Reimagining Humanitarian Aid for Children During a Winter of War

Preparing Ukraine's Children for Another Winter of War

A Special UCAP report: Analysis & Recommendations





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November 2026

Why Reimagine Aid for Ukraine's Children?

Millions of children around the world are caught up in crises that demand basic humanitarian support. Children living in communities impacted by large-scale natural disasters, children living in refugee communities or children surviving under the cloud of war need more than basic protection, nutrition and medical care.

And for Ukraine's youngest, a five-year war with their neighboring superpower has created physical injuries, mental distress, dislocation and educational disruption. There is, of course, the bloody conventional war, being fought between troops; military battles on defined battlefields. But there's more. With unrelenting attacks on civilian targets throughout Ukraine, Russia is committing crimes against humanity on a nearly daily basis.

With a brutal winter anticipated, the stresses on children and families will be greatly exacerbated. Clearly the basics – heat, light, nutrition and medical care – need to be secured.

But the long war has caused disruption in access to medical care and education and the undermining of normal childhood for millions of Ukrainian children. Aid strategies under these circumstances must be planned accordingly: sustaining education, assuring access to medical and mental health care and reinforcing sustainable aspects of normal social environments to the extent possible.

The undeniable fact is that Russia has resumed large-scale strikes on Ukraine's power and heating systems as the fifth winter of full-scale war begins. Last winter, those strikes left families without heat, electricity and water for days and sometimes weeks in temperatures below −20°C. On October 26, 2026, a UN Commission of Inquiry concluded that the attacks amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. This

report sets out what that means for Ukraine's children, using UN-verified figures, and what must be done before the coldest months arrive.

This report details the specific issues affecting Ukraine’s children and suggests how to think about comprehensive humanitarian assistance in the coming winter, as we approach the fifth year of war.

Media contacts:

Anna Fratsyvir, Director, External Affairs, Ukraine Children’s Action Project 202-556-9287

Dr. Irwin Redlener, Co-Founder and President, Ukraine Children's Action Project · ir2110@columbia.edu · 212-535-9707

Executive summary

Ukraine's children face a fifth winter of war with the country's energy system badly damaged, Russian strikes on power and heating resumed, and civilian casualties at record levels. Preparation for winter must be funded and in place now.

- **Children are being killed and injured in growing numbers.** The UN has verified at least 4,223 children killed or injured since February 2022, a minimum that excludes most cases in occupied territory [5]. Civilian casualties in the first nine months of 2026 were 59% higher than in the same period of 2025 [5].
- **The attacks on energy are deliberate, and the UN has now said so.** On October 26, 2026, the UN Commission of Inquiry found that Russia's continuous attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity [1].
- **Last winter showed the cost.** Hundreds of thousands lost heating for weeks as temperatures fell below −20°C [2], and nearly 2 million children were left without heat, electricity and water [8]. Outages disrupted two-thirds of learning time at the height of winter [10].
- **This winter may be worse.** Russia announced "massive strikes" on energy facilities in August, resumed them on September 30, and in mid-October cut power to 600,000 people in Kyiv [4]. The UN says last winter's damage cannot be fully repaired in time [2].

- **One failure cascades.** When power fails, heat, water, schools, communications and pediatric care fail with it, and the youngest and most vulnerable children are hit hardest.
- **What is needed now:** protection and rapid repair of heating, water, schools and hospitals; backup power for every school and pediatric unit; cash and winter supplies for vulnerable families; trauma-informed support for children; and weekly public tracking of the harm. UN winter appeals for this response total $358.4 million (inter-agency) and $160.5 million (UNICEF), and are not yet fully funded [6, 7].

