

VULNERABILITY TO TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS AND LABOUR EXPLOITATION IN UKRAINE

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INTRODUCTION

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has been at the forefront of combating Trafficking in Persons (TIP)¹ and protecting victims since 1994, guided by the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocols. This comprehensive approach includes identification, assistance, and protection policies that address the multifaceted vulnerabilities exacerbated by crisis. As part of these efforts, IOM conducts extensive data collection and analysis to inform TIP strategies and interventions.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022 triggered mass displacement and a humanitarian crisis, heightening the population's vulnerability to protection risks. As of April 2024, an estimated 3,548,000 people remain internally displaced in Ukraine (IOM General Population Survey Round 16), while 6,483,500 are displaced abroad (UNHCR, 16 May 2024). IOM also estimates that 4,734,000 people have returned to their place of habitual residence in Ukraine after being displaced for a minimum period of two weeks following the full-scale invasion in February 2022 (IOM GPS Round 16).²

The ongoing war has exacerbated TIP risks, particularly among displaced and conflict-affected communities. Despite comprehensive responses aimed at mitigating an expected surge in trafficking, significant risks persist as coping strategies are increasingly strained. Anti-trafficking actors across Ukraine have been vocal about the risks of trafficking, based on pre-existing trafficking trends within the country and region, knowledge of trafficking in emergencies from previous crises, and the specificities of this crisis.

Groups at heightened risk include women, children, foreign nationals, displaced individuals, LGBTQIA+ community, and those from heavily conflict-affected areas.³ The reported increased risks of gender-based violence (GBV) and conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV)⁴ further complicate protection efforts, particularly for women and children. Social fragmentation due to family separations compounds these vulnerabilities.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Potential indicators of labour exploitation were prevalent in Ukraine. The most frequently reported issues were working very long hours (42%), working without proper contracts (22%), and being underpaid or not paid for the work completed (11%). Although less common, a small proportion of respondents also reported more severe incidents: experiencing threats or violence in the workplace (3%), lack of access to drinking water, food, or a toilet (2%), and not being given protective gear when needed (4%).
2. Men, young adults (18-24) and IDPs were more likely to report experiencing potential indicators of labour exploitation. Additionally, higher proportions of respondents in southern oblasts reported experiencing at least one such incident in the 12 months prior to data collection, particularly in Odeska (69%) and Mykolaivska (54%) Oblasts. The sectors in which respondents most frequently reported potential indicators of labour exploitation included wholesale/retail trade, manufacturing, construction, forestry, and agriculture.
3. A small proportion of respondents (3%) reported that they, or someone they know, were deceived or manipulated into traveling or moving within or outside Ukraine. Young adults (18-24) were more likely to have experienced or been aware of others that have been manipulated or deceived into such travel. The most frequently reported deceptions involved job opportunities, offers related to property or accommodation, and offers of protection from conscription.
4. The awareness of support systems when facing travel-related deception or manipulation was low across Ukraine. Of those who reported having been - or knowing someone who has been - deceived or manipulated into traveling or moving within or outside Ukraine, less than half (45%) were aware of institutions or organizations that can provide assistance in cases of exploitation or abuse. IDPs expressed the lowest awareness of support systems, making them particularly vulnerable.⁶ Individuals in large cities,⁷ female respondents, as well as those in lower-income households were also less likely to be aware of support systems.⁸

¹ According to the Palermo Protocol, trafficking in persons means the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation includes, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

² The full sex and age disaggregation of respondents to the General Population Survey can be found on page 6.

³ Organization for Migration (2023). *Human Trafficking in the Ukraine Crisis*.

⁴ Gall, Carlotta. "Ukrainian Accounts of Torture Point to Systematic Russian Policy, Expert Says." *The New York Times*, September 10, 2023.

⁵ International Organization for Migration (2023). *Assessment of Risks and Vulnerabilities of Target Groups to Human Trafficking and Exploitation in Times of the War*.

^{6,7,8} The result should be considered indicative due to the insufficient sample size.

RISK OF LABOUR EXPLOITATION

The war in Ukraine has led to significant economic disruption and instability, increasing the risks of labour exploitation. The full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation in February 2022 has severely impacted the country's

labour market and industries reducing the economic resilience of many Ukrainians and making them more susceptible to exploitative employment practices.

