



# Child Protection Monitoring Report

“Don’t let Ukrainian  
children be lonely”

June-September 2023

# Child PM Report

*“If you want to help children, you should be there for them. You know how difficult is this period in our life? The period when we must make all those serious decisions about our future, while being in a completely new environment and witnessing how our home country is getting destroyed.”*

(Male, 16, Warsaw)

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 **CONTEXT**

**After almost two years of the escalation of the war in Ukraine - nearly one million refugees are currently registered in Poland, most of whom are women and children. This represents 2.5% of Poland's population.<sup>1</sup> As of June 2023, approximately 1.3 million children, with a nearly equal split of boys and girls, were under temporary protection in the EU. The largest number of children are registered in Poland (430,165), followed by Germany (358,215) and the Czech Republic (95,685).<sup>2</sup>**

The best interest of the child (Article 3) and a child's right to express their views freely (Article 12) represent fundamental principles outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and other relevant international agreements.<sup>3</sup> In reality, very often the voices of refugee children, especially regarding their safety, are not heard. That is why the IRC's Child Protection Monitoring activities are exclusively based on conversations with children refugees from Ukraine.

Refugee children acknowledge the unlikelihood of returning to their home country in the near future, a circumstance that may significantly impact their educational pursuits and early career prospects. Despite these challenges, they remain dedicated to attending school, driven by the aspiration to create both short-term and long-term opportunities for themselves.

Their ambitions include passing examinations, advancing their education, and nurturing dreams of becoming professionals. In addition to their educational goals, they also seek to form meaningful friendships, pursue happiness, and actively contribute to their current communities. However, the realization of these aspirations is impeded by various protection risks, as detailed in this report.

These Ukrainian refugees grapple with heightened challenges, including adapting to changes in their school environment, lifestyle adjustments, social difficulties, acculturation stress, disruptions in friendships, and the separation of families. Through interviews conducted for this report, it is evident that they face prominent risks such as social isolation, feelings of loneliness, educational obstacles, and instances of discrimination.

# METHODOLOGY

June 2023 - September 2023

50 interviews with children from Ukraine, aged 12-17 were conducted

In addition to General Protection Monitoring activities, the IRC conducts Child Protection (CP) Monitoring. The aim of this activity is to explore the perspective of children from Ukraine (age 12-17) on their situation in Poland.

An approach based on child participation allows to better understand the best interests of each individual child. Monitoring focuses on the psycho-social consequences of displacement for Ukrainian children refugees, their perception of safety in Poland, their support networks (relationships with family and peers), and their integration into the host community.

Much of the research regarding the situation of displaced children is done through the lens of their parents'/guardians' perspective. Less attention is paid to the voices of children themselves. CP Monitoring follows a children-centered approach and focuses on the data collected directly from a child.

Each interview is preceded by the consent expressed by the child and his or her legal guardian.

The guardian also completes the demographic data, including age, gender, household composition, disabilities, or chronic illnesses of the child. Interviews take place in public spaces, and parents/guardians are absent.

The preference is for the interviews to be conducted by two interviewers (one conducting interview, while the other takes notes).

Moreover, all quotes and notes are translated into English from both Ukrainian and Russian.



## Methods

Semi-structured interviews, that allow for a balance between standardized questions and the flexibility to explore individual experiences and perspectives.

The flexible nature of these interviews can help build trust between the interviewers and the children.

## Sampling

Purposive, non-probabilistic sampling was used.

Since the aim was to obtain an in-depth qualitative analysis, these results should not be generalized for the overall population of Ukrainian teenagers in Poland.



## Child-Centered Approach

Prioritizes the perspectives, needs, and experiences of children in research or interventions. It involves actively engaging children in the process considering their input valuable and utilizing child-friendly methods to ensure their comfort and effective communication.

# LIMITATIONS

June 2023 - September 2023

50 interviews with children  
from Ukraine, aged 12-17 were  
conducted

- The selection of participants depends on the availability and particular characteristics of the respondent (e.g., age, nationality, specific experience, possibilities of reaching respondents).
- Almost all of the participants were Ukrainian citizens. There were only one Third Country National (TCN) participant, from Belarus.
- The interviewer's impact and the social desirability effect (the tendency to present one's behaviors and thoughts favorably) are more prominent in qualitative research, particularly in semi-structured interviews, made by adults with children.
- Achieving complete neutrality in these interviews is challenging since the interviewer's biases cannot be eliminated.
- Lower degree of cross-interview comparability than in quantitative research: considering the interviewer and social desirability effect, but also the space and surroundings changing from interview to interview - the comparability of results in qualitative research is generally lower than in quantitative one.
- The quotes and notes are translated from Ukrainian or Russian into English, which may introduce issues related to the accuracy and nuances of the children's original expressions, potentially affecting the validity of the findings.

