

# The protection needs identified by displaced Ukrainian children and adolescents

Lauren Murray, Jasper Linke and Raluca Stoican<sup>1</sup>

**Research with displaced Ukrainian children and adolescents demonstrates that humanitarian actors need to provide opportunities for them to express their concerns, feelings and opinions.**

The eagerness of displaced children and adolescents to express their concerns and discuss solutions with researchers illustrates the value of direct consultations as a method of assessing their needs. The humanitarian community has an obligation to listen to these voices and to integrate children's consultations more actively in their programme planning and design, in line with the UN Convention on the

Rights of the Child, and as outlined in the Core Humanitarian Standard.

In partnership with Save the Children (SC), IMPACT conducted consultations with Ukrainian refugee children, adolescents and their caregivers in Poland and Romania, and conducted a phone survey with caregivers, between December 2022 and January 2023.<sup>2</sup> Age-appropriate and sex-and-age-separated



Yana, 9 (name changed). The Ukrainian school, Warsaw. Credit: Paul Wu / DEC

consultations were conducted in schools and counselling hubs in each country.<sup>3</sup>

### Safety and well-being concerns

“I miss my dad and my friends very much. That worries me the most.” (Boy, 12-14, Romania)

Our research demonstrated that respondents generally feel safe in their new environment. However, all children, adolescents and caregivers voiced a range of concerns about their safety and well-being related to the uncertainty of their situation and the ever-evolving context in Ukraine. They were especially worried about the future and missed their family, friends and pets. Even younger children were well informed about the situation in Ukraine, and reported hearing family members talk about the conflict and described videos they had watched. Children appear to be exposed to the situation in Ukraine on an ongoing basis. For some this is compounded by recalling traumatic events such as their houses being attacked and destroyed; others mentioned that loud noises scare them.

“There were situations when Poles called Ukrainians names, even me.” (Girl, 15-17, Poland)

Children, especially adolescents, explained that they not only miss their friends from Ukraine but also experience loneliness and

discrimination. In Poland, children of all ages reported not having many friends, while in Romania this was especially prevalent among adolescents. Some participants also described rude behaviour by local children and adults.

In Romania, most discrimination seems to take place outside school – in playgrounds, in the street and on public transport – perpetrated primarily by local children; boys also reported experiencing physical violence. In Poland, participants reported verbal harassment and abuse both inside and outside schools, perpetrated by both adults (including teachers) and children. Children in Poland were concerned about unwelcoming host communities and verbal discrimination, such as xenophobic or upsetting comments about the war. In addition, participants in both countries said one of their biggest challenges was not knowing the local language, making it difficult to get help, travel around, and run errands by themselves.

While respondents mostly indicated that they feel physically safe, they still face significant barriers to feeling accepted and comfortable in their new environment. With no immediate end to the war in sight, it is critical that humanitarian actors promote social cohesion through the design and targeting of their programming. This could include joint activities, cross-cultural learning, and language courses for children.

### Protective factors

“My opinion has more value now. My parents ask my advice. It wasn’t like that in Ukraine.” (Boy, 15-17, Romania)

Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that their family served as their primary source of protection, reporting that they discussed concerns with their parents. Most adolescents indicated that they are familiar with the challenges facing the family and they feel listened to and involved in decision-making. However, there were signs of gendered differences in the perception of autonomy. In Poland, adolescent boys tended to say that they were not sufficiently involved in household decisions, while adolescent girls often felt that their gender had a negative impact on their participation in family decisions and autonomy.

Friends were reported as the second major trusted source of help and comfort. The respondents were able to build and maintain new friendships with other Ukrainian children and rely on them for emotional support. While some respondents described experiencing discrimination, some mentioned the host community as an important protective factor, reporting that they feel welcomed and supported by locals.

Finally, children in both countries stressed the importance of spending time outdoors. This shows the potential of joint outdoor extra-curricular activities for Ukrainian and host community children both to promote increased well-being and to facilitate more sustained social connections that do not require a shared language.

Services need to target not only the child but the surrounding layers of support – namely the primary caregivers and individuals and organisations which are in daily contact with children.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, while provision of basic needs remains a priority in any response, it is critical to ensure that children can build social connections and engage in psychosocial and recreational activities.

### Pressing needs and access to services

Respondents in both countries highlighted the need for more extra-curricular and peer activities. The main barriers to engaging in

such activities are a lack of financial means and a lack of availability. In Poland, children wanted more opportunities for sports other than football. Children and adolescents also wanted longer and better-scheduled leisure time. In Romania, children who attend both Ukrainian online and in-person schooling generally complained about not having sufficient free time. Children in Poland who attend the second school shift mentioned they cannot benefit from their free time in the morning as most extra-curricular activities are scheduled for the afternoon or evening.

