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TRENDS AND FEATURES OF THE DYNAMICS OF CHILDHOOD DISABILITY IN UKRAINE

Topicality. *The problem of childhood disability is multifaceted. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), there are almost 240 million children with disabilities in the world – that is, every tenth child. In Ukraine, the number of children with disabilities is about 160,000 and tends to grow, especially in war conditions. Accordingly, their needs are growing, in particular in medical care, rehabilitation, adapted infrastructure, inclusive education and a barrier-free environment. Studying the epidemiology of childhood disability is the basis for identifying current problems and calculating the necessary resources to support these children. Purpose of the study. To analyze the trends in child disability indicators in Ukraine from 2006 to 2023, determine key patterns of disability changes by age, gender, and primary causes, and assess regional characteristics.* ***Materials and methods.*** *The study analyzed official statistical data from reports and analytical-statistical directories of the Medical Statistics Center under the Public Health Center of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine. The research methods used included bibliosemantic, epidemiological, medical-statistical, and analytical approaches.* ***Research results.*** *In 2023, the overall disability rate was 216.2 cases per 10,000 children, while the primary disability rate was 25.9 per 10,000 children aged 0–17 years. Between 2006 and 2023, overall child disability increased by 13.2%, while primary disability rose by 16.1%. A peak in both indicators occurred in 2023, with primary disability increasing by 18.3% within a year. Children aged 7–17 years constituted the majority (almost 80%) of those with disabilities. Child disability exhibits regional characteristics: the highest disability rates were recorded in western regions of Ukraine and the Chernihiv region. An analysis of overall disability dynamics across specific age groups revealed a clear trend of increasing disability rates with age. The leading causes of child disability were congenital anomalies (27.1%), mental and behavioral disorders (22.3%), and nervous system diseases (14.3%). The analysis of overall disability trends by primary causes demonstrated varying changes. However, the most concerning trend is the increase in overall disability due to mental and behavioral disorders, which has risen by 22.1% over the past three years.* ***Conclusions.*** *It is advisable to conduct an in-depth study of the rehabilitation status of children with disabilities, as well as the prevention of severe disabling diseases among children and the assessment of the quality of medical care provided to them in different regions.*

Key words: *child population health, age and regional characteristics of child disability, rehabilitation, prevention.*

Литвинова Л. О., Донік О. М. Тенденції та особливості динаміки дитячої інвалідності в Україні

Актуальність. *Проблема дитячої інвалідності є багатоаспектною. За даними Дитячого фонду ООН (ЮНІСЕФ), у світі налічується майже 240 мільйонів дітей з обмеженими можливостями – тобто кожна десята дитина. В Україні кількість дітей з інвалідністю становить близько 160 000 і має тенденцію до зростання, особливо в умовах війни. Отже, зростають їхні потреби, зокрема в медичній допомозі, реабілітації, адаптованій інфраструктурі, інклюзивному навчанні та безбар'єрному середовищі. Вивчення епідеміології дитячої інвалідності є основою для визначення актуальних проблем і розрахунку необхідних ресурсів для підтримки цих дітей. Мета дослідження – проаналізувати динаміку показників інвалідності дитячого населення України протягом 2006–2023 років, визначити основні закономірності змін інвалідності за віком, статтю й основними причинами, оцінити її регіональні особливості.* ***Матеріали та методи.*** *У дослідженні були проаналізовані офіційні статистичні дані звітів та аналітично-статистичних довідників Центру медичної статистики, підпорядкованого Центру громадського здоров'я МОЗ України. Використані такі методи дослідження: бібліосемантичний, епідеміологічний, медико-статистичний, аналітичний.* ***Результати дослідження.*** *У 2023 році рівень загальної інвалідності становив 216,2 випадку на 10 тис. дітей, первинна – 25,9 на 10 тис. дітей віком 0–17 років. Протягом 2006–2023 років загальна дитяча інвалідність зросла на 13,2 %, первинна інвалідність – на 16,1 %. Сплеск обох показників відбувся у 2023 році, коли первинна інвалідність дітей зросла за рік на 18,3 %. Серед дітей з інвалідністю превалюють діти віком 7–17 років (майже 80 %). Інвалідність дітей має регіональні особливості:*

