

# Child Protection in Ukraine

## Secondary Data Review

December 2023 | Ukraine

### CONTEXT

According to the 2024 Humanitarian Needs Response Plan (HNRP), there are 14.6 million people in need of assistance in Ukraine, of whom 3.17 million (22%) are children.<sup>1</sup> It has been observed via Protection Monitoring that children in Ukraine face psychological trauma, stress and anxiety, challenges safely accessing education, among other risks. These protection risks are higher for children in frontline areas and areas along the Russian border, including Kharkivska, Luhanska, Donetska, Zaporizka, Khersonska, Sumska, and Mykolaivska, where severity of needs was assessed to be highest in 2023.<sup>2</sup> Further, IOM estimates that up to 728,000 children under the age of 17 years are members of households displaced within Ukraine.<sup>3</sup>

While many of these threats stem from or were exacerbated by the February 2022 escalation of the war in Ukraine, there is evidence child protection concerns were present in Ukraine in the years leading up to 2022. In particular, identified concerns included higher levels of poverty in 2021 in households with children (43% of households) compared to the national average (39%).<sup>4</sup> A UNICEF report highlights this was especially the case for children in households with 3 or more children (67%) and for households with children and at least one unemployed household member (68%). Based on expert judgement, the report also points to additional household types traditionally vulnerable to poverty, including those with children under the age of 3, households with children with disabilities, and single-parent households. It also includes children in eastern Ukraine exposed to and displaced by conflict since 2014.<sup>5</sup> The escalation of the war has made additional categories of children vulnerable, including those who are displaced, suffering from lack of access to basic services, those remaining in de-occupied and frontline areas, and those who have been acutely impacted by the war (having lost family members, housing, etc.).<sup>6</sup>

Gender inequality in Ukraine has meant that protection threats are experienced differently by girls, boys, women and men. Prior to the escalation of the war, research on societal attitudes toward gender roles found that men and women in Ukraine are generally expected to serve as breadwinners and caregivers, respectively, with high prevalence of different forms of violence against women.<sup>7</sup> Since the escalation of the war, men and women have played different roles, with many women acting as caregivers to children, faced with increased responsibility, and many men engaged directly in the war, resulting in increased exposure to injury or death and psychosocial distress.<sup>8</sup> Such gender norms have impacts on children's exposure to and experiences with protection risks, including displacement, family separation, psychosocial distress, child marriage and early childbearing, and gender-based violence (GBV).

This report provides a brief overview of the available data on protection threats to which children in Ukraine are exposed. The Global Protection Cluster's Protection Analytical Framework was used as a guide while reviewing literature, consisting of four pillars: Context; Current Threats to the Population; Threat's Effects on the Population; and Existing Capacities to Address Protection Threats.<sup>9</sup> This SDR focuses predominantly on Current Threats, including physical violence; psychosocial distress; protection risks in schools, hospitals, and residential care institutions; denial of humanitarian access; family separation; trafficking in persons; transfer to other occupied territories or to the Russian Federation; detention; gender-based violence (GBV); and child labour.

### PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

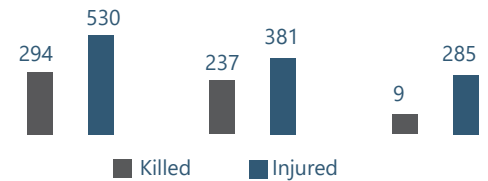
In 2022, the UN verified 2,334 grave violations against 1,482 children in Ukraine (629 boys, 474 girls, and 379 sex unknown).<sup>10</sup> Such violations include the killing and maiming of children, rape and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated against children, use of children by armed forces or armed groups, attacks on schools, hospitals, and protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals, the abduction of children, and denial of humanitarian access to children (elaborated upon later in this brief). While this brief provides an overview of such risks and violations, it is worth noting that the real number of such violations is likely higher due to low reporting rates and difficulty verifying such information.<sup>11</sup>

