

Timely and accurate data on migration and refugee movements are crucial for policymakers and organisations to respond effectively to emergency situations. Existing data collection practices, however, often lack suitability for crisis contexts. The Ukrainian refugee crisis, triggered by the war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine, has further highlighted the limitations of current migration and forced displacement monitoring systems. Considering this situation, various organisations dedicated to migration and asylum research are recognising the necessity for collaborative efforts to enhance data collection capabilities pertaining to emergency situations. In response, the OECD, EUAA, and UNHCR have convened experts from various countries and organisations to improve data collection during displacement crises.

*This **Migration Data Brief** focuses on the key messages of the first joint OECD-EUAA-UNHCR event on data collection and monitoring during the Ukrainian refugee crisis organised at the OECD in May 2023.*

What have been the lessons learnt on data collection and monitoring during the Ukrainian refugee crisis?

Background

During sudden population displacements, the availability of high quality and timely data on migration flows and refugee movements and their characteristics is essential for an effective response. As the frequency and scale of different migration and refugee crises is likely to increase in the years and decades to come, due to increased environmental shocks and armed conflicts, the calls to improve monitoring and forecasting systems are growing louder every year.

Existing monitoring systems were put to test in 2022. The war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine that started on 24 February 2022 has created a massive refugee crisis unseen in Europe since World War II. While it took two years for 3 million Syrian refugees to reach Europe, this number was hit in less than three weeks in the case of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. By the end of 2022, more than 10 million Ukrainians had become either internally displaced or fled the country.

In response, many data collection and monitoring initiatives were set up by governments, international organisations, academia, civil society, and the private sector. Border crossing surveys were carried out on the first days of the war which have sometimes been followed up with panel interviews.

Online surveys have been developed in Ukrainian and Russian to better understand the aspiration and inclusion of refugees from Ukraine. Many ad hoc surveys have been carried out sometimes on small samples. Few countries have developed specific surveys of recent arrivals or newly registered beneficiaries of temporary protection and other similar national schemes. Big data have been explored to monitor both stocks and flows. Available information sources provide a coherent picture of the situation. However, there are discrepancies between sources or between stocks and flows as well as some data gaps (notably regarding stateless individuals, persons with disabilities, children or labour market integration). More than one year after the war broke out, it is time to reflect on what has worked, what can be improved moving forward and where more cooperation and data exchange would be beneficial.

Considering these challenges, the OECD, EUAA and UNHCR organised in May 2023 a joint technical event that brought together technical experts from different fields working with migration and refugee data. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences, lessons learnt and solutions in relation to timeliness, comprehensiveness, representativeness, monitoring changes, anticipating future flows and mainstreaming (Box 1). This data brief presents key takeaways that emerged from the event.

Box 1. Key themes of the joint technical event

Participants stressed the importance of **timeliness**. They explored lessons learnt from setting up data collection and monitoring systems on a short notice to provide stakeholders with timely and sufficient information to respond to the sudden refugee movements from Ukraine.

There is also a need for **comprehensiveness**. Participants looked at the nature of the information collected during the first months on border crossings but also how this information was complemented to cover new issues progressively, notably regarding refugee's specific needs.

The **representativeness** of ad hoc data collection systems in emergency situations is often a problem, which can be addressed by developing and adapting sampling frames and dissemination strategies, while addressing issues deriving from digital divide and survey fatigue.

Real time **monitoring and anticipating future flows** is particularly useful. Participants were encouraged to share their thoughts on the types of early warning signs their organisations look out for to better anticipate inflows, secondary movement or returns as well as the potential of big data in anticipating imminent forced displacement and migration flows.

Early data collection and monitoring systems often operate independently from mainstream national statistical systems, yet at some point there needs to be an inevitable shift to mainstream solutions. **Monitoring change over time and mainstreaming** is desirable to address the ways in which this transition could be facilitated better.

Key takeaways

Existing mobility monitoring systems were essential for early data collection

The scale and speed of the Ukrainian displacement crisis created a need for large-scale data collection and monitoring systems to become operational very quickly. In many cases, stakeholders such as the UNHCR and Meta had protocols for data collection and sharing already in place and were able to adapt them speedily for the Ukrainian situation. For instance, the UNHCR's Operational Data Portal on Ukraine Refugee Situation was operational by March 1, 2022, just four days after the start of Russia's large-scale invasion against Ukraine. In other cases, organisations built upon pilot projects that had been tested out previously. The EUAA had piloted Surveys on Arriving Migrants (SAM) in a hotspot and were able to repurpose this model and launch it in April 2022 as the SAM-UKR survey jointly with the OECD.

