



Disrupted social and spatial community connections

Research looking at how physical, social and psychological barriers exclude older Ukrainians, particularly those displaced due to war, from community life.

Contents

3	Research summary
5	Research methodology
7	Research findings
13	Recommendations

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This research report was prepared by Sion Jones and Pavlo Stepashko (Hello Places) with the support of colleagues at HelpAge International.

HelpAge International

HelpAge International is a global non-profit organisation that works to improve the lives of older people around the world. We work through the HelpAge global network, an alliance of organisations committed to the wellbeing, dignity and voice of older people. HelpAge International's goal is to improve the lives of older women and men in low- and middle-income countries, especially those in crisis-prone and insecure areas.

Hello Places

Hello Places is a community engagement consultancy that seeks to build the capacity of community groups to bring about positive change in their streets, public spaces and public transportation. This is achieved through inclusive and participatory community research and engagement, training and knowledge sharing, building relationships and networks and providing design and implementation support.



Research summary

Between October 2023 and April 2024, Hello Places and HelpAge International undertook research in 3 communities in Lviv Oblast in western Ukraine to better understand the experiences of older people with regards to their mobility and social inclusion in community life.

We spoke to over 150 older people through telephone surveys and focus groups - a mix of long-term residents and older people displaced because of the ongoing war. We also spoke to leaders of organisations working with older people. We asked older people about how they move around their communities, how that has changed since the full-scale invasion and their displacement into new communities, and what the impact has been on their daily lives and social connectedness.

Going out less, walking less, using public transport less

The research revealed that older people rely primarily on walking and using public transportation to get around. However a deterioration of their mental health due to the ongoing war and their displacement means they are not going out as much as they used to or as much as they'd like to, leading to increased isolation and loneliness. These challenges are compounded however by long existing physical, social and psychological barriers that further exclude older people from community life.

Persistent physical accessibility and social and psychological barriers

Beyond the impact of the ongoing war, older people face physical accessibility barriers including steps and broken sidewalks that make it difficult to walk, a lack of places to sit and rest, and not enough public toilets. Older people with a disability that impacts their mobility are even more greatly impacted by these issues.

Social and psychological factors that further disrupt older people's social connections to the community include not having as much confidence in going out as they would like and a lack of welcoming and inclusive spaces and parks nearby.

Because older people face a number of physical and social barriers that discourage them from going out as much as they would like, the majority of older people we spoke to said they often felt lonely and isolated and that they see friends, family, and neighbours less often and are less physically active than they would like to be – which can then compound the mental health issues that further discourage them from going out.

Displacement disrupting connections

A significant finding of the research is that older people who have been displaced due to the war have faced the additional challenge of re-building social and spatial connections in their new host community. They are less confident going out in the community and have less familiarity and knowledge of places they can go compared to long term residents and are more likely to experience loneliness and isolation.

Changes older people would like to see

When asked what improvements and changes older people would like to see that would improve their social connectedness to community life, they asked for more outdoor spaces to socialise, rest and relax. Leaders of organisations working with older people agreed that having more inclusive streets and shared spaces for socialising would improve their access to community services, encourage them to participate more in community life, and improve their mental health and social connectedness.

Recommendations

This research report highlights the challenges and barriers older people face in terms of their full participation in community life. The report ends with several recommendations of how city and local governments, community organisations and other stakeholders including humanitarian agencies, can better support older people in Ukraine during the ongoing war by strengthening their inclusion, accessibility and connections to people and spaces in their communities.



Research methodology

This report is based on field and remote research that was undertaken between October 2023 and April 2024.

The research engaged with older women and men living in Lviv oblast, primarily in the city of Lviv and the nearby towns of Drohobych and Sambir. We conducted focus groups and group walks, a telephone survey of 149 older people, and key informant interviews with representatives of organisations working with older people. We analysed the data collected according to gender, age, disability and displacement status.

Research questions

The research sought to answer the following research questions, based on the lived experiences of older people, with attention given to the experiences of older people holding intersecting characteristics and identities including gender, disability, older age and displacement status.

