UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

LIVES ON HOLD: INTENTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES OF REFUGEES, REFUGEE RETURNEES AND IDPS FROM UKRAINE

REGIONAL INTENTIONS REPORT #5

Summary Findings

FEBRUARY 2024

Acknowledgements

Data used in this report was collected through a partnership between UNHCR and Ipsos SA in Switzerland, who implemented surveys with refugees, refugee returnees and internally displaced people from Ukraine.

We are grateful for the extensive involvement and support of UNHCR's partners, local authorities, civil society, international organizations, refugee volunteers and donors. This includes the contributions of the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine to the survey with internally displaced people. Most importantly, UNHCR would like to acknowledge the resilience and strength of Ukrainian refugees, refugee returnees and internally displaced people in Ukraine, who continue to share with us their challenges, fears and hopes, and who directly contribute to promoting and supporting data collection activities.

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Cover photograph:

Poland. Olena, 32, and her son Artem, 7, came to Poland from Mariupol in eastern Ukraine on 22 May 2022. They first lived in a hostel in Warsaw, but recently moved to a rented flat. Olena only has a part-time job for the time being, but hopes to find more sustainable employment. Artem is attending a Ukrainian school in Warsaw. Olena hopes she and her family will be able to return to Ukraine.

Introduction

To ensure the centrality of the voices of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) from Ukraine in discussions about their future, as well as to inform evidence-based policy responses in host countries and in Ukraine, UNHCR has been implementing a series of intentions surveys, collecting primary data on refugees and internally displace people profiles, their current situation and their intentions, and the factors influencing their decision-making. Complementing previous reports,[1] this report presents the **summary findings from the latests round of data collection including, for the first time, findings related to the experiences and current situation of refugee returnees.**[2] The full report with all detailed findings will be published separately.

The analysis is based on i**nterviews undertaken between January and February 2024** with close to **4,000 refugee households** across Europe, **4,800 internally displaced people households** in **Ukraine and close to 1,100 refugee returnee households in Ukraine** (for an overall sample of over **9,900 households**, out of which more than of **2,400 households** responded to this and the previous rounds considered as "longitudinal sub-sample"). The research used a mixed methodology combining phone and web-based surveys and using different sampling approaches for each population based on available data. Sampling and data collection was conducted by **Ipsos SA.**

1. See UNHCR's Lives on Hold #1 (July 2022), Lives on Hold #2 (September 2022), Lives on Hold #3 (February 2023) and Lives on Hold #4 (July 2023).
2. UNHCR defines refugee returnee as a former refugee who has returned from a host country to their country of origin or former habitual residence, spontaneously or in an organized fashion, with the intention of remaining there permanently and who is yet to be fully integrated.

Key findings

1 WHILE THE MAJORITY OF REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE ARE STILL PLANNING OR HOPING TO RETURN TO UKRAINE IN THE FUTURE, A GROWING UNCERTAINTY IS OBSERVED, AS DISPLACEMENT CONTINUES.

RETURN INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

	Planning to return in the next twelve months	Hope to return one day	Undecided about returning in the future	No plans or hope to return
Refugees	6%	59%	24%	11%
IDPs	5%	68%	12%	15%

