

YOUTH VOICES ON MENTAL HEALTH & PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT IN WAR-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

A VoiceMore Report from Ukraine

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OVERVIEW

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

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 VoiceMore¹, 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.

Key findings include:

- 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.

¹ <https://www.warchild.org.uk/our-work/what-we-do/innovative-Programmememes/voicemore>

- National desk-review evidence mirrors these local findings, showing sharp increases in youth mental-health concerns. For example, UNDP data documents rising mental-health worries among young people, while UNICEF reports that nearly half of adolescents in frontline areas experience significant anxiety, sleep disturbances and trauma-related symptoms.
- 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; integrating mental health into school environments; strengthening peer leadership and community-based supports; improving service sign-posting and digital awareness tools; and mapping clear, youth-friendly pathways to continuous care.

The report thus outlines: (i) the broader context of conflict, youth and mental health in Ukraine; (ii) the research and youth consultation process; (iii) the key findings; (iv) the community-based youth advocacy actions; (v) national-level recommendations; and (vi) concluding reflections.

We invite education authorities, local and national government, youth-serving organisations, donors and international agencies to join young people in their effort to ensure that mental health is not a side-line, but a central pillar of Ukraine's recovery, resilience and youth empowerment.

WHAT IS 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.

Objectives of the programme

- Support young people to identify the challenges they and other children and youth face in the regions and country where they live, and to undertake advocacy action which brings about positive change within their communities and beyond.
- Enable young people to improve their well-being by gaining confidence, knowledge and skills to honestly express their views, needs and rights, including understanding how to conduct research and advocacy.
- Promote the participation of youth in decision-making and raise the voices of young people affected by conflict to those in power.

Background and Context

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, children and youth have faced an unrelenting disruption of education, social support systems, family stability and community routines. Air alerts, displacement, school closures, disrupted peer contact and exposure to violence have become part of daily life. For many young people, childhood and adolescence —periods typically associated with exploration, belonging and future orientation— have been profoundly reshaped by survival and uncertainty.

Evidence from both community-level consultations and national studies confirms that the war has deeply affected the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of children and youth across Ukraine. A UNDP-commissioned study found that concerns about mental health among young people doubled from 11% in 2021 to 22% in 2022², with further increases observed in subsequent assessments. More recent national data indicate that mental-health concerns continue to rise: a December 2024 UNDP study reported that 25% of young people now cite mental-health concerns as a primary worry, up from 22% in 2023 and 11% in 2021.

UNICEF data further illustrates the severity and acceleration of psychological distress among adolescents living in conflict-affected and frontline-adjacent areas, with an estimated 1.5 million children at risk of depression, anxiety, PTSD and other mental health challenges³. Within a single year, the prevalence of probable PTSD increased from 17.3% to 32.3%, depressive disorders from 15.7% to 29.1%, and moderate-to-severe anxiety reached 44–48% among adolescents⁴. Particularly stark is the cumulative impact of prolonged exposure to air-raid alerts and sheltering: children in frontline areas have spent an estimated 5,000 hours underground since the escalation of the war - the equivalent of seven months - with documented effects on sleep, emotional regulation, fear responses and hyper-vigilance⁵. This prolonged confinement has been described as having devastating consequences for children's mental health and overall development.

At the same time, access to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services remains uneven and constrained. National system reviews⁶ highlight persistent gaps in service availability, staffing and visibility, particularly in rural, small-town and frontline-

² UNDP. (2023). Impact of war on youth in Ukraine: Findings and Recommendations; https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-01/undp-impactofwaronyouthinukraeen_v05.pdf

³ UNICEF. (2024). Situation Analysis of Children in Ukraine; <https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/reports/sitan2024>

⁴ UNICEF. (2025). Programmeme Brief: Multisectoral Programmemememg promoting the well-being of children and their families; www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/media/53941/file/2025_MHPSS%20brief.pdf.pdf

⁵ UNICEF. (2025). Ukraine Humanitarian Situation Report No. 47 - January-December 2024; <https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/documents/ukraine-humanitarian-situation-report-47>

⁶ REACH. (2024). Ukraine: Spotlight on settlements reporting receiving less or no assistance; <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-spotlight-settlements-reporting-receiving-less-or-no-assistance-august-2024-enuk>

adjacent communities— alongside cultural stigma and low help-seeking literacy⁷. As a result, many adolescents experience distress without clear pathways to support, reinforcing feelings of isolation and emotional burden.

Yet this context is not defined solely by vulnerability. Despite prolonged adversity, youth civic engagement, volunteering and community mobilisation remain strikingly high, with many young people stepping into roles of care, leadership and local recovery⁸, supporting peers, organising activities and contributing to community resilience even while managing their own distress.

It is within this complex reality, marked by both heightened psychosocial risk and youth agency, that the VoiceMore programme is situated. VoiceMore adopts a youth-led, participatory model in which young people are not only participants, but researchers, analysts and advocates. They collect data in their communities, interpret findings, design actions and engage with peers, schools and local authorities. This approach intentionally strengthens agency, leadership, social connection and sustainability, positioning youth as co-creators of solutions rather than passive recipients of support.

