



# “I’ve lost the life I knew”

*Older people’s experiences of the  
Ukraine war and their inclusion in the  
humanitarian response*



**HelpAge**

**International**



Bogdan Rozumnyi/HelpAge International

**Lidiya, 82, spent almost two months in an underground bomb shelter in Sievierodonetsk, before being evacuated to Lviv with her daughter, Inna, 62.**

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**HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.**

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Front cover photo: Some social care centres offer a place for older people to receive and share information about available assistance.  
Bogdan Rozumnyi/HelpAge International



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Bogdan Rozumny/HelpAge International

Lyudmila, 62, lives in a shelter with her husband and son, both of whom have disabilities.

## Summary

The situation in Ukraine has been described as the oldest humanitarian crisis in the world, with 8.9 million people, or 24 per cent of the population, over 60. Older Ukrainians face disproportionate barriers to accessing essential items and support, due to poverty and the limited accessibility of assistance, services, and information.

All older people, including older people with disabilities, have the right to life, food, water, adequate shelter, adequate healthcare, including essential medicines, information, and to humanitarian assistance, all on an equal basis with others at all times.

This report shows that older people's human rights are at risk as a result of the war in Ukraine, despite significant efforts to support them. In particular, this research finds that the experiences of older people during the war are diverse, and documents how specific sections of the older population face disproportionate risks.

These include older women of all ages, older people over 70, and older people with disabilities.

While there is a recognition among humanitarian actors and Ukrainian government officials that older people face particular risks, and there are certain International/Non-Government Organisation (I/NGO) initiatives targeting them, assistance remains insufficient, particularly in efforts to reach the most at risk.

Findings in this report are primarily from a December 2022 national survey of 400 older Ukrainians as well as focus group discussions and key informant interviews conducted by the Ukrainian research firm Info Sapiens and commissioned by HelpAge International. It is the first nationally representative survey of older people in Ukraine during the war. Data from some of Info Sapiens' 2022 nationally representative surveys of all Ukrainians, including older people, are also used, as well as testimony from HelpAge interviews with older Ukrainians. Where possible, findings are corroborated by other sources.

## Older women are more at risk

Older women in Ukraine are facing significantly more financial difficulties and barriers to accessing essential goods and assistance.

- 61 per cent of women report that they do not have enough money to cover their basic needs, compared to 46 per cent of men.
- Women's average pensions are 30 per cent smaller than those of men. While 22 per cent of older women live below the government's minimum monthly subsistence level of 2,093 UAH (\$57), only 13 per cent of older men do.
- 34 per cent of women live alone, compared to just 24 per cent of men.
- For those who live with others, women are less likely to be the head of their household, and therefore may have less power in decision-making, including control over finances and purchases.
- There are nearly three times as many internally displaced older women (14 per cent) than older men (5 per cent).
- More older men (22 per cent) reported receiving humanitarian assistance from NGOs and INGOs than older women (13 per cent).

There are a number of likely factors for this finding, including that there are more older women than older men in the population; older women more often live alone; are less likely to still be in the workforce and thus interacting with others; and report lower mobile phone and internet use, all resulting in less access to information and connection to networks and organisations providing assistance and support.

## Risks increase with age

The risks facing older people in Ukraine continue to increase as they age. Older people over 70 are more likely to be alone, face more obstacles to receiving information, and face greater risk of having insufficient money to make ends meet than those 60–69 years old.

- Older people over 70 (42 per cent) rely significantly more on modest government pensions, subsidies and payments compared those in their sixties (27 per cent).
- People over 70 are less likely to work and thus have salary income. Only 8 per cent had work in the last three months, compared to 25 per cent of those age 60–69.
- People over 70 have much greater difficulties accessing food: 8 per cent reported that they face obstacles compared to 2 per cent of people 60–69.
- Regarding medicines and assistive products, 14 per cent report barriers to accessing them, compared to 10 per cent of those 60–69.
- Older people over 70 are more than two times more likely to live alone (44 per cent) than those in their 60s (19 per cent).

- Only 40 per cent of people over 70 use the internet, compared to people 60–69 years old (70 per cent).

The fact that people over 70 more often live alone and use the internet less frequently puts them at risk of not accessing accurate and timely information about evacuations, available assistance, and news about the war on an equal basis with others.

*“I live with my 84-year-old husband who needs medicines for his condition after a stroke. A month ago, I fell while trying to carry him, and they had to put a cast on my leg. We both need treatment, but I have not received assistance apart from some food that volunteers have brought us. I don't know where I would even apply to receive medicine.”*  
Lidiya, 80, interviewed by HelpAge

## More barriers for older people with disabilities

Twenty-four per cent of older people identified as having a disability, compared to 13 per cent among the total population.<sup>1</sup> Twenty per cent of older people had physical disabilities that impact their mobility and 6 per cent said they were blind or had low vision.

People with low mobility with whom we spoke described particular barriers that they face as a result of the war, including access to food, medicine, and routine or emergency medical care including due to the lack of support to leave home.

- 16 per cent reported that low mobility impeded their access to medicines and assistive devices.
- 14 per cent said it was difficult to reach the doctor because of low mobility.
- 9 per cent said low mobility disabilities and limited their access food.
- People over 70 reported more obstacles related to low mobility than those 60–69.

*“The Russian soldiers had a barricade in our yard. My sister and I were in the cellar, and my husband, who is 73, remained in the house because he is in a wheelchair, and we simply could not take him with us.”*  
Lyubov, 76, interviewed by HelpAge

## Mental health under strain

The mental health and psychosocial impacts of the war for older people are persistent and worrisome. Fifty-five per cent of older people said that the war had impacted them emotionally because of separation from their loved ones, loneliness or isolation, disagreements with relatives or friends, and loss of loved ones.

In the last month:

- 82 per cent said they often or sometimes felt distress.
- 76 per cent of older people reported often or sometimes feeling anxious.
- 42 per cent said that they found it difficult to cope, and that they felt often or sometimes unable to perform daily tasks.

*“The most difficult thing was to leave my home, though only ruins were left. But leaving the place where you were living for so many years. This was difficult, and not everyone will understand. My son took me from there. Everything seems to be good here. But I see this house in my dreams every day. Well, it’s hard to talk about this.”*

Lidiya, 69

*“No more usual routine, I’ve lost the life I once knew. It changed, both psychologically and – not physically and financially, but psychologically – for sure.”*

Volodymyr, 64

## Older people stayed behind

This study finds that older people are less likely to evacuate from their homes and communities – a trend observed in other research on the war in Ukraine and research from other conflicts. Eleven per cent of all internally displaced people in Ukraine are older, while 18 per cent of the total population is internally displaced. Older people can thus remain in hard-to-reach areas and in difficult conditions more often than others.

Older people surveyed for this report overwhelmingly remain in their own homes (84 per cent), about equally in private houses and private flats. Among them, 59 per cent reported poor living conditions: 12 per cent said that their home had been damaged or destroyed, and 13 per cent said they need urgent repairs. Many also report severe problems due to blackouts, which can lead to disruptions in electricity and water. While blackouts impact nearly everyone in Ukraine to varying degrees, older people can be more at risk in cold temperatures and may face more obstacles to finding, buying, and/or carrying water and other essentials into their homes.



Oleksandr, 73, lives in a shelter after losing his home in the war.

Bogdan Rozumnyi/HelpAge International

## Basic needs going unmet

The majority of older people surveyed (56 per cent) report that their income does not cover their basic needs, including food, clothes, hygiene items, utilities, medicine, and healthcare. The share of older people who reported cutting back on food to save money increased from 23 per cent in February 2022 to 35 per cent in December 2022. While the majority (54 per cent) of older people surveyed said they had easy access to necessary medicines and assistive devices, of those that didn't most (78 per cent) said that they cannot afford them.<sup>2</sup> Pensions have historically been low in Ukraine and difficult to survive on. In 2022, the government raised pension rates by 14 per cent, yet 27 per cent inflation over the course of the year decimated older people's purchasing power.<sup>3</sup>

*“Medicines are the number one need, because we can't live without them. Food and clothes are at the end of the list. We take clothes, or food. It's possible to eat what's available – potatoes, sour cream, milk – and it's enough. But medicines are, of course, essential.”*

Volodymyr, 64

## Lack of access to information and assistance

Thirty per cent of older people said that they need access to information about available humanitarian support and assistance but cannot access such information. Information is frequently distributed via messenger apps on smart phones and the internet. However, older people are three times less likely to use mobile phones and smart phones than the overall population and can have less access to the internet, particularly older women and those over 70. Nearly half of the older people surveyed received crucial information by word of mouth. Twenty-eight per cent said they would prefer information about assistance to be communicated via television.

In our survey, 84 per cent of older people stated that they had not received support from NGOs and international humanitarian organisations during the war. Of those who did, more than half (55 per cent) said it was very easy to do so, though women found it more challenging than men. People most often received cash assistance and food.<sup>4</sup> As of December 2022, older people received less financial assistance from various sources, including government, NGO, and private business or persons, on average compared to the amount received by the total population. Older people received a total of 2,063 UAH (US\$56) compared to 5,294 UAH (US\$144) for the total population.<sup>5</sup>

Government officials and NGO and UN representatives interviewed demonstrated awareness of the particular concerns for older people and described programmes to provide assistance and support to them. At the same time, they corroborated the key findings of this report: that there is insufficient assistance reaching older people.



