



# “Every year it gets harder to hold on”

*Older people in Ukraine want to be seen and heard*

## **Executive summary**



**HelpAge**

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# Executive summary

## The oldest crisis in the world

There are nearly nine million older Ukrainians – one quarter of the total population. As a result, the war in Ukraine has become known as the world’s oldest humanitarian crisis. Older people continue to endure the brutal impact of this war whilst facing disproportionate barriers to accessing basic needs and essential services, due to financial pressures and limited accessibility of vital services, assistance and information. Older women, older people over 70, and older people with disabilities face even greater risks.

All older people are entitled to the same human rights as others. This includes the right to access humanitarian protection, assistance and information in times of crisis, alongside universal basic human rights that apply to us all; including the right to life, water, food, healthcare and shelter. HelpAge International’s decades of experience and numerous research studies show that despite these rights, older people are overlooked during humanitarian emergencies, time and time again.

This report paints a similar picture. It shows that despite increased focus on Ukraine’s older people from humanitarian organisations and the Government of Ukraine, and some improvements in services for older people since the research we conducted in 2022, the situation remains extremely difficult for older people, with many of their basic rights not being upheld, their needs going unmet, and the risks they face increasing, not reducing.

*“Over time, the amount of aid has significantly decreased. Meanwhile, the needs of people who have been away from home for years have not.”*  
Anatolii, 75

To develop effective solutions, it is essential to understand the specific challenges and barriers that prevent older people from realising their rights and meeting their needs. Even in the event of cessation of hostilities, the demographic and economic context in Ukraine requires a rapid and full-scale acceleration of policies and approaches that properly address the rights and needs of older people. Action is needed now to address these risks and ensure that older people no longer have their basic human rights denied, but instead can live in freedom, with security, safety, dignity and their fundamental rights upheld.

Findings in this report are primarily from a March 2025 national survey of 400 older Ukrainians, as well as focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews, and individual testimonies from older people, conducted by the Ukrainian research firm Info Sapiens and commissioned by HelpAge. Data has been disaggregated

based on age, gender and disability to better understand the specific experiences of different cohorts of older people. The findings have been compared to the first wave of research conducted in 2022, and where possible, corroborated by other sources as part of a literature review. Using this rich data, we can tell the story of older people in Ukraine who, three years into the war, continue to face severe hardship and the denial of their basic human rights.

## What has happened since 2022?

Three years on since our research found that older people’s human rights were at risk of not being upheld in the humanitarian response in Ukraine, there have been some positive changes. More older people have been able to access humanitarian assistance, and government and non-governmental organisation (NGO) policies are shifting in recognition of both demographic changes and the scale of need. Some specific areas which were of significant concern in 2022, such as the number of electricity outages and the impact that had on services for older people, have seen significant improvement.

However, overall the situation facing older people is deteriorating and those interviewed for this research recognised that the scale of the assistance directed to older people was not sufficient to meet their increasing needs.

*“I want our problems to be understood. Some older people have sons at war, some can’t get out of bed, some, like us, try to hold on. But our needs don’t decrease – on the contrary, they grow every year. And we need support not only right after displacement, but after a year, two, three, because the challenges don’t get smaller.”*  
Liudmyla, 62

Those involved in delivering the humanitarian response know that older people are among those facing the most significant risks; but there is simply not enough resource, or enough targeting of older people and their diverse experiences, to address the risks they face and to fully uphold the rights of older people across Ukraine to live in safety and with dignity.

*“It feels like we’ve stopped being heard or understood. As if we’ve become invisible.”*  
Valentyna, 97

Without a significant increase in targeted programming, older people will continue to have less access to aid, partly because of isolation, lower access to information, and the lack of accessibility to available services. Despite an improvement in digital literacy amongst some older people, the sharing of information via the internet and online registration for humanitarian support continues to result in older people missing out on available assistance. At the same time, the growing concerns around older people's mental health need a detailed and comprehensive response as the impact of war, financial insecurity and isolation on older people takes its toll. Huge financial pressures on older people currently limit their independence and their ability to live in dignity with access to basic necessities in safe housing. Urgent action is needed now to enable older people to retain or regain their independence, with the right support systems put in place around them.

### Older women are more at risk

Older women in Ukraine continue to face significantly more financial difficulties and barriers to accessing essential goods and assistance, as well as increased mental health concerns:

- 68 per cent of women report that their total income is not enough to cover their basic needs, compared to 51 per cent of men.
- 33 per cent of older women have difficulties with access to medicines and medical supplies, compared to 26 per cent of men.
- Women's average pensions are 30 per cent smaller than those of men and they are less likely to be in work (17 per cent compared to 29 per cent of men).
- Older women are less likely to use the internet than men, by 17 per cent.
- 47 per cent of women live alone, compared to 28 per cent of men.
- 69 per cent of older women reported mental health problems because of the war, compared to 52 per cent of men.

All of the above mean increased risks around poverty, isolation and mental health concerns, and a lack of access to information about organisations providing assistance.

*“Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night – and can't fall asleep again. Anxiety, despair, helplessness. I often find myself crying for no reason.”*

Nataliia, 65



Oleksandr, 60, lost his sight in a workplace accident and now relies on a homemade cane, with no access to treatment.