These existing initiatives helped to ensure that data collection and reporting started almost immediately. IMPACT Initiatives, for example, started their data collection in partnership with UNHCR in 6 neighbouring countries already on February 28 and IOM was able to publish their first report of internal displacement in Ukraine within three weeks of the beginning of the full-scale invasion. This ensured the availability of information during the early response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in OECD countries.

There is a general expectation for regular reporting

Other recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have set the precedent for providing weekly, if not daily updates, shaping the data expectations during the Ukrainian refugee crisis. This impacted not only data collection and analysis, but also reporting obligations. There was a demand to disseminate operational information quickly, including to entirely new stakeholders such as NGOs and civil society partners who were central to the response.

These expectations, however, put a lot of pressure on those working with data as existing immigration and asylum data systems were not necessarily built for such high frequency reporting. Despite this, most stakeholders have been able to adjust and speed up data collection and reporting. Instead of publishing their usual longer analytical reports, many organisations noted that they began using factsheets and briefs instead. This did not impact only operational data providers, but also large statistical organisations like Eurostat, who now provide information on temporary protection registrations monthly.

Differences in methodology and data assurance standards need to be clearly communicated to all users

The regular data assurance standards of migration statistics could not be followed when reporting operational data at required speed. While the differences in data quality between operational and standard statistics are recognised in the statistical community, it is important to make sure that all users

are aware of these differences, especially media and other civil society actors. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the decision was consequently made to not package related data as ordinary statistics, but instead as experimental statistics and to use a disclaimer cautioning users when interpreting the early data.

In a similar manner, clear and accessible information on methodologies used and their limitations was also seen as essential by many participants. The differences in approaches were not always clear even to the members of the statistical community in different organisations, creating significant challenges for comparability.

It is important to anticipate the changing information needs from the start

It was widely acknowledged that stakeholders' data needs have changed significantly throughout the Ukrainian refugee crisis. In the early months, there was a higher demand for information on flows and immediate needs to better plan for and organise the early response in host communities. Over time, there has been a progressive shift towards more granular and disaggregated data on stocks, as well as a growing demand for qualitative data to better understand motivations and intentions. Understanding and anticipating these changes helps to prepare for data collection and analysis, including ensuring data comparability over time, and to cooperate better with other organisations where relevant.

Work towards having one figure to minimise misinterpretation

Many different data collection and monitoring initiatives emerged in the early months of the crisis, leading to extensive, yet often conflicting data being available. Considering this, different organisations stressed the importance of working towards consolidating information and establishing clear and agreed-upon definitions and standards for the data that is being collected among relevant stakeholders. Moreover, the value of working towards having a single figure – or a limited number of figures – in both operational and public domains to minimise possible misinterpretation was noted by several participating organisations.

Sampling strategies should be adapted to the dynamic population

Ensuring representativeness was seen as a key challenge for data collection and analysis both inside and outside Ukraine. Sampling became particularly challenging due to limited knowledge about the target population as its structure was continuously being altered due to expected high levels of mobility. Both Germany and

Switzerland sampled through public registers, sending personalised QR codes to Ukrainians to participate in surveys, yet due to onward and return movements this was also seen as an opportunity to clean the registers of individuals who had left the country. Other participating organisations tried to overcome the issues caused by changing population dynamics by combining different sampling methods and recruitment strategies. Gradus Research, for instance, used open data to reassess the structure of their panel, while also doubling the size of their sample (from 2000 to 4000) and used snowball sampling to reach refugee communities outside Ukraine. Despite the different attempts to adapt their sampling strategies, it was widely agreed that most current survey data on displaced Ukrainians available should be taken as indicative, not representative.

Digital tools allow us to reach mobile populations better than before, but require considering the possible limitations of digital divide

Digital tools have been essential for reaching displaced Ukrainians and collecting information from refugees directly. This was facilitated by high levels of digitalisation in Ukraine, which has further increased since the start of the large-scale invasion in February 2022 as information and payments from the state are largely provided through smartphones. Consequently, a significant share of the Ukrainian population – inside and outside its territories - are very active on digital channels and can be more easily reached.

Online surveys have a number of strengths, including that data collection is not bound in time, it is fast and cheap, response rates are higher, and some in-person data collection biases are reduced. Several participating organisations saw benefits in allowing refugees to respond and share their experiences at a time that was most suitable to them during their displacement journey, rather than having to do so in stressful environments like in border control points or while on move.

At the same time, however, it is important to pay attention to the possible limitations of digital divide, especially when trying to reach more vulnerable groups. In order to overcome some of these challenges, different organisations highlighted the value of using mixed approaches and combining online and in-person data collection. In a few countries, including Germany, paper-and-pencil options are available and have been used in particular by older refugees. It was noted, however, that while the target groups reached in-person are slightly different, the outcomes of surveys have been similar regardless if they were conducted online or offline.