Between 24 February 2022 to 8 October 2023, OHCHR recorded 27,768 civilian casualties as a result of the large-scale armed invasion by the Russian Federation, including 9,806 killed and 17,962 injured. Of these casualties, 1,756 were children (560 killed and 1,196 injured). The killing and maiming of children has predominantly been caused by the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects and explosive ordnances.<sup>12</sup> However, overall casualty figures are believed to be higher due to a high number of pending reports of civilian casualties especially from areas like Mariupol (Donetska) as well as in Lysychansk, Popasna, and Sievierodonetsk (Luhanska) in non-government controlled areas, outside the reach of many international actors.<sup>13</sup> Published reports do not provide a geographic breakdown of which oblasts child casualties have been most prevalent. However, 38% of overall reported casualties (10,668 of 27,768; adults and children) were sustained in Donetska and Luhanska.

Ahead of the escalation of the war in 2022, Ukraine was one of the world's most landmine / ERW contaminated countries, which has significantly increased since February 2022.<sup>14</sup> Mine-related incidents disproportionately impact boys and men, making up 90% of all cases. Such threats are particularly relevant to children who may not understand risks associated with or be able to identify ERWs and mines.<sup>15</sup>

The 2023 Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) found that households in the East and South more frequently reported injury or death by explosive hazard to be a security concern for children than those in other macro-regions of Ukraine. In the East and the South, returnee households reported being injured or killed by an explosive ordnance (landmine/UXO) as safety and security hazard for children twice as often (28% and 16%, respectively) as displaced households (15% and 8%, respectively). This was particularly reported in Kharkivska (35%), Khersonska (43%), and Mykolaivska (29%) oblasts.<sup>16</sup> By comparison, 69% of all assessed households reported no safety and security concerns, while 16% did not know. However, a winter 2023 World Vision assessment surveying children themselves across Dnipropetrovka, Kharkivska, and Khersonska oblasts found that the second most frequently mentioned protection concern amongst children was safety and security threats (preceded by family separation, discussed further below).<sup>17</sup>

## Children civilian casualties in Ukraine 24 February 2022 - 8 October 2023 (OHCHR)



## PSYCHOSOCIAL DISTRESS

Ahead of the escalation of the war in 2022, it was estimated that one third of Ukrainians had experienced at least one mental health disorder in their life.<sup>18</sup> A World Health Organisation report for example highlights that, in 2020, Ukraine had a higher estimated suicide rate (30.6 deaths per 100,000 population) than the global average (10.4 deaths per 100,000 population).<sup>19</sup> There are a number of barriers to accessing mental healthcare in Ukraine, including weak outpatient mental healthcare and general underfunding of the mental healthcare system.<sup>20</sup> On top of such challenges, Ukrainians face societal stigma against seeking such support and poor, concerns over affordability, and poor perceptions and low levels of trust in the quality of available mental healthcare services.<sup>21</sup>

A representative survey conducted on mental health and psychosocial needs in Ukraine found that as of August 2023, 35% of Ukrainian respondents presented a poor well-being and quality of life.<sup>22</sup> UNICEF and World Vision estimate that 1.5 million children are at risk of depression, PTSD, and other mental health issues.<sup>23</sup> A recent study conducted via a survey of mothers of Ukrainian children aged 3 to 17 years, commissioned by the "Ukraine Children's Action Project", found a marked decrease in the mental health status of children since the invasion – 80% of respondents perceived their child's mental health to be good or very good prior to the invasion compared to 65% in January – February 2023.<sup>24</sup> A lower proportion of respondents reported that their child had good or very good mental health in deoccupied zones (60%), frontline areas (61%) and Kyiv (64%) as compared to the west (71%) or centre (68%). Similarly, Protection Monitoring conducted in September 2023 found that key informants in oblasts bordering the frontline were more likely to report psychological trauma, stress, and anxiety as a protection concern for children in the region (Donetska: 11%, Zaporizka: 12%,