POTENTIAL INDICATORS OF LABOUR EXPLOITATION EXPERIENCED IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS

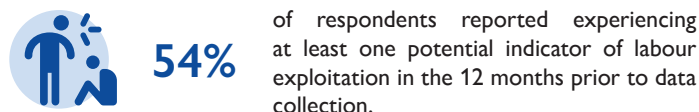
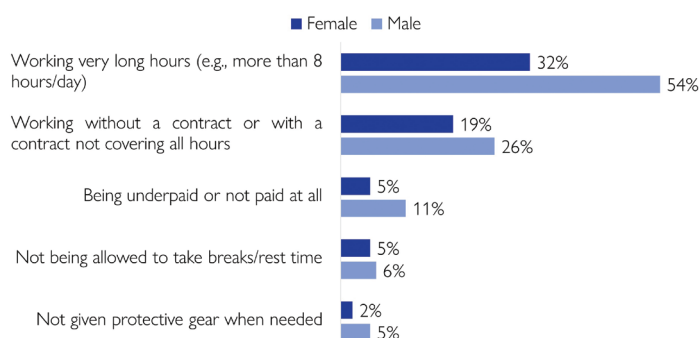


Figure 1: Top five potential indicators of labour exploitation reported, by gender



The most prevalent potential indicators of labour exploitation reported were working very long hours (42%), working without proper contracts (22%) and being underpaid or not paid for the respondent's work (11%).

Although not as prevalent as others, a small proportion of respondents also reported experiencing some of the more severe incidents, such as lack of access to drinking water, food, or a toilet (2%), threats or violence in the workplace (3%), and not being given protective gear when needed (4%).

Gender disparities were identified, with 64 per cent of men having reported potential indicators of labour exploitation compared to 45 per cent of women respondents.

Younger individuals (aged 18-24) were most likely to report potential indicators of labour exploitation (68%). This proportion decreased in older age groups: 61 per cent for those aged 25-35, 56 per cent for those aged 36-45 and 51 per cent for the 46-59 age group reported experiencing such incidents in the 12 months prior to data collection.

Figure 2: Top five potential indicators of labour exploitation reported, by population group

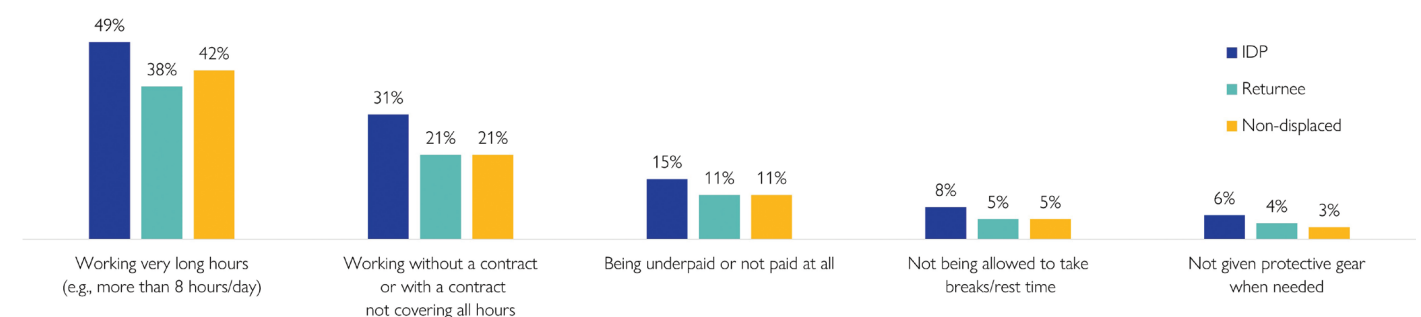
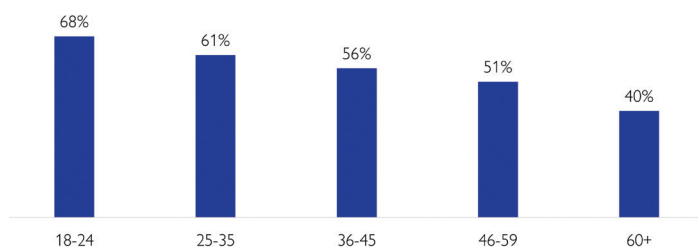


Figure 3: Proportion of respondents reporting at least one potential indicator of labour exploitation, by age groups



A higher proportion of IDPs were impacted, in comparison to other population groups assessed (returnees and non-displaced populations). Among IDPs, 49 per cent reported working very long hours (compared to 38% of returnees and 42% of non-displaced), 31 per cent of them reported working without the proper contract (compared to 21% of returnees and non-displaced), and 15 per cent of them reported being underpaid or not paid for their work (compared to 11% of returnees and non-displaced).