- How do older people get around their communities and participate fully in community life in their towns and cities, and how has this changed since the full scale invasion?
- What are the barriers and issues that discourage older people from going out in streets and public spaces and travelling by public transport?
- What are the consequences of these barriers on social connectedness, physical health, and access to services?
- What are the specific experiences of displaced older people in their new communities compared to long term residents?

Focus groups and group walks

In October 2023, we held focus groups and group walks in Lviv and Drohobych to identify and highlight issues that older people face in streets and public spaces. Each group had 10 older participants, with one being an all women group, and the other consisting of 8 older women and 2 older men. Following a focus group discussion, participants were taken on a short local walk where they pointed to issues and challenges they face in streets and public spaces. Consideration was given to enable older people with disabilities to participate in the guided walks however all participants were able to participate in the walks without significant assistance. Unfortunately some of the disaggregation data for focus group participants was not collected and so the analysis is somewhat limited by this.

Telephone survey

Of the 149 telephone survey respondents, 116 were older women and 33 were older men. 88 of the survey respondents were aged 60-69, a further 47 were aged 70-79 and 14 said they were aged 80 years or older. We used the Washington Group Short Set of Questions on Functioning to identify older people with a disability. Of the respondents, 77% said they experienced some difficulty or a lot of difficulty with their vision. 73% reported some difficulty or a lot of difficulty climbing stairs, while 55% reported difficulty remembering or concentrating.

With regards to their displacement status, 102 of the survey respondents said they were displaced from other parts of the country and Kharkiv, Kramatorsk, Bakhmut, Severodonetsk, Lysychansk as places they used to live. All of these towns and cities were significantly damaged by the war and as of April 2024, Bakhmut, Severodonetsk, Lysychansk remain under Russian control.

Interviews

We also interviewed 3 representatives from community organisations that work closely with older people in the research area of Ukraine. These organisations were Ptakha Ukrainy, Zoloti Roky and the Charitable Foundation of Voznytsky. Between them, they work closely with local and displaced older people and people with disabilities that have moved from conflict affected, providing shelter, medical and mental health and psychosocial support.

Limitations of the research

This report is an initial piece of research into the experiences of older people in public spaces in Ukraine. While it provides initial insights into key areas of concern, a more in-depth study would need to address a number of issues - including the different experiences of older people with disabilities, differences between more urban, peri urban and rural communities and the differences between communities that have suffered greater physical damage due to the war. While the research touches on public transportation, there is more to explore here in terms of accessibility, comfort, and the suitability of routes for older people and their day to day travel requirements.



Research findings

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has impacted the lives of millions of older Ukrainians. Whether remaining in their hometowns and cities under the new reality of war or fleeing danger to find some degree of safety in communities in the west of the country - their daily lives were changed overnight. Older people's social and spatial connections with people and places in their communities were inevitably disrupted, daily habits and routines changed, and mental health and social connectedness were eroded.

As a result of the ongoing war, but also long standing physical and social barriers, older people in Ukraine face several challenges that discourage and prevent them from fully participating and engaging with the communities they live in.

Older people rely almost entirely on walking and public transport to get around their communities and most go out several times a week.

80% said they currently walk somewhere daily or several times a week. 70% said they use public transportation at least once a week, although 42% said they face physical accessibility barriers when doing so. 68% of older people said they almost never use a private vehicle or taxi.

92% said they walked or relied on public transport to get to the local shops to buy food and other goods, 66% said it's how they travel to their local health clinic and 49% said it's how they get to local parks and green spaces. Other destinations included places of worship, community centres and government service access points.

A reliance on walking and public transport to move around the community, go shopping, access health services and visit parks and green spaces and means making sure these ways of getting around work for older people is particularly important.

However, the ongoing war has had a significant impact on older people and their connections to community life with a majority going out in the community less than before.

Despite living in the relative safety of cities and towns in the west of Ukraine, 51% of the respondents said they were now going out in the community less than before the full-scale invasion. Of the older people displaced into new communities, 65% said they went out less than before.