Setting up the Programme

War Child, in collaboration with Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation, launched VoiceMore in Ukraine in October 2024. Community consultations were first held with local authorities and stakeholders to ensure understanding of the programme and its objectives, including any required support at the community level. The programme was presented in different educational institutions: gymnasiums, lyceums, vocational schools, and technical colleges.

Participants were selected in a transparent and consistent way, ensuring all groups of young people were represented and working together with the administrations of educational institutions to remove barriers to participation. Interviews with interested participants were held, covering aspects regarding the requirements of the initiative, participant's motivation and expectations.

VoiceMore Training Sessions

Before starting their advocacy projects, all groups first completed the VoiceMore preparatory trainings⁹, to help build confidence, knowledge and skills in acting as a spokesperson and understanding advocacy. Young people covered topics such as the role of a spokesperson, children's rights, body language and non-verbal communication, active listening, public speaking, understanding people's perspectives, interviewing

⁷ UK Government. (2025). Country policy and information note: Humanitarian situation, Ukraine; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukraine-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-humanitarian-situation-ukraine-january-2025-accessible>

⁸ Norwegian Refugee Council. (2025). Youth needs assessment in Ukraine. NRC; <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/youth-needs-assessment-in-ukraine>

⁹ VoiceMore groups first complete a spokesperson training, then advocacy and research trainings, before moving on to plan and conduct their research and their advocacy action.

skills and keeping safe. Then they looked at the purpose and principles of advocacy action, before working together to identify the most significant issues they felt were affecting children and youth in their community, summarised below:

1. Social Isolation, Loneliness & Belonging
 - Social isolation of internally displaced youth
 - Loneliness and lack of trusted peers
 - Communication difficulties among peers
 - Feeling separated or excluded from community life
 - Feeling misunderstood or not taken seriously by older generations
2. Access to Support & Information Gaps
 - Low awareness of existing youth spaces and services
 - Lack of clear information on how to access psychosocial support
 - Limited understanding of mental health, self-help, and available resources
3. Stigma, Attitudes & Barriers to Seeking Help
 - Stigma around mental health
 - Fear of going to psychologists or specialists
 - Belief that asking for help is a weakness
 - Adults minimizing young people's emotional struggles
4. Safe Spaces, Free Time & Youth Infrastructure
 - Lack of youth spaces and safe places to meet
 - No structured or meaningful free-time activities
 - Need for parks, creative spaces, sports areas, cultural activities
 - Desire for youth-friendly public spaces (cinema, disco, skate park, bike lanes)
5. School & Community as Protective or Stress Factors
 - School pressure and academic stress
 - Difficulties with studying linked to mental strain
 - Limited mental health education within schools
 - Bullying

Before choosing their advocacy focus, the VoiceMore initiative groups engaged in in-depth discussions about the challenges facing young people in their communities, within the overarching theme of MHPSS. Through this process, mental health emerged as the core issue linking social isolation, lack of meaningful activities, conflict, stigma, and disengagement. As a result, young people prioritised psychological adaptation, peer support, and emotional resilience as the foundation for any further community development or advocacy work.

Each group undertook its own analysis to define the main issue for their project, and all ultimately chose to focus on MHPSS, while approaching it from different angles —such as increased mental health needs in rural areas or barriers to accessing support. MHPSS was consistently selected because it reflects the most immediate and visible impact of the war on young people's daily lives: stress, fear, isolation, and emotional exhaustion are shared experiences across all communities. Young people also

highlighted how limited services, persistent stigma, and the lack of safe spaces make it difficult to seek help when it is most needed. In this sense, choosing MHPSS was both personal and strategic; addressing a challenge they experience every day while aiming to create the conditions for their peers to feel safer, supported and understood.

MENTAL HEALTH AMONG UKRAINIAN YOUTH

The war in Ukraine continues to take a profound toll on the mental health of its young population. Adolescents and youth -particularly those in frontline and displaced communities- face elevated levels of anxiety, sadness and emotional burden linked to insecurity, family separation and disruption of social routines. According to “The Impact of War on Youth in Ukraine” study (UNDP, 2024¹⁰), 25% of young people reported being worried about their mental health in 2024 (up from 22 % in 2023). In the same study, the share of young people recognizing the need for psychological support rose from 12% to 18%.

Meanwhile, children’s and adolescents’ psychosocial distress is increasing: analysis of the Save the Children’s case management data from January to June 2024 reveals 43% of these children are suffering from psychosocial distress (anxiety, fear, irritability)¹¹. The Lancet Psychiatry Commission on mental health in Ukraine further underscores the substantial burden: it reports elevated prevalence of depression, anxiety and trauma exposures among Ukrainian adolescents and young people, with war-exposed youth showing significantly higher risk ratios¹². One in five youth lives with constant stress or emotional distress (UNDP, 2024¹³), while many children also face sleep difficulties due to air-raid alarms, fear of attacks, and uncertainty about the future (Save the Children, 2024¹⁴). This emotional strain is compounded by disrupted schooling, displacement, and loss of peer networks, which reduce opportunities for social connection and recreation — key protective factors for mental well-being. Additionally, research indicates that since 2022 children in frontline areas are forced to spend up to 5,000 hours (equivalent to nearly 7 months) sheltering underground — an exposure associated with poor sleep and elevated anxiety¹⁵.

