

Conceptualising and measuring internal displacement in Ukraine

Abstract

Although internal displacement has become one of the most pressing humanitarian issues today, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are often invisible - in international discourses, academic research, and within the societies where they live. One of the challenges for better understanding internal displacement is a coherent conceptual definition of who an IDP is, but also how IDPs themselves think about displacement. Existing inconsistencies raise questions about how to identify, measure, and monitor the size and composition of IDP populations. Focusing on Ukraine, we describe and compare three ways of measuring internal displacement, each with its own advantages and limitations. First, we discuss official legal registration, which allows IDPs to claim social benefits and access services such as hospital treatment. As of January 2024, 3.5 million people were officially registered as IDPs in Ukraine. Second, we examine the IOM's General Population Study, a repeated cross-sectional panel asking respondents (N~4,800) if they had moved since Russia's invasion in 2022. This survey estimated 3.7 million de facto (9.7% of Ukraine's estimated total population) IDPs in early 2024. Finally, we describe the nationally representative Household Budget Survey 2023-24 (N=18,837), which asked about displacement in four ways: whether anyone in the household was registered as an IDP (3.6%); anyone in the household received IDP benefits (4.4%); any individuals who moved after 2022 (3.9%); and any individual registered as an IDP (2.7%). By comparing these estimates over time, at various geographical levels, this investigation provides insights into how different measurement definitions and tools reflect lived realities, and how they accord with academic and humanitarian concepts of displacement.

Introduction

Internal displacement is a common consequence of armed conflict, humanitarian disasters, generalised violence, and other situations of crisis and instability globally. By the end of 2024, conflict and violence alone were responsible for an estimated 73.5 million people living in situations of internal displacement (IDMC, 2025a). While cross-border refugee movements have long been recognised in international law, notably through the 1951 Refugee Convention, internally displaced persons (IDPs) gained sustained international recognition only around the turn of the twenty-first century. Despite this lag, considerable progress has been made over a relatively short period in defining, identifying, and quantifying internal displacement (Cardona-Fox, 2020; Mooney, 2005; Polzer & Hammond, 2008). International bodies have established detailed definitions and developed sophisticated data collection systems to identify, estimate, and monitor the size and distribution of displaced populations within national borders (IDMC, 2025b; IOM, 2025; UNHCR, 2025). Today, most countries affected by conflict report at least some estimates of internal displacement. Yet, while these efforts mark an important step towards visibility and accountability, they continue to face substantial conceptual, measurement and methodological challenges (Cardona-Fox, 2020; Krynsky Baal, 2021b).

First, despite efforts to translate the legal and ethical foundations of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (GPID) - the main international framework defining the rights and protections of IDPs - into clear statistical definitions, categories, and indicators, differences in interpretation and operationalisation persist (EGRIS, 2018, 2020). Ambiguity, for example over what events constitute sufficient causes of displacement, how far or for how long individuals must be displaced to be counted, and when they cease to be classified as IDPs, has resulted in inconsistent application of standards and considerable variation in how internal displacement is reported (Beyani et al., 2016; EGRIS, 2018). These definitional inconsistencies often coincide with overlapping or competing data collection exercises, each reflecting the operational priorities of various agencies tasked with enumeration (Krynsky Baal, 2021b). Such multiple efforts often increase the likelihood of conflicting estimates of population size, needs, and vulnerabilities that complicate decision-making for humanitarian leadership and donors, while also placing unnecessary burden on respondents (Krynsky Baal, 2021). In addition to inconsistencies in official definitions, self-identification and bureaucratic barriers further challenge data collection and measurement. Not all people who flee their homes perceive themselves as displaced (Dvornichenko & Howlett, 2025), and those who do may stop doing so as time passes (Baal & Ronkainen, 2017). Social stigma, perceptions of welfare dependence, and fear of conscription can discourage registration or self-reporting of IDP status, while others fail to de-register, for instance after migrating abroad (Najafzadeh, 2013; Polzer & Hammond, 2008; Riaño-Alcalá, 2008). Limited administrative capacity within national ministries to process IDP claims further undermines the completeness and reliability of available data.

A second enduring challenge lies in the general tendency to treat displacement as brief or exceptional, despite persisting for decades or even generations (Ratnayake et al., 2022). In many contexts, this framing has contributed to the absence of IDPs from official statistics and the omission from data collection efforts of questions on their socio-economic conditions (Krynsky Baal, 2021a). Consequently, IDPs remain difficult to compare with host populations and are frequently excluded from national development planning and budgeting (Krynsky Baal, 2021b). Other persistent difficulties relate to data quality and availability. Disaggregated information by basic socio-

demographic characteristics (e.g., age, sex, education) and/or other dimensions essential for accurate measurement and targeted interventions (e.g., disability) is often lacking. Even basic age-sex breakdowns in UNHCR Global Trends reports are, in many contexts, derived from statistical modelling rather than direct enumeration (UNHCR, 2020 pp. 14-15). Moreover, the humanitarian data environment remains constrained by operational limitations, restricted access to affected areas, fragile infrastructure, and significant gaps in technical expertise and data literacy, which altogether limit the precision, comparability, and policy relevance of IDP data (Krynsky Baal, 2021a).

