



Crossfire!

Four Years of War in Ukraine: Impact on Children

Ukraine Children's Action Project

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This is the fourth report prepared by the Ukraine Children’s Action Project since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

Authors:

Irwin Redlener, M.D.

Co-Founder, Ukraine Children’s Action Project

Senior Advisor, Institute for Global Politics,

School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University

ir2110@columbia.edu

1.212.535.9707 (Office / answering service)

1.914.844.1232 (mobile)

Karen Redlener, M.S.

Co-Founder and Executive Director, Ukraine Children’s Action Project

Co-Founder, Children’s Health Fund kredlener@gmail.com

Since UCAP's original Crossfire report of June 2024, the impact of the war on children has accelerated substantially. The year 2025 was the deadliest for civilians in Ukraine since 2022, with a 31% increase in civilian casualties compared to 2024 (UN HRMMU, January 2026). Children have borne a devastating share of this escalation. As of this writing, children face not only continued bombardment but the harshest winter of the war, with systematic Russian attacks on energy infrastructure leaving millions without heating, electricity, and water in sub-zero temperatures. Civilian casualties have continued rising into 2026: OHCHR reported in May 2026 that the first four months of 2026 saw more civilians killed and injured than the same period in any of the last three years—a 21% increase over January–April 2025 (OHCHR, May 2026).

* Physical Casualties

- **Updated (May 2026):** At least **3,543 children have been killed or injured** since February 2022—the equivalent of 177 classrooms—including **791 children killed and 2,752 injured** according to UN-verified data through April 2026 (Save the Children / UN, May 13, 2026). Child casualties in the first four months of 2026 were 27% higher than the last four months of 2025, and 2025 was the deadliest year for children since 2022. Actual numbers are certainly higher, as the UN has limited access to occupied territories and frontline areas.
- There was an 11% increase in verified child casualties during 2025 compared to 2024, and a 160% increase in child casualties in urban areas such as Kyiv (UNICEF HAC 2026).
- April 2025 was the deadliest month on record for children since June 2022: at least 97 children were killed or maimed in a single month, a threefold increase over the prior quarter (UNICEF, July 2025).
- The deadliest single strike on children since the full-scale invasion occurred on April 4, 2025, in Kryvyi Rih, when a Russian ballistic missile with a cluster warhead struck near a children's playground, killing 9 children and 11 adults, and injuring 75 others, including a 3-month-old baby (OHCHR, April 2025; Human Rights Watch, World Report 2026).
- A new and alarming dimension: Children are increasingly being recruited through online channels to conduct sabotage, attacks on military objects, and information-gathering activities. The UN reports that at least two boys have died in such acts, 103 children have been detained, and 42 children have been convicted, with at least seven incarcerated (UNICEF/UN HRMMU, July 2025).

* Psychological Trauma

- At least 1.5 million Ukrainian children have been psychologically traumatized by the war (UNICEF, 2025). Half of all children in Ukraine are at risk of mental distress, with displaced children and those in frontline areas disproportionately affected (UNICEF HAC 2026).
- A UNICEF-led survey of more than 23,000 children (released February 2025) found that 1 in 5 children had lost a close relative or friend since the start of the full-scale war, and 1 in 3 reported feeling so sad and hopeless they couldn't do their usual activities.
- Among adolescents, half of 13- to 15-year-olds have trouble sleeping, and 1 in 5 have intrusive thoughts and flashbacks consistent with PTSD. Three-quarters of children and young people aged 14 to 34 reported needing emotional or psychological support (UNICEF, February 2024).
- UCAP's own study, published in JAMA Open Network (March 2025), confirmed that one-third (33.9%) of children screened at UCAP-supported Recovery Camps in Lviv showed elevated post-traumatic distress or symptoms consistent with PTSD. More than half were successfully referred to mental health professionals.

* Time in Shelters

- As of February 2024, children in frontline cities had been forced to spend between 3,000–5,000 hours (equivalent to 4–7 months) sheltering since the full-scale invasion began on February 22, 2022 (UNICEF, February 2024). With fighting intensifying markedly through 2025, that cumulative figure has continued to grow substantially.
- In Kyiv Oblast alone, since January 1, 2025, the air raid siren sounded over 405 times for a total duration of 1,018 hours—more than 40 full days under threat (Kyiv Independent, July 2025).
- Air raid sirens forced children to miss an average of 1 in every 5 school lessons during the 2024–2025 academic year; in some frontline regions, pupils missed over half their classes (Save the Children, May 2025).

