

Adaptive strategies of vulnerable groups of Kyiv citizens during winter energy crisis

August 2026

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Introduction:

Context:

Since October 2022, Ukraine's energy infrastructure has been subject to systematic attacks, resulting in both planned and unplanned power cuts. In 2024, the total duration of power restrictions for households amounted to 1,951 hours.

By 2025, power cuts had become a regular occurrence (8–12 hours a day), and by the end of the year, due to a combination of intense attacks and a sharp drop in temperatures, the duration of power cuts in some cases reached several days in a row.

Kyiv registered one of the worst indicators among Ukraine's major cities: only 3–4% of households were able to heat their housing adequately during the winter of 2025–2026.

Existing research – the Kobo Inc/TJET (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative) survey, the IOM DTM, as well as official data from the Kyiv City State Administration and the Ministry of Community and Territorial Development – provides a quantitative assessment of the scale of the problem: the size of the affected population, the average level of household resource security, and the prevalence of specific adaptation strategies. A synthesis of these sources is presented in Chapter 2.

Research question:

Quantitative sources enable us to assess the scale of the problem and the shortage of resources in households, but do not reveal the mechanisms of adaptation at the level of the individual household. Therefore, the key research question is formulated as:

What adaptation strategies do vulnerable Kyiv residents with limited resources employ to cope with prolonged power cuts? Which of these strategies are effective, and at what stage do their capacity for independent adaptation reach its limits?

To answer this question, the analysis of secondary quantitative data was supplemented by a qualitative phase to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of vulnerable groups in adapting to the situation, and of the factors that determine the limits of their ability to cope independently with the consequences of prolonged power cuts.

Based on a synthesis of quantitative sources, we formulated six expectations — statements regarding the experiences of vulnerable Kyiv residents — which were to be tested during the qualitative phase of the research: house heating; reserve energy sources; social support and support services; depletion of adaptation resources; access to external assistance; preparedness and the impact of past experience.

Structure:

Synthesis of secondary data:

An overview of the figures based on available research and official statistics.

Research methodology:

How exactly was the research carried out – sampling, data collection and analysis.

What did the interviews indicate:

The results of the qualitative phase across six expectations, with explanations from experts and quotes from respondents.

Cross-cutting themes:

The findings that emerged from the interviews themselves and were not anticipated by the original framework.

Restrictions:

Limits of the applicability of the research findings.

Recommendations:

Practical recommendations, grouped according to the level of evidence in the collected data.

Synthesis of secondary data:

2.1. Chronology and scale of power blackouts:

From June 2024, power cuts became frequent: the total duration of power restrictions for households over the course of the year was 1,951 hours (according to the Energy Map portal and the DiXi Group analytical center).

At the end of 2025, the situation came to a head: a combination of regular attacks and an unexpectedly sharp drop in temperatures meant that, in some cities, the residents were left without electricity for several days running.

The situation was most severe in Kyiv: as of early January, nearly 6,000 apartment buildings had been without heating (and, in some cases, water supply) for several days, with an average air temperature of −20 °C. Once the situation had stabilised, the average duration of outages in the capital was around 18 hours a day.

2.2. Attacks on Kyiv's energy infrastructure (ACLED, Ukraine Conflict Monitor):

In general, attacks on the capital's energy infrastructure began to be registered starting in 2022. A direct comparison of the annual figures is misleading, as the data for 2026 only covers January to June:

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Attacks on Kyiv's Energy Infrastructure

Year:	Attacks:	Months with data:	Attacks/months:
2022	12	12	1,00
2023	5	12	0,42
2024	10	12	0,83
2025	14	12	1,17
2026	13	6 (Jan–Jun)	2,17

(The average monthly rate for 2026 (2.17) is the highest for the entire monitoring period, which is partly due to the seasonal overlap with the heating season, rather than necessarily a general escalation).

2.3. Profile of registered IDPs in Kyiv (Information and Coordination Centre of the Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity):

As of 2026, over 3 million people live in Kyiv. According to data from the ICC of the Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity, as of early July, 437,724 people with internally displaced person (IDP) status were registered in the city, of whom 65,405 were children under the age of 18:

Category of vulnerability:	Number of people:
Families	356 111
People of working age	250 421
Children under 18	79 500
Pensioners	76 888

People with disabilities	7 557
Children with disabilities	562
A family with many children	159
Persons incapable of acting	58
Deprived of parental care	47
Orphans	33

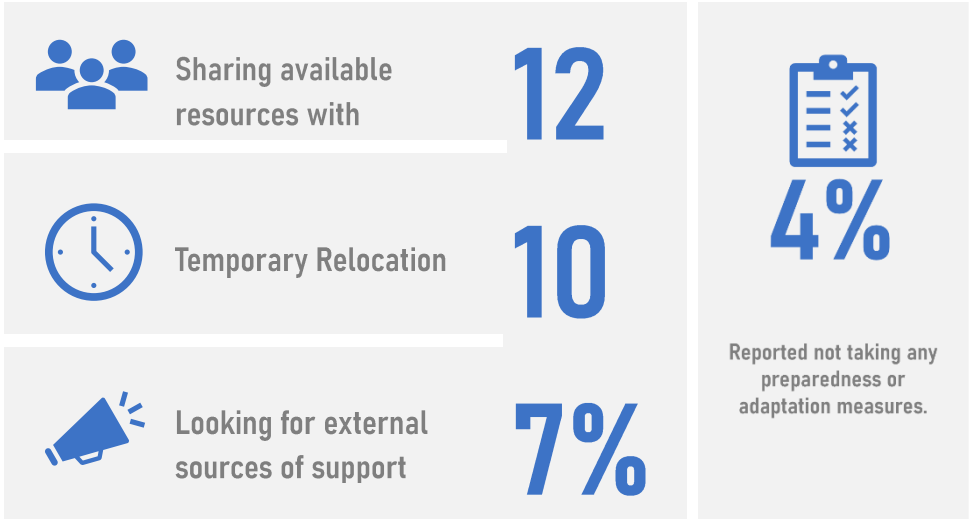
(The data on vulnerability categories overlap – a single person may fall into several categories at the same time (for example, a pensioner and a family member), which is why the total exceeds the overall number of registered IDPs.)