найвищі рівні інвалідності реєструвалися в західних областях України та Чернігівській області. Аналіз динаміки загальної інвалідності в окремих вікових групах визначив чітку тенденцію зростання рівнів інвалідності з віком. Провідними причинами дитячої загальної інвалідності є вроджені аномалії, що в структурі причин становлять 27,1 %, розлади психіки та поведінки (22,3 %) та хвороби нервової системи (14,3 %). Аналіз динаміки загальної інвалідності за провідними причинами продемонстрував різноспрямованість змін. Але особливе занепокоєння викликає зростання рівнів загальної інвалідності, особливо за останні три роки, з приводу розладів психіки та поведінки на 22,1 %. ***Висновки.*** *Доцільно провести поглиблене вивчення стану реабілітації дітей з інвалідністю, а також профілактики захворюваності на тяжкі інвалідизуючі хвороби серед дітей, а також оцінити якість надання їм медичної допомоги в окремих регіонах.*

Ключові слова: *здоров'я дитячого населення, вікові та регіональні особливості інвалідності дітей, реабілітація, профілактика.*

Introduction. In recent decades, the number of children with various types of disabilities has increased, partly due to advancements in medical technologies that allow the survival of children with severe diseases or impairments. Nearly 240 million children worldwide, or one in ten, live with disabilities and experience deficits in medical care, education, and protection [1]. In Europe and Central Asia, nearly 11 million children with disabilities often face stigma, lack of accessible services, and physical barriers. These obstacles limit their opportunities for full development and social integration. However, when such children are isolated from society, their chances of survival, development, and prosperity significantly decrease [2]. Children with disabilities experience considerable inequality compared to their healthy peers. Specifically, they have a 25% higher risk of suffering from malnutrition, a 34% higher incidence of developmental delays, a 51% greater likelihood of feeling unhappy daily, and a 41% higher risk of experiencing discrimination.

Special attention is given to early childhood development and psychosocial well-being for children under five years old, as the early years are recognized as critically important for establishing the foundation for optimal human development. This period is key to laying the groundwork for health, education, and social adaptation, impacting the child's future life. Global efforts have been established to reduce under-five mortality and malnutrition; however, insufficient attention is still given to preventing disability in early childhood. More than 53 million children under the age of five are at risk of poor development due to disabilities [3].

The number of people living with disabilities may significantly increase due to current epidemiological and demographic trends. Specifically, disability among the elderly is expected to rise due to increased life expectancy and the prevalence of chronic diseases. However, as child survival rates improve, not all children can develop fully and require greater medical support. At the same time, many healthcare systems lack the resources to fully meet the needs of children with disabilities [4].

Despite the existence of substantial research on child disability in Ukraine, it should be noted that most of these studies were conducted over five years ago [5; 6]. However, monitoring and analyzing disability trends requires continuous assessment, especially now, during wartime. Studying child disability is highly relevant for creating equal opportunities for all children, improving their quality of life, and fostering an inclusive and humane society.

Objective. To analyze the trends in child disability indicators in Ukraine from 2006 to 2023, determine key patterns of disability changes by age, gender, and primary causes, and assess regional characteristics.

Materials and methods. The study analyzed official statistical data from reports and analytical-statistical directories of the Medical Statistics Center under the Public Health Center of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine: "Age-related Disability of Children Aged 0–17 in Ukraine", "Disability of Children Aged 0–17 in Ukraine Recognized as Disabled for the First Time", and "Overall Disability". The research methods used included bibliographic, epidemiological, medical-statistical, and analytical approaches.

