



România

Until we are all equal

Invisible Wounds

**Navigating
Mental Health
Challenges
and Support
for Ukrainian
Adolescent
Boys and
Young Men.**

**Study report
March 2025**



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Photo: Isaccea border crossing staff wait for the next boat to arrive. © Plan International / George Calin

Foreword

The ongoing full-scale war in Ukraine has profoundly reshaped the lives of countless individuals, forcing them to navigate loss, displacement, and uncertainty while seeking ways to rebuild their futures. This research is more than a study – it is a **tribute to the resilience, courage, and perseverance** of adolescents and youth from Ukraine, as well as their communities.

Conducted across Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Moldova, this study amplifies the voices of young people navigating the complexities of war and displacement. It explores their mental health needs, coping mechanisms, and the support structures shaping their recovery.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the **adolescents, youth, parents, teachers, mental health workers, and humanitarian actors** who shared their stories, struggles, and insights with us. Your voices have shaped this research, offering an unfiltered view of the challenges faced and the hope that persists despite adversity.

A special acknowledgment goes to the **Ukrainian community** – those who remained in the country, those who sought refuge elsewhere, and those who continue to adapt, resist hardship, and build new paths forward. Your willingness to speak out will help shape more inclusive, effective, and compassionate responses to mental health and psychosocial support needs.

We are also profoundly grateful to **our groups of youth experts, local NGOs, INGOs, teachers, mental health workers, and humanitarian organisations** across Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Moldova. Your dedication to providing care, support, and advocacy for young people from Ukraine is invaluable.

This report is dedicated to all of you. May your voices be heard, your struggles recognised, and your needs addressed. We hope that the findings and recommendations in this report contribute to policies and programs that prioritise **healing, dignity, and hope** for adolescents and young people from Ukraine – both now and in the years to come.

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Acronyms

CBT – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

EMDR – Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

GBV – Gender-Based Violence

IDP – Internally Displaced People

INGO – International Non-Governmental Organisation

KII – Key Informant Interview

LGBTQIA+ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and other diverse sexual orientations and gender identities

MHPSS – Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

PFA – Psychological First Aid

PM+ – Problem Management Plus

PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

SOGIESC – Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics

(TF)-CBT – (Trauma-Focused) Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

TWG – Technical Working Group

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

WHO – World Health Organisation

Glossary

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) – A psychotherapeutic treatment that helps individuals change dysfunctional thought patterns and behaviours. Trauma-focused CBT (TF-CBT) is specifically designed for people who have experienced trauma.

Mobilisation law – A legal framework that mandates military service during wartime. In war contexts, mobilisation is often considered a necessary measure for national defence but may also have significant personal and psychological implications.

Coping mechanisms – Adaptive (healthy) and maladaptive (harmful) strategies individuals use, both intentionally and unintentionally, to manage stress, trauma, and mental health challenges. These can include seeking support, problem-solving, avoidance, or substance use.

Psychological First Aid (PFA) – Immediate, evidence-based support strategies designed to help individuals cope with distress in a non-intrusive and supportive way. PFA can be provided by first responders, non-professionals, and trained individuals such as teachers, community members, and caregivers, not only by mental health professionals.

Feminist research principles – A research approach that challenges power dynamics, prioritises participant agency, and centres lived experiences. It seeks to amplify marginalised voices, incorporate intersectionality, and ensure ethical, trauma-informed methodologies.

Healthy masculinity – A non-restrictive, emotionally open model of masculinity that promotes self-care, empathy, and community support rather than traditional expectations of toughness, suppression, and self-reliance.

Intersectionality – A framework recognising how multiple overlapping social identities (e.g., gender, race, refugee status, disability, LGBTQIA+ identity, military service) influence experiences of discrimination, privilege, and access to resources.

Service mapping – The process of identifying and analysing available services within a given context to assess their accessibility, effectiveness, and existing gaps.

Structural barriers – Legal, economic, policy-related, or logistical obstacles that prevent displaced or war-affected individuals from accessing mental health care, education, or employment.

Trauma – A psychological state that arises from direct or indirect exposure to experiences that overwhelm an individual's capacity to cope effectively. These experiences often induce profound feelings of helplessness, fear, and vulnerability, especially in war contexts where violence - both physical and psychological - occurs.

Trauma-informed approach – A framework that ensures all research, support services, and interventions are designed with an awareness of trauma's psychological and physiological effects, aiming to avoid re-traumatisation and foster healing, agency, and safety.

INVISIBLE WOUNDS.

**Navigating Mental Health Challenges and Support
for Ukrainian Adolescent Boys and Young Men**

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1 Executive summary



The full-scale war in Ukraine has profoundly disrupted the lives of all Ukrainians, affecting families, communities, and social structures both within the country and in host countries. The war has led to mass displacement, endangered lives, health and safety, exposed civilians to violence, and severely disrupted education, employment, and essential services. While much of the humanitarian response has primarily focused on women and children, the MHPSS needs of adolescent boys and young men have often remained **overlooked**. As the war persists, they encounter **distinct mental health and psychosocial challenges** shaped by displacement, gender expectations, exposure to violence, and structural barriers to accessing care. These include restrictive gender norms that discourage help-seeking, movement limitations due to military mobilisation concerns for those over 25, and financial instability limiting access to support. Conducted across Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Moldova, this research highlights how **structural and cultural barriers** influence their mental health experiences and aims to provide actionable recommendations to improve service accessibility.

Although the primary focus of this study is adolescent boys and young men, it also considers **broader gender dynamics**. It examines how societal expectations around masculinity – such as self-reliance and emotional restraint – affect help-seeking behaviours and service uptake. While this research does not explicitly contrast male and female perspectives, it acknowledges **the influence of gender norms on mental health access**. Some qualitative findings reflect insights from young women and service providers, highlighting how gender roles shape mental health experiences for boys and young men.

