

OVERVIEW

February 2024 marked the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and a decade since the international armed conflict between the two countries began (Atlantic Council 14/02/2023). The front lines have been almost stuck since October 2022, after Ukraine regained control over significant areas, with continued direct fighting (ISW 20/08/2022). The two-year war, following the armed conflict in eastern and southern Ukraine since 2014, has had a significant impact on civilians, in particular children.

More than 3.2 million children in Ukraine are in need of humanitarian assistance, having experienced displacement, the loss of and separation from caregivers, mental and physical harm, aggravated pre-existing risks of violence and neglect, and limited access to education and other services. Children have also experienced conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and have been casualties of armed violence (OCHA 03/01/2024 and 10/05/2024; Protection Cluster 29/03/2024).

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim

This report explores the key protection risks that children in Ukraine are facing and the vulnerabilities of different groups of children to these risks. It aims to provide an improved understanding of child protection risks for humanitarians to develop more targeted interventions addressing the specific challenges that different groups of conflict-affected children are facing.

Methodology

This report is based on a secondary data review and six in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in March 2024 with key government institutions and local NGOs. It covers the two years after the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, focusing on the 2023–2024 period to provide information relevant to the current stage of the war, which has become protracted.

This report uses the definition of child protection as the prevention of and response to exploitation, abuse, neglect, harmful practices, and violence against children (UNICEF accessed 28/03/2024; STC 2007). Because child protection is “universal: it is for all children everywhere”, this report analyses both the risks resulting from the armed hostilities and pre-existent risks that the war and subsequent humanitarian crisis have aggravated (UNICEF accessed 28/03/2024).

This report uses the Global Protection Cluster's definition of protection risk: “a protection risk is the actual or potential exposure of the affected people to violence, coercion, or deliberate deprivation.” (GPC accessed 11/03/2024) ACAPS selected the risks following the Global Protection Cluster's risks, ACAPS' own monitoring of protection risks, and WHO's and UNICEF's understanding of violence against children (GPC accessed 11/03/2024; ACAPS 27/02/2023; UNICEF accessed 08/03/2024; WHO 29/11/2022).

Limitations

This report is not a comprehensive study of children's vulnerability to all possible protection risks in Ukraine and is limited by the underreporting of many types of protection incidents. The absence of evidence does not mean the absence of protection incidents. The amount of information available does not reflect the scale or extent of the risks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Key findings.....	2
General findings	2
Factors increasing children's vulnerability to protection risks	2
Children's vulnerability to key protection risks	3
Impact on children's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing	3
Violence against children.....	3
Separation from family or caregiver	4
Association of children with armed forces or groups	7
Constraints on children's education.....	8

KEY FINDINGS

General findings

- Between one-sixth and one-fifth of children in Ukraine are projected to meet the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Researchgate 09/2023). Actual rates may be higher (Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry 03/2022; Decentralization 10/02/2024; Rating Group 27/02/2023).
- Between 24 February 2022 and 30 June 2024, the hostilities killed at least 600 children and wounded close to 1,500. Actual numbers are likely higher (OHCHR 08/07/2024). There have been cases of CRSV against children; most known perpetrators are Russian soldiers (OHCHR 18/10/2022; OHCHR 29/08/2023; OHCHR 25/09/2023; OHCHR 18/03/2024; Kyiv Post 22/02/2023).
- The risk of family-based violence against children may have increased because of the war's impact on parents' mental health and the increase in poverty rates – factors that, in other crisis contexts, have been linked to a higher likelihood of children experiencing violence or receiving less warmth from caregivers (WB 10/2023; Cambridge 05/04/2023; Acta Psychiatr Scand 10/01/2023; Sage 10/03/2019; Trauma Violence Abuse 13/09/2019).
- At least 19,500 children have been forcibly transferred across Russian-occupied territories or deported to Russia, according to Ukrainian authorities. The actual figure is likely higher, estimated at 150,000 (Children of War accessed 11/07/2024; Ukrinform 17/02/2023; Yale University 14/02/2023).
- Of the children who went missing after February 2022, nearly 2,000 remain missing according to Ukrainian authorities (Children of War accessed 09/07/2024).
- The hostilities have increased protection risks, such as abuse and neglect, for children in residential institutions and aggravated the key drivers of institutionalisation (i.e. poverty and insufficient local family support services) (HRW 13/03/2023; Protection Cluster, UNICEF 28/11/2023; WB 10/2023).
- The war has likely aggravated the risk of child trafficking in Ukraine, especially for those displaced (Eurochild 07/12/2022; Freedom Fund 10/05/2022; UNODC 2022).
- The Russian Armed Forces have used children as human shields (UN 05/06/2023). In Russian-occupied territories, youth ages 15–17 and some younger children are required to participate in military training (Independent 29/01/2023; KHISR 02/2023; Ukrinform 11/10/2023; Dmytro Lubinets 15/03/2023).
- In Ukrainian-controlled areas, only between one-third and one-half of the children learn fully in person because of safety risks (Rating Group 27/02/2023; Education Cluster, UNICEF 25/04/2024). In frontline areas, education is almost only online (Texty 16/05/2024). Remote

education is less effective than in person, leading to persistent educational deficits, further aggravated by the duration of the war (coming immediately on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic) (HAL 05/2022; WB 16/05/2022; Decentralization 10/02/2024; UNICEF 31/05/2024).