¹⁰ UNDP. (2024). Impact of War on Youth in Ukraine; https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-01/undp-impactofwaronyouthinukraeen_v05.pdf

¹¹ Save the Children. (2024). Ukraine: Mental health toll of war leaves children with speech defects, twitching, and sleep disorders; <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/ukraine-mental-health-toll-war-leaves-children-speech-defects-twitching-and-sleep-disorders>

¹² Pinchuk, I. et al. (2024). The Lancet Psychiatry Commission on mental health in Ukraine. The Lancet Psychiatry, Volume 11, Issue 11, 910 – 93; [https://www.thelancet.com/article/S2215-0366\(24\)00241-4/abstract](https://www.thelancet.com/article/S2215-0366(24)00241-4/abstract)

¹³ UNDP, Impact of War on Youth in Ukraine

¹⁴ Save the Children. (2024). Three in four children in Ukraine live in fear as attacks once again escalate; <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/three-four-children-ukraine-live-fear-attacks-once-again-escalate>

¹⁵ UNICEF, Ukraine Humanitarian Situation Report No. 47 - January-December 2024

Despite growing awareness that mental health matters, the translation into service access remains weak. The Ukraine Protection Analysis Update¹⁶ underscores that many youth and adolescents remain unsure about where to turn or what services exist. Stigma, limited youth-friendly services and rural/remote access barriers continue to undermine help-seeking. The overall picture is one of high need but inadequate structural access: while awareness that mental health matters is growing, consistent and youth-friendly pathways to support remain insufficient. Strengthened community-based MHPSS services, decentralised outreach in rural and frontline-adjacent areas, and programmes that recognize and harness youth agency are critical to preventing the longer-term psychosocial impact of the war from becoming a generational crisis.

RESEARCHING THE PROBLEM

Methodology

Over the course of March 2025 – May 2025, youth groups from the five communities conducted participatory research, undertaking a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. In total, 527 people were surveyed across Storozynets, Khotyn, Shepetivka, Trostyanets and Starokonstantinov. More specifically;

- 134 youth aged 15-25 in Shepetivka were surveyed regarding their mental health needs;
- 76 youth aged 15-25 in Storozynets were surveyed with regards to their awareness of mental health issues and services, while 3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) took place with adolescents, their caregivers and teachers;
- 216 questionnaires were administered to adolescents aged 14-17 and 16 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with adolescents on understanding the barriers to seeking help in Khotyn;
- 101 people aged 11 to 47 years old in Trostyanets responded to surveys on how effective MHPSS support can be further promoted amongst communities, followed by 9 KIIs with young people (14-25 years old);
- 231 youth aged 14-25 in Starokonstantinov were surveyed regarding their coping strategies and available resourceful spaces in the community.

Objectives

Overall, the research aimed to:

1. Understand how the war has impacted youth emotional, social and educational well-being in these communities.

¹⁶ Global Protection Cluster. (2025). Ukraine Protection Analysis Update; <https://globalprotectioncluster.org/publications/2330/reports/protection-analysis-update/ukraine-protection-analysis-update>

2. Explore youth awareness of MHPSS issues and services and identify barriers to accessing care.
3. Identify strategies, including peer support networks and youth leadership capacities within communities to foster effective MHPSS services.
4. Co-design youth-led advocacy actions that link community-based solutions to policy and service systems.

Youth Participation

Youth themselves led the research process, developing research questions and instruments through peer workshops, conducting data collection and analysis. Their leadership strengthened the relevance and ownership of the research, and laid the foundation for youth-led advocacy, as young people identified priority areas and proposed respective advocacy actions.

As participants from the VoiceMore groups note:

"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

"I liked doing the research. We heard many opinions and wishes from young people in our community. I felt like I was part of a team of like-minded people who can really influence things and make the future better for young people in our community." – Antonina, 16 years old, Starokonstantiniv community

Limitations of the Research

Research was conducted in a limited area of five communities of Ukraine, meaning that conclusions and recommendations are primarily intended to relate to those direct areas. The research presents perspectives and opinions of local children, youth and other wider community members. Consequently, the research should be regarded primarily as a lens from which to understand wider community sentiments and ideas in relation to mental health needs, awareness and help-seeking.

