

# **SURVIVING THE FREEZING COLD UNDER FIRE**

How winter is disrupting Ukrainian children's education and mental health: Evidence from displaced families in frontline areas

ADVOCACY BRIEFING

# THE EFFECTS OF WINTER ON CHILDREN AT A GLANCE

**This briefing draws on a rapid survey of displaced households with children in frontline areas of Kharkivska oblast, alongside secondary evidence.**



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## WHAT FAMILIES HAVE TOLD US

- **100%** OF FAMILIES REPORT THAT THIS WINTER IS EXTREMELY COLD, FAR WORSE THAN LAST YEAR.

### HARDSHIP IS PILING UP:

- **96%** LACK ELECTRICITY
- **92%** FACE FREEZING TEMPERATURES
- **76%** HAVE NO HEATING SUPPLIES
- **56%** LACK CASH
- **32%** ARE MISSING ESSENTIAL MATERIALS
- **72%** OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORT THAT THEIR CHILDREN HAD NO ACCESS TO EDUCATION, CHILD PROTECTION, OR PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT SERVICES THIS WINTER.

**THIS IS NOT JUST A HARSH SEASON – IT'S A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS HITTING FAMILIES AND CHILDREN HARDEST.**

## WHAT IS NEEDED

1. Fully fund winterisation as a life-saving priority, protecting flexible cash assistance to help families meet heating and basic needs.
2. Safeguard children's education, protection and mental health services beyond winter, recognising the cumulative impact of prolonged conflict and displacement.
3. Listen to families and resource local responders, ensuring winter support reflects lived realities and reaches frontline areas.







Svitlana comes to the World Vision-supported Child Friendly Space in Kyiv to keep her eight-year-old daughter Veronika warm and give her a chance to learn, and play. The space, powered by generators, ensures essential services continue even during the harshest winter blackouts.

**"My daughter is eight. She should be in school, but her lessons have stopped. In our apartment, it's barely 7 degrees Celsius, and the pipes freeze at night. We huddle under blankets and build little tents in the house just to keep warm. We've never experienced a winter like this, long blackouts lasting over 24 hours, no heating, no water, no light."**

— Svitlana, 40, Kyiv

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# BACKGROUND

## War, displacement, and children in Ukraine

Nearly four years into the war in Ukraine, humanitarian needs across the country continue to escalate. Renewed and intensified attacks have driven rising civilian casualties and triggered additional waves of displacement, with more than 3.7 million people now internally displaced. Ukraine is currently experiencing one of its coldest winters since 2014, with temperatures dropping as low as  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ ,<sup>1</sup> while repeated attacks on energy infrastructure continue to disrupt electricity, heating, and water supplies, compounding risks for conflict-affected and displaced households.<sup>2</sup>

In 2025, civilian harm reached some of its highest levels since the onset of the war.<sup>3</sup> Explosive violence and attacks on civilian infrastructure have had a devastating impact on children. Between 1 March and 31 May 2025, the number of children killed or injured increased by more than 200 per cent compared to the previous quarter, reflecting the escalating risks faced by children as hostilities intensified.<sup>4</sup>

Families in frontline and occupied areas face the harshest humanitarian conditions due to sustained fighting, insecurity, and limited access to services. Millions of children's lives have been profoundly disrupted by the war — through the loss of parents and relatives, repeated displacement from their homes, prolonged disruption to education, deterioration in physical and mental health, and the erosion of social networks and friendships that are critical to children's development and wellbeing.

## Winter and energy infrastructure

A fourth winter of war is amplifying the challenges faced by children, particularly those living in frontline and near-frontline areas. Vulnerability is significantly higher in these locations due to their concentration in winter “cold spots”;<sup>5</sup> the high presence of displaced households — many of them women-headed families caring for children, older relatives, or family members with disabilities — and extensive damage to critical infrastructure, including power plants, substations, and district heating systems.



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- 1 UN Ukraine (2026) Keeping people warm as winter and war tighten grip on Ukraine
- 2 UN Ukraine (2026) Keeping people warm as winter and war tighten grip on Ukraine
- 3 OCHA (2025a) Ukraine: Humanitarian Situation, Response and Funding Snapshot (January - December 2025)
- 4 UN-verified data, released by the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission to Ukraine; reported in UNICEF (2025) Threefold increase in the number of children killed or injured in Ukraine over the past three months
- 5 REACH (2025) Ukraine: Cold Spot Risk Assessment 2025/2026 - Autumn update, Factsheet - November 2025
- 6 OCHA (2025b) Ukraine Winter Response Plan 2025–2026

Winterisation interventions are therefore critical life-saving measures that protect the most vulnerable civilians — including children — from extreme cold, prevent avoidable mortality, and support basic survival. This principle underpins the Ukraine Winter Response Plan 2025–2026, which explicitly frames winterisation assistance — including heating, shelter repairs, insulation, winter clothing, cash for utilities, and preparedness — as essential to sustaining life between October and March, when temperatures regularly fall below freezing and energy systems remain under chronic strain.<sup>6</sup> Yet overall funding for Ukraine, including for winter-related activities, falls short of what families need, particularly in frontline areas. The situation has further deteriorated as ongoing, large-scale attacks on energy infrastructure have triggered service disruptions that go beyond the level and impact anticipated in the Plan,<sup>7</sup> deepening risks for children and displaced households throughout the winter period.