Moreover, addressing the mental health needs of adolescent boys and young men is essential not only for their well-being, but also for their families and communities. Unaddressed psychological distress can contribute to emotional withdrawal and strained relationships. In some cases, unprocessed distress manifests in maladaptive coping mechanisms, **potentially perpetuating cycles of violence** that negatively impact women, children, and broader social cohesion.

By identifying these gaps, this research contributes to the development of MHPSS programs that are **inclusive, trauma-informed, and responsive** to the unique needs of adolescent boys and young men. Strengthening support systems for this population not only enhances **their well-being but also fosters healthier family and community dynamics** as Ukraine navigates the ongoing war and its long-term consequences.



KEY FINDINGS



MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS AND COPING MECHANISMS

Adolescent boys and young men reported experiencing **emotional numbness, grief, exhaustion, and identity conflicts**, shaped by their exposure to war, displacement, and shifting responsibilities. Many struggled with **difficulties concentrating** and uncertainty about their futures. However, the impact of the war was not uniform, as young men navigated different challenges based on their circumstances. Some who have been closer to the frontline experienced intense psychological stress and loss, while others who have relocated described **feelings of guilt and alienation**. Several felt torn between personal survival and societal

expectations, compounding their emotional distress.

Despite these challenges, young men have adopted **various coping strategies** to navigate their circumstances. **Some engage in volunteer work, community initiatives, or online peer support networks** to regain a sense of purpose. **Physical activity, sports, and creative outlets** provide emotional relief. However, others have **withdrawn socially, engaged in risk-taking behaviours, or used alcohol and online gaming as an escape**, highlighting the need for interventions that provide **healthier alternatives for managing stress**.

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING MHPSS SERVICES

Several factors prevent young men from seeking MHPSS services, ranging from **social and cultural barriers to structural and financial constraints**. Traditional **masculinity norms emphasise self-reliance**, discouraging help-seeking behaviours. Many young men believe they must handle problems alone to avoid appearing weak, reinforcing **deeply ingrained stigma around mental health services**.

Beyond social and cultural challenges, **structural barriers** also play a significant role. **Language differences** make it difficult for young men living outside Ukraine to communicate with mental health professionals, while **an insufficient number of tailored mental health services** further limit access to appropriate care. **Financial constraints** present yet another obstacle – **private psychological support is often unaffordable**, and as **humanitarian funding declines**, fewer free or subsidised services are available.

Additionally, **a lack of accessible information** prevents many young men from knowing where to seek help. Without clear guidance on available services, many do not engage with MHPSS interventions,

further **exacerbating feelings of isolation and emotional distress**.



GENDER NORMS AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS

Traditional masculinity norms pressure young men to be **protectors and providers**, discouraging vulnerability and help-seeking. Many suppress emotions to avoid appearing weak, reinforcing isolation and reluctance to access mental health support.

Displacement has **altered family roles**, with young men often taking on financial and emotional responsibilities. While some find this **empowering**, others experience stress and isolation. Relationships with **peers and romantic partners** have also shifted, with social pressures, uncertainty, and changing dynamics leading to **frustration, emotional distance, or aggression**.



INTEGRATION AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

Displacement has fractured **friendships and peer networks**, with many adolescent boys and young men struggling to form new connections due to **language barriers, cultural differences, and emotional withdrawal**. Some reported experiencing survivor's guilt, feeling a sense of unearned privilege compared to peers who remain in Ukraine.

Family roles have also **shifted significantly**, with adolescent boys taking on **new responsibilities** in the absence of fathers, which can both strengthen family bonds but also increase emotional pressure. Many feel a duty **to protect and support their mothers and siblings**, while strained relationships with extended family – especially due to **external pressures or social stigma** – add further stress.

Despite efforts to foster **social integration** through **community hubs, sports**

programs, and peer-led initiatives, these remain **inaccessible for many**. While some young men feel welcomed and safe in their host countries, others perceive **growing hostility** and feel pressured to return to Ukraine despite the risks.



EFFECTIVENESS OF MHPSS INTERVENTIONS & ECOSYSTEM CHALLENGES

MHPSS interventions have had **varied effectiveness**, with **low uptake among adolescent boys and young men**.

Service providers note that young men are more likely to **engage in informal peer support, community-based initiatives, or structured activities like sports and volunteering**. The **mental health ecosystem faces systemic challenges**, including **funding gaps, shortages of trained professionals, and fragmented service delivery**.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively support adolescent boys and young men affected by the war in Ukraine, **governments, MHPSS service providers, humanitarian organisations, and host communities** must take targeted actions to reduce barriers, improve accessibility, and foster resilience.

1. Strengthening mental health systems

- **Expand mental health services** by increasing investment in national frameworks and integrating MHPSS into public healthcare to remove financial barriers.
- **Train professionals on gender-sensitive, trauma-informed approaches** to address the

psychological impact of war, including displacement stress and loss.

- **Diversify access points** by embedding MHPSS services within education, employment, and humanitarian programs to reach young men in familiar settings.

2. Addressing barriers to employment and stability

- **Simplify legal and bureaucratic processes** for employment and vocational training to help young men transition from informal work to stable jobs.
- **Ensure legal protections for displaced young men** by extending asylum and residency options to reduce uncertainty and promote long-term stability.