- School closures have resulted in the dropping out of those without access to electronic devices or the internet (about 200,000 children) (Ukrinform 27/06/2023). School closures have also had a direct negative impact on children's wellbeing, development, and nutrition (Kyiv University 2020; WVI 02/2023; BBC 01/09/2022; WHO 17/04/2024).
- In Russian-occupied territories, schools have switched to the Russian curriculum, and about one-tenth of children have continued to secretly learn in Ukrainian schools online. These children are at risk of being separated from their family if found out (BBC 25/09/2022; AI 12/2023).

Factors increasing children's vulnerability to protection risks

- **Gender** plays a critical role in heightening specific protection risks. Girls appear to be more at risk of sexual violence, including sexual exploitation. Boys are more at risk of death or injury from shelling. In the Russian-occupied territories, boys are militarised and prepared for conscription as adults.
- **Children living in Russian-occupied territories** are at heightened risk of exposure to war-related traumatic events, including CRSV and armed recruitment. They are also vulnerable to forcible transfer, deportation, and adoption in Russia, especially if they live in residential institutions, are unaccompanied or separated, or have a medical condition deemed to require 'special treatment' in Russia. Their education is aimed at adopting Russian identity and perspectives of Ukraine. Learning Ukrainian is largely limited and puts children at risk of separation from their families.
- **Children living in frontline areas** are at heightened risk of injury or death from shelling. They are also more at risk of deteriorating mental health, becoming separated or unaccompanied from their caregivers, a lack of aid from family support services, and a lack of education access.
- **Displaced children** are more vulnerable to war-related traumatic events, including becoming unaccompanied or separated from their caregivers, experiencing sexual abuse, child trafficking, and dropping out of school. Displacement is a significant risk multiplier given that about one-fourth of Ukrainians are displaced (about one-third internally), and about 17% of the displaced are children (Statistics Ukraine 12/06/2023; IOM 30/05/2024; UNHCR accessed 15/07/2024).
- **Unaccompanied and separated children** appear to be at particularly high risk of experiencing distress, sexual violence, and child trafficking. In Russian-occupied territories, they are also at higher risk of forcible transfer, deportation, and adoption in Russia.

- **Children in residential institutions** are at heightened risk of neglect, deprivation, and child trafficking. In the Russian-occupied territories, they are more at risk of forcible transfer, deportation, and adoption in Russia.
- **Children with disabilities** are at heightened risk of being placed in residential institutions (and all the associated protection risks) because of insufficient local family services. Conditions for institutionalisation preceded the war and have been aggravated by it. Children with disabilities are also more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse.
- **Children from economically vulnerable families** are at heightened risk of being placed in residential institutions and quitting their education (where it is only offered online) owing to a lack of electronic devices.
- **Roma children** are more at risk of being placed in residential institutions (and all the associated protection risks) and not receiving an education, especially where it is only offered online.
- **Children with a caregiver struggling with mental health deterioration because of war-related traumatic events** are more vulnerable to neglect, deprivation, and family-based violence. This risk is heightened if there is a perpetrator of intimate partner violence in the family.
- **Children with a parent in the Ukrainian army** are more vulnerable to poor mental health.
- The **children of people that Russia perceives as collaborators** in Russian-occupied territories are at an increased risk of forced separation from their caregivers (and all the associated protection risks).

CHILDREN'S VULNERABILITY TO KEY PROTECTION RISKS

Impact on children's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing

The war has had a widespread and persistent negative impact on child mental health (Rating Group 27/02/2023). In 2023, nearly one-fifth of children in Ukraine were thought to meet the criteria for PTSD (Martsenkovskiyi et al. 26/07/2023; ACAMH accessed 20/08/2024). Actual rates may be higher, as parents, teachers, and mental health professionals are at risk of overlooking signs of deteriorated mental health, especially in younger children (Bürgin et al. 14/03/2022; savED et al. 10/02/2024; Rating Group 27/02/2023).

Children with higher exposure to war-related stressors, including displaced children, children close to the front lines, and unaccompanied and separated children, are most vulnerable to mental distress (Rating Group 27/02/2023; WVI 22/02/2023; KII 04/03/2024). Those whose development is slower are also more vulnerable (Martsenkovskiyi et al. 26/07/2023). Issues such as poverty, the presence of a perpetrator of intimate partner violence in the family, a parent in the army, or a parent struggling with poor mental health compound the war's impact on children's mental health (Martsenkovskiyi et al. 26/07/2023; Miller and Jordans 06/2016; KII 04/03/2024). This is especially relevant given that about one in four parents across Ukraine may meet the criteria for PTSD (Karatzias et al. 10/01/2023).