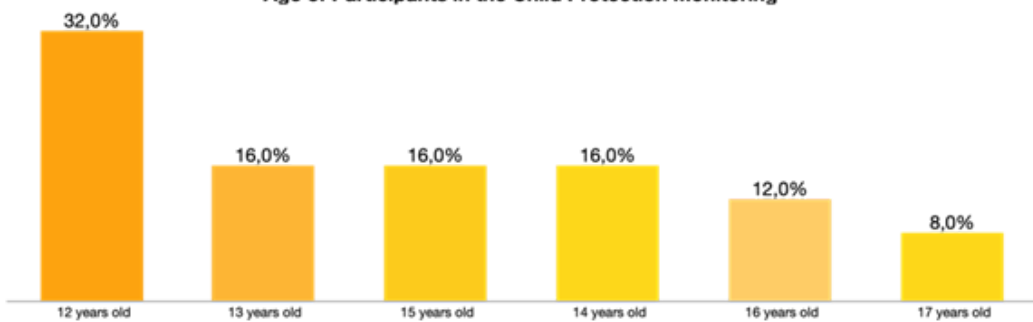


# DEMOGRAPHICS

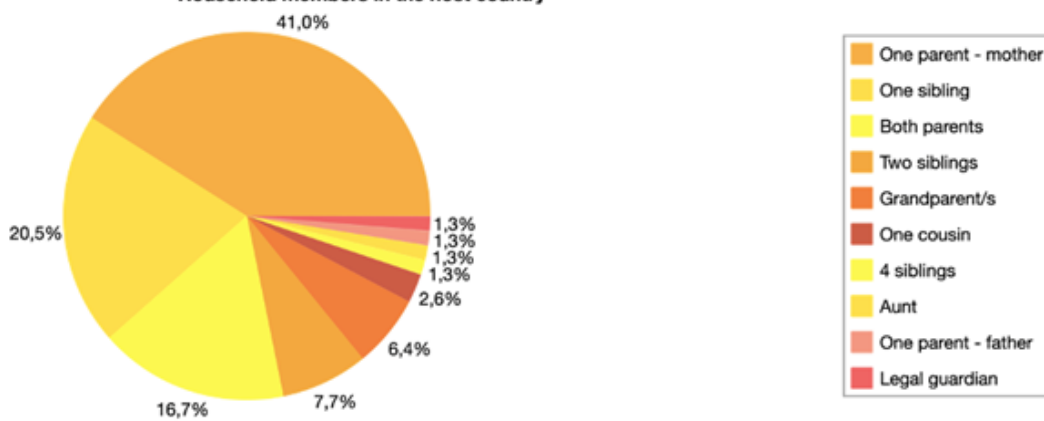
The largest group of interviewees was formed by individuals of 12 years of age (32%), while the smallest group comprised the oldest children at the age of 17 years (8%).

The division is quite diverse in terms of place of origin (with more children coming from Kyiv and Kharkiv). More girls participated in the monitoring (62%), while boys made up 38% of the respondents.

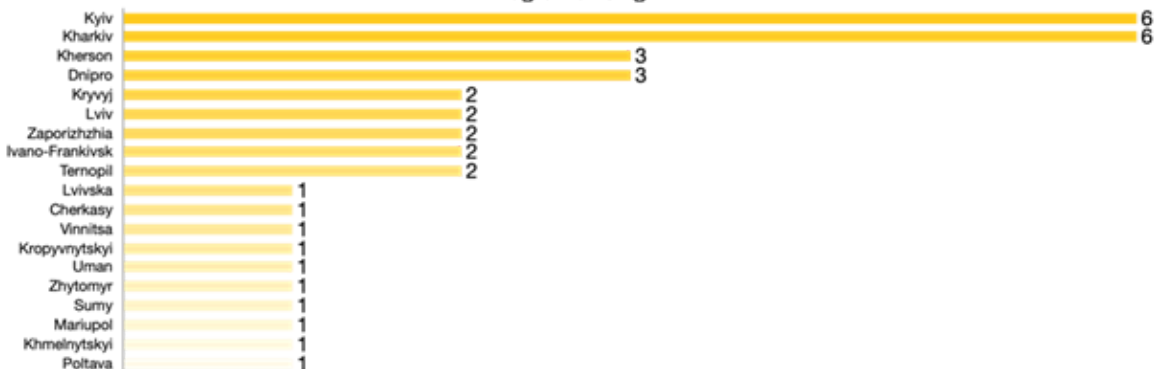
Age of Participants in the Child Protection Monitoring



Household members in the host country <sup>4</sup>



Region of Origin



# KEY FINDINGS

## PROTECTION RISKS

### RISK 1: Social Isolation and Loneliness

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The data from interviews with refugee children from Ukraine highlights significant challenges related to social isolation and loneliness.

The identified risks, consist of lack of contact with Polish peers, cultural differences and adaptation difficulties, barriers in education (e.g., classes, exclusively with Ukrainian students, or children who attend only Ukrainian online school), disrupted friendships and even abruptly interrupted passions and separated family ties.

Many respondents express a lack of friends or meaningful connections in their new environment.

*"I don't have any contact with Polish people my age because I don't feel safe here in Poland"* (Female, 12, Warsaw).

More than 80% of 50 participants indicated difficulties in forming friendships with Polish children and teenagers (and in some cases, Ukrainian peers as well). They describe feelings of isolation, limited communication, and the absence of social activities.

The children express a desire to make social contacts and friendships but have difficulty making them. Among the reasons noted are language barriers, and cultural differences.

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**They describe feelings of isolation, limited communication, and the absence of social activities.**

*"We are going through so much stress. Not everyone can do it alone. One of my friends figures out what to do with his life, without any engagement, consideration, or care, he just chooses anything, whatever it is, even for his future career and future life. Please write this down, it's very important. Don't let Ukrainian children be lonely in such hard times."* (Male, 16, Warsaw)

In the case of children refugees who were satisfied with their level of Polish language proficiency, they typically mentioned a lack of issues related to making friends and loneliness.

Identified factors influencing the protection risks:

- Language barriers
- Cultural differences
- Disruption of friendships
- Disruption of passions

*"I don't have any Polish friends, not because I don't want to, but I don't know where to find them. I would say that I have very little contact with Polish teenagers in general. And, even if I would meet some, my Polish is not fluent enough to have a normal conversation, they would be bored talking to me, I think such talk would be uncomfortable for everyone."* (Male, 15, Warsaw)





***„I don't have any Polish communication skills. I am freaking out when I need to speak Polish. When I am at school, I hope that no Polish person will talk to me, so I don't have to talk back. If it happens, I try to answer with mimics or gestures, or very quietly. I do understand everything, it's just I am so afraid to speak.”***  
**(Female, 14, Warsaw)**

### **Language barriers:**

Almost 40% of the interviewees attended some form of Polish language lessons (online or in-person, or as part of their school activities). Still, more than half of the individuals assessed their language skills as insufficient.