3. Tackling gender norms and social stigma

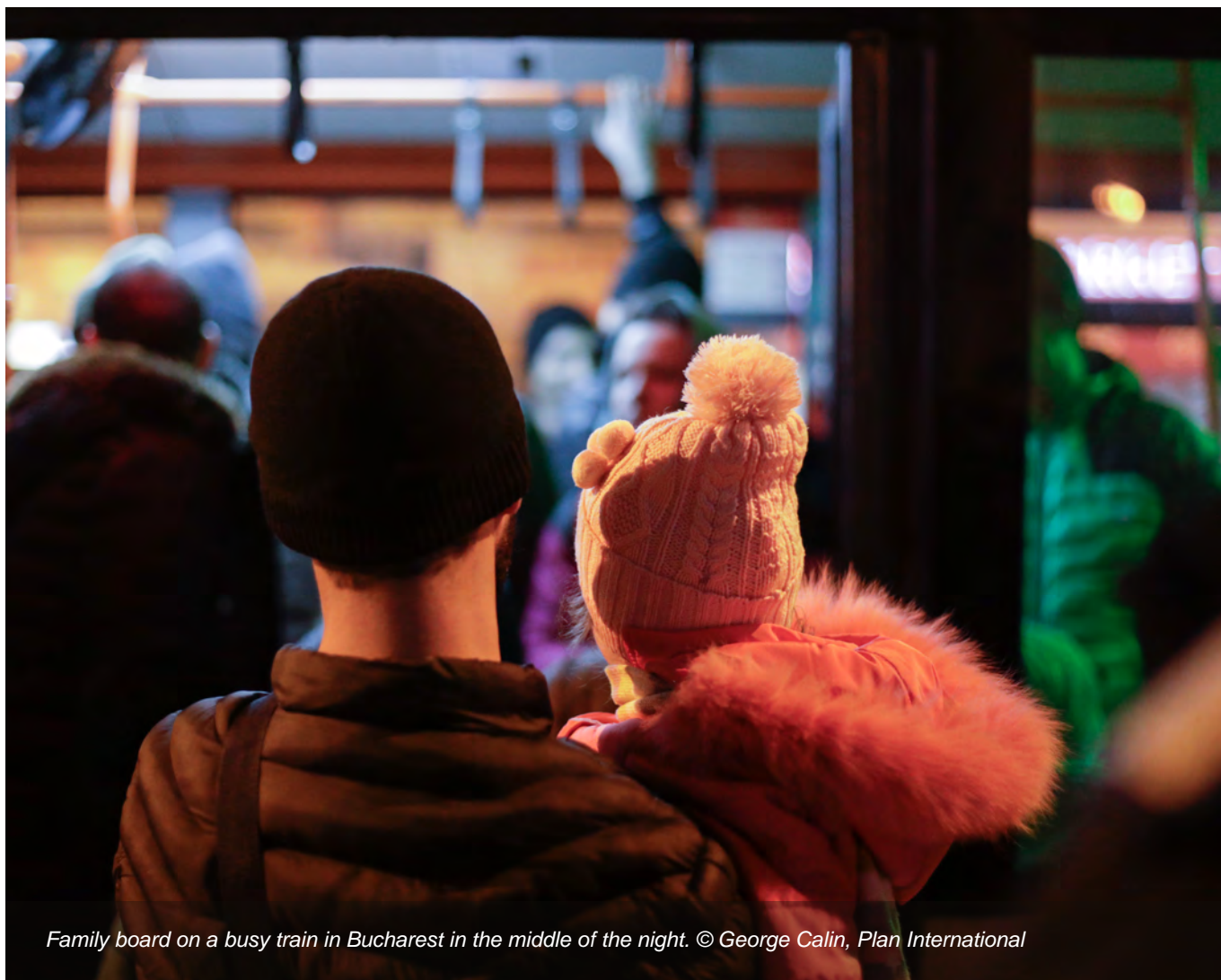
- **Challenge restrictive masculinity norms** through awareness campaigns that promote help-seeking and emotional resilience.
- **Encourage shared caregiving responsibilities and emotional openness** to reshape gender norms positively in crisis settings.
- **Engage male role models, educators, and community leaders** in mental health advocacy to normalise emotional expression and peer support.

4.Improving social integration and support networks

- **Expand mentorship and peer-led programs** to connect displaced young men with local communities and social networks.
- **Invest in youth-led initiatives and volunteering opportunities** to empower young men and enhance their sense of agency.
- **Create culturally inclusive programs** that foster long-term belonging rather than treating displaced persons as temporary outsiders.

5.Strengthening community-based and digital outreach

- **Develop family-centred MHPSS programs** to equip parents and caregivers with tools to support adolescent boys and young men experiencing distress.
- **Leverage digital platforms and social media** for mental health awareness, reducing reliance on informal and unmoderated online communities for emotional support.
- **Expand sports and arts-based therapy programs** as accessible, stigma-free entry points for mental health services.



Family board on a busy train in Bucharest in the middle of the night. © George Calin, Plan International



CALL TO ACTION

- Prioritise mental health in humanitarian response: Ensure MHPSS services are widely **available, youth-friendly, and gender-responsive**.
- Expand service delivery models: Use **digital platforms, mobile teams, and community hubs** to reach at-risk groups.
- Combat stigma and promote help-seeking: **Challenge harmful gender norms** through awareness campaigns and youth engagement.
- Foster youth participation: **Involve young men in designing** programs that reflect their experiences and needs.
- Strengthen coordination and accessibility: Improve **collaboration across stakeholders** and ensure clear, widely available service information.

Address intersectional needs: Tailor interventions to **support marginalised youth**, ensuring culturally sensitive and inclusive programming.

Invest in service provider training: Equip professionals with the **tools to deliver gender-sensitive and trauma-informed care**.



