



DRC Ukraine

Protection Snapshot —Trafficking in Persons

Overview



Between April and June 2026, DRC conducted a thematic Protection Monitoring assessment on trafficking in persons across its areas of operation in Kharkiv, Donetsk, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia and Sumy oblasts. The assessment drew on 31 key informant interviews (26 women and 5 men) and 28 focus group discussions involving 272 participants. These qualitative findings were triangulated with data from [DRC's household survey](#), which covered 188 households comprising 443 individuals. Protection Monitoring findings from April–June 2026 indicate that trafficking in persons remains a significant but largely hidden protection concern across assessed oblasts.



Although relatively few confirmed trafficking cases were identified during the reporting period, monitoring consistently found that the structural drivers associated with trafficking continue to intensify as the conflict becomes increasingly protracted. Widespread economic insecurity, repeated displacement, housing insecurity, and prolonged uncertainty are creating conditions in which conflict-affected populations are increasingly vulnerable to labour exploitation, trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Rather than emerging as an isolated protection risk, it increasingly represents the cumulative result of multiple intersecting vulnerabilities that develop over time.



Labour exploitation was by far the most commonly identified manifestation of trafficking-related risk across assessed oblasts. Respondents consistently described accepting informal or insecure employment because of limited livelihood opportunities, declining household incomes and rising living costs. Exploitative working conditions, including verbal employment agreements, delayed or withheld wages, misleading recruitment practices, excessive working hours and the absence of written contracts, were reported across multiple locations. Agriculture and construction were the sectors most commonly identified with the highest risks related to exploitative working conditions. While these situations do not necessarily constitute trafficking under national or international legal definitions, they represent conditions that substantially increase vulnerability to forced labour and other forms of exploitation.



Economic insecurity, housing instability and displacement consistently reinforced these risks. The findings demonstrate that trafficking vulnerability is increasingly linked to survival strategies adopted by households attempting to meet basic needs rather than deliberate risk-taking. As the conflict becomes increasingly protracted, trafficking risks are becoming embedded within the broader protection environment and intersect closely with other protection concerns, including unsafe migration, gender-based violence, housing insecurity and barriers to accessing livelihoods.

Community-level impact

Across assessed communities, trafficking risks were primarily linked to declining economic opportunities, limited formal employment and increased reliance on informal labour markets. In several oblasts, respondents described accepting seasonal or temporary employment without written contracts because secure employment opportunities had become increasingly limited. In Dnipropetrovska and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, more than one-quarter of surveyed households relied on seasonal, temporary or informal employment as a primary source of income, while respondents in Donetsk, Kharkiv and Sumy oblasts similarly described increasing migration for seasonal work within Ukraine and abroad.

Unsafe migration and deceptive recruitment continue to present growing protection concerns. Respondents reported increasing reliance on informal recruitment networks and online job advertisements, often with limited awareness of labour rights or contractual protections. In Kharkiv oblast, monitoring identified a trafficking-related case involving deceptive online recruitment for employment abroad, while community members highlighted increasing concerns regarding online recruitment targeting economically vulnerable populations. These findings suggest that digital recruitment is becoming an increasingly important pathway through which exploitative employers can reach conflict-affected populations.

Housing insecurity further contributes to trafficking risks by increasing dependence on employers, landlords or informal accommodation providers. Across several oblasts, internally displaced persons and households with damaged homes reported relying on informal accommodation arrangements or accepting insecure employment to meet rising housing costs. Such dependency can create unequal power relationships and increase vulnerability to labour exploitation and other forms of coercion.

Monitoring also identified indicators consistent with forced labour. In Sumy oblast, respondents described situations involving homeless individuals who were reportedly recruited into private households where identity documents and bank cards were confiscated and individuals worked in exchange for food or alcohol. While these reports cannot independently verify trafficking offences, they represent serious indicators associated with forced labour. Similarly, respondents in Dnipropetrovska oblast described employers retaining employment records coercive practices that increase vulnerability to exploitation.





Household-level impact

At household level, trafficking risks are increasingly shaped by the cumulative impact of displacement, financial hardship and limited livelihood opportunities. Many households reported accepting insecure employment because it represented the only available means of meeting basic needs. Rising living costs, unemployment, damaged housing and prolonged dependence on humanitarian assistance have significantly reduced households' ability to negotiate safe working conditions or refuse exploitative employment.

Protection monitoring indicates that economic vulnerability frequently intersects with other protection risks. Fear of losing accommodation, high rental costs and insecure housing arrangements increase dependence on informal employment, while prolonged financial pressure pushes households towards increasingly unsafe coping strategies. Respondents also described situations in which labour exploitation developed gradually through unpaid wages, misleading recruitment practices or coercive employment conditions before escalating into more serious forms of exploitation.