2.4. Kobo Inc / TJET (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative) - household survey:

Conducted in September–October 2025 (before the onset of the harshest winter): 1,450 respondents by telephone + 2,500 in person across five cities, including Kyiv (n=400). The most common ways of adapting to the conditions:



At the same time, other strategies were less popular. Some respondents stated that they had not undertaken any planning or adaptation measures at all:



(Key limitation: the data was collected before the start of the 2025–2026 winter and reflects intentions or past experience rather than actual behaviour during the most challenging period. More than half of the respondents explicitly indicated a low level of preparedness for prolonged power cuts.)

2.5. IOM DTM-«Ukrainian winter cost» (January–March 2026)

A nationwide survey (40,000 telephone interviews + 4,280 in-depth interviews, of which 1,471 were with IDPs) documenting people's actual experiences of the harshest winter, but without a separate sample for Kyiv.

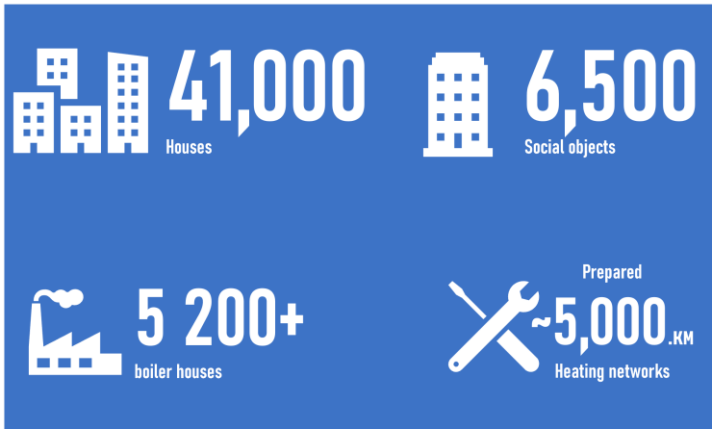
Indicator:	Meaning:
Median rent for IDP tenants	≈ 6 000 UAH/Month
Spending more than 70% of income on rent	10%+
The median price of utility services in Kyiv	3 500 UAH/Month
Receiving a housing benefit	19%
IDPs who have received state assistance for utility bills	9%
Have access to at least 1 reserve power source	70%+ (most often power banks)
IDPs: power banks / generators / inverters / solar panels	62% / 12% / 6% / 1%
Able to heat homes as much as needed (overall / IDPs / Kyiv)	32% / 27% / 3–4%
Used up savings in 30 days	49%
IDPs: moved to worse housing or are already living there and cannot move elsewhere	14% (total)

Respondents from Kyiv are included in the overall sample but are not singled out – the figures given for Kyiv (rent, heating) are the only specific exceptions; the remaining figures are representative only at national level.

2.6. Preparation for the 2026–2027 winter season by the government:

Based on the challenges faced during previous heating seasons, the government has identified the protection of energy infrastructure, the procurement of equipment and repair materials, and the development of distributed generation as key priorities for preparations:

According to the Ministry of Community Development, as of early July, the following had been prepared across the country:



- As part of the implementation of the comprehensive Regional Resilience Plans, work has been completed on 110 of the 576 planned energy objects, life-support systems and railway infrastructure projects.

- Over 4.5 billion UAH has been allocated for the development of distributed generation; the level of provision of reserve power sources for heating and water supply facilities stands at around 77%.
- In March 2026, they approved a separate Plan for Ensuring the Resilience of Kyiv (Kyiv City State Administration): the protection of 57 critical infrastructure facilities and the installation of around 200 MW of new generation capacity – which, in theory, fully covers the consumption of the utilities sector (173 MW according to the plan's first draft).
- As of the end of February 2026, the Kyiv City State Administration estimated the need for additional funding at over 50 billion UAH. It is this lack of funding, rather than the pace of work, that remains the main obstacle, as the city budget cannot cover this amount on its own.
- In June 2026, a meeting was held between the Ministry of Development and the Kyiv City State Administration to discuss preparations for the autumn–winter period of 2026–2027 – the updated Resilience Plan was reviewed; the government continues to support the city on a co-financing basis.

Independent expert assessment (EKC-EH, Institute of General Energy, NAS of Ukraine):

- Technical mechanism: In older housing buildings, heating is often supplied without pumps (a gravity-fed system) – making it less reliant on electricity; The new system includes an individual heating unit with pumps and valves – the dependence on electricity for heating itself is significantly higher. Vulnerability to power cuts is determined by the type and age of the building, not merely by the presence of a district heating network as such.
- Kyiv's heating systems are 70–80% worn out - mainly due to its age, rather than directly as a result of the war; the electricity networks remain relatively stable as long as the city remains part of Ukraine's integrated power system.

«A large part of the heat energy losses – an extremely large part – is borne by consumers, and all of this will be factored into the price.»