- The proportion of refugees planning or hoping to return to Ukraine in the future has decreased compared to one year ago (from **77 to 65 per cent**), while the share of those who are undecided about returning has increased (from **18 to 24 per cent**) as well as those who report no hope to return (from **5 to 11 per cent**).[3]
- A similar trend is observed among internally displaced people, where the proportion of those planning or hoping to return in the future has also decreased compared to one year ago (from **84 to 72 per cent**), in contrast to the increase in those who are undecided about returning (from **9 to 12 per cent**) as well as those who report no hope of returning (from **7 to 15 per cent**).
- Return intentions differ according to several factors, in particular: **proximity of host countries** (for refugees); **situation in places of origin** (e.g. relatives and/or property remaining in Ukraine), **demographic characteristics / vulnerabilities** (in particular dependency ratio) and **prospects for socio-economic inclusion** in host countries or displacement areas (e.g. participation in labour market).
- Specifically, refugees are **more likely to be planning or hoping to return among:** those hosted in countries neighbouring Ukraine (**75 per cent**) compared to those living in other European countries (**62 per cent**); those originally from Chernihivska, Khersonska or Sumska (more than **76 per cent** in each), in contrast to those from Poltavska, Zakarpatska or Kyiv city (**60 per cent** or less in each); those with spouse and/or sons / daughters still in Ukraine (**72 per cent**) compared to those with no immediate relatives (**57 per cent**); those with an intact or partially damaged home in their place of origin (**67 per cent**) compared to those who do not home there (**60 per cent**); those households composed of only older persons (**79 per cent**) or with more than two dependents per adult **(76 per cent)**, in contrast to those with no dependents (**61 per cent**); and those not participating in the labour force in their current host country (**77 per cent**) compared to those working or looking for jobs (**62 per cent**).
- In the case of internally displaced people, they are **more likely to be planning or hoping to return among:** those originally from Khersonska, Mykolaivska, Kharkivska, Zaporizka or Dnipropetrovsk (more than **77 per cent** in each), in contrast to those from Luhanska, Kyivska or Kyiv city (**67 per cent** or less in each); those with spouse and/or sons / daughters remaining in the place of origin (**86 per cent**) compared to those with no immediate relatives (**69 per cent**); those with an intact or partially damaged a home in their place of origin (**81 per cent**) compared to those who do not own home there (**53 per cent**); those households composed of only older persons or with more than two dependents per adult (**80 per cent**), in contrast to those with no dependents (**64 per cent**); and those not participating in the labour force in their current displacement area (**77 per cent**) compared to those working or looking for jobs (**70 per cent**).

3. Results from one year ago refer to those presented in UNHCR's Lives on Hold #3 (February 2023).

2 RESPONDENTS WHO WERE PREVIOUSLY PLANNING TO RETURN BUT DID NOT, REPORT THEY CHANGED THEIR MIND DUE TO THE SECURITY SITUATION IN AREAS OF RETURN, TOGETHER WITH CONCERNS ABOUT ACCESS TO LIVELIHOODS AND HOUSING. SIMILAR CHALLENGES ARE RAISED BY THOSE THAT ARE NOW LESS INCLINED TO RETURN COMPARED TO THOSE IN THE PREVIOUS ROUND.

CHANGES IN INTENTIONS AMONG LONGITUDINAL SUB-SAMPLE

	Reported plans to return in previous rounds but these did not materialize	Reported hope to return in previous rounds but now are less inclined to return	Reported being undecided or having no hope to return in previous rounds but now are more inclined to return
Refugees	7%	15%	4%
IDPs	10%	10%	8%

- While the majority of refugees and internally displaced people covered in the longitudinal sub-sample reported the same intentions as in the previous round (**70 per cent** for refugees and **69 per cent** for IDPs), around a third of the sub-sample has changed prospects towards return, in particular those who were previously planning to return but did not and those who shifted from hoping to return towards being undecided or no longer hoping to return.

- Among those whose previous plans to return permanently did not materialize, the vast majority (**81 per cent** for refugees and **76 per cent** for IDPs) indicated that the deterioration of the security situation in Ukraine and/or their place of origin was the main reason for not having returned as planned. Other reasons reported - though more frequently among refugees than IDPs- were concerns about economic opportunities in Ukraine (**18** and **6 per cent**, respectively) and because their property had been damaged or was inaccessible (**20** and **7 per cent**, respectively).

- Among those previously hoping to return one day who are now undecided or reporting no hope to return, the uncertainty about the end or solution to the full-scale war was one of the main factors (**65 per cent** for refugees and **41 per cent** for IDPs) along with the perceived deterioration of the security situation in Ukraine and/or their place of origin (**47** and **52 per cent**, respectively). Other reasons frequently reported (especially among refugees) were the worsening of economic opportunities in Ukraine (**37 per cent** for refugees and **17 per cent** for IDPs), their concerns about not having enough support or resources to return (**27** and7 **per cen**t, respectively) and because their property had been damaged or was inaccessible (**23** and **12 per cent**, respectively).