To examine how definitional and operational ambiguities manifest in practice, multiple and independent sources of data collection are ideal, although rare. Here we examine the case of Ukraine, which has developed several complementary data systems that enable comparison of different approaches to conceptualising and measuring internal displacement. Since Russia's invasion, two parallel systems have collected information about the size of the IDP population. The first is an enumeration or "census" of officially registered IDPs (the Baseline Registration System, BRS). Based on registration data collected by local oblast administration bodies, the BRS captures legal registration, which practically determines eligibility for social benefits and access to services. The second - the General Population Survey (GPS) - is a repeated cross-sectional survey based on random-digit dialling and a quota sample of approximately 4,800 respondents. The GPS measures internal displacement through questions about migratory moves since February 2022. Both of these initiatives are conducted jointly by Ukrainian institutions and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). In addition, the 2023-24 Socio-Economic Status of Households in Ukraine (HSESS) Survey - provides a third data perspective on the measurement of internal displacement in Ukraine. While not specifically targeting IDPs, the HSESS nevertheless collected self-reported information on displacement. Differently from the GPS, however, it does so through multiple questions covering IDP registration, IDP-related benefits, and conflict-induced movement. Relying on face-to-face interviews, HSEES is based on a considerably larger sample (N=18,837), thus offering data for more detailed analyses of displacement experiences across the country as well as comparisons with stayers.

In this study, we compare these three complementary sources of data on IDPs to provide an account of whether and how 1) different measurement, sampling, and modes of data collection yield different estimates of the size and composition of the IDP population in Ukraine over time, as the conflict developed, 2) different measurement tools reflect lived displacement realities and 3) how closely each data collection effort aligns with academic and humanitarian concepts of displacement. Understanding how such enumerations are produced is critical for interpreting their reliability and for determining the ways in which they can - or cannot - inform effective policy design, humanitarian planning, and resource allocation.

Background

Theoretical approaches to internal displacement

The first fundamental challenge for research addressing demographic questions of internal displacement lies in the absence of a coherent and consistently applied conceptual definition of who qualifies as an IDP (Mooney, 2005). While the research community has had a working definition of IDP since the adoption of the 1998 GPID, this non-binding document, elaborated by independent experts for the Representative of the United Nations Secretary-

General on Internally Displaced Persons, defines IDPs as:

“Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised border”

This descriptive definition presents challenges to clear and consistent measurement (Buhaug, 2023; Cardona-Fox, 2020; Ní Ghráinne, 2022). First, because the GPID were not negotiated by states, this description do not confer any legal status that can be formally granted or revoked (Mooney, 2005). Unlike refugees, who are outside their countries of origin and, by definition,¹ require substitute legal protection, IDPs remain within their country of origin and under the jurisdiction of their government. Hence, at least in principle, they retain the same freedoms and rights as the rest of the population, may not claim any different status, additional protection or identification (Hathaway, 2014; Vincent, 2000). In practice, however, IDPs often require special protection similar to that afforded to refugees (Adelman & McGrath, 2007).

Second, the GPID conceptual definition is anchored to an element of “coercion” and an assumption that forced and voluntary migration can be easily distinguished. Qualitative research has shown that this dichotomy fails to capture the complexities of migration processes (Black, 2001; Scalettari, 2007; Stigter, 2006). The insistence on “coercion” as the defining element of displacement may also overlook the fact that every act of migration involves some degree of agency in response to both perceived and actual threats (Regasa & Lietaert, 2022). From a measurement perspective, such requirement risks rendering invisible those who move pre-emptively to avoid danger, those affected by slow-onset crises, and those “displaced in place” through involuntary immobilisation or minimal distances covered (Engel & Ibáñez, 2007; Lubkemann, 2008; Regasa & Lietaert, 2022).

Third, the lack of minimum criteria indicating how long and how far a person must flee within their country to qualify as IDP, as well as what to do if international borders change represent another definitional challenge (Cardona-Fox, 2020; EGRIS, 2020). Displacement may involve minimal distances, situations in which individuals are left homeless but stay near their original homes either because of personal choice or constraints (Belloni & Massa, 2022; Bruy, 2019; Carling, 2002; DeWaard et al., 2022; Forchuk et al., 2025; Perelli-Harris et al., 2023; Perez Murcia, 2021). Displacement disproportionately affects populations for whom “habitual residence” is a difficult concept to apply (e.g., indigenous, nomadic and semi-nomadic, pastoralist populations) (EGRIS, 2020; IDMC, 2014). Displacement movements can be anticipatory, as well as brief, involve return, pendular movements and secondary migration (Balinchenko, 2021; Zetter & Long, 2012). In many cases, displacement can continue for decades or even generations, with individuals often remaining internally displaced due to unresolved conflicts or persistent instability (Ratnayake et al., 2022).

Another crucial conceptual challenge within the GPID framework concerns determining when displacement ends

¹ The definition of “refugee” is enshrined in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Convention also set out states’ obligations towards refugees with regards to their legal status and various rights. Although the ultimate way in which refugees are defined, categorised and thus counted also amounts to who defines “who is a refugee” (Goodwill-Gill, 1989), with different organisations and world regions counting refugees differently (Crisp, 1999), the 1951 Convention provides a legal framework that, at least in principle, facilitates the identification of those who fall within the refugee category within and across space, and over time.

(Cardona-Fox, 2020; Crisp, 1999). Unlike refugees, who lose legal status through resettlement, naturalisation, or return, there is no standardised criterion for when internal displacement ceases (Cardona-Fox, 2020; Mooney, 2005). Under the GPID definition, IDP status ends only upon death, cross-border movement, or attainment of a “durable solution” (IASC, 2010). This term itself remains highly contested (see, for example: Bradley, 2018) as it may involve return, integration, or settlement elsewhere, all outcomes that are often difficult to define or measure consistently, thereby leading to wide variation in how countries determine the end of displacement. In some contexts, IDP status is attached to households and can be transmitted across generations (Beau, 2003; Sarzin, 2017; Shultz et al., 2014). In others, IDP status can expire after a fixed period, regardless of whether a “durable solution” has been achieved, or might be terminated for political reasons, such as to signal conflict resolution or restrict assistance, even when vulnerabilities persist (Crisp, 1999; Walicki, 2009).

