



Out of School

Assessment on barriers to school enrolment
for Ukrainian refugee adolescents in Poland

INTRODUCTION

The „Out of School” report, commissioned by CARE International in Poland, International Rescue Committee, and Save the Children Poland, delves into one of the significant challenges confronting the education system in Poland. Thousands of Ukrainian children and youth are not attending schools, potentially compromising their social and academic development, and hindering their integration into Polish society.

One of the key findings of this study is the absence of mechanisms to monitor the number of refugee and migrant children not attending school. While estimates from various agencies vary, even conservative figures suggest that over 100,000 individuals are not physically attending school but claim to continue their education online following the Ukrainian curriculum.

Although Polish schools welcomed refugee children in March 2022, the education system was unprepared to accommodate the increased number of students and their specific needs. Challenges included language barriers and psycho-social distress related to forced displacement, separation from friends and families, and uncertainty about the future.

Over the past two years, Polish schools and civil society organizations have collaborated to address these issues. However, many efforts were short-term and project-based. It has become evident that systemic change is necessary to meet the educational needs of Ukrainian and other migrant children and youth. As Polish society becomes more diverse due to forced and voluntary migration, both Polish authorities and NGOs must find ways to integrate these children and youth, fostering their development into productive citizens and fulfilled adults in the future.

We extend our gratitude to everyone who supported this study, including our partners, donors, authorities, staff, and the Triangle team who prepared the report. Special thanks are due to all the principals, teachers, teaching and cultural assistants, and educators whose hard work and dedication have a lasting impact on the lives of refugee children and youth.

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K. Jonderko/IRC

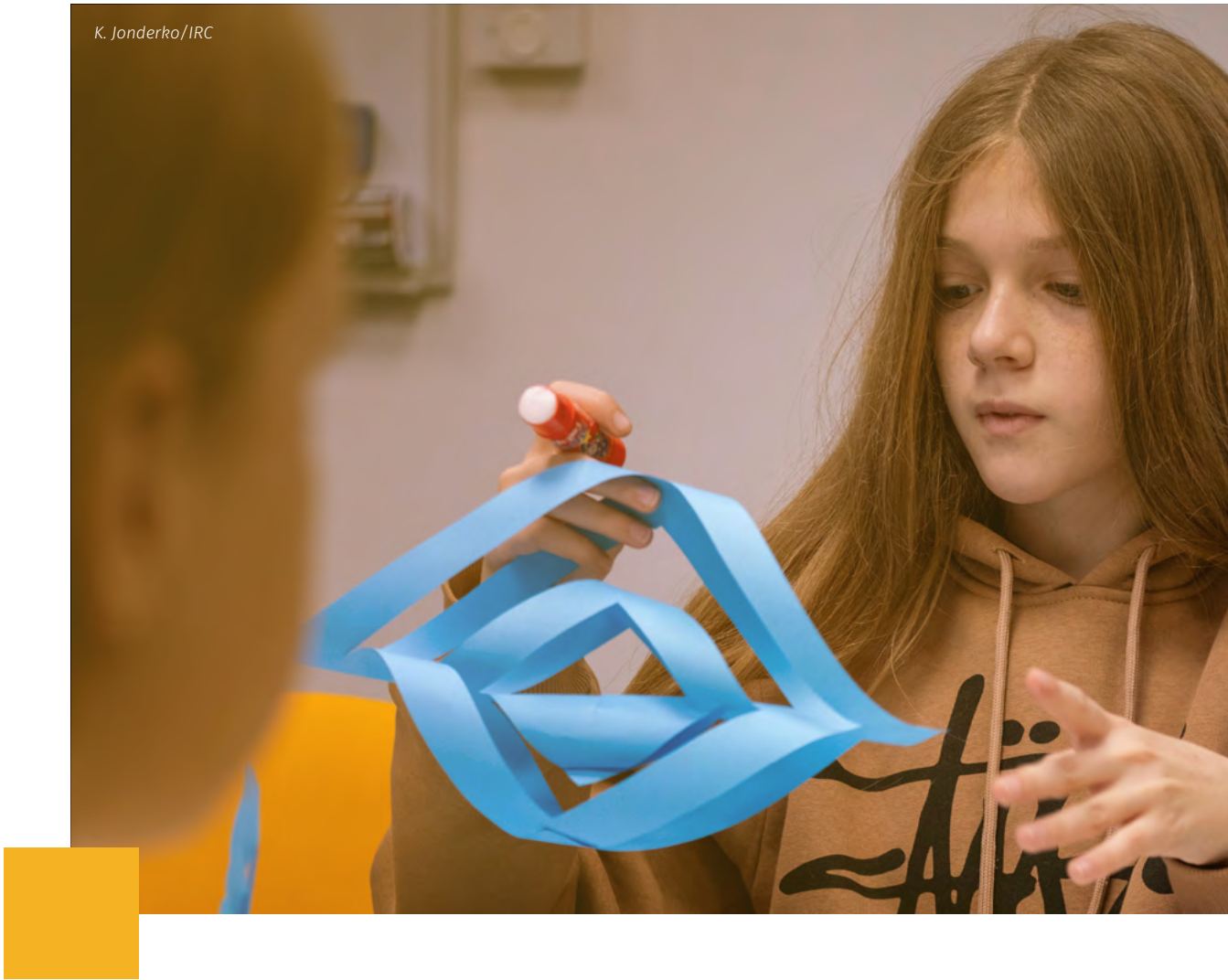


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- Ukrainian House Foundation
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Special acknowledgment is accorded to the Association of Critical Education and Syno who conducted the bulk of fieldwork for this report.



ACRONYMS

BDM	Behavioural Drivers Model
CARE	Cooperative for Resistance and Relief Everywhere
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GAGE	Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence
IDI	In-Depth Interview
INGO	International Non-Government Organisation
IRC	International Rescue Committee
KII	Key Informant Interview
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MoE	Ministry of Education ¹
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
OOS	Out-of-school
PESEL	Polish national identification number
PSEA	Prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse
SBC	Social and behavioural change
UASM	Unaccompanied and separated minors
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund

¹ On January 1, 2024, pursuant to the regulation of the Council of Ministers of December 16, 2023, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education were restored by dividing the Ministry of Education and Science.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The education context for Ukrainian refugees in Poland has been characterized by both commendable efforts on the part of governmental, nongovernmental, and international actors and significant challenges for service providers and Ukrainians alike. Following the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in February 2022, as of November 2023 an estimated 957,305 Ukrainians have been displaced in Poland, the majority of whom are women, children and the elderly.² More than half of Ukraine's children are believed to have been displaced by the war.³ In Poland, the parliament passed the "Act on Assistance," on 12 March 2022 which granted legal stay for Ukrainians and afforded Ukrainian children the right to access Polish education, and codified international standards for compulsory education. For Ukrainian adolescents in Poland, education⁴ options include Polish schools, continuing Ukrainian curriculum online, or attending the few Ukrainian schools established in Poland. Despite efforts made to ensure access to Polish education, a substantial number of adolescents do not enrol or drop out.

This study was commissioned to better understand what impacts Ukrainian adolescents' participation in the Polish school system, including barriers to entering Polish schools, push-pull factors that may inhibit enrolment, what support or coping mechanisms are

used when children and adolescents don't attend school in person, as well as what strategies might support enrolment in Polish education and resilience of Ukrainian children and adolescents.

The study incorporated a detailed literature review, direct input from 28 Key Informants (including Polish and Ukrainian educators, NGO staff and service providers, and government officials), 17 Focus Group Discussions (involving Ukrainian adolescents aged 10-18 and caregivers), and 25 In-Depth Interviews (involving a cross-section of vulnerable adolescents and caregivers, including those with disabilities). This qualitative information was supplemented by a quantitative survey involving 619 older Ukrainian adolescents and caregivers. Information was collected with protection and safeguarding principles at the forefront, and analysed along lines of gender, disability, and geographic location, with analysis incorporating feedback throughout the process.

² UNHCR, 'Multi-Sector Needs Assessment – 2022', <https://microdata.unhcr.org/index.php/catalog/826> (accessed 8.06.2023)

³ UNESCO, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ukraine-unesco-mobilizes-support-learning-continuity>.

⁴ "The Act on Assistance for Ukrainian Citizens." *InterwencjaPrawna.pl*, <https://ukraina.interwencjaprawna.pl/the-act-on-assistance-for-ukrainian-citizens/>.

KEY FINDINGS



BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN THE POLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

- Limited data is available on out-of-school Ukrainian adolescents to analyse, follow-up on, and inform decision-making. This inhibits action by educators and school administration, local authorities, and the Polish government.
- Older Ukrainian adolescents largely choose to participate in online Ukrainian education over Polish schools, hoping to continue education in Ukraine. The challenges associated with transferring Ukrainian diploma certifications for appropriate placements in the Polish education system also significantly contribute to preference for online Ukrainian education.
- Caregiver well-being and influence play a significant role in whether and how adolescents access various forms of education, as caregivers deal with multiple responsibilities, not least recovering from the stresses of war and displacement and pursuing employment in Poland.
- Admittance to Polish schools is complicated by increased crowding in schools, timing of arrival and enrolment applications per the school year and understanding of the enrolment procedures.
- Cultural and language barriers are key reasons Ukrainian adolescents drop out, or choose not to attend Polish schools, with limited availability of cultural assistants in schools to support them another factor linked to concerns about enrolling in or remaining in schools.
- Ukrainian educators face challenges in transferring their accreditation to the Polish system, and often take other jobs to take care of their families.
- Online Ukrainian education does not provide certificates to prove online course completion, while transferring previous Ukrainian school credits is also challenging.





COPING MECHANISMS AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL UKRAINIAN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

- Out-of-school Ukrainian adolescents do not engage much with Polish adolescents and experience heightened isolation, which impacts their psychosocial well-being.
- Community and NGO services are beneficial, yet there is a lack of adequate service provision to ensure greater incentivization and accommodation for those in both online and in-school classes, which could be better supported by the Polish government.
- Culturally specific psychosocial support services are insufficient to meet the needs of Ukrainian adolescents recovering from conflict, displacement, and social isolation.
- NGOs play a prominent role in providing services and information for Ukrainian refugees around educational tracks, though with limited ability to directly engage in schools.
- While some Polish teachers proactively create information and engagement services for students, such actions are not systemic and stem from the individual actions of educators.
- Intercultural activities that bring Polish and Ukrainian youth together and that promote solidarity and cross-cultural understanding are a key support system which remains insufficiently provided.



SUPPORTING RESILIENCE AND ENROLMENT OR RE-ENROLMENT OF UKRAINIAN ADOLESCENTS IN POLISH EDUCATION

- Low levels of resourcing and support from the Polish authorities are a major factor in Ukrainian families' willingness to send adolescents to Polish schools.
- While adolescents and caregivers recognize the importance of Polish schools for language learning and integration, the irregular availability of cultural assistants and language learning continues to impede integration.
- The presence of critical resources, such as psychosocial support, is needed to better facilitate Ukrainian adolescents' successful transition into Polish schools and into the broader cultural environment.
- The shrinking financial resources for education and integrations projects available to NGOs will have further negative impact on access to these services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations outline overarching proposals aimed at informing strategic policy, decision-making, and activities related to improving access to education, as well as the corresponding protective environment for adolescent Ukrainian refugees in Poland.

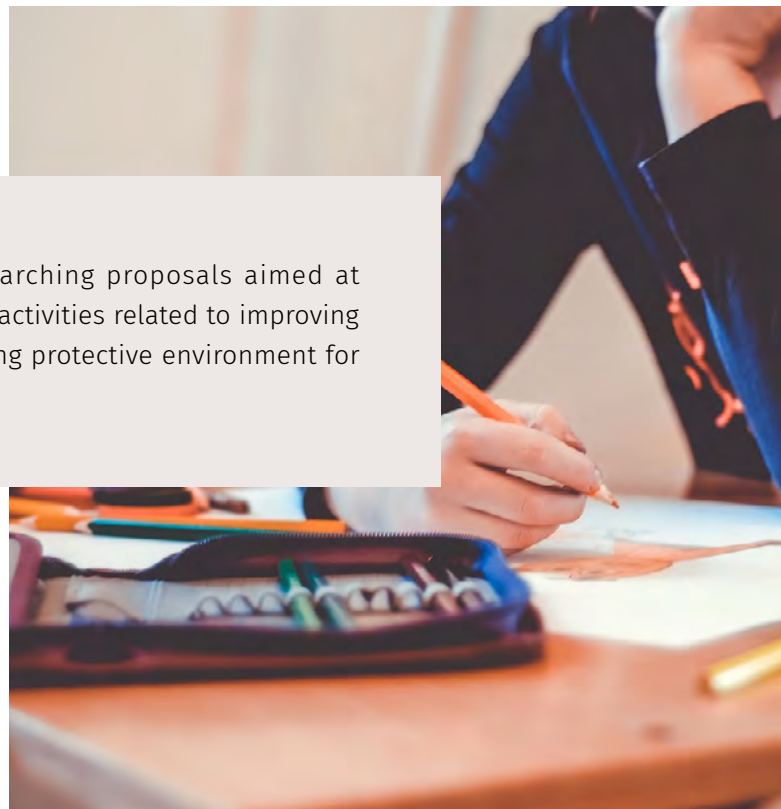
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Polish government should substantively increase its central-level investment in the education sector and decentralize resources to ensure schools can accommodate incoming Ukrainian adolescents. This includes efforts to:

- A.** Increase educational staff remuneration and incentivizing teacher recruitment, including better conditions to enable Ukrainian teacher employment.
- B.** Evaluate and reallocate resources to ensure local municipalities can accommodate Ukrainian students to promote high quality and culturally relevant service provision.
- C.** Emphasize investment in long-term engagement in reinforcing the Polish public school system and avoid short-term project-based initiatives in order to facilitate long-term sustainable education for all children in Poland

2. The Polish government should introduce and resource a comprehensive and collaborative tracking and accountability mechanism for out-of-school Ukrainian adolescents. This includes:

- A.** More systematic methods of information sharing (at local and central levels) alongside localized coordination with Ukrainian caregivers to determine MHPSS and cultural support needs of Ukrainian children and adolescents.
- B.** Structured and supported follow-up on school absences for better understanding of push-pull factors and mitigation of protection risks for those outside the Polish education system.



C. Integrated consultation with NGOs and civil society in information sharing, with an eye towards the provision of services that holistically address the needs of Ukrainian families, and sustainable outcomes across the Polish education system.

3. Public and private actors should jointly commission further research to better understand the situation of, and invest in meeting the needs of more vulnerable and marginalized populations, especially unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), the Roma community, children with disabilities, and evacuated children living in shelters. This includes:

- A.** Family tracing and reunification with dedicated attention and support to ensure accountability to UASC. Very sparse information is available around the educational needs of children evacuated from Ukrainian institutions, particularly those with disabilities.
- B.** A targeted study is needed on gender disparities regarding access to education and protection outcomes for Ukrainian refugees, specifically noting the safety risks of young women and girls in contexts of schooling, caregiving, and being out of school.



C. More wide-reaching consultation with Roma communities to better understand barriers to access to education and actively include their input in devising solutions in a participatory and inclusive manner.

4. The Polish government, institutional and private donors should amplify support to and collaboration with NGO and civil society programming targeting Ukrainian adolescents' education, social support, and protection. This includes:

A. Long-term investment in consistently available psychosocial, recreational, socio-emotional develop-

mental, and informational services across rural and urban areas to ensure successful integration of Ukrainian adolescents,

B. Making long-term funding sources available for localized and scalable joint pilot projects around effective models for providing holistic support for Ukrainian and minority inclusion and positive psychosocial and integration outcomes.

TECHNICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Polish government, NGOs, and civil society should expand linguistic and cultural assistance programs in schools to ensure regular and consistent service coverage across the country targeting Ukrainian adolescents. This includes:

A. Provision of sufficient and equitable linguistic and preparatory courses for Ukrainian children and adolescents.

B. Ensuring there are intercultural services and activities that help Polish students better understand and accept Ukrainians, as well as ensure peer-to-peer engagement.

