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Research Report

NAVIGATING RETURN:

Understanding the Challenges and Well-Being of Ukrainians Coming Home Amid Conflict

LAGUNA collective

upinion

Acknowledgements

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Foreword

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has generated the largest displacement crisis in Europe since the Second World War. As of early 2026, an estimated 10 million Ukrainians remain displaced, including approximately 3.7 million internally displaced persons and over 5.9 million refugees living abroad, predominantly in Europe (IOM, 2026a; UNHCR, 2026). At the same time, return has become a significant and complex feature of this displacement landscape. An estimated 4.4 million Ukrainians are now classified as returnees, including more than one million who have returned from abroad—many to regions still affected by active hostilities (IOM, 2026a). Notably, over one-third of returnees reside in frontline regions.

Large-scale return during active armed conflict remains globally rare and challenges prevailing assumptions in migration and post-conflict recovery research, which typically treat return as a phase following stabilization in security, governance, and economic conditions. Existing scholarship has largely focused on post-conflict return or on economic reintegration outcomes (e.g. Harild et al., 2015; Tegenbos & Vlassenroot, 2018; Ndreka, 2021), leaving limited understanding of how return unfolds while conflict continues, safety remains volatile, and protection abroad—such as the EU Temporary Protection regime—remains formally in place. In the Ukrainian context, this gap is particularly consequential given the unprecedented scale of displacement, the evolving nature of European protection frameworks, and ongoing policy debates about reconstruction and return. Understanding who returns, under what constraints, and with what consequences is therefore both empirically urgent and analytically necessary.

THE POLICY PROBLEM AND EVIDENCE GAP

Political and policy discourse in Ukraine—and increasingly in several European policy arenas—has framed return as relevant to economic recovery, demographic sustainability, and post-war reconstruction. Yet institutional monitoring of return has so far concentrated mainly on scale and geography—how many people return, from which countries, and to which regions within Ukraine.[1] While these data are essential, they remain insufficient for effective policy design.

[1] Ukrainian political discourse since 2022 has consistently framed return in connection with reconstruction, demographic recovery, and national unity. Presidential New Year addresses (Office of the President of Ukraine 2023; 2024) have described return as central to rebuilding the "soul of the nation," while government communications have characterised displaced citizens abroad as a "demographic priority" and linked reintegration to labour market restoration and economic recovery (Government Portal of Ukraine 2024; Ukrinform 2025; Suspilne 2024). Ministerial statements establishing the Ministry for Returning Ukrainians and later the Ministry of National Unity have positioned return within broader reconstruction planning. Media coverage and expert commentary (Forbes Ukraine 2025; TSN 2025; ZN.ua 2024; Radio Svoboda 2024) further illustrate how return has entered policy-oriented discussions as a strategic issue tied to workforce shortages, demographic decline, and post-war state capacity. At the European level, discussions surrounding the future of Temporary Protection and long-term integration frameworks have engaged with the prospect of eventual return in connection with reconstruction planning, burden-sharing, and migration governance.

Existing evidence rarely captures how return decisions intersect with gendered caregiving responsibilities, the legal and administrative legacies of temporary protection abroad, or the cumulative pressures that gradually constrain people's choices over time. While a growing number of policy briefs and research reports examine intentions to return among displaced Ukrainians, these studies typically focus on stated preferences rather than on actual return trajectories and lived reintegration experiences. As a result, return is often measured as an event rather than analysed as a process.

However, while such monitoring data illuminate the scale and correlates of vulnerability, they do not explain how and why return decisions are made under conditions of ongoing war, how return interacts with prior displacement experiences abroad, or how individuals navigate reintegration across institutional, social, and psychological domains. Nor do they capture how return may reflect constrained choice, administrative pressure, family separation, or deteriorating conditions in host countries rather than a straightforward preference to rebuild in Ukraine.

This study addresses that gap. Rather than treating return as a demographic outcome, it examines return as a dynamic, multi-sited decision-making process unfolding across Ukraine and European host states. By analysing lived experiences of return during active conflict, the study explores how economic pressures, legal status regimes, caregiving responsibilities, and mental well-being interact in shaping both the decision to return and the sustainability of reintegration. In doing so, it moves beyond counting returns to interrogating their conditions, consequences, and long-term viability. In the absence of such analysis, return risks being treated as an inherently positive or self-stabilising outcome, rather than as a complex and potentially fragile process that may require sustained and coordinated support in both Ukraine and European host countries.

WHAT THIS REPORT DOES

This report presents findings from Navigating Return, a 14-month mixed-methods study of Ukrainians who lived under the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) and returned to Ukraine during active conflict. It is one of the first systematic studies to examine return while large-scale hostilities continue and European protection frameworks remain formally in place.

The study combines nationwide survey data—including respondents in frontline and heavily war-affected regions—with in-depth qualitative interviews. The survey assesses economic conditions, housing stability, safety, mobility trajectories, social reintegration, and mental well-being using validated instruments, including the Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (SWEMWBS) and the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC-SF). Qualitative interviews explore return motivations, perceived constraints, family dynamics, coping strategies, and future mobility intentions.

Together, these methods allow us to analyse return not as a single event but as an evolving process shaped by cumulative pressures, uneven protection regimes, cross-border policy dynamics, and ongoing insecurity. The report identifies the structural and psychosocial factors that undermine or protect well-being after return, distinguishes between sustainable and precarious return trajectories, and highlights conditions under which the risk of secondary displacement increases. By moving beyond aggregate monitoring data and intention-based surveys, this report provides evidence on the lived realities and long-term viability of return during active conflict.

It aims to inform:

- **EU and national policymakers shaping protection, return, and integration frameworks;**
- **Ukrainian authorities responsible for reintegration, social policy, and recovery planning;**
- **International and humanitarian organisations designing return and support programmes;**
- **Mental health and civil-society actors working with conflict-affected populations.**

We hope this report provides useful insight into the realities of return during active conflict and supports informed, evidence-based policymaking across Ukraine and the European Union.

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OPORA Foundation

OPORA Foundation is a Dutch non-profit organisation based in Amsterdam, dedicated to researching and addressing challenges related to displacement, health and democratic resilience. OPORA is the author and lead initiator of the Navigating Return research project. Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, OPORA has conducted extensive research on displacement, return, social cohesion, and well-being in wartime contexts, providing evidence to policymakers at national and European levels.

Laguna Collective

Laguna Collective is a platform organisation where international mental health experts collaborate to advance knowledge and skills in humanitarian psychosocial aid. Within the Navigating Return project, Laguna Collective conducted desk research on the well-being of returnees, led the development of survey instruments measuring mental well-being, contributed to data analysis, and provided expert consultation on interpretation of findings and research outputs.

Upinion

Upinion specialises in digital, two-way engagement with crisis-affected communities, enabling real-time insight gathering through its in-house developed, secure, Digital Engagement Platform (DEP). In Navigating Return, Upinion hosted the survey environment, ensured data protection during data collection, and led the quantitative data analysis, supporting interpretation of return patterns and post-return conditions.

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Structure of the Report

List of Abbreviations

aOR	**Adjusted Odds Ratio**
CI	**Confidence Interval**
EU	**European Union**
IDP	**Internally Displaced Person**
MHC-SF	**Mental Health Continuum – Short Form** *(Measure of emotional, social, and psychological well-being used to classify flourishing, moderate mental health, or languishing.)*
NA	**Not Available / Missing Data**
OR	**Odds Ratio**
SD	**Standard Deviation**
SWEMWBS	**Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale** *(Seven-item measure of functional mental well-being assessing optimism, clarity of thought, relaxation, and coping.)*
TPD	**Temporary Protection Directive** *(European Union mechanism granting temporary protection status to displaced persons from Ukraine.)*

Executive summary

This report presents findings from *Navigating Return: Understanding the Challenges and Well-Being of Ukrainians Coming Home Amid Conflict*, the mixed-methods study of Ukrainians who lived under the EU Temporary Protection Directive and returned to Ukraine during active war. Based on 14 months of research, it combines nationwide survey data (N=324) with in-depth qualitative interviews, covering economic conditions, safety, housing, mobility, social reintegration, and mental well-being measured through validated instruments (SWEMWBS and MHC-SF).

WHO RETURNS - AND WHY

Across the sample, return is rarely described as a simple or positive choice. Instead, respondents often speak of being gradually pushed back by deteriorating conditions in host countries: the loss of temporary housing, rising living costs, uncertainty around benefits and childcare, and increasingly conditional or time-limited support frameworks across the EU. In this context, return frequently unfolds under constraint rather than as a straightforward decision to rebuild in Ukraine.

The profile of returnees reflects these pressures. Among the 324 respondents, 84.7% are women, with a mean age of 43.8 years. Nearly half are single, divorced, or widowed. Even among those who are formally married, many effectively manage households alone, as partners remain abroad or elsewhere in Ukraine due to work or military service. In practice, a substantial share of returnees function as single-adult households, carrying primary responsibility for income, administration, and care.

Caregiving responsibilities are central to understanding these movements. Nearly 60% of respondents report active caregiving duties. For many, these responsibilities are a decisive factor in returning: parents describe coming back when children struggled emotionally, socially, or academically abroad, while others returned to care for elderly or ill relatives who remained in Ukraine.

EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS AND ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION

Employment prospects play only a minor role in the decision to return: just 11.2% cite job opportunities as a primary motivation. Most returnees are highly educated—seven in ten hold a Bachelor's degree or higher—but economic opportunity in Ukraine rarely acts as a pull factor. Instead, return is driven far more often by family obligations, caregiving responsibilities, and dissatisfaction with conditions abroad.

Labour market reintegration after return shows substantial participation but limited stability. At the time of the survey, 63% of respondents were employed (48% full-time and 15% part-time), while 37% were not employed. Recent returnees were more likely to be out of work, suggesting that labour market reintegration may take time after return. Among those employed, stability remains fragile. Jobs are often low-paid, informal, or short-term, with limited access to contracts, labour protections, or predictable income. 54.6% of employed respondents report working below their qualifications, indicating downward occupational mobility. Interviews describe transitions into manual, temporary, or informal work, while remote or online employment remains accessible only to a minority.

Crucially, employment does not guarantee financial security. More than half of respondents report being unable to cover basic daily expenses, including food, housing, utilities, and healthcare. Among those experiencing financial strain, 72% cannot afford healthcare, 63% struggle with housing costs, and nearly half report difficulty affording food. Although employment is the most common source of income (46.5%), it is often insufficient to ensure economic stability. A majority of returnees (53%) are the sole income providers in their households, frequently while also managing caregiving responsibilities.

Across all multivariate models, financial security emerges as the strongest and most consistent predictor of mental well-being. Returnees who report having enough money to meet their basic needs are significantly less likely to experience low well-being or languishing mental health. The inability to cover daily expenses is strongly associated with elevated psychological distress. These patterns remain robust across both well-being measures and modelling approaches. Broader structural pressures—such as displacement-related debt, disrupted career trajectories, limited childcare availability, and a constrained wartime labour market—likely compound financial strain and intensify vulnerability.

SAFETY AND HOUSING INSECURITY

While 67% of respondents returned to the same town they had lived in before displacement, one third (33%) resettled elsewhere in Ukraine. Patterns of settlement vary significantly by region of origin. Return to pre-war places of residence is far less common among those from heavily affected or partly occupied oblasts such as Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia, where destruction, occupation, or persistent insecurity make return to the original locality unfeasible.

Returnees disproportionately originate from regions repeatedly exposed to hostilities, including Kyiv City and Oblast (18%), Dnipropetrovsk (17%), Kharkiv (9%), Luhansk (9%), Kherson (8%), Zaporizhzhia (9%), Donetsk (6%), and Odesa (6%). Across these locations, perceived safety remains low. More than half of respondents report feeling unsafe or very unsafe in their current place of residence. This perception matters: insecurity is strongly associated with poorer mental well-being across both SWEMWBS and MHC-SF scores. Importantly, insecurity is not confined to front-line areas. Interviews describe how recurrent missile and drone attacks in cities previously considered relatively “safe”, including Kyiv and major central hubs, have eroded trust in the very idea of geographical safety. Safety is experienced as unstable and reversible rather than territorially fixed.

A critical dividing line is time since return. Recent returnees report the lowest well-being scores, the highest emotional strain, and the greatest uncertainty about remaining. This reflects a widening gap between expectations of safety and stability upon return and the lived reality of continued attacks, infrastructure disruption, and seasonal hardship.

Future intentions underscore the fragility of return: 53.3% plan to stay in their current location, 33.3% are unsure, and 13.4% do not plan to stay. Separately, 34.6% are considering moving abroad again. Uncertainty about staying is closely linked to lower well-being and is most pronounced among recent returnees and those residing in insecure or repeatedly targeted areas. Taken together, these findings indicate that return during active conflict remains highly fragile, with a substantial risk of secondary displacement.

MOBILITY AFTER RETURN: LEGAL STATUS, AGENCY, AND PROTECTION AGAINST DETERIORATION

After returning to Ukraine, 28% of respondents reported travelling abroad for short periods (less than one month), and an additional 7% reported temporary relocation abroad (up to six months). In total, 28% engaged in some form of post-return cross-border mobility, while 72% remained in Ukraine without further travel. These patterns indicate that return during active conflict often takes the form of conditional or circular movement, shaped by uncertainty around safety, livelihoods, and care responsibilities rather than by a clear decision to resettle permanently.

A more differentiated pattern emerges when examining mental well-being. Among respondents who travelled abroad for short periods, 29.3% fell into the low well-being category on the Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (SWEMWBS), compared with 44.9% among those who did not travel. On the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC-SF), 17.9% of those who travelled were classified as languishing, compared with 36.5% among non-mobile returnees. In contrast, respondents who temporarily relocated abroad showed levels of low well-being and languishing closer to those who remained immobile.

These findings suggest that short-term mobility may function as an adaptive resource under conditions of prolonged insecurity. The ability to leave temporarily—whether in response to renewed missile attacks, energy outages, caregiving demands, health needs, or employment instability—appears associated with better psychological outcomes. Mobility in this sense reflects access to financial means, valid documentation, and transnational networks, preserving agency and practical options in an uncertain environment.

Qualitative interviews illuminate how this operates in practice. Many participants described return not as the end of displacement, but as part of an ongoing household strategy. Some deliberately maintained housing, bank accounts, or employment links abroad; others kept family members—particularly children—outside Ukraine. These arrangements allowed returnees to recalibrate their location in response to evolving risks.

> "I kept my flat in Poland. I'll be back and forth until things make sense."
> — one participant explained.

> "I'm here for now. But if the shelling returns, I'm not waiting this time."
> — another participant noted.

In these accounts, mobility is less a sign of indecision than a form of risk management. At the same time, mobility is not always fully voluntary. Decisions to move are often shaped by constrained choices, particularly among women with caregiving responsibilities, single-adult households, and those facing housing or income instability. Movement reflects adaptation to instability rather than its resolution.

Legal status plays a decisive role in shaping who can remain mobile. At the time of the survey, 62% of respondents were no longer covered by the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), 19.5% still held TPD status, and 19% were unsure of their legal position. Those who travelled or temporarily relocated after return were disproportionately drawn from the group still covered by Temporary Protection. Legal clarity enables mobility—and mobility, particularly in its short-term form, appears associated with better well-being outcomes.

FRAGILITY OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Using two well-established measures of mental health, SWEMWBS and MHC-SF, the study finds clear signs of strain, even though most returnees are managing their daily lives. On the SWEMWBS, 42% fall into the low well-being group, 53% into moderate, and only 5% into high. This suggests that many are coping, but under ongoing pressure. They report being able to think clearly and deal with problems, yet feel much less relaxed and optimistic about the future. The MHC-SF shows a similar picture. About one third (33.5%) are classified as languishing, 37.5% as moderately mentally healthy, and 29% as flourishing. Social well-being is the weakest area, with low levels of trust, belonging, and confidence that society is improving. Emotional well-being is also modest, while personal strengths such as autonomy and sense of purpose appear stronger. Overall, the results suggest that many returnees remain capable and resilient, but are living under significant social and emotional strain.

Well-being outcomes are shaped primarily by material and structural conditions rather than by demographic characteristics such as age, gender, or caregiving status. Across all multivariate models, financial security emerges as the strongest and most consistent predictor. Respondents able to cover basic needs have 70–80% lower odds of low or languishing well-being compared with those experiencing financial strain. The gradient is pronounced: among those unable to meet essential daily expenses, 58.9% report low well-being and 51.6% are classified as languishing; among those who can meet basic needs, these figures fall to 25.6% and 14.0%, respectively.

Employment provides some protection, but income adequacy matters more than job status alone. Unemployed respondents show markedly higher levels of distress (57.4% low well-being; 52.2% languishing) compared with those employed (33.5% and 23.0%, respectively). At the same time, education functions as a structural resource: respondents with secondary education are substantially more likely to experience poor well-being than those holding advanced degrees, likely reflecting differences in labour market access, income stability, and mobility options.

Perceived safety is another decisive factor. Individuals who feel unsafe are significantly more likely to report low or languishing well-being across both scales. Time since return further differentiates outcomes: recent returnees display the lowest well-being levels and the highest uncertainty, reflecting the gap between expectations of stabilisation and the lived reality of continued attacks, infrastructure disruption, and seasonal hardship. Those considering renewed migration report worse outcomes, while clearer intentions to stay are associated with more stable mental health.

When asked what improved their quality of life after return, respondents most frequently cite support from family and friends (52.7%) and employment opportunities (33.1%), while only 10.9% mention community support. These responses reinforce the broader pattern: well-being is protected where individuals can meet basic needs, feel safe, access stable work, and rely on close social ties. Where these conditions are absent, psychological strain rises sharply — regardless of individual resilience or commitment to return.

SOCIAL REINTEGRATION AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT: LIMITED REACH AND UNEVEN COVERAGE

Survey data show that return decisions are primarily driven by family ties and emotional attachment rather than by material incentives or improved conditions. Family-related reasons (32.5%) and homesickness or longing for home (27.7%) together account for 60% of all returns. By contrast, only 11.2% returned for employment opportunities, 1.6% due to improved safety in their home region, and none reported returning due to government or NGO incentives.

Despite the centrality of social belonging in return motivations, reintegration outcomes are socially strained. Qualitative responses document experiences of stigma, perceived judgement, and social friction, including narratives of being told they "had it easy in Europe" and reports of children facing difficulties when reintegrating into schools. Quantitatively, rebuilding social connections remains a reported obstacle for 16.2% of respondents, alongside broader structural barriers such as financial hardship (50.6%), health problems (physical: 32.8%; mental: 28.2%), employment instability (24.9%), and housing insecurity (22.0%).

