Rapid Winterization Assessment

Since the beginning of the international armed conflict in Ukraine, **more than 7.9 million border crossings of refugees from Ukraine** have been registered by Romania and **177,632 refugees** have been issued Temporary Protection permits in Romania, as of 30 November 2024. Additionally, as of the same date, in Romania there were **4,857 beneficiaries of International Protection**

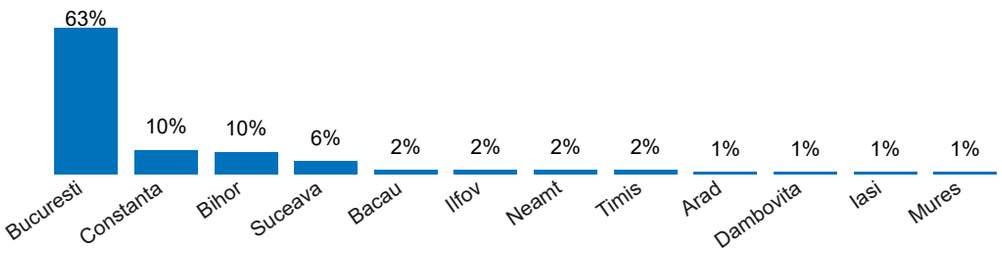
To identify the winter needs of refugees living in Romania and potential negative effects of the cold season, UNHCR, in collaboration with Save the Children Romania, rolled out the 2024 Rapid Winterization assessment (conducted also in 2022 and 2023). This document presents the findings of the rapid assessment covering the demographics and vulnerabilities, information on refugees' income and expenditure, type of accommodation and heating, and lastly the household needs in terms of non-food items (NFIs).

Methodology - Starting 18 November through 6 December, UNHCR and Save the Children Romania collected data from refugees via a self-filling form sent by text message. The sample which includes 101 households of beneficiaries of temporary protection (BTPs) and four households of beneficiaries of international protection (BIPs) was selected with a mixed method (random for BTPs and purposive for BIPs). The results of this assessment should be regarded indicative only to the people registered with the above mentioned organization for various types of assistance and should not be extrapolated to the entire population of refugees from Ukraine and beneficiaries of international protection living in Romania at the moment.

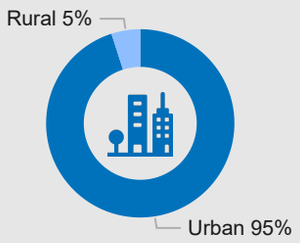
Demographics and vulnerabilities

In the first part of the assessment, the respondents were asked to indicate briefly some demographic aspects and information related to their household. As this part is covered in depth by other assessments, the scope of this section was mainly to corroborate the information and validate the diversity of the sample.

Geographical dispersion by county



Area type



Average reported household* size

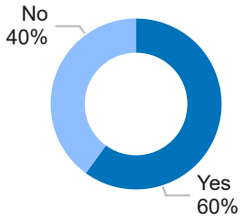
3.3

*household is defined as a group of people that live under the same roof, share expenses and food.

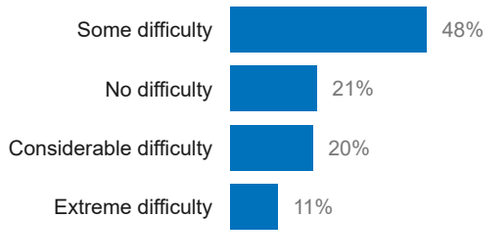
In terms of geographic dispersion more than half of the respondents were in **Bucharest (63%)**, followed by **Constanta and Bihor (10%)**, and **Suceava, Bacău, Ilfov, Neamț, Arad, Dâmbovița, Iași** and **Mureș.** 5% of the respondents indicated they live in rural areas, while the large majority (95%) resides in cities. Regarding the average household size, the assessment indicates a consistency with the previous assessment, an average of 3.3 individuals.

In terms of vulnerabilities, 60% of the respondents reported that they or one member of their family/household are in a situation that requires specific attention. Among the top situations reported, 39% mentioned financial difficulties, 30% chronic illness, and 22% indicated being a single parent. Additionally, 48% of the respondents anticipate some difficulties regarding related costs during the winter and 65% reported expecting difficulties regarding the coverage of children's educational costs.