At the core of these challenges is the inherently political nature of internal displacement (Cardona-Fox, 2020). This raises fundamental questions about who collects data, for what purpose, and how political and institutional interests shape the translation of conceptual advances into practice (Baal & Ronkainen, 2017; Krynsky Baal et al., 2018). International, national, and non-governmental actors often bring divergent motives to the definitional debate. Some may wish to maintain the status quo to uphold legitimacy and ensure the continuity of existing response systems and resource allocations; others may attempt to manipulate definitions to either inflate or deflate figures (Cohen & Deng, 2010; Walicki, 2009) or to conceal them entirely (Cantor, 2014; Cohen, 1999; IDMC, 2021; Wolf, 2020). The presence of overlapping or competing data collection exercises, each shaped by the operational priorities of the agencies involved in enumeration, can also generate “survey fatigue” among affected populations (Krynsky Baal, 2021a) and yield contradictory data, which in turn can reinforce competing narratives and impasses in practice (Baal & Ronkainen, 2017).

A final, but non-trivial element in this conceptual discussion concerns the perspectives of displaced persons themselves (Baal & Ronkainen, 2017). Above and beyond institutional definitions, who identifies as internally displaced? In some settings, social stigma (Najafizadeh, 2013; Zamanov, 2020), perceptions of welfare dependence, or fear of surveillance have been shown to discourage self-identification or registration (Polzer & Hammond, 2008; Riaño-Alcalá, 2008). Beyond its ethical implications for dignity and identity, this is important and has direct consequences for measurement. Where enumeration depends on self-identification (as in most surveys or contexts lacking registration systems), it makes it harder to estimate accurately the size and composition of IDP populations and ensure that all who wish to be counted are indeed counted (Baal & Ronkainen, 2017).

Operational approaches to internal displacement

The GPID offers a deliberately broad and adaptable conceptualisation of internal displacement, reflecting its diverse and evolving realities. While the definitional ambiguities outlined above persist, it would be inaccurate to suggest that no progress has been made to operationalise the GPID framework into concrete statistical definitions, categories, and indicators of displacement. Notably, the UN Statistical Commission-mandated Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics (EGRIS) International Recommendations on IDP Statistics (IRIS) contains five pages that carefully delineate all the aspects of the broad GPID definition of IDP, resulting in utmost

clarity on who should and should not be counted as IDPs in a wide variety of situations. (EGRIS, 2020).

At the same time, the EGRIS/IRIS also acknowledges the practical challenges of implementing its recommendations. It emphasises that data collection should be country-led and context-specific, drawing on local expertise and institutional knowledge to improve accuracy and relevance. Yet, while these contingencies are necessary and could theoretically lead to higher accuracy, these same principles highlight inherent tensions in the IDP measurement system. If data are gathered and analysed by multiple institutions across and within countries, variations in systems, procedures, and methodological rigour inevitably arise, leading to differing levels of accuracy and reliability in the resulting estimates. These discrepancies, in turn, undermine the comparability of data both across administrative units and between countries. These difficulties are further compounded by the realities of data collection during conflict, where insecurity, institutional fragility, and limited capacity constrain operations and affect data quality. In other words, there is a clear tension between the various requirements for high-quality data collection of IDPs. Specifically, for higher accuracy, data should be collected within-country by local institutions. However, within-country data collection by local institutions can also lead to lower accuracy and reliability and compromise the ability to compare across regions, countries, and over time.

Regardless of recommendations, currently governments, through their national statistical offices, remain the primary actors in collecting data on internal displacement, reflecting their legal obligations to their populations (Sarzin, 2017). In sporadic cases, this task is carried out through official registration systems maintained by local authorities (IDMC, 2015; Mykhnenko et al., 2022). These registers provide valuable compositional data and are often used to determine eligibility for assistance. At the same time, they can quickly become outdated if not continuously updated and might become increasingly subject to self-selection (Sarzin, 2017; Sentralbyra & UNHCR, 2014; UNHCR, 2023), especially for people displaced in outside camp-like settings, when authorities may be perceived as a source of displacement and/or when there are no or limited incentives for registering (Ferris et al., 2011).

In most IDP contexts, no government-led registration system or comprehensive data source exists to capture the size and composition of displaced populations. Information on self-reported movement and basic demographic characteristics is therefore typically derived from sample surveys (Abdelmagid & Checchi, 2018; Checchi et al., 2017). Especially if launched early in a crisis, these surveys often rely on quota-based or other non-probability sampling methods and face challenges such as self-identification biases, the absence of reliable sampling frames, and restricted access to displacement-affected areas (Bruck et al., 2016; Masaki & Madson, 2023). This latter challenge can be partially addressed by relying on mobile/telephone surveys (Giardini et al., 2023; Tai et al., 2022), especially in emergency phases (IOM, 2022). As crises become less chaotic, more extensive face-to-face surveys might be possible (Bruck et al., 2016), allowing for larger and more representative samples and the inclusion of more detailed questions on displacement. However, their implementation remains constrained by the substantial time, resources, and security conditions they require.

Data for measuring internal displacement in Ukraine

Since Russia's invasion, two parallel systems have been relied upon to obtain information about the evolving size and composition of the IDP population – the BSR and the GPS. In addition, the 2023-24 HSESS survey provides

a third data point that can be used to understand issues of the measurement of internal displacement in Ukraine. We next briefly describe these data sources.

1. *Baseline Registration System*

Following the large-scale internal displacement caused by Russia's full-scale invasion in early 2022, the Ukrainian government adopted Resolution No. 269 on 13 March 2022, which revised the registration system for IDPs. The resolution defines IDPs as "*citizens of Ukraine, foreigners, and stateless persons legally residing in Ukraine who were forced to leave their place of residence as a result of armed conflict, occupation, generalised violence, human rights violations, or disasters*". Compared to previous resolutions passed after Russia's first attacks in 2014, the Resolution 269 expanded eligibility to include displacement from additional regions, including Kyiv, Volyn, Donetsk, Zhytomyr, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Sumy, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Chernihiv (the list continues to be updated). Resolution 269 also simplified the process by introducing a digital registration option through the *Diiia* mobile application, enabling users to obtain certificates online. In parallel, local executive offices and councils continued to be authorised to process registrations and issue certificates.