*“Everything is different here. I am struggling with Polish language and integration with locals in general.”*  
**(Female, 14, Siedlce)**

*“I have joined four Polish language courses, so I'm learning it hard with other Ukrainians.”*  
**(Male, 12, Warsaw)**

*„My Polish isn't good. I feel uncomfortable because of this fact. It's a pity, that I don't communicate with Polish teenagers a lot.”*  
**(Female, 15, Warsaw)**

Some people mentioned positive language improvements. About 20% of the children have no communication problems.

*“In the beginning, life in Poland was challenging, but later, when my Polish improved, I started to feel the same as in Ukraine.”*  
**(Male, 12, Warsaw)**

*“After a brief period, all my language-related discomfort disappeared, and everything became as normal as in Ukrainian school. I became friends with everyone. Now, my Polish level is very good, so I don't need to join any courses to improve it anymore.”*  
**(Male, 14, Katowice)**

### **Cultural differences:**

The initial struggle with local cuisine is a common experience. Nevertheless, it is not a persistent challenge for most.

*„If I could bring something from Ukraine to Poland it would be food. From Poland to Ukraine, that would be salary.”*  
**(Male, 15, Warsaw)**

*„I do miss Ukrainian food and I find that food ingredients are not as good quality in here as they are in Ukraine.”*  
**(Male, 15, Warsaw)**

*„I like that there are nice roads in Poland, but the food is better in Ukraine.”*  
**(Female, 14, Warsaw)**

Children observed also differences in communication styles. Some feel that Polish friends are more expressive, while they are more familiar with calmer and reserved communication. Some of the cultural differences may be compounded by age differences.

Such intergenerational clashes in schools highlight the differing interests of young people.

*“I would say that Ukrainian students had normal communication with Polish students. Polish students are a bit different, maybe because of different interests. It is somehow hard to define what the difference actually is.”*  
**(Male, 16, Warsaw)**





***“I like cooking, especially desserts, and doing handicrafts. Back in Ukraine, I used to practice yoga for 6 years. I had many awards, but since I came to Poland, I lost interest in it.”***

**(Female, 14, Warsaw)**

**Disruption of friendships:**

*“I can’t talk to my friends in Ukraine, I feel guilty that I’m safe now, while they are still in danger in Ukraine.”*

(Female, 17, Siedlce)

Leaving behind friends in Ukraine has an emotional impact on children. They miss their friends and are saddened by the separation. Some express guilt for having left while their friends remain in Ukraine, potentially facing danger.

*“I have got two best friends in Kharkiv. I don’t know what has happened to one of them (he doesn’t pick up the phone), but I talk a lot to the other one”.*

(Male, 12, Katowice)

While some children maintain contact with their Ukrainian friends online, challenges such as poor internet connections can limit their ability to keep in touch. Lost or infrequent contact with friends contributes to the sense of disconnect.

*“When I moved to Poland, I lost contact with my Ukrainian friends.”*

(Male, 17, Warsaw)

They mention having had more friends and being more socially active in Ukraine. More than 30% of the interviewees indicated that they are less active in Poland and are more likely to stay at home.

*“I don’t have many friends except my boyfriend. My friends in Ukraine have different problems now. We can’t connect as we used to.”*

(Female, 17, Siedlce)

*“I do talk sometimes to Ukrainian friends online, but they have bad internet connection, so it’s hard to keep in touch with them”.*

(Male, 12, Warsaw)

**Disruption of passions:**

*“I love singing. But here, instead of this, I spend my free time using my mobile phone”.*

(Female, 15, Warsaw)

When refugee children mention that they can no longer engage in their hobbies and passions in their host country, it signifies a loss of personal fulfillment. Some have stopped drawing, while others have abandoned their passions, in which they previously achieved success, such as dance or yoga. Some children express a fear of rekindling their passions due to language barriers, but in most cases, they mention a "loss of interest," which has often been replaced by increased time spent on their phones.

These hobbies provided them with a sense of purpose, enjoyment, and accomplishment in their lives. Arguably, the inability to pursue these interests can lead to a sense of emptiness and loss of identity.

Hobbies and passions often serve as outlets for emotional expression and stress relief. Without them, children may struggle to cope with the emotional challenges of being a refugee. Moreover, this can lead to a loss of potential and the inability to capitalize on their talents.

Also, it can lead to social isolation, hindering their integration and relationship-building in the host country.

# PROTECTION RISKS

## RISK 2: Dual-Track Education, Uncertainty, and Integration Challenges

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Among the reasons for opting for online education only or attending two schools simultaneously are language barriers and the related adaptational difficulties, accounting for 70% of the monitoring participants. The next decisive factor is the uncertainty about the future and the desire to return to Ukraine, thus attempting to maintain their Ukrainian education.

*"We made this decision because we are not sure where my future will be. We thought that we might go back to Ukraine any time, so staying without Ukrainian education was not an option."*  
(Male, 16, Katowice)

Another argument revolves around nostalgia and longing for friends from Ukrainian schools, along with the desire for stability by "being close to what is familiar." These experiences of the children highlight the stress, uncertainty, and integration challenges they face when balancing Ukrainian and Polish education, which can potentially impact their well-being and prospects.

According to the IRC General Protection Monitoring, by September 2023 (in Q2 and Q3 report), almost half of Ukrainian school-age children were not registered in Polish schools. Data from the Ministry of Education and Science in October 2023 indicated that there were only 179,677 Ukrainian refugee children enrolled in the Polish education system.