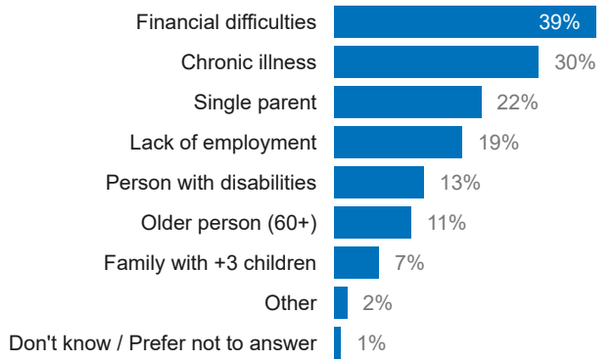
Member of household requiring specific attention



Anticipation of difficulties in terms of winter costs (heating/fuel)



Special Conditions - Vulnerabilities



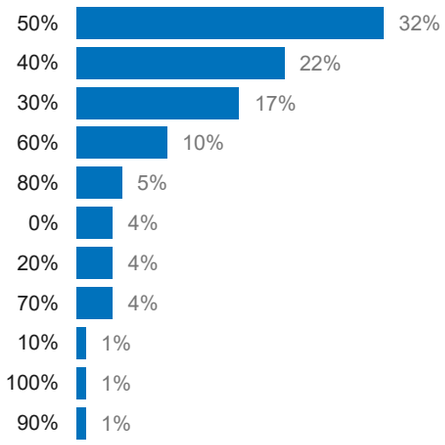
Expenditure of income

In this section, the survey assesses the monthly income of refugee households in RON (Romanian Leu), against the expenditure across seven categories: Rent, Food, Utilities, Non-food items, Medical expenses, Children's Education, and Other. The charts below illustrate how respondents allocated their income across these categories, with the value representing the percentage of people who selected the option.

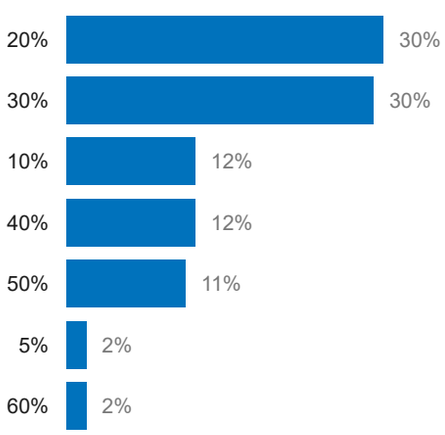
3,894

Average of monthly household budget expressed in RON (lei)

