



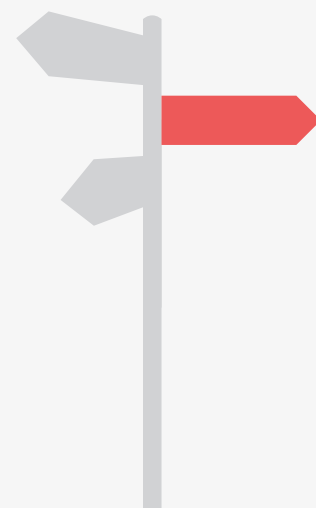
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What the Data Say About IDP Returns to Unsafe Areas?

December 2024 | Ukraine

KEY MESSAGES

- Returns to areas within 30 km of the frontline constitute **one-third of all IDP returns since February 2022, amounting to an estimated 1.6 million people**. Between January and June 2024, returns to the 30 km zone represented 11% of all returnee households in this geographic area. The majority of these returns were to **urban settlements (92%)**.
- IDPs' motivations for returning to unsafe areas are complex. Unlike returnees to other parts of the country, IDPs coming back to places within 30km of the frontline are **rarely motivated by an improving security situation**. Instead, personal reasons such as **family reunification** are the most common driver, potentially reflecting a need to care for older family members who have remained behind. Push factors such as **economic and especially housing challenges are less widely reported, but at higher rates for recent returnees to unsafe areas**.
- IDPs returning to unsafe areas are demographically similar to IDPs returning to other parts of the country. However, this means that **half of returnees to within 30 km of the frontline are households with children**.



BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Since early 2024, humanitarian aid in Ukraine has been increasingly deprioritised in the central and western regions, with many programmes being phased out; simultaneously, efforts have been redirected to bolster responses in the so-called crescent areas¹. This transition coincided with the Government's adoption of a targeted approach to internally displaced people (IDP) support, introducing eligibility criteria for IDP financial assistance, discontinuing indiscriminate payments from April 2024. While intended to allocate resources more effectively, this shift has raised concerns about the adequacy of the displacement response in central and western regions, as significant part of IDPs is located there and may now face growing uncertainty in meeting their basic needs.

Insufficient support could pressure IDPs to return to their areas of origin, often located in unsafe regions.

This document sets out to explore what the current evidence base says - and does not say - about the relationship between humanitarian aid deprioritisation, IDP payment cuts, and IDP returns to frontline areas.

The analysis draws primarily on data from the 2024 REACH Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA)², a nationwide representative survey conducted in June 2024. It also incorporates population data from the International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix (IOM DTM), data from regular monitoring of collective sites hosting IDPs, and qualitative findings from joint rapid needs assessments in frontline areas³.

1. "Crescent areas" refers to regions in Ukraine along the frontline or bordering the Russian Federation, where active on-ground hostilities are ongoing or at high risk of occurring.

2. REACH Initiative. 2024. *CCIA Brief MSNA, December 2024, Ukraine*.

3. IMPACT Initiatives. 2025. *IDP Collective Site Monitoring Dashboard, Ukraine*.

SCALE OF IDP RETURNS TO UNSAFE AREAS

The 2024 REACH Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA)^{4,5} revealed that 12% of returnee households within the population of Ukraine had returned in their areas of origin after being displaced since February 2022. Among these, 37% returned to areas far from the front line or Russian border (FL/RB), 29% to areas within the 30–100 km zone, and 34% to areas within 30 km of the FL/RB. Extrapolation of 34% of returnees to areas within 30 km of the FL/BL from the total estimated returnee population (4.8 million as of the end of May 2024⁶) indicates that about 1.6 million people might have

returned to these areas since the full-scale invasion⁷. The majority of these returns were to urban settlements (92%).

Within the 30 km zone, the recent returns between January and June 2024 accounted for 11% out of all returnee households to this geographic area. Despite the intensification of hostilities and the worsening security situation in areas along the frontline during the first half of 2024, the data suggest that people continued to return to these areas.