A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Addressing the mental health needs of adolescent boys and young men is not just a matter of individual well-being but a broader societal imperative. Unaddressed psychological distress can perpetuate cycles of violence and social exclusion, impacting families and communities. A coordinated, inclusive, and well-funded response is critical to fostering resilience, well-being, and long-term stability.



The full-scale war in Ukraine has profoundly disrupted the lives of all Ukrainians, affecting families, communities, and social structures both within the country and in host countries. The escalation of war has led to mass displacement, threats to one's life, health, and integrity, exposure to violence, and significant disruptions in education, employment, and access to essential services. While much of the humanitarian response has primarily focused on women and children, the MHPSS needs of adolescent boys and young men have often remained overlooked.

As the war persists, adolescent boys and young men face unique mental health and psychosocial challenges shaped by displacement, gender expectations, exposure to violence, and structural barriers to accessing care. The war has increased the emotional burden on young men, who often navigate the pressures of protection, financial instability, and the expectation to embody resilience in times of crisis. The introduction of military mobilisation policies and movement restrictions have further contributed to psychological stress, particularly for young men over 25.

For many adolescent boys and young men, traditional notions of masculinity – such as strength, self-reliance, and emotional restraint – have shaped their ability and willingness to seek mental health support. Simultaneously, host communities in Poland, Romania, and Moldova have played a crucial role in offering safety and integration opportunities, though access to services remains uneven. The geopolitical situation, including shifting international support and funding constraints, has further complicated access to mental health services for displaced youth.

This report is part of a broader initiative funded by the **Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC)** as part of Plan International's response to the full-scale war in Ukraine. Conducted between July 2024 and February 2025 across Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Moldova, the study aims to identify and address critical gaps in MHPSS service provision for adolescent boys and young men from Ukraine. Through qualitative and quantitative data collection, it explores their lived experiences, access to mental health support, and the role of community and institutional responses in shaping their well-being. The findings aim to strengthen MHPSS programming, inform policy interventions, and ensure that the mental health needs of men and boys are effectively addressed.



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

This study seeks to understand how the full-scale invasion and further escalation of war has impacted the mental health and psychosocial well-being of Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men. It explores the barriers they face in accessing mental health services, the prevalent coping mechanisms they employ, and the effectiveness of existing interventions across Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Moldova.

While humanitarian responses have largely prioritised women and children, men and adolescent boys encounter specific challenges that are often overlooked in MHPSS programming. These challenges include restrictive gender norms that discourage help-seeking, movement limitations due to military mobilisation concerns for those over 25, and financial instability that limits access to support. The

research highlights how these structural and cultural barriers shape their mental health experiences and aims to provide recommendations to improve service accessibility.

Although the primary focus is on adolescent boys and young men, the study also considers broader gender dynamics. It examines how societal expectations around masculinity – such as self-reliance and emotional restraint – impact help-seeking behaviours and service uptake. While this research does not explicitly contrast male and female perspectives, it acknowledges the influence of gender norms on access to mental health support. Some qualitative findings also reflect insights from young women and service providers on how gender roles shape mental health experiences for boys and young men.

By identifying these gaps, the research contributes to the development of MHPSS programs that are more inclusive and tailored to the needs of adolescent boys and young men.

The study pursues the following objectives:

- To assess **the impact** of the full-scale war on **the mental health and psychosocial well-being of Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men**, both in Ukraine and in host countries
- To examine the extent to which adolescent boys and young men in Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Moldova have accessed mental health services, while identifying structural and cultural barriers that hinder their access
- To gather insights from adolescent boys and young men on their mental health needs, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of available services
- To develop actionable proposals for policymakers, service providers, and humanitarian actors to improve the inclusivity and effectiveness of mental health interventions

Key research questions

Research focus	Key research questions
Mental health concerns	What are the primary mental health challenges faced by Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men in Ukraine and host countries?
Impact of war and displacement	How have the full-scale war and displacement influenced their emotional well-being and coping mechanisms?
Barriers to accessing mental health services	What are the main barriers preventing them from accessing mental health services?
Effectiveness of existing interventions	How effective are existing MHPSS interventions in addressing their needs, and what gaps remain?
Policy and programmatic adaptations	What policy changes or programmatic adjustments are needed to enhance accessibility and inclusivity in MHPSS services for adolescent boys and young men?

Methodology

This study employs a **primarily qualitative research design, incorporating focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs)** to provide a comprehensive understanding of mental health challenges and service accessibility. To complement the qualitative insights, **two surveys were conducted**: one targeting adolescent boys and young men to ensure wider participation given the stigma surrounding mental health, and another aimed at service providers to map available MHPSS services. The research followed **feminist, trauma-informed, and gender-sensitive principles**, ensuring an ethical and participatory approach throughout.

While the primary focus of the study was on **adolescent boys (15-17) and young**

men (18-25), the research also engaged **other community members – including adolescent girls, young women, adult men, parents, teachers, mental health workers, local and international NGOs, and policymakers**. These additional perspectives provided contextual insights into how the mental health needs of adolescent boys and young men are perceived within their communities, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the social, structural, and cultural factors influencing MHPSS access. Although the study centred on younger populations, some quotes from older men provide valuable insights into generational perspectives or experiences that influence adolescent boys and young men. These perspectives helped contextualise broader social and cultural shifts impacting mental health and help-seeking behaviours.



Children have fun together at Ludobus play session in Moldova. © Plan International

Participatory research approach

A key component of this study was its **participatory nature**. Consultations were conducted with **19 adolescent boys and 19 young men across all four research countries** at two stages of the research process. Initially, these consultations informed the **development of the methodology, research tools, and key areas of inquiry**. Later, during the **validation phase**, findings were shared with participants, allowing for their feedback and insights to be incorporated into the final analysis.