IDPs were also more likely to report experiencing more severe incidents, such as threats or violence in the workplace (4% of IDPs compared to 3% of those not displaced), and not being allowed to talk to other workers (3% of IDPs, compared to 2% of those not displaced).

INTERSECTION OF VULNERABILITIES

The characteristics above intersect to produce heightened vulnerabilities. IDPs were generally more vulnerable than other population groups, as were men and young adults. However, male IDPs and young IDPs (as well as - to a lesser degree - returnees) were the most vulnerable. Specifically, 76 per cent and 72 per cent, respectively, of 18-24 year-old IDPs and returnees reported having experienced at least one potential indicator of labour exploitation, compared to 66 per cent of 18-24 year-old non-displaced individuals. Similarly, 70 per cent of 25-35 year-old IDPs reported having experienced at least one indicator of exploitation, compared to 62 per cent of non-displaced individuals. Among 36-59 year-olds, differences between IDPs and non-displaced populations were less apparent.

Young IDPs were not only the most at-risk of having experienced labour exploitation in general, but also the most at-risk of having experienced comparatively severe indicators of exploitation. For instance, 21 per cent

of 18-24 year-old IDPs reported not having been allowed to take breaks during work, compared to up to 12 per cent among other ages and population groups; and 13 per cent of 18-24 year-old IDPs reported having experienced threats of violence, compared to up to 6 per cent among other age and population groups.

Similarly, with respect to gender and displacement, 77 per cent of male IDPs reported having experienced at least one indicator of exploitation, compared to 63 per cent of both male returnees and male non-displaced individuals. Male IDPs further appeared to be at a higher risk of more severe indicators of potential exploitation: 10 per cent of male IDPs reported not having received needed protective gear, compared to 6 and 5 per cent, respectively, of male returnees and non-displaced individuals; and 6 per cent of male IDPs reported having experienced threats of violence, compared to 3 and 4 per cent, respectively, of male returnees and non-displaced individuals.

Finally, IDPs displaced for up to one year were slightly more likely to report experiencing at least one indicator of exploitation, with 66 per

cent reporting at least one work-related protection issue, compared to 62 per cent of those displaced for more than one year.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY

The survey also included an assessment of coping strategies households utilised in order to meet basic needs. The number - as well as the type - of strategies adopted can give an indication of the degree of socio-economic vulnerability of a household, i.e. the more coping strategies have been adopted or exhausted, and the more severe these are,⁹ the more a respondent's household is likely struggling to meet basic needs using its existing resources, or the more economically vulnerable that household is. A heightened degree of socio-economic vulnerability may in turn press household members to accept (and keep) exploitative jobs, and as such put them at a higher risk of labour exploitation.

Individuals who reported their household to have exhausted a greater number of coping strategies, as well as more severe negative coping strategies, were more likely to report having experienced at least one indicator of labour exploitation. More specifically, 72 per cent of individuals having reported their household to have adopted or exhausted eight or more (of 19 assessed)¹⁰ coping strategies, indicated having experienced at least one indicator of exploitation, compared to 59 per cent of individuals in households having adopted or exhausted four to seven coping strategies, and 40 per cent to 46 per cent of individuals in households having adopted or exhausted less or no coping strategies. Similarly, 74 per cent of individuals in households having adopted or exhausted the most severe coping strategies reported having experienced at least one indicator of labour exploitation, compared to 55 per cent of individuals in households having adopted or exhausted less severe coping strategies, and 40 per cent to 46 per cent of individuals in households having adopted or exhausted no or only the least severe coping strategies.