Jonathan Moore/HelpAge International

**Lyubov, 85, lives by herself in Zaporizhzhia and volunteers everyday to support internally displaced families.**

## Older people supporting their communities

Older people have remained active and engaged in their communities, as people interviewed for this report described.

For example, one woman, 70, said she actively volunteers to support others in different ways, including assisting displaced people with clothes and providing blankets and bed linens to the local hospital. She said she really wants to be useful to the community and to Ukraine:

*“I feel like a part of the community, I like volunteering. I feel better because I work as a volunteer. And I try to do this even more. And in the future, even when the war is over, I will be involved in the volunteer movement.”*

Tetyana, 70

Another woman, 65, who has been displaced from eastern Ukraine, volunteers to help other displaced older people by offering them guidance on available assistance and services and providing emotional support:

*“Both my husband and I were inspired by volunteers who helped us when we first moved to a new place. Having gone through the same experience as them, being around the same age, we realised that we are in a unique position to extend the same kindness to others.”*

Nataliia, 65

## The way forwards

### A human rights based approach

To ensure the equal treatment and dignity of older people, principles that underpin all human rights, humanitarian actors, including the Ukrainian government, must consider the particular support and actions that enable older people to fully realise their rights. For example, in order to ensure the right to health, officials and others should provide dignified forms of support for older people with low mobility to leave their homes to reach a hospital or pharmacy or arrange for goods and services to be delivered at home. To ensure the right to an adequate standard of living, older people may require additional financial or other forms of support as well as greater access to existing financial assistance compared to others. Those who do not use mobile phones or the internet nevertheless have the right to information on an equal basis with others, and thus phones may need to be distributed or information should be published in accessible formats and disseminated through other means.

These types of responses are the necessary means to ensure equal enjoyment of fundamental human rights and to adequately apply humanitarian principles, which states and organisations are obligated to ensure.

### Strengthening humanitarian systems for inclusion

The experience of older people in Ukraine is not entirely unique. HelpAge’s research in countries around the world has found that older people are not sufficiently included in humanitarian response and can be particularly at risk of human rights violations, including freedom from violence, neglect, abuse, hunger, and others.<sup>6</sup>

Due to failures among governments and humanitarian agencies to consider their specific requirements and ensure accessibility and equal treatment, older people often face barriers in accessing accurate and timely information, evacuations, humanitarian aid, and services.

This research is the first of its kind during the war in Ukraine: a nationally representative survey of older people from across the country, with data disaggregated based on age and gender to better understand the specific concerns and hardships for different cohorts of older people. This is unusual for a humanitarian crisis where data and information on the particular experiences of older people are rarely captured. The findings illustrate that typical data collection, which either excludes older people or only considers people over 60 as a single cohort, risks missing key information that is essential to inform policy-making and programming. The same is true when there is a failure to examine the specific experiences of older women and older people with disabilities.



Jonathan Moore/HelpAge International

**Michail, 65, says volunteering has given him a purpose and helped managed the psychological effects of the war.**



Dmytro Maksymenko/HelpAge International

Lidiya, 80, in her apartment in Bucha.

## Key recommendations

**These recommendations provide a guide to those working in Ukraine and for strengthening humanitarian systems more broadly.**

- 1. The Government of Ukraine, UN agencies and I/NGOs must uphold the rights of older women and men and proactively address their needs in the humanitarian response to the war in Ukraine.**
- 2. Humanitarian actors' projects should prioritise support for older people, in particular older women, and people over 70, due to the specific risks they face and the barriers to accessing essential goods and services and humanitarian assistance, including access to financial assistance, information, food, medicines, healthcare, transportation, in-home care and support services, and psychological support services.**
- 3. Consistent with their human rights obligations and accountability to affected populations, humanitarian actors should actively support the engagement and participation of older people and incorporate their perspectives into decision-making, programming, and implementation.**
- 4. Humanitarian actors should regularly collect, analyse, report, and use data on older people disaggregated by age cohort, gender, and disability.**
- 5. Humanitarian actors should develop and implement policies and hire and train staff with the skills and knowledge to deliver age, gender and disability responsive approaches, in close consultation with older people.**
- 6. Information about assistance should be communicated via multiple mediums and in a variety of accessible formats.**

# 1. Introduction: the world's oldest humanitarian crisis

All older people, including older people with disabilities, enjoy human rights on an equal basis with all others. These include the rights to life, food, water, adequate shelter, adequate healthcare, including psychosocial support and essential medicines, information, and to humanitarian assistance, all on an equal basis with others at all times. However, too often, older people's rights are overlooked in humanitarian crises. As a small proportion of the population, assistance is generally focussed on larger population groups.

Ukraine is well known as the oldest humanitarian crisis in the world with older people constituting 24 per cent of the population.<sup>7</sup> According to an analysis of Ukrainian State Statistics Service data, 8.9 million people aged 60 and over lived in government-controlled areas of Ukraine as of 1 January 2022.<sup>8</sup> Older people as a share of the population are predicted to increase because of low birth rate, migration, and war loss. Among older people, women significantly outnumber men: there are 5.7 million women, or 64 per cent of the older population, compared to 3.2 million men.<sup>9</sup> The United Nations Ukraine Humanitarian Response Plan, released in February 2023, indicates that 3.9 million older people are in need.<sup>10</sup>



Dmytro Maksymenko/HelpAge International

Many older people were unable to escape the hostilities and had to shelter themselves using makeshift walls.

Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, 5.9 million older people lived in cities and 3 million lived in villages in government-controlled areas.<sup>11</sup> Due to active conflict, blackouts, and other hardships, there is constant migration, and the geographical distribution of the population frequently changes. According to the research for this report, 11 per cent of older Ukrainians are internally displaced, compared with 18 per cent of the total population. HelpAge's own programming and monitoring has found that older people have disproportionately stayed behind when others have fled.

The UN and others have acknowledged the particular risks, dangers, and rights violations older people in Ukraine experience as a result of the war. For example, according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which collects information on civilian casualties in Ukraine, older people make up a disproportionate number of civilian deaths and injuries in the war.<sup>12</sup>

Building on previous studies,<sup>13</sup> HelpAge commissioned this research to understand how older people are faring one year into the conflict in Ukraine as well as to understand how well the humanitarian response has upheld their rights and balanced the need to provide widescale assistance while targeting those most at risk. We sought to understand what lesson could be learnt from this crisis both for Ukraine and for other humanitarian crises.

The findings of the report reveal significant issues with the humanitarian response. Older people's human rights are at serious risk as a result of the war in Ukraine.

Their experiences are diverse, and older women, older people over 70, and older people with disabilities face disproportionate risks. Work must start now to ensure older people in Ukraine, and those affected by crises worldwide, can live in safety and dignity.

## Hearing from older people themselves

This research is the first of its kind, comprising a nationally representative sample of older people from across Ukraine. The findings in this report are primarily from a December 2022 national survey of 400 older Ukrainians and focus group discussions from December 2022 to January 2023. These were conducted by Info Sapiens, a Ukrainian research agency, commissioned by HelpAge. Data from Info Sapiens' monthly nationally representative surveys of all Ukrainians, including older people, are also used to broaden the understanding of the issues older people face and to provide comparisons with the wider population. These findings are brought to life with testimony from older Ukrainians sharing their experience in interviews with HelpAge in January and February 2023. Key informant interviews with representatives of the Ukrainian government, NGOs and INGOs working in Ukraine provide insight into the humanitarian response and efforts to support older people and fulfil their rights.

A detailed methodology can be found in Annex one to this report.

## International law

Ukraine and Russia are both parties to several international human rights treaties relevant to this research. The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), enshrines the rights to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, clothing, and housing; to work; to social security; and to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.<sup>14</sup> The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) guarantees these and other human rights protections for women, including older women, and prohibits discrimination against women.<sup>15</sup> This includes an obligation to ensure that pension policies are not discriminatory in any manner.<sup>16</sup>

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities guarantees similar protections for older people with disabilities, as well as the rights to accessibility and to live independently in the community, rather than being segregated in institutions or other settings.<sup>17</sup> The CRPD requires

states to pay particular attention to women with disabilities and ensure access to social protection and poverty programmes, especially for older persons with disabilities.<sup>18</sup> Notably, in article 11, it specifies that states must take:

***“all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict [and] humanitarian emergencies”.***<sup>19</sup>

To date, there is no single body of law guaranteeing rights of older people. The UN High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) has reported on how existing international law fails to protect the rights of older people. It notes that older people:

***“are rarely mentioned in United Nations human rights treaties, and there is generally no explicit reference to older age as an impermissible basis of discrimination”.***<sup>20</sup>



Emre Caylak/HelpAge International

Iryna, 60, Iryna is displaced in Dnipro with her 81-year-old mother and her 41-year-old son, who has disabilities.

## 2. Findings: older people's rights under threat

Humanity, neutrality, impartiality,<sup>21</sup> and operational independence<sup>22</sup> are the four guiding principles of humanitarian action. They guarantee everyone the right to safe, dignified access to humanitarian aid and protection without discrimination and on an equal basis with others, regardless of their age, gender, or other characteristics. However, HelpAge has established<sup>23</sup> that the humanitarian system too often fails to respond to the rights and unique needs of older people and the particular protection risks they face.