The children we spoke with could be divided into three groups. These include children who exclusively continue with the Ukrainian curriculum through online schooling (30%), children who only attend Polish schools (35%), and those who combine both systems (35%). This means that 65% of interview participants are still enrolled in online education.

*"Doing 100% online last year of high school was very demanding. It was much more self-learning than in Ukraine, we had more homework and self-study materials than the actual classes."*  
(Female, 13, Warsaw)

Among the challenges and issues related to online education and dual-track education, children pointed out the difficulties of adapting to self-study, independent online learning, and feeling left to "learn on their own". The lack of interaction and contact with teachers was also seen as problematic, resulting in reduced educational support.<sup>9</sup> Some older respondents criticized the inadequacy of the (Ukrainian) curriculum, emphasizing that it focused on outdated problems and literary works that were disconnected from contemporary issues and the challenges faced by Ukrainian children.

*"We were hoping to talk about war, about how it makes us feel, while all they care about is this ancient history and making sure we do not look at the monitor while reciting the poems. I got a low grade for my essay on the future of Ukrainian literature because I argued that Ukrainian literature is dead, it does not address the problems of young people at all, and it's written by old people for old people."*  
(Female, 17, Siedlce)

An additional challenge in pursuing education in Polish schools are the uncertainties regarding the recognition of their prior education, which contributes to planning education and stress-related problems.

Furthermore, there are limited opportunities for children to integrate effectively. Even if Ukrainian children attend Polish schools, their interactions are often largely limited to their fellow peers.

# PROTECTION RISKS

## RISK 2: Dual-Track Education, Uncertainty, and Integration Challenges

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Often, this is a result of the class structure where the majority (sometimes 100%) of the students are from Ukraine.

*"I am going to a Polish school, but most of my classmates are Ukrainians. There were only two Polish students, and they won't be there next year."*

(Male, 14, Warsaw)

Furthermore, children who attend both types of schools, point out the excess of responsibilities and the resulting anxieties.

*"We managed to squeeze me into Polish school with only Ukrainian students (...). I also studied in Ukrainian school. It was too much. Per day I would maybe have one hour off, when I don't have to do anything and can surf my phone. Other time of the day I would be very busy and going to bed late. I don't want this next year. I don't like online education; it is not for me. I need someone to be nearby me and point out with the finger things I don't understand."*

(Female, 12, Warsaw)



Fot. Karolina Jonderko for the IRC

# PROTECTION RISKS

## RISK 3: Discrimination and bullying

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While experiences of racism are part of the daily lives of many refugee children, these experiences are usually reported from the perspective of adults rather than directly from kids. In the voices of more than 36% of the monitoring participants, there are stories of discrimination, primarily experienced from their Polish and Ukrainian peers. However, there have been instances of discrimination from adults, for example, during school enrollment or when searching for accommodation.

*"I often have bad experiences in Warsaw just because I am Ukrainian. Once, I applied to a music school, I got the same number of points as a Polish guy. The secretary of the school told me, directly into my face, that they will enroll another boy, not me, because I am Ukrainian."*

In school settings and among peers, discrimination, violence, and bullying most revolved around language barriers and language discrimination, as well as issues related to nationality.

*„I witnessed how Polish were laughing at other Ukrainians because of their wrong pronunciation, they make jokes, I am so afraid it will happen to me, so I try not to speak Polish and don't want to make friends with them."*  
(Female, 14, Warsaw)

In several statements (for example, in the story of the 12-year-old), alarming information about direct violence among children emerged. Some of these events involved violence related to gender, bullying, and physical harassment based on their Ukrainian identity.

*"I experienced bad situations with Polish classmates at school. Some of them were saying that they are supporting Putin, they support Russia, just because I am from Ukraine and such words would hurt me. Also, since I have a bit darker skin, some of the classmates called me "nig\*\*".*  
(Male, 13, Katowice)

*"I felt unsafe in Poland twice. One day my Ukrainian classmate hit me (punch in the stomach). I was told in the teacher's room that they would deal with this, but they didn't do anything. And it was one more situation, when another Ukrainian classmate gave me a slap in the face."*  
(Male, 12, Katowice)

Among some of the statements, there were accounts of discrimination in school that did not affect their sense of safety:

*"I have never felt in danger here, even when I was bullied by my classmates at school – I didn't feel in danger."*  
(Male, 13, Katowice)

The lack of a sense of threat from child refugees, despite the harassment, can be seen as an adaptive mechanism. Its purpose is to preserve a sense of belonging or normalcy in the host country. Such an approach suggests a possible desensitization effect, where a child becomes numb to intimidation due to repeated exposure to insecurity and chronic stress (especially when compared to the danger scale in their war-affected home country).

In the case of refugee children, we may observe a normalization of adversity. This might be a way of adapting and avoiding a continuous sense of fear. However, this messaging might indicate that some of the children lack a support in this matter.

*“I was bullied because I was Ukrainian, but also because I am a girl, some boys don’t behave with respect and crossed my boundaries, also physical. For example, once, a guy in my classroom was sitting next to me during the lesson, and the teacher asked who wanted to do something and he slapped my hip with his hand, raised my hand saying that I wanted to do that. I felt so uncomfortable but said nothing to anyone.”*

(Female, 13, Katowice)



**Alarming safety issues reported:**

Among the interviewees, four alarming stories of gender-based violence (GBV) emerged. In all cases, young girls aged 12, 14, and 15 experienced GBV in public spaces (on a bus, in a shopping center, or in their neighborhood, respectively). In another instance, sexual harassment and GBV occurred at school, involving peers. There were no reports of GBV among boys (although it does not necessarily mean it does not happen).