3 ALTHOUGH THE END OF THE FULL-SCALE WAR AND OF THE OCCUPATION IS A NECESSARY CONDITION TO ENABLE THE RETURN OF MOST REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE, ACCESS TO ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND TO PROPERTY OR ALTERNATIVE HOUSING IN AREAS OF RETURN ARE KEY ENABLERS AND BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABLE RETURN.

INTENTIONS TO RETURN IF THE FULL-SCALE WAR ENDS WITHIN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS

	Would definitely return	Would probably return	Would probably not return	Would definitely not return	Do not know / cannot tell
Refugees	35%	26%	13%	7%	19%
IDPs	43%	26%	11%	8%	12%

- While many refugees and internally displaced people would definitively return to Ukraine if the full-scale war came to an end in the next twelve months (**35 per cent** for refugees and **43 per cent** for IDPs), a higher proportion report some degree of uncertainty (**58** and **49 per cent**, respectively), indicating that decisions to return also depend on other factors or circumstances.

- In particular, access to work (**42 per cent** for refugees and **18 per cent** for IDPs), the end of the occupation (**34** and **28 per cent**, respectively) and having access to their property or alternative housing (**23** and **26 per cent**, respectively) are the top factors or conditions that would influence the decisions of refugees and internally displaced people to return – in addition to the end of the full-scale war. Having enough resources or support to return (**18 per cent** for refugees and **4 per cent** for IDPs) and being able to reunite with relatives (**17** and **8 per cent,** respectively) are also among the top five enablers for return.

- Mirroring these results, the main obstacles or reasons reported among those who would not return -even if the full-scale war came to an end are also related to concerns about economic opportunities in areas of return (**49 per cent** for refugees and **20 per cent** for IDPs) and concerns about continued occupation of the territory (**21** and **23 per cent**, respectively). However, among internally displaced people, concerns about their property or housing in areas of origin (destroyed or inaccessible) is actually the barrier most frequently reported (**12 per cent** for refugees vs. **34 per cent** for IDPs).

4 ONLY A SMALL PROPORTION OF REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE ARE PLANNING TO RETURN IN THE NEXT TWELVE MONTHS, MAINLY MOTIVATED BY THEIR DESIRE TO GO BACK TO THEIR CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT, REUNITE WITH RELATIVES AND TAKE CARE OF THEIR PROPERTY. HOWEVER, A SIGNFICANT NUMBER COULD BE COMPELLED TO RETURN IF THEY FACE CHALLENGES IN HOST COUNTRIES OR AREAS OF DISPLACEMENT, IN PARTICULAR REGARDING LEGAL STATUS OR EFFECTIVE WORK OPPORTUNITIES.

PLANNING TO RETURN IN NEXT TWELVE MONTHS

	Yes	No	Do not know / undecided
Refugees	6%	46%	48%
IDPs	5%	58%	37%

- While **more than a tenth** of refugees and of internally displaced people are considering returning in the next twelve months, only a smaller proportion (**6** and **5 per cent**, respectively) indicate a concrete return timeframe as well as having taken some steps to prepare their return (e.g., informing relatives in Ukraine, informing current landlords, etc). At the same time, a significant proportion was uncertain on their plans (**48 per cent** of refugees and **37 per cent** of IDPs).

- For refugees, the main reasons reported as determinants of their plan to return in the near future are similar to previous rounds: the desire to go back to their cultural environment (**55 per cent**) and the desire to reunite with relatives (**35 per cent**). In the case of internally displaced people the main reasons for return are taking care of their property (**28 per cent**) and the desire to reunite with relatives (**21 per cent**).

- In the scenario that the full-scale war continues for the next twelve months, a significant proportion of refugees (**60 per cent**) indicate that they could be compelled to return even if this would not be their first choice if they face challenges in accessing rights and services in host countries, in particular related to uncertainty about legal status or lack of work opportunities.

- Among internally displaced people, less than a quarter (**23 per cent**) indicate they could be compelled to return even if this would not be their first choice if they face challenges in areas of displacement, in particular related to problems finding stable accommodation or lack of work opportunities.