Many older people told us they experience significant barriers in accessing food, medicine, assistive devices, and medical care, among other services, in December 2022, 10 months into the war. Financial hardship was the greatest obstacle to meeting basic needs, as well as lack of support for people with low mobility to leave their homes to access essentials and medical care. Few older people have employment, and their pensions are often too low to cover essentials. The overwhelming majority of older people continue to live in their homes but reported a variety of difficulties in their living conditions. Many also reported anxiety, distress, separation from family, isolation, and lack of information and access to professional psychosocial support.

# Income and employment

## Income

Fifty-six per cent reported that their income does not cover their basic needs, including food, clothes, hygiene items, utilities, and healthcare. This is even worse for older women and those over 70, as described below. For 19 per cent of older people, the income per household member is below the official minimum monthly subsistence level of 2,093 UAH (\$57) monthly.<sup>24</sup>

*“We live for free at the shelter and we get a free lunch every day, but the boys go to school in the morning, and I have to feed them in the evening. So, it’s tough for us.”*

**Tetiana, 72, who takes care of her two teenage grandsons**

*“Is it possible to live on this pension nowadays? It’s just a laugh.”*

**Leonid, 68, participating in a focus group discussion**

While 99 per cent of people over 60 receive pensions, the amount is typically too small to cover their basic needs, and 34 per cent of older people do not have another income source. For those who do have other sources, these are: subsidies or payments from the government (34 per cent), salaries (25 per cent), and monetary support from relatives or friends (14 per cent). A total of 9 per cent named cash payments or subsidies, such as for utilities, from non-governmental organisations.

*“Financial support remains the most important.”*

**Government official**

Inflation has reached 27 per cent, while the average pension increased by 14 per cent, since the beginning of 2022, a notable loss of purchasing power for older people. Two-thirds of older people said that they need additional funds of up to 6,000 UAH (US\$163) monthly. The remainder say they need more. In addition, older people often cannot rely on the income of others living with them, with 50 per cent of individuals who live with someone else reporting that no one is employed in their household.

In addition to low pensions and inflation, poverty among older people results from lack of job opportunities, including due to ageism, the annihilation of citizens’ savings with the collapse of the USSR, difficulties adapting to changing labour markets while having an outdated Soviet education, poor health services, among other factors.

While older people are experiencing financial hardship, they do not report the same level of change in their financial situation compared to others. Fifty-eight per cent of the total population is reporting financial loss, including 32 per cent of older people.<sup>25</sup> The lower percentage of older people reporting financial loss is likely explained by the fact that many employed Ukrainians, who are mainly younger, lost their jobs as a result of the war, while pensioners continued to receive pensions and thus perhaps did not consider themselves to have faced a specific financial loss despite their ongoing financial hardship.

People in focus groups identified financial support as a crucial need. Among the priority items to purchase, participants cited medicines (in particular, insulin, but also others) and healthcare, heating, firewood, power, construction materials and transport, internet, and drinking water. They also think about the situation for others when making financial choices.

*“Well, power is off now from time to time. I would like to improve the situation a little bit. To buy a radio, so it would be playing. But prices now are so high that it would cost a half of my pension. And then I think, ‘I will do without that radio’. I will sit in silence or go outside. When I went to the stores and looked at those prices, I told myself, ‘Well, I better help someone with this money’.”*

**Tetyana, 70**



**Olha, 66, struggles to pay rent for her current apartment but is unable to work for health reasons.**

## Employment

Older people are much less likely to be employed. Eighty-three per cent of older people reported that they have not had any work, including informal or part time work, during the last three months. Following the outbreak of full-scale war, 15 per cent of older people lost jobs. Altogether, there are only 13 per cent of employed persons among older people compared to 43 per cent among the total population.<sup>26</sup>

*“I would have to spend over half of my pension on medicines. I used to do some part-time work, cleaning houses. But now my health doesn’t allow me to do that anymore, and all the offices have closed because of the war, so I can’t any earn extra money.”*

Valentina, 65, interviewed by HelpAge

*“Not having a job is the biggest challenge for me personally, I had one of my legs amputated but I can still work with my hands, as I’ve done most of my life.”*

Mykhailo, 63, interviewed by HelpAge

The vast majority of older people surveyed are not actively looking for employment. Just 4 per cent said they are (7 per cent of men; 2 per cent of women). However, two-thirds of those who are told us that their age is a barrier to finding a job, while 24 per cent say there are no vacancies in their professional area.

During the focus group discussions, employment was listed among the important needs for older people, given the difficulties to survive when pensions are so low. Several male participants continue to work now. Women cited difficulties in finding employment in small cities or villages.



Jonathan Moore/HelpAge International

Tamara, 50, cares for her mother, 83, and relies on humanitarian aid for food.

## Access to food, clothing, medicine, and healthcare

The lack of sufficient financial resources is the top barrier for older people to access food, clothing, medicines, assistive products, and healthcare.

According to Info Sapiens’ nationally representative surveys of 1,000 people in February and December 2022, the share of older people who had to save on food increased from 23 per cent in February 2022 to 35 per cent in December 2022.<sup>27</sup> The December survey of 400 older adults found similar results, with 37 per cent reporting that they do not have enough food; and of those encountering barriers, 92 per cent said that it was due to insufficient funds.

Older people in Ukraine feel food insecurity more acutely than the overall population. They were much more likely to cut food costs or borrow money to buy food (35 per cent and 42 per cent respectively), than people under 60 (23 per cent and 37 per cent respectively). Only 8 per cent of youth aged 16–29 reported cutting back on food for financial reasons.<sup>28</sup> In order to save on food, people reduce the number of meals, change the type of food they buy, and try to eat less.

*“You understand that you can buy cheese for 250 or 400 UAH (US\$7 or 11), or not buy it at all. We will not die of hunger without it. So, I have to restrain myself.”*

Older man, 60

Most older people, 75 per cent, said that they do not have any problems with warm clothing, although of those who do, 92 per cent reported lack of financial resources.

Fifty four per cent of Ukrainians surveyed said they had easy access to necessary medicines and assistive devices and 55 per cent said they could easily access hospitals. Slightly more, 67 per cent said they could reach a family doctor when needed.

Over 78 per cent of those who reported barriers to access medicine and assistive devices said that they cannot afford them; and 7 per cent cited the cost of transportation as being a problem. Regarding hospitals, 41 per cent cited the lack of money to pay for hospital services. An additional 15 per cent said that the cost of transportation hindered access to a hospital. Difficulties accessing a doctor were distance (20 per cent); lack of money (17 per cent); and low mobility (14 per cent).

*“The only difficulty is the power outage, because doctors are not able to hold appointments at this time.”*

Lidiya, 69

*“I was hospitalised on September 28. I stayed in a hospital for almost a month. Then I was at home. I had irregular heart rhythm. Then I went [back to the hospital] for another two days for heart rhythm regulation. I couldn’t do it before because I couldn’t make it there. Also, tests were impossible because the power was off. All the medical records are in electronic format now, and the power was off.”*

Borys, 60

*“Medicines and medical services. There is always shortage of medicines.”*

NGO representative

All participants in the two focus groups confirmed these findings, describing financial hardships, including difficulty surviving on low pensions, particularly those who rent housing. They also noted inflation and price increases due to the war and the serious difficulties in finding employment, especially in small cities. They reported cutting expenditures on food and other basics and spoke about the prohibitive costs of some medicines and medical treatment. They also noted the impact of blackouts on access to healthcare.



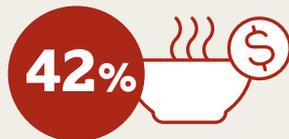
Emre Caylak/HelpAge International

**Valentina, 68, who is internally displaced in Dnipro Oblast of Ukraine, had a stroke in 2018 and wishes there was financial help to buy necessary medicine.**

### Older people survey highlights: food and medical



reported that they don't have enough food



more likely to borrow money to buy food



said they had problems accessing medicines and assistive devices



said they couldn't reach a family doctor when needed

## Housing and living conditions

Most older people live with other older people (69 per cent). Thirty-six per cent live with people aged 18–59; and 16 per cent live with children under 18. Thirty-one per cent live alone.