## Diving into the overlapping impacts of winter, children's education and mental health

Against this background, this advocacy briefing draws on primary data from a World Vision survey of displaced families in Kharkiv to examine how extreme cold, sustained attacks on energy infrastructure, prolonged displacement, and declining funding are converging to undermine children's education, mental health, and protection.<sup>8</sup> It also explores how broader funding cuts are affecting children's access to critical services and sets out action-oriented recommendations to address the most significant gaps identified.

## METHODOLOGY

The briefing is primarily based on a rapid survey<sup>9</sup> conducted in Kharkivska oblast, identified as one of Ukraine's highest winter's "cold spots",<sup>10</sup> in Kharkiv city and surrounding areas, and where harsh weather intersects with conflict exposure and displacement. Twenty-five (25) displaced households – a large majority (22 out of 25) headed by women, were interviewed in January 2026.

All surveyed households included children, with 80% caring for one or two children, and 20% (five households) including an adult or child with a disability. Surveyed households have been displaced for an average of nearly three years and have experienced close to two displacement movements, highlighting the prolonged and repeated nature of displacement for families now facing a fourth winter of war.

Secondary data was also used, including World Vision research and UN humanitarian updates. Selected qualitative quotations from World Vision assessments in the Kyiv region are included to reflect similar winter-related challenges and to illustrate broader observed trends.

7 UN Ukraine (2026) Keeping people warm as winter and war tighten grip on Ukraine

8 UN (2026) Ukraine's children enter fourth school year under invasion as 4.6 million face education barriers; The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2025) Global impact of funding cuts on children and their protection in humanitarian contexts, Briefing Note, April 2025

9 Due to the small sample size, the findings from the survey should be interpreted as indicative rather than statistically representative. The survey was implemented over a short time frame to capture urgent winter conditions and prioritised depth of lived experience over scale. To strengthen and triangulate the analysis, primary findings are complemented by qualitative evidence, including direct quotes from children and caregivers in other frontline and near-frontline areas, as well as secondary data and reporting from international agencies and organisations, which consistently document similar patterns of winter hardship, service disruption, and funding constraints affecting children and young people across Ukraine.

10 REACH (2025) Ukraine: Cold Spot Risk Assessment 2025/2026 - Autumn update, Factsheet - November 2025

# 1.

## DISPLACED FAMILIES AND CHILDREN ARE FACING A FOURTH WINTER OF WAR UNDER UNBEARABLE CONDITIONS

**“No electricity — no heating. Everything is very difficult this year.” (Survey respondent)**

Survey findings from displaced families in Kharkiv reveal that winter conditions are not only severe but increasingly unmanageable, particularly when combined with prolonged displacement, damaged infrastructure, and declining assistance. Winter is experienced as a compound crisis, in which cold temperatures, energy insecurity, and economic strain interact to undermine families’ safety, stability, and wellbeing.

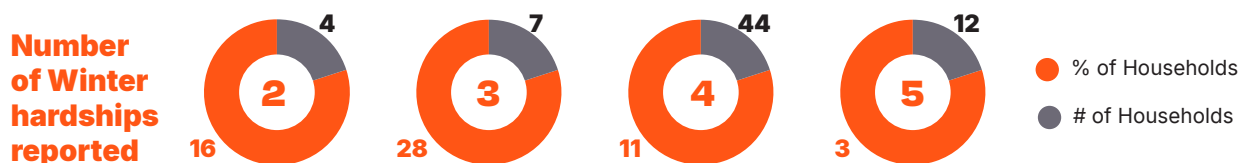
**“It is cold at home, and my mother worries about me. I am often cold and have to wrap myself in a blanket. There are frequent air-raid alarms. There is no electricity, no Wi-Fi, and I have to wear warm clothes all the time. Living like this feels unbearable.” (Mark, 8, Kyiv)**

All surveyed households (100%) described the current winter as extremely cold and that conditions were much colder than the previous year. Families consistently linked low temperatures to frequent electricity outages and insufficient heating, reporting that staying warm was difficult even indoors. These lived experiences reflect wider national conditions during the 2025–2026 winter, characterised by periods of extreme cold alongside sustained attacks on energy infrastructure, resulting in rolling blackouts and reduced heating capacity across multiple regions.

For many families, winter conditions have also triggered renewed displacement, compounding already prolonged and cyclical movement. This reflects broader regional patterns of secondary displacement in frontline and near-frontline areas, where damaged housing, high energy costs, and insecurity intersect.<sup>11</sup> A large majority of households (92%) also reported repeated displacement over the period, and twenty per cent (20%) said they have had to move again due to the harsh winter. Repeated displacement erodes social networks, affects access to various types of support, and weakens households’ ability to prepare for winter, contributing to cumulative vulnerability over time.

**“We are considering moving because I am a mother of many children, and in Kharkiv, this is a big problem.” (Survey respondent)**

Winter hardship is cumulative and multidimensional, rather than driven by a single constraint. Surveyed households reported multiple, overlapping winter-related challenges,<sup>12</sup> most commonly lack of electricity (96%), freezing temperatures (92%), lack of heating supplies (76%), and insufficient cash (56%). Together, these findings show that families are simultaneously managing cold exposure, energy insecurity, and financial constraints — underscoring the need for integrated winter responses, rather than isolated, sector-specific interventions.



<sup>11</sup> REACH Initiative (2025); OCHA (2025a).

