



Children gather outside a school damaged by shelling in Ukraine.



BACK TO SCHOOL IN A COUNTRY AT WAR

How Ukraine's Children and Families Cope with Unrelenting Trauma

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A Special Report of the Ukraine Children's Action Project

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report was prepared and published by the Ukraine Children's Action Project (UCAP), an organization dedicated to protecting the health, education, and psychological well-being of Ukrainian children affected by the war.

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About UCAP: The Ukraine Children's Action Project works with a network of Ukrainian nonprofit partners to deliver direct services to war-affected children and to inform international policy on their behalf. Areas of focus include physical and psychological trauma, pediatric health care and education disruption.

UCAP also works closely with Ukraine's Ministry of Education and Science and a number of international agencies including UNICEF. UCAP's work spans education disruption, psychosocial recovery programming, and teacher training, and is grounded in direct field visits to Ukraine and neighboring host countries since the earliest weeks of the full-scale invasion.

UCAP's fiscal sponsor is the Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with a 4-star Charity Navigator rating.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ukraine opens its fifth wartime school year with nearly 4.6 million children facing barriers to learning — a crisis of scale, safety, and psychology with no modern parallel in Europe.

More than 54 million American children will return to classrooms this month in one of the most familiar rituals of childhood. In Ukraine, entering a fifth consecutive year of full-scale war, “back to school” means something entirely different: certified bomb shelters as a precondition for opening, air-raid sirens that send students underground mid-lesson, and a generation carrying psychological wounds that outpace the country's capacity to treat them.

- Nearly 2.6 million Ukrainian children remain displaced — roughly 791,000 inside the country and almost 1.8 million as refugees abroad — as the war enters its fifth year.
- An estimated 2,800 schools and kindergartens have been damaged or destroyed since February 2022, including more than 340 in 2025 alone; roughly one in three children remains unable to attend school in person full time.
- UNICEF estimates 1.5 million Ukrainian children are at risk of depression, anxiety, PTSD, or other mental health conditions. In UCAP-supported clinical screenings, 33.9% of children from frontline communities screened showed elevated post-traumatic distress or diagnosable PTSD.
- Cities under sustained attack have gone underground — building school shelters and converting metro stations into classrooms, with lessons held directly on subway platforms, so roughly 20,000 children can attend class safely.
- UCAP calls on the U.S. government, the international community, and donors to expand funding for education recovery and continuity, teacher mental-health training, and trauma recovery programs before a generation's learning losses harden into permanent economic and social costs.

A Ritual Transformed by War

More than 54 million American children will return to school this year, most of them prior to the end of August. For most American families, the start of a new school year is a comforting ritual: new backpacks, new notebooks, the mild anxiety of wondering which friends will share a classroom. It is one of the enduring rhythms of American childhood.

In Ukraine, “back to school” means something altogether different.

One of UCAP's earliest visits after Russia's full-scale invasion came in April 2022, when Dr. Irwin Redlener and Karen Redlener traveled to Warsaw, Poland to meet Ukrainian refugee families. At a Polish public high school,

they visited two classrooms filled with Ukrainian teenagers who had fled the war only weeks earlier. Some spoke openly of missing home, of anger toward Russia, of uncertainty about their futures. But scattered throughout those classrooms were other students who never spoke at all — children who stared silently at their desks or out the windows, emotionally frozen by something far beyond ordinary fear.

The Redleners left wondering how any child carrying that level of psychological trauma could possibly concentrate on history, mathematics, literature, or science. That memory has stayed with them, and it frames this report.

Ukraine is now preparing for its fifth school year under full-scale war — layered atop nearly two years of pandemic-era closures that preceded it, and followed by the largest displacement of children in Europe since World War II. This report, prepared by the Ukraine Children's Action Project (UCAP), updates the data behind that crisis and describes what it will take to keep an entire generation learning.

The Scale of Disruption

Before February 2022, Ukraine was home to roughly 7.5 million children. Within the war's first two months, approximately one-third had become refugees outside the country, and another third were displaced internally, largely to relatively safer regions in central and western Ukraine. ^[1]

Four and a half years on, displacement remains the defining fact of Ukrainian childhood. As of February 2026, more than a third of Ukraine's children — roughly 2.59 million — remained displaced: about 791,000 inside the country and nearly 1.8 million living as refugees abroad. ^[2] UNICEF reports that this school year, approximately 4.6 million children continue to face significant barriers to education, and that at the end of the 2024–25 academic year, more than a third of students were learning in a hybrid setting (in-person and online), with 11% relying exclusively on online instruction. ^[3]

Younger children who fled abroad are increasingly absorbed into the educational systems of their host countries — a trend UNICEF describes as a growing likelihood of permanent resettlement for many refugee families. For those families, integration abroad is often essential for survival. For Ukraine, it represents one of the most difficult long-term challenges the country faces: preserving the education, identity, and eventual return of a generation currently living outside the country.