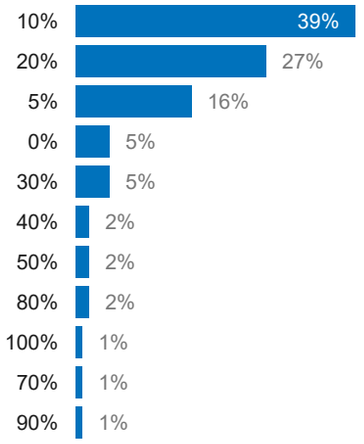
1. Rent



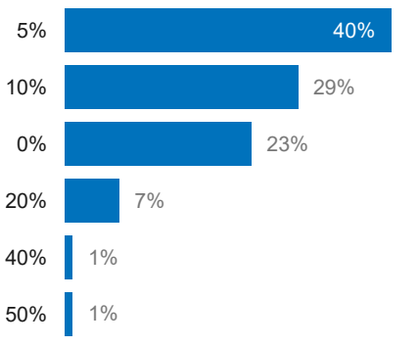
2. Food



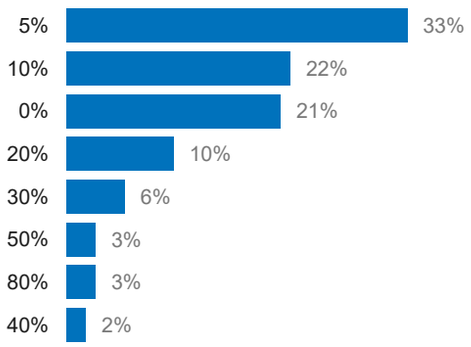
3. Utilities



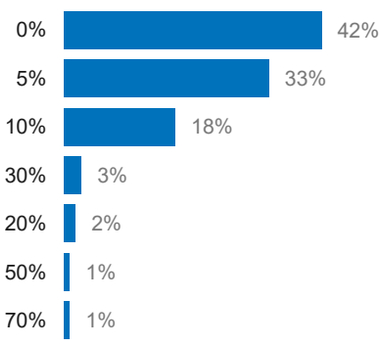
4. Non Food items



5. Medical expenses



6. Children education expenses



1. Rent - is by far the largest expense for refugee households, with 53% allocating half or more of their income to it, leading to some or significant financial stress for the household. The remaining 47% allocate 40% or less of their income to rent, which is considered acceptable according to the European benchmark, where 30% of income[1] is regarded as average housing costs. Another aspect to consider when interpreting these data is the homeownership rate in Romania, which is around 95%[2] . As a result, the same level of income may have a different impact on a Romanian household compared to a refugee household, for whom housing costs might represent a significantly larger financial burden.

2. Food - Over half of the respondents (60%) allocate 20–30% of their income to food, while a quarter spend more than 40%, making it the second-largest expense after rent. This highlights the significant financial burden food costs impose. To contextualize, more than half of the respondents spend considerably more than the EU average on food (14% of income[3]) and slightly more than Romanians, who spend 24% on food[4]. Considering their expenditure on rent and data from other UNHCR assessments, this situation often forces more vulnerable refugee households to adopt food coping mechanisms, such as skipping meals, restricting consumption for adults, or borrowing food. These actions reflect significant hardship and underline the urgent need for assistance. This underscores the importance of targeted food assistance programs or vouchers to help reduce the financial strain on refugee households.

3. Utilities - Approximately two-thirds of respondents allocate 10–20% of their income to utilities, while 16% spend as little as 5%. However, this burden increases significantly during winter due to heating costs. Seasonal spikes in utility expenses, particularly for heating, further intensify financial pressures during the colder months.

4. Non-Food Items - Most households (69%) spend 5–10% of their income on non-food essentials such as hygiene products and clothing, while 23% allocate no budget for these items. This inability to afford non-food essentials among a significant proportion of households highlights a critical gap in meeting basic living standards.

Links: (1),(2),(3),(4)

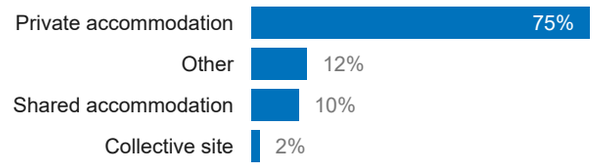
5. Medical Expenses - Over half of respondents (55%) allocate 5–10% of their income to medical needs, while 21% report no spending, likely due to unaffordability. In contrast, Romanian households have higher out-of-pocket (OOP) healthcare costs, accounting for 21% of health[5] expenditures in 2021, compared to 15% in the EU[6]. Most OOP expenses go toward outpatient care and pharmaceuticals.

6. Children's Education Expenses - Half of the respondents reported allocating between 5-10% of the budget on the children education. Notably, 42% of the respondents reported no expenses for this category. This disparity indicates that while some households prioritize education, many cannot afford it, potentially due to competing financial pressures. The provision of scholarships or school supplies could help bridge this gap and support children's development.

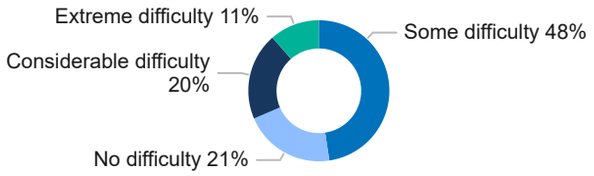
Accommodation type and utilities

This section examines the living conditions and utility expenses of refugee households in Romania and the challenges they face in this regard during the winter months. Thus, **79% of the surveyed refugees expect to face difficulties in paying utilities in the following months,** while only one third expressed no concerns in this regard. Of the surveyed households, 91% of the respondents reported living in house/apartment, 5% in residential buildings, 2% in community centers, 1% in religious centers and 1% in another type of building.