5 AROUD HALF OF REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE HAVE CONDUCTED SHORT-TERM VISITS TO THEIR PLACES OF ORIGIN IN UKRAINE AT LEAST ONCE SINCE THEIR DISPLACEMENT STARTED. VISITING RELATIVES CONTINUES TO BE THE MAIN REASON FOR VISITS BY REFUGEES, AND ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE WAS REPORTED AS THE SECOND-MOST FREQUENT MOTIVATION.

SHORT-TERM VISTIS TO UKRAINE / PLACE OF ORIGIN SINCE DISPLACEMENT STARTED

	Visited only once	Visited more than once	Have not been able to visit	Have not considered the need to visit
Refugees	27%	23%	32%	17%
IDPs	15%	32%	37%	16%

- The survey shows that the proportion of refugees engaging in short-term visits continues to increase over time: **50 per cent** in this round compared to **39 per cent** in the last round (conducted in May 2023). The situation for internally displaced people is different with a slight decrease across rounds (from **50** to **47 per cent**), which could be partly explained by the expansion in sample coverage.

- Among refugees, those hosted in countries neighbouring Ukraine are slightly more likely to have made at least one visit compared to those in other host countries (**55** vs **50 per cent**). Visits tend to concentrate in certain periods, particularly during holidays (e.g. August and December). Overall, **9 per cent** of refugees made their most recent visit during January 2024, while around **29 per cent** of them had visited between October to December 2023 and a similar proportion between July and September 2023.

- In terms of length of stay, **34 per cent** of refugees spent less than 1 week and **56 per cent** spent between 1 and 4 weeks, with the remaining **9 per cent** spending more than 1 month (including 3 per cent who stayed for more than 3 months).

- While visiting relatives continues to be the main reason for refugees' short-term visits (**56 per cent**), access to healthcare is reported as the second-most frequent motivation (**33 per cent**), followed by accessing work or taking care of business on a temporary basis (**23 per cent**) and to obtain documentation (**19 per cent**).

- Among internally displaced people, the main reason for short-term visits is to check or repair their property (**34 per cent**), followed by visiting relatives and for getting personal supplies (**28 per cent each**).

- As noted in UNHCR's Position on Voluntary Returns to Ukraine, the ability of refugees to travel home for short periods can help pave the way for more durable returns in the future, once conditions permit. UNHCR has urged host States to maintain a flexible approach to short-term visits to Ukraine and recommends that an individual's legal status and associated rights in a host country are not affected by a visit to Ukraine lasting less than three months.

6 THE MAJORITY OF REFUGEE RETURNEES SURVEYED CAME BACK IN 2022, MAINLY MOTIVATED BY THE DESIRE TO REUNITE WITH FAMILY MEMBERS AND GO BACK TO THEIR CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT. MORE THAN A QUARTER OF REFUGEE RETURNEE HOUSEHOLDS SURVEYED RETURNED TO A PLACE DIFFERENT FROM THEIR FORMER HOMES.

KEY REFUGEE RETURNEES CHARACTERISTICS

	Returned during 2022	Returned to a place different than their place of origin	Are households with at least one child and/or older person	Returned due to a desire to be back in their country and cultural environment	Returned due to a desire to reunite with their relatives
REFUGEE RETURNEES	64%	27%	82%	43%	34%

- The majority of refugee returnees surveyed came back in 2022 (**64 per cent**), particularly from May to September (**46 per cent**), coinciding with the Government of Ukraine's retaking of control of territories in northern oblasts. Close to three quarters of returns took place toward western, northern and eastern oblasts, and **58 per cent** occurred from countries neighbouring Ukraine (particularly from Poland), followed by Germany, Bulgaria, Italy and the Czech Republic (**28 per cent in total**).

- Around **25 per cent** had visited Ukraine at least once before returning, though this was **43 per cent** for those that returned after 2022.

- More than a quarter of households surveyed had returned to a different place than the one they were living in before the start of the full-scale war, although they were highly concentrated among those who were originally from the east (**60 per cent** of all those originating from this region) and the south (**34 per cent**), with less than **10 per cent** among those from other regions. The majority of them **(60 per cent**) returned to a different region than their places of origin, in particular those from the east who returned mainly to western and northern areas.