KEY FINDINGS

Emotional and Social Impact of War

Young people in the five surveyed communities highlight emotional fragility, social dislocation and interrupted life trajectories. From Trostyanets to Khotyn and Shepetivka, youth consistently describe the weight of anxiety, disrupted routines, and disconnection from peers and education. For many, adolescence, a time that should be about exploration and belonging, has become dominated by survival and responsibility. In young people's words:

"Now there is a lot of anxiety. After the 9th grade, I plan to study in another place, and it is a bit scary because of the war." — Nazar, 14 years old, Shepetivka community

"Sometimes you just get tired of everything. You want things to be calmer and simpler." — Kateryna, 15 years old, Khotyn community

"I don't know where to go when anxiety hits. The internet is scary, and in real life — there is no one." Sasha, 17 years old, Storozynets community

"We have lived through a lot in recent years, but it feels like everyone thinks children 'will manage anyway'." Karina, 17 years old, Storozynets community

Key findings from community-level data

- In Shepetivka, nearly 70% of young respondents report experiencing anxiety or stress, with one in five living with constant distress. They describe poor sleep, fatigue, headaches, and irritability — symptoms intensified by nightly air-raid alerts.
- In Khotyn, most of the 16 teenagers interviewed reported difficult emotions such as anxiety, loneliness or emotional burnout — driven by war exposure, family stresses, school pressure and conflicts with others.
- In Trostyanets, many young people described reduced confidence in social interaction — despite nearly half perceiving themselves as "open to communication," a significant number report uncertainty in interpersonal connection, shaped by prolonged pandemic isolation and the war.
- Across these communities: disrupted schooling, suspended peer-networks and reduced leisure activities are seen as ongoing, leading many young people to feel that their "life is on hold." Exposure to shelters, air-raid alerts and displacement contribute strongly to elevated fear, sleep-disturbance and hyper-vigilance. Moreover, in Trostyanets, social media emerges as both a coping strategy and a source of stress: offering connectivity but also comparison, fatigue and isolation.

Situating these findings within the national context

Recent national desk-review evidence indicates that the emotional and social fragility observed locally mirrors broader trends in Ukraine. For example:

- According to a recent brief by UNICEF¹⁷, rates of moderate-to-severe anxiety among adolescents have reached 44-48%, with probable PTSD prevalence rising from 17.3% to 32.3% and depressive disorders from 15.7% to 29.1% in the span of a year.
- A study by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in December 2024 found that 42% of young people cited health concerns (their own or loved ones') as their primary worry, and 25% reported mental-health concerns (up from 22 % in 2023 and 11 % in 2021)¹⁸.
- Additional sources show that children in frontline areas have spent between approximately 2,800 and 4,800 hours underground in shelters since the war's escalation, the equivalent of 4 to 6½ months, with measurable impacts on sleep, well-being and psychological symptomatology¹⁹.
- Mental-health-and-psychosocial-support (MHPSS) services remain under-resourced, particularly in rural and frontline-adjacent communities; cultural stigma and limited local infrastructure impair help-seeking. A comprehensive desk review by ARQ International and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (2024)²⁰ highlights how historical, cultural and institutional factors structure current vulnerabilities in Ukraine's MHPSS ecosystem.

Awareness and Access to Mental Health Services

Key findings from community-level data

In all surveyed communities, awareness of mental health importance among youth appears high, but this awareness does not consistently translate into knowledge of available services or confidence in help-seeking. The data reveals a clear gap between *understanding mental health as a concept* and *knowing how to access services*:

- Storozynets: 92.1% believe talking about mental health is necessary, and 72.4% report knowing what mental health is, yet only 40.8% know where to seek help. Rural youth feel particularly excluded — over 60% describe rural adolescents as poorly informed and a quarter report feeling completely uninformed.

¹⁷ UNICEF Programme Brief 2025

¹⁸ UNDP, Impact of War on Youth in Ukraine

¹⁹ UNICEF. (2024). Ukraine Humanitarian Situation Report No. 41;

<https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/documents/ukraine-humanitarian-situation-report-no-41-mid-year-2024>

²⁰ ARQ International & Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. (2024). Desk Review: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Ukraine – Coping, Help-Seeking and Health Systems Strengthening in Times of War;

<https://arq.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/ARQ%20desk%20review%202024%20-%20MHPSS%20in%20Ukraine%20-%20full%20report.pdf>

- Khotyn: 27% of adolescents do not know where to seek psychological support, and 43% are unsure. More than half of the surveyed youth lack a clear access pathway.
- Shepetivka: 41.8% believe mental-health information is accessible, while 44.8% say it is only “partially accessible,” pointing to fragmented or inconsistent information.
- Across communities, adolescents highlight the lack of signposting, minimal visibility of youth-friendly services, and confusion about confidentiality and eligibility.

These patterns suggest that increasing awareness has not been accompanied by improvements in service communication, availability, or youth-targeted outreach. Young people further note:

“We hear a lot about mental health, but when it comes to where to really go, few people know. It feels like there is a lot of information, but it is scattered, and you just get lost.”
– Maksym, 16 years old, Khotyn community

“People talk a lot about mental health at school now. They tell us where we can go for help if needed, but only a small number of young people go. They do not trust it, they do not believe in confidentiality, and they do not believe they will be understood and helped.” – Alina, 16 years old, Starokonstantinov community

“In our city there is a place to go for help if needed, but for example in my school I do not always want to go to the psychologist, because I do not trust them 100%. There are private specialists, but they are paid, so it is not convenient for me. Sometimes when groups are organized for free, I attend.” Anna, 17 years old, Shepetivka community

“In our place, people almost do not talk about mental health. And when it is hard — you just stay with it alone.” Yura, 16 years old, Storozhynets community

“I would like that in the village there was someone you can come to and just talk, and not be afraid that people will judge you.” Nastya, 16 years old, Storozhynets community

Situating these findings within the national context

National data reinforces these gaps: while mental-health awareness has risen sharply since 2022, help-seeking literacy and knowledge of service pathways remain limited, especially for adolescents and rural youth.