2.59M Ukrainian children displaced (Feb. 2026)	4.6M Children facing barriers to education this school year	2,800 Schools and kindergartens damaged or destroyed since Feb. 2022	1.5M Children UNICEF estimates are at risk of a mental health condition
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Sources: UNICEF, February 2026; UNICEF, November 2025; UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children 2026.

Schools Under Fire

Schools cannot legally reopen in Ukraine unless they have a certified bomb shelter. Even so, education facilities have been a recurring target: UNICEF's most recent accounting puts the number of educational institutions

damaged or destroyed since February 2022 at roughly 2,800, with more than 340 added in 2025 alone — and cautions that because these are only UN-verified incidents, the true toll is almost certainly higher.^[4]

Ukraine's own Ministry of Education and Science, as well as the National Police, have offered still higher figures at various points in the war, including a 2024 tally of 2,509 destroyed or damaged institutions — 1,668 schools, 700 kindergartens, and 141 higher-education facilities — and 2023 estimates that repair costs alone could approach \$14 billion.^[5] By 2025, roughly 90% of functioning Ukrainian schools had some form of shelter in place, a substantial improvement over the war's early years — but the remaining gap still leaves hundreds of thousands of children without access to safe, in-person instruction.^[6]

The human cost behind these numbers is not abstract. The United Nations has verified 745 Ukrainian children killed and 2,375 injured since February 2022, and grave violations against children recorded from January through October 2025 were 27% higher than the same period in 2024 — driven in part by intensified use of explosive weapons in populated urban areas such as Kyiv, where child casualties rose 160% in 2025 compared with 2024.^[7]



A Ukrainian family gathers by candlelight during a power outage caused by attacks on the energy grid.

Going Underground

In the country's most heavily bombarded cities, education has moved literally underground. Kharkiv — roughly 25 miles from the Russian border and struck almost daily — has built ten underground schools since 2023, several of them converted directly from metro stations, and is now constructing the city's first underground kindergarten. Local officials estimate that around 20,000 children in Kharkiv now study in these subterranean facilities.^[8]

In several of these facilities, teachers hold classes directly on active subway platforms and in adjoining metro tunnels rather than in purpose-built shelters — desks and whiteboards set up a few steps from the trains, with instructors teaching full lessons as commuters pass through the station. Kharkiv alone has converted six metro stations into functioning classrooms staffed by regular classroom teachers in this way, in addition to its purpose-built underground schools.^[8]

These are functioning schools in every ordinary sense — desks, whiteboards, cafeterias — built two or three stories below ground so that lessons can continue “even during missile threats,” in the words of Kharkiv Mayor Ihor Terekhov. Similar shelter-school models are emerging in other frontline cities, including Zaporizhzhia and

Sumy. Yet even these facilities serve only a fraction of eligible students: Kharkiv's underground network was built to accommodate less than one-third of the city's school-age population.



A student studies at a desk in an underground shelter classroom in Ukraine.

The Invisible Wound

Beyond physical destruction, UNICEF estimates that 1.5 million Ukrainian children are at risk of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health conditions as a result of the war — a figure consistent with global research showing that roughly 22% of populations exposed to armed conflict develop some form of mental health disorder.^[9] Many of these children have lived through missile attacks, prolonged separation from parents, displacement, occupation, bereavement, or the daily uncertainty of whether their homes will still be standing tomorrow.

UCAP's own clinical data, gathered with its Ukrainian partner Sincere Heart at recovery camps between September 2022 and July 2024, put a sharper point on the national estimate. Using the validated CATS-2 screening instrument with mothers of participating children, UCAP found that 33.9% of children from frontline communities screened showed elevated post-traumatic distress or symptoms consistent with diagnosed PTSD — most commonly difficulty concentrating, restlessness, and disrupted sleep. The majority of these children were referred to mental health professionals, and after even a brief camp intervention, 75% of mothers reported improved psychosocial functioning in their children, including 69% who said their children were enjoying activities again.^[10]



Children take part in a hands-on group activity in Ukraine.