- The 4.5 billion UAH for decentralized generation has been deemed insufficient - According to the expert's calculations, this would yield a maximum of ~150–180 MW, even if all of it were used for cogeneration – 'very, very close' even for Kyiv only.
- Scepticism regarding the claimed 200 MW of new generation capacity: Each cogeneration plant has a capacity of 1–2 MW, meaning that 100–200 units are required; connecting that many facilities within the available timeframe is extremely difficult from a technical point of view. This is further complicated by a shortage of qualified personnel:

" You see – to have the staff to maintain these 100–200 units, you need 100–200 qualified engineers who know what to do."

- The 50 billion UAH deficit has been confirmed as not purely financial: the hidden factor – human resources (certification of engineers for cogeneration equipment requires years of study abroad, and the number of specialists is "catastrophically declining"), time and bureaucratic approvals.
- Targeted instruments for vulnerable groups (Preferential tariffs, subsidies, energy efficiency programmes, and grants for homeowners' associations for solar panels and storage units have been confirmed as existing and operational – this contrasts with widespread reports of refusals in our own interviews with vulnerable Kyiv residents, indicating a disconnect between the existence of these programmes and practical access to them. Separately, it was noted that existing programmes have been scaled back and their coverage reduced due to new requirements:

«Of course, their numbers are steadily declining, and new requirements are constantly being imposed, naturally due to budget deficits»

- The dangers of homemade heating systems have been confirmed and further highlighted: as well as fire and carbon monoxide – a new, previously unanticipated risk posed by homemade lithium-ion battery systems made from second-hand cells that have not been checked for condition, which could cause a fire that is virtually impossible to extinguish:

«As these conditions deteriorate, people will increasingly turn to these various approaches. And without the necessary knowledge and understanding of the processes involved, this will lead to negative consequences, or even disasters»

Source: *expert interview (KII), Institute of General Energy NAS of Ukraine, August 2026.*

The respondent is the Deputy Director for Research and Organisational Affairs; he is involved in consultations with government authorities both personally and on behalf of the institute (include NSDC) on energy sustainability.

Sources: Ministry of Community and Territorial Development of Ukraine (press office, briefings by the Deputy Prime Minister);

KCSA (official communications and Resilience Plans).

Stated expectations:

Based on a synthesis of secondary sources, six expectations have been formulated as described above – statements regarding the experiences of vulnerable Kyiv citizens, which were verified during the qualitative phase of the research («What did the interviews indicate» chapter):



HOME HEATING

Only 3–4% of Kyiv citizens were able to heat their homes as much as they needed to (compared with 27% among internally displaced persons and 32% nationwide). It is not known exactly what is preventing vulnerable groups from doing so: money, physical ability or the condition of their homes.



RESERVE ENERGY SOURCES

62% of IDPs have only power banks, 12% have generators, 6% have inverters, and 1% have solar panels. For vulnerable groups on a fixed income, this percentage may be even lower.



SOCIAL SUPPORT AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

Only 12% of Kyiv citizens shared resources with their neighbours — a lower proportion than in other cities. It is not known whether this is a city-wide trend or specific to vulnerable groups with limited mobility.



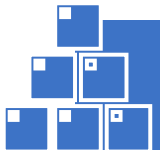
DEPLETION OF ADAPTIVE RESOURCES

14% of IDPs had exhausted their strategy of downgrading their living conditions, 49% had used up their financial reserves, and 10% had not paid their rent. The product's research question focuses specifically on the moment this transition took place.



ACCESS TO EXTERNAL SUPPORT

Only 9% of IDPs received state assistance with utility bills, 19% received a housing subsidy, and seeking external assistance was the least common adaptation strategy of all (7% of Kyiv citizens) It is unknown why this particular strategy is so rarely used.



READINESS AND THE IMPACT OF ACCUMULATED EXPERIENCE

More than half of Kyiv's citizens are not ready/only slightly ready for prolonged power cuts, despite their many years of experience.

Research Methodology:

Research design:

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. In the first stage, existing quantitative sources were synthesised: the Kobo Inc/TJET (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative) survey, the IOM DTM study, and official data from the Kyiv City State Administration and the Ministry of Community and Territorial Development. Based on this synthesis, six expectations – testable statements about the experiences of vulnerable Kyiv citizens – were formulated. In the second stage, qualitative data (in-depth and expert interviews) tested these expectations and identified themes not covered by the quantitative sources.

Sample:

Purposive sampling, incorporating elements of snowball sampling, was used. This was carried out in partnership with URCS, based on the principle of maximum variation, involving representatives of four categories of the public who are likely to face greater barriers to independent adaptation during prolonged power cuts: elderly people living alone; people with disabilities; families with many children; families with a child with a disability. This approach made it possible to cover various types of vulnerability and to investigate how they influence coping strategies and the need for external support.

Category :	Planned :	Conducted :	Reason for the extension:
Elderly people living alone	4	4	-
People with disabilities (adults)	3	4	Variation in responses across the first 3 interviews (different mechanisms of institutional barriers)
Large families / Families with children	3	3	-
A family with a child with a disability	2	4	A wide range of severity in the first 2 interviews

The sample size was determined on the basis of the principle of information power rather than statistical representativeness: the narrow scope of the research question, the homogeneity of the categories and the existence of a prior theoretical framework (six expectations) reduce the required sample size. The initial plan was for 12 interviews; the final sample size was 15, following the expansion of two categories based on an assessment of theoretical saturation during the fieldwork phase.

The sample is not representative and does not claim to provide a statistical generalisation for the entire population of vulnerable Kyiv citizens: the method used to select the sample and its limited size systematically influence whose experiences are included in the study and whose are not. This limitation is discussed in more detail in the 'Limitations' section.

