

# An Investigation of the Effects of the Ukraine War on Children's Mental Health

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## ABSTRACT

Since the start of the Ukraine war, children that have fallen victim to the war have become a part of the “lost generation”. Many of them lost family members, educational opportunities, and their childhoods. After losing the most important aspects of lives, they only encountered more impediments: physical, mental, and moral injuries. In order to mitigate the destructive impacts of this war, charities are donating food, water, clothes, and money – basic necessities that humans need to survive. Although the Ukraine war has received global attention and countless charities and non-profit organizations have provided such tangible services, there are other significant issues regarding children's mental health that are going unseen. Mental illnesses and psychological disorders have been more prevalent in children as a result of the war. Mental issues are much more impairing and serious than physical injuries. Yet, most of the focus is on the physical health of the victims. In conclusion, more humanitarian organizations must consider interventions that would relieve psychological distress and help the children overcome their hurdles.

## Overview of the Ukrainian War

On February 24, 2022, the Russian Army invaded Ukraine from multiple directions including the Donetsk, Kherson, Kyiv, and Mykolaiv regions, which started the Russo-Ukrainian war. According to the Global Conflict Tracker, the root of the war between Russia and Ukraine stems from Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which eventually led to armed conflict (Center for Preventive Action, 2022). The event that started about a decade ago has sparked dissension that developed into a more devastating and violent war. Russia's president Vladimir Putin claimed that Russia's goal for this invasion was to overthrow the government of Kyiv and establish its own regime (Karmanau, 2022). Soon after this announcement, the invasions of multiple Ukrainian cities began to erupt. As a result, many Ukrainian civilians have fallen victim, especially children. By August 7th 2022, there have been 12,867 reported casualties, with over 5,000 killed and over 7,000 injured. Out of the reported deaths, an unfathomable number of 355 boys and girls were killed (United Nations, 2022). In addition to these casualties, more than 5.2 million children inside and outside of Ukraine are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection (United Nations, 2022).



**Figure 1.** Major Timeline of the Russo-Ukrainian War

## The Effects of the Ukrainian War on Children

### Effect on Physical Health

As the war progresses, Ukrainian children continue to battle poverty, mortality, abuse, violence, deprivation of education, and forced displacement. Physical injuries are the most direct and obvious consequences of the Ukraine war on children. Children suffer from a variety of injuries including fatal wounds from bullets, burns, and head and neck damage. Due to their smaller physique, children are also at a higher risk of respiratory tract infections, diarrhea, malaria, measles, and malnutrition, due to toxicity from lethal chemical weapons such as phosphorus bombs, chlorine gas, and combinations of noxious chemicals used in armed conflict (Chai, 2022). To aggravate the situation, a majority of the victims in the Ukrainian war zones are restricted to rudimentary medical support, and thus are unable to get immediate care of their life-threatening injuries. These mortal risks and delay in treatment can cause life-changing health conditions as well as result in death (Kadir et. al, 2018). Limited healthcare services and resources offered to children in Ukraine exasperate the conditions they are currently living in.

Additionally, with continuous attacks on hospitals and healthcare facilities on a daily basis, families and children are unable to receive the medical treatment they seek and need. A total of 869 medical facilities have been bombarded – 746 facilities damaged and 123 facilities entirely demolished (Matthews et. al, 2022). A survey conducted by senior research fellow Dr. Michael Head indicates that 19.3% of respondents do not have access to any healthcare facilities or resources, 19.2% have access and have the knowledge of where to obtain healthcare service but have their own limitations (i.e. financial, physical) to obtain these services, and 19.4% have access to the facilities and services but do not know where they are located (Head et. al, 2022). Furthermore, for refugees who are relocated to other countries, additional factors that contribute to the difficulties of receiving medical care are language barriers and financial burdens. Moving on, 35% of the Ukrainian population currently live under poverty and poor living conditions, which contributes to its infant mortality rate as being one of the highest in the world, with an average of five children killed daily (Save the Children International, 2022). Furthermore, the lack of access to education or schools is problematic to younger children because they “may miss the opportunity to develop foundational skills” (World Vision, 2022). The formative years of a child are between 0-8 years old and they learn critical skills like communicating, problem-solving, and socializing at a rapid pace during those ages. They also undergo crucial cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development during those ages. Due to the war, however, the children are missing many months of school, learning survival skills instead of receiving fundamental education. Thus, their growth and development during the most pivotal point of their lives are being vitiated because of the war.