Institutional support after return is limited in both coverage and visibility. Nearly seven in ten returnees (68.9%) report receiving no formal assistance after returning to Ukraine, including financial, housing, medical, or psychological support. Even more striking, 76.6% report being unaware of any assistance programs available in their locality, indicating a substantial information and access gap.

Among the minority who did receive support (31.1%), assistance was predominantly financial (64.0%), followed by food or basic supplies (33.3%) and medical services (24.0%). Psychosocial support reached only 17.3% of recipients, and temporary housing or shelter support reached fewer than 10%.

Key Messages

1. Return during active war is widespread — but rarely voluntary.

Ukrainians returning from EU countries under the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) are most often pushed back by deteriorating conditions in host states, rather than pulled by improved safety, opportunity, or recovery in Ukraine. Loss of temporary housing, rising living costs, uncertainty around benefits, childcare constraints, and increasingly conditional or time-limited protection frameworks are central drivers of return. Empirically, return during active conflict reflects constrained choice rather than resolution, challenging policy narratives that interpret return flows as evidence of stabilisation or reduced protection needs.

2. Returnees are a structurally precarious group.

The returnee population is predominantly female (85%), of working age (mean 43.8), and characterised by high caregiving responsibilities (nearly 60%). Many function as single-adult households, managing childcare, eldercare, income generation, and administrative tasks alone. This care-structured profile is not incidental: it reflects how displacement, family separation, and policy withdrawal in host countries redistribute unpaid care work onto women. Returnees' vulnerability is structural, not individual, limiting their capacity to absorb further economic, security, or bureaucratic shocks after return.

3. Financial security strongly predicts mental well-being.

Seven in ten returnees hold a Bachelor's degree or higher, yet 37% work below their qualifications and more than half cannot cover basic daily needs. Employment is often informal, unstable, or poorly paid. A key empirical finding is that financial security outweighs employment status as a predictor of mental well-being. Having a job matters, but having *enough income to meet basic needs* matters more. This challenges labour-market-centred reintegration approaches that assume employment alone is sufficient for stabilisation.

4. Caregiving drives return — but does not worsen mental health.

Care responsibilities are one of the strongest drivers of return: parents return when children struggle abroad, and others return to care for aging or ill relatives in Ukraine. Crucially, caregiving does not independently predict poorer mental well-being after return. This finding disrupts common assumptions that caregiving itself is a vulnerability factor. Instead, caregiving functions as a mobility constraint: people return because care obligations make continued stay abroad untenable, not because caregiving undermines resilience once back. Policy responses that frame caregivers as inherently vulnerable risk misdiagnosing the problem.

5. There is no stable ‘safe geography’ for return.

One in three returnees (33%) did not return to their original town and instead settled elsewhere in Ukraine. Perceptions of safety remain fragile across locations: 57.1% of respondents report feeling unsafe or very unsafe where they currently live, while only 15.1% report feeling safe or very safe.

Perceived insecurity is strongly associated with mental well-being. On the SWEMWBS, 47.9% of those who feel unsafe fall into the low well-being category compared with 32.4% among those who feel safe. On the MHC-SF, 37.9% of respondents who feel unsafe are classified as languishing, compared with 18.9% among those who feel safe.

Interviews describe how recurrent missile and drone attacks, infrastructure damage, and winter energy disruptions in cities previously considered relatively stable — including Kyiv and other major urban hubs — have eroded confidence in geographical safety. These findings suggest that perceived safety, rather than formal regional classifications, shapes well-being and settlement decisions, challenging policy assumptions that stable internal “safe areas” exist for return.

6. Return is fragile and time-dependent.

Return is not equally sustainable over time. Recent returnees show the lowest well-being scores and the highest uncertainty about staying. Only 53% plan to remain in their current location, one third are unsure, and more than one third are considering leaving Ukraine again. The first months after return constitute an early vulnerability window, where expectations of stabilisation collide with the realities of ongoing attacks, infrastructure disruption, and economic strain. This period is associated with heightened risk of secondary displacement.

7. Mobility after return can be protective — not destabilising.

Contrary to much displacement and return literature, returnees who travelled abroad for short periods after returning to Ukraine report better mental well-being than those who remained immobile. This pattern does not extend consistently to those who temporarily relocated abroad for longer periods, whose outcomes more closely resemble those who did not move.

Under conditions of ongoing insecurity, short-term mobility appears to function as an adaptive resource. It reflects access to financial means, documentation, and transnational networks, allowing households to respond flexibly to renewed attacks, livelihood shocks, caregiving pressures, or energy disruptions.

Respondents planning to relocate soon show higher levels of psychological distress, suggesting that anticipated movement under constrained circumstances may signal instability rather than protection. Overall, these findings challenge policy assumptions that equate stability with immobility: during active conflict, the capacity for short-term movement may be more stabilising than enforced settlement.

8. Legal status as a precondition for protective mobility.

Legal status shapes who can remain mobile after return. At the time of the survey, 62% of respondents were no longer covered by the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), 19.5% still held TPD status, and 19% were unsure of their legal position. Respondents who temporarily relocated abroad after return were disproportionately drawn from the group still covered by TPD (55.6%), compared with 20.4% of short-term travelers and 14.8% of those who did not travel.

These patterns suggest that valid protection facilitates repeated cross-border relocation, allowing households to respond to renewed attacks, infrastructure disruptions, or economic shocks while preserving legal continuity. Where protection has lapsed, mobility occurs without safeguards, exposing returnees to irregular residence, loss of entitlements, administrative uncertainty, and higher psychological stress.

9. Mental well-being is under sustained pressure — socially most of all.

42% of returnees fall into low well-being and one third are classified as languishing. Many retain functional capacity such as decision-making, problem-solving, managing responsibilities but report low calm, low optimism, and weak social trust. Social well-being is the most fragile dimension and appears weaker than psychological functioning. Returnees often cope individually while feeling socially disconnected, judged, or unsupported. This pattern indicates sustained strain rather than acute breakdown: people are functioning without stability or reassurance.

10. Reintegration relies on private networks.

Nearly 70% of returnees receive no formal support after return, and more than three quarters are unaware of available assistance. Reintegration is therefore sustained primarily through family support, informal networks, and individual coping strategies. The absence of visible, accessible institutional support does not simply increase hardship; it amplifies uncertainty, administrative burden, and psychological pressure, increasing the likelihood that return becomes another phase of displacement rather than a step toward recovery.

Policy Implications

1 Recognise return as a process, not an endpoint.

Return during active conflict is frequently conditional, reversible, and unstable. Policies that assume return is permanent risk misreading actual mobility patterns and may inadvertently increase the risk of secondary displacement.

Monitoring and support frameworks would benefit from reflecting return as a dynamic process rather than a final outcome.

2 Align return policy with caregiving realities.

Returnees are predominantly women with care responsibilities. Reintegration policies that overlook childcare, eldercare, and single-adult household dynamics risk limiting access to labour markets, services, and stabilisation pathways.

Greater attention to caregiving structures would improve policy responsiveness.

3 Prioritise financial security over employment alone.

Employment without adequate income does not necessarily protect well-being.

Policies focused solely on job placement may overlook the central role of income adequacy, access to healthcare, housing affordability, and predictable utilities in stabilising return.

4 Acknowledge the absence of safe geography.

Individuals' sense of safety, rather than official regional classifications, most strongly shapes their well-being.

Support and communication strategies should reflect the reality that insecurity affects multiple regions, including major urban centres, and fluctuates over time.

5 Safeguard the legal reversibility of return.

Legal status shapes whether returnees retain the option to move again if conditions deteriorate. In this study, respondents who temporarily relocated after return were disproportionately drawn from those still covered by Temporary Protection, indicating that valid protection status facilitates cross-border mobility. At the same time, short-term travel after return is associated with better mental well-being compared to remaining immobile. While this pattern does not extend uniformly to all forms of relocation, it suggests that the ability to leave temporarily under conditions of insecurity may function as an adaptive resource. Automatic lapsing of protection status upon return may therefore reduce households' capacity to respond flexibly to renewed attacks, economic shocks, or infrastructure disruptions.

Predictable and reversible protection frameworks can help preserve legal continuity, reduce the risk of irregular movement, and maintain access to services during periods of renewed instability.

6 Pay particular attention to the 'early return vulnerability window'.

The first months after return are associated with the lowest well-being and highest uncertainty. Policies may therefore benefit from prioritising risk-buffering mechanisms rather than static integration measures.

Facilitating temporary mobility, ensuring documentation validity, enabling cross-border circulation, and providing short-term income or housing flexibility may reduce pressure toward secondary displacement.

7 Improve visibility and accessibility of support.

Low uptake of assistance reflects not only limited provision but also significant information gaps.

Clear communication, accessible local-level entry points, and coordination between state and non-state actors are essential to translate existing support into meaningful stabilisation.

8 Integrate mental well-being into return policy design.

In the current context of war, Ukraine's psychological and psychiatric services are already under considerable strain, and large-scale specialised support for returnees is unlikely to be feasible. Mental well-being should therefore be addressed structurally. Where direct psychological services are limited, scalable alternatives could be prioritised:

a. *Providing clear, accessible psychoeducational information about stress, trauma responses, and coping under prolonged uncertainty;*

b. *Facilitating and legitimising grassroots peer-support initiatives and community networks;*

c. *Investing in general infrastructure — schools, health services, local transport, and energy reliability — alongside, rather than only within, return-specific support schemes.*

1 Return During Active War: Scale, Patterns, and Significance

1.1. Ukrainian displacement in Europe: demographics and protection framework

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, millions of Ukrainians have sought safety outside the country's borders. As of late 2025 / early 2026, nearly 5.5 - 6.0 million Ukrainians remain displaced abroad, with the vast majority, approximately 5.2 million, residing in Europe (UNHCR, 2026; IOM, 2026a). While Ukrainians are dispersed across many countries, Germany and Poland host the largest displaced populations, with each accommodating roughly one million individuals. Other significant host countries include Czechia, the United Kingdom, Spain, Romania, Italy, Slovakia, Moldova, the Netherlands, and several others, each hosting more than 100,000 Ukrainians.

The demographic composition of Ukrainian refugees in Europe reflects both the drivers of displacement and the legal constraints imposed by wartime conditions. Older adults are relatively underrepresented: only around 6% of displaced Ukrainians in the EU are aged 65 or above (Eurostat, 2026), a pattern consistent with displacement contexts where mobility constraints and attachment to place limit movement among older populations. More distinctive is the gender imbalance. Due to martial law in Ukraine, most men aged 18–60 have been unable to leave the country legally, resulting in a refugee population dominated by women and children. Current estimates indicate that women constitute approximately 45% and children 31% of Ukrainians displaced in Europe, while men account for about 24% (UNHCR, 2026). This gendered structure has important implications for labour market participation, caregiving responsibilities, and mobility decisions, including return.

Ukrainians in the EU are protected under the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) (2001/55/EC), activated for the first time on 4 March 2022. The TPD grants immediate legal status and access to housing, social assistance, healthcare, education, and access to the labour market in all EU countries except for Denmark.[2] Beneficiaries are allowed to work without restriction, and children have full access to national education systems. This framework has enabled many displaced Ukrainians to rebuild a degree of stability in host countries, even as the conflict has persisted.

[2] Denmark does not participate in the EU Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC) due to its Justice and Home Affairs opt-out. However, in March 2022 Denmark adopted a separate national "Special Act" granting displaced Ukrainians temporary residence status and access to social services and the labour market under conditions broadly comparable to those provided under the Directive.

1.2. Integration indicators in host countries

Available evidence suggests relatively high levels of formal labour integration among Ukrainians protected under the TPD, particularly when compared to many previous refugee populations. Employment rates among working-age Ukrainians vary considerably across host countries but exceed 40% in many EU member states - in countries such as Poland and Czechia rates even approach 70% - with substantial increases recorded between 2023 and 2025 (OECD, 2023; UNHCR et al., 2025). Similarly, most displaced Ukrainian children participate in formal education in host countries. UNESCO (2025) estimates that close to 80% of Ukrainian children abroad are enrolled in national education systems, though participation rates vary widely depending on host-country policies, language support, and local capacity.

These indicators are often cited as evidence of successful integration. However, integration outcomes are uneven and shaped by multiple constraints, including language barriers, recognition of qualifications, access to childcare, and housing availability. Moreover, high employment or school enrolment does not necessarily translate into a stable living situation or long-term settlement intentions (Krawczyk et al., 2026). Surveys consistently show that a majority of displaced Ukrainians express a desire to return to Ukraine eventually, even when they are economically active and socially embedded abroad (IOM, 2025).

1.3. Return flows: scale, origin, and destination

Alongside continued displacement, return migration has emerged as a significant feature of the Ukrainian mobility landscape. According to IOM estimates, more than 1.5 million Ukrainians have returned from abroad since the outbreak of the war, with most returns occurring during the first year of the conflict. Since late 2024, return flows have stabilised at lower but steady levels, averaging just over 20,000 returnees per month (IOM, 2025).[3] The majority of returnees (approximately 93%) come back from other European countries, reflecting both geographic proximity and the concentration of displaced Ukrainians in the EU. Poland is the most common country of last residence among returnees, accounting for more than one third of all returns from abroad, followed by Germany. Smaller shares return from Czechia, Italy, Moldova, Bulgaria, and Romania (IOM, 2025).

Return within Ukraine is geographically uneven. Most returnees from abroad concentrate in Kyiv City and Kyivska Oblast, as well as in major central, eastern, and southern regions such as Dnipropetrovska, Odeska, Kharkivska, and Mykolaivska oblasts, while fewer return to heavily affected frontline or occupied areas (IOM, 2026a). Ongoing security risks, housing destruction, and limited access to services continue to shape settlement patterns. These patterns indicate that return is often not a simple reversal of displacement, but frequently involves secondary internal displacement within Ukraine.

[3] As of 31 December 2025, 4.35 million displaced persons from Ukraine remained under Temporary Protection in the European Union (Eurostat, 2026). In 2025 alone, EU Member States issued 683,395 new temporary protection decisions, and the total number of beneficiaries increased by 24,675 between November and December 2025 (+0.6%). Temporary Protection has been extended until 4 March 2027. The continued issuance of new decisions indicates that displacement flows from Ukraine remain ongoing and that return coexists with sustained outward mobility.

1.4. What is known about return conditions

Growing research attention has begun to shed light on the conditions returnees face after coming back to Ukraine. Available survey data indicate that most returnees return to their pre-war dwelling, with approximately 90% reporting that they moved back into the same accommodation they occupied before displacement (IOM, 2026a). However, return to the same dwelling does not imply a restoration of pre-war living conditions. A non-negligible share of returnees live in damaged or unfinished housing, and many report disrupted access to utilities and essential household infrastructure (IOM, 2026b).

Employment outcomes among returnees remain structurally fragile. While many working-age returnees are economically active, a substantial share report indicators of precarious or exploitative working conditions. According to recent IOM data, 34% of employed returnees report working long hours, 12% report working without a contract or only a partial contract, and 6% report being underpaid (IOM, 2026b). In addition, 11% report reliance on high-risk or degrading income-generating activities as a coping strategy (IOM, 2026a). Recently returned individuals and those facing material strain are more likely to adopt such coping strategies, suggesting that labour market reintegration is often shaped by constraint rather than opportunity.

Access to essential services also presents challenges. Compared to non-displaced residents, returnees report greater difficulty accessing income-generating opportunities, healthcare (including mental health services), and education (IOM, 2026a). These gaps are particularly pronounced in regions affected by infrastructure damage or where service capacity is already strained by internal displacement.

Beyond material conditions, emerging evidence indicates substantial psychological strain across all displacement groups in Ukraine. According to IOM's *Mental Health in Ukraine: Displacement, Vulnerabilities and Support (2024)*, 38% of surveyed adults scored above the PHQ-2 threshold indicative of elevated depressive risk. Symptoms were most prevalent among internally displaced persons (50%), followed by returnees (42%), and the non-displaced population (35%). Mental health vulnerability is strongly shaped by compounding factors: women, persons with disabilities, unemployed individuals, and those living in households employing crisis or emergency coping strategies report significantly higher depressive symptoms. Among returnees, time since return appears particularly salient: those who had returned within the three months prior to data collection reported markedly higher depressive risk than those who had been back longer. People who were considering moving again, either within the country or abroad, also showed higher levels of psychological distress. These findings suggest that return does not automatically restore psychosocial stability and that the early post-return period may represent a phase of acute vulnerability.

1.5. Why people return during war: push, pull, and cumulative pressure

Survey-based research highlights emotional and relational factors as central to return intentions. Large-scale survey data analysed by MPI Europe and IOM (2025) further indicates that among refugees expressing short-term return intentions, improved security in the oblast of origin (28%) and family-related considerations (21%) are the most frequently cited motivations, while host-country support constraints are reported less frequently (13%) and employment factors even less so (5%).[4] Motivations also vary by host country. Improved security was most frequently cited in Poland and Czechia, while family reasons dominated in several Baltic and Balkan host states. In Romania, by contrast, lack of support and integration challenges emerged as the most common reported reason for return. These differences suggest that return narratives are shaped not only by attachment to Ukraine but by host-country policy environments. Interestingly, MPI Europe's modelling suggests that refugees residing in more economically prosperous host countries were slightly more likely to express short-term return intentions. This challenges the assumption that return is primarily driven by economic hardship abroad. Rather, return planning may require a minimum threshold of stability and resources, including savings, documentation, and mobility capacity. In this sense, poverty can constrain return just as much as it can motivate onward movement.[5]

Importantly, qualitative evidence suggests that these motivations are rarely expressed as simple emotional pull factors or preferences for place. Instead, they are frequently articulated as moral obligations and identity-based commitments that frame return as necessary rather than desirable. References to "home" function less as indicators of comfort-seeking and more as expressions of responsibility, dignity, and belonging under constraint.

> "I didn't come back to live better. I came because I want to die at home."
> — returnee from Greece

For some earlier returnees, perceptions of relative safety also functioned as a pull factor.[6] While only a minority of more recent returnees cite improved security conditions as a reason for return, some assess risk differently from afar, comparing uncertainty abroad with familiar danger at home. Access to services, education, or employment in Ukraine occasionally appears in survey responses, though these factors are typically secondary to relational considerations.