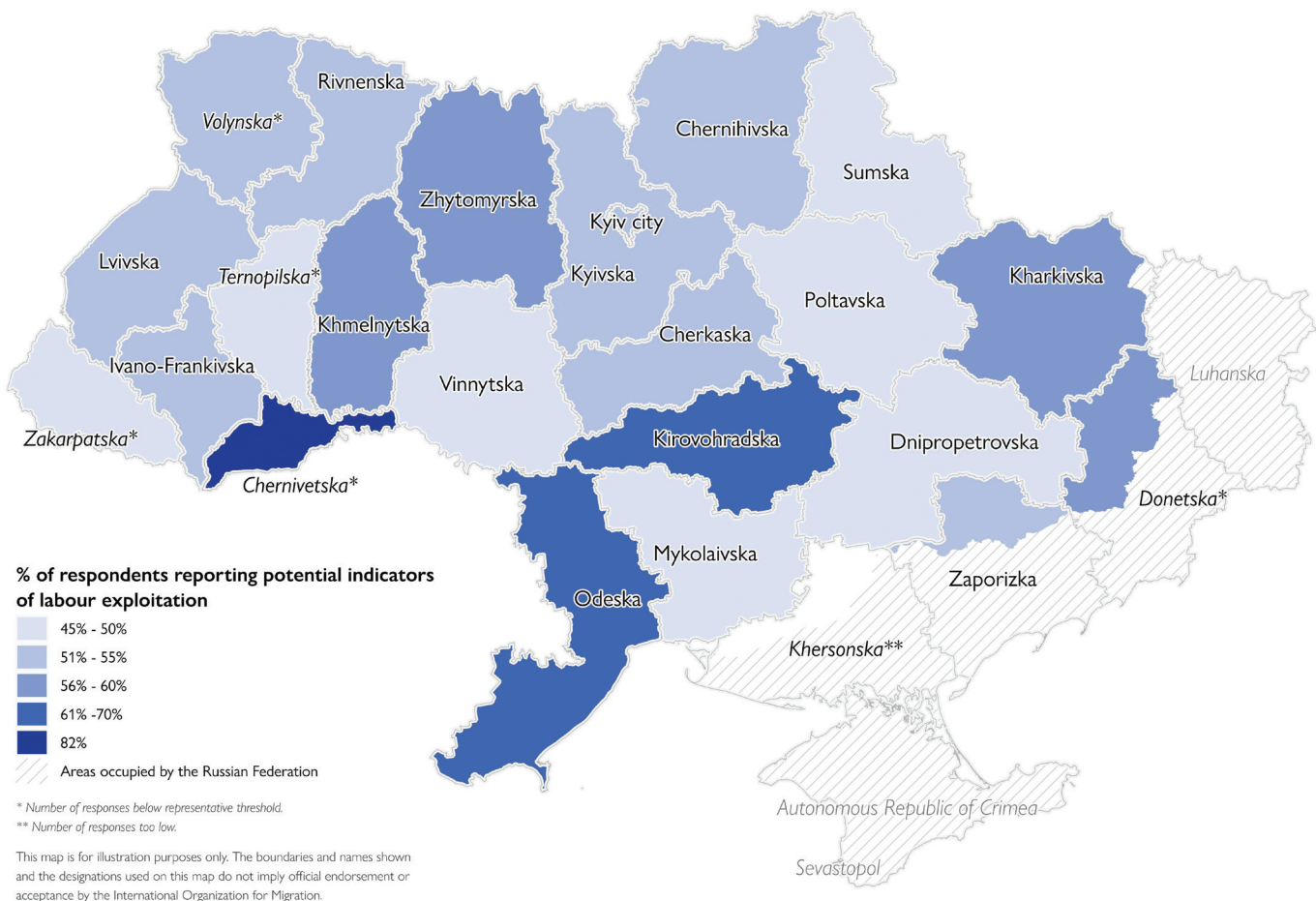
Such socio-economic vulnerability can significantly increase the risk of severe labour exploitation. The most severe potential indicators of labour exploitation were almost exclusively reported by individuals in households that had exhausted four or more coping strategies. For example, 10 per cent of individuals in households that had adopted or exhausted eight or more coping strategies reported not having been given protective gear when needed, followed by 4 per cent in households that had adopted or exhausted four to seven coping strategies, and compared to less than 1 per cent in households that had adopted no or one to three coping strategies.

Additionally, it is important to highlight the prevalence of individuals being offered informal employment, as it indicates socio-economic vulnerability and potential exploitation. During the data collection period in November-December 2023 (GPS Round 15), 54 per cent of unemployed respondents seeking employment reported being offered informal jobs. This percentage varied slightly by displacement status: 56 per cent among returnees, 54 per cent among the non-displaced, and 52 per cent among IDPs.

GEOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN

Across different macro-regions, respondents in the South reported the highest percentage of individuals having faced at least one potential indicator of labour exploitation (60%), followed by the West (56%), Kyiv (56%), and the North (both at 53%), the East (52%) and the Centre of Ukraine (51%).¹¹ At the oblast level, respondents in Chernivetska (82%)¹², Odeska (69%) and Kirovohradska (62%) Oblasts were most likely to report facing at least one such issue in the 12 months prior to data collection.

Map 1: Proportion of respondents reporting potential indicators of labour exploitation in the 12 months prior to data collection, by oblast



⁹ The most severe coping strategies include selling a house or land, moving to poorer-quality housing, using degrading, illegal or high-risk income sources, or begging.
¹⁰ The complete list of the coping strategies utilised by the General Population Survey questionnaire can be found on page 6.
¹¹ The full list of each macro-region and their constituent oblasts can be found on page 6.
¹² The result should be considered indicative due to the insufficient sample size.

SECTORS WHERE POTENTIAL INDICATORS OF LABOUR EXPLOITATION OCCURRED

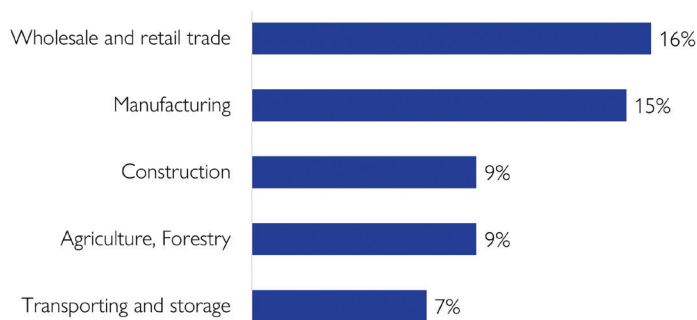
The sectors most frequently cited by respondents as being affected by potential indicators of labour exploitation were wholesale/retail trade (16%), manufacturing (15%), and both construction and forestry/agriculture (each at 9%).

Among IDPs, 18 per cent reported experiencing these issues in wholesale/retail trade, compared to 17 per cent of returnees and 15 per cent of non-displaced individuals.

Respondents in large cities were more likely to report experiencing such incidents in wholesale/retail trade (18%). On the other hand, those in the suburbs of large cities most frequently reported issues in manufacturing (20%), while respondents in rural areas predominantly cited agriculture and forestry (28%).

Gender differences were significant, with 21 per cent of women respondents reporting potential indicators of labour exploitation in the wholesale and retail trade, compared to 12 per cent of men.

Figure 4: Top five sectors where potential indicators of labour exploitation were reported



Zaporizka Oblast had the highest proportion of respondents reporting issues in manufacturing (22%), while respondents in Kyivska Oblast reported the greatest share of issues faced in the construction sector (15%). In Vinnytska Oblast, 29 per cent of respondents identified problems in the wholesale and retail trade sector, the highest proportion of any oblast.

RISK OF TRAVEL-RELATED DECEPTION AND MANIPULATION

The ongoing war and resulting displacement in Ukraine have created an environment ripe for travel-related deception and manipulation. The severe socio-economic and psychological stress, job loss, and economic hardship faced by many individuals, have heightened their susceptibility to TIP and exploitation. The prolonged nature of the conflict continues to erode coping capacities, while barriers to accessing social services, healthcare, and sustainable livelihood opportunities further compound these risks. Social fragmentation due to family separations exacerbates vulnerabilities, particularly for young adults and children. This context has provided opportunities for deceptive practices targeting those desperate for safety, employment, and better living conditions. While travel or movement is not a required element of trafficking in persons, it is often used by traffickers to separate potential victims from their support systems.

INCIDENTS OF DECEPTION OR MANIPULATION RELATED TO TRAVEL SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR



3% of respondents reported that they, or someone they know, were deceived or manipulated into traveling or moving within or outside of Ukraine.

Young adults aged 18-24 were the most likely to report being deceived, tricked, or manipulated, with 8 per cent acknowledging such experiences (pertaining to either themselves or someone they know). Among them, 10 per cent of young men reported such experiences, compared to 6 per cent of women aged 18-24.