Recent findings include:

- The HeRAMS Ukraine 2024 status-update²¹ reveals that a significant share of health facilities across Ukraine do not provide mental-health services, or provide

²¹ World Health Organization. (2024). HeRAMS Ukraine Status Update Report October 2024: Non-communicable disease and mental health services; <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/herams-ukraine-status-update-report-october-2024-non-communicable-disease-and-mental-health-services-enuk>

them only partially — due to staffing shortages, lack of training and resources. This reduces the geographic and institutional reach of MHPSS, making access uneven, especially in rural or frontline-adjacent areas.

- The 2025 national health needs survey by World Health Organization (WHO)²² found that although mental-health needs are widespread (70%+ reporting anxiety, depression, or severe stress), only a minority seek professional help — suggesting that many people either cannot find services or choose not to because services are not reachable or visible.
- A UNICEF survey underscores that 73% of youth aged 14–34 reported needing emotional or psychological support in the past year, but only 30% sought help²³. Main barriers: not knowing where to go, lack of youth-friendly information, and unclear service entry points.

Barriers to Help-Seeking

Key findings from community-level data

Youth across the surveyed communities identify multiple overlapping barriers that prevent them from accessing mental-health support:

- **Stigma and cultural norms:** In Khotyn, although two-thirds value mental-health support, 1 in 10 still disagrees or doubts its value. Many describe fear of being judged, labelled, or misunderstood. As young people say:

“I don’t want someone to laugh or talk about it later. Because of this, many people do not even try to ask for help,” — Artem, 16 years old, Khotyn community

“Before, it was very uncomfortable for me to ask for help. Now it is easier for me. But among my peers and people I know, there are many who think that asking for help is weakness, and they can laugh about it,” Bohdan, 17 years old, Shepetivka community

“Sometimes it feels like if you say you feel bad, people will see you as weak.” Kyrylo, 15 years old, Storozynets community

“I would like people to talk about mental health in a normal way, without laughing or judging.” Sofia, 16 years old, Storozynets community

- **Distrust of formal services:** A recurring theme across communities is preference for informal support (friends, siblings) over institutional channels (school psychologists, hotlines). Youth often report perceiving professionals as distant,

²² World Health Organization. (2025). Health needs assessment of the adult population in Ukraine: Survey report; <https://www.who.int/europe/publications/i/item/WHO-EURO-2025-6904-46670-80597>

²³ UNICEF. (2023). UNICEF helps ‘How Are You?’ campaign boost mental health in Ukraine; <https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/press-releases/unicef-helps-how-are-you-campaign-boost-mental-health-ukraine>

ineffective, or unrelatable. Concerns regarding confidentiality have also been raised by a number of youth.

- **Not wanting to burden others:** Adolescents describe reluctance to “add stress” to families already managing war-related challenges.
- **Practical and systemic obstacles:**
 - Lack of clear information
 - Long waiting times
 - Insufficient privacy during school consultations
 - Inconsistent availability of psychologists
 - In Trostyanets, additional obstacles include lack of time, safety concerns, financial challenges, and parental disapproval. Many youth mention that support exists “in theory” but is not usable in practice.

These findings highlight an environment where even motivated youth find help-seeking difficult or emotionally risky.

Situating these findings within the national context

Recent national studies confirm that stigma, distrust, and low service visibility remain the primary impediments to effective MHPSS utilization among Ukrainian youth:

- The recent desk review by ARQ International and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam on MHPSS in Ukraine²⁴ underscores that service gaps, fragmented provision, lack of youth-oriented services, and continuing social stigma remain central obstacles to help-seeking.
- According to the national MHPSS overview by UNICEF²⁵, many children and adolescents across Ukraine are experiencing psychosocial distress — but the coverage of mental-health supports remains uneven, with shortages especially in frontline, rural or war-affected areas.
- The 2025 news release from World Health Organization (WHO) Ukraine²⁶ documents that, after three years of war, mental-health and rehabilitation services face unprecedented strain: attacks on health-care infrastructure, shortages of trained professionals, and disruption to service delivery severely limit access for many, including youth.
- The same WHO report notes that while Ukraine is trying to expand community-based and primary care mental-health services, implementation remains uneven;

²⁴ ARQ International & Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2024

²⁵ www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/media/45566/file/Brief_MHPSS_2024.pdf

²⁶ <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/24-02-2025-three-years-of-war-rising-demand-for-mental-health-support-trauma-care-and-rehabilitation>

many facilities still lack capacity, and service visibility remains low — meaning that even where services exist, people often do not know about them or how to access them.