C. Supervisory mechanisms to ensure quality and accountability to implementing personnel, alongside culturally appropriate training of teachers.

D. Involvement of NGOs and civil society in planning and implementing cross-cultural interventions, with resources to ensure capacity building of educational personnel.

2. The Polish government, private and institutional donors should devote additional resources to expand provision of culturally relevant mental health and psychosocial support services in schools, particularly personnel, to ensure equitable and consistent support to Ukrainian adolescents. This includes:

A. Specific subsidies earmarked for local authorities to ensure targeted MHPSS assistance is made available in schools.

B. Facilitating employment of Ukrainian personnel to ensure MHPSS services are responsive to the needs of Ukrainian adolescents.

3. The Polish government should review and evaluate existing protocols for accreditation of Ukrainian educators alongside diploma recognition for students participating in Ukrainian education (both in-person and online). This includes:

A. Adapt more streamlined procedures for Ukrainian teacher certification and appropriately communicate these to enable better availability of Ukrainian teachers.

B. Analyse, and where appropriate adapt, Polish protocols for acceptance of Ukrainian diplomas to ensure the participation in and completion of online Ukrainian curricula.

4. The Polish government, private and institutional donors and civil society actors should intentionally direct more resources to ensuring adequate support to and preparation of Polish educators to engage with Ukrainian adolescents. This includes:

A. Capacity building of Polish (and where possible Ukrainian) educators to better facilitate integration of Ukrainian students in Polish schools with focus on non-discrimination.

B. Provision of adequate and accessible academic materials to enable Ukrainian students to have resources in their language.

C. Facilitation of cross-cultural activities that enable Ukrainian students to integrate in Polish culture while helping Polish adolescents understand Ukrainian culture.



EMIC

5. The Polish government should re-invest in preparatory courses targeting Ukrainian adolescents to ensure wider availability, considering the potential for such opportunities to become compulsory, adequately resourced, and conducted in parallel with the regular Polish curriculum. This includes:

- A.** Provision of affordable, widely available, and safe modalities for preparatory classes that enable students to participate in preparatory work alongside regular schoolwork.
- B.** Flexible approaches to start date vis-à-vis academic year to ensure options are available to enrol in preparatory classes based on Ukrainian student arrival.

6. The Polish government should consider the possibility of transitioning all refugee children present in the country into the Polish education

system in order to bolster educational outcomes and alleviate protection concerns. This will include:

- A.** Investing in flexible education pathways to transition all refugee children (Ukrainian and otherwise) into in-person school settings, and eventually into the Polish education system.
- B.** Establishing a baseline for minimum competencies and protection frameworks to ensure schools can remain safe and inclusive learning environments. In this respect, bridge curricula should be explored in more detail.
- C.** Developing realistic capacity building scenarios to understand how to accommodate the current stock of out-of-school refugee children, while also preparing for any fluctuations in refugee numbers caused by any escalation in the conflict in Ukraine.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To better understand the needs and conditions of out-of-school Ukrainian children in Poland, this research set out to examine access to education and correlated protection outcomes, highlighting the available and chosen educational opportunities for Ukrainians, and identifying factors that impact decisions to engage or not engage children in school. The research prioritizes the perspectives and voices

of Ukrainian children and families, as well as those engaged in the Polish education system, throughout the process to drive its formation and analysis. This study looked at engagement in Polish education, Ukrainian remote schooling, and in-country Ukrainian schools, in comparison with those not attending any form of education.

IN DOING SO THE RESEARCH SOUGHT TO ACHIEVE THE FOLLOWING THREE KEY OBJECTIVES:



Understand the barriers to participation in the Polish education system and environments enabling participation, and any other push and pull factors;



Map and understand social networks, coping mechanisms, and support systems used by the out-of-school⁵ adolescent Ukrainian refugees;



Identify strategies to increase resilience and enable enrolment or re-enrolment of out-of-school adolescent Ukrainian refugees in the education system.

The research collected primary qualitative and quantitative data and was supported by the review and use of information from across the Ukraine response, focusing on identifying barriers to accessing education, the prevalence and demographics of children not

enrolling in school or dropping out, structural barriers to education access, risks to those not attending school, and successful or recommended ways to encourage participation in the Polish education system while preserving Ukrainian identity.

⁵ Individuals from Ukraine, aged 10-18, who are not enrolled in the formal Polish education sector. Including - Ukrainian minors residing in Poland attending online education, or informal in-person schools, institutional settings, etc.

RESEARCH APPROACH & METHODOLOGY

1. APPROACH

The research drew upon conceptual frameworks focused on the impacts of conflict and displacement on adolescent education alongside social and behavioural change (SBC) theory and practice. This dichotomous approach was chosen to allow the research team to gain an in-depth understanding of the structural and institutional barriers to enrolment among the out-of-school refugee populations in Poland and to qualify key decisions made by adolescents and their households leading to non-enrolment. By combining a contextual understanding of existing barriers and enablers to enrolment with behavioural insights gained through the employment of SBC research methods, the research herein provides Education and Integration actors in Poland with actionable, evidence-informed and context-specific recommendations and entry points to inform its strategy, programming and advocacy efforts.

To conceptualize adolescent non-enrolment, the research team adapted the original Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) conceptual framework to the Polish context and broadened the framework (which exclusively targeted adolescent girls) to include all adolescents. The adapted GAGE framework, a longitudinal mixed-methods study on social change for young people, was employed to understand what works to support adolescents' educational development while emphasizing the interplay and dynamism of three pillars of analysis tailored to the refugee context in Poland: capabilities, contexts, and change strategies (see Figure 1).⁶

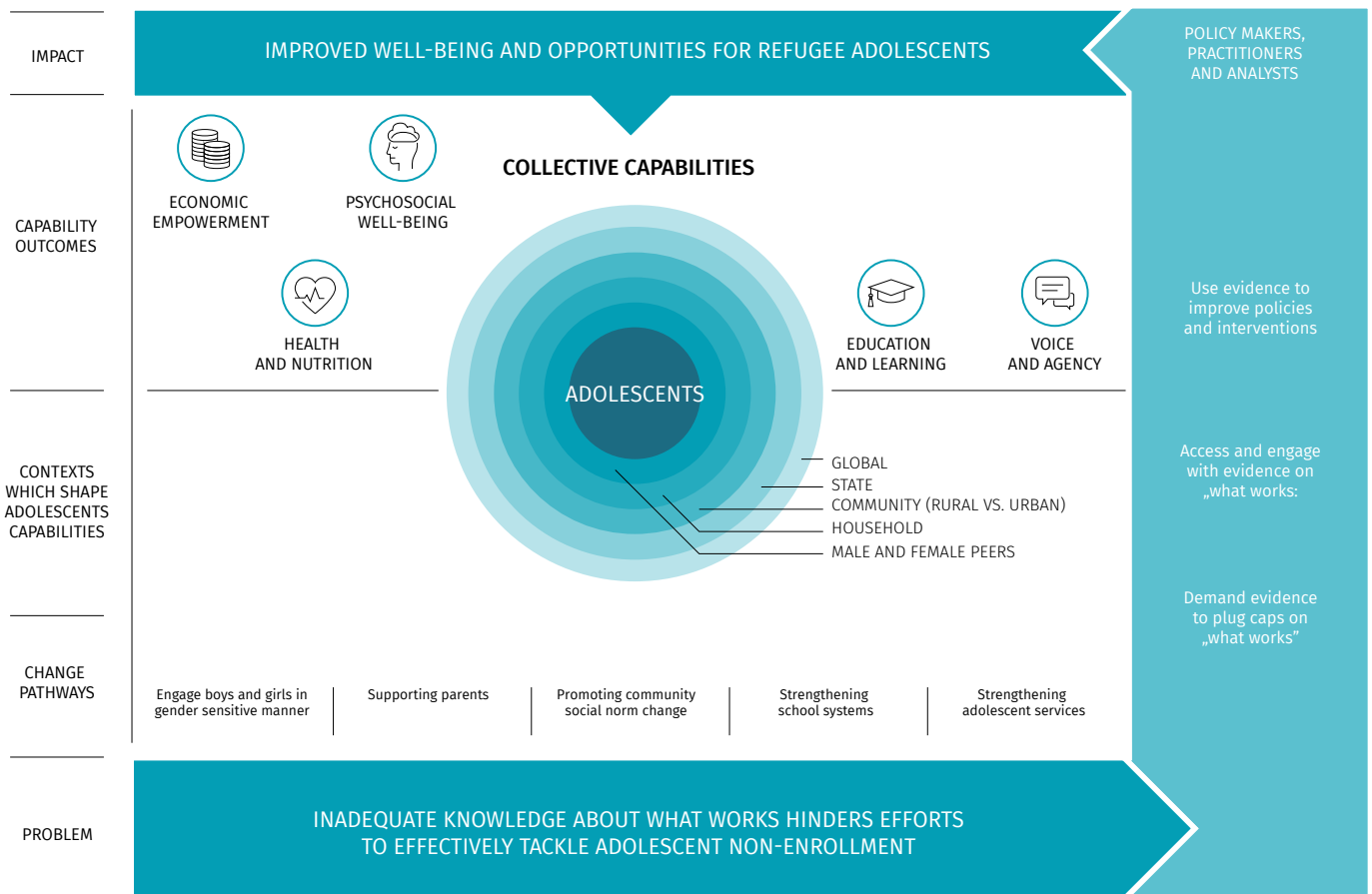
Having framed the lines of inquiry around the GAGE framework, Triangle employed the Behavioural Drivers Model (BDM) to identify the decision chains and choice architectures involved when Ukrainian refugee families decide on adolescents' education in Poland. The BDM was also adapted for the purpose of this study to account for broader dimensions acting as enabling or constraining factors that directly or indirectly influence behaviours and produce structural barriers hindering access for Ukrainian adolescents to the Polish and Ukrainian education systems.

While the term „out-of-school” in Poland is widely used to describe a range of educational scenarios, this report considers “out-of-school” to refer to all children and adolescents aged 10 to 18 who are outside of the formal Polish education system,



⁶ GAGE Consortium. "Gender and Adolescence: Why Understanding Adolescent Capabilities, Change Strategies and Contexts Matters. GAGE conceptual framework." London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence, 2017.

FIGURE 1: ADADPTED GAGE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



(source: Gage Consortium, Triangle) ⁷

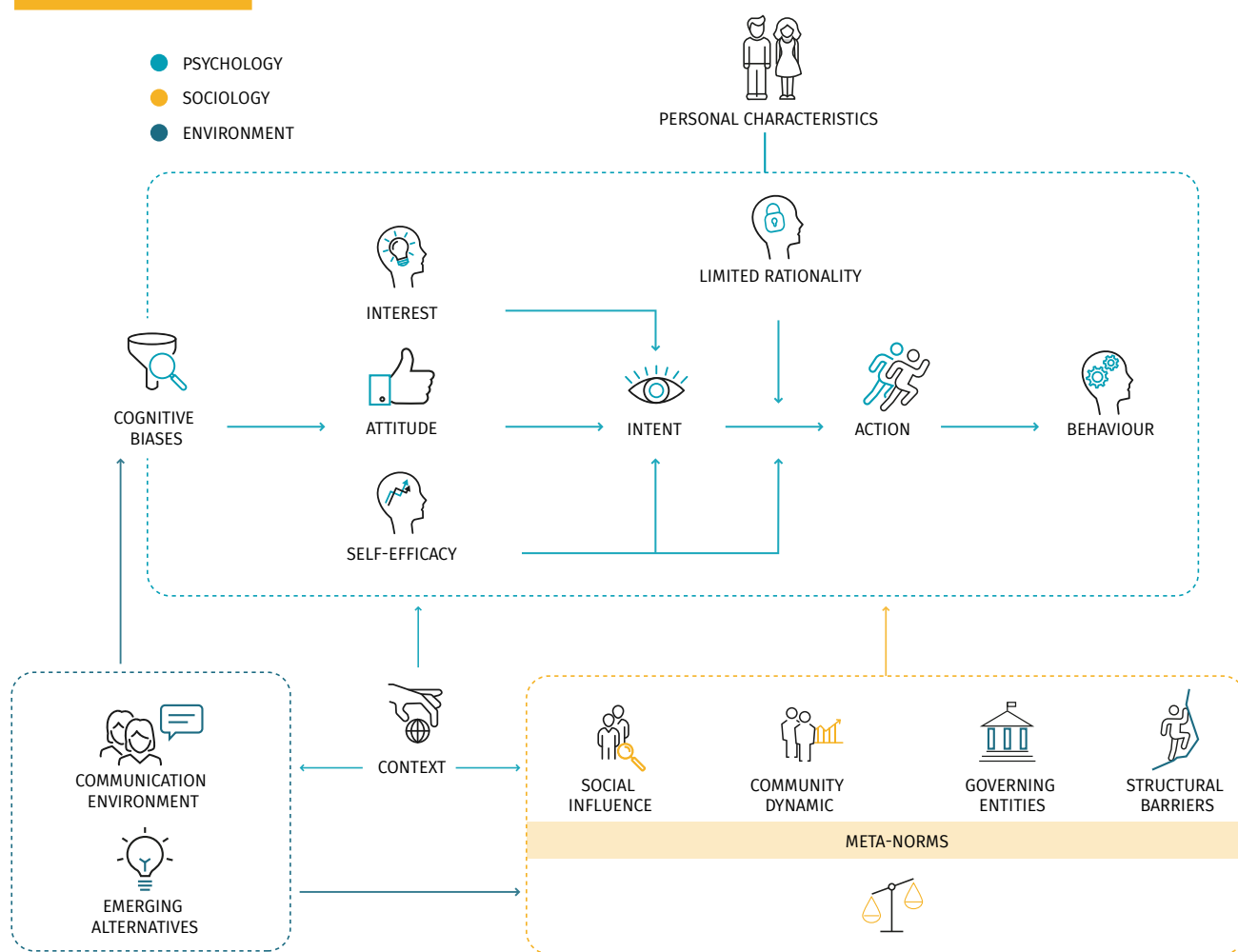


includes those attending online Ukrainian courses, and does not include those who have finished school before the age of 18. In line with the parameters of this report, “primary school age” is between 10-14, and “secondary school age” is 15-18.⁸

⁷ Ibid.
The original framework has been adjusted to address the problem of inadequate knowledge about what hinders efforts to effectively tackle adolescent non-enrolment.

⁸ The study utilizes Polish government data, which provides information on school-aged children by date of birth, to ensure tracking of those within the parameters of compulsory education to the age of 18. It does not account for those who have finished before 18, who are not considered “out of school.”

FIGURE 2: BEHAVIORAL DRIVERS MODEL



(source: UNICEF) ⁹

⁹ Petit, V. „The Behavioural Drivers Model: A Conceptual Framework for Social and Behaviour Change Programming.” UNICEF, 2019. The original framework has been adjusted to address the problem of inadequate knowledge about what hinders efforts to effectively tackle adolescent non-enrolment.

2. METHODS

Following the inception phase, Triangle utilized a phased mixed-methods, participatory, and inclusive approach and developed qualitative and quantitative research tools for field implementation. Specifically, Triangle built questionnaires for key informant interviews (KIIs) with (I)NGO staff and education system professionals (including educators - both Polish and Ukrainian -, administrators, and local government officials), in-depth interviews (IDIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs) followed by

a quantitative survey to understand perceptions around accessing the Polish education system within the Ukrainian community.

Given the study involved vulnerable groups, the Washington Group simplified questionnaire was utilized to enable sensitive engagement with and disaggregation of data based on self-identified disabilities amongst adolescents in the study. The study was also conducted in line with all cooperating organizations’ (Child) Safeguarding and prevention

of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) policy and procedures to ensure Do No Harm principles and to prevent, identify, report and respond to any (child) safeguarding and PSEA concern, while ensuring accountability and transparency throughout the study. A (Child) Safeguarding and PSEA risk assessment was conducted for data collection activities to identify any potential risks and ensure mitigating measures were in place. All field researchers and enumerators were trained on (child) safeguarding, both to identify and report these to (Child) Safeguarding and PSEA Focal Points and signed the organization's (Child) Safeguarding and PSEA Policy, including the Code of Conduct. Care was taken to create data collection conditions that protected and created a safe environment for children, following all protocols for informed consent and data confidentiality, as well as communicating to participants the ways that they could safely report any concerns or feedback during the process.