> *"The United Nations has verified at least 4,223 Ukrainian children killed or injured since Russia's full-scale invasion. But this is a minimum, not the full toll. We have no reliable accounting of the children killed or injured in Russian-occupied areas, where independent verification is severely constrained. The actual number is almost certainly higher."*
>
> **— Dr. Irwin Redlener, Co-Founder and President, Ukraine Children's Action Project**

> *" It is impossible to overstate the indirect impact of unrelenting war on children. While the children and families of Ukraine are extraordinarily courageous, motivated and resilient, there can be no doubt that the psychological stress and interruption of education caused be the constant attacks will be exacerbated by the brutal conditions coming this winter."*
>
> - ***Karen Redlener, Co-Founder and Executive Director, Ukraine Children's Action Project***

Key findings at a glance

Every figure below is from a UN body or UCAP and is linked in the References. Casualty figures are verified minimums; the true toll is higher.

Figure	What it measures	Source
4,223	Children killed (850) or injured (3,373) in Ukraine, UN-verified, 24 Feb 2022 – 30 Sept 2026	UN HRMMU, Oct 16, 2026 [5]
War crimes and crimes against humanity	UN Commission of Inquiry's legal finding on Russia's attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure	UN COI, Oct 26, 2026 [1]
423 + 74	Russian attacks on electricity facilities (423) and on heating infrastructure (74), Oct 2025 – Mar 2026	OHCHR, June 29, 2026 [2]
Nearly 2 million	Children left without heat, electricity and water in extreme cold last winter	UNICEF, Sept 15, 2026 [8]
66%	Share of learning time disrupted by power and heating outages, mid-January to mid-February 2026	UNICEF / Education Cluster [10]
1,000+	Air-raid alerts in the first 15 days of the 2026 school year, the most for that period in five years	UNICEF, Sept 15, 2026 [8]
600,000	People in Kyiv temporarily without electricity after strikes on Oct 13–14, 2026	UN HRMMU, Oct 16, 2026 [4]
$160.5 million	UNICEF winter appeal to reach 3 million people, including 540,000 children	UNICEF, July 24, 2026 [6]

The central message: winter readiness for schools, water utilities, pediatric care and homes must be funded and in place now, before severe cold and the next wave of strikes. Children cannot wait for a peace agreement.

1. Why winter is a child-protection emergency

Winter multiplies the harm of an infrastructure war: damage to one essential service quickly disables several others. A power cut can stop district heating and water pumps, close cold classrooms, cut off online lessons and emergency calls, and leave a clinic without dependable electricity. The burden falls hardest on infants and on children with disabilities, chronic illness, displacement or trauma.

The danger this winter is already visible. On August 30, Russia's Ministry of Defense announced preparations for "massive strikes" on Ukrainian energy facilities, and large-scale attacks resumed on September 30 [4]. The UN Human Rights Office has warned that damage from last winter cannot be fully repaired before this one [2].

2. How one failure cascades into many

Electricity is the system every other service depends on. Last winter showed what happens when it fails: rolling cuts left civilians with power for only a couple of hours a day in some periods, and hundreds of thousands lost heating and hot water for weeks as temperatures fell below −20°C, the coldest Ukrainian winter since 2010 [2].

When power fails	What it means for children	Evidence
Heat	District heating needs pumps, controls and power. Cold homes endanger infants, disabled and medically fragile children.	Commission witnesses described homes so cold that people feared dying in their sleep, and children falling ill from the cold [1].
Water and sanitation	Pumping, treatment and sewage need power. Upper floors lose water; hygiene and toilets fail; disease risk rises.	Damage to water systems in Dnipro and Donetsk regions cut supply to 12,000 people (UNICEF, July 2026) [6]. Rebuilding water and sanitation will cost $17.5 billion over ten years [11].

When power fails	What it means for children	Evidence
Communications	Cell towers, routers and phone charging fail, along with air-raid alerts and emergency calls.	A protection risk as well as an inconvenience. National 2026 outage-duration data is not yet published.
Schools	Classrooms need heat, light, water and safe shelters; online lessons fail when homes lose power.	Outages disrupted 66% of learning time between mid-January and mid-February 2026; winter holidays were extended into February [10].
Pediatric care	Vaccine cold chains, oxygen, neonatal units, dialysis and records all depend on power. Generators need fuel, maintenance and testing.	UNICEF is installing solar systems in health facilities ahead of this winter [6].
Mental health	Darkness, cold, sirens, displacement and education disruption compound trauma.	UNICEF estimates 1.5 million children are at risk of depression, anxiety, PTSD or other conditions [14].