Research results. According to the Institute of Demography and Social Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine [7], in 2002, there were 143,055 children with disabilities in Ukraine, including 16,729 children newly recognized as disabled. The overall disability rate was 163.6 cases per 10,000 children, and the primary disability rate was 19.1 per 10,000 children, albeit among children under 16 years old rather than 17, as currently considered. By 2023, the number of children with disabilities increased to 158,901, with 19,048 newly recognized cases.

The dynamics of child disability are presented in Figure 1. Over the study period from 2006 to 2023, the overall child disability rate (children aged 0 to 17 with disabilities per 10,000 of the child population) increased by 13.2%, while primary disability increased by 16.1%. A surge in both indicators occurred in 2023, undoubtedly linked to the consequences of the war.

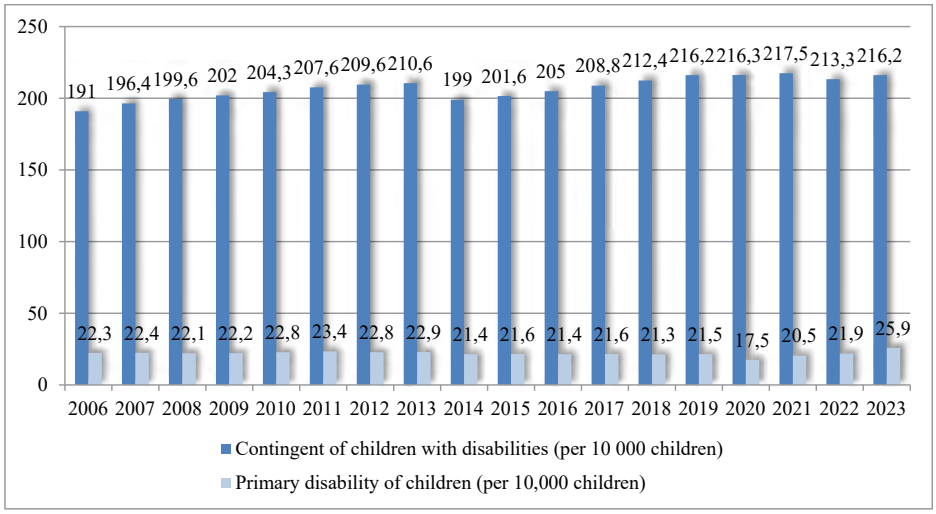

Fig. 1. Dynamics of general and primary disability of the child population in Ukraine during 2006–2023 (per 10,000 children)

A significant number of injuries, concussions, stress, and a lack of timely medical care for injured and sick children led to an 18.3% increase in primary disability among children in 2023 alone.

In the gender structure of overall disability, boys predominate over girls, and this difference has increased over the years. By 2023, boys accounted for 59.2% of children with disabilities, while girls made up 40.8%. The frequency of primary disability among girls has decreased to 4.4 cases per 10,000 children (a 2.2% decline) since 2015, whereas among boys, it has increased by 25.8%.

Positive changes have been observed in the age structure of the population of children with disabilities (Table 1): the proportion of the youngest children (0–2 years) and younger children (3–6 years) has decreased, collectively accounting for only 19.3% of the total structure (Table 1).

Table 1

Dynamics of the age structure of children with disabilities of different age groups of both sexes (%)

Age groups	2015	2021	2023
0–2 years old	7.1	4.0	3.4
3–6 years old	20.2	16.5	15.9
7–14 years old	52.3	57.3	57.0
15–17 years old	20.4	22.2	23.7
Total 0–17 years	100	100	100