[4] Studies by IMPACT Initiatives (2024) and IOM (2025) report that a majority of returnees cite being home, reuniting with family, and reconnecting with familiar social environments as important reasons for return. Across surveys, between one third and two thirds of returnees identify family ties, homesickness, or a desire to be in Ukraine as key motivations.

[5] The MPI–IOM analysis further indicates that refugees in countries offering more inclusive social, health, and educational support were more likely to express short-term return intentions, while stronger labour market integration was associated with reduced long-term return intentions. Supportive policy environments may therefore enable flexible or exploratory return rather than anchoring refugees permanently.

[6] Quantitative modelling confirms that security remains a necessary precondition for return planning. Refugees originating from oblasts experiencing lower cumulative conflict intensity were more likely to express return intentions. Geographic proximity also mattered: shorter distance between host country and oblast of origin increased the feasibility of return planning, particularly for temporary or circular mobility.

In this study's interviews, however, pull factors appeared less frequently and were often framed symbolically rather than materially. When present, they reflected a desire to restore agency, dignity, or a sense of usefulness after prolonged displacement:

> "It wasn't about money. I needed to feel useful again, and this is my country."
> — returned from Spain

For a minority of participants, return functioned as an act of identity reaffirmation. Yet even in these cases, such motivations were embedded within broader accounts of strain abroad.

While survey data often presents return in terms of pull factors or individual preference, the interview material indicates that return during active conflict was more often shaped by cumulative constraints in host countries.

> "It wasn't one thing; it kept adding up. First the rent, then the school issues, then my hours got cut." — returned from Germany

Housing insecurity, labour market precarity, and the gradual reduction of institutional support interacted to narrow the feasibility of continued stay abroad. For most participants, return occurred when available options in host countries diminished rather than when conditions in Ukraine substantially improved.

This pattern aligns with findings from IOM (2025) and IMPACT (2024), including IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) Returnee Survey rounds (2022–2024), which identify loss of housing and employment among the most frequently reported practical reasons for return. However, survey categories often aggregate motivations in ways that do not distinguish clearly between perceived opportunity in Ukraine and deteriorating conditions abroad. The qualitative data in this study suggest that return was more commonly associated with the latter.

Housing insecurity emerged as the most frequently cited trigger. As Temporary Protection frameworks shifted from emergency provision toward more conditional or time-limited arrangements, many respondents were informed that subsidised accommodation would end—sometimes with short notice. Participants described transfers between temporary facilities, placement on waiting lists, or notification that no further housing support would be available. These changes were particularly consequential for single-adult households and families with children, for whom access to private rental markets was limited.

> "They said we had two more weeks and then we'd be on the street. I couldn't risk my kids sleeping in a shelter." — returned from Poland

Importantly, return was often prompted by anticipated housing loss rather than formal eviction. Labour market conditions further contributed to return decisions. Across Germany, Italy, and Poland, participants described precarious employment arrangements, including informal work, variable hours, and the absence of formal contracts. These conditions were especially common among women and among those with caregiving responsibilities.

> "They pay cash, and it's never the same amount. Sometimes I wait two weeks. I have no contract, so I can't complain." — returned from Italy

Several respondents indicated that employment conditions became less stable over time as host-country support regimes tightened and initial solidarity diminished.

Social and institutional dynamics also shaped decisions to return. Participants described changes in interactions with landlords, employers, school staff, and local communities as public attitudes shifted and political discourse evolved. Some reported discriminatory or exclusionary treatment after being identified as Ukrainian.

> "In Germany, they stopped greeting us. My boss cut my hours once he found out I was Ukrainian. I felt invisible." — returned from Germany

Such experiences did not always constitute overt hostility but contributed to a gradual erosion of perceived belonging and long-term sustainability abroad.

Return during active conflict is therefore neither a simple pull toward improved conditions nor a straightforward push from deteriorating ones. It unfolds within structured mobility environments shaped by policy design, economic capacity, geographic proximity, and conflict intensity.

Individual motivations operate within these constraints, producing decisions that are constrained yet agentic — neither fully voluntary nor strictly forced, but embedded in layered systems of risk, support, and attachment.

2 Conceptual and Legal Framing: Return, Protection, and Voluntarness

2.1. Protection frameworks and why temporary protection exists

International refugee protection is rooted in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which define a refugee through an individualised assessment of persecution on specific grounds. This framework has provided the backbone of international protection for decades, yet it was not designed to address sudden, large-scale displacement caused by interstate war or generalised violence (Hathaway & Foster, 2014). Individual refugee status determination presumes administrative capacity, time, and institutional stability—conditions that are rarely present during mass influx situations.

When displacement occurs at scale, as in the case of Ukraine after February 2022, individual asylum systems face both practical and normative limits. Processing millions of claims is administratively unfeasible, while delays in status determination risk leaving displaced populations without legal residence, access to work, housing, healthcare, or education. These gaps have long been recognised in international refugee law and policy, prompting the development of group-based and temporary protection mechanisms (Ineli-Ciger, 2018; Türk & Dowd, 2014).

Regional protection instruments reflect this logic. The 1969 OAU Convention broadened refugee protection to include people fleeing "events seriously disturbing public order," explicitly acknowledging mass displacement. The 1984 Cartagena Declaration similarly expanded protection to those displaced by generalised violence and internal conflict. In the European Union, the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), adopted in 2001 in response to the Yugoslav wars, was designed precisely for situations of mass influx where individual asylum systems would be overwhelmed (European Commission, 2025).

Activated for the first time in March 2022, the TPD granted immediate, collective protection based on displacement from Ukraine rather than individual proof of persecution. Beneficiaries received residence rights, access to labour markets, education, healthcare, and social assistance. Crucially, however, this protection is explicitly temporary.

2.2. Return and repatriation as a "durable solution"

International refugee policy traditionally recognises three "durable solutions": local integration, resettlement, and repatriation (Jacobsen, 2001). Among these, repatriation is often presented as the preferred or most "natural" outcome, reflecting the assumption that displacement is a temporary disruption and that refugees will ultimately return once conditions improve. This preference aligns closely with state interests, as return limits long-term hosting responsibilities and political pressures in receiving countries (Toft, 2007).

Repatriation is not unconditional. The principle of non-refoulement prohibits states from returning individuals to situations where they face persecution or serious harm. Over time, international

standards have further specified that return should be voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable (UNHCR, 2004). These criteria imply not only the absence of immediate physical danger but also access to housing, livelihoods, basic services, and legal protection upon return. Yet, as Hathaway (1997; 2005) has argued, refugee protection regimes were never intended to guarantee permanent residence in host countries. Refugee status is, by design, a form of temporary protection that can be withdrawn when conditions in the country of origin have fundamentally and durably changed. This tension—between protection as temporary and return as conditional—becomes especially problematic in protracted conflicts, where conditions neither clearly improve nor decisively stabilise. In such contexts, repatriation often shifts from being a post-conflict solution to a policy objective pursued amid uncertainty, raising critical questions about voluntariness, safety, and the distribution of risk between refugees and states.

2.3. Voluntary return, pressured return, and return during conflict

Policy and legal frameworks typically distinguish between voluntary and forced return. Voluntary return is framed as a free and informed choice made without pressure, while forced return is associated with expulsion, coercion, or refoulement. Empirical research, however, consistently demonstrates that most returns occur in a grey zone between these categories (Stein, 1994; Chimni, 2004). Rather than a binary, return operates along a spectrum of voluntariness. At one end are genuinely voluntary returns, enabled by reliable information, improved security, and realistic reintegration prospects. At the other are coerced or forced returns driven by direct state action. Between these poles lie various forms of pressured return, shaped by deteriorating conditions in host countries, policy tightening, loss of entitlements, or prolonged uncertainty.

This dynamic has been widely documented in refugee studies. Chimni (2004) shows how the language of “facilitation” and “promotion” of voluntary repatriation can obscure coercive realities, particularly when host states reduce support or signal that protection is temporary and conditional. Toft (2007) similarly demonstrates how states’ preference for repatriation, especially after the Cold War, has led to policies that indirectly push refugees to return even when conditions in countries of origin remain unstable.[7]

[7] Chimni also raises concerns about “spontaneous repatriation,” where refugees return without formal agreements between host and origin countries. Such returns are challenging for the UNHCR to manage, especially in conflict-ridden areas where conditions remain unstable. Chimni argues that spontaneous repatriation blurs the line between voluntary and forced return, cautioning against scenarios where UNHCR’s involvement may implicitly legitimize coerced returns. Chimni critiques what he terms the “Nostalgia Model,” which assumes that all refugees wish to return to their home countries. He points out that this model fails to consider second-generation refugees who may not view their ancestral land as “home” and may prefer to remain in host countries or pursue resettlement elsewhere. Chimni advocates for a restrained interpretation of “promotion” that respects refugees’ autonomy and emphasizes providing accurate information and logistical support, rather than exerting pressure. He suggests that the UNHCR should prioritize monitoring conditions in the country of origin to ensure a genuinely safe environment before endorsing repatriation efforts.

Return during ongoing conflict further complicates these dynamics. Stein and Cuny (1994; 1997) describe the emergence of "refugee-induced repatriation," where refugees return based on their own assessments of risk, fatigue with displacement, or declining support in host countries rather than because conflicts have ended. Such returns are often spontaneous, self-organised, and poorly captured by formal policy frameworks. While they may involve agency, they also transfer significant risk onto individuals.

The Ukrainian case exemplifies these tensions. The TPD provides broad rights, yet its temporary nature, coupled with policy changes in housing, social assistance, and eligibility criteria across EU member states, has altered the cost–benefit calculus of remaining abroad. Asylum fatigue, rising living costs, and shifts from universal to conditional support have been documented across Europe since 2023 (EUAA, 2025). In this environment, return may appear "voluntary" in formal terms while being substantively constrained.

2.4. What this means for interpreting Ukraine's wartime returns

This conceptual framing has direct implications for how return to Ukraine during active conflict should be understood. First, return cannot be treated as evidence of resolution or success. Movement back across borders does not necessarily signal safety, stability, or reintegration. Second, the presence of agency in return decisions does not negate structural pressure. Many returns combine choice with constraint, dignity with risk.

For these reasons, this report treats return not as an endpoint but as a process embedded in legal temporariness, policy environments, and lived conditions (Black & Koser, 2000; Zetter, 1999; Crisp & Long, 2016). These findings directly challenge the "myth of return" that underpins much displacement policy design (Hammond, 1999), in which return is framed as the closure of a migration cycle and a restoration of normality. As argued by Stein (1997) and Zetter (1999), repatriation rarely represents a linear or final stage of displacement; rather, it unfolds within unstable political and socio-economic contexts that may reproduce vulnerability. In the Ukrainian wartime context, this narrative dissolves under the weight of empirical realities. Return unfolds amid gendered care burdens (OECD, 2023), limited institutional visibility, economic marginalisation (IMPACT, 2023), social strain (IOM, 2023), and cumulative psychological fatigue (Blackmore et al., 2020; Bogić et al., 2015). Rather than restoring a single, stable home, many returnees find themselves navigating between multiple incomplete homes (Zetter, 1999), uncertain about the durability of their present situation and their capacity to remain. Assessing return under these conditions therefore requires moving beyond counts and destinations. It demands attention to safety, livelihoods, access to services, social acceptance, legal status, and mental well-being (UNHCR, 2003)—dimensions that determine whether return is sustainable or whether it increases the risk of secondary displacement.

The empirical chapters that follow operationalise this approach. By analysing economic security, mobility patterns, access to support, and mental well-being among returnees from the Temporary Protection Directive, the report shifts the analytical focus from whether people returned to how they live after return, under what constraints, and with what prospects. This distinction is essential for policy design: return should not be equated with recovery, but supported only where conditions allow it to be safe, reversible, and resilient.

3 Why Study Well-Being in Contexts of Wartime Return?

The health and well-being of refugees has been extensively studied, with a strong and consistent body of evidence documenting elevated levels of psychological distress among displaced populations. Studies across settings report significantly higher prevalence of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety compared to non-displaced populations (Fazel et al., 2005; Blackmore et al., 2020; Henkelmann et al., 2020; Patanè et al., 2022). These outcomes are shaped not only by exposure to armed conflict, but also by prolonged uncertainty, disrupted social networks, and insecure living conditions during displacement. Pre-migration exposure to violence increases the risk of mental health problems (Mesa-Vieira et al., 2022), while post-displacement factors such as unstable housing, restricted access to services, and economic precarity further exacerbate distress (Goodkind et al., 2020). At the same time, social support and family connectedness consistently emerge as protective factors for both mental health and broader well-being (Jankovic-Rankovic et al., 2022).

Despite the growing literature on refugee well-being during displacement, far less is known about what happens after return. Emerging research from Ukraine has begun to document the mental health burden among internally displaced persons (IDPs). Clinical studies indicate high prevalence of anxiety and mixed anxiety–depressive disorders among IDPs, with forced displacement, uncertainty, loss, and prolonged stress identified as central catalysts (Kozhyna et al., 2025). Longitudinal evidence further suggests that displacement itself — independent of war exposure — is associated with increased risk of post-traumatic stress symptoms and anxiety over time, particularly in cases of internal displacement (Goto et al., 2025). Even relatively small increases in individual risk can translate into a substantial mental health burden at the population level, given the scale of displacement. Much of this literature focuses on clinical symptomatology; however, well-being encompasses broader dimensions, including functional capacity, social participation, and perceived life stability, which may follow different trajectories than diagnostic indicators.

However, this emerging literature focuses primarily on individuals who remain displaced — either internally or externally — rather than those who return. Existing studies from other war-affected contexts suggest that return does not automatically lead to recovery. Psychological distress may persist after repatriation and can even intensify when return occurs under conditions of housing instability, economic hardship, or unresolved trauma (Lersner et al., 2008; Bogić et al., 2015). In the Ukrainian context, there is currently no systematic empirical evidence on the well-being of individuals who have returned from abroad during the ongoing war, despite the scale and policy relevance of wartime return flows. This gap is particularly significant given that return during active conflict constitutes a second major transition, involving renewed exposure to insecurity alongside the practical demands of reintegration into disrupted social and economic systems.

3.1. Why well-being requires a broader lens

Research on refugee health has predominantly relied on psychological screening instruments that measure symptoms of mental disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. Across contexts, this literature consistently reports elevated prevalence rates of mental health symptoms among refugees and conflict-affected populations (Fazel et al., 2005; Blackmore et al., 2020; Henkelmann et al., 2020; Patanè et al., 2022).

While such findings are crucial for identifying clinical need, they also risk narrowing analysis to psychopathology alone. Several scholars have cautioned that symptom-focused approaches may overestimate disorder prevalence when based on self-report screening tools and may inadequately capture contextual and culturally embedded experiences of distress and functioning. Moreover, diagnostic categories and psychological constructs do not always translate cleanly across cultural and conflict-affected settings, raising concerns about whether such measures fully reflect lived realities (Fazel et al., 2005; Blackmore et al., 2020).

Well-being frameworks offer a broader perspective by shifting attention from the presence of symptoms to how people function in their daily lives and social environments. Rather than focusing solely on distress, well-being approaches incorporate positive and relational dimensions of functioning, such as emotional stability, purpose, autonomy, social integration, and the ability to manage everyday responsibilities (Ryff, 1989; Keyes, 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

This broader lens is particularly relevant in contexts of displacement and return. Studies show that refugees' mental health is shaped not only by exposure to violence, but also by post-displacement and post-return conditions, including access to resources, living conditions, and social support (Goodkind et al., 2020; Jankovic-Rankovic et al., 2022). Return may alleviate some stressors, such as separation from family, while simultaneously introducing new pressures related to housing, livelihoods, safety, and reintegration into changed social environments (Bogić et al., 2015; Lersner et al., 2008). Well-being is also consequential for integration and recovery outcomes. Evidence from refugee and migrant research shows that poor mental health is associated with weaker labour-market attachment and reduced capacity to sustain employment, particularly when combined with precarious working conditions and discrimination. Mental health challenges among refugees are frequently intensified by prolonged uncertainty, housing instability, and socio-economic stressors during displacement, which can in turn hamper socio-economic integration (e.g., Laban et al., 2008; Hendriks et al., 2024). In a recent feasibility study of refugees residing in Dutch asylum centres, participants reported high levels of psychological strain linked to prolonged waiting procedures and structural insecurity; improvements in resilience and affect were associated with enhanced coping capacity and self-perceived ability to manage daily challenges (Hendriks et al., 2024).

In longitudinal research more broadly, mental health and socio-economic integration appear mutually reinforcing: deteriorating mental health undermines employment and social participation, while unemployment and ongoing insecurity can further worsen mental health, increasing the risk of long-term exclusion. In practical terms, assessing well-being among returnees is therefore not only about identifying distress; it is also about understanding whether people retain the functional capacity to navigate institutions, seek and keep work, maintain social ties, and adapt to ongoing shocks. Where distress becomes chronic or unmanaged, these capacities may weaken, slowing reintegration — both in host countries and after return. As a result, assessing well-being among returnees requires instruments that are sensitive to both strain and recovery, rather than assuming that return itself constitutes a positive or stabilising outcome.

3.2. Resources, agency, and social functioning in contexts of return

Across different theoretical traditions, well-being is understood as emerging from the interaction between individuals' internal capacities and the external conditions in which they live. Rather than adhering to a single theoretical model, this study draws on overlapping insights from established frameworks to identify three domains that are particularly salient for understanding well-being among returnees: resources, agency, and social functioning.

- **Resources and material conditions**

Access to and stability of key resources play a central role in shaping well-being in displacement and return contexts. Conservation of Resources (COR) theory conceptualises stress as arising from the loss, threat of loss, or insufficient recovery of valued resources, including housing, income, employment, social support, and time (Hobfoll, 1989; 2011). Empirical research among refugees confirms that inadequate living conditions and restricted access to resources are strongly associated with poorer well-being and ongoing stress (Goodkind et al., 2020). For returnees, resource recovery is often uneven and incomplete. Poor housing conditions, limited employment opportunities, and reduced access to services can undermine environmental mastery and daily functioning, even after return (Bogić et al., 2015; Lersner et al., 2008).