In addition, two expert interviews (Key Informant Interviews) were conducted for triangulation: with a representative of a humanitarian organisation (Community of Sant'Egidio) and with a specialist from the Institute of General Energy of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

Data collection:

A tool for households – a semi-structured interview guide.

Two separate guides were used for the expert interviews, each limited to the area of expertise of a specific respondent.

Format: telephone and face-to-face interviews, conducted in Ukrainian, with recordings made with the respondent's verbal consent. Fieldwork period: July–August 2026.

Verbal informed consent was obtained at the start of each interview, including the right to stop the conversation at any time.

Respondents are coded by category (П1–П4, ОзІ1–ОзІ4, БС1–БС3, ДІ1–ДІ4; ЕКС-ЕН, ЕКС-ГО); Correspondence between codes and personal data is stored separately from analytical materials.

Data analysis:

Data presentation format – case-ordered matrix: one row per respondent, one column per topic, with a brief summary and illustrative quotations in each cell. This format was chosen as it is proportionate to the sample size (N=15) (quote-by-quote coding (one row per quote) is justified for samples of 25–30 respondents).

The household survey results were cross-referenced with two expert interviews on each of the six expectations (triangulation), with the outcome recorded as: confirmed / confirmed with some qualifications / not confirmed / unexpected finding.

Sample saturation:

Theoretical saturation – the point at which the respondent in question ceases to raise new topics, merely repeating those already recorded – was assessed after each interview within a given category.

The categories 'elderly people living alone' and 'large families' are showing signs of saturation within the initial quota. The categories 'people with disabilities' and 'families with a child with a disability' – following the expansion of the sample beyond the initial plan –

continued to show significant heterogeneity (various mechanisms of institutional barriers; a wide range of severity of circumstances). This has been documented as a limitation, rather than as formally achieved full saturation.

What did the interviews indicate?:

To understand exactly how vulnerable Kyiv citizens are adapting to power and heating cuts – and where this adaptation reaches its limits – a research institute conducted 15 in-depth interviews with households and 2 interviews with specialists – a representative of a humanitarian organisation that receives hundreds of families every week at its centres in Kyiv, and an expert from the Institute of General Energy of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian; the respondents' names have been changed to pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

Heating without electricity:

Only 3–4% of Kyiv citizens were able to heat their homes sufficiently during the winter – the worst figure among all cities in Ukraine, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Interviews with households reveal that the reasons for this were varied.

Sometimes the problem isn't with the heating system itself. One of the respondents, a 76-year-old woman who lives alone on the fourth floor, said that the central heating in her block had not been switched off once in three winters – but the temperature in her flat still dropped to 14°C because the block's owners' association had not maintained the heating system for years. The problem was only resolved when a plumber was called out..

In other cases, the dependence on electricity is direct and critical. A family forced to move from Kakhovka is living in a fully electrified home with no gas – meaning that as soon as the power goes out, any means of heating disappears. Two women with disabilities, independently of one another, recounted how they kept warm by lighting their gas cookers and surrounding them with firebricks to make the heat last longer:



«We had to turn on the gas hob and place firebricks on it to heat the flat».

(person with a disability)

The most difficult case among all those surveyed is that of a woman who has been caring for her adult daughter, who has severe mental and physical disabilities, for forty years. In the winter of 2025–2026, when the heating was cut off, the temperature in the flat dropped

to +6°C whilst it was −20°C outside, and her daughter, who cannot speak or move unaided, began to slip into a state resembling a hypothermic coma. The ambulance service advised that she be woken every half hour, but the electricity company refused to come until the woman had called the police and threatened to contact a TV station. The power was restored thirty minutes after the police intervened.

Why is the heating system so vulnerable to power cuts, even when a building is technically connected to the centralised network? According to an expert from the Institute of General Energy of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, it all depends on the age of the building: in older buildings, heat often circulates without pumps, relying on pressure differences, so a power cut has almost no effect on it. Newer developments, however, feature individual heating units with pumps and automated controls that require a power supply to operate – and it is precisely in these cases that a power cut means a loss of heat. The situation is further exacerbated by the general condition of the networks: Kyiv's heating networks are 70–80% worn out, largely simply due to age rather than directly as a result of the hostilities. Vulnerable groups of Kyiv citizens are forced to adapt to these conditions:

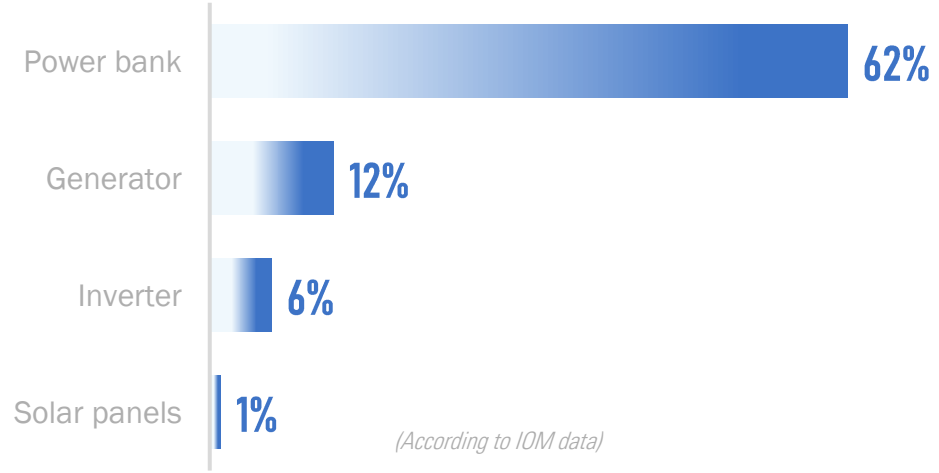
'(I used to keep warm every winter) from this towel rail; if you shut yourself in the bathroom, it's warm. Warmer than the rest of the flat, you know?'