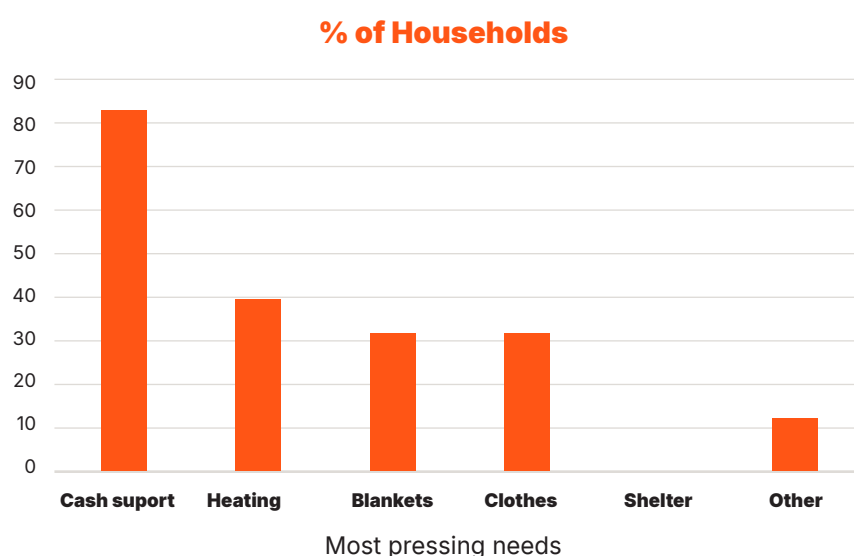
<sup>12</sup> Percentages are based on 25 surveyed households; multiple responses were permitted.

These constraints reinforce one another: electricity outages limit the use of heaters; a lack of cash restricts households' ability to purchase fuel or winter clothing; and inadequate housing amplifies exposure to cold. This pattern mirrors broader humanitarian analysis, which shows that winter vulnerability in Ukraine is driven by the interaction of energy insecurity, lack of income, and housing damage, rather than by isolated needs.

**"The apartment is very cold; because of power outages, we can't turn on the heater."  
(Survey respondent)**

Yet despite the scale of need and an exceptionally harsh winter, assistance remains insufficient and declining. While all surveyed households reported receiving some form of support at some point, nearly three-quarters (72%) stated that they had received less assistance this winter compared to the previous year.

When asked about unmet winter needs, the vast majority of households identified cash support (84%) as their most urgent requirement, followed by heating-related supplies (40%), blankets (32%), and winter clothing (32%). These findings underscore the importance of flexible assistance that enables families to prioritise their own winter coping strategies.



Women — who comprise an estimated 57% of displaced people in Ukraine<sup>13</sup> — are disproportionately affected by winter hardship, particularly in frontline areas such as Kharkivska oblast, where large numbers of displaced families continue to reside or have returned.<sup>14</sup> Heavy caregiving responsibilities — often as sole carers for children, older relatives, or family members with disabilities — combined with insecurity, limited childcare, and disrupted services, severely constrain women's access to livelihoods and income-generation opportunities.<sup>15</sup> As a result, many households enter winter with limited or no regular income, reducing their ability to pay for heating, utilities, winter clothing, or fuel and increasing reliance on humanitarian assistance, particularly flexible cash support.

These household-level findings align with wider funding trends, which show a contraction in winter activities coverage in 2025–2026 due to reduced humanitarian financing, limiting both the scale and duration of assistance despite worsening winter conditions.

13 IOM (2025) Ukraine — Internal Displacement Report — General Population Survey Round 20 (April 2025)

14 Ibid.

15 CARE International (2024) Rapid Gender Analysis Ukraine, August 2024

## 2.

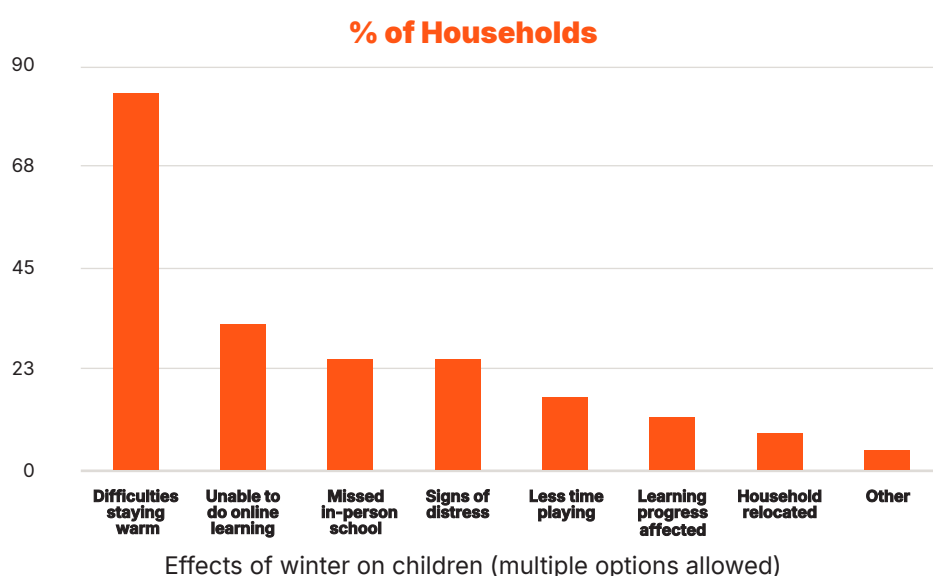
## WINTER HARDSHIP WORSENS EDUCATION DISRUPTIONS AND CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO LEARNING

Winter conditions experienced by displaced families in Kharkiv translate directly into disruptions to children's education, reduced access to essential services, and heightened psychosocial stress. Extreme cold, electricity outages, repeated displacement, and declining assistance interact to undermine children's ability to learn, maintain routines, and access protection and mental health support at a time when needs are increasing.