Kharkivska: 13%, and Sumska 16%; as compared to 3% of key informants nationally).<sup>25</sup> Contributing factors and stressors may include experience of conflict events, displacement, family separation, loss of caregivers, disruption to education and day-to-day routines.<sup>26</sup>

## PROTECTION RISKS RELATED TO SCHOOLS AND HOSPITALS

The Government of Ukraine reports as of November 2023 that 3,798 educational institutions have been damaged by the war in Ukraine, while 365 have been destroyed.<sup>27</sup> In 2022 alone, 751 conflict incidents occurred in or around schools (461) and hospitals (290), mostly involving explosive weapons with wide area effects. In these cases, 577 schools and hospitals were damaged, 151 were destroyed, 17 were looted, and 6 faced other threats. Child casualties were confirmed in 20 of these incidents. Additionally, 23 schools and 7 hospitals were repurposed for military use in 2022.<sup>28</sup> Further reports from 2023 confirm continued repurposing of civilian facilities for military use, for example children's health centres, schools, and maternity hospitals in Luhanska and Zaporizka.<sup>29</sup> Beyond the physical threat of airstrikes, targeted attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure since October 2022 have resulted in electricity shortages, negatively impacting a range of public facilities, including schools.<sup>30</sup>

Under Ukrainian law (No. 14529/0/1-22), educational institutions are mandated to have adequate bomb shelters to conduct in-person education, which has prevented many children in Ukraine from accessing in-person schooling since the escalation of the war in 2022. Shelters were available in only 68% of educational facilities to protect children as of August 2023, with the highest proportion of schools without shelters in Dnipropetrovska, Kharkivska, Mykolaivska, and Odeska.<sup>31</sup> At the beginning of the 2023 school year beginning 1 September, only one third of children in Ukraine had access to full in-person learning, while another third was learning through a mix of in-person and online, and the last third learning online only.<sup>32</sup>

The 2023 MSNA found that of those households with children who reportedly attended school either in-person or through blended learning during the 2022-2023 school year (n=3,404), 96% were reportedly able to safely travel to school and learn in safe conditions. Households living in raions along the Russian border or frontline and with school-aged children who reportedly attended formal school in-person or remotely in the 2022-2023 school year, reported at least 5 times more frequently (17%)<sup>33</sup> that school-aged children were unable to safely travel to school and learn in safe conditions at the school. Returnee households were at least twice as likely (6%) to report that school-aged children were unable to travel safely to school and learn in safe conditions at school.<sup>34</sup>

## DENIAL OF HUMANITARIAN ACCESS

As of September 2023, the areas of Ukraine with "very high" and "extreme" access constraints included areas along the frontline, including Kharkivska, Luhanska, Donetska, Zaporizka, and Khersonska.<sup>35</sup> The UNSG's annual report on Children in Armed Conflict noted that in 2022 there were 10 verified instances of the denial of humanitarian access, including denial to cross the frontline to deliver humanitarian assistance (8) and attacks on aid distribution points (2).<sup>36</sup>

## FAMILY SEPARATION

Family separation has become an increasingly concerning risk for children in Ukraine since the escalation of the war, with Ukrainian NGO Magnolia having received over 2,500 requests to find children who have gone missing since February 2022.<sup>37</sup> The 2023 MSNA found that across Ukraine, 2% of households surveyed reported that at least one child (under 18 years old) was not residing in the household. Percentages were higher in the East, with 7% of surveyed households in Donetska, 5% in Khersonska, and 4% in Zaporizka and Kharkivska reported at least one child not residing in the household. Findings showed that male-headed households were five times (5%) more likely to report at least one child not residing in the household than female-headed households (1%) – in the East they were even eight times more likely (8%) to report this.<sup>38</sup>