In January 2026, UNICEF called last winter the harshest of the war for children, warning that darkness and freezing temperatures intensify fear and stress and worsen respiratory illness [9].

3. The attacks: a documented pattern, now a UN legal finding

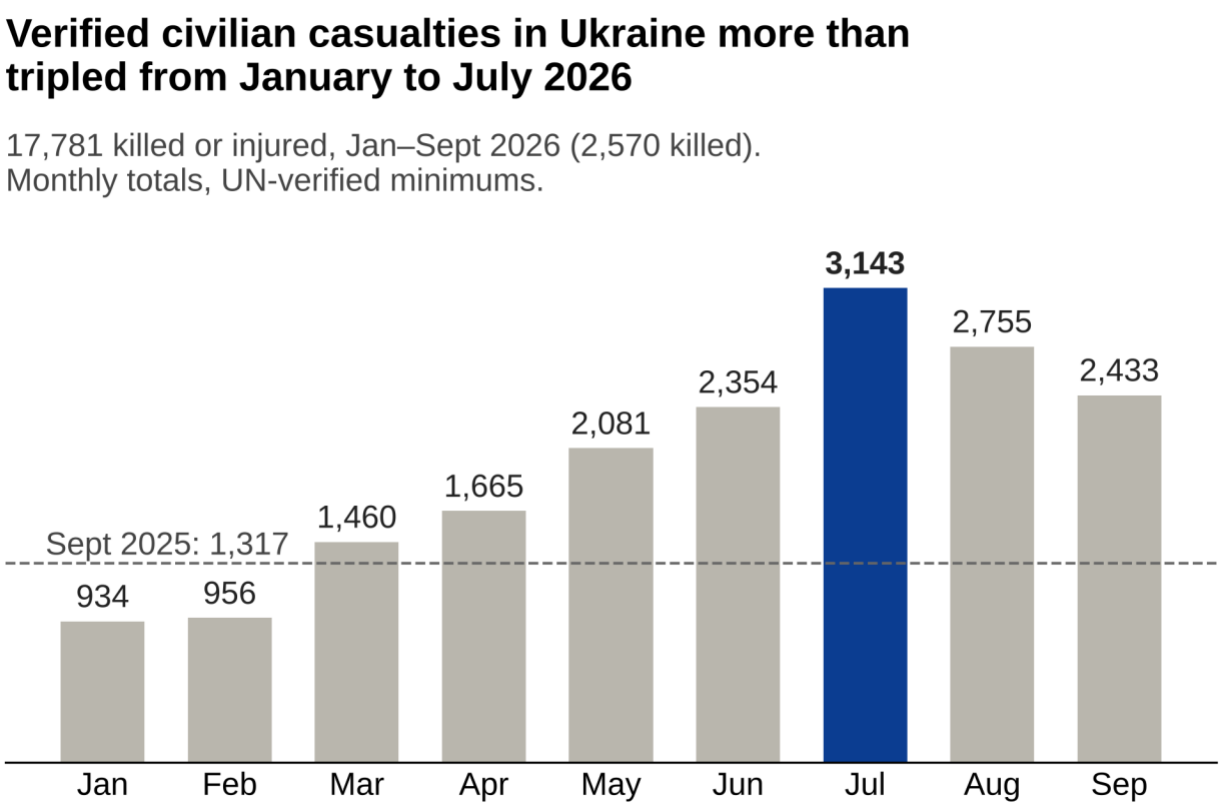
The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine concluded on October 26, 2026 that Russian authorities committed war crimes and crimes against humanity through continuous attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure [1]. The Commission found that commanders knew the heating facilities they targeted were

indispensable to civilians in winter, and that the attacks followed a state policy to deprive civilians of essential services and cause suffering [1].