Coping, Resilience and Youth Leadership

Key findings from community-level data

Despite adversity, young people demonstrate notable adaptive capacities. In Trostyanets, most young people report relying on peer and family support, music, walks, and art as primary coping methods, and prefer face-to-face connection over online tools. Many describe striving to maintain routines, engage in hobbies, or support friends —actions that help reconstruct a sense of normalcy. Illustrative quotes from the Trostyanets sample include:

“I try to hold on to usual things: music, walks, talking with friends. This helps at least a little not to get stuck in bad thoughts.” Karina, 16 years old, Shepetivka community

Yet emotional fragility coexists with resilience: interviews reveal that youth experience loneliness, self-doubt, fears about the future and low hope:

“Sometimes I feel very lonely, even when everyone is near. You just don’t know who you can really talk to.” Maksym, 16 years old, Khotyn community

These mixed responses reflect both vulnerability and agency: while youth experience anxiety and isolation, they are actively seeking purpose and social belonging. Many express forward-looking aspirations such as education, creative careers or community involvement. Across communities, youth describe a desire to “be useful,” “help others,” and “make change”. This blend of vulnerability and initiative underscores the importance of youth-centered approaches.

Situating these findings within the national context

National evidence supports the dual reality observed locally: Ukrainian adolescents act not only as recipients of psychosocial risk but also as agents of resilience, sustaining social connection and meaning making even under conflict pressure.

Relevant sources include:

- The ARQ International review finds that Ukrainian youth often rely on informal support networks, community structures, peer relationships, and non-clinical coping mechanisms. It argues that in the context of war, community-based and peer-led psychosocial support — alongside formal services — is critical.
- According to the 2024 Situation Analysis of Children in Ukraine²⁷, many children and adolescents show resilience factors: open communication with parents, hobbies or creative activities, social connectedness, and family support are associated with better psychosocial outcomes — even amid war-related stress.

²⁷ UNICEF, Situation Analysis of Children in Ukraine 2024

- Recent policy and system-strengthening efforts by WHO under the WHO Special Initiative for Mental Health²⁸ aim to expand community-based mental health services and integrate them into primary care — acknowledging explicitly that “community services, outreach and informal supports” are essential in the current emergency and for long-term recovery.
- UNICEF mid-year 2024 report²⁹ highlights that despite enormous pressures, many community and humanitarian actors (NGOs, international agencies, local volunteers) continue to support youth through creative, peer-oriented, and community-driven MHPSS and psychosocial activities — underscoring the role of youth and community resilience in the national response.

Support Needs & Service Gaps

Key findings from community-level data

When asked what would most improve their mental health, youth reported the below:

- In Shepetivka youth prioritized interest-based clubs (33.6%), individual psychological consultations (32.8%), peer-support groups (27.6%), and trainings (25.4%).
 - More than half were unable to suggest any form of support — indicating low familiarity with existing coping or service models.
- In Khotyn, adolescents explicitly requested a single, clear, accessible entry point for youth—either a physical youth space or an anonymous age-appropriate online channel.
- Youth consistently expressed preference for safe, informal and relational support models.

These findings reveal a mismatch between youth needs and the existing system design: adolescents need decentralised, youth-friendly, informal and hybrid MHPSS models — exactly the types of solutions youth themselves are advocating for.

Relevant quotes from youth include:

“Many people do not ask for help simply because they do not feel safe. They want to have a place where people do not judge you and do not give you labels, but where you can calmly talk with a person you trust. Not formal, not official, but just like a human talk,” Hanna, 15 years old, Khotyn community

“It would be cool if we had a youth space in our community. You know, like a place where you feel that people hear you, understand you, support you, and where you want to come back after a hard day. I think it would help young people a lot to improve their mental

²⁸ <https://www.who.int/initiatives/who-special-initiative-for-mental-health/ukraine>

²⁹ UNICEF, Ukraine Humanitarian Situation Report No. 41

health. And it would also be good if psychologists came to the space and did different activities for young people.” Yehor, 15 years old, Starokonstantinov community

“I like such meetings with other young people, where we can talk freely and also learn something interesting. I cannot always come because I work, but when I can, I join.” Dmytro, 18 years old, Shepetivka community

“If there were support groups in our village, I would definitely go there.” Valia, 15 years old, Storozhynets community

Situating these findings within the national context

Overall, national data supports the VoiceMore findings: available services are often centralized, adult-oriented, and poorly sign-posted, while youth seek local, informal, and low-threshold models. Local preferences point toward hybrid approaches that combine community-based activities, peer engagement, and digital entry points to bridge awareness and access:

- According to the 2024 status-update of HeRAMS Ukraine³⁰ (managed by World Health Organization, WHO), many health facilities report limited availability or absence of mental-health services: mental-health services are not uniformly available, staff shortages, lack of training, and limited resources are frequent barriers to service delivery.
- The 2024 UNICEF’s national “Humanitarian Situation Reports” showcase that, although MHPSS services are being scaled up (through mobile teams, community-based psychosocial support, Resilience Centres, online and phone modalities), many children and adolescents remain underserved. The number of people reached remains a fraction of those likely in need — indicating that service coverage remains patchy and many youth likely remain without access.
- A 2025 report by WHO Ukraine³¹ describes how ongoing conflict, damage to infrastructure and displacement has disrupted many existing services — meaning that even where mental-health services existed pre-war, they may no longer function or be accessible, contributing to service invisibility for many ordinary people.