These household-level experiences reflect broader national trends. Winter-related power outages and heating failures disrupt all learning modalities simultaneously — in-person, online, and blended<sup>16</sup> — resulting in cumulative learning loss rather than temporary shifts between modalities.<sup>17</sup> An estimated 34% of students nationwide are exposed to war-induced winter vulnerability, with children in frontline and near-frontline oblasts — including Kharkivska — facing the greatest risk. In these areas, face-to-face learning has often been unavailable, leaving online education as the primary learning modality and making winter power outages particularly devastating, as they remove children's sole pathway to education.

Survey findings reinforce this pattern. Eighty-four per cent (84%) of households reported that children experience difficulties staying warm. More than half (56%) reported disruptions to education, either because children could not attend in-person schooling (24%) due to cold weather, unsafe conditions, or inadequately heated classrooms, or because they were unable to participate in online education (32%) as a result of electricity outages or a lack of heating at home. In frontline contexts such as Kharkiv, where distance learning predominates, winter-related power outages can effectively eliminate access to education altogether. In addition, 12% of households reported that children's learning progress has been affected. Repeated displacement during winter further disrupts enrolment, attendance, and relationships with teachers and peers, increasing the risk of longer-term disengagement from learning.

**"Everything is working, but due to constant air alarms and the cold, they don't attend much school". (Survey respondent)**



<sup>16</sup> UNICEF (2026) Under fire and freezing, children in Ukraine endure the harshest winter of war

<sup>17</sup> Ukraine Education Cluster (2025) Learning During Winter: Risk and Response of war begins





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Maksym comes daily to World Vision's partner Child Friendly Space to access psychosocial support and non-formal education amid winter hardships.

**"I keep my jacket on at home because there is no heating. In the child-friendly space, I can take it off and just be comfortable. With no access to electricity or Wi-Fi, we cannot attend any classes, and this is the only way I can interact with other children."**

— Maksym, 8, Kyiv

**"There is no in-person learning in Kharkiv, only distance learning — but when there is no electricity, they don't study at all." (Survey respondent)**

National data further illustrates the scale of the challenge. In 2025, an estimated 4.6 million children in Ukraine faced ongoing educational barriers due to damaged infrastructure, insecurity, and displacement,<sup>18</sup> including more than 340 schools and kindergartens damaged or destroyed,<sup>19</sup> limiting access to safe, heated learning environments. Education cluster analysis and REACH assessments estimate that children in high-risk areas may lose dozens to over 100 learning hours per month during severe outages and cold spells.<sup>20</sup> Even where generators, power banks, or alternative learning spaces are provided, coverage remains partial and cannot compensate for sustained energy disruption.

**"Without electricity, children cannot attend even remote lessons." (Survey respondent)**

These conditions disproportionately affect displaced children, younger learners, and children with additional support needs, widening existing educational inequalities and compounding the long-term impacts of conflict and displacement.

**"During power outages, it is hard for me to do my homework, and it is very cold at home. The only way to stay warm is to wrap myself in a blanket or put on more clothes." (Artem, 10 IDP from Kharkiv, now in Kyiv)**

18 UNICEF (2025a) 4.6 million children in Ukraine face ongoing educational barriers as the fourth academic year of war begins

19 UNICEF (2025b) More than 340 educational facilities damaged or destroyed in Ukraine this year

20 UNICEF (2025b) More than 340 educational facilities damaged or destroyed in Ukraine this year

# 3.

## WINTER, CONFLICT, AND EDUCATION DISRUPTIONS ARE NEGATIVELY IMPACTING CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH AND OVERALL WELLBEING

Four consecutive years of war have created a mental health crisis for Ukrainian children and young people.<sup>21</sup> UNICEF estimates that around 1.5 million children across the country face an increased risk of mental health difficulties as a result of prolonged conflict, including anxiety, depression, and trauma-related symptoms.<sup>22</sup> A large-scale survey<sup>23</sup> conducted in 2023–2024, involving more than 1,500 children, parents, and caregivers, underscores the severity of this crisis: nine out of ten children reported experiencing psychological or emotional stress. Among them, 73% reported feeling unsafe or fearful, 64% struggled with a lack of interest in learning, and 54% experienced sadness or low self-confidence.

More recently, a 2025 World Vision rapid assessment among displaced families in Ukraine found that 45% of parents identified their children's mental health as their primary concern,<sup>24</sup> reflecting widespread anxiety about the cumulative effects of war, displacement, and instability. Survey findings from Kharkivska oblast mirror these patterns, with 25% of households reported signs of emotional distress, stress, or anxiety among children, which caregivers directly linked to cold living conditions, disrupted routines, fear associated with ongoing hostilities, and increased isolation during the winter months.

**"Everything is very difficult now — children are anxious because of the cold and constant alarms" (Survey respondent)**

Prolonged exposure to conflict, the loss of loved ones, exposure to violence — including explosive violence — repeated displacement, and sustained disruption to education and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) are among the key factors undermining children's and adolescents' wellbeing. The erosion of daily routines, peer relationships, and safe spaces further compounds these risks.<sup>25</sup>

**"Because of shelling and air-raid alerts, children stay at home most of the time and do not communicate with others." (Survey respondent)**

Disruption to education is a particularly powerful driver of psychological distress, especially for adolescents. Schools provide structure, social interaction, and a sense of safety and belonging,<sup>26</sup> and when access to education is interrupted, emotional distress often deepens. Survey findings from Kharkivska oblast indicate that education disruption and emotional distress are closely linked at household level, with caregivers frequently reporting missed schooling alongside signs of anxiety and stress among children.