IDPs displaced for 4-6 months showed greater vulnerability to such risks, as 9 per cent¹³ reported experiencing deception or manipulation, compared to 3-6 per cent of IDPs in other displacement durations. Furthermore, 4 per cent of respondents in suburbs reported experiencing deception or manipulation, compared to 2-3 per cent in other settlement types.

From the perspective of economic vulnerability, 6 per cent of individuals in households having adopted or exhausted eight or more coping strategies reported having been or knowing someone who had been deceived or otherwise misled to travel, compared to 3 per cent of individuals in households having adopted or exhausted four to seven coping strategies and 1-2 per cent in other households.¹⁴

Additionally, 4 per cent of respondents in the Center macro-region reported experiencing deception or manipulation, compared to 2-3 per cent in other macro-regions. The highest proportion of respondents reporting such experiences among those non-displaced were in Donetsk (7%), Kirovohradska (5%) and Ternopiiska (5%) Oblast.

Figure 5: Proportion of respondents reporting incidents of deception or manipulation related to travel since the beginning of the war, by gender and age group

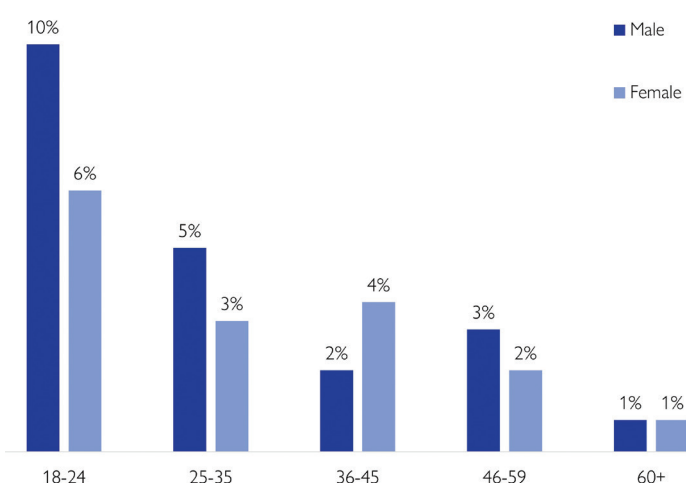
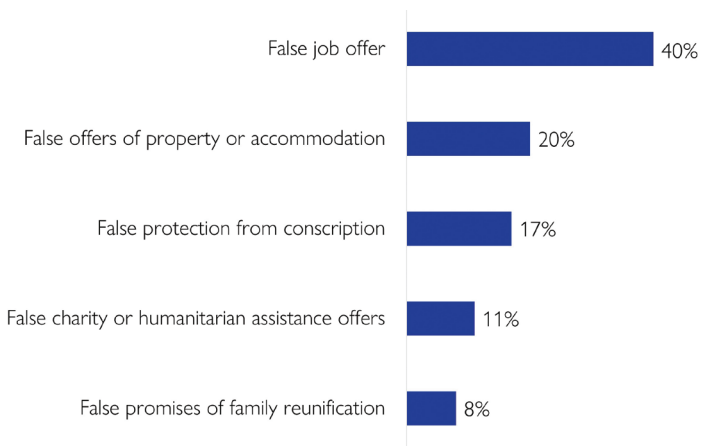


Figure 6: Top five types of promises or offers that led to travel-related deception or manipulation



¹³ The result should be considered indicative due to the insufficient sample size.

¹⁴ As the question did not ask only about household members having been deceived but also acquaintances more broadly, these results can only provide a proxy between household-level vulnerability and risk of falling victim to travel-related deception.

TYPES OF PROMISES OR OFFERS THAT LED TO TRAVEL-RELATED DECEPTION OR MANIPULATION

Among the 3 per cent of respondents who reported incidents of deception, manipulation, or being misled to travel or move within or outside Ukraine since the beginning of the war, 40 per cent reported receiving false job offers. Of these, 47 per cent were female and 34 per cent were male. Additionally, 20 per cent reported receiving false offers related to property or accommodation, with 18 per cent of these being female and 23 per cent male. Fraudulent offers of protection from conscription were reported by 17 per cent of the respondents (14% of women and 19% of men).