Insufficient mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), stigma, and low awareness around mental health, all of which were already issues even before the full-scale invasion, compound the above risks, especially in rural areas and for those with fewer financial resources (WHO 19/03/2021; WB 31/10/2017; IMPACT accessed 03/03/2024). Since February 2022, mental healthcare access has been even more limited as a result of safety and capacity constraints (IMPACT et al. 26/06/2024). Only about one-third of families with children know of available psychosocial support services for youth. Although 13% of surveyed mothers noticed that their children needed MHPSS services, only 5% sought them (IMPACT accessed 03/03/2024; Rating Group 27/02/2023).

Violence against children

Violence against children includes but is not limited to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, and deprivation (UNICEF accessed 08/03/2024; WHO 29/11/2022).

Conflict-related violence (excluding sexual violence)

Children are more vulnerable than adults to injury and death from explosive weapons (STC 08/05/2019 and 06/07/2023). Between 24 February 2022 and 30 June 2024, warfare killed at

least 600 children and injured around 1,500. Actual numbers are likely higher (Children of War accessed 01/08/2024; OHCHR 08/07/2024). Most casualties resulted from explosive weapons (Protection Cluster 29/03/2024). Russian forces have also deliberately targeted children in attacks on apartment blocks and children's and maternity hospitals and shot some dead at close range (HRW 22/03/2023; UN 03/01/2024; CNN 03/03/2024; Politico 21/09/2023; Telegraph 07/03/2024; BBC 08/07/2024).

Shelling has affected children living in current and former frontline oblasts the most, killing and injuring more boys than girls (ACAPS accessed 08/04/2024; OHCHR 08/07/2024). Children with limited mobility are more vulnerable because of physical accessibility barriers preventing evacuation and the use of public transport and bomb shelters (Euronews 19/01/2024; OHCHR 14/04/2022; UNDP 21/03/2023; KII 05/03/2024). Evacuation procedures considering the special needs of people who are deaf, blind, or have physical disabilities are lacking. This particularly affects the evacuation of children from residential institutions, many of whom have a disability (EDF 04/12/2023; OHCHR 14/04/2022; WHO 12/04/2023).

Sexual violence

There have been reports of verified and alleged CRSV cases involving children. Those in Russian-occupied and frontline territories are most at risk, and most known perpetrators of CRSV against children have been from the Russian Armed Forces and affiliated groups (UNGA 18/10/2022; OHCHR 29/08/2023, 25/09/2023, and 18/03/2024; Kyiv Post 22/02/2023). Girls are more likely to experience CRSV, although reports suggest perpetrators may target both boys and girls (UNGA 18/10/2022; OHCHR 29/08/2023, 25/09/2023, and 18/03/2024; Kyiv Post 22/02/2023; STC 18/02/2021).

Data collection is not comprehensive, so the true extent of CRSV, including the identities of perpetrators, may be challenging to accurately ascertain. The actual number of cases is likely higher as a result of trauma, stigma around reporting, fear of reprisals, and insecurity hampering access to support services (OHCHR 01/11/2022). The pre-existing low capacity of social, health, law enforcement, and judicial institutions, such as the lack of dedicated child-friendly facilities and cross-sectoral collaboration, and the risk of re-traumatisation during the provision of services aggravate the risk and further limit data availability (OHCHR 19/10/2023 and 27/10/2022; KII 22/02/2024; KII 26/02/2024; KII 05/03/2024; KII 06/03/2024; KII 07/03/2024).

A psychologist working for an NGO in Ukraine noted that people known to the children commit most cases of sexual violence reported to their organisation, reflecting global patterns (Ukraine Media Center 24/11/2023; D2L 22/12/2015; NOCS accessed 11/03/2024). While data from Ukraine is unavailable, evidence from other countries suggests that girls may be more vulnerable to sexual abuse than boys, and children with disabilities or chronic conditions may be more vulnerable than those without (Assink et al. 05/2019; CAC accessed 29/03/2024).

The war may aggravate existing risks of sexual violence, including sexual violence perpetrated against children. Displaced children may also be more vulnerable to sexual violence if they live in collective accommodations (mostly owing to a lack of gender-segregated facilities) or with private hosts (Seddighi et al. 13/03/2019; HIAS/VOICE 06/03/2023; CARE 24/01/2024; GPC 05/07/2023).

Family-based violence

The use of psychological and physical violence against children under the guise of discipline has long been an issue without considerable improvement (Lansford et al. 27/10/2016; Grogan-Kaylor et al. 02/03/2018). In other humanitarian crisis contexts, caregivers more affected by economic stressors or war-related traumatic events are more likely to use violence against their children or give them less warmth (Eltanamly et al. 10/03/2019; Seddighi et al. 13/03/2019). In Ukraine, poverty rates rose from 5.5% in 2021 to 24% in 2022 (WB 10/2023). Many parents in Ukraine have been exposed to war-related traumatic events, and about one-fourth may meet the criteria for PTSD, often induced by this exposure (Hyland et al. 05/04/2023; Karatzias et al. 10/01/2023). This suggests that the risk of parental violence against children in Ukraine may have increased during the current war, as some humanitarian responders have observed (KII 04/03/2024). There are also reports of some veterans struggling with the mental health impacts of armed combat using domestic violence, including against children (Intent 27/07/2023).