21 State University of Kherson (2024) Challenges of Adolescents in War: A Report from Ukraine's Frontline Territories

22 UNICEF (2023) War in Ukraine pushes generation of children to the brink, warns UNICEF

23 Save the Children (2024) "I need a peaceful sky": Education and Children's wellbeing in wartime Ukraine

24 World Vision (2025) No Peace of Mind: The Looming Mental Health Crisis for Children in Ukraine

25 UNICEF (2025) Three years of full-scale war for Ukraine's children; Plan International (2023) Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Ukraine

26 UNICEF (2025) Three years of full-scale war for Ukraine's children; UNDP (2024) Impact of war on youth in Ukraine – 2024; Tech for Ukraine (2026) Adolescents' well being and learning in war time; Plan International (2023) Adolescent Girls in Crisis: Ukraine; Save the Children (2024) "I need a peaceful sky": Education and Children's wellbeing in wartime Ukraine; Global Partnership for Education (2026) Ukraine: Education brings mental health support to children

**“Without electricity, life becomes extremely difficult, especially in winter. Power outages affect our mental well-being and our daily routines. They are unpredictable and can happen at any time, for an unknown duration. Under these conditions, it is impossible to work.” (Mykhailo, 19, Kyiv region)**

Winter conditions further intensify these risks.<sup>27</sup> Cold temperatures, limited daylight, power outages, and uncertainty around heating and basic services heighten children’s anxiety and emotional distress, particularly when combined with disrupted schooling and prolonged exposure to insecurity.<sup>28</sup> Winter also compounds education-related stressors by limiting in-person attendance, disrupting online learning through electricity outages, and confining families to cold, overcrowded living spaces with fewer opportunities for social interaction, play, and emotional recovery.

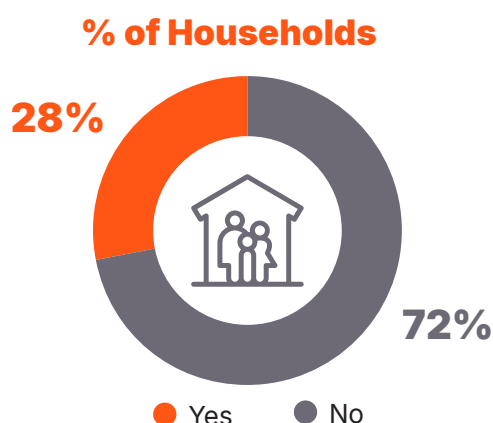
**“In winter it is especially hard — no school, no activities, just staying inside.” (Survey respondent)**

Winterisation responses must therefore go beyond heating and shelter alone and explicitly support education continuity, safe learning environments, and integrated MHPSS, tailored to the specific needs of young children and adolescent girls and boys. Without this integrated approach, winter risks becoming a force multiplier for psychological harm, particularly for displaced children and adolescents living in frontline and near-frontline areas.

### **1. Access to education, protection and MHPSS services is uneven and fragile**

**“In many apartments, temperatures drop to 8–9 degrees Celsius. Children stay indoors fully dressed, wearing shoes, hats, and gloves while doing their homework. When parents bring their children to the center and we have electricity, we can turn on heaters for a short time, making it slightly warmer. One mother almost fell asleep because she finally felt warm.” (Olena, Facilitator and Project Coordinator, World Vision–supported child-friendly space in Kyiv, implemented by the local partner Arms of Mercy)**

Children’s and young people’s access to critical assistance — including child protection and MHPSS — remains severely constrained. Survey findings show that only 28% of households reported that children were able to access services provided by INGOs, NGOs, or UN agencies, while 72% reported no access at all, underscoring significant gaps in service availability and reach.



Children being able to access assistance (e.g. MHPSS, education, protection)

27 World Vision (2026) Ukrainian children cut off from school and heat in the coldest winter; WHO European Region (2025) Ukraine: 2025–2026 Winter risk assessment (October 2025)

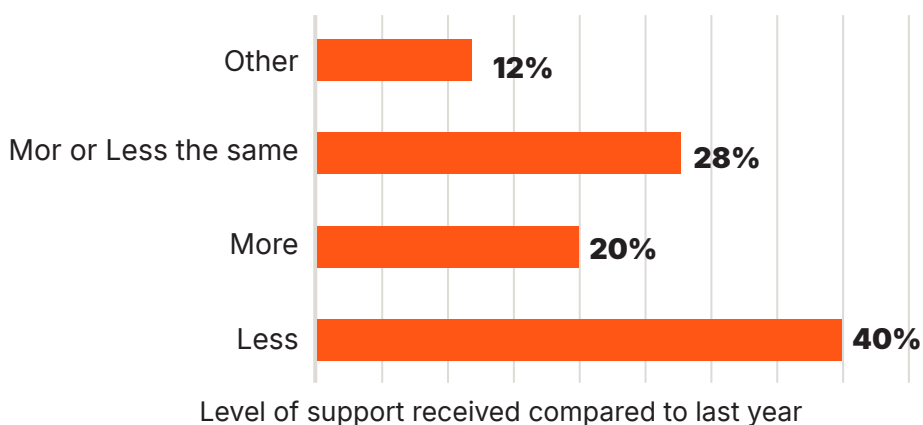
28 UNICEF (2026) Under fire and freezing, children in Ukraine endure the harshest winter of war; Ukraine Education Cluster (2025) Learning During Winter: Risk and Response



### **"In our settlement, these services are unavailable." (Survey respondent)**

Among households where children were unable to attend services, cold weather is the most frequently cited barriers, reflecting the mobility impacts of winter conditions. This is followed by electricity outages, which disrupts both in-person attendance and participation in online or remote services. Insecurity and air-raid alerts are also reported, forcing families to prioritise safety over attendance.