### Impact on Ethics and Morals

Due to the menacing environment that these children are placed in, there is a change in moral structure and social norms. For instance, killing, stealing, lying, and other unethical behavior are becoming social norms because the conditions of war have lowered children's morality and shifted their perspective on what is right or wrong (Tavares, 2015). With this new perspective of moral sense, children may not only hurt themselves but also their loved ones, including close friends and family members, by making poor decisions. They could be a bad influence on others and end up skewing healthy relationships with peers. Also, the trauma they have from war may persist until their adulthood and may cause them to potentially harm their own children and loved ones in the future. Studies have shown that adolescents who are resettled in low or middle income countries are more prone to substance abuse and often experience family violence, social isolation, mass trauma, marginalization, loss of social status, and discrimination. Similarly, children who are resettled in high income countries have to deal with parents suffering from trauma who directly impact their development, low expectations from teachers, discrimination, bullying, lack of support and empathy, and barriers in communication (Kadir et. al, 2018).

War both directly and indirectly alters a child's morality, through the behaviors of their parents, family members, peers as well as other social contacts. Many children get direct moral injuries through "news media, stories shared by family members and friends, and other interaction in the community" (Nash, 2013). For example, a family member's story of death and violence on the battlefield can welcome violence and hopelessness as a social norm of that child's life. On the other hand, indirect moral injuries include the harsh and self-destructive behaviors of military parents and "betrayals of trust" by family members (Nash, 2013). For example, caregivers can reject and neglect their children therefore leading to family violence. This can lead to a vicious cycle where this behavior is passed on when the children, themselves, become parents (Smith, 2001). This highlights the great influence that parents' behaviors have on their children during their developmental years. Whether they are direct or indirect effects, they inflict serious harm on children's morals which can have lasting impacts on their adulthood and future generations.

## Psychological and Emotional Impacts

Along with the lack of basic necessities like food and education, children are suffering from emotional and psychological damage due to the war. Teachers have reported signs of emotional distress amongst children in the classroom who were triggered by loud noises – which reminded them of the sounds of bombs, gunshots, and other weapons – and recent estimates reveal that more than 1 in 4 children require psychosocial support (Júnior, 2022). Additionally, permanent separation from family members and support systems cause additional psychological damage in children. As a consequence of war, many children are separated from their families, especially during the time when they need the most support and guidance from their parents. This lack of attention, love, and care from their guardians have a powerful psychological and emotional impact on children, including disruption in brain development, inability to solve problems alone, and incapability of connecting and relating to others (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2017). Approximately 100,000 children out of the many are at risk of being permanently split from their loved ones and are placed in orphanages. Children without parents are inevitably exposed to abuse, various trafficking, neglect, psychological distress, and exploitation.

More severe psychological conditions that children face as a result of war are PTSD, depression, and anxiety. A study shows that in a review of 7,920 children who were exposed to war, the prevalence of PTSD was 47%, that of depression is 43%, and that of anxiety is 27% (Attanayake et. al, 2009). The gravity of these psychological disorders is notable because they can shape the future of an adolescent. A child with PTSD, depression, or anxiety is more vulnerable to other mental health issues compared to an adult with the same conditions because children process their responses to trauma differently than adults do (Zlotnick, 2007). Additionally, these factors obstruct the social development of children. Children with PTSD experience social

withdrawal, where they avoid social interaction and engage in solitary activities instead (Bürgin, 2022). This stunts a child's social skills, which could impact the way they withstand the cutthroat realities of life as an adult. Eventually, other mental and emotional disorders may arouse pessimistic and negative emotions such as guilt, anger, loneliness, and hate. Even younger children may display behavior of fear, sadness, attention seeking, and temper tantrums. Such behavior is debilitating because it hinders toddlers from developing and reaching their full potential. Psychiatric counseling and medication are the most common treatments for mental disorders. These methods of treatment are perceived to be more difficult than treating physical injuries because each patient responds to treatment differently and treatments may take longer and require consistent care.

These powerful psychological impacts have devastated many other child victims in the past. Just like the refugee children of the Ukrainian war, those of the Syrian Refugee Crisis were forcibly displaced in neighboring countries. "45.6% of Syrian children and adolescents developed PTSD, while 53% of Syrian refugee adolescents in Jordan experience high insecurity levels, and 82.5% were exposed to more than four lifetime traumas" (Rizkalla, 2020). Many also display signs of anxiety and fear through panic attacks and bedwetting nightmares.

Similar to the way the morals of children reflect the morals and behavior of parents, the mental health of young children mirrors that of their own caregivers. Dr. Jack Shonkoff, director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, said, "Even babies are at risk of suffering from trauma despite being too young to remember what is happening" because they are "highly in tune to how responsive the adults are" (Kekatos, 2022). If a parent is showing signs of psychological distress, his or her child will react the same way because children learn by observing as part of a crucial stage in development. In order to protect children in war circumstances, the focus should be on the adults more so than the children because stability and structure for children come from parents or adults that they interact with in their lives.

## **Current Relief Programs for Ukrainian Children**

Since the start of the war, a lot has been done to aid the Ukraine children that are in danger. A myriad of charities have donated food, clothes, medical supplies, and money. UNICEF has provided over 288,000 children with learning supplies, distributed health and medical supplies to approximately 2.2 million children and their families, and assisted about 25,000 households with finances (UNICEF, 2022). ChildFund is another charity that works to sponsor children. It allows volunteers to connect with their designated children through exchanging letters and photos and building personal bonds with them and their families. In addition to donating medicine, diapers, and emergency hygiene supplies to hospitals and orphanages, ChildFund has evacuated children from the dangerous war zones and set up networks that provide education and virtual learning opportunities (ChildFund, 2022).