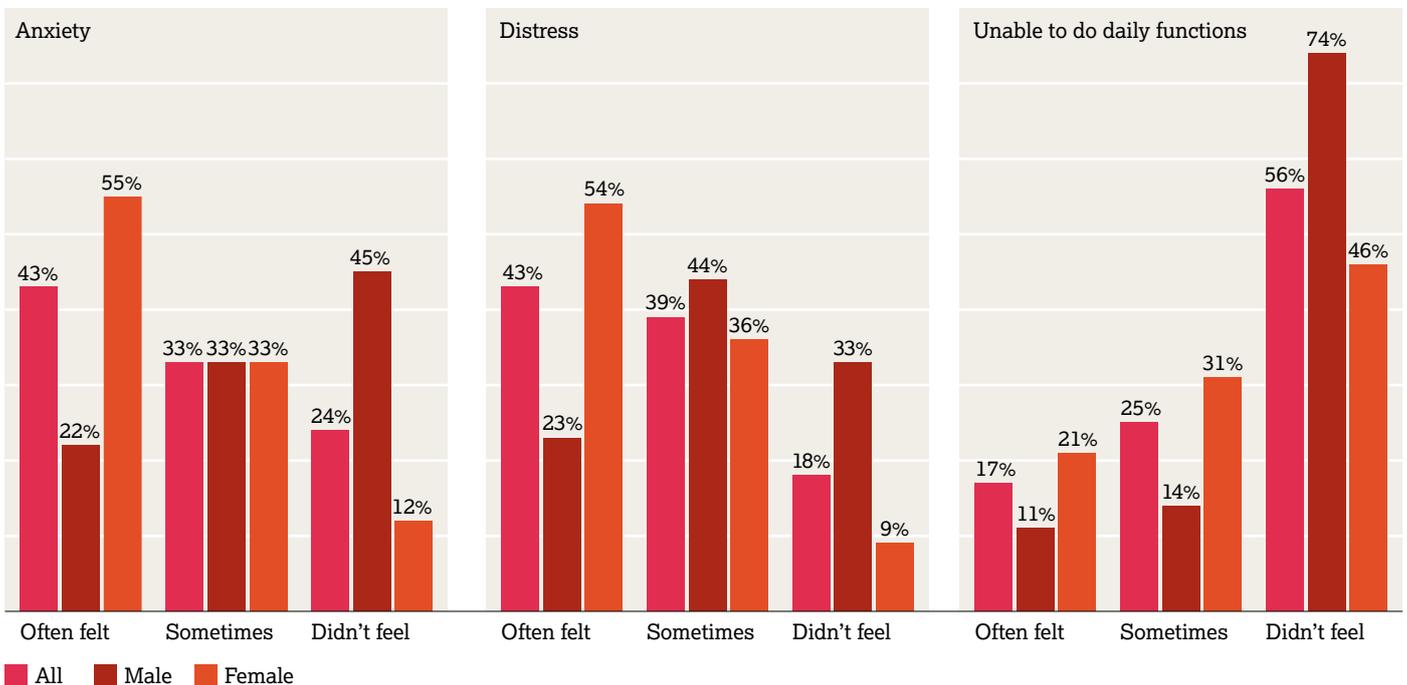
Older people surveyed for this report overwhelmingly remain in their own homes (84 per cent), about equally in private houses and private flats. Some 59 per cent reported problems with their living conditions. For example, 12 per cent of older people said that their home had been damaged or destroyed and 13 per cent said they need urgent repairs. Further, 15 per cent struggle to pay their utility bills. Lack of air raid shelters or accessible shelters was cited by 20 per cent of people as a concern about their living conditions. An additional 24 per cent reported severe problems due to blackouts, including lack of heating, lack of water supply, impossibility to work or receive medical treatment, and being forced to move elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

## Mental health concerns and access to psychosocial support services

The disruption and breakdown of normal family and community support structures can leave older people isolated. Thirty-five per cent of people surveyed said that they are separated from loved ones as a result of the war, and 16 per cent said they experienced isolation. Fifty-five per cent of older people stated that the war has impacted their mental health, including negative impacts on sleep, nightmares, and inability to cope. Some older people also reported uncertainty about their future living situations, which can contribute to anxiety. Eleven per cent of older people said that they did not know whether they will remain in the same residence or relocate within the next six months.

When asked about their feelings in the last four weeks, 76 per cent of older people reported feeling anxious, and 82 per cent said they felt distress, often or sometimes in the previous month, with a further 42 per cent saying that they have found it difficult to cope unable to perform daily tasks. Men and women had different experiences, with women feeling significantly more anxious and distressed, as the following table shows.

**In the past four weeks, how often have you felt anxiety, distress or been unable to perform daily functions?**



*In the presentation of responses, 'refuse to answer' has been removed because of the very small percentages (3% or less)*



Stefan Trappe/HelpAge International

Anatoly, 66, fled from Kramatorsk to Lviv in Western Ukraine.

Despite these experiences, just 2 per cent of older people talk to a mental health specialist, and 28 per cent said that they do not have information on how to access psychosocial support services. Lack of information was the most significant barrier to psychosocial support, followed by cost.

In order to cope with their distress, 55 per cent of people talk with family and friends. Other activities to manage anxiety and distress included cooking, exercise, spending time in nature, and work. Similarly, focus group participants said they went for a walk, did exercise, communicated with relatives, friends and especially children, especially their grandchildren, or read books or 'light' content on the internet.

*“We always talk within the family, you know, there is always someone with me, and so on. I may always share my worries. There were not any special situations when it was necessity to have a specialist psychologist. I have always someone to talk to. So, to speak, to complain, I always have.”*

Victor, 70

*“We always calm down each other, tell each other that everything will be good. Children. They are the main thing in life. It is crucial to be able to phone my children, find out their situation. And grandchildren. They are the main priorities in life.”*

Svitlana, 70

All focus group participants mentioned that it is psychologically difficult to live with war. They worry about relatives, the loss of housing, bad news about the war, bombings, destruction, and deaths of civilians and military personnel. They feel that generally, no one in Ukraine now, irrespective of where they live, is safe. People live with permanent feelings of stress, danger and anxiety.

*“Even though I have moved to a calmer place, it's not 100 per cent safe. And there are worries about family, relatives, close ones and neighbours.”*

Lidiya, 69

People who have been compelled to change their location, who live in more dangerous areas near active conflict, or who experienced living under the temporary military control of Russian forces, indicated more dramatic changes in life as well as experiencing traumatic events and serious problems: Bombings and shelling, displacement, particularly harsh and dangerous experiences while living under the control of Russian forces, loss of housing, separation from relatives, loss of jobs, lack of basic essentials (such as drinking water in Mykolaiv).

*“The most difficult thing was to leave my home. Though only ruins were left. But leaving the place where you were living for so many years. This was difficult, and not everyone will understand. My son took me from there. Everything seems to be good here. Everyone is nice. But I see this house in my dreams every day. Well, it’s hard to talk about this.”*

Lidiya, 69

*“Safety? The scariest is when the war is going on. And when I was at home, it wasn’t safe at all. Things were falling into cellars as well, it was clattering. And I wouldn’t say that it is 100 per cent safe in Dnipro. Neither is it here. But, nevertheless, it’s calmer, calmer. And I am with my kids, together. And it’s, of course, quieter.”*

Lidiya, 69

*“Well, it was scary today because of shelling, and those hits. They are flying over our heads – and this is horror, scary. Especially when they explode.”*

Tamara, 74

At the same time, focus group participants strongly believe in the Ukrainian army and spoke of resilience and unity. Some indicated that family relations strengthened and communication with more distant relatives improved and became more frequent.

*“How is it possible to be happy when there is a war in Ukraine? Well, I feel happy when my children and my grandchildren are near, and when I am with them.”*

Sergiy, 64

*“I think that family ties have, on the contrary, become stronger, including distant relatives. It is possible to say that not only family ties have changed and become stronger. Feelings for other people have also changed. And it can be felt.”*

Borys, 60



Jonathan Moore/HelpAge International

Nelya, 70, is displaced from the city of Severodonetsk in the Luhansk region. “After the invasion we have become even closer and begun to trust each other even more. We will rebuild, be a different country, with different people who have strong characters and show kindness towards others”.



Dmytro Maksymenko/HelpAge International

**Lidiya, 80 and Oleksandr, 84, in Bucha.**

## People over 70 face greater risks

By assessing the experiences of older people by distinct age cohorts, this research found that people over 70 are at greater risk of not having their basic food, medical and other needs met, as well as more likely to be isolated.

These findings also illustrate that data collection which only considers older people as a single group, for example, aged 60 and older, risks missing key distinctions in the obstacles people 60–69 and people over 70 face in accessing basic goods and services, which should be key considerations to guide the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

### Financial insecurity

People over 70 are more likely to experience financial hardship and be at risk of not having sufficient money to make ends meet. More people over 70 (46 per cent) said that they do not have enough money to cover basic needs than those aged 60–69 (41 per cent). Poverty was a serious concern for older people in Ukraine prior to the war; however, they fare worse now, including due to the loss of work, including informal work, decreased or loss of support from relatives who have lost their earnings, moved away, died, or were injured, and inflation, as described in this report.

In terms of access to employment, less than 8 per cent of those 70 and over said they had work in the last three months, compared to 25 per cent of those age 60–69. This includes informal and part-time work.

In addition, people over 70 are less likely to live in a household with someone who works and thus do not benefit from salary income. Fifty-four per cent reported that no one in their household works, compared to 48 per cent of the 60–69-year-old cohort. This is also connected to the fact that people over 70 are more likely to live alone, as described in more detail later in this report.

People over 70 rely significantly more on government subsidies and payments (42 per cent compared to 27 per cent), in addition to their pensions.

In addition, they are more than five times more likely to require in home assistance with cleaning, cooking, purchases and personal care, than those in their sixties (11 per cent versus 2 per cent).

Slightly more people over 70 have someone with a disability in their household (35 per cent), compared to those 60 to 69 (31 per cent). Households which include a person with a disability can often experience higher overall expenditures, such as the purchase of assistive products, hygiene items, specific food, additional or specialised medications, cost of using taxis or private cars due to inaccessible transport, etc.