- **Agency and autonomy**

A second core dimension concerns agency and autonomy. Self-Determination Theory emphasises autonomy as a basic psychological need, referring to the experience of being able to make meaningful choices aligned with one's values (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In return contexts, however, decisions are frequently shaped by constrained options rather than fully voluntary choice, including economic pressure, legal uncertainty, and family obligations. Where individuals experience limited control over their circumstances, well-being is negatively affected, even in the absence of acute psychological symptoms. Conversely, a sense of agency and competence contributes to psychological well-being and resilience, particularly in unstable environments (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

- **Social integration and belonging**

Social relations constitute a third key domain. Multiple well-being frameworks highlight the importance of positive relations, social integration, and perceived contribution to society (Ryff, 1989; Keyes, 2002). Empirical studies among refugees show that social support acts as a protective factor for mental health, while social isolation and stigma increase vulnerability (Jankovic-Rankovic et al., 2022). For returnees, social belonging may be re-established through family reunification, but can also be disrupted by changed community dynamics, tensions with stayees, or weakened institutional trust. These dynamics directly affect social well-being and the ability to rebuild meaningful roles within society (Bogić et al., 2015).

Taken together, these domains reflect shared elements across psychological well-being models (Ryff, 1989), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), flourishing frameworks (Keyes, 2002), and resource-based approaches (Hobfoll, 1989; 2011). They provide a coherent conceptual basis for assessing well-being in conflict-affected return settings, without assuming that return is inherently beneficial or that recovery follows a linear trajectory.

4 Findings: Return, Living Conditions, Mobility, and Well-Being

Building on the conceptual and legal framework outlined in previous chapters, this chapter presents the empirical findings of the study. Rather than treating return as a binary outcome or a marker of recovery, the analysis examines return as a process shaped by structural conditions, legal status, caregiving responsibilities, and ongoing insecurity. Findings are organised around six interrelated dimensions that together determine whether return is stabilising, precarious, or a precursor to renewed displacement.

4.1. Who Returns and Under What Constraints?

A GENDERED AND CARE-STRUCTURED PROFILE OF RETURN

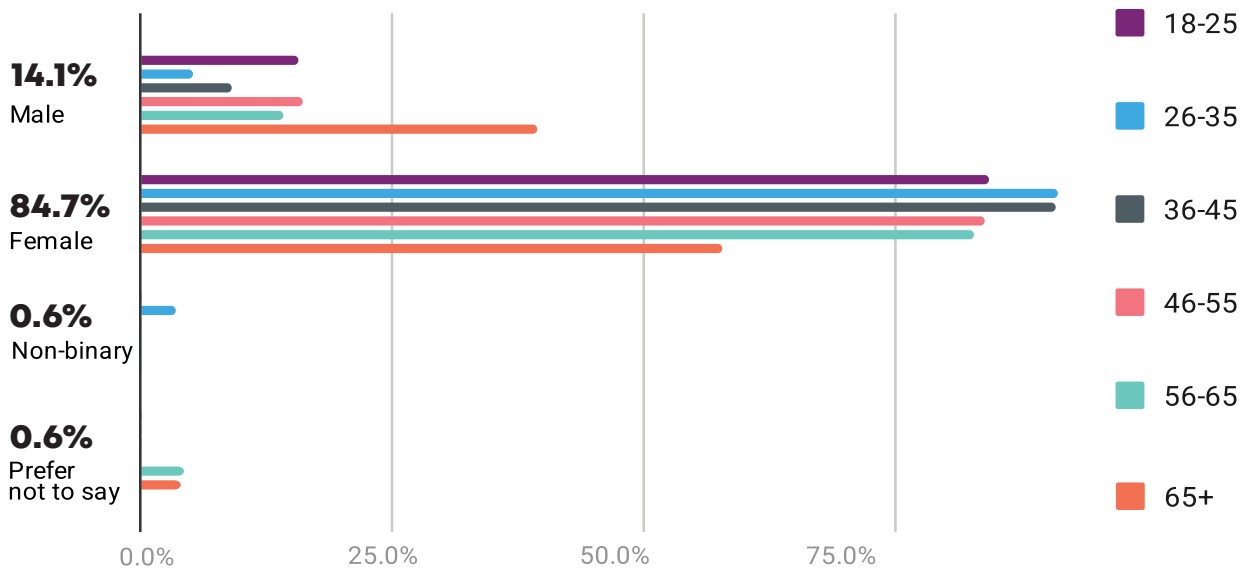


Figure 1. Demographics: gender and age group

The survey data reveal a highly gendered profile of return. Among the 324 respondents included in the analysis, 84.7% were women, 14.1% men, and fewer than 2% identified as non-binary or preferred not to disclose. The average age of returnees was 43.8 years, placing the majority within working age.

This gender imbalance should be interpreted in light of the broader displacement context. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the population of Ukrainians displaced abroad has been predominantly female, due in part to restrictions on the exit of men of military age. The gendered composition of returnees therefore partly reflects the gendered structure of displacement itself.

At the same time, qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that return decisions are embedded in gendered care responsibilities. Women disproportionately carry responsibility for children, elderly parents, and household coordination during displacement and upon return. Returnees originate from across Ukraine, with particularly high representation from Kyiv City and Oblast, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Luhansk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Donetsk—regions heavily affected by ongoing hostilities. This confirms that return is not confined to a specific region or social group, but cuts across areas with varying levels of insecurity and destruction.

HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION AND HIDDEN SINGLE-ADULT HOUSEHOLDS

Nearly half of respondents (49.1%) reported being married or living with a partner, while the remainder were divorced (19.8%), single (14.8%), widowed (9.7%), or in a relationship but not co-residing (6.6%).

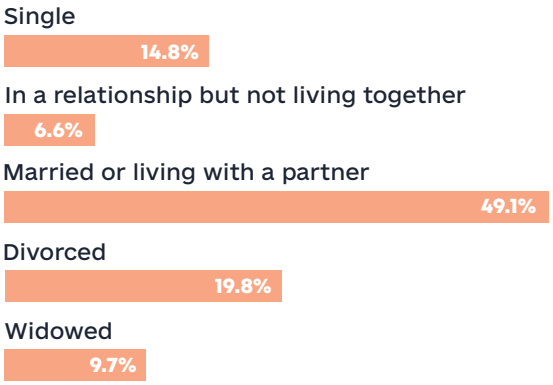


Figure 2. Marital & relationship status

Importantly, formal marital status often masked actual household arrangements. Interview data show that many respondents who identified as married were effectively managing households alone, with partners remaining abroad or elsewhere in Ukraine due to employment, caregiving, or military obligations.

As a result, a substantial share of returnees, regardless of marital status, functioned as single-adult households, responsible simultaneously for caregiving, income generation, administrative tasks, and reintegration. The key analytical distinction, therefore, lies not in formal relationship status but in the presence or absence of a co-resident adult. This shapes the distribution of care work, financial pressure, and bureaucratic burden after return.

CARE RESPONSIBILITIES AS A PRIMARY DRIVER OF RETURN

Care responsibilities are a defining characteristic of the returnee population. Nearly 60% of respondents reported caregiving duties: 38.8% cared for children under 18, 13.2% cared for both children and adults, and 7.9% cared for adults only. 40.1% reported having no caregiving responsibilities.

Both survey and interview data indicate that caregiving was one of the strongest drivers of return decisions. Parents frequently returned when children struggled abroad—emotionally, socially, or academically—due to language barriers, school integration problems, or isolation. Others returned to care for aging or ill relatives in Ukraine who were unable to adapt to life in host countries or lacked adequate care arrangements at home.

Return is frequently undertaken alone or with children, and less often with partners. This reflects the broader feminisation of return and the central role of caregiving in shaping mobility decisions. Many women returned with children while partners remained abroad or elsewhere in Ukraine for

work, effectively recreating single-parent households. For these households, location choices were driven less by abstract notions of safety and more by everyday functionality: proximity to schools, access to doctors, availability of childcare, and the presence of extended family. Interviewees repeatedly described choosing places where "things work," even if those places were not objectively safe.

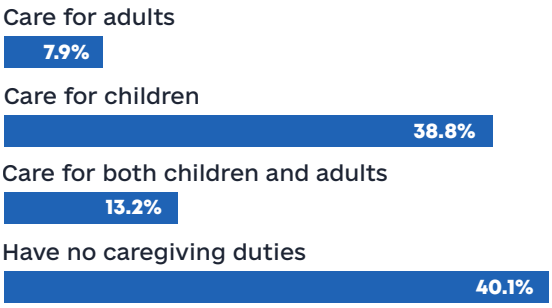


Figure 3. Care responsibilities

> "I came back with my daughter. School abroad was too hard on her, and my husband stayed to work. I handle everything now—homework, gas bills, and her nightmares." — one interviewee described

Such accounts illustrate that return decisions were embedded in everyday care obligations, rather than driven by improved conditions in Ukraine or abstract preferences for home. Care responsibilities narrowed the range of viable options abroad and increased reliance on informal family networks inside Ukraine, often making continued stay in host countries untenable.

Crucially, caregiving did not statistically predict poorer mental health outcomes after return. Caregivers were not significantly more likely than non-caregivers to report low well-being or languishing mental health. This challenges common assumptions that caregiving itself drives post-return vulnerability. Instead, the findings point to a more precise interpretation: care responsibilities function primarily as a driver of movement, not as a determinant of well-being once back in Ukraine. In other words, people did not feel worse because they were caregivers; they returned because caregiving pressures—combined with housing loss, rising living costs, and increasingly conditional or time-limited support in EU host states—made continued stay abroad unsustainable.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that return is not simply "feminised," but care-structured. The broader population of displaced Ukrainians abroad has been predominantly female, in part due to restrictions on the exit of men of military age. The gender composition of returnees therefore reflects this wider displacement context. However, within this gendered landscape, care responsibilities play a central structuring role. Women disproportionately absorb unpaid care work under conditions of displacement and family separation, and interview evidence indicates that caregiving pressures frequently narrowed the range of viable options abroad. Many returns occurred under constraint, shaped by the loss of temporary housing, rising costs of living, uncertainty around benefits and childcare, and shrinking support frameworks in host countries. Return decisions, therefore, cannot be understood purely as voluntary movement or preference for home, but as care-mediated mobility within a gendered displacement regime.

4.2. Economic Reintegration Under War Conditions

HIGH EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, LIMITED LABOUR MARKET ABSORPTION

Ukrainian returnees in this study are, on average, highly educated. Nearly 70% hold a Bachelor's degree or higher, including 43.4% with a Master's degree or above and 25.6% with a Bachelor's degree, while only a small minority report incomplete secondary education. This profile mirrors broader patterns observed among Ukrainians who accessed Temporary Protection in the EU, where higher educational attainment was associated with greater mobility, language acquisition, and access to information during displacement.

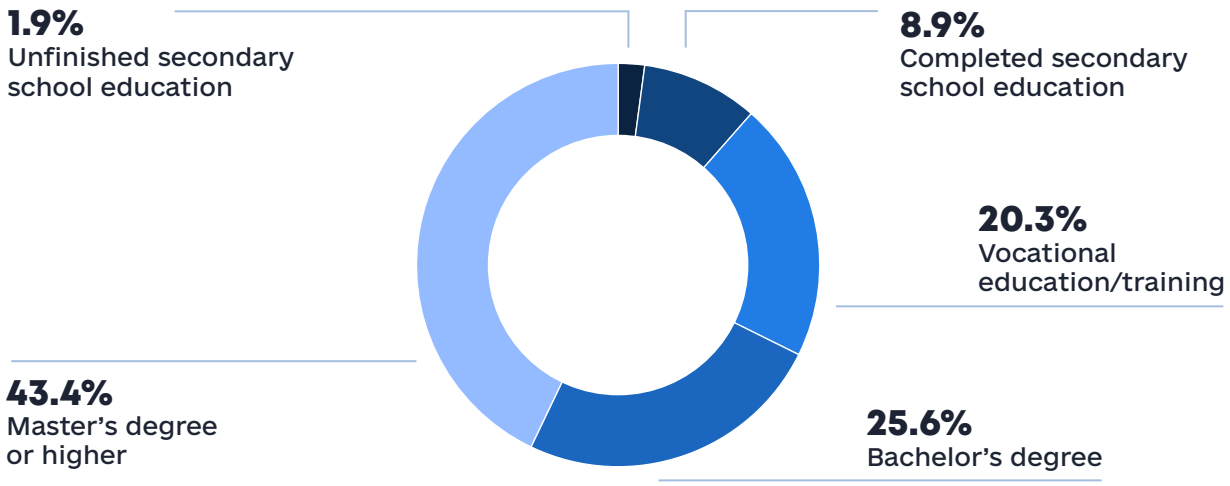


Figure 4. Demographics: education

However, high levels of education did not translate into smooth professional reintegration upon return. Both survey and interview data point to a persistent mismatch between qualifications and available employment opportunities in Ukraine's war-affected labour market. Returnees re-enter an economy shaped by contraction, regional disruption, and informality, with limited capacity to absorb skilled labour.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS: PARTICIPATION WITHOUT STABILITY

At the time of the survey, 63% of respondents reported being employed, either full-time (48.4%) or part-time (14.6%). While this indicates substantial labour market participation after return, employment does not necessarily translate into stability. More than one third (37%) were not employed, including 19.6% actively seeking work and 17.4% not currently looking, often due to caregiving responsibilities, health constraints, or discouragement after repeated unsuccessful job searches. Recent returnees were more likely to be out of work, suggesting that reintegration into the labour market takes time and may be particularly difficult in the early post-return phase.

Among those employed, attachment to the labour market remains fragile. Reported work arrangements include fully on-site (37%), hybrid (14.2%), and fully online roles (13.3%), reflecting varied and often unstable employment forms. These figures are based on self-reported employment and work modality.

Crucially, 37% of employed respondents reported working below their level of education or qualifications, indicating widespread downward occupational mobility. Qualitative interviews reinforce this pattern. Many returnees described having held more stable or better-matched positions abroad—even when those jobs were low-paid or temporary—than those available after return. Upon re-entering Ukraine's labour market, they encountered informality, weak labour protections, and regional disparities, pushing many into short-term survival jobs below their skill level.

> "I worked as a project coordinator abroad. Now I clean the stairwells. There's no contract. No rights."— returned from the Netherlands

INCOME INSECURITY DESPITE EMPLOYMENT

Employment did not guarantee financial security. Across the sample, 50.6% of respondents reported not having enough money to cover daily basic needs, including housing, utilities, food, transport, and healthcare. This included a substantial share of those who were employed, underscoring the prevalence of low wages, irregular income, and informal work arrangements in the wartime economy.

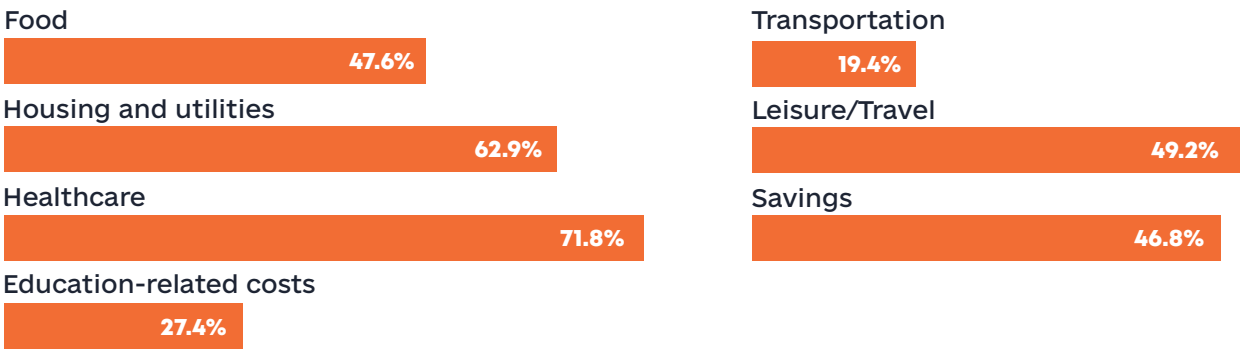


Figure 5. What do they lack resources for?

Among respondents who could not cover basic needs, shortages clustered around essentials rather than discretionary spending. The most frequently unaffordable items were: healthcare (71.8%) housing and utilities (62.9%), food (47.6%), leisure or travel (49.2%), savings (46.8%), education-related costs (27.4%), transportation (19.4%).

These patterns indicate that returnees are not merely reducing non-essential consumption; many are struggling to meet fundamental requirements for health, shelter, and long-term stability. Difficulties affording healthcare are particularly consequential in a wartime context, where stress-related illness, caregiving demands, and limited public provision intersect.

Interviews illuminate the lived consequences of this precarity. Returnees described unpredictable pay, cash-in-hand work, and the absence of formal contracts—particularly in service, care, and

manual sectors. These conditions restricted access to social insurance, sick leave, and credit, while increasing exposure to sudden income loss.

Financial strain was often compounded by debt accumulated during displacement. Several participants reported returning with outstanding debts incurred abroad—for rent, utilities, childcare, or medical expenses—that could not be serviced on Ukrainian wages.

> "I borrowed just to buy medicine for my son. Now I'm back and I owe more than I can earn in six months." — returned from Italy

FINANCIAL SECURITY AS THE STRONGEST PREDICTOR OF WELL-BEING

Across all quantitative analyses, financial security emerged as the strongest and most consistent predictor of mental well-being. In multivariate models, respondents who reported having enough money to meet basic needs were significantly less likely to experience low mental well-being (SWEMWBS) or languishing mental health (MHC-SF), even after controlling for employment status, future plans, and other covariates.

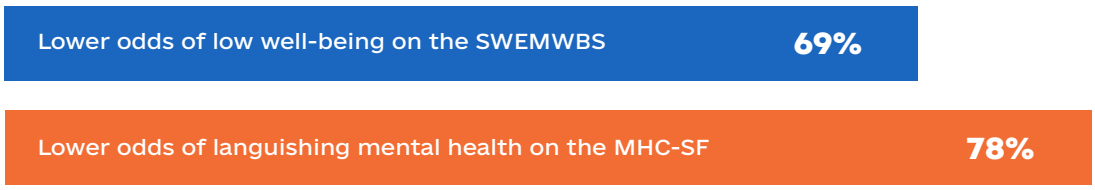


Figure 6. Improvements that financially secure returnees show

Employment itself was protective—particularly against languishing mental health—but its effect was weaker and less stable than that of financial security. This distinction is critical: having a job mattered, but having enough income to meet basic needs mattered more.