Constrained access to child protection and family support services aggravates the risk of family-based violence. Even before the full-scale invasion, low awareness, insufficient protection and rehabilitation infrastructure and services, and a lack of cross-sectoral collaboration already limited this access (OHCHR 27/10/2022; HIAS/VOICE 06/03/2023). The war has further reduced the capacity of family support services to monitor and act on behalf of children, families, and survivors to access such services, especially near the front lines (Protection Cluster 28/11/2023; KII 22/02/2024; KII 26/02/2024; KII 05/03/2024; KII 06/03/2024; KII 07/03/2024).

Separation from family or caregiver

The separation of children from their family or caregiver can be intentional or unintentional. Unintentional separation includes accidental separation as a result of conflict-related chaos and child abduction. Intentional separation includes the abandonment or turning over of a child to the care of another person or institution (ICRC 10/06/2020; GPC accessed 16/02/2024 a; GPC accessed 16/02/2024 b; ACAPS 27/02/2023).

Forcible transfer and deportation of children

Some children living in the Russian-occupied territories have been forcibly transferred within these territories or deported to Russia and Belarus (OHCHR 19/10/2023; Yale University 14/02/2023 and 27/11/2023; The Telegraph 17/07/2023; AP 07/11/2023). Forcible transfer and deportation are crimes under international law (ICRC accessed 01/08/2024). In March 2023, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia's commissioner for children's rights (ICC 17/03/2023). Russia has confirmed the so-called evacuation of children from areas with more intense fighting (Govt. Russia 26/04/2022; Ukrinform 31/07/2023; Current Time 01/06/2023). Reported incidents were most prevalent in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (Yale University 14/02/2023; Voices of Children/KhISR 02/2023 and 10/2023).

In February 2023, the Government of Ukraine (GoU) estimated that about 150,000 children had been transferred or deported (Ukrinform 17/02/2023). By July 2023, the latest available data indicates that the GoU had identified the names of 19,546 transferred or deported children (Children of War accessed 22/02/2024). At least 2,100–2,400 children had been deported to Belarus (Yale University 27/11/2023; European Parliament 13/09/2023; Ukrinform 27/12/2023). Some Ukrainian sources present deported children figures of more than 700,000, but these are actually the estimated numbers of all children displaced to Russia, including those not forcefully transferred or deported (Ukrinform 31/07/2023; Children of War accessed 22/02/2024; TASS 20/02/2023; Ombudsman of Ukraine accessed 28/02/2024; UNHCR accessed 27/02/2024). Despite retrieval efforts by families, NGOs, and the GoU, only 388 children had returned to Ukrainian-controlled territories by July 2024 (Children of War accessed 11/07/2024; Rubryka 02/09/2023; Ukrinform 27/12/2023; Radio Svoboda 28/04/2023; CNN 09/04/2023; Current Time 01/06/2023; Voices of Children/KhISR 02/2023).

Although Russia has been forcibly transferring and deporting children since its 2014 occupation of parts of Ukraine, it became a large-scale coordinated process after the 2022 full-scale invasion. Most transfers and deportations have occurred by way of not returning children home from 'holiday camps' by Russian public institutions (Yale University 14/02/2023 and 27/11/2023; Vice 01/05/2023). Children from low-income families (such as those who could not afford a holiday or even struggle to provide adequate nutrition for children) and unaccompanied or separated children are more likely to be sent to such camps (Yale University 14/02/2023 and 27/11/2023; The Telegraph 17/07/2023). Children have reported staff violence in some camps, including physical violence, being locked up, and being denied contact with their families (OHCHR 19/10/2023; The Telegraph 17/07/2023).

Institutionalisation, separation, or being unaccompanied are all vulnerability factors. The forcible transfer and deportation of children have also taken place via the relocation of entire groups from residential institutions (Yale University 14/02/2023 and 27/11/2023; E-IR 15/06/2023; Voices of Children/KhISR 10/2023). Children in areas of Russian-forced evacuations are

particularly vulnerable to becoming unaccompanied and deported (Current Time 01/06/2023; Georgetown Univ. et al. 05/03/2023). Some children whose caregivers have been apprehended for suspected cooperation with Ukraine have also been separated from their parents and forcibly transferred or deported (OSCE 04/05/2023; Current Time 01/06/2023). Unaccompanied and separated children and those from residential institutions are the least likely to have returned to their families (Yale University 14/02/2023 and 27/11/2023; Current Time 01/06/2023; OHCHR 19/10/2023).

All children residing in territories occupied since 2022, but especially those with serious health conditions, are at risk of transfer or deportation if, during medical check-ups, they are determined to need 'special medical care', resulting in their placement in sanatoriums or similar institutions in Russia. Parents have been threatened with the deprivation of their parental rights if they refuse (Sprotyv 04/12/2023; Voices of Children/KhISR 02/2023).

Russia has implemented procedures hampering the finding and returning of children, such as placing them across Russia (including in the most remote regions), moving them from place to place, depriving them of their documents, preventing contact with caregivers, and, if found, requiring caregivers to pick the children up in person, which some caregivers cannot afford (Yale University 14/02/2023; OSCE 04/05/2023; Rubryka 02/09/2023; Voices of Children/KhISR 10/2023; Current Time 01/06/2023).