Operated by the Ministry of Social Policy with IOM's support, the Baseline Registration System (BRS) thus constitutes a full enumeration (or "census") of all individuals who qualify as internally displaced persons under Resolution No. 269 and have formally registered as such (IDMC, 2015).

2. *The General Population Survey*

The General Population Survey (GPS) is a repeated cross-sectional study run since March 2022 by the IOM's Data and Analytics Unit to monitor displacement, mobility, living conditions, and intentions among people affected by the war in Ukraine (IOM, 2024a). Currently, the IOM has conducted 38 GPS rounds collecting a comparable set of questions to an independent sample of respondents in each survey round.

During its first 12 rounds (March 2022-January 2023), the survey, implemented bimonthly and later, monthly, relied on random-digit dialling (RDD) to select about 2,000 adult respondents (aged 18+) from areas under government control. During rounds 13-16 (June 2023-May 2024), data started to be collected quarterly, and the sample size was increased to 20,000 per round. From round 17 onwards (May 2024-), the sample was further increased to 40,000 respondents/round, and the design was expanded into a two-stage design.

In the first stage, a large "screening" survey contacts randomly generated mobile phone numbers built from real network prefixes and assigns digits in proportion to each operator's national market share. Respondents are asked short questions about their place of residence and movement since 24 February 2022 (details below), allowing classification into three population groups - non-displaced, IDPs, returnees. The relative proportions of these groups identified during the first stage are then applied to baseline population estimates from the UNFPA Common Operational Dataset on Population Statistics (COD-PS), restricted to government-controlled territories (thus excluding occupied raions in Donetska, Khersonska, Luhanska, and Zaporizka oblasts, as well as the Autonomous Republic of Crimea). These adjusted baselines are used to weight the GPS population estimates across rounds. In the second stage, up to 4,800 respondents from the initial contacts are selected for in-depth follow-up interviews using structured questionnaires that collect detailed information on socio-demographic characteristics, economic conditions, current location, and displacement experiences, including return and mobility

intentions. The sample is stratified by oblast and population group (non-displaced, IDPs, and returnees). All interviews are anonymous and voluntary, conducted via computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI).

The survey adopts a specific approach to identifying IDPs. Specifically, it uses the following short sequence of questions on current residence, migration, and reasons for movement:

1. Question A: Is the city or village where you live now your permanent residence from before the full-scale war that began on 24 February 2022?
2. Question B: If not, did you move from your city/village of permanent residence because of the full-scale war?
3. Question C: If not, are you staying in the city/village where you live now because of this full-scale war?

Respondents who answer “yes” to either Question B or C are classified as IDPs.

3. The Socio-Economic Status of Households in Ukraine Survey

The HSESS, conducted between December 2023 and February 2024, is a nationally representative survey of all regions of Ukraine except those temporarily occupied. Data collection occurred through face-to-face interviews with household heads, including both household-level and individual-level questionnaires. In total, the survey covers 8,023 households and 18,837 individuals, with household weights constructed using the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)’s post-war population estimates to ensure representativeness.

Like the GPS, the HSESS relies on self-reported information. However, it measures displacement in a more multidimensional way that relies on actual movements alongside actual registration and benefits. Specifically, the HSESS questionnaire includes four distinct items asked either at the household or individual level that operationalise displacement across different dimensions within a broader socio-economic framework, namely:

1. Household questionnaire: Identification of any household member registered as an IDP.
2. Household questionnaire: Identification of any household member receiving IDP-related benefits.
3. Individual questionnaire: Identification of individuals who moved as a result of conflict.
4. Individual questionnaire: Among those who reported moving, identification of individuals who subsequently registered as IDPs.

Respondents who responded positively to one or more than one of these questions are considered IDPs.

Methods

This study adopts a descriptive methodology and a comparative perspective to examine the different measurement approaches, sampling strategies, and modes of data collection used to capture internal displacement in Ukraine since Russia’s full-scale invasion, and how these features may yield varying estimates of the displaced population’s size and composition within each source.

After collecting and systematising all monthly reports from administrative registration data (BRS) and survey-based estimates (GPS) between March 2022 and early 2025, we first trace and describe changes in the number of IDPs over time. We visualise these dynamics by plotting both national and macro-regional trajectories, identifying points of convergence and divergence across sources.

Second, we compare these trends with estimates produced by the 2023-24 HSESS, paying particular attention to

the survey's distinct set of questions designed to capture displacement, as well as temporal and geographical patterns of movement and the population's composition by age and sex.

With this approach, we plan to assess the extent to which definitional (e.g., EGRISS/IRIS-based versus voluntary registration), methodological (e.g., sampling design, coverage and data collection modes), and contextual factors (e.g., registration incentives, conflict dynamics) contribute to variation in IDP counts and profiles and, more broadly, to the observed patterns of measurement.

Preliminary results

Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of Ukraine's IDP population as recorded by the BRS and estimated through the GPS. Figure 1 shows a marked divergence between the two GPS and BRS series from the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion until the second quarter of 2023. Whereas the GPS estimated nearly seven million IDPs in mid-2022, the BRS captured only about 2.3 million officially registered individuals. Over the first year of the war, GPS estimates declined sharply, while BRS figures rose gradually as registration capacity expanded, eventually stabilising at around 3.3 million (or 9.2% of Ukraine's estimated population). Figure 2 disaggregates the trends by macro-region and sources. Although GPS estimates exceeded those of the BRS in nearly all regions, the discrepancies observed during the first year of the war were most pronounced in the South and West. By mid-2023, the two sources began to converge, becoming close for the first time around December 2023-January 2024, when the GPS recorded approximately 3.7 million and the BRS around 3.5 million, i.e., approximately 9.7% of Ukraine's estimated total population.