Returnees relied on a fragmented mix of income sources. Employment (46.5%) was the most common primary source, though often unstable or informal. Support from family or friends (17.6%) played a substantial role, highlighting the importance of private safety nets, while government assistance (14.3%) remained limited and unevenly accessed. Smaller shares relied on savings, pensions, disability-related income, or small businesses, reflecting constrained economic options.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY OF RETURN

Taken together, these findings point to a structural pattern of post-return precarity. Highly educated individuals are re-entering a disrupted labour market with limited absorptive capacity, widespread informality, and insufficient wages. Economic insecurity persists even among the employed and is strongly associated with poorer mental well-being, reinforcing the fragility of return.

These daily realities help explain why returnees' plans are often conditional, and why intentions to re-migrate remain high. Living conditions do not merely accompany return; they actively shape whether return can be sustained.

> "I had no choice. But I can't live like this forever. If nothing changes, I'll have to leave again." — returned from Poland

This context is essential for interpreting the mobility patterns discussed in the following section. Post-return mobility does not reflect restlessness or lack of commitment, but often emerges as a rational response to unresolved insecurity and material deprivation—particularly in the first months after return.

4.3. Safety, Geography, and the Feasibility of "Home"

Return during active conflict is profoundly shaped by geography. Where people originate, where they are able to return, and how they experience safety and housing after return all conditions whether return functions as stabilisation or as a continuation of displacement. Survey and interview data show that return is highly uneven across regions, producing stark differences in living conditions, perceived safety, and future mobility intentions.

WHERE RETURNEES COME FROM — AND WHERE THEY ARE ABLE TO RETURN

Returnees originate from across Ukraine, but certain regions are disproportionately represented, reflecting both early displacement patterns and ongoing insecurity.

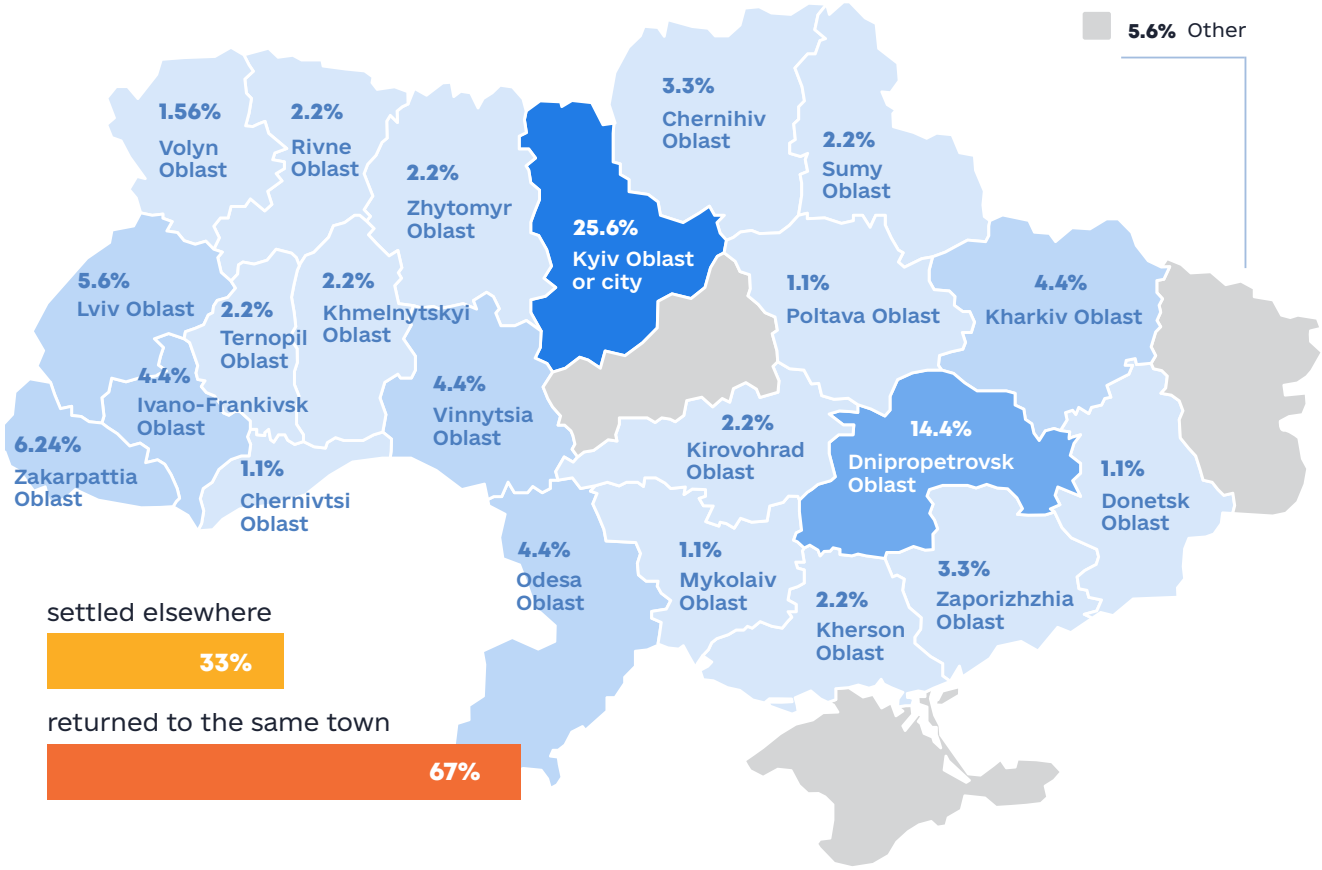


Figure 7. The map shows the newly specified region of return

The largest shares come from Kyiv City and Oblast (18%), Dnipropetrovsk Oblast (17%), Kharkiv Oblast (9%), Luhansk Oblast (9%), Kherson Oblast (8%), Zaporizhzhia Oblast (8%), Donetsk Oblast (6%), and Odesa Oblast (6%), with the remaining 19% spread across other regions.

However, the ability to return to one's original town varies dramatically by region. In heavily affected front-line and formerly occupied oblasts, return to the same town is the exception rather than the rule. Only 7.1% of respondents from Luhansk, 17.6% from Donetsk, 33.3% from Zaporizhzhia, and 40.9% from Kherson were able to return to their home towns. By contrast, nearly 90% of returnees from Kyiv City/Oblast, Dnipropetrovsk, and Odesa returned to the same town they had left.

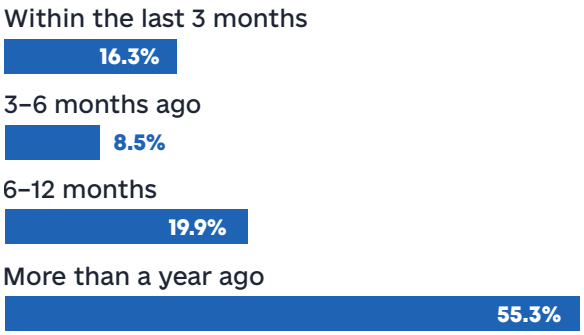


Figure 8. Date of return

For many from the east and south, return therefore does not mean "going home," but continued internal displacement within Ukraine. These respondents often resettled in regional hubs such as Dnipro, Kyiv, or Odesa, seeking access to employment, healthcare, and schooling in the absence of viable return to their place of origin.

> "I returned to Ukraine, but not to Donetsk. That's impossible for now. Dnipro is as close as I can be while still having work and some stability.
> — returned from Germany.

Importantly, many participants did not self-identify as "returnees" at the time of the study. In interviews and open-ended survey responses, respondents frequently described themselves simply as "living at home again" or as continuing to experience displacement despite having returned. Return, in this context, does not necessarily mark the end of displacement but often signals a transition into new forms of precarity. Individuals tend to become institutionally visible primarily when they register as internally displaced persons after return, highlighting how return is often administratively under-recognised despite its profound social and psychological consequences. This study therefore treats return as a process rather than an endpoint, shaped by ongoing mobility, insecurity, and uncertain legal and economic conditions.

LIVING CONDITIONS, HOUSING, AND UNEVEN REGIONAL PRESSURES

Regional return patterns suggest a distinction between front-line and other parts of Ukraine. However, lived experience complicates this binary. Across the sample, 57.1% of respondents report feeling unsafe or very unsafe in their current location, while only 15.1% feel safe or very safe. A further 27.8% describe their situation as neither safe nor unsafe, reflecting uncertainty rather than confidence.

Importantly, insecurity is not confined to eastern or southern oblasts. Interviews document how recurrent missile and drone attacks in cities previously perceived as "safe" — including Kyiv, Dnipro, Lviv, and Ternopil — have eroded trust in geographical safety altogether.

Safety is therefore experienced not as a stable regional characteristic, but as provisional and reversible. The sense that "nowhere is fully safe" reshapes how return is lived across the country.

Perceived insecurity is strongly associated with mental well-being. Respondents who feel unsafe are significantly more likely to report low well-being on the SWEMWBS and languishing mental health on the MHC-SF. Insecurity thus affects not only exposure to physical risk but also everyday psychological functioning, reinforcing tension, vigilance, and reduced optimism about the future.

Housing conditions intersect directly with these safety dynamics. Regional displacement has concrete implications for housing access and stability. Returnees from front-line or formerly occupied oblasts are frequently unable to return to their original homes and instead rely on rental markets or temporary accommodation in unfamiliar cities, often without established family support networks. In contrast, central and western regions may offer comparatively more stable housing environments, but this stability is constrained by high rents, overcrowding, and intense competition in cities that have absorbed large numbers of internally displaced persons.

These pressures reflect broader structural constraints. National assessments indicate that approximately 13% of Ukraine's housing stock has been damaged or destroyed since February 2022, with severe regional disparities and limited reconstruction capacity in frontline regions (Cedos, 2025; IOM, 2026a). At the same time, the private rental market remains largely informal, weakly regulated, and increasingly unaffordable for displaced households, contributing to short-term rental arrangements, eviction risk, and chronic housing insecurity (Cedos, 2025a).

Housing insecurity does not operate in isolation. It compounds broader material strain. As shown in the previous section, more than half of respondents cannot cover basic needs, and financial insecurity is the strongest predictor of poor mental health across all regression models. Together, precarious housing, economic pressure, and persistent insecurity undermine the sustainability of return. Rather than restoring stability, return often relocates households into environments marked by layered uncertainty—where safety, shelter, and income remain fragile and contingent.

TIME SINCE RETURN AND THE RISK OF SECONDARY DISPLACEMENT

Time since return emerges as an important fault line, particularly in measures of day-to-day mental well-being.

On the SWEMWBS scale, recent returnees report significantly lower well-being and higher functional strain compared to those who returned earlier (trend test p = 0.016). This pattern is less pronounced when using the broader MHC-SF flourishing/languishing classification (p = 0.106), suggesting that the early return period may affect everyday optimism, calm, and coping more strongly than deeper, longer-term psychological flourishing.

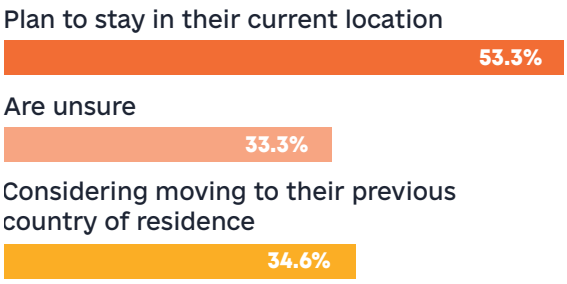


Figure 9. Future mobility intentions of returnees

Recent returnees are also more uncertain about whether they will remain in their current location, indicating that instability is both psychological and practical. Future intentions underscore the fragility of return: 53.3% plan to stay in their current location, 33.3% are unsure, and 34.6% are considering moving to their previous country of residence.

Uncertainty aligns with lower well-being scores and is most pronounced among recent returnees and those living in insecure or repeatedly targeted areas. Taken together, these patterns suggest that the early post-return period is structurally and psychologically fragile, increasing the risk of secondary displacement.[8]

INTERPRETING "HOME" UNDER CONDITIONS OF WAR

Taken together, the findings show that return during active conflict does not restore a stable or singular sense of home. Instead, *home* emerges as a contested and unstable concept, shaped simultaneously by moral meaning, social relations, material conditions, and ongoing insecurity. For some returnees, home functions as a moral geography rather than a material destination. In these accounts, return is framed as an ethical commitment tied to identity, belonging, and collective endurance. Participants spoke of home in terms of national loyalty, responsibility toward children, and the desire to remain connected to place regardless of hardship. In this framing, return was less about safety or opportunity and more about reclaiming agency and emotional truth under conditions of war. Even when material conditions were harsh, the act of return itself carried symbolic value. This aligns with scholarship on *affective citizenship* and *moral geographies of belonging*, which conceptualise return as a relational and normative act rather than a purely instrumental choice (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Eastmond, 2006; Hammond, 1999).

At the same time, many participants experienced home as a site of disillusionment rather than restoration. Upon return, they encountered social resentment, judgment for having left, and limited institutional recognition. These experiences exposed a gap between imagined home and lived reality. Instead of emotional reconnection or support, some returnees faced social exclusion, administrative invisibility, and exhaustion. This reflects what earlier return migration research has described as the *post-return gap* — the distance between expectations embedded in return narratives or policies and the realities of reintegration on the ground (Black & Koser, 1999; Lersner et al., 2008). In these cases, return did not resolve displacement but reproduced rupture, destabilising belonging rather than restoring it.

Importantly, these narratives do not represent mutually exclusive categories. Moral commitment to home frequently collided with the practical realities of housing insecurity, financial strain, and persistent risk. Geography determined whether return meant homecoming or renewed internal displacement; housing markets and income constraints shaped everyday viability; and safety was experienced as provisional and reversible rather than stable. Similar dynamics have been documented in other conflict-affected return contexts, where return unfolds under continued insecurity and limited institutional support (Tegenbos & Vlassenroot, 2018; Ndreka, 2021).

[8] Recent returnees may be particularly vulnerable because expectations of safety and stability upon return often exceed the realities they encounter. Many return with the hope of regaining normalcy, security, and economic stability, but instead face continued attacks, damaged infrastructure, housing shortages, and limited income opportunities. Research on conflict-affected and displaced populations supports this pattern. Large-scale studies show that mental health symptoms are typically highest closer to the time of displacement or major life transition and tend to decrease only gradually over time (Mesa-Vieira et al., 2022). Longitudinal evidence from conflict settings further demonstrates that forced displacement, income loss, and traumatic loss are associated with persistently elevated anxiety, depression, and stress symptoms, particularly in the first months following disruption (Amsalem et al., 2025). Together, these findings suggest that the early phase after return is structurally and psychologically fragile, especially when expectations of stability are not met.

In this context, return should not be interpreted as a marker of stability or success. Rather, it represents a precarious middle position—neither settled nor fully mobile—where the feasibility of staying depends on factors largely beyond individual control.

4.4. Mobility After Return: Agency, Protection, and Mental Well-Being

For a substantial share of respondents, returning to Ukraine marks a conditional and reversible phase rather than permanent resettlement. Survey data show that post-return mobility is both common and strategically significant.

After returning to Ukraine: 21.2% travelled abroad for short periods, 2.9% relocated abroad for less than three months, 4.0% relocated for three to six months, and 8.1% reported plans to travel or relocate soon.

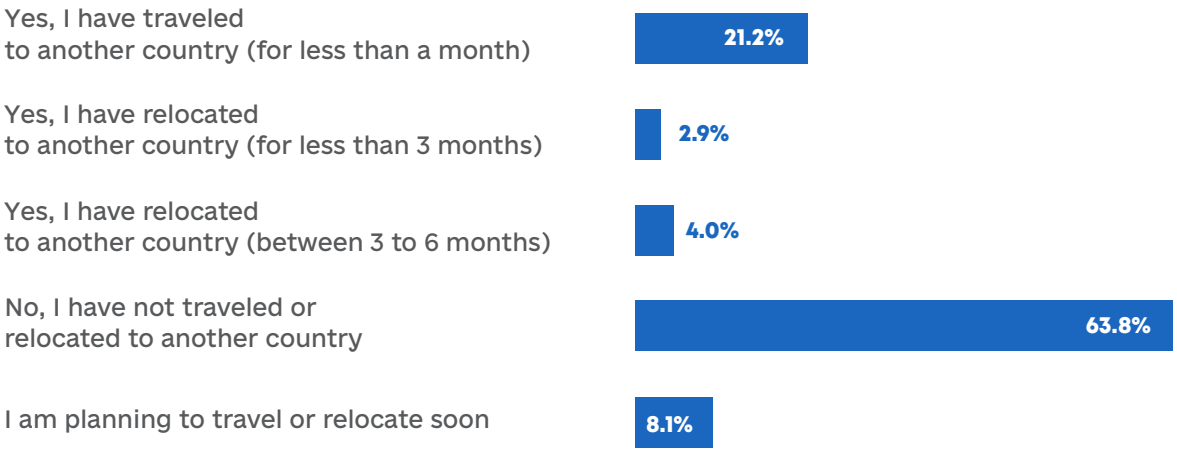


Figure 10. Mobility after returning to Ukraine

In total, 28.1% engaged in actual cross-border travel or temporary relocation after return, while an additional 8.1% reported plans to move in the near future. Approximately 36% either moved or anticipate moving again, while 64% remained fully immobile at the time of the survey. At the same time, 34.6% are considering moving back to their previous country of residence, and a further 26.4% remain unsure, confirming that for many, return is provisional rather than final.

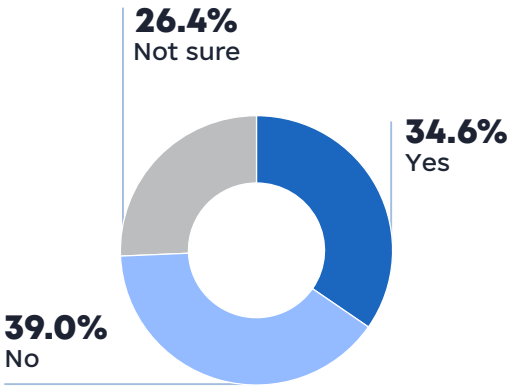


Figure 11. Are you considering moving back abroad?

MOBILITY AND MENTAL WELL-BEING: A COUNTERINTUITIVE PATTERN

Contrary to much of the displacement literature, certain forms of post-return mobility in this sample are not associated with worse outcomes. In particular, short-term travel abroad after return is linked to better mental well-being compared to remaining immobile.