By January 2023, Russia had qualified over 1,000 Ukrainian children for adoption; by September, Russia had placed more than 380 in family-based alternative care (Yale University 14/02/2023; Rubryka 02/09/2023; OHCHR 07/09/2022; OSCE 04/05/2023). This forcible deportation of children, placed without cooperation with the Ukrainian authorities, has raised legal and child protection concerns, also since Ukraine's law restricts international adoptions during the war (ICRC accessed 11/07/2024; Georgetown Univ. et al. 05/03/2023; HCCH 16/03/2022). Unaccompanied children and those from residential institutions are more vulnerable to such placement, with concerns about whether Russian-installed authorities make an effort to find their caregivers (Yale University 14/02/2023; OSCE 04/05/2023; Current Time 01/06/2023).

Unaccompanied and separated children in Ukrainian-controlled territories

Between 24 February 2022 and March 2024, more than 13,000 children are known to have been left without parental care in Ukraine; more than 1,700 of these were orphaned by the war (Ukrainian law considers a child an orphan if both their parents are dead, are unknown, or have legally abandoned the child) (Radio Svoboda 04/03/2024; OSCE 04/05/2023). Between 2–4% of surveyed families across Ukraine reported a child not living with the family (Protection Cluster 07/12/2023 and 28/11/2023; IMPACT 11/10/2023). More than 31,000 children have been reported missing since the full-scale invasion, nearly 2,000 of whom remained missing until July 2024 (based on the cumulative number of children found and the current number of those missing) (Children of War accessed 09/07/2024).

Displacement makes children more vulnerable to family separation, with some children becoming separated because they are sent to stay with extended family or acquaintances in safer locations (GPC 02/2023; Eurochild 12/07/2022; UNICEF 07/09/2022; DRC accessed 22/02/2024). Some children become unaccompanied during displacement when they lose contact with their parents or their parents are unable to care for them (Eurochild 12/07/2022). Disability or health issues limiting children's mobility also make them more prone to separation, as some parents unable to care for the children leave them behind (Eurochild 12/07/2022; KII 05/03/2024).

Children in residential institutions

Ukraine has the second-highest child institutionalisation rate in Europe. Prior to the full-scale invasion, between 90,000–120,000 children were in institutional care, approximately 58,000 of whom part-time (HRW 13/03/2023; UNICEF 10/06/2022; EC 07/2022; Reuters 09/09/2022). In the context of Ukraine, the term 'institutions' refers to a range of residential facilities, including children's homes, children's care homes and baby homes, a range of boarding schools for children with and without health conditions and disabilities, and other institutions. While the term 'boarding school' might not be typically associated with an institution such as an orphanage, Ukrainian and international researchers consider them together because many boarding schools have been specifically designed for orphaned children or those whose parents cannot care for them because of socioeconomic reasons or the child's disability (such as orphanages with schools on premises). Protection issues have been identified across the institutional system, regardless of the profile of the institution (Hope and Homes 28/09/2015; Slozanska and Horishna 02/04/2021; Reuters 09/09/2022; OSCE 04/05/2023). Most (about 90%) institutionalised children had a parent with full parental rights, and about 80% were placed in institutions at least in part at the request of their caregivers (Hope and Homes 28/09/2015; HRW 13/03/2023). According to the latest available data from before the full-scale invasion, the main drivers of institutionalisation were family crisis (e.g. poverty, substance abuse, and weak parental skills) and lack of adequate family support services (HRW 13/03/2023; Hope and Homes 28/09/2015 and 22/06/2020; UNICEF 23/06/2022).

Children with disabilities are disproportionately more vulnerable to institutionalisation, making up nearly half of all residents, because of the lack of locally available social and health services and inclusive education (UNICEF 10/06/2022 and 23/06/2022; Hope and Homes 28/09/2015; HRW 13/03/2023). It appears that many diagnoses may not have been medically accurate and some were issued to ensure placement, e.g. for a sibling of a child with a disability (Hope and Homes 28/09/2015 and 22/06/2020). Roma children have also been more likely to be placed in institutions because of discrimination, removal from their families because of poverty, and a lack of inclusive education matching their needs (DRI 05/05/2024; ERRC 10/12/2020).

Evidence from Ukraine and other countries proves that institutionalisation hinders children's physical, cognitive, and socioemotional development (Slozanska and Horishna 02/04/2021;

van Ijzendoorn et al. 23/06/2020; UN 10/10/2022). Before the full-scale invasion, about seven in ten babies in institutions in Ukraine experienced developmental delays solely because of deprivation (Hope and Homes 22/06/2020). Many residential institutions in Ukraine fail to meet basic nutrition, clothing, and healthcare needs, and instances of staff violence against children have been reported. With insufficient funding, children with disabilities have not been receiving adequate care or rehabilitation (Hope and Homes 28/09/2015 and 22/06/2020; Ombudsman of Ukraine 09/06/2023; DRI 05/05/2024).