³⁰ World Health Organization, 2024

³¹ World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe (2025). WHO’s response to health emergencies in Ukraine: annual report 2024. World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/381942>. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO

YOUTH ADVOCACY AND COMMUNITY ACTIONS

In each of the five communities, youth formulated locally-grounded advocacy actions, which now offer scalable models for youth-driven mental-health engagement. Below are summary highlights.

Trostryanets, Sumy oblast



- A reading club became a trusted space where young people could talk openly about mental health through books.

- The youth group has secured an agreement with the municipal Youth Centre to establish a dedicated mental health and meeting space, co-designed by youth and adult allies.

- In partnership with local secondary schools, regular “emotional-literacy” sessions have been scheduled, and youth drafted a “communication-hour” agenda for peer-to-peer sharing.

- Movie clubs and information materials addressed children’s rights and challenged stigma around seeking psychological support.

- Youth leadership workshops strengthened local capacity for

continued advocacy and peer-led initiatives.

- Advocacy to embed youth mental-health metrics into the local Youth Policy Plan 2025–2027 is underway.

Storozynets, Chernivtsi oblast

- Youth are transforming a library annex into a safe youth space, with monthly “chat & create” sessions focused on self-expression, peer-support and psycho-education.

“Mental health is just as important as physical health, so it should be clear where to find support. It is good that there is a place with a circle of like-minded people for mutual support.” Karina, 17 years old

- A local awareness campaign “It’s OK to ask” is being rolled out in schools and community centres, co-facilitated by youth leaders.
- Youth trainers (selected from the community) are being equipped to sustain peer-support beyond the project lifespan.

- Youth publicly presented findings from their study on adolescent mental health, highlighting loneliness, anxiety, lack of safe spaces, and limited opportunities for emotional dialogue.
- Structured advocacy meetings with educational institutions and local authorities strengthened partnerships and promoted long-term, system-level responses.
- Agreements with school leadership enabled the introduction of regular MHPSS-focused class hours, embedding prevention and emotional literacy into routine school practice.
- A separate dialogue with a school principal resulted in preliminary agreement to provide space for ongoing youth activities.



Starokonstantiniv, Khmelnytskyi oblast

- Youth advocacy was informed by community research identifying safe leisure spaces as a priority for adolescent mental well-being.
- The local community library serves as the hub for youth-led psychosocial activity: art therapy afternoons, peer forums, and “mind-spaces” for young people to relax and de-compress. Workshops such as “Let’s Talk About Important Things” and “Self-Support Tools for Teenagers”, structured games, film screenings, and psycho-educational trainings addressed stress, self-help, peer-support, tolerance, and emotional well-being.

- Youth participated in advocacy trainings and presented their findings to diverse community stakeholders.
- Cooperation agreements with local actors aim to ensure sustainability beyond the project period.
- The youth group is negotiating with the city council for formal recognition of the youth space as a “Youth Well-being Hub” and securing a long-term lease.

Shepetivka, Khmelnytskyi oblast

- Youth presented their advocacy project to senior municipal decision-makers, including deputy mayors.

“It is cool and very nice that the authorities listen to the needs of young people. It inspires me. I want to do something useful for my city and for young people.” – Daria, 18 years old



- Community-wide actions (online flash mob, open-air movie night, “Run for Peace”) promoted public dialogue on mental health.
- An information campaign for Children’s Rights Day and locally distributed leaflets improved awareness of mental-health support pathways.
- Youth are piloting a peer-support mobile app (or Telegram-bot) that helps map local services, host facilitated check-ins and signpost professional help.

- Partnership between youth, city library and local authorities has resulted in a Memorandum of Understanding to embed youth-well-being sessions into the school-library network.

Khotyn, Chernivtsi oblast

- Youth successfully advocated to include comprehensive youth mental-health priority lines in the Khotyn Youth Policy Support Programmememe (2025-2027) and in the Strategic Development Plan of Khotyn Academic Lyceum.
- Their key messages for the city council, schools and parents emphasise that youth mental health is a community development asset, not a luxury.

“Mental health is not something ‘extra’ or less important. If young people live in stress and anxiety all the time, it is hard to talk about community development. We want people to care about it like they care about sport, education, or safety — it is also an important part of life.” Kateryna, 17 years old

- A Telegram bot (“Poruch | Support Bot”) was developed by youth to improve access to information on available psychological support.
- Regular peer-support meetings and public anti-stigma actions aimed to normalize help-seeking in the community.
- Solidarity and resource workshops were co-facilitated by the youth groups for their peers in neighboring and frontline-adjacent communities, strengthening the connections between communities and fostering support and participation.
- Intergenerational art-therapy sessions for teenagers and their caregivers strengthened family dialogue and mutual understanding.
- A series of meetings took place, facilitating safe dialogue about teenagers’ emotions during the war. The aim was to help develop self-regulation skills, mutual support, and promote help-seeking. The meetings included interactive exercises, small group work, and reflection, which helped build trust and active participation.



International Advocacy

In October 2025, two child representatives from the Khotyn youth group presented their work, research findings, and recommendations at the opening session of the Second Edition of the Advanced Training on Children and Armed Conflict hosted by the Office of the United Nations Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict. The training was attended by 50 high-level professionals, including diplomats

and government officials, senior staff members of NGOs, research centres, regional organizations, such as the European Union, NATO, and African Union.