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Triangle conducted a literature review based on publicly available documents, literature relating to the educational and child protection environment for Ukrainians in Poland, and complementary humanitarian programming. As trends and new information emerged during initial qualitative data collection, other documents were examined to confirm or elaborate existing understanding of the core areas of inquiry. The review included reports from humanitarian and development agencies and organizations, academic sources, 'grey' literature from agencies, and other relevant studies and assessments.

2.2 TOOLS DEVELOPMENT

Based on the literature review, the research team developed semi-structured questionnaires, prioritizing information to be gained from interviews with adolescents¹⁰ and caregivers, which then informed the adaptation of the quantitative data collection tool. The quantitative survey used information from KIIs and IDIs to optimize the use of perceptions to triangulate qualitative data. Ultimately, 28 KIIs, 17 FGDS, and 25 IDIs were conducted, followed by a survey conducted with 619 caregivers and adolescents.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KII)

Semi-structured KIIs targeted knowledgeable individuals within the education and protection spheres in Poland, including educators, government representatives, and humanitarian response actors.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGDS)

FGDs specifically targeted Ukrainian adolescents and caregivers, aiming to better understand their engagement (or lack of) in the Polish educational system and what barriers they may face to attending school.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS (IDIS)

IDIs were used to better engage Ukrainian refugees in a safe and comprehensive manner, particularly focusing on more vulnerable populations from whom more nuanced information was desired, including households that have adolescents with disabilities,

¹⁰ For the purposes of the current study, adolescents comprise those aged 10-18, with "younger adolescents" referring to those 10-13, and "older adolescents" referring to those 14-18, corresponding to the cohorts selected for this study.

LIMITATIONS, CONSIDERATIONS, & MITIGATION MEASURES

low-income families, and those providing temporary care to Ukrainian adolescents.

While conducting research on the needs and conditions of out-of-school Ukrainian adolescents aged 10-18 in Poland, several limitations were considered. These limitations impact the generalizability and reliability of the findings and should be considered when interpreting the results. Such limitations for this project include:

SAMPLE SELECTION:

While the research team faced challenges in reaching all relevant individuals due to language barriers and the transient nature of the refugee population, measures were taken to ensure ample qualitative data through collaboration with an organization that utilizes Ukrainian researchers. Recognizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences within the target population, methodology and profiling were adjusted. As a key part of this mitigation measure, the number of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) was increased to accommodate the need to cover those aged 10-13 who could not be included in the survey sample. This enhancement ensured a more extensive and varied collection of data, enabling Triangle to capture a broader range of perspectives and experiences. Additionally, Triangle maintained collaborations with organizations working with out-of-school (OOS) adolescents from Ukraine, in order to ensure that there was a representative sample that aligned with the refined research approach.

This research also considered the inclusion of children aged six to nine in order to cover all school-

aged children. However, the decision was made to exclude this cohort due to the fact that both agencies and researchers deduced that there was no reliable method to elicit information around decisions to enroll, drop-out, or not to enroll in the Polish education system from this cohort. Additionally, the to expand ethical research protocols and compliance were viewed as equally prohibitive.

RESPONSE BIAS:

As the study directly engaged adolescents and their caregivers, there was an inherent risk of response bias due to social desirability or fear of repercussions, as the refugee population may have been reluctant to share sensitive experiences about education or support systems. To address this, Triangle delivered an extensive training program for all data collectors. This training emphasized not only fundamental data collection techniques but also placed a significant focus on advanced communication skills, effective



P. Wu/DEC

interaction with vulnerable groups, tackling sensitive issues, and addressing potential protection concerns. Additionally, the questionnaires were meticulously developed to balance the need for collecting relevant data with the imperative of not suggesting answers or inadvertently re-traumatizing participants. Data from across cohorts was also compared to identify differences and indicate where biases were prevalent, particularly in terms of social desirability bias.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL BARRIERS:

In appreciation of the importance of understanding and bridging cultural and linguistic differences, there was a risk that depth and accuracy of data could be impacted due to nuanced linguistic and cultural differences. To mitigate this, Triangle established a partnership with the Association of Critical Education¹¹, a local entity experienced in working with the Ukrainian community, including children and adolescents, in Poland. The research team was composed of both Polish and Ukrainian members and leveraged their collective experiences in the education sector to ensure sensitive and effective engagement with participants. This approach was designed to minimize language and cultural misunderstandings, thereby enhancing the quality and reliability of the data collected.

TEMPORAL FACTORS:

The research may have been influenced by temporal factors beyond the control of the research team, including political or policy considerations that impact the education system or child protection

programming related to the Ukraine refugee response in Poland. Specifically, policies put in place to respond to the refugee influx at the start of the conflict were designed and implemented by a government that differs significantly from the current one. As such, the relevance of certain recommendations targeting state-level actors should continue to be analysed. Additionally, the course of the conflict changed during the research, which caused a palpable shift leading to an understanding that the conflict would most likely be protracted. In this vein, calculations around return and longer-term adaptation policies have factored into a larger extent, particularly given the end and start of a new academic year. To mitigate these temporal changes, Triangle designed a comprehensive methodology to best capture the context in which the research is conducted and avoid the generalizability of the findings.

GENDER-SPECIFIC FINDINGS:

This study was designed in a gender-sensitive manner, making sure to disaggregate research activities by gender across all participants. Lines of inquiry targeting caregivers were also structured accordingly, with sampling strategies focusing on responses from female caregivers who comprise the majority of the Ukrainian adult refugee population. Analysis of representative and non-representative data did not reveal largely significant differences between genders across most data points. However, where significant differences between girls' and boys' experiences were identified, they are included in the report.



¹¹ "Edukacja Krytyczna." *Edukacja Krytyczna*, <https://edukacjakrytyczna.org/en/home/>.

KEY FINDINGS

1. BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN THE POLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM



PREVALENCE AND DEMOGRAPHICS OF SCHOOL DROPOUTS AND NON-ENROLMENT

Information about the numbers of out-of-school Ukrainian adolescents is difficult to obtain, with inconsistencies across pupils who are registered but do not attend, attend irregularly, or those who have dropped out. According to the Polish government as of November 2023, there are 293,229 children and adolescents of school age who are registered with PESEL¹² numbers.¹³ Among those, 220,662 adolescents aged 10-18, the target age group for the study, are registered. In parallel, there are 108,884 Ukrainians of the same age range (10-18) who are “assigned” to a school, constituting 49% of the registered population.¹⁴ That said, the latter figure does not account for those who initially applied to the Polish education system but either never attended or have dropped out. There is no structured system for comprehensively tracking out-of-school Ukrainian adolescents and, given population movements and various push-pull factors drawing Ukrainian students to online education, it is known that official figures do not reflect students regularly attending in-person courses. Follow-up regarding attendance or those who do not attend for a period of time happens at local and school levels, and educators are not always

provided with information and resources regarding how to ensure they can accurately report dropout figures to the central government. Complicating matters further, Ukrainian families often choose to return to Ukraine, move locations within Poland, or choose to withdraw from (or never initially attend) Polish schools.

Based on official figures¹⁵, we can estimate that the number of out-of-school children and adolescents was over 111,500 people. While this figure is almost certainly inaccurate due to the limitations listed above, it is indicative of the scale of the issue, with some estimates much higher.

According to Ukrainian adolescents their caregivers, online Ukrainian courses are the most prevalent form of schooling, as opposed to in-person Polish schooling. Older Ukrainian adolescents not in Polish schools show a preference for attending online Ukrainian schools, with 83% reporting engaging in online schooling and 31% saying they are home-schooled – with some availing of both methods¹⁶. From a caregiver’s perspective, results are broadly similar across all age groups. Interestingly, there is a discrepancy between the viewpoint of caregivers and older adolescents in relation to children not following any form of education at all. A negligible amount of caregivers attest to their children (from 10-18) not being in education at all, while 3% of older

¹² PESEL is a Polish identification number assigned to legal citizens and residents and is needed for formalities such as opening a bank account or seeking medical services. Applications are free of charge and issued at the municipal level.



[Knowing how to serve out-of-school children] is a problem because it is very difficult to reach these children. Not only at the level of the municipality, which is completely unable to arrange such contacts, but also even at the level of public organizations that would like to help. Because if there are no children in any system, either because they are attached to a Ukrainian school in Ukraine, or they are not attached, then in principle how do you get to them? Children, where can they be found — even if we offer them programs, additional classes — if they are outside the system we do not see them.

KII, local government official [F]

adolescents (14-18) attest to not attending school at all. This discrepancy indicates that parents might be unaware of whether or not their (older) children attend school, or simply do not want to admit to not sending their children to some form of schooling.

Teachers note that the level of resources and support for Polish schools have waned after the first year of Ukrainian refugee arrivals. Intentions of Ukrainians to stay in Poland or return to Ukraine also factor heavily into decisions around school enrolment. Many Ukrainians who arrived in Poland earlier during the

onset of the war are more likely now to be enrolled in the Polish education system, as they have had more time to find employment and adjust to living conditions in Poland, may have family members who were in Poland prior to the war, and may have had more time to reconcile their expectations on the duration of the conflict. Others reported preferring online classes due to a desire to return to Ukraine where they perceive their academic certifications will be more assuredly recognized, and many still anticipate an impending end to the war.



Those [Ukrainians] who have been or are here have jobs, they have some stabilization, while at home [in Ukraine] the situation is not entirely certain, they are the ones who remain in school. Some of them went further [West], returned [to Ukraine], because we also had such cases.

KII, Polish school teacher

¹³ "Zarejestrowane Wnioski o Nadanie Statusu Ukrain." Dane.gov.pl, <https://dane.gov.pl/pl/dataset/2715,zarejestrowane-wnioski-o-nadanie-statusu-ukr/resource/52339/table>.

¹⁴ "Uczniowie uchodźcy z Ukrainy." Otwarte Dane. Accessed December 5, 2023. <https://dane.gov.pl/pl/dataset/2711,uczniowie-uchodzcy-z-ukrainy/resource/52039/table>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ukrainian caregivers consider homeschooling to be them following the Ukrainian curriculum and guiding their children, without the child participating in online classes

FIGURE 3: WHAT BEST DESCRIBES YOUR CHILD’S CURRENT EDUCATION SITUATION? ¹⁷

data in %

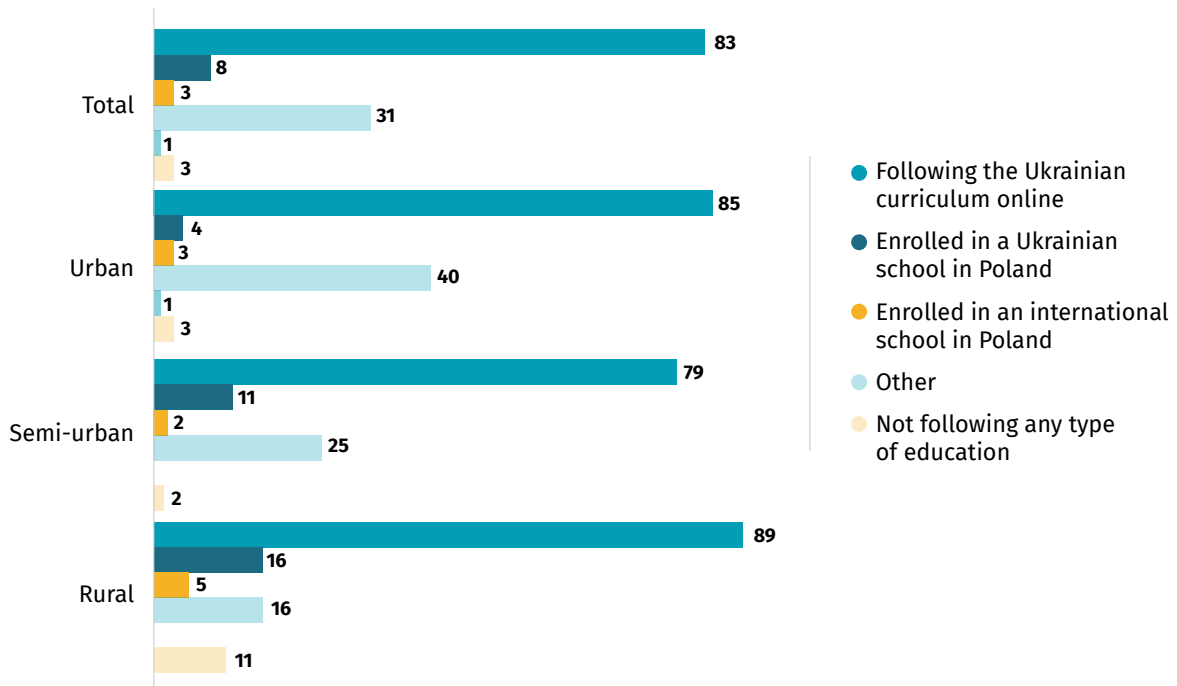
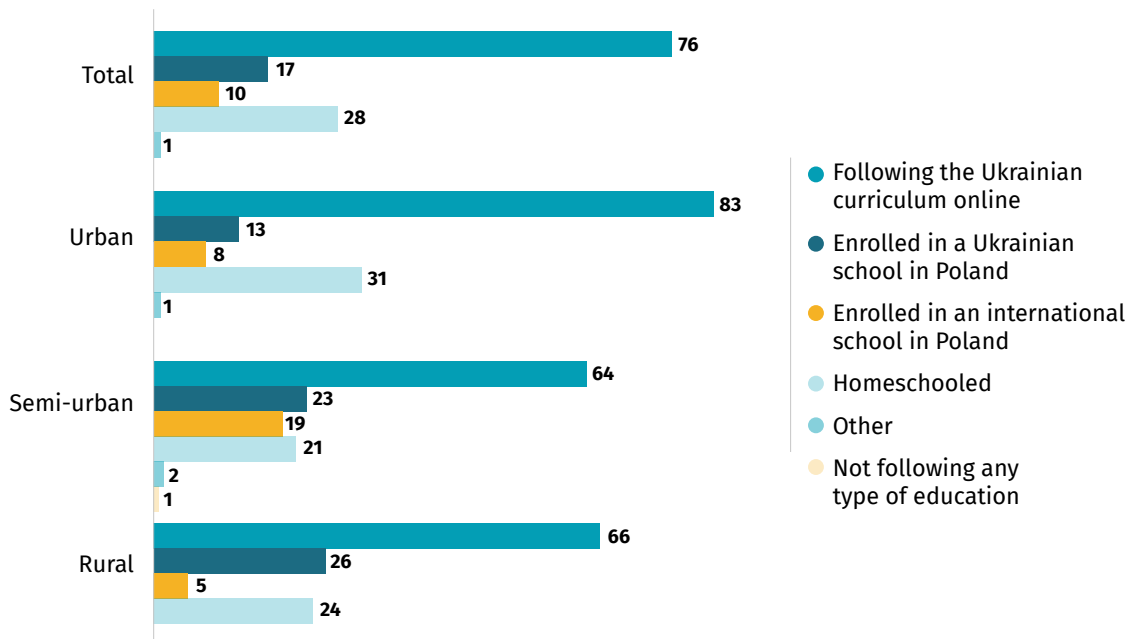


FIGURE 4: WHAT BEST DESCRIBES YOUR CHILD’S CURRENT EDUCATION SITUATION? ¹⁸

data in %



¹⁷ Figures shown in the graph represent children not attending Polish schools.

¹⁸ Figures shown in the graph represent children not attending Polish schools.