“I want to see a psychologist but I’m afraid to tell my mum.” (Girl, 12-14, Romania)

Some children in both countries expressed that they required increased access to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services. Some of the adolescents explained that they did not know how to reach out to a mental health professional, and some said their parents disapproved of them accessing this service. In contrast, caregivers had much less of a focus on children’s MHPSS needs when asked about key concerns. This potentially points to a difference in perception between refugee children and their caregivers regarding the urgency of psychosocial needs and their access to MHPSS services.

“We are short of money. Prices went up drastically.” (Boy, 15-17, Romania)

Respondents in both countries stressed the need for additional financial resources for their families; this would help in accessing services – especially health care (including dental care) and extra-curricular activities. Children in Poland explained that high costs, poor quality of services and long waiting times hinder their access to health-care services, and households sometimes even return to Ukraine for treatment. It is critical that children and adolescents’ perspectives are sought independently from their caregivers to ensure services can be tailored to their needs. In not addressing these, we run the risk of children facing ongoing and compounding stress as well as families being forced to resort to negative coping mechanisms such as travelling back to an area of conflict to access services. It is essential that financial assistance takes these various barriers into account.

### Children's and adolescents' recommendations

Financial aid was the most common solution that children proposed for better access to services. In Poland, respondents reported needing funds to access health care. In Romania respondents priorities varied, they reported needing more money to access extra-curricular activities, to enable their household to purchase better quality or more food, or for specific needs such as internet and phone expenses. Some adolescents in Romania mentioned they were searching for part-time work to contribute to their household's income. Children also stressed the need for financial aid for more vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, households with many children, people with disabilities or recently arrived refugees.

In regard to extra-curricular activities, participants suggested that new premises or courses could be established for activities that are not available where they are currently living. A few children specified that they would like Ukrainian-speaking facilitators. Children and adolescents in both countries mentioned their desire for language classes to learn their host community's language and English. They often explained that such classes would be important for their caregivers as well, to help gain access to employment.

The issues flagged by children and adolescents could be the result of a lack of available activities, or a lack of information about what is available. Across the response, inter-agency service mappings are underway to ensure activities, locations and requirements are accessible for refugees, but wider dissemination of this information may be needed. The findings, however, suggest that services are strained. Additional services may be required, specifically with language capacities to accommodate the growing population.

### Conclusion

The Ukraine response has suffered from a lack of visibility of the voices of children throughout their journey. The study found that while most children and adolescents generally feel safe in their host country, they are often deeply affected by the uncertainty of their situation

and struggling with separation, loneliness, and discrimination. Those consulted reported a lack of psychosocial support and limited access to leisure activities, especially sports. They struggle to exercise their right to "rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child"<sup>5</sup> during their displacement.

Key recommendations for humanitarian, government and civil society actors supporting Ukrainian children and adolescents include:

- Provide age-appropriate opportunities for children and adolescents to share their experiences with those seeking to support them.
- Provide opportunities for extra-curricular activities.
- Strengthen and expand MHPSS services with a focus on dealing with worries about the situation in Ukraine and general uncertainty in children's lives.
- Reduce financial and time barriers to children's and adolescents' access to health care and extra-curricular activities.
- Provide better access to language courses and opportunities to socialise with their peers in the host community.
- Provide age- and gender-appropriate information on existing activities and services and ensure it is disseminated in a child-friendly manner.

**Lauren Murray**

[lauren.murray@savethechildren.org](mailto:lauren.murray@savethechildren.org)

Lead Humanitarian Child Protection Advisor, Save the Children

**Jasper Linke** [jasper.linke@impact-initiatives.org](mailto:jasper.linke@impact-initiatives.org)

Assessment Specialist, IMPACT Initiatives

**Raluca Stoican**

[raluca.stoican@impact-initiatives.org](mailto:raluca.stoican@impact-initiatives.org)

Assessment Officer, IMPACT Initiatives

1. Research contributors: Killian Foubert, PhD, Álvaro Sardiza, Jessica Durant, Lauren Stephens and Samira Abou Alfa

2. See Poland briefing [bit.ly/pol\\_ukr\\_refugee\\_cp\\_brief\\_june23](https://bit.ly/pol_ukr_refugee_cp_brief_june23) and Romania briefing [bit.ly/rou\\_ukr\\_refugee\\_cp\\_brief\\_june23](https://bit.ly/rou_ukr_refugee_cp_brief_june23)

## Ukraine: Insights and implications

3. IMPACT conducted 20 age-appropriate consultations in Romania (50 girls, 64 boys) and 26 in Poland (95 girls, 97 boys), separated by sex and age (8-11, 12-14 and 15-17). The research was approved by an independent ethics review committee. A referral pathway was in place to help provide support should serious concerns or unmet urgent needs be disclosed. The research has some important limitations, mainly that a) participants were

among those receiving support from SC and partner organisations and b) no children with disabilities and only almost exclusively children of Ukrainian origin were consulted.

4. Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Alliance CHPA, 2019

5. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31