Among households accessing some form of winterisation assistance, 40% reported receiving less support than in the previous year, highlighting widening gaps as families enter a fourth winter of war. Even where services were available, access was often irregular and fragile, with caregivers describing disruptions linked to winter conditions, electricity outages, insecurity and air-raid alerts, illness, and caregiving or transport constraints.



These household-level findings align with a 2025 World Vision national-level analysis, which notes that winter conditions and energy outages significantly reduce the reach, continuity, and regularity of child protection and MHPSS services, particularly in frontline and near-frontline areas where needs are highest.<sup>29</sup>



<sup>29</sup> World Vision (2025) No Peace of Mind: Children's mental health in Ukraine

## Spotlight on the impacts of winter and ongoing conflict on children and adults living with a disability

While the survey did not specifically target households with children with disabilities, it is important to recognise that the winter-related challenges documented in this briefing are likely to have disproportionate and compounding impacts on children with disabilities, particularly in frontline areas such as Kharkivska oblast, where risks linked to insecurity, damaged infrastructure, and service disruption are most acute.<sup>30</sup>

Based on a small sub-sample of households reporting a family member with a disability (5 households), all respondents stated that the current winter season and lack of winterisation support had a negative impact on daily life. Caregivers described difficulties keeping family members warm during periods of cold weather and power outages, reduced mobility and increased isolation during winter months, and disruptions to rehabilitation services that were previously accessible before displacement.

### **“Access to rehabilitation services has become complicated.” (Survey respondent)**

These challenges extend well beyond our survey. A 2025 assessment on disability and childhood in Ukraine finds that children with disabilities in frontline regions face compounded risks linked to cold living conditions, disrupted healthcare and rehabilitation services, and social isolation, all of which increase health vulnerabilities and safeguarding risks during winter.<sup>31</sup>

Winter conditions and insecurity exacerbate barriers to education for children with disabilities, including inaccessible school buildings, lack of reasonable accommodation, disrupted transport, unreliable electricity affecting online learning, and limited availability of specialised support, resulting in prolonged exclusion from education in frontline areas.<sup>32</sup>

For children with disabilities, the loss of education continuity, rehabilitation, and safe community-based services during winter compounds existing vulnerabilities and heightens risks to health, protection, and mental wellbeing.

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30 War Child et al. (2025) Invisible at the Frontline: Disability and Childhood in Wartime Ukraine – Needs and Barriers Faced by Children with Disabilities and Their Families in War-Affected Communities of Ukraine

31 Ibid.

32 Ukraine Education Cluster (2025) Learning During Winter: Risk and Response

## 2. Declining winterisation funding is widening service gaps for children

Winterisation support in Ukraine has evolved dramatically since the war started four years ago. What began as a large, urgent, intersectoral effort in 2022 has gradually contracted into a narrower, more resource constrained response shaped by global funding cuts, and by the humanitarian system's own limitations in tracking and reporting winter specific needs.

The first Winter Response Plan (October 2022–March 2023) was built for a country reeling from massive displacement and widespread destruction as the war occurred in February 2022. It targeted 4.2 million people and required US\$ 460 million, with a heavy focus on emergency repairs, heating systems, and fuel. While the humanitarian architecture at the time had no mechanism to track winterisation funding separately, the 2022 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) was one of the few globally to exceed its requirements, with donors front loading large contributions in response to the war. This meant that winter activities — although not tracked separately — benefited from a high volume, flexible funding environment. Cash assistance, in particular, became a central modality, enabling households to prioritise heating, electricity, fuel, winter clothing, and transport according to their circumstances.

The 2023–2024 winterisation cycle unfolded in a context where humanitarian needs were deepening, but the funding environment was beginning to tighten compared to the exceptional mobilisation of 2022. Funding levels remained relatively strong, but early signs of contraction were already visible.<sup>33</sup> The Winterisation Plan 2023-2024 was revised in October 2023, outlining a dedicated winter response for the October 2023 – March 2024 period.

Needs were intensifying, operational delivery was strong, and OCHA's Winter Response Snapshot reports that winter-related activities were approximately 70% funded.<sup>34</sup> However, this figure reflects winter-related projects within the HRP rather than a standalone funding line, because no dedicated tracking mechanism existed.

The 2024–2025 Winter Response Plan marked a significant escalation in winter-related needs as systematic attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure intensified throughout 2024, driving widespread electricity shortages, heating disruptions, and repeated damage to water and district heating systems. Humanitarian partners appealed for a record US\$ 492.1 million to support 1.8 million people, reflecting both the scale of infrastructure degradation and the rising cost of generators, insulation materials, and emergency repairs. The January 2025 funding freeze triggered an abrupt mid-cycle shock: major programmes were suspended, winterisation pipelines stalled, and clusters were forced to cut or delay activities at the height of the cold season. The wider 2025 HNRP ultimately received only around 55% of its requirements, far below the levels needed to sustain the winter plan's original scope.