UNICEF also reports that 83% of young children in frontline communities now show signs of emotional distress or delayed development. Still, the stress of war is not confined to children directly exposed to combat. A recent survey found that one in four Ukrainians aged 15 to 19 is losing hope of a future in Ukraine at all.^[11] Separately, surveys of Ukrainian parents have found that as many as 75% report visible symptoms of psychological trauma in their children.^[12]

What Ukrainian Families Say: New Survey Data

A nationwide survey of 7,551 Ukrainian parents and caregivers of school-age children, conducted annually between 2022 and 2025 by researchers at the Marzieiev Institute for Public Health of Ukraine's National Academy of Medical Sciences and published in the journal *Conflict and Health* in February 2026, offers the most detailed population-level picture yet of how families experience the mental health toll of the war. Using a validated clinical screening tool, the study found that 12.8% of children screened positive for elevated anxiety or depressive symptoms across the study period, with the highest rates — nearly a quarter of children — recorded in 2022, the first year of the full-scale invasion.^[13]

The survey also documented a persistent gap between need and access: only 9.9% of parents reported actually contacting a mental health professional for their child, even though 12.0% believed their child needed psychological support and a substantially higher share of children screened positive for symptoms. Among children who did receive support, 68.1% of parents rated it as helpful — but that figure dropped to 53.9% among parents of children with the most severe symptoms, pointing to a shortage of specialized care for the children who need it most.^[13] Rural families and those with limited migration experience reported the lowest access to services, while internally displaced families and those in urban areas were more likely to seek help.

The same research offers encouraging evidence for low-cost, school-based intervention: brief “psychological minutes” exercises introduced in Ukrainian classrooms by the Ministry of Education and Science were associated with a 28.2% reduction in the odds of depressive symptoms and a 26.6% reduction in the odds of anxiety symptoms among participating children — though parental awareness of these programs declined by nearly 30% between 2023 and 2024, suggesting a need for renewed outreach and sustained funding to keep such programs visible and accessible.^[13]

A Cohort That Has Never Known Peace

Children born at the moment of the full-scale invasion are now entering kindergarten having spent their entire early childhood — the years of fastest brain development — amid extreme stress and loss, a pattern UNICEF and child-development researchers warn places them at elevated lifelong risk for psychological disorders and poorer physical health. For this youngest cohort, many of whom have never set foot in a functioning kindergarten, the disruption is arguably the most severe of any age group, with long-term consequences that will not be fully visible for years.

Teachers on the Front Line

This reality has quietly transformed the role of the classroom teacher. Ukrainian teachers are no longer simply educators; they are frequently the first adults outside the family to recognize signs of trauma in a child —

sudden withdrawal, anxiety, lost concentration, an inability to participate. More than 60,000 education professionals, including teachers, principals, and school psychologists, have now been trained in psychosocial support and school-safety protocols, and teachers increasingly work alongside mental health professionals to help students regain not only lost instructional time but the emotional stability required to learn at all.



A teacher leads her class in a Ukrainian primary school classroom.

UCAP has contributed directly to this effort. Working with Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP), UCAP developed “The Impact of Trauma and How It Affects Behavior and Learning: What Teachers Should Know,” a free, web-based interactive course built specifically for Ukrainian and Polish educators. Grounded in trauma-informed education and education-in-emergencies frameworks and developed with Ukrainian, Polish, and American teachers, psychologists, and instructional designers, the course reached educators across Ukraine and Poland by the 2023 school year and continues to scale. ^[14] An updated version of the online training program, supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies, has reached more than 20,000 participants.

The American Federation of Teachers, led by President Randi Weingarten, has made repeated on-the-ground missions to Ukraine and Poland since April 2022 — including a joint mission with Dr. Redlener and Karen Redlener in October 2022 — raising relief funds, delivering generators and school supplies to Ukrainian kindergartens, and organizing delegations of American educators continuing to provide professional development for Ukrainian educators. ^[15]

Catch-Up Learning: Closing the Gap

Four and a half years of interrupted, hybrid, and online instruction have left millions of Ukrainian children behind grade-level expectations in literacy, numeracy, and foundational skills — a phenomenon education researchers call “learning loss.” Unlike a single lost semester, this is a compounding, multi-year deficit affecting an entire national cohort simultaneously, and it will not resolve on its own once the war ends. Left unaddressed, it will translate directly into reduced workforce productivity, higher long-term social service costs, and a slower national recovery.

What Catch-Up Learning Requires

- Diagnostic assessment at scale. Ukraine needs a systematic, nationwide effort to measure where individual students and cohorts stand relative to pre-war benchmarks, rather than assuming uniform loss across regions and age groups.
- Structured, sustained remediation — not one-off tutoring. Evidence from other conflict and post-pandemic settings shows that intensive, small-group instruction sustained over multiple years, not short catch-up camps, is what closes multi-year learning gaps.
- Integration of psychosocial support with academic remediation. Because trauma directly impairs concentration and memory, catch-up learning programs that ignore children's mental health needs consistently underperform those that address both simultaneously.
- Investment in early childhood and preschool education specifically, since the youngest cohort — children who have never known peacetime — has the least existing foundation to rebuild from and the greatest long-term stakes.
- Digital and hybrid learning infrastructure that persists even where in-person schooling remains impossible, including reliable offline-capable devices and connectivity for the roughly one million children still learning primarily online.