But there is an urgent issue that is veiled in the midst of chaos: children's mental health and the psychological consequences of war. Evidently, there is a sheer number of relief programs related to physical help but consequently, there is a lack of relief programs related to mental health. What many of these charities fail to do is provide psychological relief to the children that were robbed of their childhood, education, and proper development. The lack of mental health services also exists among war veterans as well. An investigation of the correlation between lack of mental health support and suicide rates among veterans shows that this insufficiency of mental health services leads to "suicidal behavior, especially among young military veterans who have completed multiple deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq" (Hester, 2017).

Fortunately, there is a sliver of hope for these children who are suffering from emotional and psychological damage. A handful of organizations that have realized the importance of psychosocial support began to bring this subject into light. For instance, the International Rescue Committee established Safe Healing and Learning Spaces where the staff "facilitate games intended to foster social and emotional learning, such as dealing with conflict or negative feelings" (International Rescue Committee, 2022). Another organization called

Voices of Children has various services that support children's mental health. Voices of Children offers art therapy, video storytelling, and even mobile psychologists (Voices of Children, 2022). First, art therapy helps children to cope with anxiety and fear they feel as a result of living in war conditions. By expressing their emotions through drawing, painting, and coloring, children who have trouble describing their feelings in words can benefit from this program. Next, video storytelling allows children to speak out about their experiences, which is another way of coping and relieving stress. Finally, mobile psychologists serve to give healing to children who witnessed various trauma – trauma from war, family violence, etc. In this program, the mobile psychologists act as parental figures that some children may have lost during the war. Taken together, the few charities that are providing children with psychological support are simply not enough. There is a dire need of more organizations that emphasize mental health care for young refugees fleeing war and seeking safety.

## Conclusion

The world of psychology and psychiatry has developed and grown rapidly over the past few years. Up until the late 1900s, mental illness was often ignored and deemed unimportant. Recently and specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic disclosed the disastrous psychological impacts of isolation from others and many people have gained awareness of the dangers of mental illness if they are left untreated. Further studies and developments in psychology have destigmatized mental disorders and the importance of good mental health. Mental health is the foundation of well-being. It controls how humans think, feel, and behave and determines the wellness of their physical and social health. Mental disorders are not only more difficult to cure but also have more lasting impacts than physical health that threaten the proper development of a child. If untreated, trauma, PTSD, depression, and anxiety can be extremely dangerous for they can disrupt one's relationships with peers, daily activities, and overall life. These mental disorders also may propagate throughout generations creating a domino effect through future generations. Children are especially vulnerable to PTSD because their brains are still developing and trauma has shown to be linked with reduced size of the brain cortex. Changes to this area of the brain may change a child's ability to control emotions and even feel overwhelming fear and anxiety. Along with the incapability to regulate emotions, loss of developmental skills is another result of childhood trauma (Hamblen, 2008). Losing crucial developmental skills during childhood is a substantial problem. As children enter their teenage years, trauma may open the path to substance abuse and addiction (De Bellis, 2002). Depression and anxiety are as equally harmful as PTSD and trauma. Disorders related to depression and anxiety are leading causes of suicide in youth. In 2017, it was reported that 6,200 young adults between the ages of 15 to 24 died from suicide (Kalin, 2021). Evidently, these haunting numbers indicate how detrimental mental disorders are to children. Due to the horrors of war, children are forced to endure mental destruction.

Meanwhile, there are not enough programs that focus on the pernicious psychological repercussions of war that kids face because it is easier to send food, water, money, and necessary materials to the refugees than to provide therapy and attention, especially during the war. Today, therapy comes in many forms, from exposure therapy to animal assisted therapy to treat PTSD patients (Smith, 2020). Despite the wide variety of therapy approaches, many people avoid getting treated because they cannot afford it, are afraid of the stigma surrounding mental illness, or are not educated about mental health. To focus on mental health, people should learn more about it and spread awareness so that they break the barriers they had previously built. Understanding that being diagnosed with a mental disorder is not something to be ashamed of is also a step in breaking the stigma.

Through studies concerning the benefits of therapy during armed conflicts, organizations and charities can figure out more engaging ways to help children who were stripped of their innocence and childhood with their emotional and psychosocial issues. In the future, this research can be applied to study if providing psychological support and therapy helped children during and after war and can even be extended to veterans and other victims of armed conflict. As mental health awareness rapidly grows, it is important to now shift focus

not only on the daily lives of people but those who are impacted by large traumas that were forced upon their lives. Victims of war are forced to live with and deal with many hardships and to better integrate them back into society is to help their mental health.

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