One woman, 76, shared the challenges of insufficient income for a household with a person with disabilities:

*“I live my sister and my husband, both 73. He has had two strokes and has been confined to bed since 2015. My sister has acute osteoarthritis. I have problems with my spine as well so I’m in constant pain. The list of medications we need is long. We cannot afford most of it.”*

**Lyubov, 76**

### Access to food, medicine, healthcare, and psychosocial support

Eight per cent of people over 70 reported that food was very difficult to access, or mostly very difficult to access, compared to 2 per cent of people 60 to 69.<sup>30</sup> Access to medicines and assistive products was more difficult for people 70 and older: 14 per cent reported access to be very difficult or mostly difficult, compared to 10 per cent of other older people. Additionally, 22 per cent of people over 70 reported low mobility and the lack of accessibility to reach services as the primary obstacle to access medicines and assistive products. This is notably greater than just 9 per cent of those 60 to 69 experiencing this barrier.

Many more people aged 60–69 (73 per cent) felt there was no obstacle for them in reaching a hospital, when necessary, compared to just 64 per cent of people 70 and over. About two-thirds of people in each age cohort said it was easy to access a family doctor.

Of all older people who reported obstacles to accessing medical care, more than 20 per cent of those over 70 reported mobility difficulties and lack of accessibility as barriers for them to reach a doctor. Twenty-five per cent stated that similar obstacles hindered their access to hospitals. Only 5 per cent of people in the younger cohort experienced barriers to accessing a doctor, and only 8 per cent for hospitals. Among people over 70, 21 per cent said that physical accessibility was a barrier to accessing psychosocial support, while no people under 70 said that this was a concern.

## Risks of isolation and lack of communication and information

People over 70 in Ukraine are much more likely to live alone, which increases their isolation and can result in reduced access to information, assistance, and services. Among those surveyed, 44 per cent of people over 70 live alone, compared to 19 per cent of people in their sixties. Most older people report receiving information about aid and services by word of mouth, which requires regular contact with others.

Notably, people over 70 are much less likely to use the internet (40 per cent) than people 60–69 years old (70 per cent). As described in more detail later in this report, many older people (60+) do not use mobile phones. These findings reflect the importance of communication and information for older people, especially those over 70, in a variety of formats.

Several people in the focus groups and others interviewed by HelpAge said that they try to get involved in social activities, help other people, and volunteer.

One woman, 70, interviewed for this report actively volunteers to support others in different ways, including assisting people with clothes and providing blankets and bed linens to the hospital. She said really wants to be useful to the community and to Ukraine. She said:

*“I feel like a part of the community, I like volunteering. I feel better because I work as a volunteer. And I try to do this further. And in the future, even when the war is over, I will be involved in the volunteer movement.”*

**Tetyana, 70**

## Older women are more at risk

Across most topics covered in this research, women reported more concerns, barriers to access, and hardships as a result of the war than men, highlighting that older women face particular risks, which should be understood, analysed, and incorporated into decision-making and policy-making.

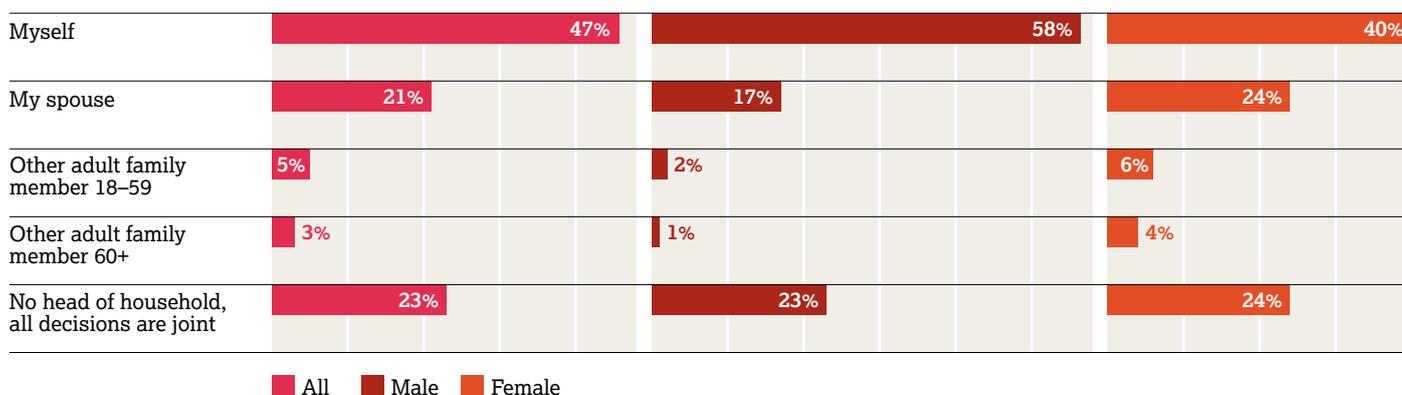
### Income and household decision-making

Among older women, 61 per cent say that they do not have enough money to cover their basic needs, compared to 46 per cent of older men. Older men typically earn higher retirement pensions given that they typically have higher paying jobs while they worked and may have worked longer. Women’s pensions are 30 per cent smaller than men’s, as noted above.

In addition, older men more frequently work after age 60: according to the survey, 30 per cent had some kind of work, including informal or part time work, in the last three months, compared to just 10 per cent of women. More than twice as many men reported currently receiving a salary: 36 per cent to 18 per cent of women. More older women said they lived in a household in which no one worked (51 per cent compared to 48 per cent). Women rely more heavily on government subsidies, monetary support from others, and payments or subsidies from NGOs.

Among older people who live with others, older men are overwhelmingly considered the head of household, meaning that they are more likely to take the lead in decision-making and control finances and expenditures, potentially leaving women at risk when they are unable to share equally in household decisions: 58 per cent of older men considered themselves the head of household, and 24 per cent of older women said their husband was head of the house, as reflected in the graph below.

### Who is the head of your household? (of those who do not live alone)





Bogdan Rozumnyi/HelpAge International

**Unable to evacuate from Mariupol, Svitlana, 74, sheltered in the bathroom of her home under constant bombardment.**

## Food, housing, and access to essential services

Of the 35 per cent of older people who said they have to cut back on food due to costs, 37 per cent were women, and 31 per cent were men. Of the 41 per cent of respondents who reported that there were no problems with their living conditions at home, two-thirds were men. That is, women more often said they had difficulties with their living conditions. Nine per cent reported damage to their homes compared to just 3 per cent of men. This is likely explained by the fact that more older women lived or remain in eastern Ukraine and locations of current or past active fighting. Many more women (17 per cent) said that it was impossible to live a decent life (for example, to buy necessary hygiene products), than men (8 per cent). Slightly more women than men (14 per cent and 10 per cent, respectively) said they lost access to essential healthcare.

As noted above, 11 per cent of older people are internally displaced; there are nearly three times as many internally displaced older women (14 per cent) than older men (5 per cent). In addition, more older men reported receiving humanitarian aid from NGOs and INGOs: 22 per cent of men compared to 13 per cent of women. There are a number of likely factors for this finding, including that older women more often live alone; are less likely to still be in the workforce and thus interacting

with others; and report lower mobile phone and internet use, all resulting in less access to information and connection to networks and organisations providing assistance and support.

## Mental health concerns and isolation

Women were significantly more likely to report mental health concerns (60 per cent versus 47 per cent of men) as a result of the war. Women report feeling much more anxiety and stress than men: 90 per cent of women surveyed sometimes or often felt distress, compared to 67 per cent of men. Similarly, 88 per cent of women sometimes or often felt anxious, yet only 66 per cent of men felt the same way.

In addition, 18 per cent of women and 13 per cent of men mentioned loneliness or isolation as significant concerns.<sup>31</sup> More women (38 per cent) mentioned separation from loved ones as a consequence of the war, compared to men (35 per cent), and 34 per cent of women live alone, compared to just 24 per cent of men. In terms of the disruptive effect of the war, 14 per cent of women reported disagreements within relationships, while just 6 per cent of men noted this. In addition, 13 per cent of women were uncertain about their future place of residence over the next six months, compared to 7 per cent of men. There are nearly three times as many internally displaced older women (14 per cent) than older men (5 per cent).

## Obstacles to information about assistance

Nearly 30 per cent of older people reported that they need access to information about support but cannot access it; only 5 per cent said that they have enough information. Of those receiving information, 48 per cent heard by word of mouth from friends or relatives; 18 per cent received information from the internet, 18 per cent by SMS or messenger app, and 2 per cent from television.

With information frequently shared by word of mouth, there are real risks that the many older people who live alone, particularly people over 70 and older women, may not access the information that they need. In addition, according to data from a February 2022 representative Info Sapiens survey, 20 per cent of older people did not use mobile phones, compared to just 7 per cent of the total population. Those who do use mobile phones are much less likely to use a smartphone than younger people.<sup>32</sup>

In the survey of 400 older people for this research, 56 per cent said that they use the internet at least once a week. By comparison, 83 per cent of the total population use it once a week.<sup>33</sup> Regarding barriers, 17 per cent of older people have skills to use the internet, but do not have access, while 20 per cent said that they do not have the skills to use the internet. Men were more likely to have internet access and skills. Twenty-eight per cent of older people said that they would prefer to receive information through television.

Both focus group participants and key informants mentioned barriers to internet access for older people in two dimensions: technical problems, i.e., blackouts, low level of internet access in rural areas, frontline areas, and border zones, as well as a low level of 'digital literacy' for some older people.