- Refugee returnees are more likely to be households with dependents (children and/or older persons) compared to refugee households (**82** vs. **71 per cen**t), although those returning to Kyiv city are in higher proportion adult(s) without dependents compared to the average for all refugee returnees (**28** vs. **18 per cent**).

- The main reasons for return coincide with those reported by refugees who are currently planning to return: the desire to be back in their cultural environment (**43 per cent)** and to reunite with relatives (**34 per cent**). Among other reasons for return, around **a third** reported reasons related to access to services in areas of return - particularly access to education and to health services- and around **a fifth** reported challenges in accessing services, work or difficulties to adapt in host countries.

- As noted in UNHCR's Position on Voluntary Returns to Ukraine, UNHCR does not consider that promotion or incentivization of return to Ukraine is appropriate at the current time, given the ongoing full-scale war and hostilities, and continues to call on States to refrain from forcibly returning nationals and former habitual residents of Ukraine. This does not preclude refugees from taking personal decisions to return, as returning to one's country is a fundamental right that needs to be respected; however, it is important that these decisions are truly voluntary, well-informed and without inducement to return. Given the ongoing full-scale war and general volatility of the situation, UNHCR does not consider that such voluntary decisions to return undermine the overall assessment that the vast majority of persons displaced from Ukraine are likely to have international protection needs.

7 REFUGEE RETURNEES REPORT THAT ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES IN AREAS OF RETURN ARE WORSE THAN WHAT THEY EXPECTED BEFORE RETURNING, AND WHILE HALF OF RESPONDENT ARE CURRENTLY WORKING, ONLY AROUND A QUARTER REPORTED BEING ABLE TO COVER ALL OR MOST OF THEIR BASIC NEEDS. FURTHERMORE, ONLY AROUND A THIRD REPORT FEELING SAFE IN THEIR CURRENT LOCATIONS.

KEY INDICATORS ON THE CURRENT SITUATION OF REFUGEE RETURNEES

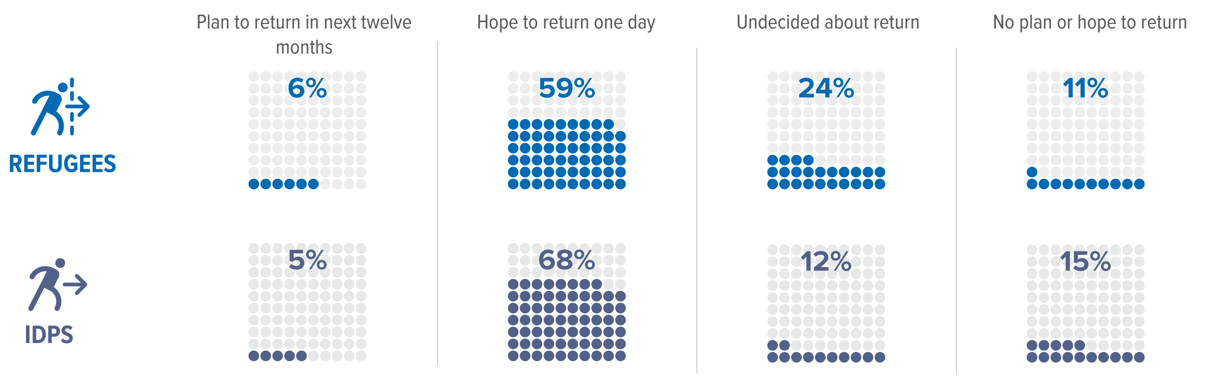
	Of those who were separated from relatives were able to reunite with all or some of them	Report feeling safe in their current place of residence	Are currently working	Report being able to cover all or most of their basic needs	Report concrete plans to move within the next twelve months
REFUGEE RETURNEES	88%	37%	50%	27%	3%