The four main reasons for why children were not residing in the household were that they left the house because they married or left with a partner, they left the house to study, they left the house to seek safety and security, or the child is with foster family or kinship family or friends.<sup>39</sup> Of the households reporting at least one child not residing in the household, 59% of the households in the North and 56% of the households in the East reported that the child left to seek protection, indicating a clear correlation to proximity to the frontline/Russian border and thus to on-going or increased likelihood of active conflict.<sup>40</sup>

## CHILD MARRIAGE, EARLY CHILDBEARING, AND TEENAGE PREGNANCIES

Up-to-date data on the prevalence of child marriage in Ukraine is not available. However, UNFPA reported in 2014 that early marriages were uncommon in Ukraine, having decreased greatly since the 1970s.<sup>41</sup> The most recent representative study on the topic was conducted by UNICEF in 2012, finding that 9% of women ages 20-24 years had married (or been in union) before the age of 18.<sup>42</sup> The percentage of women married under the age of 18 in a broader age bracket of 20-49 was higher, at 11%.<sup>43</sup> Early marriages have historically been more common for girls than for boys in Ukraine, with 2.9% of men from the same age group in 2012 having been married before the age of 18. Child marriages were also more common in rural than in urban areas.<sup>45</sup>

According to UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) population data, the adolescent fertility rate (birth rate of women and girls ages 15-19) has decreased greatly in the last decades in Ukraine, from 61 per 1,000 births in 1991 (the year of Ukraine's independence) to 16 per 1,000 births in 2021.<sup>46</sup> In 2023, UNFPA estimates the adolescent fertility rate has fallen further to 14 per 1,000 women and girls ages 15-19.<sup>47</sup> Such rates have become closer to the European Union's adolescent birth rate in the last decades, which was 21 per 1,000 births in 1991, and 9 per 1,000 births in 2021.<sup>48</sup>

## SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN MINORS

The latest comprehensive study on substance abuse amongst minors in Ukraine was conducted with teenage school students (ages 14-17) in 2019 by the European Survey of Students on the Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD). Findings from this study indicated that 86% of students used alcohol (23% on a weekly basis), while 18% of students had used an illicit drug at least once in their life.<sup>49</sup> Smoking prevalence had trended downward from prior years, with 70% of respondents in 2003 having smoked cigarettes at least once in their life, compared to 50% in 2019.<sup>50</sup> While nationwide representative data is not available on substance abuse in children since escalation of the war in 2022, a child protection assessment conducted in December 2022 and January 2023 focused on Kharkivska, Dnipropetrovska, and Khersonska found that smoking or other addictions were the most common negative coping mechanisms adopted by children, having been identified as a coping mechanism for 78% of male and 55% of female respondents ages 14-17; and 44% of female and 39% of male respondents ages 9-13.<sup>51</sup>

## CHILDREN IN RESIDENTIAL CARE INSTITUTIONS

Ukraine had the highest number of children in institutional care across Europe prior to the escalation of the war with 100,000 children living in 722 institutional care settings, which were mostly build before Ukrainian independence in 1991 under the Soviet Union.<sup>52</sup> Such institutions include "baby homes, children's care

homes, children's homes, boarding schools of general education, education and rehabilitation centres, sanatorium boarding schools, 'specialized' as well as 'special' boarding schools of general education, and educational complexes."<sup>53</sup> Around half of children in institutions in Ukraine are those with disabilities, as well as orphans and children who have been separated from their families due to poverty, drugs, alcoholism, and bad health.<sup>54</sup>

The 2022 escalation of the war resulted in Ukrainian authorities ordering institutions to send children home.<sup>55</sup> 90% of such children have at least one parent and, as of May 2022, a third of these children were returned to their families.<sup>56</sup> In May 2022, UNICEF's Regional Child Protection Advisor raised concerns were raised about whether proper protection procedures had been put in place to handle the rehoming / relocation of these children.<sup>57</sup> Thousands of others have either stayed in institutions, or were relocated within Ukraine or to neighbouring countries.<sup>58</sup> Children with disabilities in institutions were particularly at-risk at the beginning of the war, many of whom were not accounted for in evacuation plans.<sup>59</sup> This was, in part, a result of the reduced capacity of staff in such institutions who were impacted by the war themselves, limiting their ability to care for children in institutions.<sup>60</sup>

## TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

While actors working on combatting trafficking in persons have highlighted the risks of human trafficking (and its potential impacts on children) due to the large-scale displacement resulting from the escalation of the war in Ukraine,<sup>61</sup> comprehensive, up-to-date data on the number of cases of trafficking in persons in Ukraine is not available. Since the 1990s, Ukraine has been a source, transit country, and destination for human trafficking, with IOM having estimated that prior to the escalation of the war in February 2022, 300,000 Ukrainians had suffered from human trafficking, of whom 46,000 were trafficked between 2019-2021.<sup>62</sup> IOM's Trafficking in Persons programme reported that between January and September 2023, its programming identified and assisted 296 victims of trafficking, including the 2% of these victims who were under the age of 18.<sup>63</sup> Historically, children have been trafficked for the



purpose of forced labour, sexual, and other forms of exploitation.<sup>64</sup> The primary countries to which Ukrainians have been trafficked include the Russian Federation, Poland, Turkey, and within Ukraine.<sup>65</sup> Other groups of children vulnerable to trafficking include children in institutions and unaccompanied children.<sup>66</sup>

## TRANSFER OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN

Since February 2022, OHCHR has documented cases in which civilians (adults and children) have been transferred from one temporarily occupied territory to another or to the Russian Federation by Russian authorities.<sup>67</sup> The suspected scale of such transfers are difficult to confirm due to accessibility of temporarily occupied territories and areas near to the frontline. However, the Government of Ukraine believes the figure to be at least 19,546.<sup>68</sup> The cases documented by OHCHR have included the transfer of children previously in institutions (sometimes having physical or intellectual disabilities), children who have either lost parents or lost contact with parents during hostilities, children who were separated due to the detention of a parent, and children who had been sent to summer camps in the Russian Federation in summer and fall of 2022 and were not returned to their parents.<sup>69</sup> According to the Ombudsman of Ukraine and as of September 2023, 386 children have been returned to Ukraine following such transfers.<sup>70</sup>

## DETENTION AND USE OF CHILDREN

In a report covering the period between February 2022 and May 2023, OHCHR confirmed cases of the detention of children, mostly having occurred shortly after the escalation of the war. Such instances were perpetrated by the Russian armed forces and affiliated armed groups in Chernihivska, Donetska, Kyivska, Khersonska, Mykolaivska and Zaporizka. In some cases, children were forcibly disappeared, deported, tortured or ill-treated while detained. In the case where 92 children were detained in Kyivska and Chernihivska in March of 2022, the UN confirmed children were also used as human shields by Russian armed forces, as well as hostage and for domestic chores and intelligence gathering.<sup>71</sup> All of these children were later released.<sup>72</sup>

## GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Prior to the escalation of the war, two thirds of women in Ukraine reported experiencing psychological, physical, or sexual violence since the age of 15.<sup>73</sup> A 2021 study on sexual violence in Ukraine found that 23% of adults had experienced sexual violence and harassment during their childhoods, with 4% of Ukrainians having been raped before age 18.<sup>74</sup> While 62% of Ukrainians believed that sexual violence was perpetrated by strangers, 85% of such cases were perpetrated by adult acquaintances.<sup>75</sup>

The 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview reported a total of 3.6 million people in need of GBV prevention services.<sup>76</sup> Women and girls, as well as men and boys (though to a lesser extent), have been at heightened risk

of GBV since the escalation of the war in 2022, although up-to-date information on the scale and exact nature of GBV is unavailable.<sup>77</sup> The most recent analysis based on the Ukraine Protection Monitoring Tool (PMT) found that women and girls face two primary protection issues related to gender-based violence (GBV):<sup>78</sup> 1) violence, harassment and abuse within the household, and 2) a lack of independent access to livelihoods and opportunities (however, it is unclear to what extent, and in what ways, these specific issues are linked to the escalation of the war in 2022).<sup>79</sup>