37%

Returnee households in settlements **away** from the FL/RB

29%

Returnee households in settlements from **30 to 100 km** from the frontline or russian border

34%

Returnee HHs living in settlements **up to 30 km** to the frontline or russian border



REASONS FOR RETURN

IDPs' motivations for returning to unsafe areas are complex. An analysis of self-reported reasons for return, broken down by proximity to the FL/RB, highlights a clear contrast in security-related factors, while other self-reported reasons remain largely consistent across all returnee groups. While in areas further from the FL/RB, improved security was a dominant reason of return, returnees within 30 km of the FL/RB were significantly less likely to cite security improvements as a reason for their return (29%, compared to 54% in 30-100km and 58% in areas away from RB/FL).

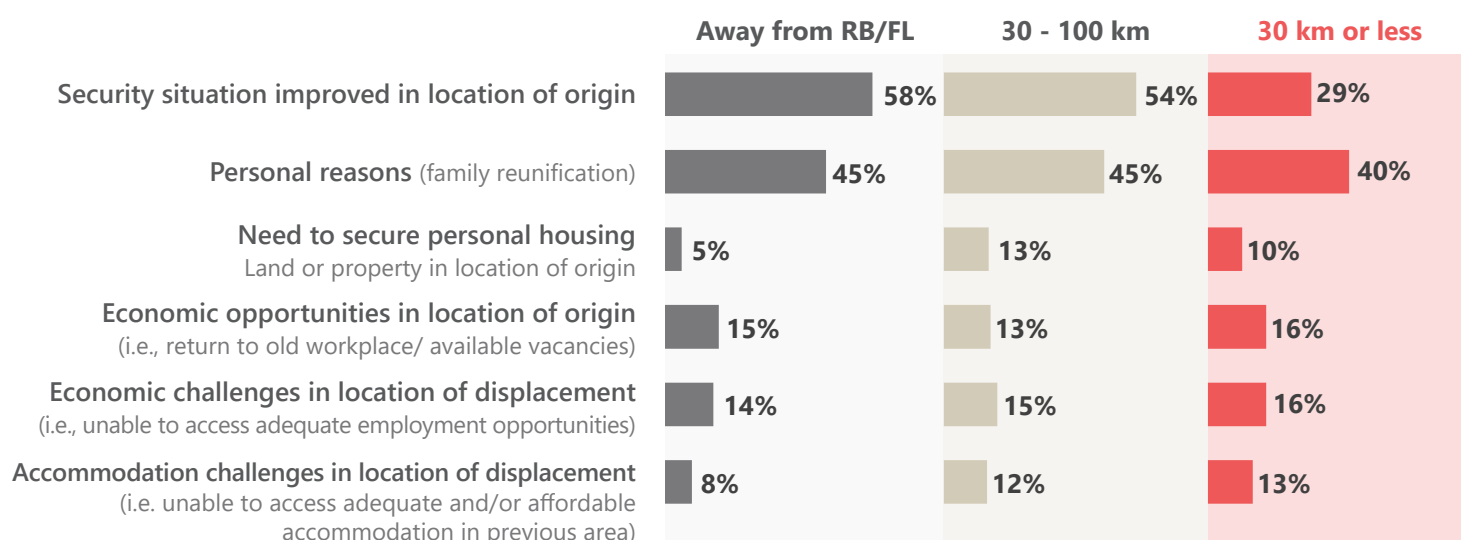
The predominant reason for returning to the 30 km zone was family reunification (40%). As the non-displaced population in the 30-km zone is significantly older than the displaced and returnee populations, these returns could be potentially explained by the need to reunite with older family members who need care. Other, less frequently reported reasons included economic and housing challenges in areas of displacement, as well as the availability of economic opportunities and housing in locations of return (Figure 1).

4. REACH Initiative. 2024. *General Population MSNA Frequency Tables - Oblast, Ukraine*.

5. REACH Initiative. 2024. *Displacement MSNA Frequency Tables - Oblast, Ukraine*.

6. International Organization (IOM) for Migration. 2024. *Ukraine — Returns Report — General Population Survey Round 13 (June 2023) | Displacement Tracking Matrix*.

7. The data on the identified returnee population within the MSNA and IOM align closely. According to the IOM General Population Survey, as of the end of May 2024, 11.6% were identified as returnees.