- Among refugee returnees who indicated having been separated from relatives due to the full-scale war (**78 per cent**), the majority had managed to reunite with all or some of them upon their return (**88 per cent**), although with a lower proportion among those who returned to a place different than the one before the full-scale war (**71 per cent**).
- The vast majority of refugees who returned to their place of origin were able to go back to their previous property or dwelling (**92 per cent**). Among those who returned to a different place, **27 per cent** report their previous dwelling was significantly damaged and **13 per cent** were uncertain about its status.
- Only **37 per cent** of refugee returnees report feeling safe in their current locations, although with a higher proportion among those who returned to a different place compared to those who returned to their place of origin (**47** vs. **33 per cent**). Perceptions of safety were also higher among those residing in western or central oblasts (close to **50 per cent**) and lower among those residing in the east (**24 per cent**).
- **Half** of refugee returnee respondents are currently working (compared to **39 per cent** among IDPs), with the remaining being unemployed (**15 per cent**) or not economically active (**35 per cent**, mainly retirees and fulltime caregivers). Those currently residing in Kyiv city are more likely to be working (**65 per cen**t), likely linked to the fact that there is a higher prevalence of adult(s) without dependents.
- Of those currently working, **30 per cent** report their employment is of a lower level compared to the one they had before, while **10 per cent** indicate their employment is of a higher level, including those who were not working before.
- Compared to their expectations before returning, a significant proportion of refugee returnees report that economic opportunities are worse than they thought they would be (**55 per cent**), with higher incidence among those currently residing in the south and east of the country (close to **60 per cent**).
- Only **27 per cent** of refugee returnees reported being able to cover all or most of their basic needs, although this was the case for **47 per cent** of refugee returnees currently residing in Kyiv city. A much lower proportion of households composed only of older persons reported being able to cover all or most of their basic needs (**14 per cent**). There are also differences among households where respondent is currently working, with **34 per cent** of them reporting being able to cover all or most of their needs, compared to households where respondent is unemployed (**20 per cent**) or not economically active (**18 per cent**).
- Only a small minority (**3 per cent**) reported concrete plans to move within the next twelve months, although approximately **a quarter** were still unsure of their plans. The vast majority of those planning to move reported intentions to leave the country (**60 per cent**).

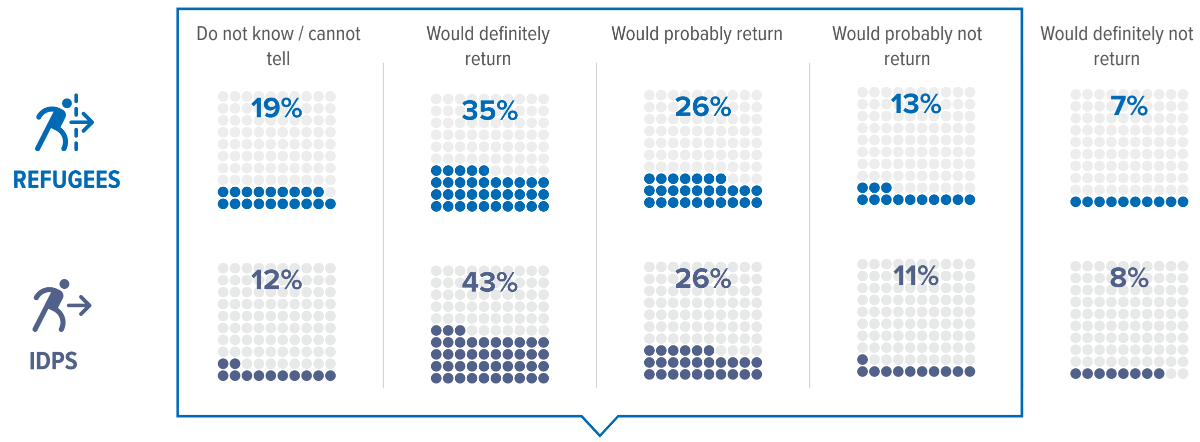
Kukhari village, Kyiv oblast, Ukraine: *Halyna walks in the yard of her house that was repaired by UNHCR after it was destroyed as a result of hostilities © UNHCR/Alina Kovalenko*