(a lonely elderly person)

A representative of the humanitarian organisation 'Community of Saint Egidio', who visits vulnerable residents of Kyiv in their homes every week, confirms that the main obstacle is not a lack of understanding or a willingness to prepare, but a lack of funds. According to her, the older generation is usually 'quite responsible' and tries to prepare for themselves, but physically lacks the resources to do so. Added to this is another barrier – many elderly people are simply afraid or physically unable to leave their homes in icy conditions, so even help that is theoretically available – such as a warming centre or delivered firewood – remains out of reach.

Emergency power supply:

The following alternative food sources are listed for IDPs:



This pattern was fully confirmed in all 15 interviews: practically everyone, without exception, has a power bank and a torch. However, the next step – something more powerful – depends almost entirely on the family's financial situation.

Only two families in the sample – both of whom are raising children with disabilities and are relatively more financially stable – have a fully-fledged portable power station (Ecoflow). One mother was forced to improvise using a car battery connected to a blender to prepare special therapeutic food for her child during power cuts.

A representative of the humanitarian organisation explicitly confirms this inequality:



«If wealthier families can afford to buy an Ecoflow power station and have a backup power supply, then essentially all an elderly person can do...'

(Humanitarian organisation)

She also mentioned a less obvious detail: the push-button mobile phones still used by most of the organisation's elderly beneficiaries are physically incompatible with standard power banks — so adaptors have to be bought separately. And so as not to miss the brief window when the power comes back on, neighbours in some blocks ring each other at three o'clock in the morning — to wake each other up and have time to charge their lamps, mobile phones and power banks.

An expert from the Institute of Energy considers the funds allocated by the state for the development of distributed generation across the country (over 4.5 billion UAH) to be insufficient — according to his calculations, this would be enough for a maximum of 150–180 megawatts of new capacity, and this is "very, very close" even to the needs of Kyiv alone. Targeted programmes for vulnerable groups do exist — for example, municipal grants for co-owners' associations for solar panels and storage systems — but this support is provided at the level of the building as a whole, rather than for individual vulnerable families, so it did not reach the respondents in this research.

Who's nearby?:

Only 12% of Kyiv citizens shared resources with their neighbours during power cuts — a lower proportion than in other major cities in Ukraine (data from Kobo Inc/TJET, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative). Among the vulnerable Kyiv residents surveyed, the picture was even more polarised: some received extremely strong support, whilst others received practically none.

According to the interview findings, respondents from vulnerable groups identified social support as one of the most effective tools helping them in practice (among those who had access to it). This applies both to the context of a harsh winter marked by power cuts and in general. Moreover, the assessment of its impact was positive regardless of the source – whether from a neighbour, an acquaintance or a social worker. Respondents reported significant difficulties and a deterioration in their standard of living in cases where such support was suddenly lost:

«Then, for five months I had no one; it was a nightmare»

(a lonely elderly person)

A visually impaired woman, who lost her sight twelve years ago, shares a flat with a strange young woman: the latter lives there rent-free in exchange for daily care — an informal arrangement that arose not from family ties, but from the practical needs of both parties. Another respondent — a mother who cares for her severely disabled daughter on her own — relies most heavily on a volunteer from a community organisation, an acquaintance who helps her more frequently and reliably than any state service, despite living in a different part of the city.

At the other end of the spectrum are a few families who describe themselves as being practically isolated, with no support whatsoever apart from their immediate family. Two respondents, independently of one another, mentioned that the mutual support amongst neighbours, which had been strong at the start of the full-scale invasion, has noticeably waned over the years.

The humanitarian organisation 'Community of Saint Egidio' is so well aware of this that it has turned it into a practical tool: for every vulnerable person in its database, it notes the contact details of a neighbour or friend who can be called upon to carry out periodic checks. According to the organisation's coordinator:

> ***«It might seem like a very simple mechanism, but it really does save people's lives and helps them react quickly in critical moments»***.

She also noted that there is no significant difference in the level of loneliness between IDPs and elderly Kyiv residents — for many long-time Kyiv citizens, their children have also long since moved abroad or to other cities, so both groups are equally left to face their difficulties on their own.

When resource ends:

49%

Spent all savings during the first month of winter

14%

Forced to accept a lower standard of living

(data about IDP, IOM)

Most of the households surveyed confirmed that each successive winter had been harder than the previous one, with some even describing the winter of 2025–2026 as 'horrible' and a 'disaster'.

But there is one exception, and it is telling: two families raising children with disabilities found last winter easier to cope with than previous ones — not because the winter was objectively milder, but because they had purchased a powerful generator in advance, had come to terms with the situation psychologically, and made use of the more precise power cut schedules introduced by the city.

The coordinator of the humanitarian organisation confirms that resources are running low, almost word for word:

«Resources are definitely running out... we were recently talking with friends who are tired of getting tired».

However, she also described a powerful countervailing mechanism that she observes on a weekly basis: internally displaced people (IDPs) who once relied on humanitarian assistance often return later as volunteers, helping newly displaced families. According to her, this is not only beneficial for the organization but also serves as a therapeutic experience for the volunteers themselves:

«When you help others, you stop focusing on your own problems; you no longer see yourself as a victim».

Two respondents in this research — a woman with a disability and the mother of a child with a disability — personally confirmed the same pattern: despite their own pressing needs, both concluded the conversation not with a request for themselves, but with a plea to pay more attention to another vulnerable group — older people.