*"If communication and information about assistance for the elderly were presented better, then, in my opinion, it would make sense. Because I found out about UN assistance via 'word-of-mouth'."*

**Borys, 60**

*"Digital services and technology are not always accessible to the elderly [older people] who often don't know how to use them."*

**NGO representative**



Dmytro Maksymenko/HelpAge International

**Lyubov, 76, and Ihor, 73, were unable to evacuate from Bucha during hostilities.**

## Access to basic goods and services for people with disabilities

In an August 2022 survey by Info Sapiens, 24 per cent of older people reported having a disability compared with 13 per cent among the total population. Specifically, 20 per cent have disabilities that impact their mobility, and 6 per cent were blind or had low vision, which could not be corrected by wearing glasses or contact lenses. Other disabilities were cited less often.<sup>34</sup>

In the survey of older people for this report, which looked at additional aspects of experiences of older people with disabilities, 23 per cent of older people reported having a disability, which is similar to the findings of the August 2022 survey. In this case, 18 per cent of those who reported having a disability were men and 26 per cent were women.

People with low mobility with whom we spoke described particular barriers that they face including access to food (9 per cent), medicine (16 per cent), and routine or emergency medical care (14 per cent) including due to the lack of support to leave home.

Almost half of older people with disabilities have not registered their disability status with the government. Notably, 58 per cent of older women with disabilities have not registered for benefits compared to 22 per cent of men. Of the 14 per cent of older people who did not apply, the reason given was that the disability benefits are less than their retirement pension. According to Ukrainian legislation, once an individual with a disability reaches age 60, they must choose between a retirement pension or disability pension.

However, people who are registered as having a disability are eligible to receive additional benefits, including related to medicine, medical care, transportation, and assistive devices. People with the highest support needs (Group I of three groups of disability defined under Ukrainian law) can continue to receive a disability pension even while receiving their retirement pension. This situation again reflects insufficient information for older people about all sources of benefits they may be eligible for.

Of older people with disabilities surveyed, 35 per cent say they have not registered because the process for doing so is time-consuming, bureaucratic, and requires visits to different agencies. This was true before the war but has become even more difficult with government services disrupted by electricity blackouts, air raid sirens, lack of staff, and in some areas damage and destruction of administrative buildings.

According to information from key informants, the main problems and needs for people with disabilities are: evacuation issues (including difficulties during transportation); provision of medicines and access to healthcare services; lack of assistance and social workers for people with disabilities; and housing for displaced people with disabilities.

**“Providing treatment and access to medicines for people with limited mobility and people with disabilities [should be a priority].”**

NGO representative

**“[We are concerned about:] Difficulties with transportation if people are disabled or immobile. Settlement of people in modular towns. Arrangements for more comfortable housing in such towns.”**

NGO representatives

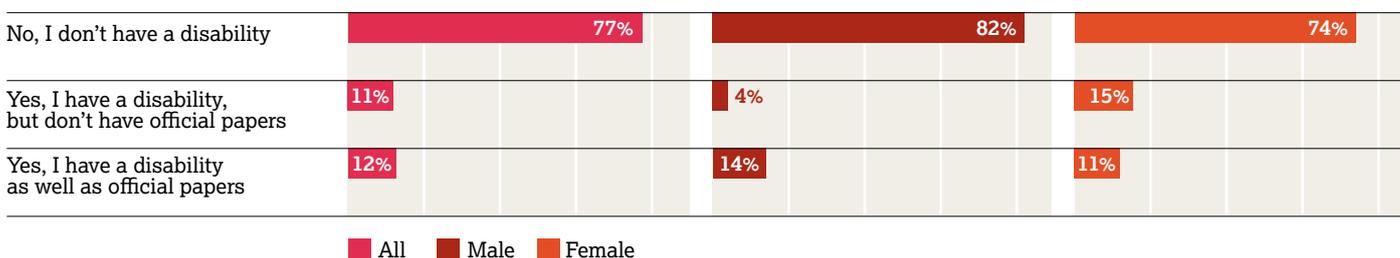
**“Older people with disabilities need evacuation from dangerous areas.”**

Government official

## Discrimination

Overall, 6 per cent of older people surveyed felt that they experienced negative or unfair attitudes related to their age since the war began, primarily in the employment sector and humanitarian aid distribution. In addition, 3 per cent reported experiencing bad or unfair attitudes because of other criteria; half of them because they were Russian speakers. Focus group participants reported no obvious cases of discrimination. They also expressed their feeling that the government has no opportunity to pay more attention to older people.

### Do you have a disability and do you have official papers for it?



### 3. Access to humanitarian and other assistance

Our research found that one in four older people who seek aid from government, NGO, and INGO sources, encounter barriers.

#### Government assistance

Looking at the total population, slightly more older people reported receiving government assistance than the total population. Forty-four per cent of older people and 37 per cent of total population had received social assistance from the state in the past month.<sup>35</sup> In the December 2022 survey of older people for this report, 39 per cent of older people said they applied for state social benefits since the war began and 26 per cent of them encountered barriers or did not receive help.

All people who applied believed they were eligible for the assistance provided, although we could not independently verify this through the survey. In this context, the very low level of access to legal assistance for older people is significant; they have limited options to challenge denials of assistance with professional support. Only 38 per cent of older people (47 per cent of men and 33 per cent of women) reported easy access to legal support.

The situation with access to state administrative services is better. Twenty-seven per cent of older people sought support for services such as the issuing of identity documents, and just 11 per cent encountered barriers.



Jonathan Moore/HelpAge International

**Viktor, 66, who’s house was bombed; he now lives in a shelter for internally displaced people in Zaporizhzhia, where he also volunteers to help others: “volunteering is like breathing to me”.**

## NGO and INGO assistance

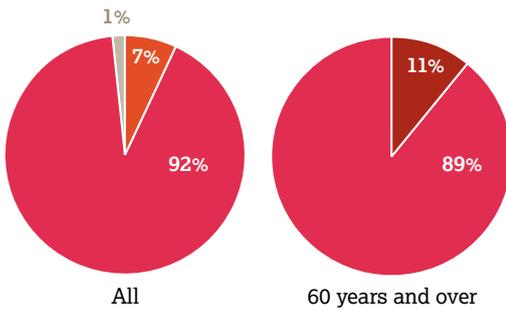
The majority of people we interviewed (84 per cent) stated that they had not received support from NGOs and international organisations during the war. Of those that did, more men reported receiving aid than women. Just over half (55 per cent) of all those who had accessed humanitarian assistance said it was very easy to do so, though women found it more challenging than men. Data from a perception survey conducted by NGO Ground Truth Solutions also found that older people experienced challenges accessing support, with 58 per cent saying it was difficult to access humanitarian assistance.<sup>36</sup> Two-thirds of older people we surveyed could not identify any organisations which provide humanitarian assistance.

## Total assistance from all sources

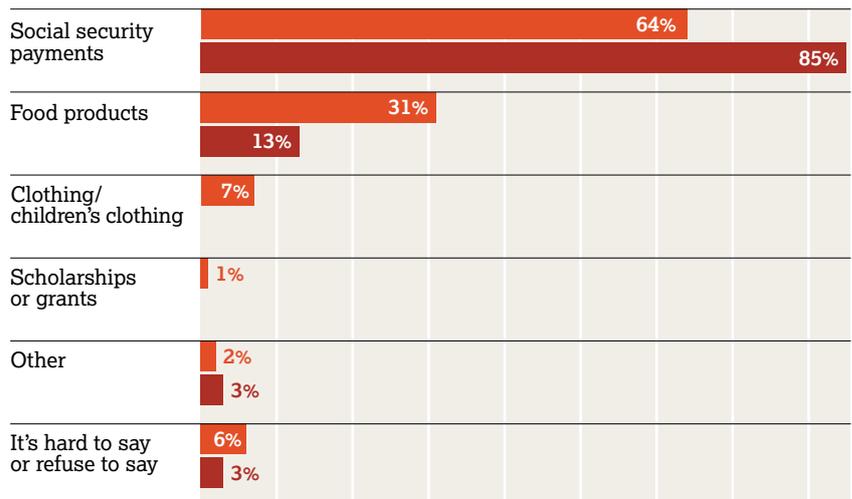
When comparing older people with the total population and looking at all sources of available assistance (government, NGO/INGO, businesses, and individuals), 50 per cent of older people and 47 per cent of the total population received at least one type of assistance in the past month. Given the income insecurity and barriers to accessing services, it is concerning that there is not a greater amount of support going to older people.<sup>37</sup>

Overall, older people are better covered by NGOs and INGOs than the total population, but not by much. Eleven per cent of older people received assistance from these sources in past month compared to 7 per cent among total population. According to our analysis, this figure of 11 per cent may be an underestimation, because older people may not have understood that the support was coming from an NGO. Most recipients of assistance from NGOs received monetary assistance, followed by food.