Table 1 presents the shares of IDPs estimated using the various questions included in the 2023-24 HSESS. In stark contrast to the values estimated for early 2024 in the GPS and BRS, HSESS data indicate that, depending on question phrasing, only about 3.4-3.7% of the 8,023 interviewed households reported including at least one IDP member. Even lower shares emerged when estimates were derived from the individual-level survey: approximately 2.7% of all 18,837 interviewed respondents reported having moved due to conflict since February 2022, and only 2.3% reported having also registered as IDPs. Table 2 presents basic socio-demographic characteristics of individuals who reported having left their homes due to the war. The majority were women (56%) and adults aged 18–59, with the mean age of IDPs being approximately 39 years. Regionally, the largest shares were located in Central (22%) and Eastern (28%) Ukraine, followed by the West (21%). Considerably smaller proportions were observed in the capital city Kyiv city (8%). Temporal trends in displacement as estimated by HSESS (weighted counts) are closer in terms of dynamics to the GPS, but significantly lower in magnitude (Figures 3-4).

Future versions of this manuscript will investigate the mechanisms likely accounting for the gaps between GPS and BRS figures, especially during the early phases of the conflict. Specifically, we will describe, and when possible, empirically examine four broad dimensions that likely influenced the observed under-registration: access barriers, incentives to register, stigma and self-exclusion, and self-identification. We will also consider definitional, survey administration modes, sampling and coverage differences that might have affected GPS estimates on their own and in relation to the HSESS. Below we summarise preliminary discussions of these dimensions for each data source.

Issues with the administrative registration data

1. Access barriers

During the initial phase of the conflict, widespread insecurity, repeated displacement, and damage to infrastructure made it difficult for many people to reach administrative offices or access online registration systems. For example, the early spike in IDP GPS-estimates observed in the South (Figure 2) coincided with intensified fighting in and around Kherson and Mykolaiv, culminating in Ukraine's counteroffensive and the liberation of Kherson city in November 2022, when a subsequent decline in estimated IDPs is visible. During this period, the destruction of infrastructure and the shifting of frontlines disrupted local administrations and likely rendered physical registration nearly impossible. Because the BRS required in-person or online registration through official channels, many newly displaced households were unable to formalise their status. These access barriers were probably most severe for those in heavily bombarded or remote areas, individuals who lost identity documents while fleeing, people displaced while away from their place of residence (e.g., labour migrants) (Mooney, 2023), as well as groups already more likely to lack official documentation, such as Roma communities (NRC/IDMC, 2016).

In contrast, the GPS, relying on RDD, was likely better equipped to reach respondents remotely, including those temporarily settled in informal or transitional locations. As a result, it was more sensitive to rapid changes in population movements and captured a more immediate rise in displacement that administrative data missed. Overall, early BRS data almost certainly undercounted IDPs and disproportionately reflected those residing in safer or better-connected areas.

2. Incentives to register

Registration is not only a matter of access but also of perceived benefit. Because in Ukraine official registration determines eligibility for state assistance, registrants are often those in greatest need, e.g., pensioners, persons with disabilities, and households with children (KPVV, 2021; Mikheieva & Kuznetsova, 2023). This was true already before the full-scale invasion, with evidence suggesting that some residents of the occupied territories registered as IDPs and regularly crossed the contact line in order to access benefits such as pensions and healthcare, which they would otherwise be unable to access (KPVV, 2021; Mikheieva & Kuznetsova, 2023).

Today, the level of aid provided by official registration is modest (IOM, 2024b). This may partly explain the relative stability in registration trends and suggests that the BRS may be selectively representative of the most economically vulnerable. Individuals in this group may further have little incentive to deregister as IDPs, even after permanently resettling in a new location or abroad. Using information gathered through official reports, we plan to compare the socio-demographic profiles of registered IDPs with those in GPS surveys. Over-representation of older and/or lower-educated individuals in BRS would indicate selective registration.

3. Stigma and self-exclusion

The visible BRS undercount may also reflect the social costs associated with IDP registration for certain groups. Prior to 2022, many displaced persons avoided registering due to stigma or political labelling as "sympathetic to Russia" (Mikheieva & Kuznetsova, 2023; Rimpiläinen, 2020). Although such stigma has diminished since the full-scale invasion, part of the early undercount may nonetheless reflect reluctance to register in order to avoid being "othered" (Sereda, 2023; Tarkhanova, 2023) or discriminated against in housing and labour markets. Some

individuals may have also feared that disclosing personal information to state authorities could expose them to risks, such as military conscription for men. Others might have abstained from registration out of a sense of civic responsibility, wishing that scarce state resources be prioritised for the armed forces. Collectively, these factors likely contribute to the observed BRS undercount and suggest under-representation of individuals facing higher social or political risks.

4. Self-identification

The BRS requires individuals to self-identify as “internally displaced”, which presupposes both awareness of the concept and willingness to adopt that legal label. Given that international guidelines like the EGRIS/IRIS devote extensive attention to clarifying who qualifies as an IDP, it is unlikely that all IDPs fully grasp the formal criteria. Instead, there is reason to think that those who are better educated or socially connected are more likely to understand and comply with registration requirements (Dvornichenko & Howlett, 2025). As the GPS, by contrast, identifies IDPs based on observable mobility patterns, it aligns more closely with the EGRIS/IRIS criteria and avoids the subjective filters affecting the BRS.

Issues with survey estimates

Although GPS estimates exceed those of the BRS, the GPS is still likely to undercount the total number of IDPs for reasons related to its sampling design, coverage, mode of data collection, and conceptual definitions.