This appeal takes on a distinct significance when the statistics are viewed through the lived experience of older people. If 49% of respondents had exhausted their savings within the first month of winter, then for the older people living alone interviewed in this study, the reality is even more stark: in practice, they have little or no opportunity to accumulate savings at all:

«I live alone. I have no one. My pension is UAH 3,000 a month (approximately USD 1.5 per day). I am both low-income and alone. Those are my vulnerabilities. In general, I have to give up almost everything, including medicine and food»

(a lonely elderly person).

Consequently, many Kyiv citizens from this vulnerable group found themselves in a desperate situation during the winter of 2025–2026, unable to cope on their own. In some cases, receiving assistance can be a matter of life and death for this group.

When support was requested and why it did not always work?:

Only 9% of internally displaced persons (IDPs) received government assistance to cover utility costs, while seeking external assistance was the least common coping strategy among Kyiv residents overall (7%, according to Kobo Inc./TJET data). This emerged as one of the most complex and nuanced themes in the entire study.

In several cases, the reasons for rejection were quite specific. One man was denied a one-time municipal assistance payment because his income, consisting of his pension and the displacement support payment, totaling approximately UAH 5,300 per month, exceeded the

eligibility threshold of UAH 4,500. One respondent discovered that the humanitarian organization she had approached and the local Territorial Centre for Social Services could not provide her with a social worker simultaneously. This formal rule left her without support for several months.

In another case, access to assistance was tied to official place of registration rather than actual place of residence. A woman who had relocated from Donetsk Oblast to Kyiv was only able to obtain diapers for her bedridden husband in the city where she had previously been registered.

Beyond outright denials of assistance, respondents who regularly relied on basic support in the form of food parcels and essential non-food items reported a decline in the volume of aid available. This was reflected in smaller food packages and in the reduction or complete discontinuation of assistance programmes offered by organizations from which they had previously received support:

> ***«They give less now, much less. At the beginning of the war, the assistance was more substantial. The packages included cereals, flour, and other basic items. Now the distributions have become smaller. And many churches have stopped providing assistance altogether.»***
>
> (a lonely elderly person)

Informal and politically mediated channels appeared, somewhat unexpectedly, to be more reliable than official ones. Two respondents, independently of one another, reported receiving regular annual assistance through local council members and the mayor, while formal assistance mechanisms had denied them support.

Respondents provided different explanations for why they had not sought assistance. Some had previously been denied support and had given up trying. Others had already concluded that they would not meet the eligibility criteria: *"I can see that there is no point."* Still others were reluctant to ask for help, believing that those around them were facing similar hardship:

> ***«Well, but the neighbours are sitting there without any light themselves. How can I? As for charging – maybe they've got a power bank. But they're charging their own devices, aren't they?»***
>
> (person with disability);

Others received assistance only passively, through a neighbour who applied on their behalf.

Four respondents independently confirmed another recurring pattern: a number of humanitarian programmes in Kyiv are exclusively targeted at internally displaced persons (IDPs), leaving some local residents, despite facing equally severe hardship, without access to support.

> ***«I would say that they should also help Kyiv residents. Because whenever assistance is available in Kyiv, it seems to be only for internally displaced people»***
>
> (humanitarian organisation).

However, the coordinator of the Community of Sant'Egidio offered an important qualification: her organization deliberately does not distinguish between people based on displacement status. As she explained, *"We do not categorize people; we welcome the person."*

At the same time, the coordinator of the Community of Sant'Egidio described its cooperation with the city authorities and social services as functioning well. Organizations share lists of the most vulnerable individuals and coordinate visits to ensure that support reaches those in need.

This stands in striking contrast to the individual cases of exclusion and rejection described by respondents. Most likely, this discrepancy reflects the fact that institutional cooperation between humanitarian organizations and government agencies operates according to a different set of rules and processes than an individual seeking assistance from a specific service provider.

A separate and particularly acute challenge concerns the lack of specialized equipment for the care of bedridden individuals. One woman with a disability interviewed for this study has needed a patient lift for years to transfer between her bed and wheelchair. However, both the humanitarian organization she approached and the local authorities denied her request.

The coordinator of the Community of Sant'Egidio confirmed that this is not an isolated case but a systemic gap in available support. She also proposed a solution that her organization already applies to wheelchairs: a social lending and return scheme for costly assistive equipment, allowing families to borrow and return items when no longer needed rather than requiring each household to obtain them independently.

Why previous winter experience does not always help?:

More than half of Kyiv citizens acknowledge that they are either unprepared or only somewhat prepared for prolonged power cuts, despite having lived through three or even four consecutive winters marked by such disruptions (Kobo Inc./TJET data). At first glance, one might expect experience alone to lead to better preparedness. In practice, however, the primary barrier remains financial constraints rather than a lack of awareness. Yet the findings also point to another, less obvious reason.

The coordinator of the humanitarian organization described it this way:

"Our winters are difficult, but no two winters are the same. There is always an element of unpredictability.

Last year, there were almost no power outages; this year has been the most difficult winter so far."

This suggests that some respondents cannot rely on "accumulated experience" in the conventional sense, because the conditions they face change from year to year and remain inherently unpredictable. She also identified another reason why people do not always adapt, even when doing so would appear to be the rational choice:

> *"For an older person, relocating to a new home, even if it would theoretically improve their warmth, safety, or living conditions, is in itself a traumatic experience. That is why many of them stay where they are until the very last moment."*

Another notable finding is the sharp contrast in the severity of challenges experienced during the winter of 2025-2026 compared with the previous two winter seasons. Although regular power outages lasting 8-12 hours per day were common during those earlier winters, respondents generally perceived them as difficult yet still ***"within their capacity to cope with."***

As a result, households gradually developed experience in preparing for such disruptions over the course of two years. A minimum preparedness standard emerged, typically consisting of several power banks for lighting and charging devices, as well as portable gas stoves with fuel canisters for heating food and cooking.