### Have you received assistance from other states, foreign foundation, or public organisations in the past month?



- Yes, all
- Yes, 60 years and over
- No
- It's hard to say

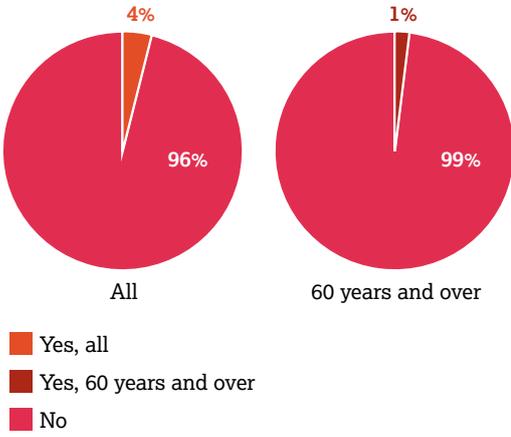


- All
- 60 years and over

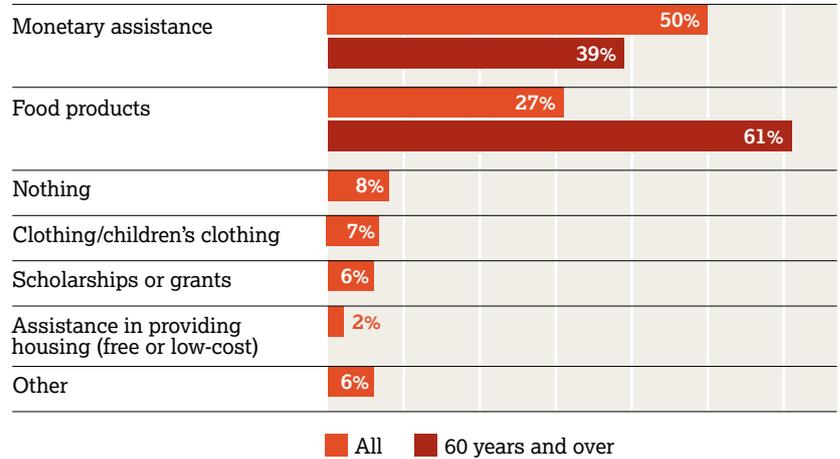
We also asked about assistance from businesses and individuals outside a person's household, which respondents said consisted overwhelmingly of monetary assistance and food. Older people receive less assistance from these sources than the overall population; 1 per cent

compared to 4 per cent received assistance from businesses. Only 5 per cent of older people received support from individuals who were not household members, compared to 10 per cent among total population.

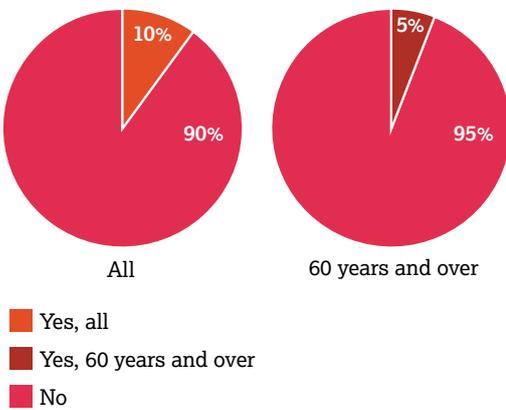
### Have you received assistance from private organisations in the past month?



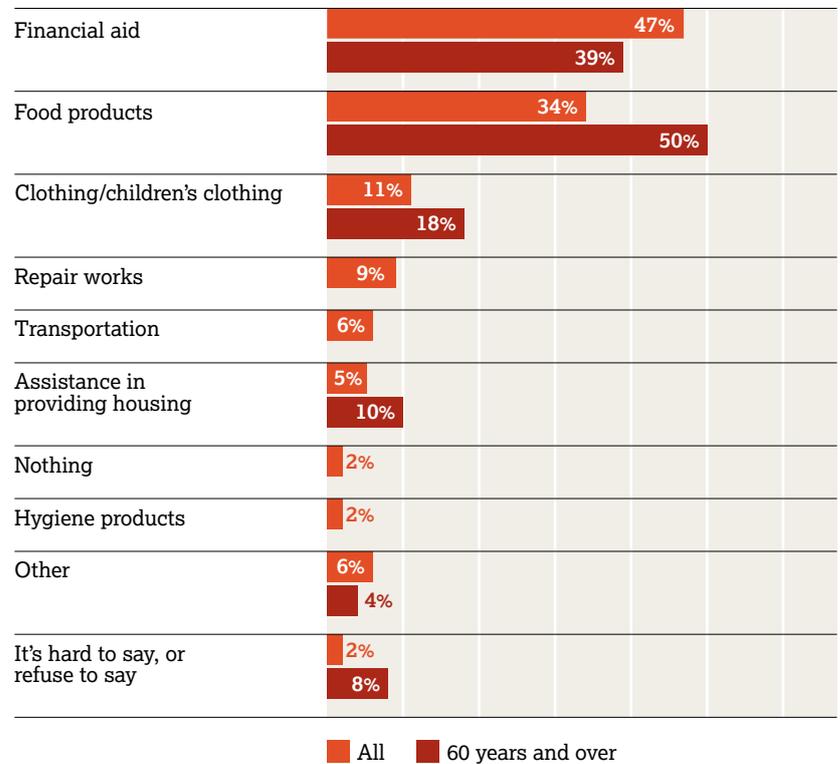
Of those who have received assistance:



### Have you received assistance from private persons (excluding household members) in the past month?



Of those who have received assistance:



Only one woman and one man in the focus groups reported receiving humanitarian assistance, with most saying that did not have information about where to get it. The woman who reported receiving such assistance said that she received it after her children informed her and helped her apply. The man, who received the help from a UN agency, said he found out about it by accident. Internally displaced participants in the focus groups reported more difficulties than others, but they received help from their children and religious communities.

Some of the focus group participants also said they doubted whether they should even seek out assistance, believing others have greater need. Additionally, those who were displaced stated that they did not apply for displaced person status, which would entitle them to additional monthly monetary support. They claimed they did not want to bother others with their requirements, believing that others have more urgent needs. Key informants also noted barriers, as described in more detail later in this report.

*“In general, yes. It could be done, but I don’t do it [register as an internally displaced person]. There is no need. People live in worse conditions, why should I do it?”*

Volodymyr, 64

*“Many services are unavailable because many social workers have left. Territorial rehabilitation centres are closing. Access to medicines, drinking water and food is sometimes absent.”*

Government official

## Differences in monetary assistance provided to older people and others

Looking at monetary assistance from various sources (government, NGO, business, or private individual), the total average amount for both older people and the total population increased from November 2021 to 2022. Older people received a greater percentage increase. However, the total financial assistance which older people received was significantly less than what the overall population received.<sup>38</sup>

From November 2021 to November 2022, the average amount of assistance received by older people increased by 53 per cent from 1,698 UAH (US\$46) to 2,063 UAH (US\$56).

In the same period, monetary assistance among total population increased by 38 per cent from 3,835 UAH (US\$104) to 5,294 UAH (US\$144).

**How much financial assistance including subsidies, did you receive in November 2021? (pre-war)**



**How much financial assistance from all sources, did you receive in November 2022? (during the war)**



■ All ■ 60 years and over UAH = Ukraine hryvnia

# Conclusion

The findings of this report present a troubling picture of the response to older people's humanitarian needs in Ukraine. They reveal older people's human rights are at serious risk as a result of the war.

## Doing better for older people in Ukraine and worldwide

Older people described barriers to accessing items and services necessary for their survival and ability to live a dignified life. They told us that they cut back on food because they could not afford to buy enough. Electricity blackouts that impact the whole of Ukraine

can harm them particularly as they find it harder to stay warm and face greater health risks associated with cold weather. They are more likely to live alone and not have the information they need to receive the services and assistance available to them. The situation for older women, people over 70 and older people with disabilities is particularly challenging.



Dmytro Maksymenko/HelpAge International

Lyudmila, 75, lives alone in Irpin and remained there throughout the fiercest battles.

## What went wrong?

Until the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the humanitarian response in Eastern Ukraine was considered to be leading among humanitarian responses on the inclusion of older people.<sup>39</sup>

Key informants interviewed for this report, including government officials as well as representatives of NGOs, INGOs and UN agencies, described a complex situation with regard to humanitarian assistance. They acknowledged that while there are some programs and projects directed towards older people, the response falls short.

***“A lot of humanitarian aid is provided for Ukraine. Both by the government and international institutions. But the problem of this target group [older people] is that this aid is not reaching it.”***

**Government official**

They recognise that older people are among those facing the most significant risks. However, they acknowledge that, while humanitarian assistance to older people has increased in line with the scale of the humanitarian response, responses have become less targeted.

***“As for the humanitarian response, I would say that assistance programmes have become less targeted. If, before February [2022], organisations selected people who should receive assistance very carefully, finding the most vulnerable of the most vulnerable, now the need is such that everyone applies for assistance.”***

**NGO representative**

Without targeted programming, older people have fewer chances to access aid, including because of lower access to information, isolation, and the lack of accessibility of available services. Sharing of information via the internet and online registration for humanitarian support was also recognised as a risk.

***“These people lack certain skills and don’t know how to register and receive this humanitarian aid and where to receive these hygienic articles or medicines, and so on.”***

**Government official**

Those interviewed also recognised that the scale of the assistance directed to older people was not sufficient to meet their increasing needs.

***“The main problem is to provide housing for people and evacuation. It’s necessary to look for accommodation options for older people; it is a great challenge now.”***

**NGO representative**

## Lessons for the humanitarian system in Ukraine and beyond

The challenges to including older people in the humanitarian response speak to wider problems in the humanitarian system. Previous research by HelpAge and others has found that, faced with the frequency and scale of today’s humanitarian crises, organisations often resort to one-size-fits-all programmes that can be delivered at scale<sup>40</sup> and fail to uphold older people’s rights. Experience from other crises has shown that, while age mainstreaming is accepted in principle, the scale and intensity of need prevented humanitarians from taking a more nuanced approach.<sup>41</sup>

Faced with an immediate and large-scale crisis in Ukraine, humanitarian assistance was understandably focussed on meeting the needs of the largest numbers of people in the fastest possible way. However, as this research shows, a focus on business as usual in programming and digitalisation of the response failed to meet the specific needs of older people and ensure that they had information and access to the general support available. In so doing, the humanitarian response in Ukraine has fallen short of humanitarian principles and failed to protect and uphold the rights of the many older people affected by the conflict.