Qualitative data collection

The qualitative data collection was conducted through **94 KIIs** and **29 FGDs**, engaging **88 adolescent boys and young men**, along with parents, caregivers, mental health professionals, teachers, school counsellors, humanitarian workers, and local and international NGO representatives. These discussions explored personal experiences, coping strategies, barriers to mental health service access, and the impact of displacement and war on emotional well-being.

To ensure a diverse sample, the study included **adolescent boys and young men who had arrived in host countries both before and after the full-scale war began in February 2022**. Some

participants had previously moved for work or education, while others were displaced due to the war. The research also sought perspectives from individuals **across different geographic locations, including urban and rural settings**. Additional efforts were made to engage professionals working in **remote areas through MHPSS mobile teams** and those providing **specialised support to persons with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and ethnic minority communities**. While the study aimed to understand the experiences of young men with **military backgrounds, these insights were gathered through the perspectives of mental health service providers and those in their social circles** – both women and men – **rather than directly from those with active military experience**. The study further included young men and adolescents pursuing education through online or in-person learning to capture the varied experiences of displaced youth.

A **thematic analysis** was applied, integrating **both inductive and deductive approaches** to identify key patterns and unexpected insights, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the mental health challenges and service gaps faced by Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men.

The study examined multiple dimensions of MHPSS, including:

Impact of the conflict on masculinity & gender roles	MHPSS topics examined	Experiences of minority groups
Relationships with others	Mental health needs & wellbeing	Digital safety & social media influence
Protection, security & movement	Community & peer support systems	Stress & coping mechanism
Stress & coping mechanism	Education & learning	Barriers

Data collection

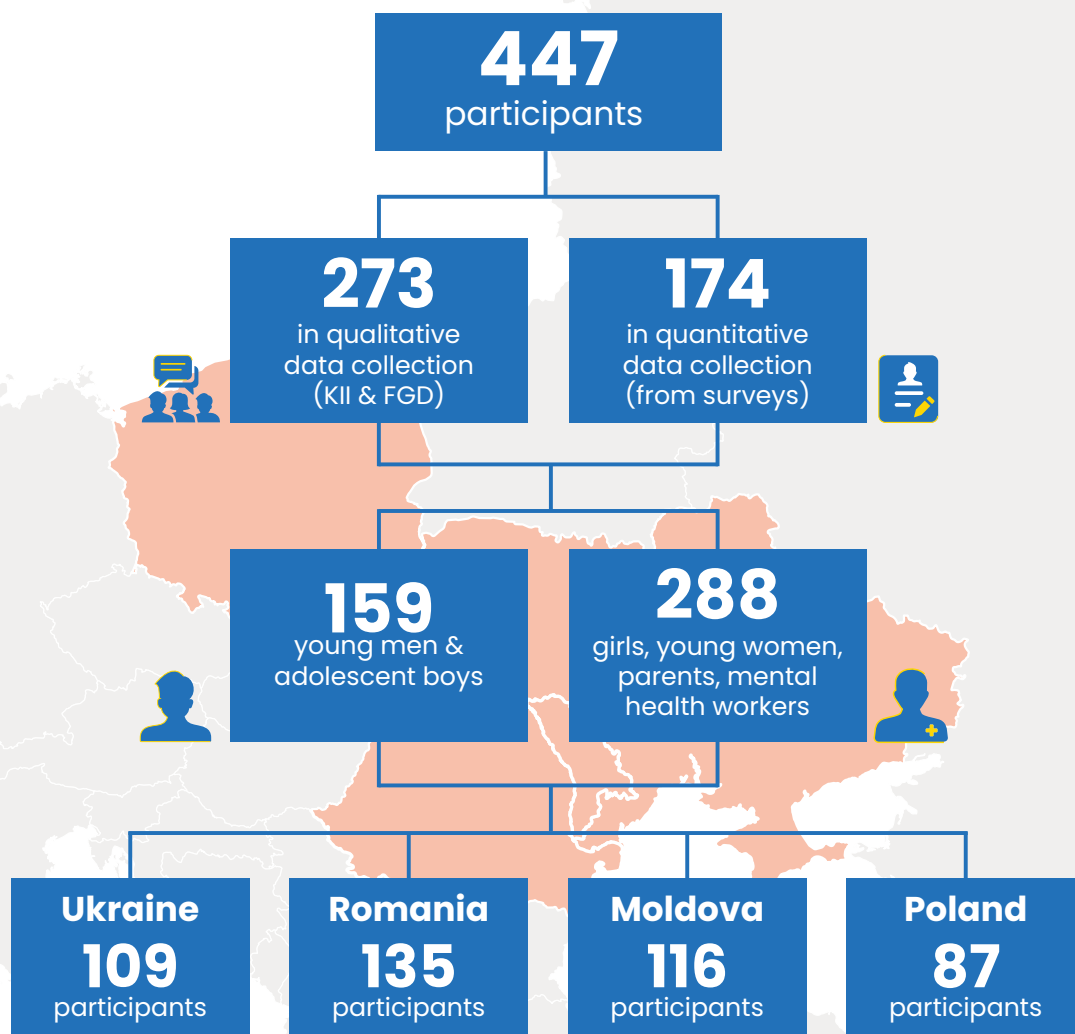
To complement the qualitative findings, two surveys were conducted. These surveys provided broader insights into service availability, mental health perceptions, and barriers to access, while also allowing for data triangulation with the qualitative findings.

- A **survey of service providers and organisations** (n = 103) to map available MHPSS services, assess gaps in provision, and explore service accessibility for Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men.
- A **survey targeting adolescent boys and young men** (n = 71) to capture their perspectives on mental health, coping mechanisms, and experiences with MHPSS services in both Ukraine and host countries.