The winter of 2025-2026, however, marked a significant departure from this established experience. In Kyiv, electricity outages began lasting more than 18 hours per day, while interruptions to heating services and sporadic water supply disruptions further compounded the situation. These conditions fundamentally challenged the coping strategies that households had developed during previous winters.

Consequently, Kyiv residents, and especially vulnerable groups represented in this study, were largely unprepared for this new level of hardship and disruption.

An expert from the Institute of Energy confirms that adaptation is indeed taking place at an individual level – ***"people have already adapted to a certain extent"*** – but declines to give a precise forecast in terms of figures, explaining that too much depends on the intensity of future attacks and the weather to make such statements responsibly.

At the same time, two families with children with disabilities show that exceptions are possible: when there are financial resources available for advance preparation, and the city provides more predictable power cut schedules, the approach really does start to work.

Cross-cutting themes:

The six themes discussed in the previous section were identified in advance based on a review of quantitative research conducted prior to the in-depth interviews.

The findings presented below were not anticipated within that analytical framework. However, they emerged with sufficient consistency across respondents from different vulnerability groups to be considered distinct patterns rather than isolated cases.

Why is it that sometimes the problem isn't the refusal, but the fact that the system forgets about the person?

In two independent cases, the absence of support was not the result of a direct rejection by a specific institution, but rather the loss of documentation during the transfer of case files between social protection authorities and the Pension Fund.

One respondent, a woman with visual impairment, went without receiving her pension for twelve months. Another respondent, a woman caring for her adult daughter with a severe disability, encountered an almost identical administrative failure and likewise remained without her caregiver allowance for several months.

Both cases are structurally similar: the cause is not a decision made by a single employee of an institution, but a breakdown in the data sharing procedure between the two agencies. This has practical implications for understanding the barrier: when the source of the problem is not attributable to any individual, the respondent has no clear point of contact to whom they can turn or lodge a complaint, and the process of resuming payments drags on indefinitely.

A separate, opposite yet related type of barrier was identified: a lack of information about existing support programmes. One family received high-quality support from a humanitarian organisation to equipment for a child with a disability, but once the support had ended, they had no way of finding out about the organisation's future opportunities. In another case, a respondent learnt about a palliative care programme (funded by the National Health Service of Ukraine and, according to her doctor, in operation for several years) by chance, through an advert on social media; her GP was also unaware of the programme's existence. In both cases, the problem lies not in the design of the support programme itself, but in the lack of proactive follow-up after the initial contact with the beneficiary.

Which is more helpful – financial support or support in kind?

Three respondents from different vulnerability categories (a single mother with children, a woman with a disability and cancer, and the father of a child with cerebral palsy) independently expressed the same

view: cash assistance is more useful than in-kind assistance (food parcels, humanitarian aid packages).The reasoning in all three cases is similar — the respondent is better placed than the donor to determine the priority expenditure at any given time (medicines, rent, specific food items), whereas the composition of a standard package does not allow for such flexibility.

One of the respondents also pointed out that the contents of the humanitarian aid parcels did not match the household's actual needs, citing tinned fish as an example, as the children in the family do not eat it.

Is the return of electricity safe?

Two respondents reported damage to household appliances or household infrastructure when the electricity supply was restored following a prolonged power cut.

In one instance, a power surge caused a washing machine to break down; in another, a respondent described a similar risk relating to the heating system — an old radiator which, in her view, had been damaged by a sudden rise in pressure when the water supply was restored, whilst there were no funds available to replace the equipment.

Although the number of such reports in the sample is small, both cases point to a technical risk, in addition to the power cut itself — damage caused not by the power cut itself, but by the process of restoring the power supply.

What is more important than heating and electricity??

A respondent, whose previous home in Kakhovka had become uninhabitable as a result of the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Station, expressed a view that goes beyond the scope of the six topics under investigation: in her assessment, problems with heating, electricity supply and finances stem from the lack of stable, permanent housing, rather than existing as separate, parallel difficulties.

The respondent applied for social housing two years ago; at the time of the interview, no decision had been made.

This is an uncommon case in the sample; however, the very structure of the argument — identifying housing insecurity as the root cause underlying other forms of vulnerability — merits attention as a hypothesis for further research.

Who are invisible in the statistics?:

The sample for this study covered four specific categories of vulnerability: pensioners, people with disabilities, large families, and families with a child with a disability. During an expert interview, a representative of a humanitarian organisation drew attention to a category that is overlooked by existing support programmes — people without a permanent place of residence in Kyiv. According to her, there is only one official night shelter operating in the city, the capacity of which does not meet the actual need; she also noted an increase in the

proportion of people with mental health conditions among the homeless, for whom there is currently no systematic support mechanism in place.



«When you have a home of your own, you gain a sense of security. From there, other aspects of life, such as work and schooling, begin to fall into place»

(Large family)

This group was not included in the research sampling framework, and the information presented here should therefore be understood as an observation provided by a single expert rather than a documented research finding. Nevertheless, it points to a potential gap that warrants consideration when designing future studies of vulnerability in the context of the energy crisis.

Can heat become dangerous?

At least three respondents from different vulnerability categories, independently of one another, described using the same method of heating: a gas hob left on high, lined with firebricks to prolong heat transfer after the hob had been switched off. The recurrence of this practice amongst respondents from different categories and areas of residence suggests that it should be regarded as a widespread, rather than an isolated, coping strategy.