On the Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (SWEMWBS), 29.3% of respondents who travelled abroad for short periods fall into the low well-being category, compared with 44.9% among those who did not travel. Respondents who temporarily relocated abroad for longer periods show levels of low well-being closer to those who remained immobile.

On the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC-SF), 17.9% of those who travelled are classified as languishing, compared with 36.5% of those who stayed put. This association is statistically significant at the bivariate level ($p = 0.026$). No statistically significant association is observed for longer-term relocation.

These findings suggest that short-term cross-border travel may function as an adaptive strategy under conditions of ongoing insecurity. Rather than signalling failed reintegration, temporary mobility appears to reflect access to resources and options.

It signals:

- **access to financial means,**
- **valid documentation,**
- **transnational networks,**
- **and the ability to respond flexibly to changing conditions, including renewed missile attacks, energy outages, health needs, caregiving demands, or employment disruptions.**

Interview data clarify how mobility operates in practice. Many participants described return not as the end of displacement, but as part of an ongoing household strategy. Some deliberately maintained housing, bank accounts, or employment links abroad; others kept family members—particularly children—outside Ukraine to preserve options.

> "I kept my flat in Poland. I'll be back and forth until things make sense."
> — one participant explained

> "I'm here for now. But if the shelling returns, I'm not waiting this time."
> — another participant noted

Such accounts indicate that mobility often functions as risk management, allowing returnees to recalibrate their location in response to security developments, livelihood shocks, or care needs. At the same time, mobility is not uniformly protective; its effects appear to depend on duration, voluntariness, and access to legal safeguards. In some cases, anticipated or prolonged relocation is associated with higher psychological strain.

LEGAL STATUS AS A PRECONDITION FOR PROTECTIVE MOBILITY

Legal status plays a decisive role in shaping who can remain mobile after return. At the time of the survey: 61.8% of respondents were no longer covered by the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), 19.5% still held TPD status, and 18.8% were unsure of their legal status.

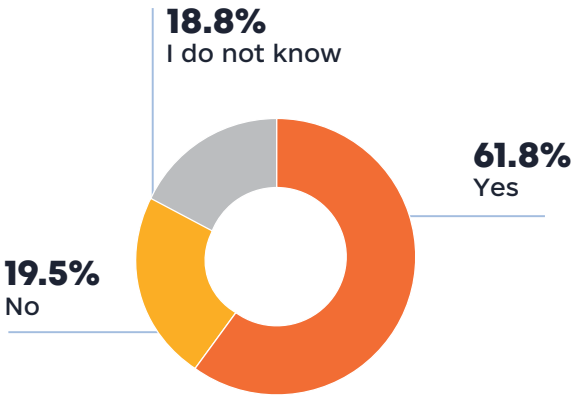


Figure 12. Did you close your Temporary Protection?

Patterns of cross-border movement vary substantially by protection status. Respondents who temporarily relocated to another country after return were disproportionately drawn from the group still covered by Temporary Protection: more than half (55.6%) of those who relocated retained TPD status. By contrast, 20.4% of those who travelled abroad for short periods and 14.8% of those who did not travel remained covered by TPD.

These findings indicate that valid protection status facilitates sustained or repeated relocation across borders. Legal clarity makes it administratively feasible to move without losing residence rights or access to services.

At the same time, improved mental well-being in this study is observed primarily among respondents who engaged in short-term travel, rather than longer-term relocation. Legal status therefore appears to enable mobility, but the psychological effects of movement depend on its form, duration, and degree of voluntariness.

Interviews highlight a critical risk associated with the loss or ambiguity of protection status. Many individuals returned with the intention to stay, including in regions initially perceived as safer. However, renewed attacks, winter-related infrastructure failures, or economic strain frequently forced renewed movement. When Temporary Protection had lapsed or legal status was unclear, this movement occurred without safeguards, increasing exposure to loss of services, irregular residence, and administrative uncertainty. In such contexts, mobility may shift from an adaptive option to a source of heightened vulnerability.

4.5. Mental Well-Being After Return

This study assesses mental well-being among Ukrainian returnees using two complementary, validated instruments: the Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (SWEMWBS), which captures everyday functioning, resilience, and psychological resources, and the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC-SF), which distinguishes between flourishing, moderate mental health, and languishing across emotional, social, and psychological domains. Together, these tools provide a multidimensional picture of how returnees are coping after returning to Ukraine during active conflict.

FUNCTIONING UNDER SUSTAINED STRAIN: SWEMWBS RESULTS

Overall, SWEMWBS results point to a population that is functioning but under sustained strain. Among the 264 out of 324 respondents who completed the scale, the mean transformed score (20.79) falls within the moderate range. However, this average masks substantial vulnerability: 42% of respondents fall into the low well-being category, while only 4.9% reach high well-being.

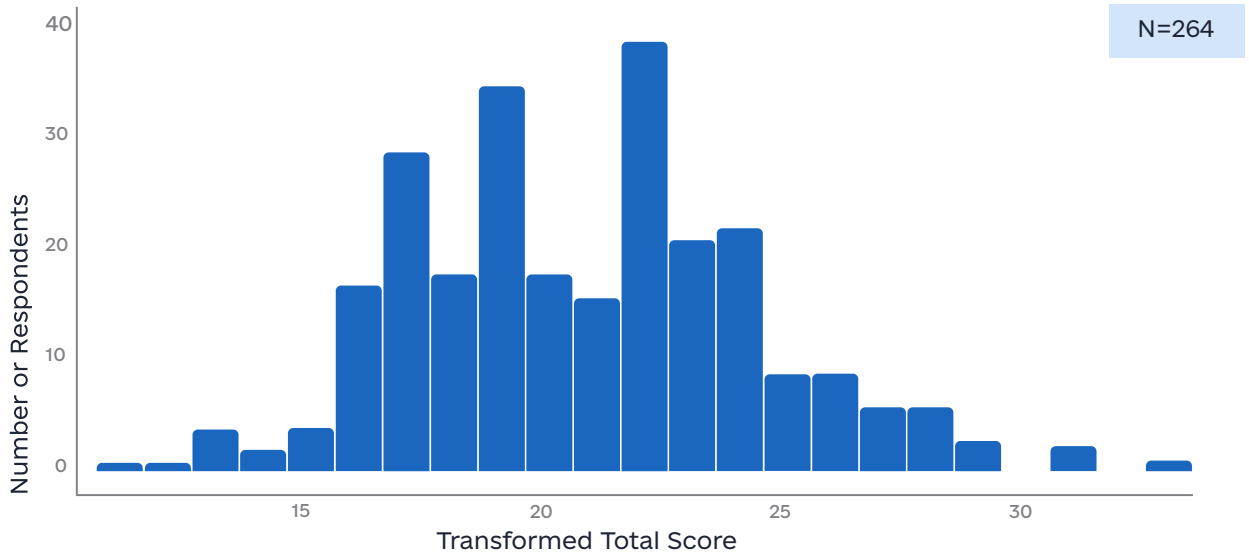
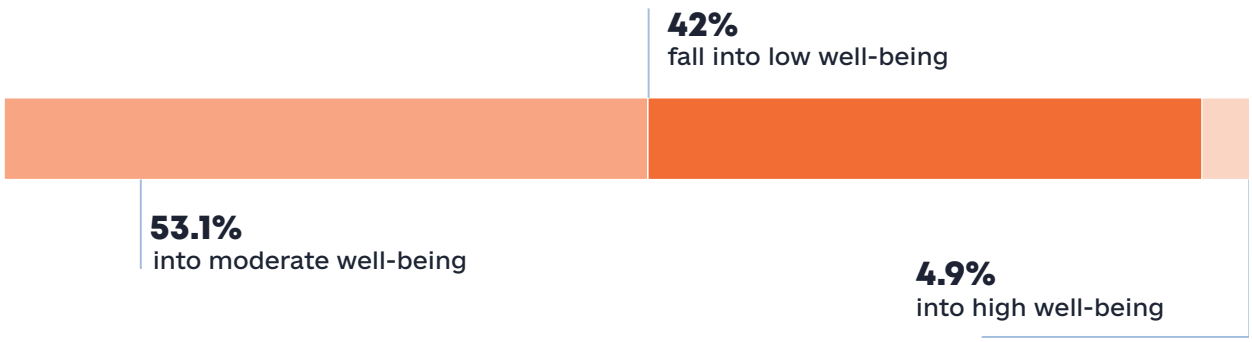


Figure 13. Everyday mental well-being after return (SWEMWBS)



Item-level analysis reveals a clear and consistent pattern. Returnees score highest on items related to cognitive functioning and agency:

- **"I've been able to make up my own mind about things"** (mean 4.17),
- **"I've been thinking clearly"** (mean 3.88),
- **"I've been dealing with problems well"** (mean 3.36).

These scores suggest that many returnees retain decision-making capacity, practical reasoning, and the ability to manage daily demands. In contrast, the lowest scores cluster around calm and future orientation:

- **"I've been feeling relaxed"** (mean 2.28),
- **"I've been feeling optimistic about the future"** (mean 2.41).

In other words, returnees are coping without comfort. They manage responsibilities, make decisions, and solve problems, but do so in a context of persistent tension, fatigue, and limited confidence about what lies ahead. This profile aligns closely with the qualitative findings, where interviewees describe being "functional but exhausted," maintaining routines while feeling emotionally depleted.

BEYOND DISTRESS: MHC-SF AND THE STRUCTURE OF MENTAL HEALTH

The MHC-SF provides a broader assessment of mental health, capturing not only distress but also positive functioning and social integration. Among the 251 respondents who completed the scale: 33.5% are classified as languishing, 37.5% as moderately mentally healthy, 29.1% as flourishing.

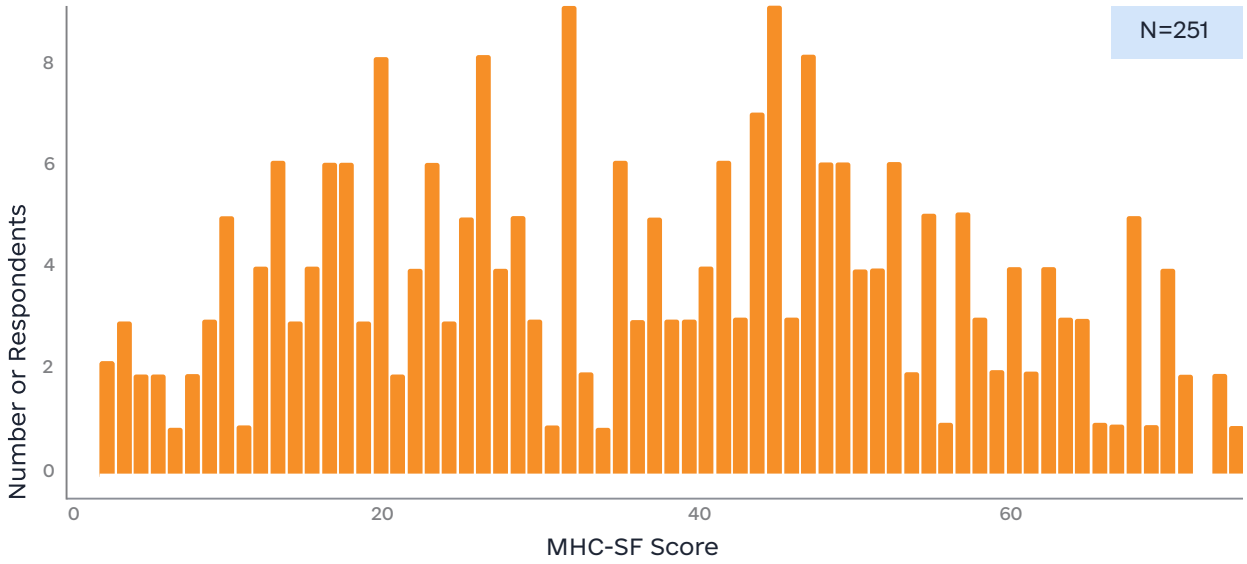
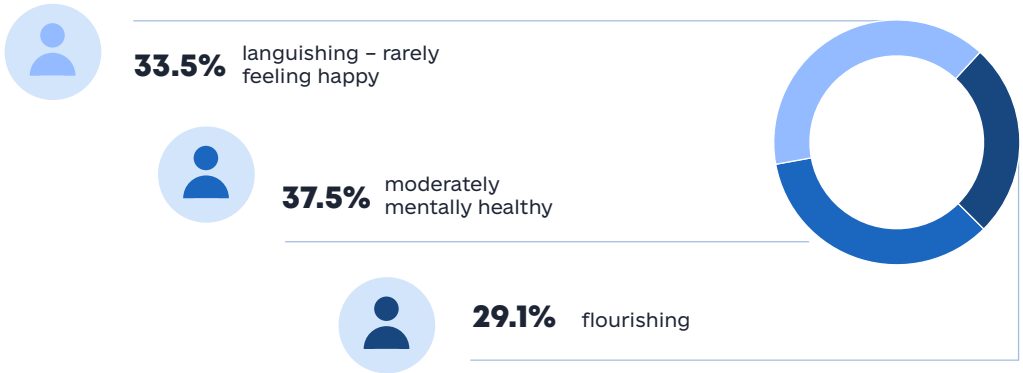


Figure 14. How returnees are coping emotionally, socially, and psychologically (MHC-SF)



At first glance, this distribution suggests heterogeneity rather than uniform crisis. However, disaggregating the scale into its three subdomains—emotional, social, and psychological well-being—reveals important asymmetries.

Emotional well-being (happiness and life satisfaction) is modest. Respondents report relatively low levels of happiness (mean 2.01) and life satisfaction (mean 2.04), while interest in life remains somewhat higher (mean 3.12). This indicates that curiosity and engagement persist even when joy and satisfaction are scarce.

Social well-being emerges as the weakest dimension. Scores are particularly low for items related to trust, belonging, and societal coherence:

- **"Our society is becoming a better place for people like me"** (mean 1.41),
- **"The way our society works makes sense to me"** (mean 1.67).

These results point to a deep sense of social disconnection and mistrust, echoing interview accounts of stigma, resentment, and feeling judged for having left Ukraine. Even when individuals manage psychologically, many do not feel socially anchored or valued.

Psychological well-being—including self-acceptance, autonomy, and a sense of purpose—is comparatively stronger. Respondents report being reasonably able to manage responsibilities (mean 3.45), express ideas (mean 2.86), and maintain some sense of meaning or direction (mean 2.87). This suggests that personal resilience often outpaces social reintegration.

The strong correlation between SWEMWBS and MHC-SF scores ($r = 0.75$) confirms that both instruments are capturing overlapping but distinct dimensions of well-being. Importantly, the contingency analysis shows that most respondents classified as having low well-being on SWEMWBS are also classified as languishing on the MHC-SF, reinforcing the robustness of the findings.

WHO IS STRUGGLING MOST: STRUCTURAL DETERMINANTS OF WELL-BEING

Across both scales, well-being is shaped far more by material and structural conditions than by individual demographics such as age or gender. Distress is widespread rather than concentrated in a specific subgroup. Four fault lines, however, consistently divide those who are coping from those who are struggling.

Education plays a buffering role. Among respondents with a master's degree or higher, 35% fall into the low well-being category, compared to approximately 59% among those with secondary-level education (completed or unfinished). On the MHC-SF, the proportion classified as languishing rises from 22% among the highly educated to 48% among those with secondary education. Higher education appears to provide partial protection—likely through better access to information, networks, and employment—but it does not guarantee good well-being.

Employment is strongly protective. Only one-third of employed respondents fall into low well-being on SWEMWBS, compared with 57.4% of unemployed respondents. On the MHC-SF, over half of unemployed respondents are languishing, versus 23% among those with a job. Employment offers not only income but also structure, social contact, and a sense of usefulness—elements repeatedly emphasized in interviews.

Financial security is the strongest and most consistent predictor of well-being. Among respondents who cannot cover basic needs, nearly 59% report low well-being, and more than half are languishing. Among those who can meet basic expenses, these proportions drop dramatically. Multivariate models confirm that financial security outweighs all other factors in predicting mental health outcomes. In practical terms, the inability to afford essentials—food, housing, healthcare, transportation—translates directly into psychological strain.

Perceived safety also matters. Respondents who feel unsafe or very unsafe are significantly more likely to report low well-being and languishing mental health. Given that over half of the sample feels unsafe in their current environment, this finding underscores the psychological toll of ongoing conflict, even outside active front-line zones.

Well-being is further undermined by the near absence of formal reintegration support. Almost 70% of respondents report receiving no assistance after return, and three-quarters are unaware of any support available in their area. While formal support does not show a strong independent statistical association with well-being—largely because uptake is so low—qualitative data indicate that its absence contributes to confusion, stress, and a sense of abandonment.

Crucially, many returnees face multiple stressors simultaneously: recent return, financial insecurity, unemployment or informal work, unsafe environments, and displacement from their home region. These overlapping risks compound distress. Respondents exposed to several of these pressures at once show the steepest declines in well-being, helping explain why recovery remains elusive for a substantial share of the sample.

4.6. Social Reintegration and Institutional Support

Social reintegration after return is uneven and weakly supported by institutional frameworks. While return decisions are often driven by social and emotional ties, the conditions returnees encounter after coming back are marked by limited formal support, strained social relations, and persistent barriers to rebuilding everyday stability. Rather than completing displacement, return during active conflict frequently relocates vulnerability into social and institutional domains.

RETURN MOTIVATED BY BELONGING, NOT OPPORTUNITY

Survey data show that return to Ukraine is driven far more by social attachment than by material opportunity or improved conditions. Family-related reasons (32.5%) and homesickness or longing for home (27.7%) together account for 60% of all reported return motivations. These findings underscore that return is primarily rooted in relational obligations, caregiving needs, and emotional belonging.

By contrast, material or structural pull factors play a marginal role. Only 11.2% of respondents returned due to employment opportunities, 1.6% cited improved safety in their home region, and none reported returning because of government or NGO incentives. Return is therefore not best understood as a response to recovery or opportunity in Ukraine, but as a socially compelled decision taken when remaining abroad becomes untenable.

This pattern helps explain why return often occurs despite continued insecurity and limited reintegration prospects: people return *because they belong*, not because conditions are favourable.

SOCIAL REINTEGRATION UNDER STRAIN

Despite the centrality of social belonging in return motivations, reintegration outcomes are frequently strained. Both survey and interview data document difficulties rebuilding social ties and a sense of acceptance after return. Quantitatively, 16.2% of respondents identify rebuilding social connections as a significant post-return obstacle. While not the most frequently cited challenge, this figure is notable given that social reintegration is often assumed rather than measured.