The scale and intensity of the Ukraine crisis cannot be underestimated. However, as international law comes under threat worldwide, as the effects of climate change are felt and as conflicts and natural disasters continue to displace large numbers of people, humanitarian need will continue to grow. Humanitarian organisations will continue to come under pressure to do more with less.

To ensure the equal treatment and dignity of older people, principles that underpin all human rights, humanitarian actors must consider the particular support and actions that enable older people to fully realise their rights.

# Recommendations

**Based on this research and the experiences that older people have shared, we have included detailed recommendations which we believe can serve as an important guide to all those working in Ukraine to protect and support those at risk, and can also strengthen humanitarian systems more broadly. Above all, older people's views must inform decision-making and efforts meant to support them.**

- 1. The Government of Ukraine, UN agencies and I/NGOs must uphold the rights of older women and men and proactively address their needs in the humanitarian response to the war in Ukraine.**
- 2. In line with their human rights obligations, humanitarian actors' projects should prioritise support for older people, in particular older women, and people over 70, due to the specific risks they face and the barriers to accessing essential goods and services and humanitarian assistance, including access to financial assistance, information, food, medicines, healthcare, transportation, in-home care and support services, and psychological support services**
- 3. Humanitarian actors should ensure that older people have a voice in decision-making, in line with their human rights obligations and commitments to accountability to affected populations. Specifically, they should actively support the engagement, participation, empowerment, agency, and autonomy of older people and incorporate their perspectives and experiences in plans, programmes, and monitoring.**
- 4. Humanitarian actors should regularly collect, analyse, report, and use data on older people disaggregated by age cohort, gender, and disability. They should use the information to inform policy and programmes, and publicly share their data and findings with others to achieve greater reach and inclusion of older people.**
- 5. Humanitarian actors should develop and implement policies and hire and train staff with the skills and knowledge to deliver age, gender, and disability responsive approaches, in close consultation with older people.**
- 6. The Government of Ukraine should introduce policies that provide incentives for the retention and employment of older people.**
- 7. There should be greater social and legal support for older people to receive assistance and social benefits, including support in registering with the government as a person with a disability.**

- 8.** Humanitarian organisation and government websites, phone numbers, and informational hotlines regarding assistance to older people should be widely and frequently promoted.
- 9.** Information about assistance, including entitlements and distribution modalities, should be communicated via television, radio, organisations working to support older people, and social service organisations, as well as via phone calls, SMS, and messenger apps. Information should be distributed in a variety of formats, including in sign language, braille, easy-to-read formats, and using images.
- 10.** Means of communication should be provided for older people, including mobile phones and internet, televisions, radio, generators, or power banks, along with education and support services on using the devices.



Bogdan Rozumnyi/HelpAge International

Community safe spaces that have been set up across Ukraine serve as a place for many older people to receive information about available support.

# Appendix 1: Methodology

## Quantitative research

We conducted a representative survey of 400 older men and women, of whom 211 were 60–69 years old, 117 were 70–79 years old, and 72 were 80 and older. There were 256 female and 144 male respondents. The survey was conducted from 28 December 2022 to 4 January 2023 via computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) and random generation of mobile phone numbers of citizens aged 60 and older. The survey was conducted in all regions of Ukraine, except the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Sevastopol, and areas of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts under the temporary military control of the Russian Federation.

Interviewees were given the option of speaking in Ukrainian or Russian. When asking respondents about the consequences of the war on their lives, we requested they name only current concerns, not past problems that have been resolved. On average, each interview lasted 26,5 minutes. The marginal theoretical error for the entire sample is 4.9 per cent.

After completion of the survey, we applied weighting using the following parameters: age, gender, region of residence and size of settlement of residence prior to 24 February 2022, using Ukrainian State Statistics Service data on population distribution as of 1 January 2022.

Additionally, from 12-18 December 2022, Info Sapiens conducted a nationally representative computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) survey of 1,000 individuals aged 16 and over from across Ukraine. The survey included 285 people over 60. This survey provided insights into some of the differences in experiences between people 60 and older and the total Ukrainian population since February 2022.

The percentages in the tables can constitute 99 per cent or 101 per cent instead of 100 per cent due to rounding.

## Qualitative research

We also conducted 10 in-depth individual interviews, eight by telephone and two in person with key informants (KIs) involved in humanitarian assistance and response, including eight key informants from non-governmental organisations and two key informants from government agencies. Representatives from the following organisations and agencies were interviewed: HelpAge (two interviews), Let's Help, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), National Assembly of People with Disabilities, Right to Protection (R2P), Turbota pro Litnih v Ukraini, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Kyiv state regional administration (Pereyaslav – Khmelnytskyi Center for Social Protection of Pensioners and Persons with Disabilities); Department of Social Policy (Kyiv territorial center of social service and social protection of the population of the Holosiivsky district).

Key informants had worked in the organisation for at least six months and participated in or led projects and programmes for older people (60+) since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine.

We also conducted two focus group discussions (FGDs) with older people over 60 by video conference: one group of seven women and a separate group of six men.

- Each group included two people over 70.
- There were two internally displaced people in each group.
- Each group included people from both cities and rural areas.
- People in the groups were from different regions, including from areas which have experienced active conflict, have been temporarily under the military control of the Russian Federation, or both, including the Luhansk region and Iziium and other locations in the Kharkiv region.
- There were three people with disabilities in each group.

## Limitations of the research

- The quantitative survey does not include Ukrainian men and women who have gone abroad.
- The quantitative survey does not cover settlements under the temporary military control of the Russian Federation in 2022, where Ukrainian operators do not provide mobile telephone services.
- Although the telephone numbers for the quantitative survey were randomly generated, the survey did not capture any older people living in hospitals or residential institutions, such as homes for older people or institutions for people with disabilities.<sup>42</sup>
- The quantitative survey does not include people who do not use mobile communication, a disproportionate number of whom are over 60. Since Russia's full-scale invasion, Info Sapiens has not conducted in-person interviews in frontline areas or areas of active conflict, for security reasons. The use of in-person interviews meant those without mobile phones could be included. The differences in mobile phone use for older Ukrainians and the rest of the population are described in more detail in this report.

## Research principles and ethical considerations

Info Sapiens complies with ICC/ESOMAR research standards. All interviews were conducted voluntarily and confidentially. Interviewees gave verbal informed consent. Qualitative interviews were conducted one-on-one. The only personal information collected was the respondent's name and telephone number, which served as a control. Personal information was stored separately from the interview data.

For the quantitative survey, interviewers do not see the respondent's telephone numbers, which are dialled centrally, and do not have access to the respondent's personal data. The data is stored on the Info Sapiens server separately from the respondent's answers. The data will be deleted three months after the project's completion.

Info Sapiens informed focus group participants and key informants that the discussion and interviews would be recorded. Transcripts were prepared without identification of the respondents. During air raid alerts, the interviewers stopped the interview and were required to go to a bomb shelter. If an air raid alert happened during the interview, the interviewer asked the respondents to go to the shelter and continue the interview there (when possible, to do so privately). If the respondent declined to go to a shelter, the interviewer went to the shelter and asked the respondent when would be a good time to continue the interview.



Dmytro Maksymenko/HelpAge International

**Despite vision impairment, Viktor, 65, continues his part-time job as a chess teacher in Irpin.**

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# Endnotes

## Summary

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26. Ibid.
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28. Sample size constitutes 1,000 Ukrainian citizens aged 16+. The methodology of February 2022 survey was face-to-face interview at the respondent's home, and the methodology for the December 2022 survey was CATI.
29. According to a nationally representative Info Sapiens study conducted in January 2023, 97 per cent of Ukrainians experienced periods of power outages in the previous two weeks, but the duration varied by household.
30. Reported on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “very difficult to access” and 5 being “free access, have enough”.
31. The researchers note that traditional gender expectations and stereotypes may have a role in these answers, with men potentially less inclined to be open about and share their feelings.
32. Sample size constitutes 1,000 Ukrainian citizens aged 16+, including 285 (29 per cent) people over 60. The methodology of the February 2022 survey was face-to-face interview at the respondent's home.
33. Info Sapiens December 2022 telephone survey of 1,000 Ukrainian citizens aged 16+, including 285 (29 per cent) people over 60, using CATI methodology. The fieldwork took place from 12–18 December 2022.
34. Using the to the Washington Group Short Set of Disability Questions (WGQ).

## 3. Access to humanitarian and other assistance

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## Appendix 1: Methodology

42. The December 2022 report by Amnesty International (see note 10) documented the lack of access to housing for displaced older people, and their placement in institutions, often as a result of the lack of accessible housing and community-based services to support them at home.



Stefan Trappe/HelpAge International

Helena, 91, fled to Lviv with four generations of her family; they now live together in what was a school classroom.

Find out more:

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“I’ve lost the life I knew”