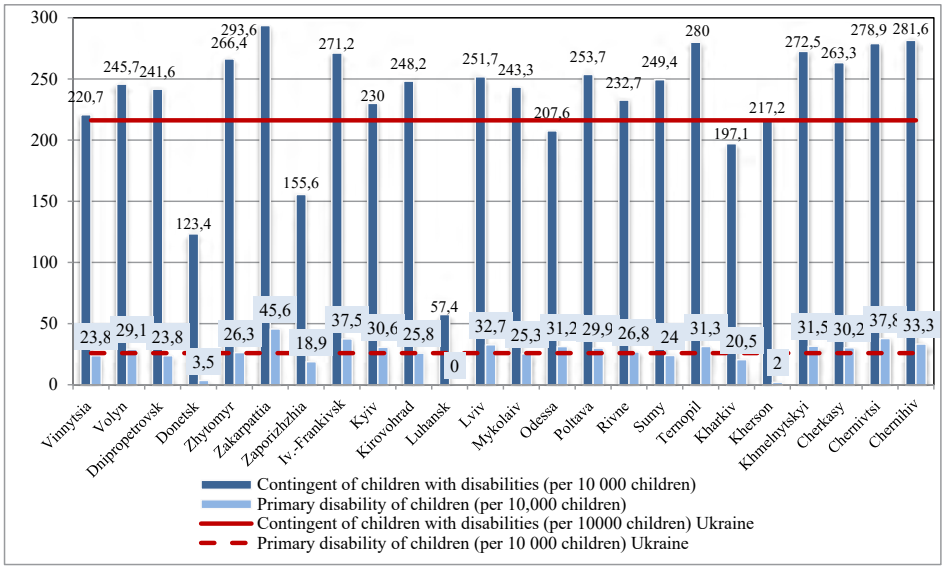

Fig. 2. Levels of general and primary disability by regions of Ukraine in 2023 (per 10,000 children)

An analysis of regional characteristics of child disability (Figure 2) reveals significant disparities between regions. Comparatively low disability rates in the Donetsk, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions do not reflect the real picture, as a substantial portion of these territories is temporarily occupied. Since 2006, and even more so since 2002, regional characteristics of child disability have undergone some changes, and by 2023, the regions with the highest disability rates were clearly identified. These regions are primarily located in western Ukraine, as well as in the Chernihiv region (Table 2). In the Zakarpattia region, the overall disability rate exceeds the national average by 35.8%, while primary disability is 76.1% higher. Compared to 2021, these figures have increased by 22.7% and 2.1 times, respectively. This unexpected and rapid increase in disability rates, particularly primary disability, in a region that previously did not have such high rates, is unlikely to be explained solely by war-related migration processes (Fig. 2).

A detailed analysis of primary disability in children in the Zakarpattia region revealed that between 2021 and 2023, disability rates due to respiratory diseases increased 3.5 times, nervous system diseases increased 3.2 times, and musculoskeletal disorders increased 3.1 times. The level of disability among children is linked to the prevalence of diseases, but due to a lack of official statistical data on childhood morbidity, this correlation cannot currently be determined. A study [8] hypothesized that disability rates would not differ significantly among children from different regions with the same severity of disease, but this assumption was not confirmed. Our analysis also revealed significant regional variations that cannot be explained solely by wartime events. Therefore, it is advisable to conduct an in-depth study of the level of primary prevention of severe disabling diseases in children and the quality of medical care provided to them.

An analysis of the dynamics of overall disability across different age groups (Figure 3) showed a clear trend of increasing disability rates with age.

Table 2

Regions of Ukraine that occupy the first five ranking places in terms of child disability indicators in the dynamics of 2002–2023 (per 10,000 children)

Indicators	2002*		2006		2021		2023	
General disability	Kharkiv Rivne Khmelnytskyi Vinnytsia Kirovohrad	193.5 189.9 187.5 186.4 174.0	Rivne Vinnytsia Khmelnytskyi Ivano-Frankivsk Kyiv	226.1 211.3 211.0 210.8 204.4	Chernihiv Zhytomyr Chernivtsi Ternopil Zaporizhzhia	280.2 256.7 252.8 252.8 252.8	Zakarpattia Chernihiv Ternopil Chernivtsi Ivano-Frankivsk	293.6 281.6 280.0 278.9 271.2
Primary disability	Volyn Ivano-Frankivsk Rivne Zhytomyr Cherkasy	23.8 23.8 23.1 21.6 21.6	Ternopil Volyn Chernihiv Ivano-Frankivsk Mykolaiv	27.7 26.0 25.7 25.5 24.3	Ivano-Frankivsk Chernivtsi Chernihiv Zaporizhzhia Ternopil	26.5 25.8 25.5 25.1 25.0	Zakarpattia Chernivtsi Ivano-Frankivsk Chernihiv Lviv	45.6 37.8 37.5 33.3 32.7