Qualitative evidence suggests that these challenges extend beyond practical difficulties and are deeply relational. Returnees report experiences of stigma, moral judgement, and social friction, particularly in interactions with non-displaced populations. Narratives of being told they "had it easy in Europe," or being implicitly blamed for having left, recur across interviews. Children's reintegration into schools is a particularly sensitive site of tension, with parents describing bullying, exclusion, or heightened scrutiny of returnee families.

These dynamics are reflected in the well-being data presented in Section 4.5, where social well-being emerges as the weakest domain on the MHC-SF. Low scores on trust, belonging, and perceived societal coherence point to difficulties re-establishing social membership, even when individuals are functionally coping.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS COMPOUND SOCIAL STRAIN

Social reintegration challenges do not occur in isolation. They intersect with broader structural barriers that constrain everyday functioning and limit the capacity to rebuild social life. Survey respondents report multiple, overlapping obstacles after return: financial hardship: 50.6%, physical health problems: 32.8%, mental health problems: 28.2%, employment instability: 24.9%, housing insecurity: 22.0%.

These conditions restrict participation in social life, reduce time and emotional capacity for relationship-building, and increase reliance on immediate survival strategies.

For caregivers and single-adult households in particular, social reintegration is often deprioritised in favour of managing basic needs.

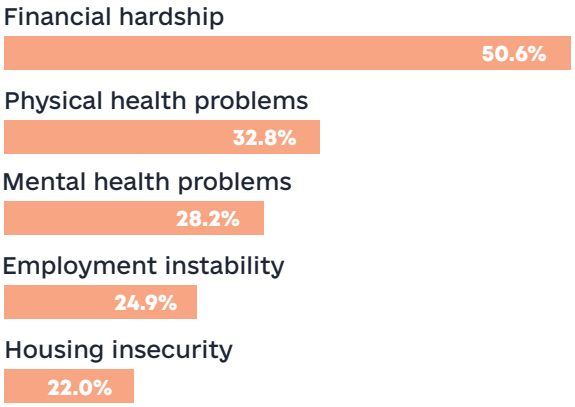


Figure 15. Overlapping obstacles after return

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT: LIMITED, FRAGMENTED, AND POORLY VISIBLE

Formal institutional support after return is limited in both reach and visibility. Nearly seven in ten returnees (68.9%) report receiving no formal assistance after returning to Ukraine, including financial, housing, medical, or psychological support. Even more striking, 76.6% state that they are unaware of any assistance programmes available in their locality. This points not only to gaps in provision, but to a substantial information and access deficit.

Among the minority who did receive some form of support (31.1%), assistance was unevenly distributed: financial assistance 64%, food or basic supplies 33.3%, medical services 24%, psychosocial support 17.3%, temporary housing or shelter <10%.

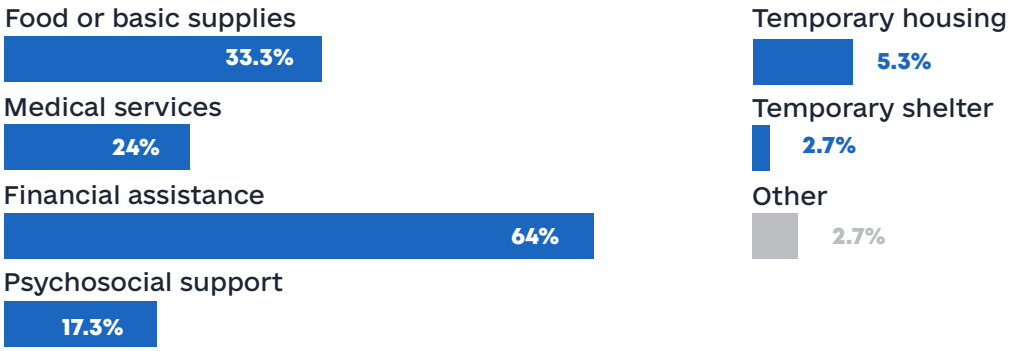


Figure 16. Type of formal support

Support is therefore concentrated on short-term material relief, with limited coverage of housing and psychosocial needs.

Formal support is not statistically associated with improved mental well-being in this sample. At the bivariate level, well-being outcomes do not differ significantly between those who received assistance and those who did not. In fact, the proportion classified as languishing is slightly higher among respondents who received support (36.8%) than among those who did not (31.5%). This likely reflects the fact that support is accessed by, or targeted toward, individuals already experiencing greater vulnerability, rather than indicating that assistance worsens outcomes.

Qualitative data suggest a more complex picture. Many interviewees described not knowing where to register, what they were entitled to, or whether they qualified for any assistance at all. Others reported that available support was short-term or insufficient to address structural challenges such as housing instability or income insecurity. These findings indicate that institutional support, as currently structured, may be reactive and fragmented rather than preventive or stabilising.

INFORMAL NETWORKS AS DEFAULT SUPPORT—AND THEIR LIMIT

Returnees rely heavily on informal networks: family members, friends, NGOs, religious communities, and personal savings. For some, proximity to extended family was a key motivation for return and a critical buffer against hardship. However, informal support is uneven, geographically constrained, and often overstretched. Returnees without strong family networks—particularly those internally displaced from front-line regions—are significantly more exposed to isolation and insecurity.

Informal networks can mitigate immediate hardship, but they cannot substitute for coordinated reintegration frameworks. In this context, social reintegration is a key fault line in the sustainability of return. Without visible, accessible, and coordinated support—and without efforts to address stigma and social fragmentation—return risks becoming another phase of displacement, rather than a step toward recovery.

Conclusions:
Return as Precarious Stabilisation

This study examined return to Ukraine during active war as a lived and evolving process rather than a discrete event. Drawing on nationwide survey data and in-depth qualitative interviews, it analysed who returns, under what constraints, and with what consequences for material stability, social reintegration, and mental well-being. The findings challenge policy narratives that equate return with recovery and instead reveal return as a fragile, conditional, and often reversible phase within ongoing displacement.

- **Return under constraint, not recovery**

Return during active conflict does not reflect improved conditions in Ukraine, nor does it signal the resolution of displacement. Very few respondents returned because their region had become safer or because economic opportunities had improved. Instead, return was primarily shaped by deteriorating conditions abroad: rising living costs, the loss or uncertainty of temporary housing, increasingly conditional support frameworks, administrative ambiguity, and cumulative exhaustion. Return therefore frequently occurred under pressure and constrained choice. Many respondents described returning without savings, clear plans, or reliable information about housing, employment, or safety conditions. In this context, return should not be interpreted as evidence that protection is no longer needed. It reflects narrowing options rather than restored stability.

- **Return is care-structured and gendered by responsibility**

Returnees are predominantly working-age adults, highly educated, and deeply embedded in care relationships. Women are overrepresented not because return is inherently feminised, but because caregiving responsibilities become decisive under displacement. Care for children struggling abroad, elderly relatives unable to relocate, or ill family members in Ukraine emerged as one of the strongest drivers of return. Importantly, caregiving itself does not independently predict poorer mental well-being after return. Rather, it functions as a mobility constraint: households return because care responsibilities make continued stay abroad untenable. This distinction matters. Return decisions are shaped less by preference than by the redistribution of unpaid care work under strained protection regimes.

- **Functioning without stability: the profile of well-being after return**

Well-being after return is neither collapsed nor restored. Returnees demonstrate cognitive and functional capacity: they report being able to think clearly, make decisions, and manage daily responsibilities. At the same time, they experience persistent tension, low optimism, emotional fatigue, and weak social trust. One third of respondents are classified as languishing, while only a small fraction report high well-being. The overall profile reflects sustained strain rather than acute breakdown — coping without comfort.

Crucially, well-being outcomes in this sample are more strongly associated with material and structural conditions than with basic demographic characteristics. Financial insecurity emerges

as the most consistent predictor of poor mental health across models, followed by employment status and perceived safety. Education shows a gradient pattern, with lower educational attainment associated with worse outcomes. By contrast, gender and caregiving status are not statistically associated with well-being in the analyses conducted.

Psychological strain among returnees should therefore not be interpreted as a deficit of resilience or an individual vulnerability trait. Rather, it reflects exposure to material precarity, labour market disruption, and ongoing insecurity under conditions of active war.

- **Geography does not guarantee safety**

Return reproduces spatial inequality rather than resolving it. For many originating from front-line or formerly occupied regions, return does not mean going home but relocating elsewhere in Ukraine. These individuals often experience continued internal displacement, housing insecurity, and weaker social support networks. Even in regions commonly perceived as safer, repeated missile and drone attacks have eroded confidence in geographical stability. Safety is experienced as unstable and reversible across the country. Over half of respondents report feeling unsafe or very unsafe in their current location.

Housing pressures compound this insecurity. National assessments indicate that approximately 13% of Ukraine's housing stock has been damaged or destroyed since February 2022, with severe regional disparities and limited reconstruction capacity in frontline areas. The private rental market remains largely informal and weakly regulated, contributing to rising rents, short-term contracts, and unstable housing arrangements. For many returnees, return does not restore home; it reconfigures displacement within national borders.

- **Mobility as protection under war**

Return is rarely final. A substantial share of respondents remain mobile, uncertain about staying, or actively considering re-migration. Post-return movement is common, and for some, strategic. In this study, short-term travel abroad after return is associated with better mental well-being compared to remaining immobile. This pattern does not extend uniformly to longer-term relocation, which shows well-being outcomes closer to those who did not move. The findings therefore suggest that flexible, temporary mobility—rather than sustained relocation per se—may function as an adaptive resource under conditions of ongoing insecurity. Mobility in this context reflects access to financial means, documentation, and transnational networks. It allows households to respond to renewed attacks, infrastructure failures, care demands, and livelihood shocks. In a setting of active war, the ability to leave temporarily may help preserve agency and optionality.

Legal status shapes who can remain mobile. Two thirds of returnees are no longer covered by Temporary Protection. Respondents who temporarily relocated abroad were disproportionately drawn from those still holding valid protection status, indicating that legal safeguards facilitate cross-border movement. However, the relationship between legal status and well-being is not direct. Rather, legal clarity appears to determine whether movement can occur with administrative continuity and access to services.

Where protection lapses or legal status is unclear, renewed movement may expose individuals to irregular residence, loss of entitlements, and administrative uncertainty. In such contexts, mobility can shift from an adaptive option to a source of vulnerability. The same act of movement therefore carries different implications depending on legal and material conditions.

- **Institutional absence and structural fragility**

Formal reintegration support is limited and poorly visible. Most returnees receive no assistance after return and are unaware of available programmes. Reintegration is navigated through informal networks, NGOs, or private coping strategies. This institutional gap amplifies uncertainty and administrative burden. Without predictable income, accessible housing, legal clarity, and coordinated services, return becomes a high-risk transition rather than a pathway to recovery. In such conditions, the likelihood of secondary displacement increases.

- **Rethinking return during active war**

Taken together, these findings indicate that return during active conflict should not be understood as repatriation in the classical sense. It is neither closure nor restoration. It is a negotiated, risk-bearing strategy undertaken within constrained protection systems. Return does not resolve displacement; it reshapes it. Its sustainability depends not on intention, loyalty, or resilience, but on access to material security, legal reversibility, housing stability, and mobility options. Policies that equate return with recovery risk misreading fragility as success. Monitoring frameworks that count returns without examining post-return conditions obscure the structural pressures shaping these movements.

A meaningful response to wartime return must therefore shift focus from the act of return to the conditions that follow it: income adequacy, housing access, safety, legal status, caregiving realities, and the preservation of mobility options. Without attention to these foundations, return will continue to function not as a durable solution, but as a redistribution of vulnerability onto individuals and households already operating at the limits of endurance. Return during war is not an endpoint. It is a provisional position within an ongoing landscape of risk. Whether it becomes stabilising or destabilising depends less on movement itself and more on the structures that make staying — or moving again — possible without falling into deeper precarity.

Appendix A.

Study Design and Methodology

1. Study Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining a large-scale quantitative survey with in-depth qualitative interviews, to examine the experiences, reintegration conditions, and well-being of Ukrainians returning during an active armed conflict. The mixed-methods approach was selected to capture both the structural patterns shaping return—such as employment, housing, safety, and access to services—and the subjective motivations, and coping strategies that cannot be adequately understood through quantitative measures alone. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) argue, mixed-methods designs are especially valuable when research questions span multiple levels of analysis and when neither quantitative nor qualitative approaches alone are sufficient. Similarly, Small (2011) highlights the importance of qualitative inquiry for explaining how and why social patterns emerge, particularly in situations marked by uncertainty, constraint, and heterogeneity—features that strongly characterise return migration during war.

The study follows an observational, non-experimental, and exploratory design. No interventions were introduced, and participants were not assigned to experimental conditions. Instead, the research documents returnees' experiences as they unfold in real time, recognising that return during ongoing conflict is an under-researched phenomenon for which established theoretical expectations and empirical baselines remain limited. The exploratory nature of the design reflects both the novelty of large-scale wartime return in Ukraine and the ethical and practical constraints of conducting research in a conflict setting.

Data collection took place while hostilities were ongoing, including periods of active shelling, air strikes, and infrastructure disruption in several regions of Ukraine. Conducting research during an active armed conflict introduces significant methodological challenges—such as mobility constraints, uneven access to participants, and heightened emotional strain—but is essential for understanding return as it is currently occurring, rather than retrospectively reconstructed. Therefore, this study does not aim to produce nationally representative estimates of all Ukrainian returnees. Rather, its objective is to generate empirically grounded insights into the conditions, challenges, and well-being of those who return during active conflict, a population that remains poorly captured in official statistics and policy frameworks. The methodological choices made reflect a balance between analytical rigor, ethical responsibility, and the realities of wartime research.

STUDY POPULATION AND SCOPE

The study examines Ukrainian adults who were displaced across an international border following the full-scale invasion and later returned to Ukraine while the conflict was still ongoing. In this research, returnees are defined specifically as individuals who (1) left Ukraine and lived abroad under temporary or humanitarian protection arrangements, including the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), and (2) physically re-entered Ukraine during active hostilities with the intention

to stay. Internally displaced persons who never crossed an international border were therefore not included in the study population.

This strict definition was adopted for both analytical and conceptual reasons. First, cross-border displacement under Temporary Protection involves a distinct legal, institutional, and social trajectory compared to internal displacement. Second, return from abroad entails a specific set of decisions related to legal status, access to services, mobility rights, and protection trade-offs that differ fundamentally from those faced by internally displaced persons. Maintaining a narrow definition of return allows the study to examine these dynamics with greater precision and avoids conflating heterogeneous forms of displacement and mobility.

INCLUSION CRITERIA

Participants were eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria:

- **Ukrainian nationality;**
- **Aged 18 years or older;**
- **Previously or still falling under Temporary Protection Directive;**
- **Prior displacement abroad following the 2022 full-scale invasion;**
- **Physical return to Ukraine during the period of active conflict;**
- **Ability and willingness to provide informed consent and participate in a digital survey or interview in Ukrainian or another supported language.**

Participants who had not left Ukraine, who remained abroad at the time of data collection, or who were under the age of 18 were excluded from the study. Participants for the qualitative interviews were drawn from the broader survey sample and through referrals from trusted partner organisations. Selection followed a purposive logic, aiming to capture variation in gender, age, region of return, time since return, family status, and exposure to conflict. This ensured that interviews reflected a range of return trajectories and reintegration conditions. Interviews were conducted only with participants who explicitly consented to further contact and participation. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached, with emerging insights informing subsequent interview rounds. Because “returnee” status is not always self-identified (and because many people become institutionally visible only once they register as IDPs or seek assistance), eligibility was operationalised through behavioural and temporal criteria within the survey flow rather than through self-labelling alone.

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

The study has nationwide coverage, including returnees residing across all regions of Ukraine at the time of participation. Crucially, this includes respondents living in or originating from regions directly affected by active hostilities, occupation, or proximity to the frontline (including Donetsk, Luhansk, Charkiv, Cherson). Capturing experiences from these areas was a deliberate design choice, as return under conditions of heightened insecurity is central to the research objectives. Data were collected digitally to enable participation despite mobility restrictions, infrastructural damage, and security risks.

SAMPLE SIZE AND ACCESS CONSTRAINTS

The quantitative survey reached 340 respondents, of whom 324 met the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the analytical sample. In addition, 14 participants took part in in-depth qualitative interviews. The achieved sample size reflects both the exploratory nature of the study and the substantial practical and ethical constraints of conducting research with returnees during an active war.

Recruiting participants posed significant challenges. Returnees constitute a highly mobile and often institutionally invisible population: many do not register with formal support systems after returning, lack stable housing or employment, and move intermittently between Ukraine and other countries. Fear of exposure, survey fatigue, emotional distress, and limited trust in research initiatives further constrained participation. These factors made probabilistic sampling infeasible and limited the scale of recruitment despite extensive outreach efforts.

Within these constraints, the sample size is analytically meaningful. It allows for robust descriptive analysis, the identification of key associations between return conditions and well-being, and the inclusion of respondents across diverse regions and socio-demographic profiles. Combined with qualitative interviews, the sample provides sufficient depth and breadth to address the study's core research questions while remaining proportionate to the risks and burdens placed on participants.

2. Sampling and Recruitment

Given the absence of comprehensive registries of returnees and the fluid nature of mobility during active conflict, the study employed a non-probability, multi-source sampling strategy. This approach was necessary to reach a population that is partially invisible, highly mobile, and unevenly connected to formal institutions. Probability-based sampling was neither feasible nor ethically appropriate in the context of ongoing hostilities, infrastructural disruption, and heightened participant vulnerability.

Rather than relying on a single recruitment channel, the study deliberately combined multiple access points to reduce selection bias associated with any one institutional pathway. This strategy reflects the reality that Ukrainian returnees do not constitute a clearly bounded or uniformly registered group. Many returnees only become visible to authorities if and when they apply for internally displaced person (IDP) status or seek targeted assistance. As a result, reliance on a single administrative or humanitarian database would have systematically excluded large segments of the target population. The sampling strategy was therefore designed to prioritise reach, diversity of return experiences, and geographic spread, rather than statistical representativeness. This approach is consistent with the exploratory objectives of the study and with the need to document return dynamics as they unfold under conditions of uncertainty and insecurity.