The situation deteriorated sharply in 2025. The Winter Response Plan requested US\$ 277.7 million to reach 1.7 million people, reflecting a deliberate reduction in ambition aligned with the reprioritised 2025 HNRP.<sup>35</sup> This contraction occurred at a time when Ukraine was facing its harshest winter since the full-scale war, alongside sustained, large-scale attacks on energy infrastructure. As of 3q December 2025, approximately two-thirds of required

30 War Child et al. (2025) Invisible at the Frontline: Disability and Childhood in Wartime Ukraine – Needs and Barriers Faced by Children with Disabilities and Their Families in War-Affected Communities of Ukraine

31 Ibid.

32 Ukraine Education Cluster (2025) Learning During Winter: Risk and Response

33 Development Initiatives (2024) Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2024

34 OCHA (2024) Ukraine: Winter Response Snapshot (October 2023 - April 2024)





Maryna received World Vision's cash support to cover utilities and buy wood, but the challenges keep growing. Temperatures have plunged to -20°C, and relentless attacks continue in her city.

**"There's no water, electricity, or heating, and buying batteries or generators is very expensive—we cannot afford it. We have to somehow survive this winter. It's a winter full of cold, bombardments, and fire. It's terrifying."**

— Maryna, Mykolaiv

funding (66%) had been secured, leaving an estimated 600,000 people without planned winter support.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, 2025–2026 marks a structural shift in how winterisation funding is tracked. For the first time, winterisation has been established as a distinct, standalone appeal, with live funding monitoring visible through OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (FTS) and associated PowerBI dashboards. Unlike previous winters, funding gaps are now explicitly visible and formally acknowledged in planning and tracking tools, rather than being absorbed implicitly through reduced coverage, delayed implementation, or reprogramming within sector budgets.

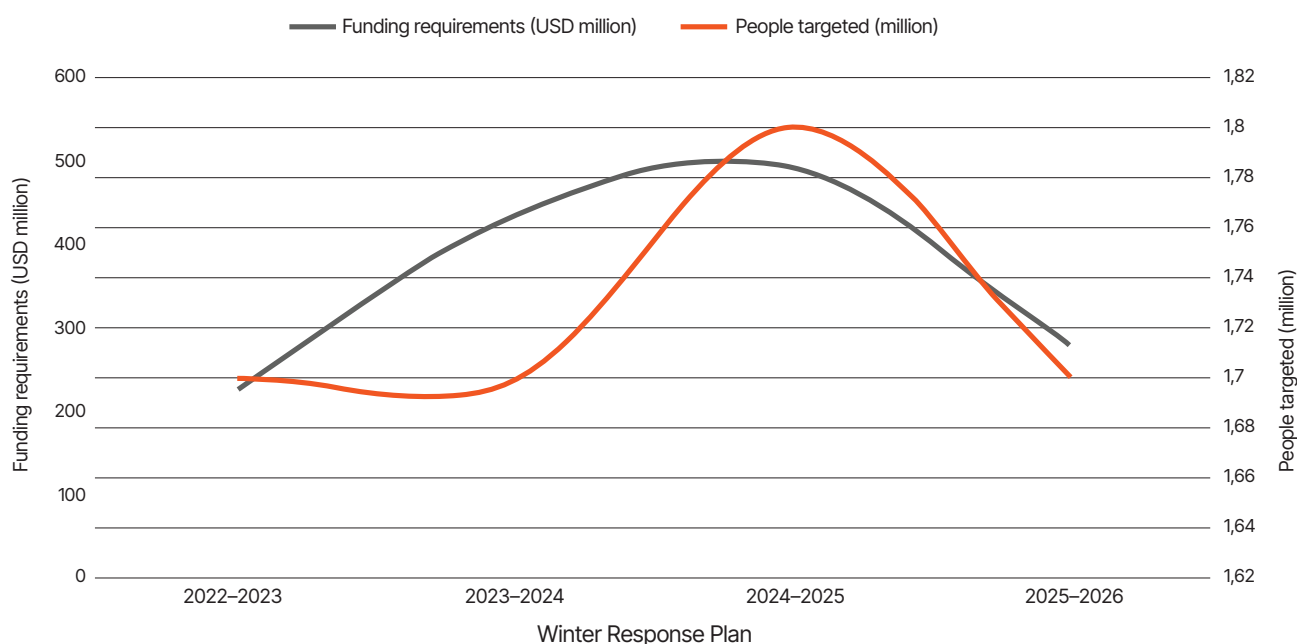
<sup>35</sup> OCHA (2025) Re-Prioritized Humanitarian UKRAINE Needs and Response Plan (July 2025)

<sup>36</sup> OCHA Ukraine Winter Response Plan 2025–2026 Dashboard (last accessed 1 February 2026)



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## Funding requirements and People Targeted by Winter Activities<sup>37</sup>



<sup>37</sup> Targets for 2023-2024 are based on the revised Winter Response Plan, whereas targets for 2024-2025 were set before the April 2025 HRP reprioritisation exercise and therefore reflect pre-reprioritisation planning assumptions.



Winterisation funding trends must also be understood alongside the systematic targeting of Ukraine's energy infrastructure. Since October 2022, large-scale missile and drone attacks on power generation facilities, transmission networks, and district heating systems have become a recurring feature of the war, particularly during winter months. Between late 2022 and early 2024, more than half of Ukraine's electricity generation capacity was damaged or destroyed, resulting in widespread and recurrent outages.<sup>38</sup> Attacks intensified again in late 2024 and throughout 2025, with repeated nationwide and regional blackouts reported during winter periods, including in heavily affected oblasts such as Kharkivska.