*“Sometimes when I go to the park, adults talk to me, one guy said, “You are pretty”. He is old, probably in his 40s. I did not feel comfortable. Other times, some guys were taking pictures of me and my sister and laughing, you could hear them saying that we are pretty girls. I don’t tell anyone about it, my mother will be worried and will not allow me to go to the park.”*

(Female, 14, Siedlce)

# VULNERABILITY FACTORS

## Socioeconomic status

Refugee children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face additional challenges in dealing with discrimination, those who benefit from humanitarian aid and social benefits also can be more affected by stigmatization.

## Language barriers and cultural differences

which may lead to ridicule and exclusion. Differences in cultural norms and behavior, making them susceptible to bullying.

## Gender

Refugee may experience violence differently, with the added dimension of gender-based violence further complicating their experiences.

## Location

Smaller and isolated areas may not guarantee humanitarian aid access, struggle with the availability of places in the education system and have limited economic opportunities.

## Ethnic and national identity

which can make refugee children targets for discrimination.

## Disability

Children with disabilities encounter prevalent disability-related stigma, barriers in accessing essential services and inaccessible social events, facing challenges in education, healthcare, and public spaces.

## Trauma

The general trauma of the refugee experience, which can affect their ability to cope with additional stressors.

## Legal status

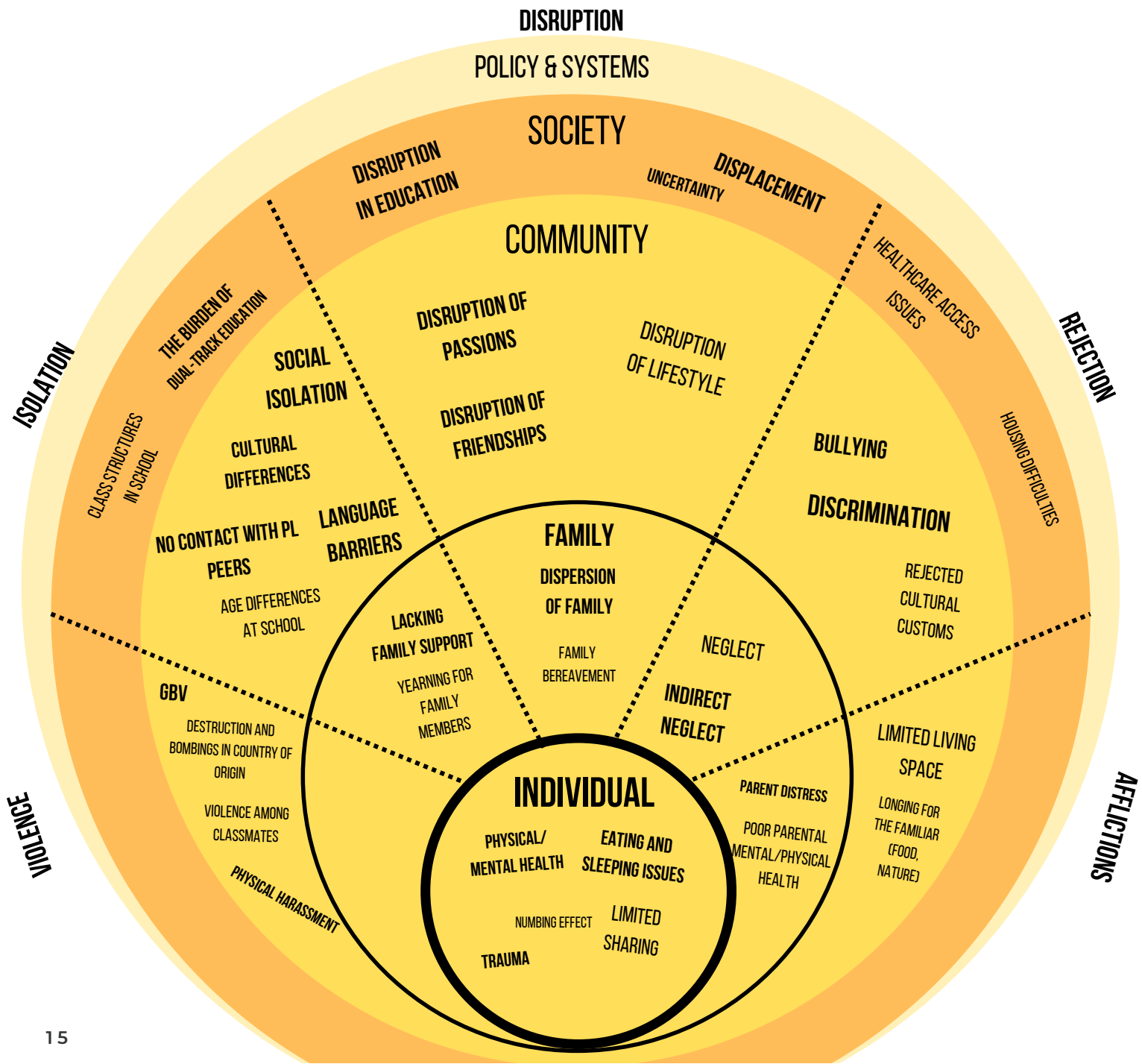
Refugeehood may intersect with other vulnerabilities. Those with uncertain legal status may be more reluctant to report discrimination or seek assistance (e.g., those facing loss of UKR status and access to social benefits).



# EFFECTS OF THE THREAT

All the identified factors contributing to current risks operate at several levels: individual, family, community, and society. Below, we present their effect on the population of Ukrainian children refugees.