Figure 1. Returnee households' reasons for return, by proximity to frontline/Russian border (RB/FL)

Recent returnees to the 30-km zone reported slightly different self-reported reasons for their return, with housing and economic challenges in areas of displacement being elevated. The primary driver was family reunification (46%), followed by accommodation challenges in the location of displacement (31%) and economic challenges in areas of displacement (30%). Additionally, 13% reported economic opportunities in areas of return, 14% cited the need to secure housing, and 9% mentioned the loss of IDP payments.

The high rate of returns to areas within the 30km zone can be partly attributed to the presence of major urban centres in these regions. Among returnees to the 30 km zone, 92% returned to urban areas, particularly in Kharkiv (59%), Zaporizhzhia (10%), and Sumy (8%).

Rental payments constitute a significant portion of IDP household expenditures, and with reduced humanitarian aid, this may drive people to return to their homes. According to the 2024 MSNA, 60% of the IDP population had rental costs in their monthly expenditures, compared to 16% among returnees. Instances of IDPs leaving rented accommodation due to a lack of financial resources and moving to collective sites were also observed in the first half of 2024. According to the monitoring of collective sites housing IDPs in July 2024 the nearly half (46%) of collective sites reported new arrivals between April and June 2024, with 8% citing the inability to afford rent – attributed to the discontinuation of the IDP allowance – as one of the reasons for the new arrivals.⁸

Despite their proximity to the frontline and ongoing frequent attacks, the evidence suggests that urban centres continue to attract displaced people back home – particularly those facing financial difficulties in renting accommodation in displacement areas or unwilling to compromise their living conditions by staying in collective sites.

The MSNA data reveals no distinct patterns in return trends based on age groups, households with disabilities, or household size, which is consistent with the trends observed among IDPs. A noteworthy finding is that households with children are equally likely to return to unsafe areas, with 53% of returnee households to the 30-km zone consisting of households with children.

In conclusion, the decision to return is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including family ties, a sense of home, and economic push and pull dynamics – particularly the availability of private housing in areas of return. These decisions are often influenced by the presence of humanitarian assistance in both areas of displacement and return. Further research is needed to understand the specific role of these push and pull factors, to enable more effective policy-making by humanitarian and government actors, and to ensure that people have access to adequate assistance, protection and information, regardless of their choices.

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“We ran out of money, but [in Kostiantynivka] we have our own housing for which we don’t have to pay, and humanitarian aid is constantly given.”

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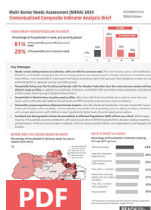
Female returnee to the frontline settlement of Kostiantynivka, Donetsk Oblast

8. REACH Initiative. 2024. *Ukraine Collective Site Monitoring: Round 13, June - July 2024*

TO READ MORE ON THE TOPICS:



1
Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) 2024 Contextualized Composite Indicator Analysis Brief



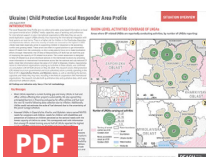
2
HSM - Evolution of humanitarian needs in occupied areas (July-October 2024)



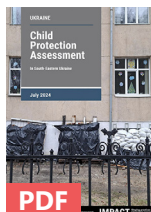
3
Unsafe returns: what makes refugees return to Ukraine and settle in the frontline areas of the country?



4
Child Protection Local Responder Area Profile



5
Child Protection Assessment in South-Eastern Ukraine



ABOUT IMPACT

Created in 2010, IMPACT is a Geneva-based NGO and the largest independent data provider in contexts of crisis. Since 2015, IMPACT works in Ukraine via its REACH – a joint initiative with NGO ACTED and United Nations Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT). We aim to support a range of stakeholders in making better, more informed decisions in humanitarian, stabilisation, and development settings. We believe that a key pathway to better planning and decision-making is direct engagement with local communities and their leaders. Through our team of assessment, data, geospatial, and thematic specialists, we promote the design of people-centred research and set standards for collecting and analysing rigorous, high-quality data in complex environments. IMPACT also aims to foster partnerships and build capacities with key stakeholders.

ABOUT REACH

REACH strengthens evidence-based humanitarian decision-making through efficient data collection, management, and analysis – before, during, and after an emergency. The work of REACH directly feeds into aid response and decision-making by providing accessible and precise information on the humanitarian situation of crisis-affected populations. REACH activities are conducted in support and within the framework of inter-agency coordination mechanisms at field and global levels to enable more efficient aid planning and response.

Donors and Acknowledgements



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