Women experiencing economic hardship reported increased exposure to workplace harassment and suspicious employment offers. Monitoring also identified emerging concerns regarding online grooming and technology-facilitated exploitation, particularly affecting adolescent girls and young women. These findings highlight the close relationship between trafficking, gender-based violence and economic vulnerability.

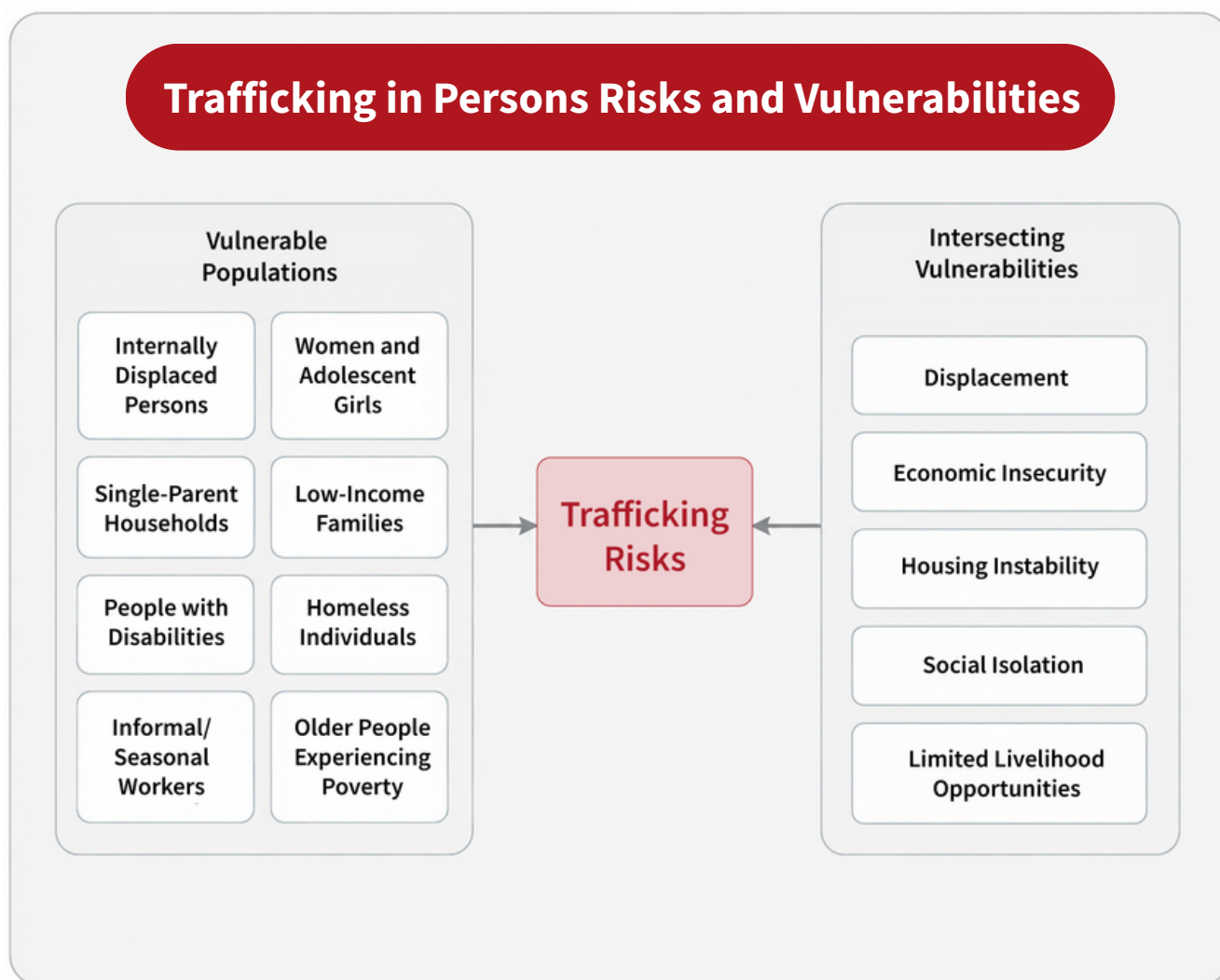
Although relatively few trafficking concerns involving children were identified during the reporting period, respondents described adolescents increasingly engaging in seasonal agricultural work and informal employment to support household incomes. Combined with growing reliance on online recruitment platforms, these trends suggest increasing vulnerability among adolescents approaching working age and reinforce the need for preventative child protection and trafficking awareness initiatives.



Groups most affected

Across assessed oblasts, trafficking risks were consistently highest among populations experiencing multiple, overlapping vulnerabilities. Internally displaced persons, women and adolescent girls, single-parent households, low-income families, people with disabilities, homeless individuals, older people experiencing poverty and people relying on informal or seasonal employment appeared to face heightened exposure to exploitation.