Additionally, older adolescents face challenges integrating into the Polish system – both in terms of language acquisition and the core curricula content, particularly as well as secondary school profiles in Ukraine are more technically focused. Integration is notably difficult amongst students after 8th grade (the last year of primary school in Poland). Older adolescents reported feeling that the disparity with Polish education proficiency requirements may not enable them to pass exams in Ukraine, and the burden of learning the language without falling behind in their educational progress is widely deemed not worth the time and effort. The structure of Ukrainian education is three-tiered as opposed

to the two levels (primary and secondary) in Poland, therefore older adolescents find it more arduous to align with the levels they had completed in Ukraine.¹⁹ In tandem with onward migration intentions, location of origin in Ukraine impacts choices around school enrolment. Those coming from Kyiv and other large cities (or who still have family there) are more likely to avail themselves of online Ukrainian education programs, may have caregivers who continue to travel back and forth, and are therefore less willing to invest in Polish education.

¹⁹ "2022_szkoly_PL_UA.pdf" Education for Democracy Foundation, https://fed.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022_szkoly_PL_UA.pdf.



”

Everything was great, but I didn't like the fact that after eighth grade I went to the lyceum. We study at the lyceum for four years, and I didn't want to just study for another four years. So I could study for two more years at a Ukrainian school and go to university.

FGD participant, aged 15-17 [F]

We sat down and said that we were definitely here to stay for the winter, and we would see in the spring. Maybe there will be some improvements, or something will become clearer, then we'll decide. Or from next year, it will be possible to decide if we will study here at a Polish school, or maybe we will return in the spring.

IDI, caregiver [F]

”

SPOTLIGHT: ROMA COMMUNITY



C. Adolphs/CARE

The Roma community has been historically marginalized, and those coming from Ukraine and seeking to integrate in Poland face double-stigmatization. Because they are more isolated, they have more limited access to information regarding education access. The reported discrimination they face on multiple levels engenders a distrust of institutions and makes it harder for Roma youth to make friends and be willing to attend public schools.

Roma populations tend to be more impoverished and struggle to meet basic needs, including accommodation as few facilities will accept them. Roma community members rely on the support of few specialized organizations to advocate on their behalf and face more limited access to Polish resources. Due to fluctuations in Polish law, many lose PESEL UKR status and associated benefits, not knowing how or when these may be restored.

In areas of highest Roma concentration, preparatory classes are being reduced, and there are no Roma assistants in schools to help that specific population group – while Roma adults would take these jobs, they

cannot without PESEL, and there are no subsidies in the schools to support such uptake. Because literacy rates are very low among certain Roma groups, they require support to adapt to school environments, including details such as the use of school stationery. Therefore Roma children are often placed with much younger children and often drop out from the stress. Even being admitted to regular schools poses a challenge because of the discrimination and language barriers. As a result, a disproportionate amount of Roma children are enrolled in special education institutes.

As they have had negative experiences, many Roma community members do not come to organized social activities and trainings, so specialized organizations have taken unique approaches to bring them together and share information. Such organizations report having more success cooperating with local rather than central government to accommodate Roma community needs, with hopes that continued advocacy can help.

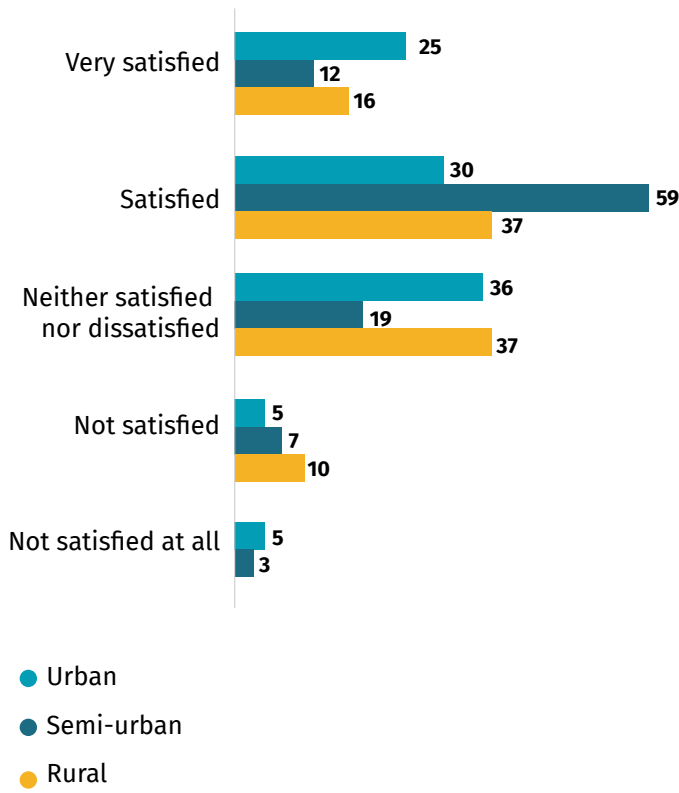


We are talking about systemic changes, about engaging organizations like ours to engage the community because ... if there are Roma children at school, you have to work with the Roma community to make them feel okay.

KII, NGO staff

FIGURE 5: TO WHAT EXTENT ARE YOU SATISFIED WITH THE SCHOOL AND EDUCATION OPTIONS YOUR CHILD HAS IN POLAND?

data in %

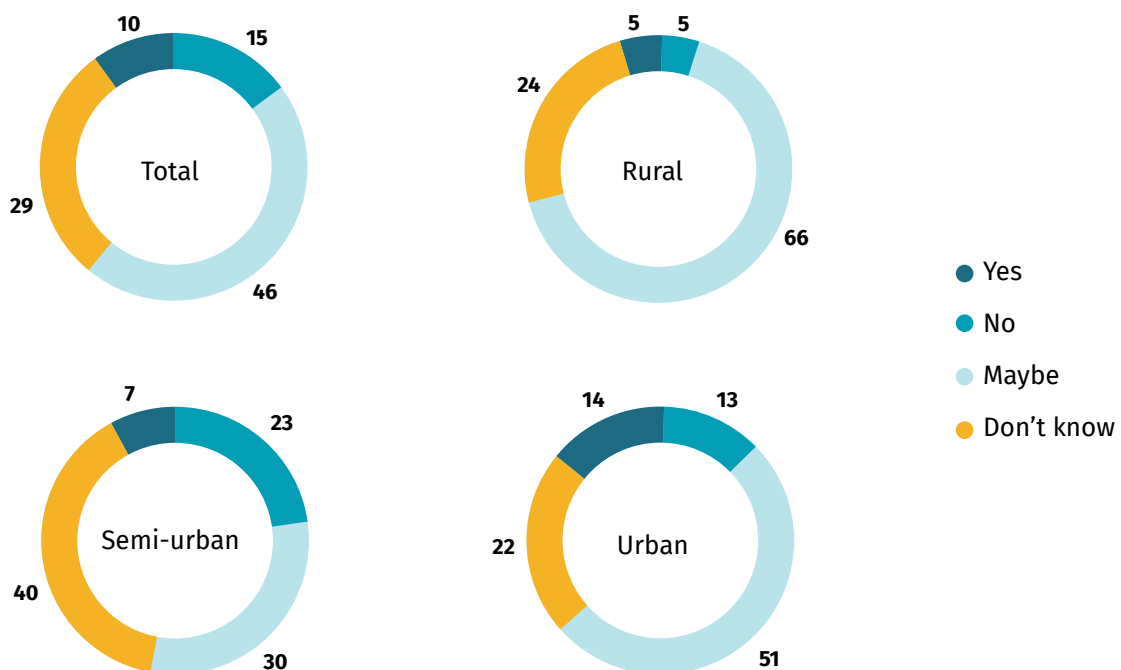


The quality of education and preparatory activities is in big cities. In smaller cities, it's harder to provide these children with services. Because the smaller number of children means that it's more expensive for us to operate. And these children are nowhere [in the system] and nobody can help them and reach them.

KII, NGO staff [F]

FIGURE 6: WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO TO A POLISH SCHOOL?

data in %



Access to services and willingness to participate in Polish in-person and online schooling vary across urban, rural, and peri-urban areas in Poland. Nearly half of older adolescents indicated no interest in pursuing a Polish education, with the majority (67%) residing in rural areas. Remote areas also have the highest percentage of older adolescents not following any type of education (11%). With that said, there is also an upward trend towards utilizing online Ukrainian schooling in urban areas. Only 36% have tried at some point to access Polish schooling (compared with 59% in rural areas) and either did not succeed with the application process or dropped out. The largest proportion of refugees who are satisfied with education options in Poland are in peri-urban areas. Rural areas notably have fewer resources, including shelter and economic opportunities, impacting willingness and ability to enrol in educational programs. Rural areas of Poland are also less likely to have Ukrainian teachers and translation services, and programs enabling Polish teachers to enhance their understanding of Ukrainian culture are very limited in most parts of the country to support integration into Polish society.

Caregiver stability and mental health are very important for school enrolment, as many who experienced extremely stressful events in Ukraine have difficulties navigating Polish school registration



Attending Ukrainian online school is quite unstable because in Ukraine we often have lack of electricity, lack of internet, rockets, air sirens and so on, so on. So in such cases lessons just interrupt Ukrainian children who are in Ukraine. They have to go down to the basement and this is like a pause in lessons. This pause can continue a few hours, a few days, a few weeks.

KII, NGO staff [F]



A single mother is also logistically unable to handle it at some point... and the logistics just terrify her.

KII, service provider [F]

[It] gnaws at me that I don't have time for my child.

IDI, adult caregiver [F]

and adapting to the new environment. Mental health issues are compounded by the prevalence of female-headed households troubled by the burden of providing and caring for the family, often without support, and who may be caring for extended family members' children separated from their parents as well. This may have stronger educational implications among younger adolescents who are unlikely to actively ask about or pursue school enrolment, and who themselves are dealing with the emotional impact of war and in some cases refuse to go to school. As single mothers are typically working, many noted during in-depth interviews that older adolescents are often placed in charge, faced with becoming familiar with the Polish education procedures largely on their own, and with noted knock-on effects of caregivers being less available at home. While some Ukrainians already have family members in Poland who can support their integration, many do not, and this impacts their understanding of processes to undertake for education enrolment and knowledge around the availability of support systems to balance their own needs and those of their children.

Several challenges associated with damage to Ukrainian educational infrastructure and ongoing

violence across the border preclude Ukrainian adolescents from participating in online courses, both in terms of the consistency in internet connectivity and availability of classes.^{20 21} Many times, classes are stopped, postponed, or have inconsistent attendance for those still in Ukraine, causing parallel inconsistency for those attending remotely from Poland. Ukrainian students in Poland also experience psychological turmoil when faced with reliving stressful experiences.

Despite the noted difficulties faced with online Ukrainian schooling, many adolescents have become accustomed to similar issues, as they participated online during the COVID-19 pandemic or had already dropped out due to the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted students worldwide, with no

Older adolescents and younger adolescents have differing rates of dropout and different experiences with the Polish school system. In this study, older adolescents were generally more likely to be out of school or not enrolled in Polish schools to begin with, in part because they are more culturally rooted in Ukraine. Older adolescents thus struggled more to adjust to the Polish educational environment. They are less inclined to pursue in-person education, partly because they prioritize higher education opportunities in Ukraine that may be impeded by delays due to misalignment between Ukrainian and Polish curricula that require processes to review certification and diploma documentation for approval and placement that can take time and be difficult to navigate. Sending younger adolescents to school enables caregivers to work during the day, and to



Parents simply told us that it was very bad during COVID in Ukraine when it comes to teaching. And some children in general, they say, had already by then fallen out of the system. Generally, in Poland, this is not the first moment when they fell out of this system, but they have been like this since the beginning of COVID, so children also often have big adaptation problems related to socialization.

KII, NGO staff [F]

exception in Ukraine²² Most students reverted to online schooling, with some choosing or needing to drop out of school entirely. This means, even before the war, schooling was interrupted with Ukrainian students falling behind in learning the curriculum, limiting their desire to enter the Polish system where they were already at a different educational level than their counterparts, and likely would be placed with younger students at a different cognitive and socioemotional stage.

a degree, younger adolescents were reported as more easily able to acclimate to a new language and Polish curricula, which has fewer substantive differences than secondary school subjects (which are particularly technical). In addition, for younger adolescents who attend online school and whose caregivers may not be available, attention can be challenging to maintain without adequate oversight from adults or teachers.






20 “Ukraine: UNESCO Mobilizes Support for Learning Continuity.” UNESCO, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ukraine-unesco-mobilizes-support-learning-continuity>.

21 Approximately 50% of online classes were cancelled during the final three months of 2022.

22 “The Impact of COVID-19 on Education: Recommendations and Opportunities for Ukraine.” World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2021/04/02/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-education-recommendations-and-opportunities-for-ukraine>.

TABLE 1: ON AVERAGE, HOW MANY HOURS PER WEEK DOES YOUR CHILD/DO YOU PARTICIPATE IN ONLINE EDUCATION ACTIVITIES?

data in %

	 female	 male	 rural	 semi-urban	 urban
caregivers	17,2	19,7	20,2	10,9	20,3
group 14-18	16,5	16,4	8,2	10,4	22,6



Those older, that is, these kids about 16, 18, 19 years old, mostly think that this is not the place for them, they do not feel the future here, they want to go back to where they were born.

KII, Teacher [F]

They didn't want to be in Poland, they didn't want to be in a Polish school. [...] And it was visible that there were simply children from Ukraine who sat in the corner, or turned their backs. Already showing with their whole personalities how much they do not want to be there. And their right was to feel like this.

KII, NGO staff [F]

TAKE-AWAYS

1. Limited data is available on out-of-school Ukrainian adolescents to analyse, follow-up on, and inform decision-making.
2. Ukrainian adolescents largely choose to participate in online Ukrainian education over Polish schools, particularly older adolescents, who hope to continue education in Ukraine.
3. Caregiver well-being and influence play a significant role in whether and how adolescents access various forms of education, as they deal with multiple responsibilities in addition to recovering from the stresses of war and displacement and pursuing efforts to engage in meaningful employment in Poland.
4. Trends in lack of in-school attendance due to the COVID-19 pandemic affect higher rates of non-enrolment and preference for online Ukrainian education.
5. Little is understood about the educational situation of unaccompanied and separated children, who may find themselves having differentiated access to Polish schools depending on whether they are supported by the Polish child protection system.



UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED MINORS (UASM)

There is little available data around the number of unaccompanied Ukrainian minors in Poland, most of whom fall under the Polish protection system and enter foster care or institutions. As such, they are more likely to attend Polish schools and be more naturally integrated in Polish society, though more studies are needed to better understand their protective environment and educational access.

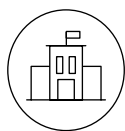
A larger population comprises children and adolescents separated from their immediate family members, and typically sent to live with extended relatives, friends, or neighbors in Poland. The situation of such children is even less well understood and likely more vulnerable as they may be cared for by a single-headed household with other children. Oversight to their participation in education could be more minimal, and more targeted research into their experiences and circumstances should be undertaken.

While UNICEF has done excellent work to look at the protective environment of UASM and further efforts towards family tracing and reunification ([htt](#)), such initiatives require the full support and investment of the Polish government to ensure accountability to this population of Ukrainian children.

In terms of unaccompanied and separated child, the data is inaccurate because there's a different approach to registration and the temporary protection directive. ... at the beginning of the crisis, we were identifying unaccompanied children at the border...but it's a different way of registering. It isn't easy to identify and it's not easy for us to access data that the government authorities have.

