents had been displaced within Ukraine and 13 abroad. Eighteen respondents had a recorded displacement start date in 2022 and 12 between 2024 and 2026. For respondents who left more than once, the recorded date may refer to the most recent displacement rather than the first: at least one respondent whose recorded displacement began in 2024 had previously been displaced within Ukraine.

Interview data were analysed thematically to identify recurring experiences, perceptions and factors influencing return decisions. Figures such as 19/30 indicate the number of respondents whose interviews contained a given theme; they are minimum counts and do not measure prevalence.

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ABOUT REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).

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