Importantly, monitoring findings indicate that vulnerability rarely results from a single characteristic. Rather, trafficking risks increase where displacement, economic insecurity, housing instability, social isolation and limited livelihood opportunities intersect. Individuals lacking strong social support networks or access to formal employment opportunities were consistently identified as facing increased exposure to exploitative practices.





Overall analysis

Despite relatively few confirmed trafficking cases being identified during the reporting period, Protection Monitoring findings suggest that trafficking in persons remains substantially underreported. Limited awareness of trafficking indicators, confusion between labour exploitation and trafficking, fear of retaliation by employers, dependence on exploitative working relationships, stigma and limited access to specialised services all contribute to low reporting rates and delayed identification of victims.

The findings demonstrate that trafficking in persons is becoming increasingly embedded within the broader humanitarian consequences of the conflict. Rather than being driven primarily by organised criminal recruitment, vulnerability increasingly emerges through everyday survival strategies adopted by households experiencing prolonged displacement, economic hardship and housing insecurity. Labour exploitation remains the predominant manifestation of this risk, while unsafe migration, online recruitment, document retention and financial dependency continue to increase vulnerability to more severe forms of exploitation.

Addressing trafficking therefore requires an integrated protection response that extends beyond awareness-raising alone. Strengthening safe livelihood opportunities, legal assistance, housing support, case management, gender-based violence programming, child protection services and community awareness of labour rights will be critical to reducing vulnerability and preventing exploitation. Without addressing these underlying structural drivers, conflict-affected populations are likely to remain increasingly vulnerable to trafficking and other forms of exploitation as the conflict continues.

Recommendations



Donors and Foreign Diplomatic Missions

- Increase investment in integrated Protection–Economic Recovery programming that expands access to safe and dignified livelihood opportunities targeting both workers and employers.
- Invest in community-based prevention initiatives that combine labour rights and decent work awareness with income generation opportunities, safe migration, digital safety and trafficking prevention, particularly for adolescents, young adults and conflict-affected populations seeking employment.
- Support programmes that improve access to affordable housing, social protection and durable solutions to reduce economic pressures that increase households' vulnerability to exploitation.



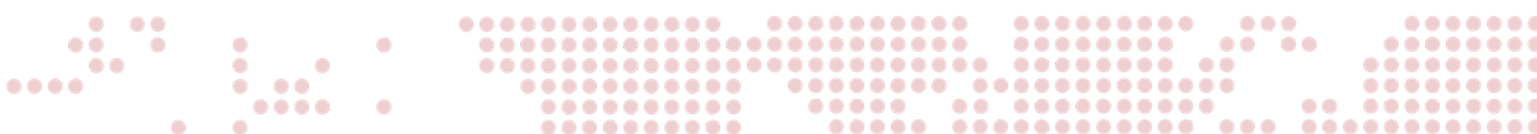
Humanitarian Actors (Civil Society, UN Agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations)

- Integrate trafficking prevention and identification into routine protection monitoring, case management, outreach and legal assistance activities, ensuring frontline staff are equipped to identify indicators of labour exploitation, forced labour and trafficking.
- Expand awareness-raising on labour rights, safe employment informed with labour market analysis on sectors offering safer employment opportunities, trafficking risks and available reporting mechanisms, prioritising internally displaced persons, adolescents approaching working age, seasonal workers and other economically vulnerable populations.
- Increase community outreach on safe migration, online recruitment risks and digital safety, recognising the growing role of online platforms in deceptive recruitment and technology-facilitated exploitation.
- Integrate trafficking risk mitigation into livelihoods and cash-based programming by promoting safe recruitment practices, written employment contracts and access to legal assistance where labour exploitation is identified.



Local Authorities

- Strengthen labour inspection, oversight and referral mechanisms to improve identification and response to labour exploitation, particularly in sectors with high levels of informal employment and seasonal work.
- Improve access to information on labour rights, safe employment, trafficking risks and available reporting mechanisms through accessible community communication channels, Administrative Service Centres (CNAPs), social protection offices and local employment services.
- Promote formal employment opportunities and support inclusive local economic recovery initiatives that expand access to decent work for internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, women and other vulnerable groups.





Danish Refugee Council (DRC) was founded in Denmark in 1956. We are a leading, international humanitarian displacement organisation, supporting refugees and internally displaced persons during displacement, in exile, when settling and integrating in a new place, or upon return. We provide protection and life-saving humanitarian assistance. We support displaced persons in becoming self-reliant and included into hosting societies—and we work with communities, civil society

and responsible authorities to promote protection of rights and peaceful coexistence.

To read more about what we do, see: www.drc.ngo