Results at a glance

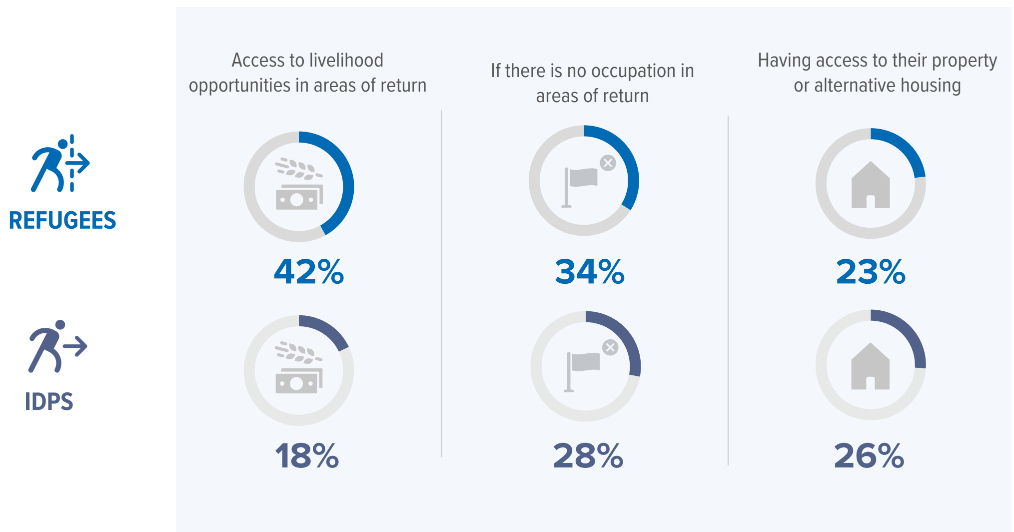
INTENTIONS TO RETURN AMONG REFUGEES AND IDPS



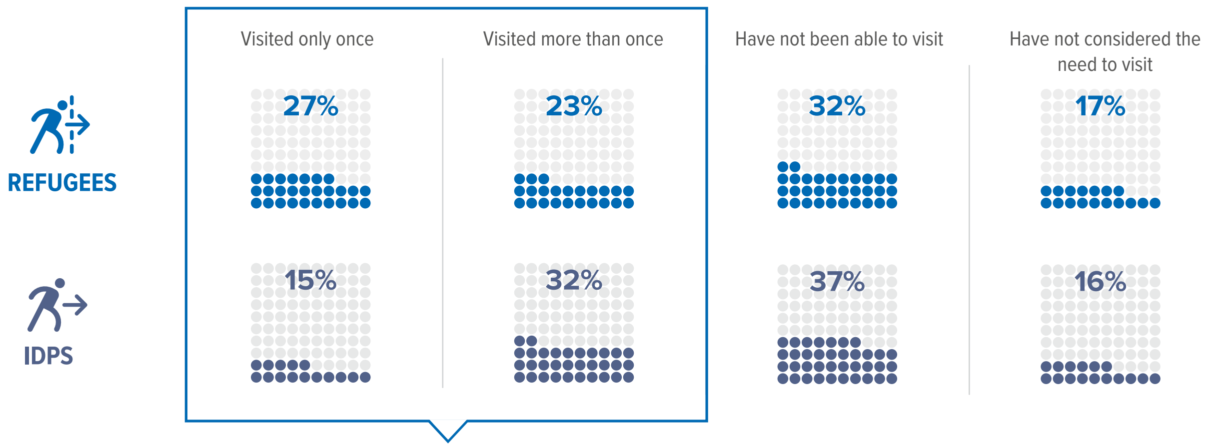
INTENTIONS TO RETURN IF THE FULL-SCALE WAR ENDS WITHIN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS



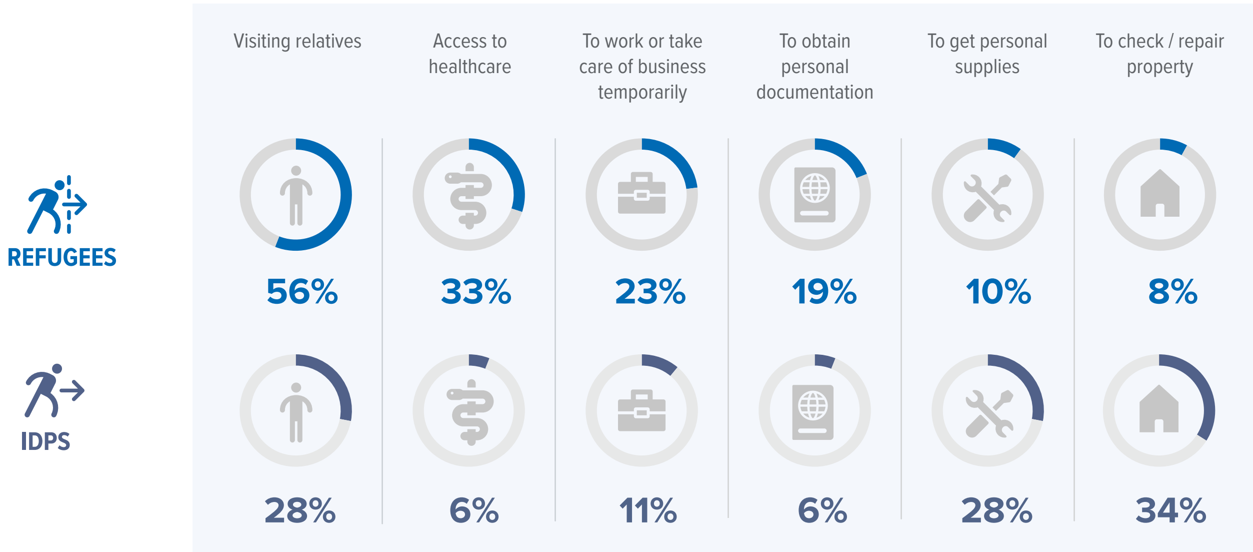
ADDITIONAL FACTORS THAT WOULD ENABLE DECISIONS TO RETURN IF THE FULL-SCALE WAR ENDS



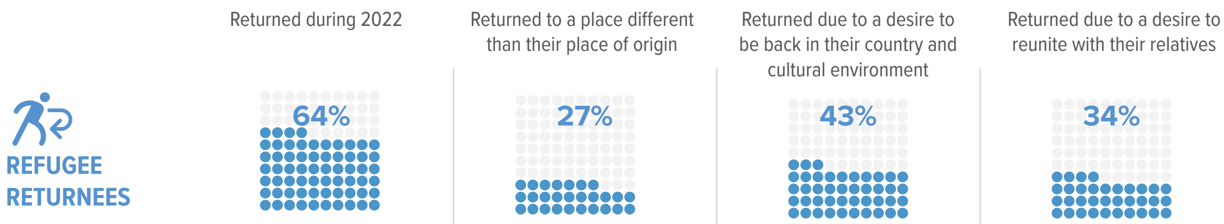
SHORT-TERM VISITS TO UKRAINE / PLACE OF ORIGIN BY REFUGEES AND IDPS



MAIN REASONS FOR SHORT-TERM VISITS TO UKRAINE / PLACE OF ORIGIN



REFUGEE RETURNEES EXPERIENCES



HOUSEHOLD PROFILES

	Refugees	IDPs	Refugees Rturrnees
One or more adults (18-59) without dependents	31%	31%	18%
Only one adult (18-59) with dependents	31%	21%	26%
Two or more adults (18-59) with dependents	28%	27%	33%
One or more older persons (60+)	10%	21%	13%

PLACES OF ORIGIN AND DISPLACEMENT

	Originally from the East and South of Ukraine	Arrived at current location in 2022	Dwelling in place of origin damaged or unknown status	Spouse and/or sons / daughters still in place of origin
REFUGEES	56%	81%	30%	36%
IDPS	89%	76%	54%	12%
REFUGEE RETURNEES	46%	64%	16%	n.a.

KEY SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICATORS

	Employed or self-employed	Receiving social protection or cash assistance	Income is enough to cover all or most basic needs	In private accommodation (inc. subsidized)
REFUGEES	45%	55%	40%	38%
IDPS	39%	70%	17%	55%
REFUGEE RETURNEES	50%	45%	27%	83%

Shevchenkove village, Mykolaiv oblast Ukraine:
Halyna stands inside her damaged house, that is being repaired with construction materials provided by UNHCR. Following heavy shelling in summer 2022, she and her family of three children and two grandchildren were forced to leave to Moldova. Later, they decided to return to Ukraine as they were missing their relatives too much.
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SUMMARY FINDINGS

February 2024

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