



Netherlands Enterprise Agency



This report summary outlines the interventions led by five groups of young people living in Western and Northern Ukraine, supported by the Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation and the War Child Alliance.

It details their concerns regarding the escalating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) needs of children and youth in conflict-affected communities of Ukraine, including persistent barriers to awareness, access and trust in available services.

Additional materials, including youth advocacy outputs and community action summaries, can be made available upon request.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the UPF project “Beyond Trauma: Integrating Mental Health in Primary and Community Care for Ukraine's Conflict-Affected Communities”, these youth have come together through VoiceMore, a youth advocates development programme, to share their experiences and take action to combat issues impacting them.

Since November 2024, five VoiceMore groups have been established in Storozynets, Khotyn (Chernivtsi oblast), Shepetivka, Starokonstantyniv (Khmelnyskyi oblast) and Trostyanets (Sumy oblast), engaging 75 young people aged 15-24.

Through structured dialogue, participatory research and collective reflection, youth explored how war-related disruption has affected their mental health, relationships, education and sense of agency, as well as what kinds of support they believe would genuinely help. They were then supported to design and implement their own advocacy initiatives in their local communities - engaging peers, schools and municipal actors - and to elevate youth-defined concerns to national and international platforms.

Drawing on youth empowerment methodologies, participatory research and national and international desk-review evidence, this report sets out the challenge, the youth-defined solutions, and a call to action for local and national stakeholders.

VoiceMore

VoiceMore is War Child’s youth-led advocacy programme methodology, which empowers young people affected by armed conflict to share their experiences and take action to combat issues impacting them.

Groups discuss and debate how conflict affects children and youth in their area and what they feel could be done to help improve their lives.

They are then supported to design and run their own advocacy projects in their local community, with War Child helping them elevate concerns onto national and recommendations to national and international platforms.



VoiceMore participants in Storozynets, Chernivtsi Oblast

Youth Voices from Ukraine

“We are not asking for something special - just to be heard and to have help nearby when we need it. If people take care of us now, we will be able to take care of our community in the future”.

Maksym, 16 years old, Khotyn community

“When we made the questions and did the survey ourselves, I felt for the first time that our voice really matters. We see these problems every day, so we had to say them out loud. Adults often do not see what is happening to us, but we know it from inside.”

Iryna, 15 years old, Khotyn community

RESEARCH FINDINGS

- Young people across the five communities report high levels of emotional distress, anxiety, disrupted routines, sleep difficulties and a weakening of peer-support networks, often describing their “life as being on hold”.
- While awareness of mental health as an issue is relatively high, knowledge of where and how to seek support is limited; help-seeking is further hindered by stigma, fear of judgement, concerns about confidentiality and not wanting to burden already-stressed families.
- Access to MHPSS services is uneven and often fragmented - particularly in rural, small-town and frontline-adjacent areas, with many services perceived as distant, formal or not youth-friendly.
- Despite these challenges, youth themselves are stepping up: creating peer spaces, organizing group activities, campaigning within schools for emotional literacy, and advocating for informal, relational and community-based psychosocial support models.
- National desk-review evidence mirrors these local findings, showing sharp increases in youth mental-health concerns.
- The youth-led advocacy initiatives emerging from the VoiceMore programme offer concrete, transferable entry points for policy and practice, including embedding youth spaces in municipal youth strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Integrate Mental Health into Youth Policy and Education via awareness days, communication hours for peer and adult check-in, tailored teacher training, adoption of UNICEF’s (Ukraine) socio-ecological MHPSS strategy and link municipal youth policy instruments to measurable mental health indicators
- Strengthen Youth-Led Spaces by investing in accessible youth-friendly hubs (physical and digital) that are co-designed by youth with safe monitoring, facilitation and sustainable resourcing beyond short-term project cycles. Pilot digital tools that map services, enable peer check-ins, signal help-seeking pathways and reduce isolation.
- Foster Community Collaboration and Ecosystems through enhanced collaboration with local institutions, prioritising youth-wellbeing over isolated interventions, engaging parents/caregivers in awareness raising and de-stigmatisation, the creation of formal youth policy-designing, monitoring and governance roles.
- Enhance Awareness, Access and Help-Seeking by scaling local and national campaigns and incorporating young people into these initiatives. Improve the visibility and accessibility of youth-friendly psychosocial services, address stigma explicitly and collect disaggregated data on youth mental-health needs and service-uptake.
- Sustain Youth Leadership and Participation by funding youth leadership programmes, training peer-facilitators, youth researchers and youth-advocacy networks. Ensure youth are part of the design and evaluation of mental health programmes and promote youth representation in municipal youth councils, school governance bodies and national youth strategies.

CONCLUSION

The VoiceMore Ukraine initiative demonstrates that youth are not merely passive victims of war-related psychosocial distress - they are emerging as agents of change, creative thinkers, peer-leaders and advocates for their own well-being and that of their communities.

Yet, youth cannot do this alone. The escalating mental-health burden in Ukraine - rising levels of anxiety, depression, sleep disorders and trauma among adolescents and children - requires system-wide, youth-inclusive responses.

We call on policymakers, education and health authorities, local governments, donors and civil-society actors to join hands with youth: invest in youth-spaces, integrate mental health in policy and schooling, support peer-leadership, de-stigmatise help-seeking, and ensure that Ukraine's recovery is not only physical and economic - but emotionally and socially inclusive.

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