Nested Risk Circles:<sup>10</sup>  
Ukrainian Children Refugees in Poland





# EFFETCS OF THE THREAT

## RISK 1: Social Isolation and Loneliness

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### Risk 1. Effects:

The threat of social isolation among refugee children poses multifaceted risks, affecting their emotional, social, and personal development.

- **Educational Challenges:** Language barriers and the absence of social connections can disrupt the educational experience, affecting academic performance and engagement.
- **Psychosocial Impact:** Social isolation and loneliness have a significant psychosocial impact on refugee children, potentially leading to depression, anxiety, and a sense of hopelessness.
- **Premature transition to adulthood:** “Back in Kharkiv I used to be a child, now I feel like I am adult” (Female, 12, Warsaw). Refugee children often miss out on essential childhood experiences like playing and forming friendships, which impact their emotional and social development. Additionally, these children may take on extra responsibilities to support their families in the host country (helping with household tasks, acting as interpreters for their families, or even searching for job to support the family financially). “Most of the household’s stuff is on me, since I am the oldest in the family and I am always at home” (Female, 16, Warsaw). Moreover, by being exposed early to trauma, they may develop negative coping mechanisms to navigate complex emotions and unfamiliar environments.

***“I think I’m more mature now and much more connected to the Ukrainian context now compared to when I was in Ukraine. I monitor all the apps with alarms for my region and often wake up at night to check the status. I’m scared of planes and helicopters; I react when I hear a plane or helicopter approaching.”***  
**(Female, 17, Siedlce)**

*“I used to be happier. Now, I have many responsibilities and decisions about my future. All this affected me so much. I became less communicative, less confident, more closed, and sadder”.*

(Female, 14, Siedlce)

- **Physical health:** negative coping mechanisms, such as overuse of technology (“My whole life is in my phone. My family, things for fun, or useful things like finding directions or useful information. In summertime I used my phone a lot, from 10-15 hours a day” CP23), and potential eating and sleeping disorders – can have detrimental effects on physical health.

*“I have got eating problems. I eat much more now because of stress (because of my family problems and because of war). And I have a nervous tic (on my face and in my hand).”*

(Male, 12, Katowice)

# EFFECTS OF THE THREAT

## RISK 1: Social Isolation and Loneliness

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Half of the monitoring participants experienced issues related to sleep (irregular hours, difficulty falling asleep, insomnia, and resorting to sleeping pills, waking up at night to check the news, excessive sleep duration, or insufficient sleep) or eating (irregular meal patterns and neglecting to eat, stress-eating and gaining weight, or loss of appetite).

**“Also, I have some stomach problems, so I can’t eat breakfast, I used to have them in Ukraine, but it was gone. After the war started these issues came back. I want to go to a psychologist maybe it can help to fix it.”**

**(Female, 16, Warsaw)**



**“It’s also about sleeping through the night – my parents put me on sleeping pills when the war started because I could not sleep at all.”**

**(Male, 15, Warsaw).**

Fot. Karolina Jonderko for IRC

# EFFECTS OF THE THREAT

## RISK 2: Dual-Track Education, Uncertainty, and Integration Challenges

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### Risk 2. effects:

- **Physical Effects:** The stress, uncertainty, overexertion and fatigue, stemming from dual-track education can lead to physical health issues and negative coping mechanism such as sleep disturbances, irregular eating patterns.
- **Social and Psychosocial Effects – limited integration and exclusion:** The dual-track education (or staying only in Ukrainian online education) system contributes to social isolation, as Ukrainian children even in Polish schools often find themselves interacting primarily with fellow Ukrainians. The creation of so-called “foreign classes” and separation of children definitely reduces their integration possibilities and reinforces language barriers. Another effect is an increased risk of nationality-based conflicts at school.

*„I don't have any Polish teens around, so if I talk Polish it's only with adults or elderly. Or, if we are joining some courses or classes with my mom then we are surrounded by Ukrainians.”*

(Female, 15, Warsaw)

- **Legal and Material Effects:** Moreover, the uncertainty surrounding the recognition of prior education can result in difficulties planning and pursuing education, causing stress, and affecting the children's academic trajectory. Additionally, the decision to opt for online education due to language barriers and adaptational issues may impact the children's access to educational resources and their future material well-being.

*“At the same time, I had to continue my school in Ukraine. Who knows what the future will be, I didn't feel secure to drop out of 9th grade. I had to graduate, so after I could join college and get some profession.”*

(Female, 14, Warsaw)



Fot. Karolina Jonderko for IRC

# EFFETCS OF THE THREAT

## RISK 3: Discrimination and bullying

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### Risk 3. effects:

- **Physical Effects:** discrimination and bullying can lead to physical harm, especially when it escalates to direct violence, as reported in some cases. Physical aggression, such as slapping and hitting, may result in injuries and physical discomfort for the affected refugee children.

Few girls have reported experiencing gender-based violence, including physical harassment, mostly from their male classmates. This can lead to physical and emotional trauma, affecting their overall well-being.

- **Social and Psychosocial Effects:** discrimination can cause emotional distress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Such experiences can lead to social isolation and affect the quality of social competence in peer relationships.
- **Educational Effects:** discrimination and bullying in educational settings can hinder learning and academic performance. Refugee children may become reluctant to engage in educational activities, impacting their educational attainment and future prospects. These experiences can influence their personal development, lack of enthusiasm for learning and academic trajectories.

The results show that schools are not free from discrimination. Interviews with children reveal the more individual dimension of this problem.



Fot. Anna Liminowicz for the IRC

# SAFETY PERCEPTION

## based on the social ecological model

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Understanding the perception of safety among refugee children provides valuable insights into their needs and priorities. Among their statements, several categories of safety perceptions emerged. Most often, the children emphasized geographical-centric safety and family-centric safety.