The finding rests on a record built over the past year:

- **June 29, 2026:** The UN Human Rights Office documented at least 423 attacks on electricity facilities and 74 on heating infrastructure between October 2025 and March 2026. It said the attacks appear to violate fundamental principles of international humanitarian law [2].
- **September 21, 2026:** The Commission reported systematic waves of attacks during last winter as temperatures fell to −20°C, leaving millions without power or heat for long periods [3].
- **September 30, 2026:** Coordinated strikes damaged generation, transmission and distribution facilities in three regions and Kyiv, causing emergency outages [5].
- **October 13–14, 2026:** Strikes hit multiple energy facilities, including Kyiv's three main power stations, temporarily leaving 600,000 people in the capital without electricity [4].

Civilian harm is rising alongside the energy attacks. UN monitors verified 328 civilians killed and 2,105 injured in September 2026, 85% more than in September 2025 [5].



Source: UN HRMMU, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict — September 2026 update [5].

Note for editors: UN bodies have also documented Ukrainian strikes on energy infrastructure in Russia and in occupied areas of Ukraine. The Commission said it could not investigate their impact because Russia denied access [1].

4. Winter 2026–27: three planning scenarios

These are UCAP planning judgments for preparedness, not forecasts with probabilities attached.

Scenario	What happens	What it means for children
A. Disruption contained	Repairs, air defense and backup power keep most outages manageable. Frontline communities are still hit hard.	Schools and hospitals run with occasional interruptions; heating costs and poverty keep children at risk.
B. Repeated regional failures	Successive strikes disable major energy nodes as cold drives demand up. Multi-day loss of heat, water, elevators and communications.	Schools rotate schedules or close; clinics defer non-urgent care; displacement; educational disruption and family separation rise.
C. Compound system emergency	Damage to electricity, heat and water during sustained freezing weather overwhelms repair crews and fuel supply.	Some districts lose essential services for long periods; medically vulnerable children must be relocated; extensive loss of schooling. Scale cannot be estimated without current utility data.

5. What must happen now: a child-centered action plan

Preparation has to be funded and in place before the first hard freeze; once a major strike lands, local repair capacity is quickly overwhelmed.

1. **Protect critical services.** Air defense, physical protection, spare parts and rapid-repair crews for district heating, substations, water pumping, hospitals and schools.
2. **Make every school winter-ready.** Independent backup power; tested heat, water and sanitation; safe shelters and accessible evacuation routes; a plan to keep teaching when buildings close.
3. **Keep children connected.** Charging hubs, backup connectivity, redundant air-raid warning channels and family reunification protocols.
4. **Prioritize vulnerable households.** Cash assistance, warm clothing, heating support and food, with outreach to displaced families, infants and children with disabilities.
5. **Protect pediatric care.** Backup power for neonatal and pediatric units, medicine cold chains, oxygen and referral routes.
6. **Expand trauma-informed learning and mental-health care.** Teacher support, school-based psychosocial programs and family recovery services.
7. **Track outcomes weekly**, with geography and dates attached (Section 7).

The funding picture

Two UN appeals are open for this winter. They overlap and must not be added together.

Appeal	Amount	Reach	Period
UN and humanitarian partners, Winter Response Plan [7]	$358.4 million	2.1 million of the most vulnerable people	Oct 2026 – Mar 2027
UNICEF winter response [6]	$160.5 million	3 million people, including 540,000 children	2026–27 winter

UNICEF's plan includes cash for 225,000 people (45,000 children); district-heating repairs serving 3 million people (540,000 children); school energy and heating grants to keep 375,000 students learning in person; energy resilience for health facilities serving 230,000 people (41,400 children); and child-protection services for more than 10,000 at-risk children [6]. These target groups overlap and cannot be summed.

UCAP's education, psychosocial and local-partner programs complement these large operations by helping communities keep child-focused services running.

6. What should be measured this winter

UCAP proposes these indicators so that winter readiness and harm can be tracked week by week. They are proposed measures, not reported results.