*Note: * disability rates for children aged 0 to 16.*

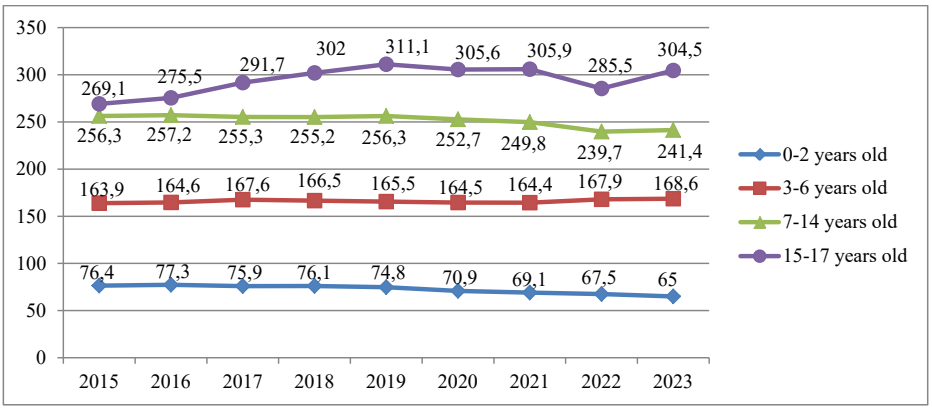

Fig. 3. Dynamics of the contingent of children with disabilities in different age groups in Ukraine (all causes, per 10,000 children of the corresponding age)

The highest rate (304.5 cases per 10,000 children) and the largest increase (13.2%) were observed in the 15–17-year-old adolescent group, corroborating findings from other studies [8]. The number of children with disabilities aged 7–14 years decreased by 5.8%, those aged 0–2 years decreased by 14.9%, while the 3–6-year-old group saw a slight increase.

The leading causes of overall child disability are congenital anomalies, which account for 27.1% of all cases. Mental and behavioral disorders rank second (22.3%), followed by nervous system diseases (14.3%).

An analysis of overall disability trends by primary causes (Fig. 4) demonstrated mixed changes. While congenital anomalies had shown an increasing trend in recent years, they declined by 7.5% from 2021 to 2023, which can be attributed to a significant decrease in birth rates in Ukraine. Despite the existence of a medical-genetic counseling and prenatal diagnostic service in Ukraine, the prevalence of congenital malformations remains high. Reducing the frequency of severe disabilities in children is possible through the early application of modern prenatal diagnostic technologies [9]. Preventing the birth of children with developmental anomalies requires a comprehensive approach, including further development of medical-genetic consultations, improving medical care for newborns with low birth weight, and implementing medical-social support programs for high-risk families [5] (Fig. 4).

A positive trend has been observed in disability caused by ear diseases, with primary disability levels decreasing by 17.4% since 2006. This improvement is attributed to significant advancements in medical treatment for these conditions when parents seek timely medical assistance. At the same time, overall disability due to endocrine disorders has nearly doubled. Although skin diseases are not a leading cause of disability, the overall disability rate due to these conditions has increased by 44.4% over the study period.

A particularly concerning trend is the rise in overall disability due to mental and behavioral disorders, which has increased by 22.1% over the past three years. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze the dynamics of the disabled child population across different age groups specifically for this reason (Fig. 5).