UNICEF's 2026 education investment in Ukraine — more than \$91 million aimed at reaching approximately one million children — explicitly targets learning-loss recovery alongside early development, youth-skills programming, and system-level reform tied to Ukraine's EU accession process, but Ukrainian officials and international partners agree that the scale of need still substantially outpaces available funding and delivery capacity.^[16] UNICEF's broader 2026 humanitarian appeal for Ukraine and the refugee response totals \$387.9 million.^[17]

What Is at Stake for Ukraine's Recovery

Education and child well-being are not peripheral to Ukraine's national recovery; they are among its essential pillars. Millions of Ukrainian children now require structured catch-up learning after years of interrupted instruction. Left unaddressed, today's educational losses will become tomorrow's workforce shortages, economic underperformance, and social strain — costs that will fall on Ukraine for a generation.

Ukraine's crisis is also part of a larger, worsening global picture. UNESCO's 2026 Global Education Monitoring Report found that the number of children and youth out of school worldwide climbed for a seventh consecutive year, to 273 million, with armed conflict cited as a principal driver of the slowdown in progress on education access. Ukraine is, in this sense, both an acute national emergency and a case study in a broader global failure to protect children's education from war.^[18]

UCAP's Response

Through the Ukraine Children's Action Project, Dr. Redlener and Karen Redlener have worked directly with Ukraine's Ministry of Education and Science, Teach for Ukraine, and a network of Ukrainian nonprofit partners to expand educational catch-up initiatives and to help teachers recognize and respond to the psychological

effects of war on their students. UCAP's recovery-camp partnership with Sincere Heart, based in Lviv — combining structured activity with clinical screening and referral — has produced some of the most detailed trauma data available on Ukrainian children affected by the war, summarized in this report. Its collaboration with Columbia's National Center for Disaster Preparedness has equipped more than 20,000 Ukrainian and Polish educators with trauma-informed teaching skills, and its work alongside the American Federation of Teachers and Education International has helped sustain direct relief for displaced Ukrainian teachers and students.

Recommendations

Based on this work and the data assembled in this report, UCAP recommends the following actions by the international community, donor governments, and Ukrainian authorities:

Funding and Infrastructure

- Sustained, multi-year funding — not single-year emergency appropriations — for school reconstruction, shelter retrofits, and underground or hardened-facility construction in frontline communities.
- Formal evaluation of which hybrid and remote-learning models developed during the war should be made permanent components of Ukraine's education system, rather than emergency measures to be discarded once conditions allow — particularly for frontline communities where full in-person return may remain unsafe for years.
- Continued international commitment to formal accountability for attacks on schools and other civilian infrastructure protected under international humanitarian law.

Teachers and Workforce

- Expanded investment in teacher training for trauma recognition and psychosocial first response, building on the more than 60,000 educators already trained nationally and the NCDP–UCAP trauma curriculum.
- Targeted incentives and support — housing, salary supplements, professional development — to recruit displaced Ukrainian teachers back into the domestic workforce as regions stabilize, addressing an emerging teacher shortage in rebuilding communities.
- Aim to increase formal psychological services in schools.

Children and Families

- Nationwide diagnostic assessment of learning loss by grade and region, paired with sustained, multi-year remediation programs rather than short-term catch-up camps.
- Scaled clinical screening and referral programs modeled on the UCAP–Sincere Heart recovery-camp approach, which has demonstrated measurable improvement in children's psychosocial functioning even after brief interventions.
- Sustained support for host-country integration of displaced Ukrainian students, paired with efforts to preserve their connection to Ukrainian language, curriculum, and identity.

Conclusion: A Declaration of Resolve

In countries around the world, August and September mark the start of a new school year — an occasion for hope and expectation. In Ukraine, as in every place where children are caught in the crossfire of war, going back to school — if it is even possible — represents something far more profound. It is a declaration that despite the relentless threat of violence, despite displacement and the unavoidable sadness of living in a country at war, children, families, and teachers will do whatever it takes to sustain a sense of normalcy and keep learning.

For American children, the return to school is an annual ritual. For Ukraine, it is an act of national resilience and resolve — and it deserves the sustained attention and support of the international community.

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About UCAP: The Ukraine Children's Action Project was co-founded by Irwin Redlener, MD, and Karen Redlener to protect the health, education, and psychological well-being of Ukrainian children affected by the war. UCAP works with Ukrainian government ministries, international agencies, and local partner organizations to deliver direct services and to inform international policy. For more information, visit ucap.help.