Self-reported results should be cross-checked using other data sources

Self-reporting has been prevalent in surveys and participating organisations expressed some concerns about misreporting, especially in relation to education and professional experience. It was noted that countries and organisations are looking to cross-check the findings using other data sources to validate the self-reported information collected through online surveys. Unfortunately, there is only limited administrative data available on some topics, so other innovative solutions need to be explored to obtain complementary information. Switzerland, for example, is working with academia to carry out simplified online tests to check skills levels.

While we know a lot about displaced Ukrainians, there remain many challenging data gaps

Despite the remarkable efforts to collect diverse types of information about displaced Ukrainians across host countries, there remain challenging data gaps. For instance, there is only limited disaggregated data on displaced Ukrainian children, especially in relation to school enrolment and attendance, yet they make up almost third of all arrivals in OECD countries. Some organisations such as FRA have attempted to collect information directly from minors, but it has been challenging and generally the stakeholders rely on parents and guardians to provide information on accompanying children.

Other problematic data areas are secondary and return movements. There are high levels of uncertainty about stocks across the OECD that are very specific to the Ukrainian situation. The ease of cross-border movements for displaced Ukrainians, combined with the possibility of short-term returns to Ukraine, make it challenging to know who is still in the country, who has returned permanently and who has moved to another country. This information, however, is essential to understand integration outcomes such as enrolment and employment rates, and for longer-term planning during the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

Better co-operation and data sharing agreements help with overcoming respondent fatigue and other challenges

Better co-operation between different stakeholders and data sharing could help to bridge some of these gaps, which cannot be easily overcome by a single

organisation. Unfortunately, data sharing has been a challenge throughout the crisis, even internally among governmental agencies. Nevertheless, there are some promising examples to build upon such as the Ukrainian Education Data Hub co-ordinated by UNICEF, UNESCO, UNHCR, and DG HOME (European Commission), where information is being shared on data sources, collection activities, and gaps linked to Ukrainian children's education.

Several participating organisations called for a wider use of data sharing agreements moving forward. In addition to overcoming data gaps, these could help with combatting increasing respondent fatigue, avoiding duplication and optimising resource use by limiting the need for running many data collection efforts in parallel. Moreover, the possibilities for creating anonymised data repositories for sharing specific types of information should be considered. There are already some existing microdata libraries available, for instance, the UNHCR's Microdata Library that includes anonymised microdata of surveys done by the UNHCR as well as external datasets shared by other interested parties, but there is potential for wider cooperation between more organisations in this sphere.

Mainstreaming still lies ahead, but it is necessary for better insights

Since spring 2022, numerous independent initiatives have emerged to gather data on Ukrainians' displacement, providing key stakeholders with a valuable evidence base. However, in addition to addressing challenges such as respondent fatigue, it is necessary to streamline data collection efforts and plan for wider mainstreaming to improve comparability and our understanding of outcomes within and between countries. This includes integrating ad-hoc data collection initiatives into national statistical systems.

Despite the benefits of mainstreaming, there are several challenges that need to be addressed. One such challenge is the need to oversample in certain country contexts to ensure sufficient representation of Ukrainian refugees in national statistics. This can be a costly endeavour. Additionally, some characteristics of Ukrainian refugees may cause them to remain invisible in such data. For example, the EU Labour Force Survey does not cover collective households, which can exclude a significant portion of arrivals. However, there are ongoing efforts to improve data quality in the field of refugee data, such as the work of EGRISS, which can help overcome some of these challenge

Image 1. The joint OECD-EUAA-UNHCR event on data collection and monitoring in May 2023



Next steps

Additional meetings and activities are planned as a follow-up to the technical event in Paris, with a focus on delving deeper into various aspects of data collection and monitoring. Moreover, the OECD will explore the feasibility of developing a regularly updated dashboard on labour market participation of Ukrainian refugees, using available data from the main host countries. Drawing from previous experience in sharing data on Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the UNHCR Europe is piloting an online Factbook on Ukraine that will serve as a repository of different indicators from relevant UNHCR surveys and other publicly available surveys. Efforts are also underway to collaborate on determining the most effective ways to measure the return and secondary movements of the beneficiaries of temporary protection, as well as potential remigration flows of returnees. All interested parties are encouraged to contact the OECD, EUAA, and UNHCR to participate in and contribute to the ongoing work of improving monitoring and data quality in the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

✉ Contacts

Jean-Christophe Dumont, OECD
Email: Jean-Christophe.DUMONT@oecd.org

Ave Lauren, OECD
Email: Ave.LAUREN@oecd.org

Bernhard Chiari, EUAA
Email: Bernhard.Chiari@euaa.europa.eu

Giorgia Tornieri, UNHCR
Email: tornieri@unhcr.org

🔗 Useful links

<https://www.oecd.org/migration/>

<https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/>

<https://euaa.europa.eu/>

<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>