The war has aggravated pre-existing drivers of institutionalisation (e.g. loss of caregivers, poverty, and constrained access to public services and benefits, such as healthcare and social assistance) (WB 10/2023; Protection Cluster 28/11/2023; openDemocracy 26/04/2023; ACAPS 08/11/2023; KII 04/03/2024). It has also aggravated the risk of neglect and abuse by institutional staff. There have been incidents of reduced staffing leading to children with disabilities being tied to their beds, having their hygiene neglected, or leaving children unattended, leading to them playing with explosive remnants of war (HRW 13/03/2023; DRI 05/05/2024). Some children have been handed over by institution staff to men so they could present themselves as caregivers and leave Ukraine under that exemption despite martial law (Ukrainska Pravda 03/07/2024).

To mitigate potential casualties in case of attack, the GoU sent home most children in full- and part-time care (about 96,500, including those with disabilities) by the end of July 2022 (Reuters 09/09/2022). There were concerns that the best interests of some children may not have been determined beforehand and that adequate support was not provided to their families (OHCHR 11/08/2022; HRW 13/03/2023). In August 2022, only about 5,500 children remained in institutions (including those evacuated to other institutions), although their number increased again to 25,000 by the end of the year. This suggests that about one-fifth of the children who had been sent home may have been returned to institutions (Reuters 09/09/2022; HRW 13/03/2023). The re-institutionalisation rate in some places was higher, such as Zhytomyrska oblast, where two of three rehomed children were re-institutionalised by November 2022 (HRW 13/03/2023). These numbers likely refer only to Ukrainian-controlled territories.

Child trafficking

The risk of child trafficking in Ukraine precedes the full-scale invasion, even if few cases have been identified (UNODC 2022; US DOL accessed 12/07/2024). At the same time, the war has likely heightened its risk (IOM 19/06/2024). In 2014, when the armed conflict began in Ukraine, the number of detected trafficked Ukrainians increased (UNODC 24/01/2023).

Displacement makes children more vulnerable to trafficking, especially those displaced who are unaccompanied or separated (Eurochild 12/07/2022; La Strada/The Freedom Fund 10/05/2022).



Immediately after the full-scale invasion, when thousands of people were leaving Ukraine, the Ukrainian border guard did not always check if adults had legal authority over the children they were travelling with (HRW 13/03/2023). Potential traffickers have been identified in the EU, attempting to find anyone affected among refugees from Ukraine (Frontex 06/04/2022). The GoU has since implemented regulations on unaccompanied and separated children crossing the border, but the risk persists (Protection Cluster 27/03/2022). Displaced children may also be more vulnerable because displaced adults (many of whom are caregivers) are more likely to receive and accept risky offers of work or travel, and are less likely to know where to report potential traffickers (IOM 01/12/2023 and 19/06/2024).

Gender may be a vulnerability factor. Before the full-scale invasion, according to a study of seven Eastern European countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine), girls were more likely to be trafficked than boys (UNODC 24/01/2023 and 2022). Girls may also be more at risk of trafficking for sexual purposes; before the full-scale invasion, nearly all trafficked girls were sexually exploited. There is evidence to suggest that sex traffickers have attempted to take advantage of the Russia-Ukraine war (UNODC 24/01/2023 and 2022; ECPAT 02/03/2023). Children displaced from residential institutions may be particularly vulnerable. Concerns have been raised about insufficient anti-trafficking prevention during children's evacuation from institutions (HRW 13/03/2023). There is also evidence to suggest that, before the full-scale invasion, some residential institution staff may have been actively involved in child trafficking for sex and labour (US DOS accessed 26/02/2024).

Association of children with armed forces or groups

The association of children with armed forces or groups refers to all people under the age of 18 that an armed force or group recruits or uses in any capacity, including but not limited to playing a direct part in hostilities (UNICEF 30/01/2007; GPC accessed 16/02/2024 c).

There are verified cases of Russian Armed Forces using children as human shields in 2022 (UNGA 05/06/2023). Ukrainian authorities also claim that from 2022–2023, Russian forces used children to set up roadblocks, plant fake mines, or spy for the Russian army, sometimes unwittingly (using Russian-prepared mobile games) (Ukrainska Pravda 28/11/2022; Interfax Ukraine 05/03/2023; SSU 29/03/2023 and 11/04/2022; GP Ukraine 24/08/2022; SSU Telegram 24/05/2022; Oleksii Reznikov X 08/01/2023). There is insufficient information to determine if the risk of being used by armed forces or groups is gender-specific.

At the age of 16, all boys in Russian-occupied territories are registered for future conscription to the Russian army as adults (Ukrinform 27/12/2023; Serhiy Hayday Telegram 10/03/2023; MDI 08/12/2022). The conscription of civilians by an occupying power is a violation of international humanitarian law (ICRC accessed 17/06/2024).