Sampling strategy & recruitment

A total of **447 participants** took part in the study across Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Moldova. The sample included:

- **273 individuals in qualitative data collection** (interviews and FGDs).
- **159 adolescent boys and young men** engaged in either FGDs, KIIs, or the survey.
- **94 KIIs and 29 FGDs** with a diverse range of stakeholders



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The study employed **purposive sampling**, a non-probability technique, to ensure that selected participants reflected diverse demographics and experiences, particularly adolescent boys and young men in vulnerable situations from Ukraine. The recruitment strategy varied by country. In **Ukraine and Poland**, outreach efforts focused on **organisations working with internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees from Ukraine**, including those supporting LGBTQIA+ individuals, persons with disabilities, and specific at-risk groups. Researchers contacted hundreds of organisations, universities, student councils, sports clubs, and UNHCR technical working group members to identify potential participants. Efforts were made to ensure representation from both urban and rural areas, as well as from organisations providing mobile services in remote regions. In **Romania and Moldova**, researchers employed a **snowball sampling approach**, leveraging existing networks and community-based referrals to reach Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men.

Desk review

The **desk review** played a foundational role in shaping the study's methodology, ensuring that the research design was informed by existing knowledge and contextual realities. Conducted before data collection, the review examined a diverse range of sources, including **academic literature, grey literature, policy documents, and consultation reports**.

The review examined **gendered trauma responses, cultural attitudes toward mental health, and the impact of war on Ukrainian communities**, shedding light on help-seeking behaviours and access to services. It assessed the **MHPSS service landscape**, including national policies, legal frameworks, and available mental health support across Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Moldova.

By mapping **self-help, community-based, and institutional support mechanisms**, the desk review **highlighted gaps in service** provision and directly informed the study's approach, ensuring a research design that responded to the realities faced by adolescent boys and young men affected by war.

Ethical considerations

This research adhered to strict ethical standards and was reviewed and approved by **Plan International's Ethics Review Team**. Participants provided **informed consent and assent**, with parental consent required for minors, and were informed of their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time.

Confidentiality and data protection were ensured by anonymising personal data and securely storing all information for research purposes only. **Safeguarding measures** were in place, with participants receiving consent forms detailing safeguarding procedures and access to designated focal points. After FGDs and KIIs, they were provided with information about feedback channels and referral options for further support. To **mitigate retraumatisation risks**, emergency psychological support was available for minors, while adults were referred to appropriate MHPSS services if needed.

The research team ensured that facilitators were trained in **trauma-informed and gender-sensitive** data collection techniques. Special attention was given to facilitators working with adolescent boys and young men, who may experience stigma or internalised distress regarding mental health challenges.

One of the guiding principles of this research was the recognition that distress responses among men and adolescent boys in war-affected contexts are **natural and expected reactions to extreme stress**.

Rather than pathologising trauma, the study sought to highlight the structural and social barriers preventing individuals from accessing the support they need. We believe that **mental health interventions should focus on resilience-building, community-based support, and accessible psychosocial care, rather than framing distress as an individual failing.**

Limitations

Several challenges influenced the recruitment process and overall data collection, leading to potential **selection bias**. The study relied on **purposive sampling**, which, while ensuring the inclusion of diverse voices, limits the generalisability of the findings. The perspectives captured in this study reflect the experiences of those who were reachable through our recruitment strategies and may not fully represent all adolescent boys and young men affected by the escalation of war.

One significant challenge was **the difficulty in recruiting adolescent boys and young men, particularly in Poland**. Despite extensive outreach efforts, participation remained lower than anticipated. Factors contributing to this included **reluctance and scepticism** from both young men and their parents regarding research participation. Mental health remains a **taboo topic**, and concerns around stigma likely discouraged engagement. Additionally, some families expressed hesitation about participating in a formal study.

Service providers also demonstrated **respondent fatigue**, as many had participated in multiple research initiatives. This may have influenced their level of engagement, and the depth of responses provided. Furthermore, the simultaneous collection of **qualitative and quantitative data** presented **logistical challenges**, limiting the ability to **iteratively refine research tools based on emerging insights**.

The study also faced **difficulties in engaging directly with vulnerable groups**, including **LGBTQIA+ individuals, Roma communities, and persons with disabilities**. Despite targeted outreach efforts, recruitment proved challenging, resulting in a reliance on insights provided **by service providers, NGOs, and parents** rather than directly from members of these communities. While these second-hand perspectives offer valuable insights, they do not fully replace the direct voices of individuals from these groups. Future research should **prioritise strategies for amplifying these voices**, ensuring a more **inclusive and representative** understanding of their lived experiences.

Finally, the **use of translated and interpreted data** introduced the **risk of subtle meanings being lost in translation**. Efforts were made to mitigate this through careful verification of transcripts and cross-checking with facilitators, but the potential for **nuance loss** remains an inherent challenge in multilingual research.

2 Country specific case studies



2.1 UKRAINE

2.1.1 Mental health needs & well-being



THEN VERSUS NOW

The Russian Ukrainian war has profoundly altered the social landscape, affecting the mental health of adolescent boys and young men. **Before the full-scale war**, many of them were actively engaged in structured activities – engagements such as **sports, hobbies, extra-curricular activities, and social interactions**. These activities provided a sense of routine, identity, and purpose, fostering stability in their personal and family environments. The war has disrupted these scheduled routines, leading to psychological distress, loss of interest in previous activities, and a sense of uncertainty. Disruptions like displacement, economic instability, and family separations have fostered chronic stress, emotional detachment, and social withdrawal. *“Before the war, I was very fond of racing. I dreamed of becoming a professional racer. I pursued this dream in karting. When the war started, there was such a breakdown, racing completely disappeared for me.” (17-year-old adolescent boy)*

The study involved **67 adolescent boys and young men in Ukraine** through a qualitative, quantitative, or consultation process, capturing a broad range of perspectives on their mental health. With communities that once supported their

hobbies dissolving, young men have **lost key sources of social connection, their sense of identity, and perceived support**. Some have become engaged in the Ukrainian Forces, while others have seen their **friendships fractured due to** differing views on the war. Several experience a **shift in self-perception and meaning**, often describing emotional numbness. Mental health service providers noted that young men have been affected differently based on their circumstances, such as joining the military, adapting to life in a new environment, or struggling with societal expectations; thus, **all experience different psychological burdens**. Some face stigmas or exclusion based on their decisions. **These experiences are further shaped by a combination of risk factors, protective factors (individual, familial, social, and contextual), and vulnerability factors**.