KII, NGO staff





BARRIERS PREVENTING ENROLMENT IN POLISH EDUCATION

Despite claims that education is free and widely accessible to Ukrainian students, there are substantive barriers to getting admittance to Polish schools. Nearly half of older adolescents said they found it difficult to access Polish education, with some citing challenges in finding spaces in the Polish schools, including 20% of adolescents in urban areas – and particularly among adolescents with special needs. These barriers to enrolment indicate potential saturation concerns that are anticipated to become more acute as more Ukrainian refugees enter Poland or opt for in-person schooling in Poland. This is occurring within the context of a Polish education system that was already overstretched due to insufficient resources, frustrations with perceived substandard wages for teachers, increased class sizes, unique needs of Ukrainian students, and consequent educator fatigue. Ability to find spots in Polish schools is further complicated by the timing of arrival vis-à-vis the school year and deadlines for registration to attach to a particular school. There are specific timelines and processes for each school to submit the expected class size based on registration numbers, with laws dictating maximum classroom size²³ – though class size has been increased recently to accommodate incoming populations.²⁴ These changes in procedures can lead to delays for students depending upon when they seek to enrol and subsequent gaps in adolescents’ educational status and can potentially exacerbate challenges in socioemotional adaptation and cognitive development of Ukrainian adolescents.

²³ Article 61(3) of the Education System Act.

²⁴ “Większa liczba dzieci w oddziale przedszkolnym i w oddziałach I-III szkoły podstawowej - rozporządzenie podpisane.” Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki, <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja-i-nauka/wieksza-liczba-dzieci-w-oddziale-przedszkolnym-i-w-oddzialach-i-iii-szkoly-podstawowej---rozporzadzenie-podpisane>.

²⁵ “Poland’s education responses to the influx of Ukrainian refugees.” UNESCO. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/polands-education-responses-influx-ukrainian-students>. Accessed December 5, 2023.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ REACH & UNHCR Multi-Sector Needs Assessment. “Education Sector Findings.” Poland, October 2022.



It’s not that all schools immediately accept students, because some schools already had a lot, and you know, the more peripheral, the longer it took. A little longer.

KII, government official [M]

Additionally, while measures have been taken to circulate information on enrolment procedures, including a chatbot called #SzkotaDlaWas,²⁵ 53% of adult caregivers and 24% of older adolescents noted lack of understanding information of the Polish education system as the most cited reason for difficulties in education access. Further, despite government actions in March 2022 to ensure compulsory and free education for Ukrainian children,²⁶ many noted that the costs for some schools were prohibitive. While allowances are available to Ukrainians for public schools and childcare,²⁷ some desire to attend private schools, and even with public schools, there are numerous “hidden costs,” for school materials, appropriate clothing required by schools, and payment for school trips, among others.



We also had situations where parents just stopped sending their children to school at some point because they didn’t have the means to make a sandwich.

KII, NGO staff



Well, we tried, there are no seats [in Polish schools]. That is, we went and wrote the statement, a package of documents, those they [requested], they collected, everything was done. And we were told that if the class opens, we will take her, but the class did not open. They said there was no funding. The class did not open.

IDI, adult caregiver [F]

FIGURE 7: HOW CHALLENGING DID YOU FIND ACCESSING FORMAL POLISH EDUCATION FOR YOUR CHILDREN/ADOLESCENT?

data in %

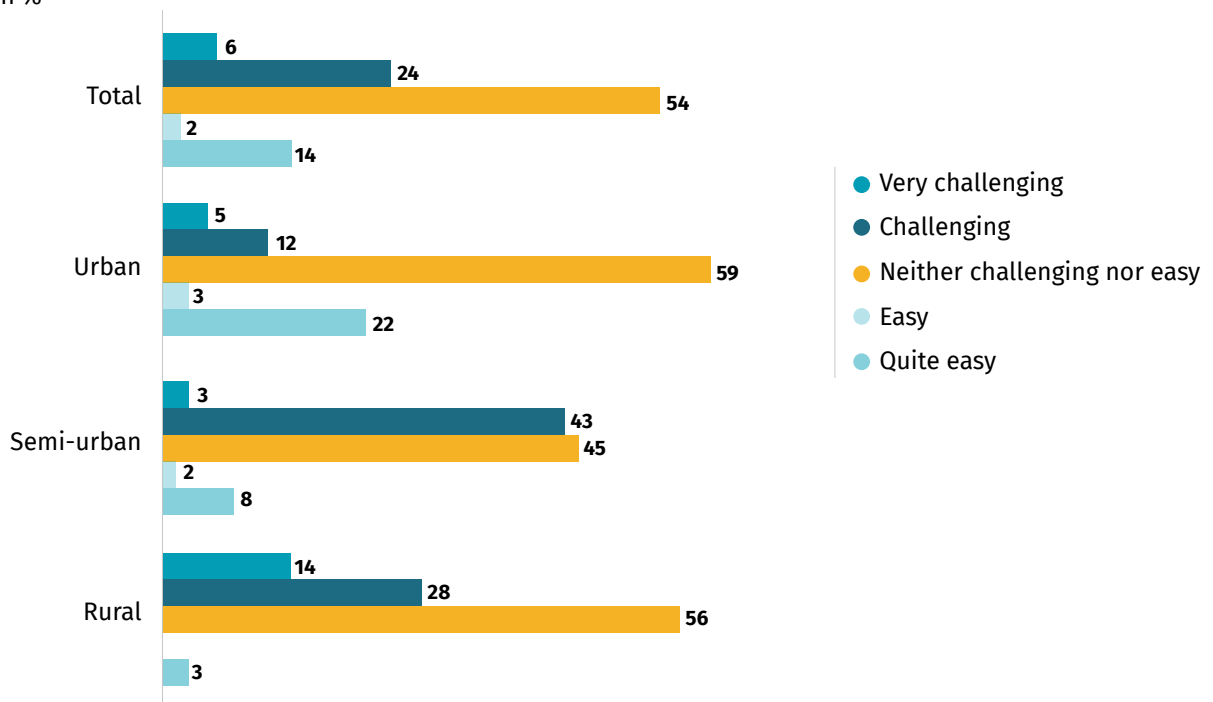
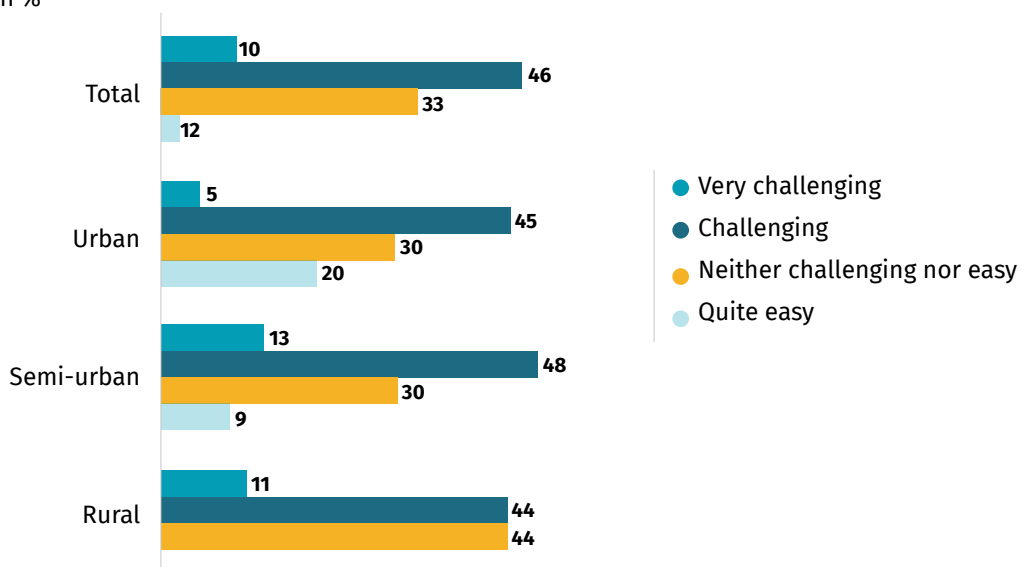


FIGURE 8: HOW CHALLENGING DID YOU FIND IT TO ACCESS FORMAL POLISH EDUCATION?

data in %



While in theory education is compulsory and mechanisms exist to follow up if a child is absent from school, in practice these are inconsistently applied. Insufficient information is available on the actual number of out-of-school Ukrainian children in Polish schools.²⁸ The lack of timely and accurate information can be attributed to frequent population movements, Not all children have verifiable PESEL numbers, parents fail to report when their child has enrolled in or switched to online education, and teachers do not always follow up with individual families as well as report absences or dropouts. Given gaps in public school authorities' systematic gathering and sharing of information on dropouts or non-enrolments, including the various levels of accountability needed to ensure accurate information – in the context of inadequate resourcing – it becomes even more difficult to track and quantify with accuracy the number of out-of-school students in the Polish public education system.

While procedures exist for parents to notify their local municipality of their children's attendance in online Ukrainian schooling to account for compulsory education requirements in Poland, typically, the parents do not do this.²⁹ The gap between procedures and their application thus contributes to data gaps in understanding the prevalence of out-of-school



If the child is not in school for some time and we do not have any information from the parent that he is sick, that he left, then the educator is obliged to contact the parents. If [this] does not work, you wait a few days, then there is a [registered] letter from the management. [The teacher then] reports this to the principal office, if the principal office also fails, then higher-level entities such as the Local Education Authority are notified.

KII, teacher [F]

28 „Ukrainian Schools in Poland, or Orphans of Education Ministries in Poland and Ukraine Are Washing Their Hands.” Nezlamna. Accessed December 5, 2023. <https://nezlamna.org/organization/ukrainian-schools-in-poland-or-orphans-of-education-ministries-in-poland-and-ukraine-are-washing-their-hands/>.



A child who is under 18-19 years old, well, it is known that there is an educational obligation. We should see this child in the system somewhere, have information about where he lives, can be contacted by some field guardian, by social assistance. And to us as teachers and to the school, no one gives such information.

KII, teacher [F]



children and adolescents and the reasons for their being out of school. This also leads to inadequate understanding of protection risks, needs and concerns out-of-school children and adolescents face as a result. Accountability and follow-up by Polish school authorities for those who do not enrol, attend irregularly, or who drop out of Polish schools are inconsistent, often occurring on an ad hoc basis. Insufficient staffing at the local level also contributes to the inability to maintain proper records of and to track reasons for non-enrolment, irregular attendance, and dropout. This is not solely reflective of the current crisis supporting Ukrainian refugees; the Polish education system during the COVID-19 pandemic also struggled to track whether and when children dropped from courses, given challenges with equipment and internet to facilitate remote learning, among other concerns.^{30 31}

29 Gmiterek-Zabłocka, Anna. „Dzieci z Ukrainy poza systemem edukacji.” TOK FM, <https://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/7189654,29034156,czesca-dzieci-z-ukrainy-jest-pozza-systemem-edukacji-alarmuja.html>.

30 Pyżalski, Jan. „Sytuacja dzieci i młodzieży w kontekście doświadczeń pandemii COVID-19.” ResearchGate, 2022. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366356982_Pyzalski_J_2022_Sytuacja_dzieci_i_mlodziwy_w_kontekscie_doswiadczen_pandemii_COVID-19_W_M_Sajkowska_R_Szredzinska_red_Dzieci_sie_licza_2022_Raport_o_zagrozeniach_bezpieczenstwa_i_rozwoju_dzieci_s_340.

31 Pyżalski, Jan, and Walter, Natalia. „Edukacja zdalna w czasie pandemii COVID-19 w Polsce– mapa głównych szans i zagrożeń. Przegląd i omówienie wyników najważniejszych badań związanych z kryzysową edukacją zdalną w Polsce. Raport dla Rady Dialogu Społecznego w Gdańsku.” Operon, 2021.

32 “Rapid Gender Analysis: Ukrainian Refugees in Poland.” CARE International. <https://www.care-international.org/resources/rapid-gender-analysis-ukrainian-refugees-poland>.



SPOTLIGHT: CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Many children with a wide range of physical and cognitive disabilities fled Ukraine with their families to seek safer conditions in Poland. These children now encounter similar challenges in accessing education as Polish children with disabilities due to legislative and infrastructural limitations that result in the inability of the education system to accommodate for the wide spectrum of needs among learners within the school environment. As a result, many Ukrainian children with disabilities study online.

Ukrainian children with disabilities experience additional stigmatization given their experiences of having been displaced from a conflict zone. Ukrainian children with disabilities are also often excluded from integration classes that are designed to help Polish children with disabilities engage with the wider school population, as educators feel they already have enough to deal with. According to a Rapid Gender Analysis done by CARE in 2022, throughout Europe, the largest number of children in institutional care are from Ukraine, half of whom have a disability.

Early in the Ukrainian war as many arrived in Poland, some institutions that help diagnose disabilities hired Ukrainians to support this population and ensure adequate diagnoses and documentation were provided. Poland now only requires a certificate indicating functional disability (not specifically educational) which is approved by local authorities; this certification enables caregivers to request access to an institution that meets the child’s needs. That said, given the range of types of physical and cognitive disabilities faced, it is difficult to uniformly characterize challenges in the education system, as individualized needs require varied accommodations and different resources. The provision of these is often inconsistent depending on school management.

One particularly vulnerable group are children who were evacuated from institutional care facilities in Ukraine, largely because of



disabilities, and who have been placed in various ad hoc shelters in Poland without accompanying family members. Because of the unique situation faced by children evacuated from institutional care facilities, it appears that these children do not neatly fit within the Polish child protection system and may instead remain under the jurisdiction of Ukraine's child protection system. This has led to instances where unaccompanied children have been returned to Ukraine.³³ Education delivery in these centers varies widely, influenced by factors such as the specific needs and disability status of the children, the geographical location of the centers, and the availability of staff. Unfortunately, this variability often leads to situations where children have limited or no access to educational opportunities that are adequately tailored to their needs. This issue is particularly acute for children with high support needs or severe disabilities, who are frequently excluded from any learning opportunities. Furthermore, these children find themselves in a state of extreme isolation, caught between two child protection systems and unable to fully benefit from either. This predicament arises from the absence of a solid legal and political framework facilitating cooperation between the Polish and Ukrainian governments. To address these challenges more effectively, targeted studies are urgently needed to ascertain the accessibility of education, evaluate the protective environment, and identify the support required to meet the needs of children evacuated from institutional care facilities.

We talk about children with disabilities who are misdiagnosed, underdiagnosed, over diagnosed, just huge problems in terms of basic access to education as well as health care. So that group is a huge priority

KII, NGO staff [F]



It depends on the city or the municipality that decides [how resources are being mobilized], and there are very different implementation types ... We know that, for example, intercultural assistants play a great role in reaching out to the families and in ... conveying the importance of the preparatory classes. So if the school doesn't really pay attention [we] don't really benefit from all the intercultural assistance. I also see a downward trend, that there are less and less of these forms of support. And I have the impression that we are simply trying to patch it with NGOs, and there is simply no system support.