Marina Kyrynska/HelpAge International

### Risks increase with age

The risks facing older people in Ukraine continue to increase as they age:

- Older people over 70 (27 per cent) rely significantly more on modest government pensions, subsidies and payments compared to those in their 60s (18 per cent).
- People over 70 are less likely to work and thus to have salary income. Only 9 per cent had work in the last 3 months, compared to 33 per cent of those aged 60–69.
- People over 70 were almost twice as likely to need help with cleaning, cooking, shopping, and personal care than those aged 60–69, but less likely to apply for state support by 12 per cent.
- People over 70 have much greater difficulties accessing food: 23 per cent reported that they face obstacles compared to 18 per cent of people 60–69.
- Regarding medicines and assistive products, 34 per cent report barriers to accessing them, compared to 28 per cent of those 60–69.
- People over 70 are significantly more likely to live alone (51 per cent) than those in their 60s (31 per cent).

People over 70 told us repeatedly of difficulties with mobility and a lack of accessibility in reaching doctors and hospitals, making this a significant problem for people aged over 70 accessing adequate and safe healthcare. People over 70 also experienced significant barriers to registering their disability and accessing further support as a result.

***“I can’t walk well; I can only move around with a walker. I haven’t applied for disability status – it’s too difficult, time-consuming, and requires travelling to the hospital and standing in queues. I’m physically too weak for that.”***

Valentyna, 97

Significantly more older people over 70 live alone (51 per cent) than those aged between 60–70 (31 per cent), and people over 70 use the internet much less often than those aged 60–69, with 55 per cent of people over 70 using it compared to 81 per cent of those between 60–69. Both these factors contribute further to isolation as well as low-income levels and barriers to accessing information and assistance.

***“Now – I am alone. The war has taken my home and the ability to communicate with loved ones and my community. That’s what I find hardest. It gets worse over time. Over the past year, I’ve felt more isolated and lonely. What worries me most is what’s next?”***

Anatolii, 75



Liubov, 83, in a shelter in Lviv.

## More barriers for older people with disabilities

Twenty-seven per cent of older people reported having a disability, which is an increase of 4 per cent from 2022. Almost half of the older people we spoke to (44 per cent) said they did not register their disability with the state because of the complexity of the procedure. This is a rise of 9 per cent since 2022, and was cited as the main obstacle to accessing official disability status and associated benefits. Our research found that the number of older people with disabilities who applied for state aid actually decreased by 10 per cent compared to December 2022. More than a quarter (31 per cent) of those who did apply said they faced barriers during the process of receiving aid.

***“I had a workplace injury and suffer serious consequences. I didn’t apply for disability – I didn’t want to get involved with the bureaucracy. Things got really bad – the doctor prescribed medicine costing 5,000 UAH (\$120)! That’s almost my entire pension. I don’t know how much longer I’ll have the strength and energy to look after the house, the land, and my husband, with a disability. My body is breaking down not by days but by hours.”***

Liudmyla, 66

Older people with disabilities have more difficulties in accessing and meeting basic needs:

- 31 per cent struggled to access food compared to 14 per cent of those without disabilities.
- 26 per cent struggled to access hospitals compared to 18 per cent of people without disabilities.
- 31 per cent struggled to access mental health support compared to 14 per cent of older people without disabilities.

Older people with disabilities are less likely to use the internet than those without by 10 per cent, further limiting their access to information, assistance and communication networks.

## Mental health under greater strain

The war continues to have a major and growing impact on the mental health of older people – 63 per cent of older people told us that their mental health has been negatively affected because of the war, up from 55 per cent in December 2022. Only 6 per cent of respondents say that the hostilities have not impacted on their lives at all; fewer than the 11 per cent who said this in the first wave of the research in 2022.

Eighty per cent of respondents reported experiencing anxiety and sadness often or sometimes within a four week period, and 53 per cent said their psychological state affected their ability to perform daily tasks often or sometimes over the same period.

*“At our age, we’ve essentially become poor and homeless... I often feel completely hopeless and in despair.”*

Nataliia, 65

## Not enough money for basic necessities and adequate housing

Financial assistance is the biggest need that older people reported, with many telling us they do not have enough money for the most basic necessities. In this research, 62 per cent of older people told us that their income does not cover basic needs, including food, clothing, hygiene items, utilities, and medical services. This figure has risen by 6 per cent since 2022. This is despite an increase in the number of older people working, and an increase in those receiving humanitarian assistance.

Of the older people who told us that their income does not cover their basic needs:

- 93 per cent struggle to afford food.
- 91 per cent struggle to afford hygiene items.
- 88 per cent struggle to afford medicines.
- 87 per cent struggle to afford warm clothes and shoes.

This financial situation coupled with intense fighting in certain parts of Ukraine, and the limited mobility of a significant number of the older people we spoke to (20 per cent), is severely impacting on older people’s access to the most basic necessities.

This includes housing and accessing the right to adequate shelter. Whether living near the frontline or in rental housing having been displaced, housing was one of the main issues raised by older people. Two-thirds of older people (65 per cent) reported problems with their living conditions, up by 7 per cent from 2022. The cost of renting was reported as a big problem for older people.