Russia introduced Russian school curricula, involving militarisation and support of the Russian army, in Crimea in 2014, in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in 2015, and in newly occupied territories in September 2022 (AJ 14/08/2016; FT 05/06/2016; ECFR 15/01/2016; Atlantic Council 03/05/2019). Ukrainian schoolchildren have had to participate in activities such as writing letters of gratitude to and making gifts for Russian soldiers (Voices of Children/KhISR 02/2023; Ukrainska Pravda 01/03/2023; Crimea SOS 14/04/2023). Paramilitary organisations are also intertwined with the education system; they have units in schools and participate in school events (Voices of Children/KhISR 02/2023; Ukrainska Pravda 10/04/2023). Militarisation extend to extracurricular activities too, such as sports and recreation (Voices of Children/KhISR 02/2023; Crimean HRG 06/08/2022; 1news.zp.ua 10/10/2023; RIA-M 27/05/2024).

Military training, which before 2023 was compulsory in some schools in the occupied territories, has become compulsory for all upper-secondary students (those ages 15–17) (US DOL 26/11/2022; Independent 29/01/2023; Ukrainska Pravda 10/04/2023; Radio Svoboda 14/11/2023; Govt. Ireland accessed 29/02/2023). Schools in these territories are teaching youth how to assemble drones and younger students how to use rifles (Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets Telegram 15/03/2023; Ukrinform 11/10/2023). Russia has expanded teenage cadet corps and classes and military training – which may have been established in Russian-occupied territories soon after the start of the conflict in 2014 – into the newly occupied territories, such as in schools in Khersonska and Luhanska oblasts (Virtual Museum of Russian Aggression 10/04/2014; IN 08/07/2019; Ukrinform 07/11/2022; Tribun 02/11/2023; Center for Investigative Journalism 22/04/2024). Children have also participated in one-off military training sessions, including at so-called holiday camps (Mariupol City Council Telegram 09/03/2023; Sprotyv 05/12/2023 and 25/05/2023; Yale University 14/02/2023; The Telegraph 17/07/2023; Yale University 27/11/2023).

In 2021, the Young Army, a Russian paramilitary organisation, had about 29,000 members in Crimea and 7,500 in the Russian-occupied areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (Liga 15/05/2022). It was later merged with other paramilitary organisations to form the Movement of the First for people ages 6–25 and extended to the newly occupied territories, where other paramilitary organisations have also been formed (Ukrinform 07/11/2022 and 09/12/2023; Voices of Children/KhISR 02/2023; Andryschenko Time Telegram 13/04/2023; 1news.zp.ua 10/10/2023; Vedomosti 05/02/2024). There is also information to suggest the presence of a teenage militia in occupied parts of Zaporizka oblast, created by Russian authorities to “support the police” (Sprotyv 24/03/2023).

There have been isolated incidents of the direct association of children with the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UNGA 05/06/2023; Interfax Ukraine 08/11/2023). Ukraine's core curriculum also includes optional military education from the lower-secondary level (middle school), and more than 120,000 students have participated in military and patriotic extracurricular activities (MES accessed 29/02/2024; IEA 01/02/2024).

Constraints on children's education

Safety risks and the impact of attacks on civilian objects

By 10 July 2024, according to Ukrainian authorities, the hostilities had damaged nearly 3,800 schools and other educational facilities in Ukraine, including 365 destroyed (Education in Emergency accessed 10/07/2024). The damage or destruction of education facilities relative to the number of existing facilities has been highest in Donetsk, followed by Kharkiv, Luhanska, and Khersonska oblasts (Education in Emergency accessed 10/07/2024; SSU accessed 28/02/2024). Attacks on civilian infrastructure continue to be a risk for children's safety; in June 2024 alone, the attacks damaged about 257 civilian objects, including 23 schools (ACAPS accessed 10/07/2024; IMPACT et al. 26/06/2024).

In February 2023, about one in three children in Ukrainian-controlled territories missed school every day or several days a week, and another one in three several times a month, mostly as a result of air raid alarms and power outages. Children in frontline areas and those learning online missed school more often (Rating Group 27/02/2023). Online learners were estimated to lose about 55% of their learning hours per month and in-person learners 17% (Education Cluster 25/07/2024).

Some children have returned to fully in-person education. Across all Ukrainian-controlled areas, about one in four children were enrolled for fully in-person education in the 2022–2023 school year; one in three in September 2023; and about one in two in April 2024 – although actual participation may be lower at about one in three as per survey research (UNICEF 24/01/2023 and 29/08/2023; Texty 16/05/2024; Education Cluster 25/04/2024; Rating Group 27/02/2023). In December 2023, 80% of schools had access to a bomb shelter (a requirement for in-person education), an increase from 68% in August (SESU 27/06/2022; COM 11/08/2023; WB 15/02/2024). In frontline areas, in-person education has remained nearly inaccessible because of hostilities and fewer bomb shelters in schools (Texty 16/05/2024; savED et al. 10/02/2024; IMPACT et al. 26/06/2024).

Active hostilities and the damage, destruction, or conversion of schools into military facilities in some areas of Russian-occupied territories also constrain in-person education (Nova Kahovka 05/02/2023; Ukrainska Pravda 26/02/2023 and 12/08/2023; Kochegarka 03/03/2023; Ukrinform 11/07/2023). Minimal frontline shifts since March 2023 suggest that the situation persists (ISW 28/02/2023 and 09/07/2024).