Area	Indicators
Households	Share of households without heat for more than 24 and 72 hours; indoor temperatures; access to safe water and sanitation; displaced families by region
Education	School days lost to blackouts and alerts; classroom and shelter temperatures; attendance; offline-learning access; working school backup power
Pediatric health	Days of interrupted outpatient care; oxygen and cold-chain incidents; referrals caused by loss of heat; acute respiratory illness; access to medicines
Protection and mental health	Family separation; shelter access; child-distress referrals; disability access; trained school psychosocial teams
Repair and resilience	Hours to restore power and water; generator fuel stocks; spare transformer inventory; district-heating status; number of winter-ready schools

Data should be broken down by age, sex, disability, displacement status and region, with denominators and verification dates published. Modeled risk should never be presented as observed illness or death.

7. Methodology and notes

This report draws only on published material from UN bodies, UNICEF and UCAP. Each figure is attributed to its source and release date; all were checked against the original documents on October 27, 2026.

- **Child casualties.** The figure of 4,223 is from the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission's September 2026 update (850 children killed, 3,373 injured, 24 Feb 2022 – 30 Sept 2026) [5]. The earlier figure of 3,946, reported by UNICEF on August 25, covered the period to July 31 [12]. Both are verified minimums; cases in occupied territory are largely unverifiable.
- **Scenarios and pathways** in Sections 2 and 4 are planning judgments, not predictions.
- **UCAP figures** describe program reach or a defined screened group, not national estimates. Earlier UCAP data appear in *Crossfire!* (May 2026) and *Back to School in a Country at War* (August 2026) [13, 14].
- This report presents no unverified field interviews, outage forecasts or unpublished program results.

Addendum:

UCAP's Winter 26/27 Agenda

UCAP is coordinating a comprehensive package of winter assistance and resilience measures designed to reach more than 35,000 children, parents, and educators. Keeping children warm and families equipped. UCAP, works with local Ukrainian partner organizations, coordinated with UCAP's regional office in Lviv.
UCAP will:

- Provide warm clothing and winter, boots for 750 children, firewood assistance for 75 families, and portable power stations for 65 families.
- Distribute 1,000 solar-powered lights and chargers to help children and families maintain light and charge essential devices during power outages.
- Supply humanitarian aid packages to support large-family orphanages in front-line areas.
- Equip 32 front-line schools serving 20,000 students and teachers with winter-resilience systems, including electrical backup, heating and student shelter readiness.
- Support five digital learning centers in Odessa's safe school basement shelters that provide educational access for 3,750 children.
- Support mental health services for children and the adults who care for them; will reach will reach 300 mothers and children, helping them cope with fear, stress, air-raid alerts, and winter blackouts.
- Train 500 child-care professionals in techniques to calm family fears and reduce stress, as well as identifying and referring children with PTSD.
- Provide medical assistance to vulnerable children. The initiative will support additional medical care and equipment needed for hundreds of hospitalized children, helping ensure that young patients receive essential treatment during an exceptionally challenging period.

UCAP Special Initiatives

- **Trauma-informed teaching.** UCAP and Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness developed, with Ukrainian edtech company EdEra, an online course for teachers, caregivers and social workers on supporting children who have lived through traumatic events.
- **Recovery Camps and the Recovery Camp Academy.** The Recovery Camp model has run more than 250 camps for mothers and children across Ukraine since 2022. In a UCAP study published in *JAMA Network Open* in March 2025, 33.9% of children screened at UCAP-supported camps showed elevated post-

traumatic stress or symptoms consistent with PTSD. This was a high-risk group, mostly from frontline communities, and is not a national prevalence estimate. The new online Academy trains professionals to use the model [18].

- **Wartime Access to Health Care.** “Normal” access to specialty health care for children is not safe in frontline communities. UCAP's current projects include a telehealth project with Dnipro Children's Hospital enabling pediatric subspecialty physicians in Dnipro to communicate virtually with patients and families in distant communities.

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The Ukraine Children's Action Project is a fund of the Entertainment Industry Foundation, a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. ucap.help