*“What worries me the most is the cost of rent. My daughter, son-in-law, and I are all of pension age, and our three pensions barely cover the rent.”*

Valentyna, 97

Eleven per cent of older people said their housing was damaged or destroyed, and 22 per cent said they needed urgent repairs (in December 2022, this figure was 13 per cent).

## Access to information and assistance

More older people access and use the internet since 2022, up to 69 per cent from 56 per cent. The share of those without access has decreased to 11 per cent. This is a positive trend. There remains some distance to go to

ensure no older people miss out on information about assistance, especially for older women, those over 70, and those with disabilities.

## Older people refusing to give up

*“I sing in a choir. You know, I feel very needed. Other people say my energy inspires them. And I’m very pleased with that.”*

Olena, 89

Despite all the challenges older people reported, they spoke of trying to hold on to hope and remaining active, resilient members of their communities. Some described volunteering and teaching they are doing in their villages, whilst others spoke of getting new jobs and finding different ways to support their families. One woman spoke about restarting her business having been displaced, having to endure long journeys to her workshop and shame at the prospect of asking for assistance, but refusing to give up.

*“It is hard for me. But I won’t stop! My advice to older people is look for opportunities to start your own business so you can be independent. I would very much like to see a Ukrainian society supportive of businesses started by older people. I want to run an honest business, pay taxes – and live with dignity, even if the war has turned my life upside down. My message is – older people have strength and experience – don’t give up!”*

Liubov, 64

## The way forward in a changing sector – lessons for the humanitarian system in Ukraine and beyond

As the humanitarian sector goes through reforms and responds to drastically reduced funding levels, it is essential that older people are not left behind. A human rights based approach is the only way to ensure that commitments to localisation and accountability to all people within affected populations are not forgotten, but affirmed and extended. The challenges facing older people relating to the humanitarian system in Ukraine mirror the challenges facing older people caught up in humanitarian crises across the globe.

Specific, targeted, and large-scale programmes and support services are needed to ensure the equal treatment and dignity of older people, and the full upholding of their human rights. For example, to ensure the right to adequate housing, measures should be put in place to ensure older displaced people have the financial means to afford rent and other housing costs. To ensure older people’s right to health is upheld, more mobile

services are needed to overcome mobility and access issues. Support accessing state services may need to be better explained, or information provided in a different format.

These examples alone demonstrate how response programmes need to adjust and adapt to make sure that older people enjoy equal access to essential services and equal enjoyment of their rights.

The scale and intensity of the Ukraine crisis cannot be underestimated. At the same time, the humanitarian community is under more pressure than ever before to make cuts that, time and time again, will impact on groups that need tailored and specific support. To ensure the equal treatment and dignity of older people, humanitarian actors must implement support and policies that protect older people and enable them to fully realise their rights.

## Recommendations

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

- The Government of Ukraine, United Nations (UN) agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) must uphold the rights of older women and men and proactively address their needs in the humanitarian response to the war in Ukraine, paying specific attention to risk areas where needs are increasing, including financial insecurity, housing, and access to food and medicines.
- Building on the increase in older people supported in Ukraine, all humanitarian actors must ensure they specifically prioritise support for older people, systematising and scaling up programmes, in line with their human rights obligations.
- Tailored programming for, and deliberate involvement of, older women, older people over 70, and older people with disabilities, must be a priority for all agencies.
- Humanitarian actors should continue to monitor ceasefire negotiations to prepare contingency plans for a cessation of hostilities, including how to support those older people living near the frontline.
- Humanitarian donors should support programmes that target older people, as an at-risk population who need specific and tailored assistance. In the absence of increasing funding, humanitarian assistance must be better targeted.
- Humanitarian organisations and government services must ensure information is made more accessible.
- Government agencies and any humanitarian actors delivering a health-based response should ensure that all medical facilities are accessible, available, affordable and reachable for older people with disabilities and where this isn't possible, increase mobile healthcare provision.
- Health services and response programmes should include specific attention to the psychological support that older people need.
- The Government of Ukraine should ensure that public sector professionals and volunteers are properly trained in the rights and needs of older people.
- The Government of Ukraine should introduce policies that provide incentives for the retention and employment of older people, and support for older entrepreneurs.
- The basic pension and other safety nets targeting older people should ensure that older people can live in dignity and afford to pay for healthcare, food, housing (including repairs or rental costs) and all other basic necessities.
- Greater support is needed from the Government of Ukraine to ensure safe and adequate housing and better access to state assistance for older people.
- The Government of Ukraine should support the inclusive drafting of the convention on the rights of older people.



Katya Moskaliuk/HelpAge International

**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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PO Box 78840, London SE1P 6QR, UK

Tel +44 (0)20 7278 7778  
info@helpage.org  
**www.helpage.org**

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Written by: Madeleine McGivern, independent consultant, with Tamila Motuzka and Inna Volosevych, Info Sapiens. Additional content and support provided by Stefan Stoyanov, Tamta Daviataia and Maryna Moroz from the HelpAge International Ukraine country office.

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