Some adolescent boys and young men experienced a shift in their **sense of purpose due to the war**. A common theme across interviews is the **numbing of emotions and the loss of meaning in once-exciting activities**. This **emotional detachment** is exacerbated by the loss of familiar routines and relationships. However, their experiences are not uniform, as the psychological impact varies depending on their region, displacement status, and personal circumstances. Those living in frontline regions have faced significantly different realities compared to those in relatively safer areas. Additionally, IDPs and those who remained in their home communities have navigated distinct sets of challenges, from adapting to new environments to enduring prolonged exposure to war-related stressors.



IMPACT & TYPE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND BEHAVIOURAL RESPONSES

The war has launched a cascade of mental health issues among adolescent boys and young men. Several respondents report **anxiety driven by several factors, including uncertainty about the future, military mobilisation concerns for those over 25, and the general unpredictability of life under wartime conditions.** This anxiety manifests in **persistent worry, intrusive thoughts, and sleep disturbances.** Some describe experiencing intense **feelings of distress triggered by memories of air raid sirens** or past traumatic experiences, even in moments of safety.

The bar chart below illustrates the emotional and behavioural changes reported in the survey by adolescent boys and young men since the onset of the war. Notably, 50% of respondents indicated **increased feelings of anxiety.**

Beyond the disruptions of displacement and instability, young men in Ukraine **continue to face the daily reality of war. The persistent threat of airstrikes, shelling, and destruction profoundly impacts their mental health, fostering chronic stress and heightened states of vigilance.** According to mental health

workers, among those who have joined the military, these stressors are compounded by **direct combat experiences, exposure to violence, and the challenge of reintegration into civilian life.** Processing traumatic experiences while remaining in an active war zone further complicates their psychological well-being.

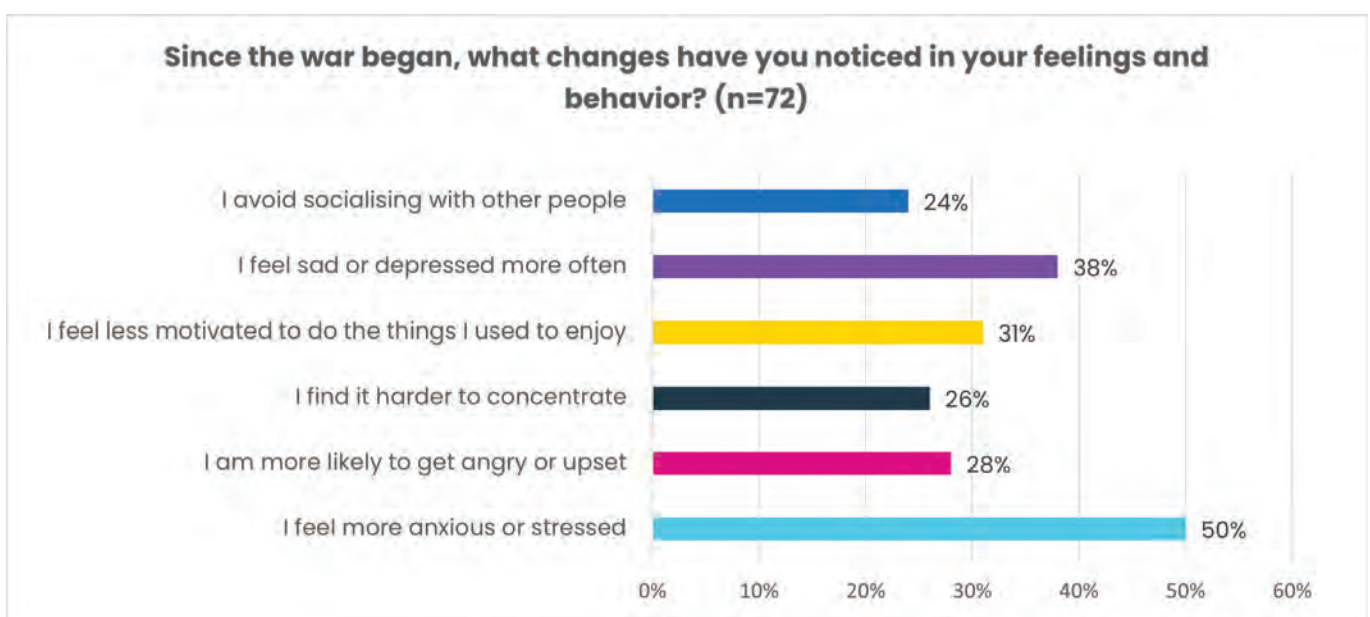
Depressive symptoms were widespread, as self-reported by participants, with many struggling with emotional detachment, apathy, and a sense of meaninglessness. Activities that once brought joy now leave them feeling hollow, leading to **social withdrawal** and disconnection from their past selves. The breakdown of family structures, forced migration, and the absence of emotional support networks exacerbate these issues. **Grief and exhaustion** were particularly pronounced among those who have lost loved ones or close friends.