In addition to the general increase in disability rates due to mental and behavioral disorders across all age groups, in 2023, children aged 7–14 surpassed adolescents in disability prevalence. The most significant growth in overall disability frequency was observed among the youngest children (0–2 years), with a 10.8-fold increase, whereas the lowest growth rate was among adolescents, at only 2.2%. It is evident that the war has had a negative impact on children's mental health across all age groups. Children with disabilities who have spent prolonged periods in unsuitable conditions (such as shelters, evacuation zones, or occupied areas) have experienced fear, distress from forced relocation, or separation from loved ones. As a result, they may develop symptoms of anxiety disorders, eating disorders, depression, and loss of self-care and communication skills [10] (Fig. 5).

An age-specific analysis of overall disability trends due to nervous system diseases revealed a contrasting positive trend, with disability rates decreasing across all age groups (Fig. 5), particularly among younger children, where a 15-fold reduction was observed.

Cerebral palsy (CP) remains one of the most common and severe neurological disorders leading to disability. The number of children with disabilities due to CP has decreased by 32.8% since 2006, reaching 14.5 cases per 10,000 children. The disability rate itself declined by 57.1%, standing at

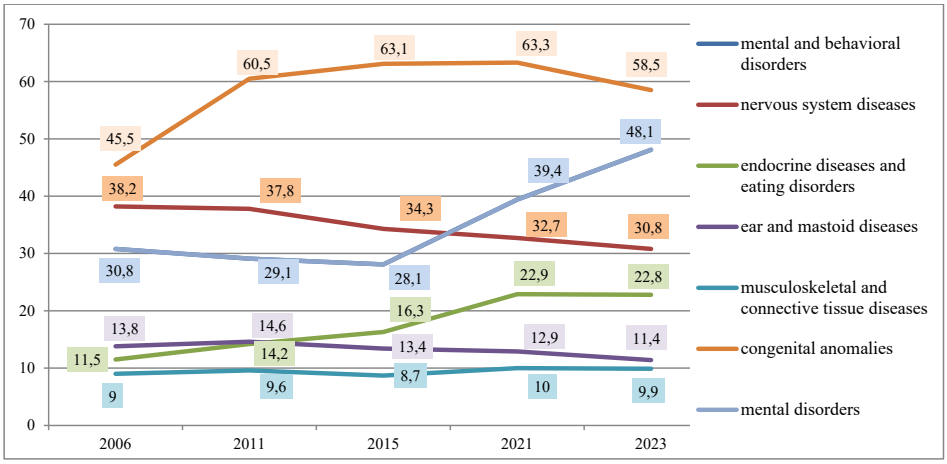

Fig. 4. Dynamics of general disability of the child population by individual classes of diseases (per 10,000 children)

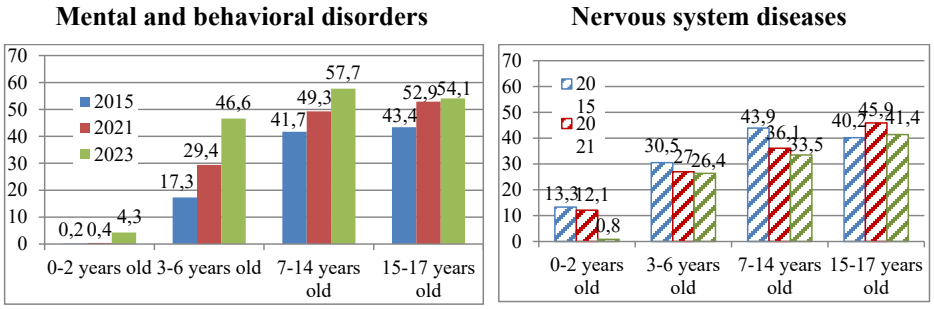

Fig. 5. Dynamics of the contingent of children with disabilities in different age groups in Ukraine due to mental and behavioral disorders and diseases of the nervous system (per 10,000 children of the corresponding age)

0.6 cases per 10,000 children. A modern assessment of functional abilities in children with CP allows for the effective implementation of a contemporary biopsychosocial care model focused on patient-centered rehabilitation goals [11].