* Attacks on Schools

- More than 2,800 educational facilities (UN-verified) have been damaged or destroyed since February 2022. The true number is likely higher (UNICEF, November 2025).
- Attacks on education facilities more than doubled from 2023 to 2024: 576 facilities damaged or destroyed in 2024 compared to 256 in 2023 (Save the Children, January 2025). In 2025, more than 340 additional facilities were damaged or destroyed (UNICEF, November 2025).
- More than 10% of all educational infrastructure in Ukraine has been damaged or destroyed. Damage to educational institutions is estimated at \$13.4 billion (World Bank, 2025).

* Education Disruption

- 4.6 million Ukrainian children face educational barriers as they persist through their fourth academic year during the full-scale war. Nearly 1 million children are forced to study entirely online due to safety concerns and lack of shelters; 2 million have seen their schools closed (Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science; UNICEF, September 2025).
- Learning loss has deepened: Assessments show children are approximately two years behind in reading, at least one year behind in math, and half a year behind in science. In rural and frontline areas, children are four to five years behind their peers (UNICEF; Plan International, February 2025). Some children in grades 5–6 (ages 10–12) are unable to read or write correctly.
- For preschoolers, the disruption is especially severe: 83% of young children in frontline regions show signs of emotional distress and delayed development. Many have never attended kindergarten (UNICEF, September 2025).
- Children born when the full-scale invasion began are now turning three. They have spent their entire critical early years—when brains develop fastest—amid extreme stress and loss, placing them at higher risk of psychological disorders and poorer physical health throughout life (UNICEF, February 2025).

* Abducted Children

- Ukraine has verified the forced deportation of at least 19,546 children to Russia, Belarus, or Russian-occupied territory. Approximately 1,600 have been returned. The actual number is likely far higher: Yale's Humanitarian Research Lab estimates closer to 35,000; Ukraine's 5 AM Coalition estimates the range at 260,000 to 700,000 (Euronews, August 2025; Georgetown University, 2025; International Coalition for Return of Ukrainian Children, September 2025). The EU has sanctioned 16 individuals and 7 entities specifically for involvement in the abduction and forced assimilation of Ukrainian children (EEAS, May 2026).

- In 2025 alone, Russia forcibly deported nearly 11,000 Ukrainian children to 164 camps across Russia and occupied Crimea, with increasingly militarized programming (Regional Center for Human Rights, September 2025).
- In August 2025, Russian occupation authorities created an online catalogue where Russians can select Ukrainian children for adoption based on photos, descriptions (e.g., “obedient,” “calm”), and filters for age, eye color, and hair color (Euronews, August 2025).
- Russia is expanding militarized youth programs (Yunarmiya/“Youth Army”) and plans to double Yunarmiya centers in occupied Ukrainian territories. Children as young as six are trained in military skills and anti-Western ideology (Georgetown University; FDD, December 2025).
- In March 2026, the UN’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine formally concluded that Russian authorities committed **crimes against humanity** through the deportation and forcible transfer of children and through their enforced disappearance (OHCHR, March 2026).
- On December 4, 2025, the UN General Assembly voted 91–12 (with 57 abstentions) to demand Russia immediately and unconditionally return all forcibly transferred or deported Ukrainian children (UN News, December 2025).
- In October 2025, U.S. First Lady Melania Trump facilitated the return of 8 children from Russia. While welcome, this represents a fraction of those taken.

* **Winter Crisis 2025–2026**

- Attacks on energy infrastructure escalated beginning in October 2025, knocking out 50% of Ukraine’s energy generation capacity and 60% of natural gas production. Millions of families endure days without heating, electricity, or water, with temperatures reaching –18°C to –20°C (UNICEF, January 2026; Save the Children, February 2026).
- UNICEF describes the winter of 2025–2026 as “the harshest winter of war.” Children and families are in “constant survival mode.” Newborns and infants are at heightened risk of hypothermia and respiratory illness (UNICEF, January 16, 2026).
- Schools and kindergartens have been forced to switch to remote learning due to extreme cold, but power outages simultaneously disrupt online classes, leaving children with no educational access at all (UNICEF; Save the Children, January–February 2026).
- Household poverty has risen to 65% for families with children (up from 43% in 2021), with approximately 70% of children now living in poverty. 3.3 million people, including 564,000 children, remain internally displaced (UNICEF, 2025).

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Note: All UN-verified figures represent confirmed cases and are widely understood to undercount the actual number, particularly in occupied territories and areas near the front lines where access for monitoring is restricted.