An expert from the Institute of General Energy of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine has confirmed that this practice poses a real danger — and not just because of the risk of fire. According to his assessment, carbon monoxide poisoning is no less significant a risk factor, as the gas is colourless and odourless, making it difficult to detect the danger in time.

The expert also drew attention to a related, less obvious but more dangerous risk: homemade backup power systems based on lithium-ion cells assembled from second-hand, untested batteries. Unlike a conventional fire, a lithium-ion battery fire is virtually impossible to extinguish using standard methods — the combustion process continues until the fuel is completely exhausted. The expert identified raising public awareness of both types of risk as a priority area for preventative work.

Restrictions:

Sample:

The sample was purposively selected, incorporating elements of the snowball sampling method, in partnership with the Ukrainian Red Cross Society. This defines the limits of generalizing the findings: the study reflects the experiences of individuals reached through this recruitment approach and is not statistically representative of all vulnerable residents of Kyiv. The sampling strategy may also have systematically excluded people who have no contact with humanitarian organizations, particularly the most isolated individuals, whose experiences may differ from those documented.

The sample size (N=15) was determined on the basis of information power rather than statistical representativeness ('Methodology' section). The categories 'people with disabilities' and 'families with a child with a disability' continued to show significant heterogeneity in responses after the sample was expanded beyond the initial plan. Conclusions regarding these two categories should be interpreted with greater caution than those concerning the categories 'pensioners' and 'large families', which showed signs of saturation within the planned sample size.

Reliability of the analysis:

Data coding was carried out without an independent cross-check by another researcher (inter-coder reliability check). No member checking was carried out with the respondents themselves. Both factors reduce the possibility of independently verifying that the analytical conclusions correspond to the raw data.

Time limits:

The results reflect experience from three heating seasons, with a focus on the winter of 2025–2026. According to expert interviews, the frequency of power cuts varies significantly from year to year and is difficult to predict. Consequently, documented adaptation patterns should not be automatically extrapolated to future heating seasons without taking their specific conditions into account..

Geographical specificity:

The research is limited to Kyiv. Certain documented mechanisms — in particular, the dependence of access to assistance on one's place of official registration — may not be replicated in other cities with different organisational structures for administrative services and humanitarian response. Patterns of adaptation should not be automatically extrapolated to future heating seasons without taking their specific conditions into account.

Category not covered by the sample:

During the expert interview, a category of vulnerability was identified that had been completely overlooked by the research sample: people living without permanent accommodation in Kyiv.

The available information on this group is limited to the observations of a single expert and is not the result of systematic research; accordingly, it has not been incorporated into the report's conclusions, but is merely noted as an area for further study.

Recommendations:

Recommendations confirmed by several independent sources.

Proactively inform existing beneficiaries about new and related support programmes:

Respondents who encountered not a refusal but a lack of information about available programmes described essentially the same mechanism: financial support exists, but is not accompanied by further information for the recipient about related opportunities. This problem differs from the others in that it concerns not the quality of the programmes themselves, but the way in which they are communicated.

Strengthen the social support network for vulnerable people living independently:

The importance of a personal social network — neighbours and friends who are able to check in on a vulnerable person from time to time — was confirmed by both the respondents and the humanitarian organisation, with both sides reaching this conclusion independently. Respondents described specific cases where help from neighbours proved to be lifesaving; the humanitarian organisation confirmed this at a systemic level, explaining that it deliberately records the contact details of neighbours of vulnerable people for this very purpose as part of its daily practice.

To prioritise cash assistance where operationally feasible:

Respondents who had experience of both cash and in-kind assistance consistently highlighted the advantage of cash: it allows them to decide for themselves which expenditure to prioritise at any given moment — medicines, rent, or food — whereas the composition of the standard package does not allow for this flexibility. This finding was consistently reported by respondents across different vulnerability categories, independently of one another, which lends it greater credibility despite the limited sample size. Where a switch to cash is not possible, it is also important to offer a choice of in-kind assistance formats.

Strengthen targeted awareness-raising on the risks associated with unsafe self-heating practices:

The practice of using a lit gas hob with firebricks for heating proved not to be an isolated incident, but one that was commonly reported among respondents from various categories and areas of residence. An expert from the Institute of General Energy of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine independently confirmed the reality of this risk — not only because of the threat of fire, but also because of carbon monoxide poisoning, which is colourless and odourless. The campaign should specifically warn of the risks associated with homemade lithium-ion battery systems.

Recommendations for further piloting and validation:

These proposals are based on individual, detailed documented cases or expert observations. They have the potential for practical application, but require further testing and/or pilot schemes before they can be scaled up.)

Pilot a network of small heating points within walking distance of households:

A representative of a humanitarian organization highlighted that older people are not always physically able to travel to a large centralized heating point, particularly during adverse weather conditions. This suggests the need to consider piloting small-scale heating points serving several neighbouring residential buildings as a complement to larger centralized heating facilities.

To pilot a system for the hire and return of expensive specialised equipment:

An individual case involving a prolonged failure to provide a patient lift for transferring a person from a bed to a wheelchair was confirmed by a representative of a humanitarian organization as an example of a broader gap in access to such equipment. Given the rental and lending mechanisms already used by humanitarian organizations for rehabilitation assistive devices, consideration should be given to piloting a similar approach for specialized equipment.

To consider mechanisms for reimbursing transport costs for vulnerable groups and volunteers during the heating season:

A representative of a humanitarian organization highlighted rising transportation costs as a potential barrier for both volunteers and aid recipients who need to travel to assistance points or provide support to others. This observation suggests the need for further assessment of transportation-related barriers and consideration of piloting cost-reimbursement mechanisms during periods of increased demand and operational pressure