Representatives of older people's organisations that we spoke to said that it was often difficult to encourage older people to participate, that their mood was low due to the ongoing war, and that they often felt discouraged from going outside.

This means older people are seeing friends, family, and neighbours less often, spending less time in public squares and parks and being further marginalised from community life. 41% said they see friends and family less often than they would like and 36% of older people said they currently almost never go to a park or green space. Of these, 81% had a mobility related disability.

57% of older people said they sometimes feel lonely, rising to 71% of older people who have been displaced into new communities.

Spending time in parks and green spaces can often bring mental health benefits by giving people spaces to reflect, relax and socialise. They can also encourage physical exercise which is particularly important in older age.

“I only go out for walks when I need to. I sometimes go to sit on a bench near the house and breathe some fresh air.”

Survey respondent

“I almost never leave the house. It's difficult to move. There are very few benches, they are only in parks.”

Survey respondent

“My husband doesn't want to go anywhere but I try to go for a walk every evening in the park, it's nice to see other people. I like the city, all the trees.”

Older woman focus group participant, Lviv

Rather than concern about the ongoing air raids, many spoke about a deterioration of their mood and mental health as the reason they are less enthusiastic about going anywhere. Alongside this, they also said they face significant physical, social and psychological barriers to going out in the community.

Only 29% said that concerns about their personal safety due to the war is what discourages them from going out in the community as much as before. Some of the older people we spoke to said that before the full-scale invasion, they would go for walks, visit a park or exercise outdoors several times a week. They said that now they almost never do those things.

Older people who have been displaced from other parts of the country are particularly reluctant to go outside, often lacking confidence and familiarity with their new communities.

39% of older people who have been displaced to new communities said they felt unfamiliar with the area and unaware of places they could go and visit. 53% said that they did not feel as confident going out in the community as they would like to be. When we spoke to leaders of organisations working with older people, they also mentioned that displaced people in particular struggle to find their way around and to access services available to them.

Displacement into new communities means people lack the social and spatial connections they had in their home communities. Displaced people are less likely to know places that are nice to go to in the community, or how to get there. These connections can be rebuilt over time, but the risk of increasing isolation and exclusion is significant.

“I like that there are signs in the street telling me about interesting places to go or things to see.”

Focus group participant, Lviv

“I came to Drohobych from Lysychansk. I was impressed that I could follow signs to get to the historical church in the town. I take many photos of the flowers on my phone.”

Focus group participant, Drohobych

Physical barriers that existed before the war often discourage older people from going out in the community. 76% said that physical inaccessibility due to steps, broken pavements and road crossings that feel unsafe was a problem.

While 82% of respondents with a self-identified mobility disability, the data shows that accessibility barriers discourage a majority of older people from going out in the community, whether they have a disability or not.

32% said that they felt worried for their safety when trying to cross the road. This can discourage older people from going out at all, or if they do, severely limit the places and spaces they can get to.

“I sometimes have to jump over potholes, I wish there were more nice walking paths.”

Focus group participant, Drohobych

“The pavements are in reasonably good condition in the centre but elsewhere they are broken, narrow, and sometimes non existent.”

Focus group participant, Drohobych

“A piece of metal sticks out of the pavement. People have tripped there. I’ve tried calling to get it fixed but I can’t get through.”

Older woman focus group participant, Lviv

Both older women and men said a lack of public toilet facilities also made it difficult for them to go outside.

Older people can experience anxiety and be discouraged from going outside when they cannot be confident of access to public toilet facilities if and when required and the issue can generate feelings of shame and embarrassment. 31% of older women and 42% of older men said that a lack of public toilets discouraged them from going out in the community.

Some older people said they face challenges using public transportation.

Many older people struggle with inaccessible public transportation vehicles, such as high floors, particularly on older trams in the city of Lviv. Many respondents said that when the bus driver sees an older person waiting for the bus, they often continue driving because they know that older people do not have to pay. Others said that they struggle to hear the announcements on the trams.