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV)<sup>80</sup> – a form of GBV – has been committed in Ukraine since the beginning of the conflict in 2014.<sup>81</sup> OHCHR has verified 4 cases of sexual violence against girls in Ukraine between February 2022 and July 2023 (in addition to 94 men and 51 women).<sup>82</sup> However, there is a high likelihood that rates of CRSV are higher than what has been documented, as 80% of cases of sexual violence in conflict tend to go unreported.<sup>83</sup>

## CHILD LABOUR

The most recent comprehensive study performed on child labour in Ukraine is from 2014-2015, estimating that 9.7% of children in Ukraine were engaged in child labour across the agriculture, industry, and services sectors in Ukraine.<sup>84</sup> Some children in Ukraine are also subjected to the worst forms of child labour, including commercial sexual exploitation, recruitment of children by non-state armed groups for use in armed conflict, forced begging, and production of pornography.<sup>85</sup> According to the Verkhovna Rada, ahead of the escalation of the war in Ukraine, Ukraine was one of the top five countries producing child pornography, and one in ten countries leading its distribution.<sup>86</sup>

State-run orphanages have used children for illegal labour in business, seasonal agricultural work, construction and sexual exploitation. In the Donbas and occupied Crimea, some children (mostly boys) between ages 11-16 engaged in illegal coal mining.<sup>87</sup> Internally displaced children (especially those who are unaccompanied) are particularly vulnerable to being exploited to perform the worst forms of child labour.<sup>88</sup> While the current prevalence of child labour in Ukraine is unknown, the escalation of the war in 2022 has increased the vulnerability of displaced children to exploitation in the worst forms of child labour, as well as children in institutions, those with disabilities, stateless children, children from minority groups, forcibly transferred children, homeless and orphaned children.<sup>89</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Children in Ukraine are exposed to a range of protection risks, a number of which have been exacerbated by the 2022 escalation of the war in Ukraine. These threats include physical violence, psychosocial distress, protection risks in schools, hospitals, and residential care institutions, denial of humanitarian access, family separation, trafficking in persons, transfer to other occupied territories or to the Russian Federation, detention, GBV, and child labour.

While the UN has worked to systematically document protection threats against children in Ukraine, (including the grave violations of killing and maiming of children, rape and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated against children, use of children by armed forces or armed groups, attacks on schools, hospitals, and protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals, the abduction of children, and denial of humanitarian access to children) the scale of some of these threats are difficult to determine based on both the sensitivity of the topic of violence committed toward children and limited accessibility in frontline and Temporarily Occupied Areas. Other protection threats affecting children that could benefit from further evidence-generation include psychosocial distress, child labour, the situations of children in residential care, and the transfer of Ukrainian children. In the coming months, IMPACT Initiatives will be undertaking a nationwide in-depth mixed-methods assessment with the aim of better understanding the landscape of child protection threats, needs, access and barriers to accessing services to address protection concerns.

## ABOUT IMPACT

IMPACT Initiatives is a Geneva based think-and-do-tank, created in 2010. IMPACT is a member of the ACTED Group. IMPACT's teams implement assessment, monitoring & evaluation and organisational capacity-building programmes in direct partnership with aid actors or through its inter-agency initiatives, REACH and Agora. Headquartered in Geneva, IMPACT has an established field presence in over 15 countries. IMPACT's team is composed of over 300 staff, including 60 full-time international experts, as well as a roster of consultants, who are currently implementing over 50 programmes across Africa, Middle East and North Africa, Central and South-East Asia, and Eastern Europe

## ENDNOTES

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