IDPs were twice as likely to have been misled, or aware of others misled, by false offers of property and accommodation.¹⁵ Moreover, those aged 18-24, particularly females, were most likely to have been misled or aware of others misled by false education opportunities.¹⁶ Deception related to false protection from conscription was most commonly reported by returnees and non-displaced populations in Dnipropetrovska and Kharkivska Oblasts.¹⁷

AWARENESS AND ACCESSIBILITY OF SUPPORT

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has not only exacerbated vulnerabilities to trafficking and exploitation but has also strained the capacities of support institutions. The war has impacted the ability of the Government of Ukraine, non-governmental organizations, and other entities to identify and support survivors of trafficking effectively. Despite efforts to provide assistance, there remain substantial gaps in both awareness and access to these support services, particularly among those at a heightened risk of exploitation.

AWARENESS OF SUPPORT INSTITUTIONS FOR ASSISTANCE IN REPORTING OR PREVENTING TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS



of those who reported being, or knowing someone who has been deceived or manipulated into traveling or moving within or outside Ukraine, less than half (45%) were aware of institutions or organizations that can provide assistance in cases of exploitation or abuse.

IDPs reported the lowest awareness of support systems, with only 31 per cent of respondents aware of such support systems, compared to 47 per cent of returnees and non-displaced individuals. In addition, slightly lower levels of awareness in large cities and rural areas was observed (41% of respondents in large cities and 42% in rural areas were aware). A lower proportion of female respondents (36%) reported awareness of these support services, compared to male respondents (53%).

IDPs displaced for more than one year had a lower awareness of support systems (29%) compared to those displaced for up to one year (36%).¹⁸

Economic vulnerability also impacted awareness, as respondents in lower income households reported slightly lower levels of awareness than those in higher income households (43% of households with income up to UAH 6,024 were aware, compared to 48%¹⁹ of those with higher income). Moreover, those adopting eight or more coping strategies reported the lowest awareness of support systems (34%, compared to higher percentages among those who adopted fewer coping strategies).

INSTITUTIONS IDENTIFIED AS SOURCES OF ASSISTANCE IN REPORTING OR PREVENTING TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

Among those aware of assistance options, around one in four respondents identified police or other law enforcement institutions as a resource, as well as volunteer organizations and government social services. Respondents aware of assistance options were notably less likely to cite international and non-governmental organizations or anti-trafficking hotlines as potential support options.²⁰

AWARENESS OF HOW TO SEEK HELP FROM SUPPORT INSTITUTIONS

Those who were aware of any institutions or organizations to turn to for assistance if they or someone they knew was deceived or misled to travel or move within or outside Ukraine since the beginning of the war, were asked whether they knew how to seek help from these organizations. Twenty-eight per cent indicated that they did not know how to seek help from these organizations, indicating significant gaps in both awareness and access.²¹

CONCLUSIONS

1. The prevalence of labor exploitation indicators, such as long working hours without proper contracts and underpayment (most notably among at-risk groups such as IDPs), highlights a crucial need for stronger labor protections. The use of adverse coping strategies related to employment suggests that those seeking work are more likely to accept exploitative or poor conditions to meet their basic needs. As the economy is in recovery, potentially attracting migrant workers, ensuring proper labor protections will be essential to prevent exploitation.
2. The low awareness and accessibility of support systems among vulnerable groups, particularly IDPs and women, calls for a robust public awareness campaign and the expansion of accessible support services. Although the sample was too small to be fully representative, the need for increased awareness about available support systems was identified and requires additional research.
3. The correlation between economic vulnerability and susceptibility to exploitation emphasises the need for economic support programs. Addressing the root causes of economic distress through job creation, financial aid, and sustainable livelihood opportunities can reduce the likelihood of accepting risky employment or other offers that might lead to exploitation of travel-related deception.

^{15,16,17,18,19,20,21} The result should be considered indicative due to the insufficient sample size.

METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this report was commissioned by IOM and collected by Multicultural Insights as part of Round 16 of the General Population Survey (GPS). Data was collected via phone-based interviews with 1,428 IDPs, 1,639 returnees, and 2,266 non-displaced persons carried out between 10 March and 11 April 2024. IDPs are defined as people who left their homes or are staying outside their habitual place of residence due to the full-scale invasion in February 2022, regardless of whether they hold registered IDP status. Returnees are defined as people who returned to their habitual place of residence after a significant period of displacement (minimum of two weeks since February 2022). All remaining individuals are considered non-displaced.