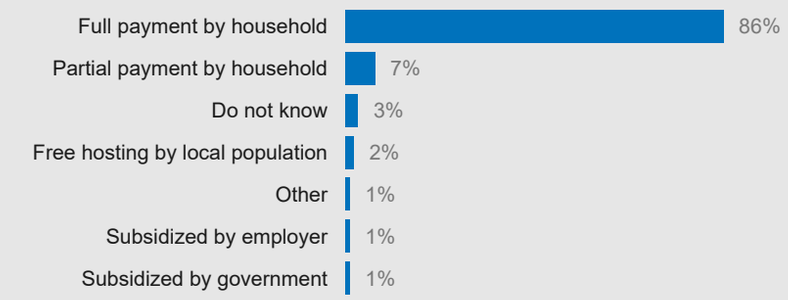
Type of accommodation



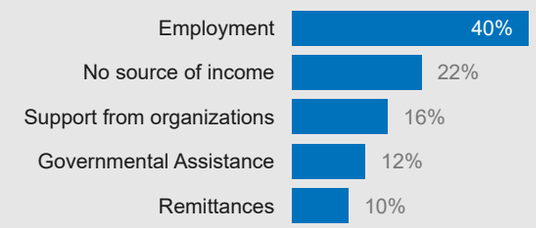
Anticipation of difficulty in paying or accessing utilities this winter



Paying rent or utilities



Source of income in the last month



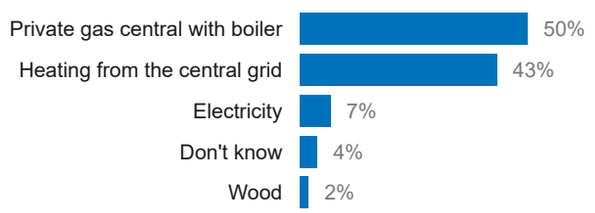
When asked about the proportion in which they pay for rent or utilities, 86% of the respondents reported full payment, while another 7% are paying partially.

Regarding the sources of income in the last month, 40% reported employment as being the main source, 16% cash or voucher support from organizations, 12% Romanian governmental support and 10% remittances, while 22% reported having no source of income.

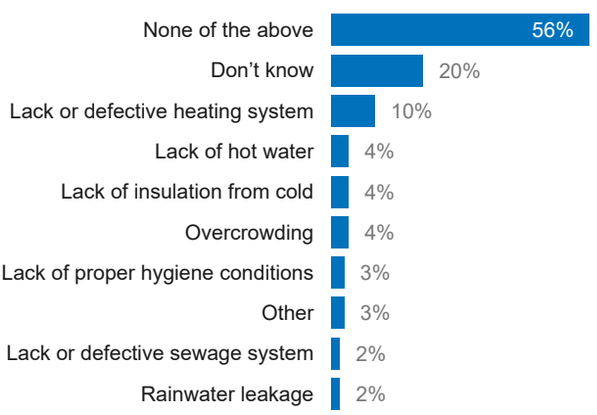
Looking at the type of heating that refugees use in their households, half (50%) rely on private central heating systems powered by gas, while another 43% are connected to the municipal heating grid. The respondents reported spending an average of 171 RON during summer for electricity bill per month, and 150 RON for the heating bill. Comparatively, during winter, the respondents spend an average of 212 RON for electrical bill during winter, and 459 RON for the heating bill.

More than half (76%) of the refugees reported not having or being aware of any issues with the accommodation. Among those who did report issues, the most commonly mentioned were related to the heating system (10%), or lack of hot water (7%).

Type of heating



Top 5 issues with the accommodation



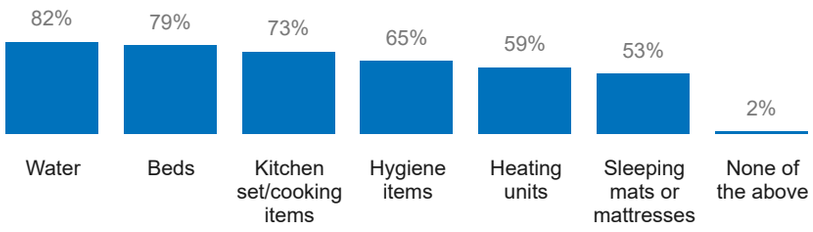
Links: (5),(6)

Non-food items - needs

The final section of the assessment measured the need for non-food items among refugee households. One part focused on whether households had essential items for every member. Nearly half (47%) reported lacking sufficient sleeping mats or mattresses for all household members or needing replacements, while 42% reported a similar need for heating units.