There is an urgent need for rehabilitation services both in Ukraine and globally, and particularly in developing countries. National and global epidemiological disability statistics facilitate the development of rehabilitation programs tailored to these needs, supporting the WHO initiative Rehabilitation 2030: A Call for Action [12]. The number of children with disabilities receiving rehabilitation services in Ukraine increased from 14,200 in 2015 to 18,500 in 2019, with the coverage rate rising from 9.2% to 11.3%. However, this level remains critically low [13]. Early intervention, particularly between the ages of 0–3 years, is crucial. It involves providing qualified social and rehabilitation assistance through individualized programs for young children with disabilities, including corrective and developmental therapies, physiotherapy, medical and social support, occupational therapy, and rehabilitation activities. Additionally, it includes family support and counseling to improve their quality of life [14].

Overall, medical care for children with disabilities does not meet established standards, and patient safety is a key component of healthcare quality. Stigmatization, lack of knowledge, inadequate training, and insufficient skills among healthcare professionals remain significant barriers to providing high-quality care for children with disabilities [15].

Psychological support for children with disabilities and their parents is essential. It involves psychological counseling aimed at fostering a sense of safety and emotional stability in children, maintaining their developmental achievements, preventing behavioral regression, and enhancing cognitive engagement [16]. Childhood is a crucial period for education and personal growth. However, during crises, children may develop symptoms that significantly affect their mental processes and disrupt their learning [17]. Children with physical disabilities often start school later, while those with intellectual disabilities face greater challenges, including lower school enrollment rates, higher dropout rates, and difficulties in staying engaged in the learning process [18]. Children with sensory, physical, or intellectual impairments are 2.5 times more likely than their peers to have never attended school [1].

Disability affects not only the health of the child but also has significant consequences for the well-being of their family members. Research findings [19] highlight the need to support parents of children with disabilities, as their quality of life is closely linked to their child's disability. The physical and mental health of parents, in turn, directly impacts the well-being of their children. Parents, especially mothers, caring for children with severe disabilities require social and financial support from society and the government, as caregiving responsibilities limit their labor market participation, reduce working hours, and lower income [20]. The decline in health among parents, particularly those with lower levels of education, caring for children with disabilities, can be seen as a reflection of health inequalities, highlighting the need for a cross-sectoral approach [21]. At the same time, improving parental competence regarding their child's condition and its potential consequences is crucial [5].

Research on the health and living conditions of children with disabilities often lacks their own perspectives, as studies primarily focus on the views of parents and specialists [22]. Children with disabilities are rarely involved in designing or conducting high-quality health research and are often treated merely as passive data sources. Therefore, it is necessary to use inclusive and adapted research tools [23].

Conclusions. In 2023, the overall child disability rate was 216.2 cases per 10,000 children, while primary disability stood at 25.9 per 10,000 children

aged 0–17 years. Between 2006 and 2023, overall child disability increased by 13.2%, and primary disability rose by 16.1% (with an 18.3% increase in primary disability in 2023 alone). Children aged 7–17 years constitute the largest proportion of those with disabilities (nearly 80%). Disability rates vary regionally, with the highest levels recorded in western regions of Ukraine (Zakarpattia, Ternopil, Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Lviv) as well as in the Chernihiv region. The frequency of disability increases with age, reaching its peak among adolescents aged 15–17 years (304.5 cases per 10,000 children).

The leading causes of overall child disability are congenital anomalies (27.1%), mental and behavioral disorders (22.3%), and nervous system diseases (14.3%). Analyzing disability trends by major causes revealed mixed changes. While disability due to congenital anomalies and ear diseases has declined, disability related to endocrine disorders has nearly doubled, skin disease-related disability has increased by 44.4%, and mental and behavioral disorders have risen by 22.1%. These findings highlight the need for further development of rehabilitation programs for children with disabilities, particularly focusing on mental health in the context of war. Monitoring the prevention of diseases leading to disability, particularly congenital anomalies, along with early disability diagnosis and addressing social issues related to childhood disability, remains crucial.

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