All interviews were conducted using a random-digit-dial (RDD) and computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) approach, generating results with an overall margin of error of 1.35 per cent [CL 95%]. The survey included all oblasts in Ukraine, excluding the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC) and the areas of Donetsk, Luhanska, Khersonska, and Zaporizka Oblasts under the temporary military control of the Russian Federation where phone coverage by Ukrainian operators is not available.

Limitations: The exact proportion of the excluded populations is unknown. Those currently residing outside the territory of Ukraine were not interviewed, following active exclusion. Population estimates assume that children (those under 18 years old) are accompanied by their parents or guardians. The sample frame is limited to adults that use mobile phones. It is unknown if all phone networks were fully functional across the entire territory of Ukraine for the entire period of the survey; therefore, some respondents may have had a higher probability of receiving calls than others. Residents of areas with a high level of civilian infrastructure damage may have a lower representation among the sample – likely resulting in an under-representation in the report. Those residing in the ARC or areas of Donetsk, Luhanska, Khersonska, and Zaporizka Oblasts under temporary occupation by the Russian Federation are not included in the survey.

Additionally, given the low proportion of respondents having reported deception or manipulation in traveling within or outside Ukraine, the results for this indicator and subsequent questions related to awareness and accessibility of support should be considered indicative. This is due to the limited sample size for certain populations, which fail to yield representative results with the expected confidence level and margin of error.

Furthermore, data collection on experiences of trafficking in persons (as defined by the Palermo Protocol) is difficult in the context of the individual-level phone-based surveys. The act, means and purpose are the three main elements of human trafficking - and often they need a very wide range of questions to be identified, ideally involving mixed-method approach. The short set of questions included in the General Population Survey had to settle on questions that capture certain aspects of these elements and indicate potential vulnerability to human trafficking. The questions are not meant to identify a respondent as a victim of trafficking.

DEFINITIONS:

Table 2: Macro-regions and their constituent oblasts

Macro-regions	Constituent oblasts
East	Dnipropetrovska, Donetsk, Zaporizka, Luhanska, Kharkivska
West:	Volynska, Zakarpatska, Ivano-Frankivska, Lvivska, Rivnenska, Ternopilska, Khmelnytska, Chernivetska
Center	Vinnytska, Kirovohradska, Poltavska, Cherkaska
Kyiv	Kyiv City
North	Zhytomyrska, Kyivska, Sumska, Chernihivska
South	Mykolaivska, Odeska, Khersonska

Table 1: Sex and age disaggregation of respondents to the General Population Survey

	Male	Female	Total
IDP			
18-24	40	54	94
25-35	102	210	312
36-45	105	226	331
46-59	105	230	335
60+	100	247	347
Refuse	5	4	9
Total	457	971	1428
Returnee			
18-24	44	60	104
25-35	84	241	325
36-45	154	287	441
46-59	122	279	401
60+	95	261	356
Refuse	9	3	12
Total	508	1131	1639
General Population			
18-24	70	55	125
25-35	151	154	305
36-45	193	230	423
46-59	290	346	636
60+	277	480	757
Refuse	13	7	20
Total	994	1272	2266

Table 3: The complete list of the coping strategies utilized by the General Population Survey questionnaire

List of the coping strategies
Sold household assets/goods (furniture/household appliances, smart phone, jewelry, etc.)
Spent savings or consumed emergency stocks
Purchased food on credit or borrowed food
Sent household members to eat/live with another family or friends or eat at a food bank/soup kitchen/collective centre distributing food
Sold household property items or means of transport (sewing machine, bicycle, car, etc.)
Reduced essential health expenditures (including drugs or medicines)
Reduced essential education expenditures
Sold house or land
Household's member(-s) moved elsewhere in search of work
Used degrading sources of income, illegal work, or high-risk jobs
Had to ask strangers for money to cover essential needs
Reduced usage of utilities (wood, coal, electricity, gas)
Switched to cheaper food and non-food items
Reduced quantity of food and essential non-food expenditure, e.g. on hygiene, clothing, baby items
Moved to poorer quality dwelling
Skipped paying rent
Skipped debt repayments
Accepted lower qualification or low paid job
Depended on humanitarian assistance to meet basic needs

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