1. Sampling design and coverage

First, there are issues of coverage that likely make the GPS an undercount of the real extent of displacement in Ukraine. By design, the GPS sampling frame includes only areas under Ukrainian government control. As such, it excludes populations in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and under-represents territories under temporary Russian occupation, including parts of Donetsk, Luhanska, Khersonska, and Zaporizka oblasts, where Ukrainian mobile networks are inactive.

Second, the survey relies on RDD of mobile phone numbers. Therefore, this sampling method automatically excludes individuals without access to a functioning phone (e.g., poorest or the elderly), and those residing in areas experiencing severe infrastructure damage, groups among which hard-to-reach populations, such as IDPs, are likely disproportionately represented.

Another major challenge concerns unit non-response in areas that can be surveyed. In the case of the GPS, this issue is likely to be particularly pronounced among individuals in highly mobile or precarious situations, who may be less likely to answer survey calls or remain available for follow-up interviews. Conversely, the act of answering the phone and agreeing to participate in a survey of uncertain duration with a stranger is itself likely to appeal only to certain types of individuals.

2. Mode of data collection

The GPS use of CATI enables data collection under crisis conditions but restricts the depth and inclusiveness of the sample. Telephone interviews can be less effective at reaching households with limited privacy, shared devices, or unstable networks, and they preclude direct observation or household verification. By contrast, face-to-face methods as implemented in the HSESS likely allow for better respondent engagement, and validation of living

conditions, but they are far more resource-intensive and difficult to implement in insecure or rapidly changing settings.

3. Conceptual issues

Conceptually, while the GPS question sequence aligns relatively closely to international guidelines, it still does not fully correspond to the EGRIS/IRIS categories of internal displacement. In particular, the GPS classifies only those who have physically left their city or village as IDPs, whereas EGRIS/IRIS explicitly states that displacement may include people rendered homeless but remaining near their original residence, whether by choice, lack of resources, or limited freedom of movement (EGRIS, 2020 p. 23). In Ukraine, where attacks on civilian housing are widespread, such individuals would be omitted from GPS counts (Maidanik, 2023). Moreover, since the capacity to leave one's city or village depends heavily on household economic means, social networks, and regional conditions, this omission likely introduces further selection along socio-economic characteristics and reliability concerns over GPS estimates.

4. Item non-response and social desirability bias

Item non-response refers to situations in which individuals do not provide answers to specific questions, for instance by replying that they do not know or by refusing to answer. Such respondents are often referred to as the “don't knows”. While there is limited reason to believe that the sets of questions used to measure displacement in the GPS and in the HSESS would generate systematic patterns of item non-response, it is possible that some respondents may choose not to disclose their displacement status (correctly). This may occur due to social desirability bias, particularly if identifying as an IDP is associated with stigma, perceived political sensitivity, or fear of repercussions, and might be more or less salient depending on the mode of data collection.

Discussion and next steps

The international community has developed a range of collaborative studies, guidelines, and recommendations to improve data collection on IDPs. All these frameworks emphasise that effective policymaking and planning, both in the immediate and longer term, depend on accurate, consistent, and comparable data collected over time and across subnational and national contexts. They provide detailed definitions of IDPs and related categories, as well as methodological guidance for data collection, sampling, and identification. At the same time, these documents acknowledge the complex realities of data collection in crisis contexts. They recognise that situations of instability often require diverse institutional arrangements, rapid data collection with limited preparation time, and flexible approaches adapted to local administrative capacities. In practice, therefore, while the production of high-quality, standardised data is a stated priority, these same guidelines concede that in many - if not most - situations of internal displacement, ideal standards are difficult to achieve, and data requirements are rarely met.

Ukraine represents a unique and particularly instructive context for examining this tension between the expectation for high-quality, standardised data and the practical constraints of collecting such data in wartime. The country's experience is distinctive because it offers several complementary data systems that enable a rare, systematic comparison of alternative approaches to conceptualising and measuring internal displacement. Preliminary analyses of existing data sources suggest a considerable underestimate of the true number of individuals meeting the international criteria for internal displacement in both administrative and survey data. The largest discrepancies

between the GPS and administrative data occurred roughly until later 2023. However, estimates from the HSSSES, which was conducted around the same time (December 2023-January 2024) yield significantly lower estimates than both other two sources. So far, we have presented a range of plausible reasons, including access barriers, (dis-)incentives to register, stigma, differences in self-identification, as well as issues of sampling and coverage, modes of data collection and conceptual challenges that might account, at times in countervailing ways, for these inconsistencies

The next phase of this research will build on these foundations through a more detailed empirical investigation of differences in population composition - specifically by age, sex, and region - across the three data sources. It will also thoroughly examine the above-cited survey methodological aspects, including the likely implications of different modes of survey data collection (face-to-face vs. CATI), as well as issues of coverage and representativeness. Collectively, these analyses aim to inform recommendations for improving the measurement of internal displacement in Ukraine, develop tools that best reflect lived realities and to generate broader insights applicable to other contexts of forced migration and crisis.

Tables

Table 1 Share of IDPs identified using HSESS questionnaire

Household-level identification (n = 8,023):	Abs.	%	Weighted %
Household includes IDPs (self-identified)	286	3.6	3.4
Household received IDP benefits over the last three months	354	4.4	3.7
Individual-level identification (n = 18,837):			
Anyone who moved due to the war since February 2022*	537	2.9	2.7
Anyone who was registered as an IDP since 2022 among those who relocated*	484	2.6	2.3

Source: 2023-24 Socio-Economic Status of Households in Ukraine (HSESS). Notes: Excludes respondents those who moved after 2022 and returned home.