Among the most commonly needed non-food items were winter boots (65%), winter clothes (61%), hygiene kits (42%), and blankets (36%). Additionally, 19% of respondents reported having sufficient winter clothing and items for all household members. For specific sizes, the reported needs across different segments should be considered indicative due to the smaller sample of respondents requesting these items.

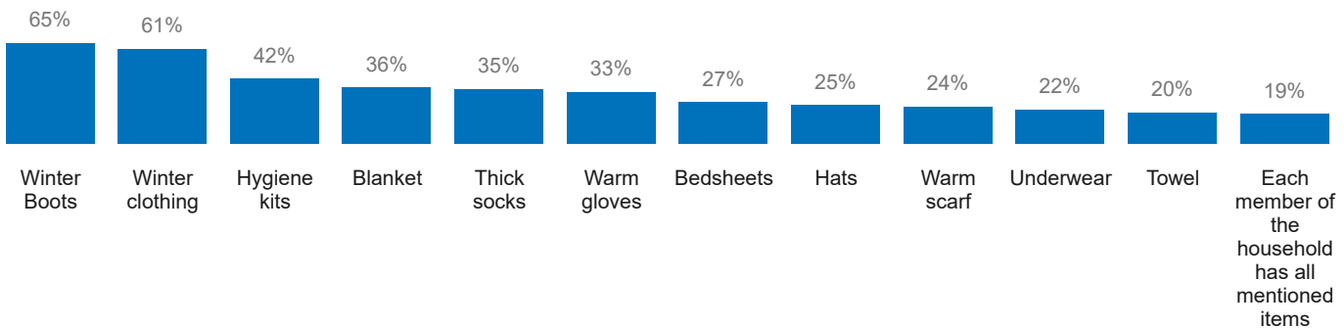
Percentage of refugees reporting HAVING the items listed



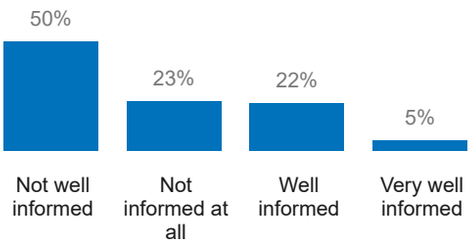
Female clothing:
32% Medium (M)
20% Large (L)
19% Small (S)
17% XLarge (XL)
6% XSmall (XS)
3% XXLarge (XXL)
2% XXXLarge (XXXL)

Male clothing:
29% Medium (M)
26% Large(L)
14% XSmall (XS)
13% XLarge (XL)
9% XXlarge (XXL)
8% Small (S)
1% XXXLarge (XXXL)

Percentage of refugees reporting the need for the below items



Degree of information about support services in the community during winter



When asked about their awareness of support services in the community during winter, 50% of respondents reported being poorly informed, 23% not informed at all, 22% well informed, and only 5% very well informed.

Regarding the presence of organizations offering material support or assistance for winter, only 10% of respondents reported being aware of such organizations. The responses were similar for refugee-led organizations, with only 10% indicating the existence of such groups.

Conclusion

The rapid assessment highlights challenges faced by refugees in Romania in meeting their basic needs over the winter period. A significant proportion of households allocate most of their income to rent and utilities, leaving limited resources for essential items such as food, medical care, and non-food items. Winter-specific needs, including winter clothing, shoes, and heating units, are critical, with many households struggling to provide adequately for all members. Vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by limited access to information on available assistance, especially for single parents and individuals with chronic health conditions**.** Many refugees are unaware of or poorly informed about community support services, which intensifies their hardship.

To help alleviate some of these challenges, UNHCR and Save the Children have been providing cash assistance during the winter months, enabling refugees to cover essential expenses and improve their living conditions. With the financial burden of accommodation and utilities weighing heavily on refugee households, sustained and targeted interventions, including improved access to support services and non food items, are urgently needed to prevent further deterioration of living conditions and ensure a more stable future for those affected.