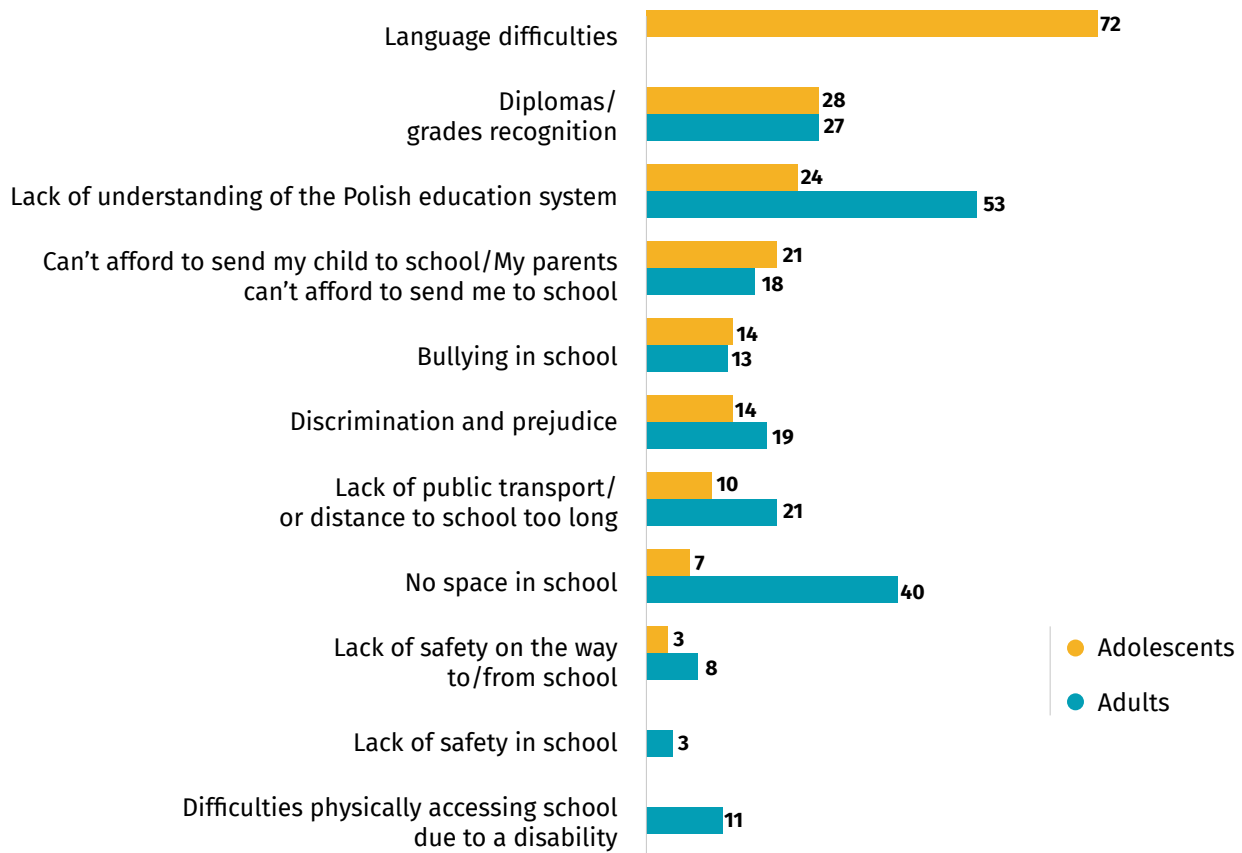
KII, NGO staff [F]

Ukrainian students face significant cultural barriers within the Polish school system. Of those surveyed, 72% reported difficulties with the language barrier (which was markedly higher in peri-urban areas at 86%) and 28% noted issues with certification of their diplomas and compatibility between Polish and Ukrainian curricula, which further impacted their ability to adjust to the Polish school environment. While some schools are staffed with cultural assistants by the municipality, the majority of local education authorities do not have the budget to cover the costs of supporting the number of students needing cultural assistance and rely on external funding from INGOs — both of which result in staffing that is disproportionate to need. In some instances, Ukrainian teachers volunteer their time to support the students, without financial support. According to one mother interviewed, the absence of adequate cultural support and translation services available in the school factored into her decision not to send her child to a Polish school.



³³ UNHCR. „Voluntary Return to Ukraine of Refugee Children without Parental Care, including Unaccompanied Children and Children Evacuated from Care Institutions in Ukraine.” July 2023. Accessible: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/64ac0f924.pdf>.

FIGURE 9: MAIN PROBLEMS/CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY:
data in %



Experiences of bullying and harassment further complicate Ukrainian adolescents’ ability to integrate and feel welcomed into the Polish school environment. While many adolescents felt mostly safe and comfortable in their Polish communities, 14% (15% females vs. 11% males) mentioned experiencing bullying by their Polish peers, largely due to their Ukrainian background and perceptions of the war in their home country. 19% of caregivers reported the same of their children and adolescents. In the school environment, some teachers insisted that these cases are handled expediently, though several caregivers noted feeling a lack of support by teachers and school management. Both physical and psychological threats were cited. There were other cases in which adolescents felt they had no choice but to continue with Polish schooling given parental insistence on continuing to attend school in-person.

The Polish education system does not incentivize enrolment nor have sufficient resources to ensure Ukrainian students can learn Polish language at

” ”

The number of [cultural] assistants is very low. I would not say that all the children understood everything. I was looking for a school, Polish, with additional Polish language courses. I did not find any.

IDI, caregiver [F]

a level needed to learn the school curriculum. In many cases, Ukrainians are expected or advised to seek Polish language support outside of the public school system’s preparatory courses. According to government data, only 37.2% of those registered for Polish education are also enrolled in free Polish



language courses.³⁴ While a 2022 UNICEF study noted 63% of Ukrainian caregivers desired to have their adolescents in Polish language classes.³⁵ Yet, Polish MoE data confirms a significant drop in availability of preparatory classes, from 2,414 in the 2021-2022 school year to 956 in 2023.³⁶ In part this is based on a centralized analysis of minimum number of students needed per class to justify the investment, which does not accurately reflect the overall need in country. In the current study, some students were told by their Polish school that they should attend Polish language courses for 1-2 years – paying from their own financial resources – before re-entering the formal school year. Such decisions would further disrupt the child’s educational progress, have important implications for socioemotional and cognitive development, and are a deterrent for school enrolment for some Ukrainian students. This set of barriers poses further challenges for adolescents with disabilities, including those with mental health challenges, or other behavioural concerns that can complicate their ability to integrate into the Polish cultural environment. NGO staff who participated in the study claim that NGOs are picking up a large portion of the burden despite insufficient and limited-term, project-based funding.

³⁴ Zarejestrowane Wnioski o Nadanie Statusu Ukrain, Dane.gov.pl, <https://dane.gov.pl/pl/dataset/2715,zarejestrowane-wnioski-o-nadanie-statusu-ukr/resource/52339/table>

³⁵ UNICEF, “Survey of Ukrainian Refugees in Poland: Children’s Education”, April 2022

³⁶ Chrostowska, Paulina. “Co w tym roku szkolnym zmieniło się w sytuacji uczniów uchodźczych i szkół?” January 2023.



There was a case where some of our children prepared a presentation about Ukraine, about themselves. And some children simply ruined this presentation. They went to the principal, the children who used to study in my class, and asked him to intervene in some way.

KII, Ukrainian teacher [F]

My daughter told me about a case [where] the younger child was pushed and insulted, he was called Russian because he speaks Russian. And when she approached the teacher, said that this was the situation, the teacher told her that she doesn’t have time for this.

KII, psychologist [F]



Last year there were many more preparatory classes, but this year we received information that there will be fewer of them... when the preparatory class ends, it is not clear if the child will go to the first grade. It means you have to enrol your child again. If there are fewer of these preparatory classes, it means that not all children will be admitted

KII, Ukrainian teacher [F]

The fluctuating Polish legislative environment in relation to Ukrainian refugees complicates their ability to understand and navigate changes in the system, particularly as new arrivals continue to enter Poland. Ukrainian families – and Polish educators – struggle to keep up with the evolution of central policies regarding Ukrainians, both with regard to the education sector as well as the rights and entitlements of Ukrainians that enable them to live and thrive in the country. These phenomena are not atypical in countries hosting large volumes of refugees but make it very difficult to maintain consistency and to convey clear information at all levels and to all audiences.

Ukrainian teachers face challenges to validate their accreditation in Poland, particularly for those who do not have original documentation, which limits their work opportunities and the availability of culturally specific support to Ukrainian adolescents. While the Polish Ombudsman's office has enabled those with refugee or protective status to be certified utilizing the European Refugee Qualification passport,³⁷ questions remain about compatibility with the broader European system, which prolongs the process and increases associated costs of transferring Ukrainian certification documents to the Polish context. This is in the context of a system which has already noted sub-standard wages of Polish teachers and insufficient material provision, fuelling past and recent protests by educators.³⁸ Many Ukrainian educators feel that the need to immediately earn income for their family supersedes engaging in the

complicated bureaucracy to ensure their certification is recognized, with many deciding to engage in daily custodial labour instead. Some schools hire Ukrainian teachers as assistants to ensure support is available for Ukrainian students when they are not approved yet to be officially employed as teachers. Additionally, teaching assistant positions for former Ukrainian teachers do not provide a liveable wage.^{39 40}

³⁷ Nostryfikacja dyplomów obywateli Ukrainy – bez względu na datę ich przybycia do Polski. MEiN odpowiada RPO (brpo.gov.pl)

³⁸ "Teachers Protest in Warsaw Demanding Modern Schools, Better Wages, and More Funding." Notes from Poland, September 2, 2023. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/09/02/teachers-protest-in-warsaw-demanding-modern-schools-better-wages-and-more-funding/>

³⁹ "Podwyżki dla nauczycieli w 2024. Pensje wzrosną o 12,3 proc. Ile nauczyciele dostaną na rękę? Stawki." Dziennik Gazeta Prawna. <https://serwisy.gazetaprawna.pl/edukacja/artykuly/9286228,podwyzki-dla-nauczycieli-2024-pensje-wzrosna-o-12-3-proc-ile-nauczyciele-dostana-na-reke-stawki.html>

⁴⁰ "How to Calculate a Teacher's Salary in 2023: Average Salary, Minimum Salary, Allowances." Samorzqd.infor.pl. <https://samorzqd.infor.pl/sektor/edukacja/nauczyciele/5646825,jak-obliczyc-wynagrodzenie-nauczyciela-w-2023-r-wynagrodzenie-srednie-minimalne-dodatki.html>



It will be better for them, that the school proposes to teach Polish before lessons, after lessons, therefore it is best to do these things in parallel.

KII, Teacher [F]



[Current assistance from the Polish government] is just a bandage for the wound... but we all know that this crisis has created a temporary legalization hole.

Everyone is legal now, but no one knows what will happen tomorrow. In order to think at all about education, about everyday life, we cannot have legalization issues in the back of our heads all the time.

KII, local government official

Alongside increasing preference for online education, there are concerns about the acceptance of online Ukrainian school credits in the Polish education system. Older adolescents – who more often engage in online education – worry given their interest in higher education in either Poland or broader Europe or intend to return to Ukraine. There is mixed reporting on whether and to what extent Ukrainian education is recognized in Poland for secondary and university-level education. Officially, certifications resulting from successful in-school education completion in Ukraine are accepted in Poland because of an international agreement; however, when entering Polish schools there are noted differences in curricula that complicate the process of certifying documents and placing students in their equivalent educational course level.^{41 42 43 44} While one informant noted a change in Poland during 2023 that enabled students to pass a multinational test to enter Polish universities, it was caveated that success in practice has yet to be seen, and it may depend on individual school management on a case-by-case basis. Meanwhile, it has been documented that the widely-used All-Ukrainian Online Schedule typically used by adolescents in Poland does not provide certificates,⁴⁵ further complicating validation of course completion.

TAKE-AWAYS

1. Admittance to Polish schools is complicated by increased crowding in schools, timing of arrival and enrolment applications per the school year, and level of understanding of the enrolment procedures.
2. Cultural and language barriers are one of the top reasons Ukrainian adolescents drop out or choose not to attend Polish schools, with limited availability of cultural assistants in schools to support them as another factor linked to concerns about enrolling in or remaining in schools.
3. Ukrainian teachers face challenges in transferring accreditation to the Polish system and take other jobs to take care of their families.
4. Online Ukrainian education does not provide certificates to prove online course completion, and transferring previous Ukrainian school credits can be challenging.

41 *Uznawanie zagranicznych dyplomów i świadectw – Punkt Koordynacyjny ds. Polskiej i Europejskiej Ramy Kwalifikacji (men.gov.pl)*

42 *“Uznanie równoważności zagranicznego wykształcenia – Biuro ds. Rekrutacji UW.” University of Warsaw (UW).*

43 *Nostryfikacja dyplomów obywateli Ukrainy – bez względu na datę ich przybycia do Polski. MEiN odpowiada RPO (brpo.gov.pl)*

44 *Uznawanie kwalifikacji nauczyciela z Ukrainy – Portal Oświatowy (portaloswiatowy.pl)*

45 *“War in Ukraine: Attacks on Schools, Interrupted Education, and Loss of Learning Outcomes for Children in Ukraine and Host Countries.” ReliefWeb. Accessed December 5, 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/war-ukraine-attacks-schools-interrupted-education-and-loss-learning-outcomes-children-ukraine-and-host-countries>*



In Ukraine we have multinational tests for children, and they pass these exams and receive the results. And with these results, they can enter Polish universities. This new rule was approved by Poland this year, 2023... we will see how it works in practice...If there is an OK from the principal, this document can be accepted. In some cases it works, in some cases Dot.

KII, NGO staff [F]



2. COPING MECHANISMS AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS USED BY OUT-OF-SCHOOL UKRAINIAN ADOLESCENTS



RISKS FACED BY OUT-OF-SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS AND AVAILABLE SUPPORT STRUCTURES

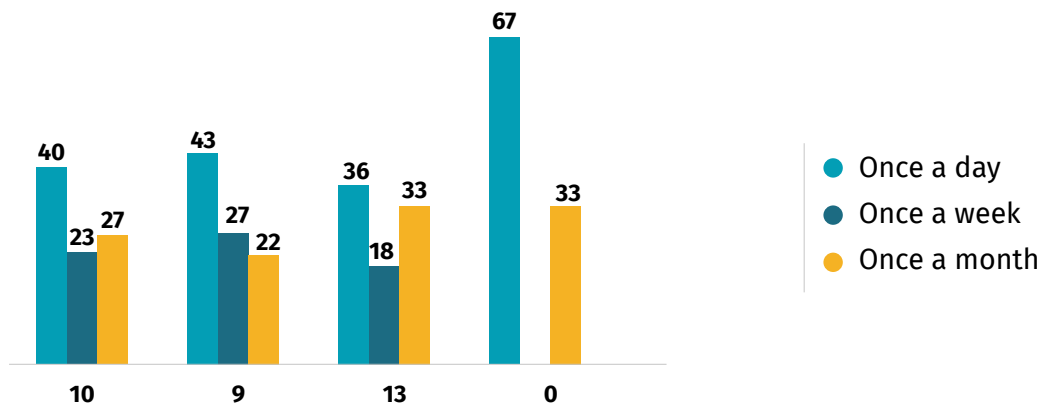
Ukrainian adolescents not in Polish schools face elevated levels of cultural and social isolation that impacts their psychosocial well-being. In rural areas, 48% of adolescents indicate they never interact with Polish peers, leading to potential psychosocial distress and limited opportunities for integration into the host community. Due to frequent population movements among Ukrainian refugees, many communities lack Ukrainian social groups to enable them to feel comfortable and share a sense of cultural identity – and because relatively few Ukrainians attend Polish schools, this compounds the sense of isolation. Some adolescents noted school as the primary

place for meeting Polish friends; those out of school or engaging in online courses therefore find it more challenging to build a social network and to learn and practice language skills in-person. One study highlighted peer-to-peer activities as the top unmet need identified for children and adolescents by caregivers. In the same study, while many older adolescents felt Polish adolescents were friendly to them, they did highlight instances of bullying and harassment towards Ukrainians.⁴⁶ Adolescents from rural areas moving to urban cities further struggle to adapt to the lifestyle and behaviours of their peers and feel discomfort in their interactions with urban Polish adolescents.

⁴⁶ IMPACT & Save the Children. "Protection Needs of Children, Adolescents and Their Caregivers Displaced from Ukraine, January 2023."

FIGURE 10: HOW OFTEN DO YOU HAVE THE CHANCE TO MEET AND INTERACT WITH POLISH PEERS?

data in %



Several students came to my school, including a girl who was studying in an environment that was completely unurbanized. She didn't know how to dress for school and because she had little with her, she was also a little shy. Old-fashioned skirt, slippers, she did not understand this world, the city. She didn't really know what those peers were doing. You could see that she was going through this situation terribly.

KII, teacher [F]



Out-of-school adolescents are also at risk, depending on the level of availability and support of caregivers they receive. One third of adolescents surveyed said no one helps them with homework, and many cited boredom or and admitted that they spent significant amounts of time wandering outside alone or in parks. This can introduce security risks and potential for exploitation in a new environment, especially for those less comfortable with the Polish language. Little accountability is available as to whether and how adolescents engage in online classes, particularly if an adult caregiver is not monitoring attendance and completion of schoolwork tasks and remote Ukrainian educators may be forced to shelter and be unavailable. Community psychosocial or recreational services, typically provided by NGOs on a time-bound and project-specific basis in community centres, do not always account for children and adolescents' time spent in school, with many centres closed on weekends. Further work can be done to help Ukrainian caregivers incentivize their adolescents to attend such centres and to participate in activities.