Table 2 Socio-demographic characteristics of IDPs in the HSESS individual-level sample

	Abs.	%	Weighted %
Gender			
Male	186	34.6	44
Female	351	65.4	56
Age			
0-17	150	27.9	20
18-59	262	48.8	56.7
60+	125	23.3	23.2
Current location			
West	130	24.2	20.9
North	28	5.2	3
East	105	19.6	27.9
Central	161	30	21.5
South	85	15.8	18.7
Kyiv city	28	5.2	7.9
Total obs.	537	2.9	2.7

Source: 2023-24 Socio-Economic Status of Households in Ukraine (HSESS). Notes: IDP respondents identified as respondent who reported having relocated due to conflict since February 2022.

Figures

Figure 1 Trends in the estimated IDP population in Ukraine by GPS and BRS (March 2022-April 2025)

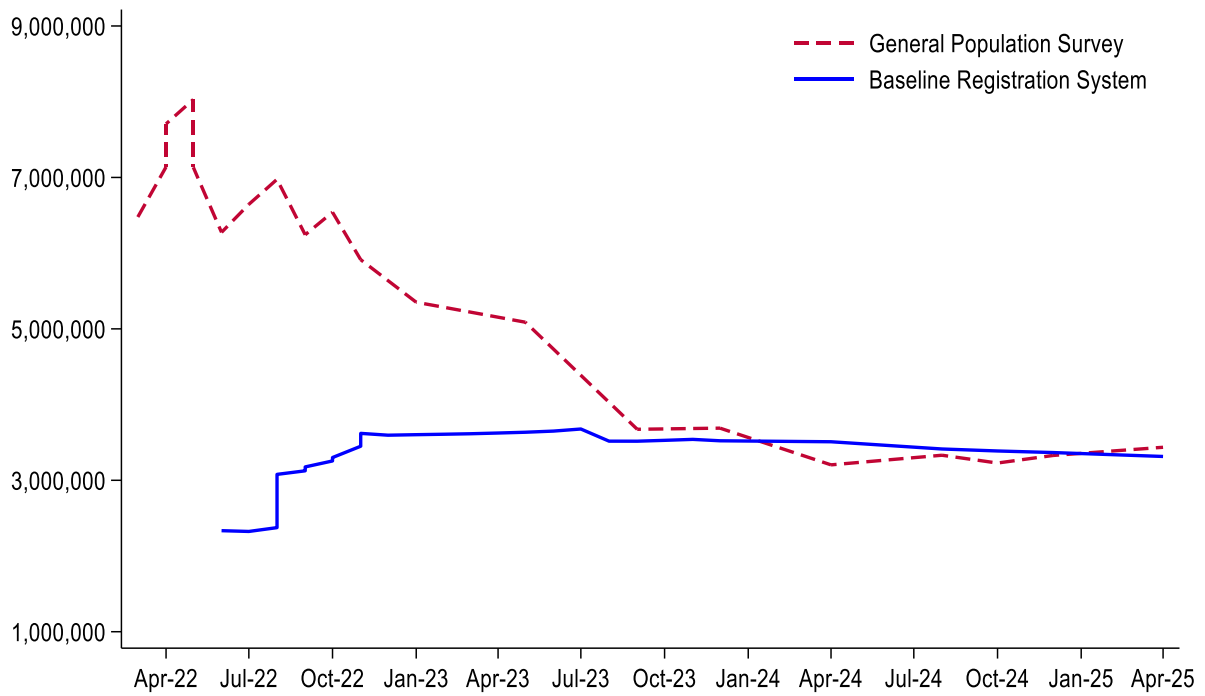


Figure 2 Trends in the estimated IDP population by current macro-regions (March 2022-Nov. 2023)