RECRUITMENT CHANNELS

Participants were recruited through a wide network of institutional, civil society, and local-level actors, as well as through digital outreach. Key recruitment channels included:

- Humanitarian and civil society organisations working directly with displaced populations and returnees, including organisations providing legal, social, and reintegration support at the local level (e.g. ROKADA, PAH);

- International organisations and programmes engaged in return and reintegration support, including initiatives linked to UNHCR and Ukraine Is Home–type programmes focused on return information and assistance;

- Municipal and local authority contacts, particularly in cities and regions receiving significant numbers of returnees, which facilitated outreach beyond national-level organisations;

- Digital and social media dissemination, including targeted outreach through platforms commonly used in Ukraine, directing potential participants to a secure survey environment;

- Trusted intermediaries and community-based networks, who shared information about the study within personal and professional circles, helping to reach individuals not connected to formal assistance structures.

- This diversified recruitment strategy enabled the study to include returnees with varying degrees of institutional engagement, including those who had received no formal support since returning and those residing in areas with limited humanitarian presence.

Measures and Instruments

3. Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected through a digital survey administered via Upinion's DEP, a research-oriented platform designed to enable secure and anonymous participation. The choice allowed participation across a wide geographic area, including locations affected by instability, while reducing physical risks for participants and researchers. It also enabled respondents to complete the survey at their own pace, which is particularly important in wartime conditions where electricity interruptions, air-raid alerts, caregiving, and mobility constraints can disrupt participation. In line with the study's broader ethical approach, respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participation required active digital consent before proceeding to any questions.

SURVEY STRUCTURE AND SEQUENCING (THREE-SECTION DESIGN)

To reduce respondent burden and improve completion in a high-stress context, the survey was organised into three sections. This structure allowed the instrument to move from "low sensitivity" to "higher sensitivity" content, while also enabling partial data capture if participants dropped out later in the survey.

SECTION 1:

Demographic and contextual characteristics

The first round captured background variables necessary for describing the sample and for later subgroup analyses. Topics included:

- **Demographics and household context:** age, gender, marital/relationship status, caregiving responsibilities
- **Socio-economic position:** education, employment status, work arrangement (online/on-site/hybrid), job–qualification match
- **Displacement/return trajectory:** pre-war oblast of residence; country/countries of residence under temporary protection prior to return; current temporary protection status; timing of return; whether the respondent returned to the same town; post-return mobility; whether temporary protection status was closed
- **Household composition at return:** whether respondents returned alone or with family members

This round establishes the analytical baseline for understanding variation in reintegration conditions and well-being across groups.

SECTION 2:

Standardised well-being measures

The second round measured well-being using validated instruments included as part of the survey battery:

- **Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS)** – 7 items (e.g., optimism, feeling useful, relaxation, clear thinking, closeness to others, autonomy), answered on a 5-point frequency scale ("None of the time" to "All of the time").
- **Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC-SF)** – 14 items, answered on a 6-point frequency scale ("Never" to "Every day/almost every day"), covering:

a. **Emotional well-being** (happy, interested in life, satisfied)

b. **Social well-being** (belonging, contribution, social optimism/acceptance, social coherence

c. **Psychological well-being** (self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relations, personal growth, autonomy/confidence, meaning)

SECTION 3:

Return motivations, reintegration conditions, and open-ended feedback

The third round combined closed and open-ended questions to capture return decision-making and post-return realities, including:

- **Motivations for return** (e.g., family, work, patriotism, homesickness, dissatisfaction abroad, improved safety, government/NGO support, other)
- **Future plans and mobility intentions** (plans to stay, considering moving back abroad)
- **Perceived safety in current environment**
- **Economic security** (ability to cover basic needs; specific domains of shortage; income sources; main household provider)
- **Formal support since return** (whether received; type of support)
- **Perceived positive influences on quality of life**
- **Main obstacles since return**
- **Open-ended item on how community/government could better support returnees**

The qualitative component was designed to complement the survey by exploring mechanisms, meanings, and decision-making processes that cannot be captured through structured questionnaires alone. In line with mixed-methods rational logic, interviews were used to explain

how and why return decisions were made, how return was experienced in practice, and how well-being, safety, and reintegration were interpreted by returnees themselves (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Small, 2011).

INTERVIEW MODE AND FIELDWORK CONDITIONS

Interviews were conducted remotely (via secure online communication platforms or telephone), reflecting security constraints and participants' geographic dispersion across Ukraine. Conducting interviews during an active armed conflict required flexibility in scheduling, with interviews occasionally interrupted or rescheduled due to air raid alerts, electricity outages, or participants' caregiving and work responsibilities.

All interviews were conducted in Ukrainian. Interviews were semi-structured, guided by a flexible interview guide/protocol that covered:

- **displacement and return trajectories,**
- **decision-making processes surrounding return,**
- **experiences with housing, employment, services, and safety,**
- **perceptions of voluntariness and pressure to return,**
- **emotional well-being, stressors, and coping strategies, and**
- **future intentions and mobility plans.**

This format allowed respondents to prioritise themes they considered most salient, while ensuring comparability across interviews. With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded. Recordings were transcribed verbatim. Identifying information (names, precise locations, workplaces) was removed during transcription to ensure anonymity. Each transcript was assigned a unique identifier linked only to broad demographic characteristics (e.g. gender, age group, return timing). Given the sensitivity of the material and the conflict context, transcripts were stored on encrypted devices and access was restricted to the research team.

ANALYTIC APPROACH AND CODING STRATEGY

Qualitative analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, combining deductive and inductive elements. An initial coding framework was developed based on: the study's conceptual framing (return, voluntariness, protection, well-being), prior literature on refugee return and repatriation, and key domains covered in the interview guide.

At the same time, inductive coding was used to capture themes emerging directly from participants' narratives, particularly where these challenged or complicated existing frameworks (Small, 2011).

Coding proceeded in three stages:

1. Open coding, identifying recurring concepts and experiences (e.g. housing insecurity, pressure from host-country systems, identity and dignity, emotional exhaustion).
2. Axial coding, linking these concepts to broader analytic categories such as push and pull factors, degrees of voluntariness, and reintegration constraints.

3. Selective coding, focusing on themes most relevant to the study's core research questions, particularly the interaction between return decision-making and well-being.

4. Data preparation and analysis overview

After data collection closed, survey data were exported from the Upinion platform into the analysis environment. Analyses were conducted in RStudio using R (version 4.5.1). Descriptive statistics were reported as means with standard deviations for continuous variables and frequencies with percentages for categorical variables. A stepwise cleaning procedure was applied to align the analytic dataset with the study's target population:

1. Dropout handling (partial completes retained). Respondents who started but did not finish the survey conversation were not automatically excluded; partial responses were retained where available to avoid unnecessary loss of data in a hard-to-reach population.
2. Eligibility exclusions. Respondents were excluded if their answers indicated they had not moved abroad or had not yet returned to Ukraine (n = 15), as they did not meet the operational definition of externally displaced returnees. One additional respondent was excluded due to data quality concerns.
3. Final analytic sample. After exclusions, the main analytic sample consisted of 324 eligible returnees (from 340 total respondents).

This approach reflects the practical realities of researching return during active conflict: strict eligibility criteria were applied, while incomplete response patterns were treated as an expected feature of data collection under instability rather than as a reason for wholesale exclusion. A core objective of preparation was to produce a clear descriptive profile of returnees and their return trajectories. The analysis report summarised sociodemographic variables (e.g., gender, age, education, employment), pre-war region of residence, return timing, mobility after return, and temporary protection-related indicators. Where respondents could select multiple options (e.g., countries of residence under temporary protection), responses were treated as multi-response items rather than mutually exclusive categories.

SCALE SCORING AND PSYCHOMETRIC CHECKS

The Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS) includes 7 items scored 1–5. A raw total score was calculated by summing item scores, and raw totals were converted to metric (transformed) scores using the published conversion procedure. Completion was defined as responding to the full SWEMWBS item set; among the eligible sample, 264 respondents provided complete SWEMWBS responses. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α = 0.78), indicating acceptable reliability. Item-deletion diagnostics showed no meaningful improvement in alpha if any item were removed. For interpretability, transformed scores were grouped into low (7.0–19.5), moderate (19.5–27.5), and high (27.5–35.0) well-being categories following the cut-points applied in the analysis report.

The Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC–SF) includes 14 items scored 0–5. A total score was computed as the sum of item scores. In the eligible sample, 251 respondents provided complete MHC–SF responses. Internal consistency was excellent (α = 0.92), with strong reliability observed for the emotional (α = 0.82), social (α = 0.83), and psychological (α = 0.86) subscales.

Item-deletion diagnostics indicated no substantive improvement in internal consistency if items were removed, and all items were retained. In addition to continuous scoring, respondents were classified into flourishing, moderately mentally healthy, and languishing categories using the standard frequency-based rule applied in the analysis report. To examine convergence between instruments, Pearson's correlation was computed between MHC–SF totals and SWEMWBS transformed totals ($r = 0.75$), and categorical agreement was assessed using a contingency table.

MISSING DATA ASSESSMENT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INFERENCE

Given the study context, missingness was treated as analytically meaningful rather than purely technical. The analysis report documented that 85 eligible respondents dropped out before completing the full conversation, and dropout was not random: dropouts were more likely to be male, to have returned more recently, and to still be covered by temporary protection. Because these characteristics plausibly relate to both reintegration conditions and well-being, the analysis compared completers and dropouts to identify potential bias pathways.

For descriptive and bivariate analyses, missing data were handled using complete-case analysis per test, meaning that respondents were included in each analysis if they had non-missing data for the variables involved. As a result, partial completers contributed to some bivariate results where relevant data were available.

Multivariate regression models were more restrictive: they were estimated among respondents who completed the full questionnaire and had complete data on all variables included in model selection. Only five respondents had complete model-relevant data but did not complete the full survey and were therefore excluded. This analytic strategy prioritised transparency and interpretability but requires caution when generalising findings to subgroups with systematically higher dropout risk.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYTIC STRATEGY

First, descriptive analyses summarised sociodemographic characteristics and return-related variables, establishing the empirical context in which well-being scores should be interpreted. Next, associations between well-being outcomes and key covariates were tested using:

- **Chi-square tests for categorical predictors,**
- **Cochran–Armitage trend tests for ordinal predictors (education level, return timing categories, perceived safety), and**
- **T-tests for continuous predictors such as age.**

Bivariate results were reported separately for SWEMWBS-derived well-being categories and MHC–SF-derived mental health categories, allowing comparison of whether predictors behaved similarly across operationalisations of well-being.

To identify the set of factors that best predicted mental well-being in our sample of Ukrainian returnees, multivariate logistic regression models were estimated with:

- **SWEMWBS outcome:** low vs. moderate/high well-being
- **MHC–SF outcome:** languishing vs. flourishing/moderately mentally healthy.

Candidate variables were drawn from those assessed in bivariate analyses; the region of origin was not considered for inclusion in the multivariate models as specified in the analysis report. Model selection used forward stepwise selection guided by the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC). Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factors (VIF), with no major concerns identified. Model fit was summarised using McFadden's pseudo R^2.

Because a small number of responses contained inconsistencies between reported employment status and work arrangement, employment status was recoded in the primary bivariate and multivariate analyses to reflect actual work engagement. As a sensitivity analysis, multivariate regression models were re-estimated after excluding respondents with such inconsistencies.

These sensitivity checks indicated that MHC–SF regression results were relatively stable, whereas SWEMWBS logistic specifications were more sensitive to minor data changes. This instability is important to acknowledge when interpreting the relative strength of predictors across well-being measures.

In addition, linear regression models were estimated using the continuous SWEMWBS transformed score and MHC–SF total score, with robust standard errors used to derive confidence intervals and p-values. This complementary approach allowed assessment of whether predictors remained consistent across categorical and continuous outcome specifications.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with core ethical principles for research with conflict-affected and displaced populations: voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, minimisation of harm, and respect for participants' agency. These principles are particularly critical in contexts of ongoing armed conflict, where participants may face heightened vulnerability, stress, and insecurity.

The research design explicitly recognised that returnees to Ukraine are not only a hard-to-reach population, but also individuals living under conditions of uncertainty, exposure to violence, and socio-economic precarity. Ethical considerations therefore informed all stages of the research process, from recruitment and data collection to analysis and reporting.

INFORMED CONSENT AND VOLUNTARINESS

Participation in both the survey and the qualitative interviews was strictly voluntary. Before taking part, all participants received clear and accessible information about:

- **the purpose of the study,**
- **the organisations involved,**
- **what participation would involve,**
- **how their data would be used,**
- **the measures taken to protect confidentiality, and**
- **their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.**

For the quantitative survey, informed consent was obtained digitally prior to accessing any questions. For interviews, consent was obtained verbally and recorded before the interview began. Participants were reminded that they could decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any point. Given the prevalence of pressured or constrained decision-making in displacement and return contexts, particular care was taken to ensure that participants did not feel obligated to participate due to their contact with partner organisations or service providers.

MINIMISING HARM AND EMOTIONAL RISK

The research team took active steps to minimise potential emotional distress. Survey questions were structured to progress from less sensitive to more sensitive topics, and interview guides were designed to avoid unnecessary probing into traumatic events unless participants themselves chose to raise them.

Interviewers were trained to:

- **recognise signs of distress,**
- **pause or redirect conversations when needed,**
- **remind participants of their right to stop or skip questions, and**
- **maintain a supportive, non-judgmental stance throughout the interaction.**

Participants were not asked to recount graphic experiences of violence. When interviews touched on difficult topics such as loss, insecurity, or emotional hardship, these were approached through participants' own framing rather than imposed categories.

SAFEGUARDING, REFERRALS, AND SUPPORT

Although the study was not a clinical or therapeutic intervention, safeguarding procedures were in place. Where participants expressed acute distress or unmet needs, interviewers provided information about available support services, including local NGOs, humanitarian organisations, or psychosocial support resources operating in Ukraine, where appropriate and feasible. Similarly, all individuals who participated in the digital surveys received a dedicated information sheet containing psychosocial support resources. No incentives were offered that could unduly influence participation. Compensation, where provided, was modest and aligned with standard research practice, ensuring it did not constitute coercion.

CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT AND FEEDBACK LOOP

Beyond the formal data collection period, the project prioritized a continuous feedback loop to ensure a participatory process. Through the DEP, active engagement with the community was maintained, providing regular updates on the development of research findings and outputs. This sustained dialogue culminated in the participants being invited to digitally join *"The Future of Return: Towards Long-Term Solutions for Ukrainians Abroad and in Ukraine"* conference hosted in The Hague in December 2025.

CONFIDENTIALITY, ANONYMITY, AND DATA PROTECTION

Protecting participants' identities was a central ethical priority. All data were anonymised at the earliest possible stage:

- **No real names, precise addresses, or identifying details were retained in the datasets.**
- **Interview transcripts were pseudonymised and stripped of identifying references.**
- **Survey data were analysed in aggregate form.**

Digital data were stored on secure, access-restricted systems, with access limited to the core research team. Audio recordings and raw transcripts were not shared beyond the research team and were used exclusively for research purposes. In reporting findings, care was taken to ensure that quotations could not be traced back to identifiable individuals or small communities, particularly in frontline or sparsely populated areas.

5. Study Limitations

While the study provides important insight into return during active conflict, several limitations should be acknowledged.

- **Non-representative sample**

The survey sample is not statistically representative of all Ukrainian returnees. Participants were recruited through networks and outreach channels that may favour individuals with access to digital tools, civil society organisations, or information networks. As a result, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than nationally representative. The qualitative sample, while diverse in geography and experience, reflects purposive sampling designed to capture variation rather than proportional representation.

- **Gender imbalance**

Women constitute the majority of respondents in the analytic sample. This reflects broader displacement patterns and the feminisation of return in caregiving contexts. However, it may limit the generalisability of findings to male returnees, particularly those subject to military-related mobility constraints.

- **Self-reported data**

All survey measures, including mental well-being scales, perceived safety, financial sufficiency, and legal status, rely on self-report. Self-reported measures capture subjective experience rather than objective verification. Perceptions of insecurity or financial strain may not align fully with administrative indicators but are nevertheless central to lived experience and behavioural decisions.

- **Cross-sectional design**

The study captures conditions at a single point in time. As such, it cannot establish causal relationships. For example, while financial insecurity is strongly associated with lower well-being, the data do not allow definitive causal inference regarding directionality. Longitudinal research would be necessary to assess how well-being evolves over time after return.

- **Non-response and attrition**

Not all participants completed the full set of mental well-being measures. Individuals experiencing higher levels of distress or instability may have been less likely to complete the survey, potentially leading to underestimation of vulnerability. Conversely, individuals with stronger opinions or experiences may have been more motivated to participate.

- **Contextual volatility**

The research was conducted during ongoing war, characterised by rapidly changing security conditions, infrastructure disruptions, and policy adjustments both within Ukraine and across EU member states. As such, some findings reflect conditions specific to the data collection period.

The dynamics of mobility, protection status, and perceived safety may shift as the conflict evolves.

- **Interpretation of mobility and protection status**

Legal status and mobility were measured based on respondents' self-reported understanding of their situation and were not independently verified against administrative records. Protection status was analysed primarily in relation to patterns of post-return mobility rather than as a direct predictor of mental well-being.

While respondents who retained Temporary Protection were more likely to engage in cross-border relocation, the study did not formally test whether legal status independently predicts well-being outcomes. Similarly, the observed association between short-term travel and better mental well-being should not be interpreted as universal or causal. Mobility appears to function differently depending on its duration, voluntariness, and legal context.

In this sample, short-term travel is associated with better well-being, whereas longer-term relocation does not show the same pattern. Moreover, no interaction between protection status and well-being was formally modelled. These findings therefore suggest differentiated associations rather than a single protective effect of mobility or legal status.

CONCLUDING ETHICAL REFLECTION

Conducting research in contexts of active conflict requires balancing the need for evidence with the responsibility to avoid harm. This study sought to ensure that participation was respectful, voluntary, and proportionate to the risks involved. At the same time, the limitations outlined above underscore the importance of cautious interpretation and the need for continued monitoring, longitudinal research, and complementary qualitative inquiry.

Return during active war is a fluid and evolving process. The findings presented here capture a specific moment within that process and should be understood as part of an ongoing effort to document and respond to the lived realities of return under conflict conditions.

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Research results “Navigating Return: Understanding the Challenges and Well-Being of Ukrainians Coming Home Amid Conflict”

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