Reduced access to education resources and quality services and its impact

Children from low-income families are vulnerable to exclusion from online education because of a lack of devices, affecting at least 200,000 children in June 2023 (Ukrinform 27/06/2023; WVI 22/02/2023). Children in rural locations are also vulnerable to exclusion; before the full-scale invasion, only 44% of rural families had internet access compared to 80% of urban families (Rubryka 01/09/2021). Experience from the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that Roma children may also be more at risk of dropping out (UNESCO 2021).

Online education is less effective than in person, leading to a persistent educational deficit that grows larger the longer it lasts and affecting children's future socioeconomic prospects. In Ukraine, the full-scale invasion came on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic, compounding the impacts of remote education (UNICEF 29/08/2023 and 31/05/2024). Online learners also miss more classes because of power outages, which have become more widespread and last longer in 2024 (Rating Group 27/02/2023; BBC 05/07/2024; KII 04/03/2024). About six in ten teachers in Ukraine have noticed a deterioration in students' performance in part because of online learning (savED et al. 10/02/2024).

Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are likely to experience a larger deficit with online education (Betthäuser et al. 05/2022 and 30/01/2023; WB 16/05/2022; Di Pietra 05/2023). Given the constraints described above, the deficit is also likely higher for rural and Roma children. School closures and online education negatively impact children's mental and physical health, wellbeing, and development because of longer screen time and reduced social interaction, physical activity, and access to support (Chaabane et al. 19/05/2021; UNICEF 24/01/2023). Their negative impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of children in Ukraine has also been identified (Gozak et al. 2020; WVI 22/02/2023; BBC 01/09/2022). Teachers who do not interact with their students in person may be less likely to notice child protection incidents. Finally, where schools are closed, children no longer have access to school meals, creating nutritional risks (WHO 17/04/2024; IEA 03/2023).

Shortages of teachers have affected education availability and quality, especially in frontline and Russian-occupied areas, where teachers are displaced or refuse to work for Russian-installed authorities (Vox Ukraine 01/09/2023; KII 05/03/2024; Ukrainska Pravda 03/12/2022; Suspilne 20/01/2023; AI 11/12/2023 a and 11/12/2023 b). At the beginning of the 2023–2024 school year, Russia forced the teachers in Russian-occupied territories to return to work or replaced them with Russian teachers (Voices of Children/KhISR 10/2023; AI 11/12/2023 b).

Displaced children likely experience more impediments to high-quality education because of a lack of learning spaces (e.g. in collective shelters) and learning shifts (ACAPS 18/08/2022; HRW 09/11/2023; DRC accessed 22/02/2024; Ombudsman of Ukraine accessed 28/02/2024; KII 04/03/2024). Some displaced children are unable to enrol for school or face discrimination for speaking Russian (KII 04/03/2024; ZN 28/02/2023).

Children with disabilities are also less likely to receive inclusive and high-quality education; the full-scale invasion has aggravated pre-existing difficulties in providing inclusive education (UNICEF 23/06/2022; Shevchuk et al. 10/05/2020). While online education may present some children with disabilities with new opportunities for learning, it provides additional challenges for other children with disabilities, especially those with learning difficulties or who need but lack assistive technology (Collegenp 20/06/2023; ETFO 14/04/2021; Purwati et al. 2022).

Denial of access to Ukrainian education in Russian-occupied territories

Children in Russian-occupied territories – both newly occupied and occupied since 2014 – have been denied access to Ukrainian education. Since September 2022, schools have been required to follow Russia’s education curriculum, including the imposition of Russian identity and Russian views of Ukraine (Crimean HRG 15/05/2020; BBC 25/09/2022 and 23/08/2022; Ukrainska Pravda 06/11/2022). Russian has become the only language of instruction, and learning Ukrainian or about Ukraine has been banned or limited, depending on the territory (CCD Telegram 14/03/2023; PON 04/09/2022). Even speaking Ukrainian with peers at school has led to threats of separation from family (PON 04/09/2022; AI 11/12/2023 b). The Russian National Guard and Police have also been installed in some schools, creating protection risks for children (AI 11/12/2023 b; Crimea SOS 01/09/2023).

By 2023, most families who initially chose not to send their children to Russian-run schools had been forced to do so (AI 11/12/2023 b). Some children continued to study with Ukrainian teachers outside official schools; at the start of the 2022–2023 school year, about 100,000 children in Russian-occupied territories were engaged in remote education in Ukrainian schools, making up about 10% of the total number of students in Donetsk, Luhanska, Khersonska, Kharkivska, and Zaporizka oblasts before the full-scale invasion (BBC 25/09/2022; AI 11/12/2023 a; Govt. Ukraine 13/10/2022; SSU accessed 02/03/2024). Engagement in Ukrainian education puts children and their families at risk of reprisal by Russian or Russian-installed authorities, including separating children from their families or their forcible transfer or deportation to alternative care. There have been reports of Russian forces investigating children, inspecting houses, and threatening families regarding education (BBC 25/09/2022; AI 11/12/2023 a and 11/12/2023 b).