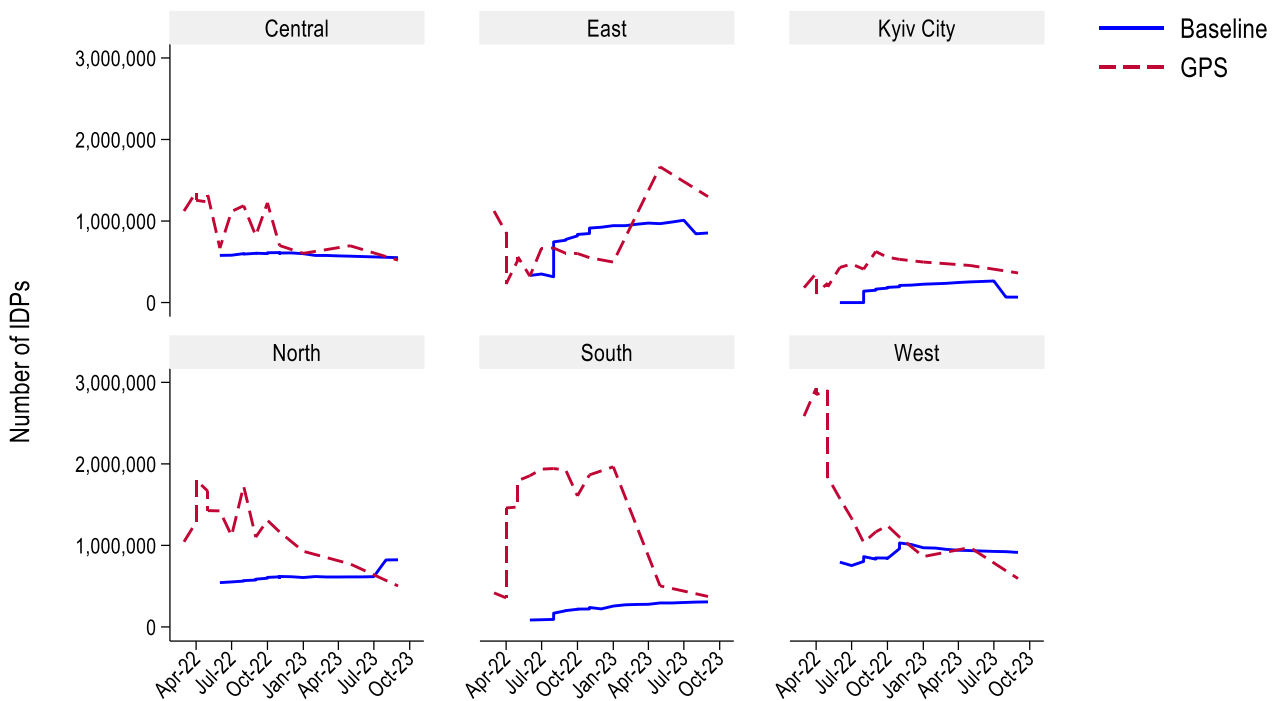


Figure 3 HSESS weighted counts of IDPs by month/year of movement

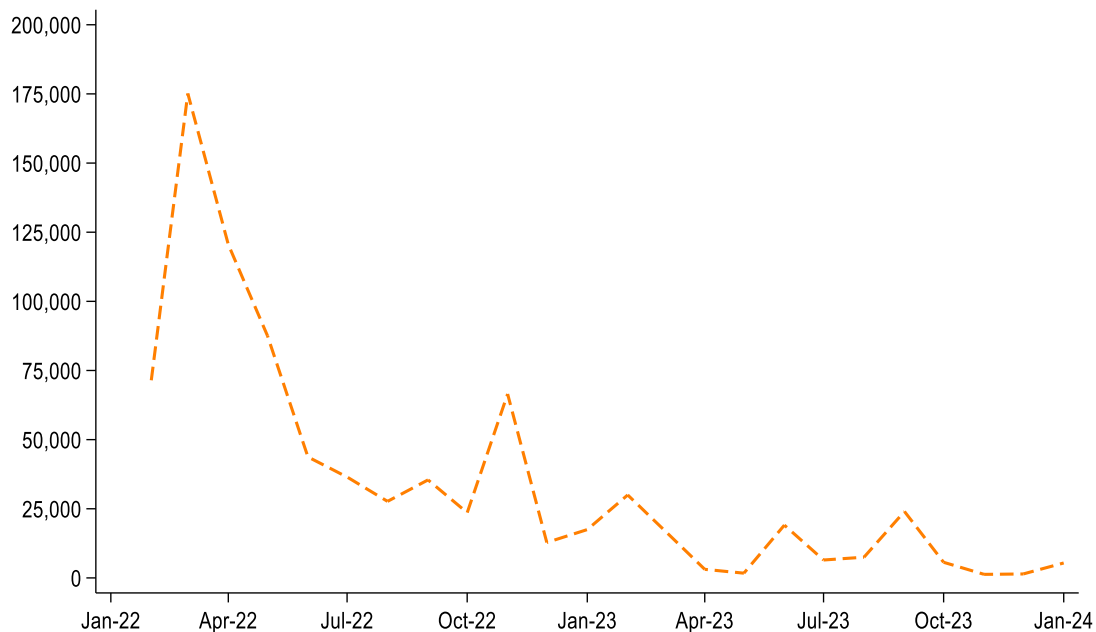
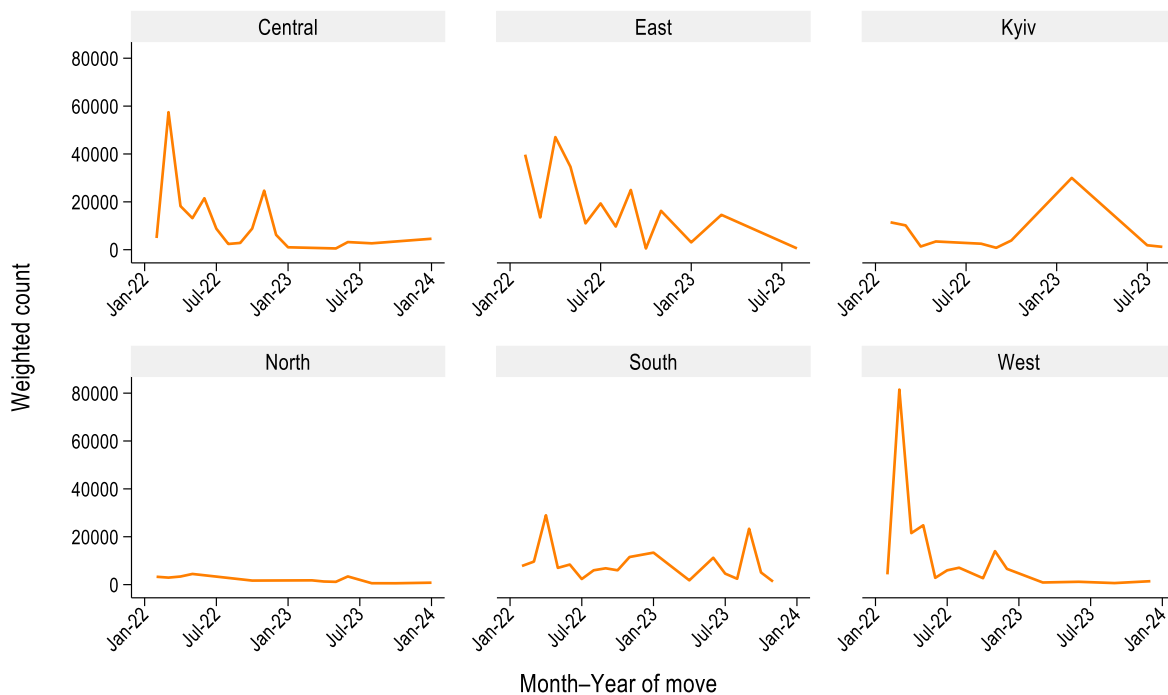


Figure 4 Trends in HSESS weighted counts of IDPs by current macro-regions



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