### Family level

#### Family-Centric Safety:

in this case children's understanding of safety as primarily related to the well-being of loved ones reflects a protective instinct and a desire to ensure the security of their family members. This is a valuable aspect of their safety understanding, emphasizing the importance of family bonds.

*"Safety is when all the family is together, everything is calm around."*

(Female, 12, Warsaw)

This underscores the idea that for some children family unity is a source of stability and reassurance. They feel secure when their loved ones are nearby, providing emotional support and stability.

*"Safety is when you are surrounded with people you feel comfortable with. So, I need my friends and family, who are in Ukraine, to feel fully safe."*

(Female, 15, Katowice)

The hope of being reunited with family and friends in Ukraine is a strong driver of their sense of safety. They see it as contingent upon the prospect of returning home and being with their loved ones once again.

*"I am at home with my family almost all the time, so I feel safe in Poland."*

(Male, 12, Katowice)

*"It's when your loved people surround you."*

(Male, 15, Warsaw)

Loved ones can be perceived as a protective shield. The children rely on their family for emotional support, companionship, and a sense of belonging, making them feel secure in the midst of adversity.

*"Safety is when there are people around who can protect me. At first, I felt weird in Poland, not in my plate. But very fast I started to feel better. Now, I realize that there is more order, more security services. I often see police near my house, it makes me feel safe and protected."*

(Female, 13, Warsaw)

### Community and social levels

#### Geographical centric safety:

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Besides the importance of community and broader society, geographical displacement and the safety implications linked to it, remarkably in terms of war/lack thereof, play a crucial role in the perception of children and their families. In these cases, children highlighted the role of geographical location in shaping their individual feelings of safety. They also made comparisons, often contrasting their sense of security in Polish and Ukrainian societies.

*"I wasn't allowed to go for a walk myself back in Kharkiv. I was small and the area I used to live in was very dangerous. So, I really had never walked alone there. At the same time, I had never had any bad incidents. Here, I can go out as I want. Safety for me is when I am protected and in comfort."*



# SAFETY PERCEPTION

## based on the social ecological model

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In many children's accounts, safe spaces were associated with "peaceful, solitary walks in the city in the evenings." The community and social environments and independence played a significant role. In several statements (n=4), there were indications of feeling safer in smaller cities, closer to nature (compared to their previous experiences in Ukraine).

On the other hand, among the positives of living in Warsaw or Katowice, some mentioned the absence of stray dogs, which some of the children had negative memories of.

*"It's when I am not afraid to go out of home. When I have a space where I feel comfortable to stay with myself. When I am not afraid to walk alone in the evening. I have never felt in danger here."*

### Societal norms and policy levels

In other cases, safety took the form of adhering to societal norms and the effectiveness of law enforcement and order. This may reflect the need for predictability and the absence of potential threats:

*"I would bring to Ukraine efficacy of law. I feel that law works better in Poland, while in Ukraine it's not. That makes me feel safer in Poland."*

(Female, 15, Warsaw)

*"It's safe for me when everything is under control and when you can trust the world around you. It will be much better if there is even more control of the streets for complete safety. And also, I'm sure that it is important to adhere to social rules, and then it will be safer to live."*

(Male, 15, Warsaw)

### What does it mean for child protection?

The perceptions of safety provided through interviews with refugee children reveal important needs:

- **Emotional Support:** the importance of initiatives for maintaining connections with loved ones in both the host and home countries if they prioritize family-centric safety.
- **Legal Empowerment, Control and the need for Predictability:** Some value effective law enforcement and a stable legal environment. This highlights the necessity for legal empowerment programs to help them understand their rights and responsibilities in the host country and navigate the legal system. It also underscores the importance of children's empowerment, involving them in decisions affecting their lives and providing opportunities for participation.

# RESILIENCE

## self-perception of strength and empowerment

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At the same time, over 30% of children have also noticed positive changes in themselves and report a positive self-perception of strength. Children mention new, healthier habits, both in terms of how they spend their free time and their focus on health and maintaining a balanced daily routine.

*"I am in Ukraine, and I am in Poland – these are two different people."*

(Female, 17, Warsaw)

*"I acquired new healthy habits, I try to have the same morning routine in the AM and PM e.g., for my skin care, in Ukraine I used to eat a lot of unhealthy things, but here I try to eat healthy."*

(Female, 12, Warsaw)

*"I became more sociable here. Back in Ukraine, I used to spend more time alone in front of the computer at home. I like a lot more my life now in Poland, there are so many opportunities."*

(Male, 13, Warsaw)

Additionally, more than 30% of the children share the perception of having more leisure time, which allows them to rest and engage in self-realization. With this newfound freedom, they passionately pursue their dreams and sharpen their skills through dedicated work and the pursuit of their passions.

*"In Ukraine I had no free time at all. So here I can rest much more. For example, I play computer games, read psychology books, look for scientific articles on the Internet. I have time to develop in those directions I am interested in."*

(Female, 12, Warsaw)

An example of this can be seen in the story of a 14-year-old girl, whose passion lies in drawing in the Japanese anime style. She is entirely self-taught and manages her creative pursuits while simultaneously attending both Polish and Ukrainian schools and assisting in caring for her younger siblings.

Similarly, a 15-year-old boy from Kherson has linked his future to swimming, accepted into a professional swimming team. This achievement has also motivated him to learn Polish more swiftly.

*"I train swimming professionally. Here, I got accepted into a professional swimming team, even without Polish knowledge. But of course, I had to learn some phrases fast, because technical terms in Polish are different from the one in Ukrainian. I had to understand what my coach says. Now, my Polish is good."*

(Male, 15 Warsaw)

By cultivating healthier habits, embracing their passions, and making the most of their free time, they are not merely surviving but actively shaping their own futures. Their stories demonstrate that, with support, determination and opportunity, refugee youth can emerge from difficult circumstances with newfound strength, self-belief, and an unwavering drive to succeed.