Availability of psychosocial support services in schools and the broader community for Ukrainian adolescents is insufficient, yet direly needed. In many schools, only one (if that) staff is available and responsible for the well-being and psychosocial development of students,⁴⁷ and that person may not be able to address the specific needs of Ukrainian adolescents. For out-of-school adolescents, lack of supervision, boredom, and loss of years of schooling have led to depression and in many cases increased substance abuse and other harmful activities. Adolescents experience aggression, restlessness, loneliness, and constant worry for the future.⁴⁸

Some educators highlighted trends toward dropout and reverting to online education specifically for adolescents suffering more acutely from mental health concerns, so that they can be better monitored by caregivers - but without certainty of having available mental health professionals in their community for proper support.

⁴⁷ Often the term "psychologist" is utilized for those who serve essentially as "pedagogues" or school counsellors and are not tasked with nor capable of providing therapeutic interventions. Instead, they provide guidance and intervene when situations arise in a school setting.

⁴⁸ Save The Children. „This Is My Life, And I Don't Want to Waste a Year of It." *The Experiences and Well-being of Children Fleeing Ukraine*. Accessible: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/This-is-my-life_research-on-experiences-children-from-Ukraine_FINAL.pdf



Psychological well-being comes first because these kids are attending online education; and when they do not go to school, we observe apathy among children here in the centers. The degree of motivation is very low, in both adults and children, who simply spend most of their time in front of their smartphones.

There is a great threat, because we have had cases where the mother reported to us that her teenage daughter was talking on the phone with some older men. So the lack of time management also leads to risky behaviour, plus these are children who are teenagers, right? And these teenagers are in a foreign country, without language skills, so here comes the hurdle and marginalization in the future.

KII, NGO staff [F]

The problem is the weekends when the center is not working, some parents also [show] such apathy, so here they do not animate this free time for these kids and mainly spend time just in front of the phone.

KII, NGO staff [F]



While social and extracurricular activities are beneficial, considerations must be made for adolescents who are both attending Polish schools and engaging in online Ukrainian courses and are overburdened. When recreational and creative opportunities do exist for adolescents, participating in them can be highly restorative; some adolescents appreciate the freedom to be outdoors – walking, biking, meeting new people in person – as a way to cope with the extreme stress of war and displacement. In some places, Telegram instant messaging groups have been created by Ukrainian refugees to help adolescents meet one another. Many communities additionally have adolescent safe spaces or recreational facilities, some specifically targeting Ukrainian refugees. That said, many adolescents participate in mixed education between Polish

schools and online courses, which was noted to have a physical and mental toll and reduce the energy to participate in non-school activities. In many cases, exhaustion leads to skipping classes if there is any overlap in class schedules and can be counterproductive to the goal of integration into Polish culture. Ukrainian students are facing stimulation overload, between dealing with recovery from their previous experiences, adapting to a new educational environment while endeavouring to successfully learn the Ukrainian curriculum to advance through school, and seeking out and building social and support systems – all while seeking to make time for extracurricular activities meant to be salubrious.

TAKE-AWAYS

1. Out-of-school Ukrainian adolescents do not engage much with Polish adolescents and experience heightened isolation, which impacts their psychosocial well-being.
2. Community and NGO services are beneficial, yet efforts can be made by such service providers to ensure incentivization and accommodations for those in both online and in-school classes.
3. Culturally specific psychosocial support services are insufficient to meet the needs of Ukrainian adolescents recovering from conflict, displacement, and social isolation.

*They say they have bad dreams, they're in this state...
they say they don't really want to eat, they're so sad.*

psychologist [F]

*[Yes, we should have Ukrainian psychologists]. So that the child can relax and talk openly.
For example - what worries him - he cannot always express in Polish what he feels, or what is
happening inside; maybe someone was not accepted by the children. And they are lonely and want
to share this with someone. It seems to me that it is imperative that there is a person who speaks
the same language as he does.*

adult caregiver [F]

*"Of course, [doing both in-person and online school] leads to an exhausted child emotionally,
intellectually, because it's a lot of work. Because there are projects there too. And, of course, if you
come to study in Polish class, there are also requirements, there are also some certain standards for
the performance of work. Pulling two schools is very difficult. This is a very large load on them."*

psychologist [F]

*I walk by myself very often. I walk in the forest, to the river. When I started sitting less with the
phone, my mood improved, I started thinking more rationally. It became easier for me to study."*

teenager [M]





OPPORTUNITIES IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR FOR UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

NGO service providers take on a large role in providing information, activities, and projects that support Ukrainian adolescents to integrate and adapt socially in Poland. In some locations, scholarships are provided by humanitarian organizations to enable adolescents whose families may lack financial means to participate in the Polish education system. In other cases, local organizations with specific knowledge about and experience working with the Roma community and persons with disabilities have focused specifically on encouraging participation of persons from these marginalized groups. Some local NGOs with support from international funding also sometimes provide free language courses and laptops to enable students to study and complete online courses. In many cases, adolescents prefer Polish language courses to recreational activities, even when the latter are offered. Some organizations offer vocational and socioemotional learning courses alongside information services to help adolescents understand their educational track and to support their decision making around schools and courses they wish to attend.



We launched a platform to show the adolescents their pathways. So, for example, if they came from Ukraine and they're 15 years old, they have been staying at home for the last year, so they [can] click and see their opportunities and choose and go on their pathways.

KII, NGO staff [F]

Polish educators have also actively facilitated innovative learning and support opportunities for Ukrainian students. In one instance, teachers co-created an online tool to learn the Polish language, together with the support of the MoE.⁴⁹ The tool functions as an interactive game to support linguistic education from a social and emotional lens. At local levels, some cities have also established centres where Ukrainian adolescents can access online educational activities in consideration of those who do not have equipment or struggle to access web-based opportunities. There is an opening for NGOs and schoolteachers to have stronger collaboration in their mutual attempts to support Ukrainian adolescents' school engagement, but this requires stronger support from Polish education authorities.

Opportunities are needed for Polish education authorities to introduce more widely available Ukrainian and cross-cultural content to supplement approved Polish curricula. Ukrainians strongly desire to learn about their country's culture, history, and language, while exploring intercultural integration within Polish culture. Currently NGOs provide the bulk of these opportunities but are not allowed to be formally engaged inside Polish schools, and few Ukrainian schools exist throughout Poland. Some initiatives are facilitated by local governments, such as education-focused psychological support and training programs in Wrocław, to help address issues of aggression and bullying in schools, as well as supporting intercultural assistants. However, these are not available in all locations with a high prevalence of Ukrainian refugees. Activities that promote cross-cultural integration are lacking, with many activities segregated only for Ukrainians and that don't intentionally foster an appreciation of both Polish and Ukrainian cultures amongst peers.

⁴⁹ Grając w Minecraft dzieci z Ukrainy uczą się polskiego. December 16, 2022. Accessed Dec 20, 2023. <https://news.microsoft.com/pl-pl/2022/12/16/grajac-w-minecraft-dzieci-z-ukrainy-ucza-sie-polskiego/>



We have an informational channel on Telegram, social media, with 10,000 followers, with information about education and to provide the parents with [an] easier, adapted version of it. And there are a lot of changes every time. So our social manager is working on it constantly but it's hard to see and read all the information of course. Especially I can imagine the very political jargon, regulations coming from the top level, it's not easy to understand. UNICEF does a great job with this, they also created Spilno, they have a website and social media channels.

NGO staff [F]

In addition to Ukrainian and cross-cultural content, many expressed a desire for the Polish government to provide more leadership in creating opportunities and pathways to increase Ukrainian adolescents' enrolment in education and supplemental services. Notably, educators and local government officials wish to see more financial resources, subsidies, additional human resources, and more coherent and consistent support structures and systems for encouraging continued engagement of Ukrainian refugee adolescents' participation in schools.

TAKE-AWAYS

- 1.** NGOs play a prominent role in providing services and information for Ukrainian refugees around educational tracks, though with limited ability to directly engage in schools.
- 2.** Some Polish teachers proactively create information and engagement services for students.
- 3.** Greater attention and resources are needed for intercultural activities that bring Polish and Ukrainian youth together and that promote solidarity and cross-cultural understanding.



There are these problems, but they arise simply from the fact that we do not have - we hope that the new government will work on this - a separate path for all children and foreigners who should be involved in our education system. And it's just that we throw them right into our Polish classes and think, come on, you can't swim, and we threw you into the pool. You will try for a long time, you will learn.

KII, local Government official [M]

3. SUPPORTING RESILIENCE AND ENABLING ENROLMENT OR RE-ENROLMENT OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL UKRAINIAN ADOLESCENTS



FACTORS THAT ENCOURAGE UKRAINIANS TO INTEGRATE INTO POLISH EDUCATION

Ukrainian families require the Polish education system to be better prepared and sufficiently resourced to accommodate their needs for them to prioritize enrolment. Many Ukrainian families appreciate the benefits of the Polish education system to support cultural integration and to help promote socioemotional and language learning, while acknowledging some of the downfalls or limitations of Ukrainian online learning opportunities. However, the conditions are not consistently present for them to reap the benefits. There are existing cultural assistants in many schools, and a recently introduced course at Warsaw University, enabling Polish individuals to obtain knowledge of Ukrainian culture and to retain a certificate to fulfil the cultural assistant role. However, the presence of cultural assistants does not sufficiently address the need across the country for Ukrainian teachers to support Ukrainian students' integration into the Polish education system and the benefits of intercultural education that enables Ukrainian and Polish educators to work together and craft a curriculum that enables mutual cross-cultural understanding and positive engagement. Both caregivers and adolescents wish to see better preparation and support for Polish teachers to accommodate Ukrainian students (and generally more personnel), the presence of intercultural assistants in schools on a reliable basis, adequate supplies and materials, and more straightforward and consistently applied enrolment and certification processes. These will, according to this study, improve students' educational experience and incentivize regular school participation. Without the capacity to provide these, limited project-based supplemental support will not



When I do photocopy materials for them, they treat it like a treasure. Some people have special files to keep them, because they treat it as if someone took care of them, that they gave them something, that it is not worthless, that it is not a piece of paper, only that it is a piece of knowledge.

KII, teacher [F]

suffice in the long-term to address the challenges and barriers to enrolling Ukrainian adolescents in the Polish education system.

Cross-cultural integration, socioemotional learning, and more effective Polish language learning are critical benefits to Ukrainian adolescents attending Polish schools. When holistic approaches involving family, community, NGOs, and the public school system are employed, this provides the ideal environment for Ukrainian students to thrive. However, such an approach requires several elements that are not consistently in place in schools across Poland and that need sufficient investment – including financial resources, trained personnel, support to and cooperation with caregivers, and well-designed complementary integrated social activities. NGOs provide an invaluable service to support families psychologically and socially, supported by

the joint work of Polish and Ukrainian educators. The sustained input of teachers for such efforts, however, requires sufficient and adequately paid personnel – in particular translators and/or cultural assistants and psychosocial support professionals who can meet the needs of Ukrainian students. Some students note that while they enjoy Polish schools, they wish their Polish teachers were better prepared to handle the specific complications Ukrainian students are facing.

To accompany having sufficient, and sufficiently trained and skilled personnel, Ukrainian students need adequate and appropriate materials, such as study guides in Ukrainian that can help with technical subject-matter terminology. Some educators indicate this is more available in private schools, so



Certainly, there should be more Ukrainian specialists, our teachers or psychologists. We need to have them in every school. So that children could turn to such a person in case of need. And to talk to them about all these issues and nuances.

IDI, caregiver [F]

those without economic means may not have the opportunity to benefit. Often teachers take on the responsibility of creating and supplying materials to accommodate larger class sizes and newly arrived Ukrainian students.

NGOs and Polish educators can have a positive impact by reaching out to Ukrainian families and adolescents to provide support and encourage enrolment when consistent and organized information on dropouts or out-of-school adolescents is available. With better tracking of individual students who drop out or have irregular attendance, and more specific information

on the circumstances for which families do not enrol their adolescents, paired with a more centralized system to analyse such data to inform resource allocation and decision-making, it would be easier to plan for and implement strategic interventions and programs to identify and engage these adolescents in Polish schools. NGOs have strong connections to communities and engage with families in a variety of ways, given the right level of cooperation and data. Such collaboration to ensure sufficient information would also improve understanding of the scale of the need to inform both local and larger-scale strategic planning within the education sector to ensure the school system can accommodate those who are currently out of school. Teachers say this would better facilitate their ability to engage with students and families and provide better and more targeted support.

Many Ukrainian adolescents appreciate the opportunity to learn Polish and build relationships through in-person interactions at school. Despite the linguistic ease for Ukrainians who attend online schooling, many students prefer live interactions with and support from their teachers. Attending schools can also afford supplemental recreational activities that draw adolescents away from screen time associated with online education and can further help them engage with Polish peers in a more relaxed



Ukrainian children did not have access from the first to the eighth grade to any textbooks, exercises, work cards. The fact that they had it on the desks is because of a Polish teacher. There is one lady, she comes to work an hour earlier and runs to the secretariat to copy, for example, work cards or exercises for her Ukrainian children.

KII, teacher [F]



If we had such a registry [of out-of-school adolescents], we would be able to send one letter to the parents inviting them to school, for example, to a school event, to have a little mingling with their peers live, not just online. This would be the first step to show them, you don't have to know the language, but you're still a teenager, you have the right to have fun, you have the right to communicate with your peers.

KII, teacher [F]

manner that better facilitates language learning and socioemotional learning, critical for those coping with the impact of conflict and displacement.⁵⁰

Culturally preferred methods of communication about the Polish education environment and opportunities are being utilized to inform decision-making on enrolment. While Polish authorities employ various approaches to ensure information about the education system is available, many Ukrainians in the study noted they specifically share information on Ukrainian-initiated Telegram channels. Families will create groups with those who have engaged with the Polish school system to better understand others' experiences. They often consult Polish websites, then discuss amongst themselves about the quality of the school, the principals and teachers, and whether the school in practice is receptive to Ukrainian students. Many caregivers included in the study seek out others who have attended certain schools, and this largely informs enrolment decisions.

50 Abdi, Saida, Adeyinka M. Akinsulure-Smith, Anna Sarkadi, Mina Fazel, B. Heidi Ellis, Sarah Gillespie, Linda P. Juang, Theresa S. Betancourt. „Promoting positive development among refugee adolescents.” *Journal of Research on Adolescents*, October 9, 2023. Accessed December 20, 2023. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jora.12890>

Presence of qualified restorative services, particularly mental health, better eases Ukrainian adolescents into Polish education. Many students and caregivers feel that initial transitions can be the hardest, both psychologically and socially; support in the beginning of their arrival better prepares them for the transition. While no longer being in a conflict setting can itself ease students' pressure, the addition of adequate support to heal from previous extreme stress aids the healing process and builds adaptive skills. The same is true for caregivers, who also need encouragement and support to better motivate their adolescents to go to Polish lessons or public schooling. Many families noted that this requires a holistic approach, as caregivers are concerned also with basic needs, accommodation/shelter, employment, and their adolescent's future. Limited resources are available to support this.



They want to focus on their well being primarily. But as the education sector we have to show them that going back to school makes their lives more normal. It normalizes their lives and they overcome the traumas quicker. It's the MHPSS support when you think about it. Bringing them to safe learning spaces, having peer interaction, those are important aspects ...but MHPSS is still a huge priority.