## **The double impact — winterisation shortfalls and wider funding cuts**

Declining winterisation funding is compounding broader humanitarian funding cuts that have directly affected children's protection and mental health services in Ukraine. Since 2024, funding reductions have constrained operational capacity and reduced the number of active humanitarian responders, with smaller frontline organisations particularly affected. While assistance has been increasingly prioritised toward frontline oblasts, the cumulative impact of funding shortfalls is most visible in eastern and southern regions where needs are highest.<sup>40</sup>

Child protection actors report that funding freezes and cuts have limited field-based casework and psychosocial support, with remote modalities often inadequate due to connectivity and privacy constraints. Children without access to phones or the internet have been unable to continue receiving support at a time when stress and psychological distress are rising.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time, winterisation assistance has not been consistently prioritised. Support for district heating systems declined by at least one third in 2025—equivalent to around 400,000 fewer people reached compared to 2024<sup>42</sup>—while invincibility points, which previously provided heated safe spaces and essential services during outages, have been deprioritised and now receive only minimal funding.

Together, these trends create a compounding effect: families struggle to keep homes warm while losing access to critical services that protect children's wellbeing. In frontline areas, where winter hardship intersects with ongoing hostilities, this double impact has weakened child protection referral pathways, reduced monitoring of risks, and limited children's access to safe spaces, education, and psychosocial support.

38 International Energy Agency (2024) Ukraine's Energy Sector Under Attack

39 OCHA (2025b).

40 Development Initiatives (2025) One Year On: The Implications of US Foreign Aid Cuts on Humanitarian and Development Assistance in Ukraine

41 Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2025) Global impact of funding cuts on children and their protection in humanitarian contexts

42 Development Initiatives (2025).



# CONCLUSION:

## WINTERISATION AT A BREAKING POINT FOR CHILDREN IN UKRAINE AMIDST THE ONGOING WAR

Four years into the war, winter in Ukraine has become a predictable, recurring emergency rather than a seasonal shock. Evidence from displaced families in Kharkivska oblast shows that extreme cold, sustained attacks on energy infrastructure, prolonged displacement, and declining winterisation funding are converging to undermine children's education, mental health, and protection. For many families, winter is experienced as a compound crisis — marked by freezing homes, prolonged power outages, repeated displacement, and shrinking access to support — with children bearing the heaviest burden.

At the same time, the humanitarian system's ability to respond has narrowed.

Winterisation funding has shifted from emergency surge to formal contraction, even as winter-related risks have intensified. Without adequate, timely, and predictable winterisation assistance, winter itself becomes a risk multiplier, deepening learning losses, heightening psychosocial distress, and weakening protective environments for children.

Winterisation is therefore not optional. It must be treated as a core pillar of the humanitarian response — especially as Ukraine enters a fourth winter of war. As a matter of urgency, donors:

# 1.

## **Funding: Protect and fully fund winterisation as a core, life-saving response for children and families**

Winterisation must be prioritised and adequately resourced within humanitarian funding decisions, recognising that repeated winters of conflict directly exacerbate risks to children's health, education, and mental wellbeing—particularly for displaced families and those living in frontline and near-frontline areas.

- Fully fund the Ukraine Winter Response Plan 2025–2026, ensuring sufficient resources for heating, insulation, winter supplies, and preparedness in areas facing the highest winter-related risks.
- Protect flexible cash assistance as a central winter modality, including multipurpose cash and winter top-ups, enabling families to meet priority needs such as heating, electricity, fuel, transport, and winter clothing according to their circumstances.
- Improve predictability of winter funding, shifting away from short-term, reactive allocations toward earlier and more reliable financing that supports preparedness, early procurement, and continuity of assistance across winter periods.

## 2.

### **Children's mental health and education: Safeguard protection, MHPSS and education through sustained, integrated support — beyond winter alone**

Children's mental health, protection, and access to education must be treated as core humanitarian outcomes, not secondary or seasonal concerns. Safe and continuous access to learning is itself protective, yet remains fragile due to insecurity, damaged infrastructure, displacement, and winter-related disruptions.

- Prioritise safe and continuous access to education, ensuring Education in Emergencies (EiE) programming addresses security risks, inadequate shelters, heating gaps, and other barriers that interrupt learning including disabilities and location. Safe, predictable, and accessible learning spaces must be maintained even amid ongoing hostilities, with distance and remote learning reinforced where in-person access is unsafe.
- Integrate mental health and psychosocial support as a core component of education, recognising that MHPSS and protection services are not optional add-ons but preconditions for meaningful learning. Scale up psychosocial support for children and adolescents, while also supporting teachers and caregivers through trauma-informed approaches embedded in schools and child-friendly spaces.
- Ensure winter-resilient service delivery, enabling education, child protection, and MHPSS services to continue through cold weather, power outages, and access constraints, rather than being suspended at times of greatest need.

## 3.

### **Localisation and accountability: Listen to affected families and children and resource locally-led efforts in the frontlines**

Effective winter and recovery responses must be shaped by the priorities of affected families and delivered through actors with the trust, access, and contextual knowledge to respond effectively in frontline and displacement-affected areas.

- Systematically listen to families and children, integrating their feedback into winter planning, targeting, and modality choices, and recognising families' own assessments of what support is most urgent and effective to protect their well-being and resilience.
- Resource Ukrainian organisations with flexible and predictable funding, enabling them to sustain operations, manage risk, and remain present in high-risk areas throughout winter and beyond. Without adequate support for core operational capacity and staff safety, local responders are forced to scale back precisely when winter conditions and insecurity intensify risks for children.





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