Over 45% of the participants indicated that they plan to stay in Poland due to better opportunities, both in terms of education and pursuing their passions.

The experiences of some Ukrainian refugee children reflect a broader pattern of resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity. They demonstrate remarkable positive changes in behavior and attitude, showcasing their ability to thrive despite challenging circumstances. Through their passion-driven pursuits, such as art and sports, these children exhibit unwavering determination and commitment to personal growth. Their stories exemplify the transformative power of pursuing one's interests, fostering not only skill development but also a sense of purpose and belonging.



*“My worldview has changed. I feel like my life has more colors now. I used to be very depressed in Ukraine. I didn’t have any specific plans for my future. Now, everything has changed for the better, I started to plan, to imagine my future, I started to see people and beauty around me. I am not afraid to walk outside in the evening anymore. In Kyiv, I used to live in a very dangerous district.”*

(Female, 15, Warsaw)

*“Here, I started going for a walk, shopping, having lunch by myself, and after some time I started to enjoy it. This is a big revelation that has happened to me in Poland, I discovered myself.”*

(Female, 16, Warsaw)



Fot. Tamara Kiptenko for the IRC

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Polish Government and Schools

Raising awareness and knowledge of educational authorities (at all levels) regarding different integration models and strategies for implementing integration in school settings (while allowing the preservation of cultural identity).

## Protection Sector and Humanitarian Organizations

Creating targeted child protection programs that address protection issues, mental health, and social isolation among children in host countries.

## Donors

Continuing support for programs and initiatives that address integration, social isolation and mental health of refugee children, providing opportunities for more interaction with their peers in the host communities.

Ensuring opportunities for active participation and a sense of agency for refugee children in both schools and the broader community, as well as establishing effective psychological support and tools for safeguarding the well-being of refugee children.

Continuing the thorough monitoring of the children situation and well-being, particularly focusing on protection risks (with special attention to highly vulnerable individuals, especially those outside major urban centers, or in collective accommodations) and enhanced monitoring of safety issues related to violence and gender-based violence.

Funding Child Protection programs, that promote safety and reduce violence (with its various forms) among refugee children, as well as anti-bullying and anti-discrimination campaigns within host communities and schools.

Social campaigns highlighting the positive aspects of migration for the host community and anti-discrimination campaigns (also dedicated to school-age youths).

Developing uniform guidelines for school directors managing multicultural schools (admissions, class structure, Polish language classes).

Begin monitoring the situation of unaccompanied children from Ukraine, about whom data is particularly lacking.

Creating Peer Support Networks and Peer Support Groups - support networks within schools and communities to encourage interaction and friendships between refugees and local peers, for example small groups with regular meetings, engaged in various activities, language and book clubs, cultural exchange and team-budling exercises



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Polish Government and Schools

Monitoring cases of students dropping out of the Polish education system and providing preventive support in this regard.

## Protection Sector and Humanitarian Organizations

Initiating refugee youth consultations to ensure that the voices and perspectives of children are heard and considered in the decision-making processes. This could include the formulation of consultation groups and topics, facilitation of the process, initiation of structured sessions, establishment of feedback mechanisms, and data collection for advocacy and action. They should offer capacity-building opportunities.

Avoiding the creation of foreigner-only classes that are separated from the Polish student community, and broader support from intercultural assistants.

**Mental Health Awareness Campaigns:** Conduct awareness campaigns to reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health support and inform refugee children and their families about available mental health services.

Awareness campaigns targeting Ukrainian parents about the consequences of keeping children outside the education system or relying solely on online education.

Continuing to implement projects focused on providing free, out-of-school recreation, including sports and art activities, benefits both Ukrainian and Polish children. These initiatives not only offer children opportunities for engaging in productive and developmental activities but also serve as means for building rapport and fostering integration.

# References

1. UNHCR, UNICEF (2023). Joint report: More than half of Ukrainian refugee children not enrolled in schools in Poland [available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/pl/14657-unhcr-i-unicef-edukacja.html>]
2. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023). The Russian aggression against Ukraine – Displaced children finding protection in the EU - Bulletin 3, [available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2023/ukraine-bulletin-3-2023>]
3. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (1989). United Nations.
4. In this case, it is the distribution of all emerging family members. If one parent is indicated (then the child is in the care of single parent, but may also be accompanied by siblings, grandparents, or other family members). If the number of siblings is indicated - this does not mean that the child is solely in the care of a sibling. Such cases have not arisen. The only case where the guardian was someone other than the parent - was a case of "legal guardian". In this case it was the mother of the teenager's boyfriend.
5. Report PM Q2 IRC [available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/poland/protection-monitoring-report-poland-april-june-2023>]. This is confirmed by statistics from UNHCR and UNICEF (2023).
6. RP Service (2023) Data from MEiN, UA refugee students, by school type, district and as of 2.10.2023 [available at: <https://dane.gov.pl/pl/dataset/2711>]. This data does not consider children in daycare, college students, or children who arrived from Ukraine after February 24, 2022, but do not have Ukrainian citizenship.
7. "Dual-track education" refers to the situation when children are continuing Ukrainian school curricula, followed by being enrolled also in the Polish education system.
8. We used the structure of the graph, from: Abdelhamid S, Lindert J, Fischer J, et al Negative and protective experiences influencing the well-being of refugee children resettling in Germany: a qualitative study *BMJ Open* 2023;13:e067332. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2022-067332
9. Geographical location refers to the place where children live, or lived before. In this report often means home or host state (Ukraine, Poland). This term also encompasses the cities in which children have lived or are currently residing.

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