KII, NGO staff [F]

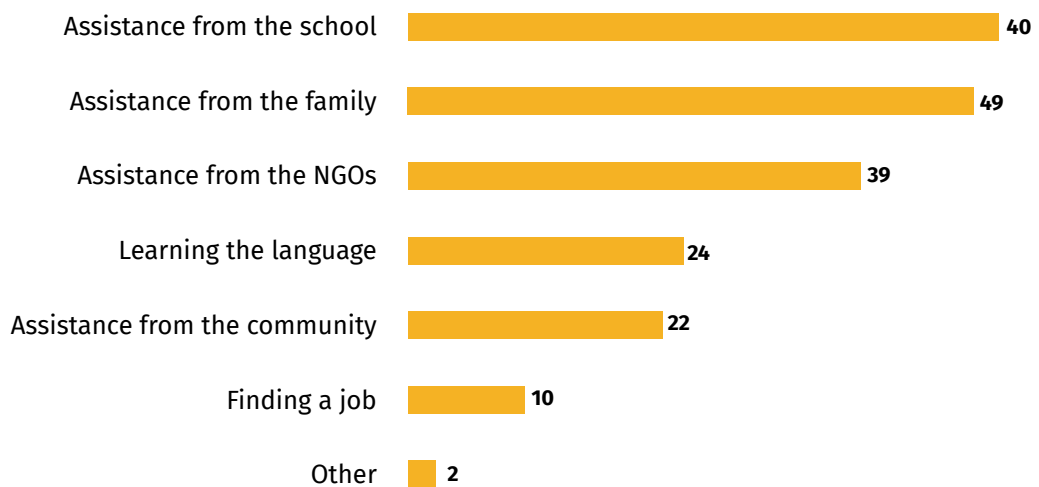
FIGURE 11: WHAT IMPROVEMENTS OR CHANGES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN POLAND TO BETTER SERVE CHILDREN/ ADOLESCENTS LIKE YOURS?

data in %



FIGURE 12: WHAT IMPROVEMENTS OR CHANGES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN POLAND TO BETTER SERVE CHILDREN/ADOLESCENTS LIKE YOU?

data in %





At first, when we arrived, we went and took courses - separately. But all the same, it seems to me that the best thing is when you communicate with someone who is a native speaker, who can speak Polish.

IDI, caregiver [F]

TAKE-AWAYS

- 1.** Levels of resourcing and support from the Polish authorities are a major factor in Ukrainian families' willingness to send adolescents to Polish schools.
- 2.** Adolescents and caregivers recognize the importance of Polish schools for language learning and integration, should other necessary accommodations be met, such as regular availability of cultural assistants and language learning.
- 3.** The presence of critical resources, such as psychosocial support, is needed to better facilitate Ukrainian adolescents' successful transition into Polish schools and into the broader cultural environment.



They want to focus on their well being primarily. But as the education sector we have to show them that going back to school makes their lives more normal. It normalizes their lives and they overcome the traumas quicker. It's the MHPSS support when you think about it. Bringing them to safe learning spaces, having peer interaction, those are important aspects ...but MHPSS is still a huge priority.

KII, NGO staff [F]

CONCLUSION

Significant barriers exist that affect the participation of out-of-school adolescent Ukrainian refugees in the Polish education system. One of these barriers is the difficulty in obtaining accurate information about these adolescents, with inconsistencies in tracking those who are registered but do not attend or have dropped out. Most Ukrainian students in the study attend online Ukrainian courses, especially among older adolescents, with a preference for this form of education over in-person Polish schools. This trend is influenced by various factors, including the expectation of needing to be prepared academically to be able to return to Ukraine, where their academic certifications are more likely to be recognized, and the challenges of integrating into the Polish system, particularly in terms of language acquisition and curriculum differences.

The isolation of marginalized Ukrainian communities, including Roma, children with disabilities, and unaccompanied and separated children who already face historical marginalization, is exacerbated in Poland. Improving understanding of the specific circumstances and available support systems for these populations to ensure they have equitable and appropriate resources needed to succeed and thrive requires further inquiry – using a gender and inclusion lens. Children evacuated from Ukrainian institutions without family members in Poland appear to be one of the most vulnerable populations, often with restricted access to education, protection and mental health services.

The Polish education system is not adequately resourced to provide quality education given the influx of refugee students and anticipated increases in the coming months due to continued and potential escalation of the conflict. Schools suffered from insufficient personnel and materials prior to the reception of Ukrainian children and adolescents. While admirable efforts have been

made to accommodate the increased need on the part of teachers and local school administrations to support Ukrainian refugee adolescents and their families, this is not sustainable and requires systemic efforts and wide scale investment to ensure equitable and appropriate financing is available to prioritize inclusion of Ukrainians and minority groups and resource specific activities that meet their targeted needs. This should involve close collaboration with donors, (I)NGOs and civil society to propose and pilot local initiatives to this end.

The impact of both preparatory courses and cultural assistants is well noted and should be amplified, particularly considering the reduction in their availability in the past year. More efforts to ensure these services are available, coupled with efforts to simplify or streamline the processes of accrediting Ukrainian teachers and training Polish teachers to work with Ukrainian students, are vital to the success of Ukrainian adolescents and incentivizing their enrolment in Polish education. This should be accompanied by sufficient mental health and psychosocial support services or referrals to ensure both adolescents and caregivers have resources to help with their adaptation to the Polish environment.

The findings from this study underscore the need for targeted and holistic interventions to address the complex challenges faced by out-of-school adolescent Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Collaborative efforts between Polish authorities, institutional and private donors, local and international NGOs and civil society are essential to create inclusive educational environments and address systemic barriers, as well as support efforts towards intercultural understanding and solidarity to enable Ukrainian adolescents to thrive in their new environments.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations outline overarching proposals aimed at informing strategic policy, decision-making, and targeted activities related to improving access to education and the corresponding protective environment for adolescent Ukrainian refugees in Poland.⁵¹ The time of this publication coincides with a protracted conflict in Ukraine, a large number of remaining refugees in neighbouring countries and changing policies relative to migration. With the recent appointment of the new government in Poland and the very welcomed improved coordination between education actors such as the Children Ombudsman and local authorities, greater opportunity to instil more inclusive, diverse and long-term approach to education in a multicultural context has presented itself. It is also imperative to better understand the differential experiences based on gender, which requires further inquiry beyond this study. To help ensure Ukrainian boys and girls have relevant and timely support for their continued psychosocial well-being and resilience, the below recommendations are posed to influence positive outcomes for Ukrainian adolescents and their families. The report should be disseminated widely with consultative plans for actioning recommendations.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Polish government should substantively increase its central-level investment in the education sector and decentralize resources to ensure schools can accommodate incoming Ukrainian adolescents. Schools have long been under-funded, including quantity, remuneration, and capacity building of educators and broader school personnel, availability of necessary teaching and learning materials, and assurance of vital resources such as psychosocial and cultural assistance, along with preparatory course

availability. To secure continued dedication of the Polish and Ukrainian educators who are responsible for promoting a smooth transition for Ukrainian adolescents into Polish schooling – and reducing risks of dropout or non-enrolment – central authorities should prioritize efforts to:

- A.** Analyse and increase financial investment in educational staff remuneration to ensure adequate liveable wages, incentivization of teacher recruitment, and to enable Ukrainian teachers to contribute to the Polish school system.
 - B.** Evaluate and reallocate resources to ensure local municipalities can accommodate Ukrainian students in ways that promote high quality and culturally relevant service provision.
 - C.** Emphasize investment in long-term engagement in reinforcing the Polish public school system and avoid short-term project-based initiatives in order to facilitate long-term sustainable education and protection outcomes for all children in Poland.
- 2.** The Polish Ministry of Education should introduce and resource a comprehensive, systematic, and collaborative tracking and accountability mechanism for out-of-school Ukrainian adolescents. The vacuum of information on Ukrainian adolescents who do not enrol, attend irregularly, or drop out of Polish schools

⁵⁰ While this study primarily focuses on the educational challenges faced by Ukrainian minors in Poland, it is crucial to contextualize these findings within the broader framework of migrant and refugee children's rights to education. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR – Article 14) and its Optional Protocols No. 1 (1952) and 12 (2000), alongside the European Social Charter (Articles E, 10, and 17) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 14), assert the right of all children to equitable access to education. These instruments mandate the provision of equal educational opportunities to all children, including those from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Thus, the recommendations presented here, while tailored to the situation of Ukrainian minors, should be viewed as relevant and beneficial to all migrant and refugee children in Poland, aligning with these essential European principles and legal standards.

is a central point that inhibits planning at central, municipal, and school levels, as well as for civil society and humanitarian organizations that play a critical role in supporting these adolescents and their families to integrate into Polish society and facilitate access to the school system. Of priority should be:

- A.** More systematic methods of information sharing (from central government to community- and school-level), alongside localized coordination with Ukrainian caregivers – including accountability to registries for adolescents attending Ukrainian online courses.
 - B.** Structured and supported follow-up on absences from Polish schools to ensure better understanding of push-pull factors and mitigation of protection risks for those out of the Polish school system.
 - C.** Integrated consultation with NGOs and civil society in information sharing, with an eye towards the provision of services that holistically address the needs of Ukrainian families, and sustainable outcomes across the Polish education system.
- 3.** Public and private actors should jointly commission further research to better understand the situation of and invest in meeting the needs of more vulnerable and marginalized populations, especially unaccompanied and separated minors, the Roma community, children with disabilities, and evacuated children living in shelters. While some information has been gleaned from the current study, there is still limited data around, and access to, highly vulnerable refugee populations to enable a better understanding of their access to education, protective environments, and priorities for support and advocacy. Efforts to be made include:

- A.** Family tracing and reunification still require dedicated attention and support from the Polish government, in collaboration with the international community, to ensure separated accountability to UASM. Very sparse information is available around the educational needs of children evacuated from Ukraine (largely with disabilities).
- B.** A targeted study is needed on gender disparities regarding access to education and

protection outcomes for Ukrainian refugees, specifically noting the safety risks of young women in contexts of schooling, caregiving, and being out of school.

- C.** Engage in more wide-reaching consultation with Roma communities to better understand barriers to access to education and actively include their input in devising solutions in a participatory and inclusive manner.
- 4.** The Polish government, institutional and private donors should amplify support to and collaboration with NGO and civil society programming targeting Ukrainian adolescents' education, social support, and protection. Substantial efforts have been made to ensure availability of supportive services for Ukrainian refugees in Poland on behalf of INGOs and civil society, which can be further benefited by closer collaboration and coordination with central and local Polish governmental authorities, prioritizing:
- A.** Long-term investment in consistently available- psychosocial, recreational, socio-emotional, developmental, and informational services across rural and urban areas that are critical to ensuring successful integration of Ukrainian adolescents the Polish school system,
 - B.** Making funding sources available for localized, joint pilot projects around effective models for providing holistic support for Ukrainian and minority inclusion and positive psychosocial and integration outcomes, prioritizing long-term investment in learning and scalability.

TECHNICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.** Polish government in collaboration with and support of NGOs and civil society should expand linguistic and cultural assistance programs in schools to ensure regular and consistent service coverage across the country targeting Ukrainian adolescents – with prioritization for intercultural activities that engage both Polish and Ukrainian students and educators. Cultural assistants play an integral role in helping Ukrainian adolescents adjust to the use of a foreign language and an unfamiliar schooling environment and should be more readily available

and adequately trained and supported. This support should be developed in conjunction with more widely available organized Polish language classes for Ukrainian students. Priority should be placed on:

- A.** Provision of sufficient and equitable linguistic and preparatory courses for Ukrainian children and adolescents to ensure they have understanding of Polish language and culture for better integration.
 - B.** Ensuring there are intercultural services and activities that also help Polish students to better understand and accept Ukrainians and ensure peer-to-peer engagement – both academic and recreational.
 - C.** Supervisory mechanisms to ensure quality and accountability to implementing personnel, alongside culturally appropriate training of teachers that accounts for the needs of adolescents coping with stress from conflict and displacement.
 - D.** Integral involvement of NGOs and civil society in planning and implementing cross-cultural interventions, with resources provided to ensure adequate capacity building of all personnel in the educational environment.
- 2.** The Ministry of Education, private and institutional donors should devote additional resources to expand provision of culturally relevant mental health and psychosocial support services in schools, particularly personnel, to ensure equitable and consistent support to Ukrainian adolescents. While it may not be feasible to have a certified psychologist in most Polish schools, efforts should be made to employ adequate staffing so that each school has dedicated personnel to provide psychosocial support, assist with cross-cultural adjustment, and serve as focal point for referrals to mental health professionals. Proposed actions include:

- A.** Specific subsidies earmarked for local authorities to ensure targeted MHPSS assistance is made available in schools. This includes personnel who are responsible for establishing and/or maintaining well-run service mappings and referral pathways for qualified mental health professionals.

- B.** Prioritize facilitating employment of Ukrainian personnel to ensure MHPSS services are responsive to the needs of Ukrainian adolescents. Such investments will ensure that out-of-school Ukrainian adolescents feel comfortable transitioning into the Polish school system, and mitigate any potential protection risks they face.

3. The Polish government should review and evaluate the existing protocols and procedures for accreditation of Ukrainian educators, as well as diploma recognition for students participating in Ukrainian education (both in-person and online). To ensure a smoother transition of Ukrainian teachers into possible employment in Polish schools and to enhance their availability to meet the educational needs of Ukrainian adolescents and for such students to ensure their certifications are recognized, the following should be done:

- A.** Adapt more streamlined procedures for Ukrainian teacher certification and appropriately communicate these so that Ukrainian teachers can transfer certifications of to the Polish system.
- B.** In coordination with Ukrainian counterparts, analyse and where appropriate adapt Polish protocols for acceptance of Ukrainian diplomas to ensure the participation in and completion of online Ukrainian curricula in enabling Ukrainian adolescents to more easily and expediently transition into Polish schooling. Any changes in said protocols should be transparently communicated and disseminated in a culturally appropriate manner to ensure compliance.

4. The Polish Ministry of Education, private and institutional donors and civil society actors should intentionally direct more resources to ensuring adequate support to and preparation of Polish educators to engage with Ukrainian adolescents. Polish teachers were stretched prior to the large influx of Ukrainian adolescents, and few opportunities exist for them to receive cross-cultural orientation or training. This is critical to the success of Ukrainian students, and therefore investments should be made in:

- A.** Capacity building of Polish (and where possible Ukrainian) educators to better facilitate integration of Ukrainian students in Polish schools.

B. Provision of adequate and accessible academic materials to enable Ukrainian students to have resources in their language as a reference and to support their educational engagement.

C. Facilitation of cross-cultural activities that enable Ukrainian students to learn about and integrate into Polish culture and interact with Polish peers while helping Polish adolescents better understand Ukrainian culture.

5. The Ministry of Education should re-invest in preparatory courses targeting Ukrainian adolescents to ensure wider availability, considering the potential for such opportunities to become compulsory, adequately resourced, and conducted in parallel with the regular Polish curriculum. Preparatory courses for Ukrainian students have shown to be useful and strategic both in cultural and linguistic integration, as well as in enabling Ukrainian adolescents to more easily navigate the Polish curriculum without losing additional time in their educational development. Without the pervasive availability of such preparatory linguistic and cultural courses, Ukrainian families feel their adolescents are less able to gain ground in their attempts to integrate into the Polish school system and broader Polish society. Priority should thus be given to:

A. Provision of affordable, widely available, and safe modalities for preparatory classes that enable students to participate in preparatory work in tandem with their regular schoolwork.

B. Flexible approaches according to the school year vis-à-vis the arrival of Ukrainian students to ensure options are available to enrol in preparatory classes without further delaying educational progress.

6. The Polish government should consider the possibility of transitioning all refugee children present in the country into the Polish education system in order to bolster educational outcomes and alleviate protection concerns. This will require further research into the level of service provision required, not just in terms of school capacity, but also cultural integration as well as the alleviation of protection concerns associated with out-of-school children and adolescents. This will include:

A. Investing in flexible education pathways to transition all refugee children (Ukrainian and otherwise) into in-person school settings, and eventually into the Polish education system.

B. Establishing a baseline for minimum competencies and protection frameworks to ensure schools can remain safe and inclusive learning environments. In this respect, bridge curricula should be explored in more detail.

C. Developing realistic capacity building scenarios to understand how to accommodate the current stock of out-of-school refugee children, while also preparing for any fluctuations in refugee numbers caused by any escalation in the conflict in Ukraine.