“Sometimes I can’t hear the tram stop announcements but not all of the trams have displays either.”

Focus group participant, Lviv

Many older people said that a lack of nice public spaces to socialise and places to sit and rest meant they didn't go out as much as they'd like, or socialise with friends and neighbours as much.

69% said that their community lacked places to sit and rest while 45% feel that there are no nice public spaces to socialise that they can easily get to in their communities. Some spoke of enjoying visiting a park or public space, but that it usually means travelling on public transport to get there. People with a disability were less likely to spend time in a public square or visit a park.

Benches and other resting points are important to support older people as they walk around their town or community. They provide a point to rest on their way to their destination, but also act as opportunities for social interaction with neighbours, friends, and family.

56% of respondents said they almost never spend time in squares or public spaces, with 35% saying they did so less often than before the full-scale invasion. People with a disability were even less likely to visit public squares.

Similarly, only 36% said they visited a park or green space at least once a week. 48% said this was less often than before the full-scale invasion, while 81% of those who said they almost never go to a park or green space, had a disability.

“I wish we had some small parks and places to sit and rest, read a book.”

Focus group participant, Drohobych

“I like sitting near the church where there are nice benches. But there are hardly any nice parks or green spaces.”

Focus group participant, Drohobych

“My knees are bad so when I go out and walk it's important I can rest, but there are no benches along the way to sit on.”

Focus group participant, Drohobych

We asked older people what changes they would like to see in their communities. They asked for more places to sit, rest, socialise with friends and neighbours, and in particular with other older people.

Their responses show a clear demand for more inclusive streets and public spaces that would provide them with opportunities to socialise, build social connections in the community, and even to exercise outdoors.

- 64% asked for more benches and places to rest
- 48% want more public spaces to socialise with other older people
- 42% would like more places to rest and relax
- 25% suggested more spaces to exercise outdoors
- 37% want more public toilets for both women and men

When we spoke to leaders of organisations working with older people, they echoed the call for more spaces, indoors and outdoors, where older people can feel comfortable and included. Such spaces, they argued, would improve older people's mental health, provide more opportunities for socialising and help engage them in broader community life.

To successfully create streets and public spaces that succeed at being inclusive social spaces for older people, the numerous physical, social and psychological barriers identified in this research must also be addressed. While physical accessibility is undeniably essential, creating welcoming spaces where older people feel confident and a sense of belonging is also vital. With more such spaces, towns and cities in Ukraine can create communities that are more inclusive of older people and support them to maintain and rebuild their social and spatial connectedness.



Recommendations

Based on the research findings and the preferences expressed by older people themselves for improvements to their communities, we make the following recommendations so that older people, including those displaced, are better included in streets, public spaces and transport in their communities.

Ensuring the engagement and participation of older people

1. National government and city authorities should meaningfully engage older people as full stakeholders when planning streets, public spaces, and public transport services and related policies and the importance of these spaces and forms of mobility for the inclusion of older people in community life.
2. Civil society and NGOs should establish and build the capacity of groups of older people to understand their own diverse experiences of streets, public spaces and public transportation, and create advocacy strategies to influence policymakers.

Creating more inclusive public spaces and streets

3. Streets, public spaces, and public transportation should all meet strict and well-established physical accessibility standards to ensure the inclusion of all older people with and without disabilities.
4. Towns and cities should create more public spaces and green spaces for older people to sit, rest and socialise. These spaces should be numerous, easy to get to and near to where older people live.
5. Good quality, accessible and interesting walkable and wheelchair accessible routes should be clearly marked and signposted to support and encourage older people to walk and use wheelchairs. Traffic speeds should be reduced, and road crossings made safer to encourage walking.
6. Well maintained accessible public restroom facilities should be provided and clearly signposted to give older people confidence in their communities.

Support for displaced older people in their new communities

7. Older people, particularly those who have been displaced to new communities, should be provided with additional support and guidance to build their knowledge and awareness of walkable routes, public spaces, green spaces, and how to use public transportation. Without this, their isolation is exacerbated.