The focus of the training was to raise awareness and strengthen knowledge about the Children Affected by Armed Conflict (CAAC) Agenda, enabling participants to contribute to its implementation through their work, and develop skills and competencies to empower and enable translating knowledge into practice. Most participants had very little to no experience of participatory practice with conflict-affected children and limited knowledge on the topic of MHPSS. The training provided a valuable opportunity for the VoiceMore groups to influence duty bearers understanding of children's MHPSS needs in Ukraine, while also positively demonstrating how to engage and partner with affected young people who live in places actively impacted by conflict.



In November 2025 two VoiceMore groups from Shepetivka and Trostyanets participated in a closed roundtable briefing for the UK Minister responsible for children affected by armed conflict, coordinated and supported by the Foreign and Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The two groups worked together before the event to produce two powerful statements which included their recommendations for how the UK Government could better support children in Ukraine. These two Ukraine representatives joined the meeting virtually, alongside another child representatives from Sudan and Yemen. The Minister's Office prepared responses for the children and committed to their recommendations being used in the Minister's own later briefings in government.

International advocacy will continue in 2026, when participants from VoiceMore Ukraine will be joining the 61st session at the Human Rights Council and the accompanying Annual Day on the Rights of the Child at the UN Headquarters the Palais

des Nations in Geneva. A small delegation will be travelling in person to Geneva to speak at a child-led side event organized in collaboration between War Child, Child Rights Connect and Defense for Children International. The children will also be attending an in person briefing for Ms. Vanessa Frazer, the new UN Special Representative the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG CAAC). The events will offer valuable space for the VoiceMore representatives to raise their concerns and recommendations regarding MHPSS needs for children and youth in Ukraine directly to Member States. It will also provide a unique chance to connect with other child advocates from other regions in the world affected by armed conflict.

NATIONAL-LEVEL ANALYSIS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The local-level insight from the five VoiceMore communities aligns with and amplifies national trends—offering clear entry points for systemic change. Below are key recommendations.

Integrate Mental Health into Youth Policy and Education

- Embed “Mental Health & Well-Being Days” into school calendars and youth centres; establish regular “communication hours” for peer and adult check-in.
- Ensure teacher training includes emotional literacy, trauma-informed practice and youth-led facilitation techniques.
- Promote adoption of the multisectoral MHPSS strategy of UNICEF (Ukraine) which emphasizes a social-ecological model: children at the centre, supported by family, community, and society.
- Link municipal youth policy instruments to measurable mental health indicators (e.g., percentage of youth reporting peer-support access, knowledge of services, self-rated emotional competence).

Strengthen Youth-Led Spaces

- Invest in accessible youth-friendly hubs (physical and virtual) where young people themselves can lead peer support, creative self-expression and psychosocial well-being programming.
- Ensure these hubs are co-designed by youth, including safe monitoring and facilitation, and receive sustainable resourcing beyond short-term project cycles.
- Pilot digital tools (mobile apps, Telegram bots) to map services, enable peer check-ins, signal help-seeking pathways and reduce social isolation.

Foster Community Collaboration and Ecosystems

- Local governments, schools, libraries, youth centres and civil-society organisations should collaborate towards community ecosystems that promote youth well-being, rather than invest in isolated interventions.
- Parents and caregivers to be engaged in awareness raising and de-stigmatisation efforts: for example, community forums led by youth and adult allies.
- Youth should have formal roles in designing policy, monitoring services and governance structures, recognizing their capacity as changemakers.

Enhance Awareness, Access and Help-Seeking

- National and local campaigns (e.g. “How Are You?” Initiative by the All-Ukrainian Mental Health Support Programme) show promise: youth report wanting to understand their emotions but fear adults won’t listen. Scaling such campaigns, alongside the involvement of youth in those campaigns, is critical.
- Improve visibility and accessibility of youth-friendly psychosocial services, including mobile outreach, tele-services, and flexible scheduling.
- Address stigma explicitly: peer-stories, youth-voice testimonials, school-based campaigns.
- Collect disaggregated data on youth mental-health needs and service-uptake, including in rural, frontline and displaced youth populations.

Sustain Youth Leadership and Participation

- Fund youth leadership programmes, training peer-facilitators, youth researchers and youth-advocacy networks to ensure continuity.
- Ensure that young people are part of design and evaluation of mental health programmes, not just recipients of aid.
- 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. The insights from the five communities show that when youth are given voice, resources and partnership, they can transform the narrative of war-impact into one of resilience, connection and future-orientation.

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.

In their own words:

"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

"Young people in our community want to be heard and supported in solving problems. Because if today we are not left alone with problems, then later we will be able to give back to the community with our own care." Kateryna, 15 years old, Starokonstantyniv community

"We want to be heard, we want the authorities to consider our needs, we want support and help so that later we can support and help others. It is important for us to have a space for development and free time." Nataliia, 17 years old, Shepetivka community.

When youth rally around their own stories, support each other, and lead action, they become the foundation for a resilient Ukraine.

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