“

I also used to socialise more with my friends, and it was definitely an important part of my life. Communication has become less frequent and of lower quality, and is no longer as satisfying.

”

22-year-old young man



Some young men also reported psychosomatic symptoms, such as persistent pain and chronic fatigue, which they attribute to psychological distress. These symptoms often lack a clear physiological cause but are linked to heightened stress, anxiety, and emotional suppression. Service providers reported an increase in **referrals to psychiatrists**. While this may reflect a growing recognition of mental health concerns, it could also stem from other factors, such as changes in service availability, increased distress, or evolving referral practices. However, stigma and fear of judgment continue to deter many from actively seeking professional help. Some coped through denial, refusing to acknowledge their distress.

Aggression, risk-taking behaviours, and substance use were also common, as reflected by mental health workers. Some engaged in reckless activities, excessive drinking, or self-destructive behaviour as a way to escape emotional pain. Others expressed frustration through violent outbursts, bullying, or interpersonal conflicts, often as a reaction to overwhelming stress. These behaviours **may not always be intentional but can emerge as a response to feelings of helplessness and inability to regain control over their circumstances**. Being overwhelmed by distressing experiences, combined with heightened stress levels, can further impair their ability to process emotions and make rational decisions.

Additional issues reported include **loneliness, fear of being drafted for those over 25, lack of clarity about their future** in Ukraine, and **self-harm**. According to Ukrainian organisations working in the MHPSS space, reports of **domestic violence** towards children and adolescents by parents have increased, alongside incidents of **bullying** in educational institutions and misunderstandings with parents. **Substance use**, including alcohol and tobacco, as well as gambling and excessive online gaming, have increased.

Some young men are contemplating migration out of Ukraine as a means of escaping insecurity, fearing both the ongoing war and uncertainty about their future. Others report experiencing **difficulties with concentration and self-aggression**.

“

I have problems with my studies, it's cool when an air raid alarm goes off during a test and you don't end up writing it, but in the long run it's certainly harmful. I start to see gaps, I don't understand the topics during which the alarms were going off.

”

17-year-old adolescent boy

At the same time, a growing number have expressed the **need for sexual education and open discussions about sexual orientation**, reflecting a gap in available resources and support. Many feel unprepared to navigate questions related to relationships and reproductive health, as these topics are often absent from formal education. In addition, there is growing concern over **regional bullying**, particularly for children and adolescents who have been evacuated from occupied areas or active war zones to safer regions of Ukraine.

Some young men have responded to the war-related stress by **engaging more actively in society**. Many have taken on roles as volunteers – **helping displaced individuals, traveling to the front lines to support friends, supporting their communities, and participating in grassroots initiatives**. These activities provide them with a **renewed sense of purpose**, counteracting the feeling of helplessness. Some have reported an **increased interest in societal problems**, using the circumstances as catalyst for personal growth and **community engagement**.



DIFFERENTIATED IMPACT ON BOYS/MEN

The war affects young men differently depending on their circumstances. While all young men in Ukraine are affected by the war, those in military service face unique challenges. Some experience a strong sense of camaraderie and self-confidence, which can serve as a protective factor against distress. However, mental health service providers also described the **psychological toll of combat exposure, survivor's guilt, and difficulties adjusting to civilian life after prolonged service**. Several noted the absence of comprehensive reintegration programs, leaving young men without sufficient psychological support to process their experiences.

Those who remain in Ukraine but are not part of the Ukrainian Armed Forces may struggle with **guilt, alienation, and judgment**, while those who have left the country often feel isolated and disconnected from their peers. Some displaced individuals have returned despite the risks, having been unable to rebuild their lives abroad, while others remain displaced due to ongoing occupation, destruction, shelling, and military attacks of their hometowns.

While both adolescent boys and young men experience severe psychological distress, their struggles differ. According to mental health workers, **adolescents, who are still forming their identities, face disrupted socialisation, increased isolation, difficulty building relationships, and emotional numbness**. Some feel deep insecurity about their future and a loss of control over their lives.

Several young men, particularly those in their early 20s, often struggle with **issues of identity and masculinity**. Societal expectations, rooted in traditional gender norms, create an internal conflict between personal aspirations and perceived duty,

leading to shame, guilt, and, in some cases, suicidal ideation. Some have been socialised from a young age to suppress emotions, equating vulnerability with weakness – a pattern that is further reinforced in times of war. These deeply ingrained norms significantly impact help-seeking behaviours, with **74% of service providers stating that societal expectations around masculinity hinder boys' and men's willingness to seek support** for mental health concerns.

For both age groups, there is a significant increase in self-described mental health challenges such as **disrupted sleep patterns, chronic stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms**.

“

First of all, now you may not get enough sleep because there is a nightly alarm and you have to wake up to see what is going on. Ballistics, or drones, if it's drones, it's not so scary. In fact, it's a bad habit, but I won't run (for cover) every time there are drones, but here they shoot them down right next to us, so I don't sleep well, they shoot.

”

17 yo adolescent boy



COPING MECHANISMS: ADAPTIVE VS MALADAPTIVE

Coping mechanisms fall into two broad categories: adaptive strategies that support mental well-being, and maladaptive strategies that offer temporary relief but contribute to long-term distress. The war has significantly shaped how adolescent boys and young men cope, influencing their emotional regulation, social interactions, and behaviours. Their responses vary based on individual, familial, social, and contextual factors, which serve as risk, protective, or vulnerability factors.

Some young men have found ways to maintain resilience and psychological stability amid the challenges of war. These adaptive coping strategies include seeking emotional support, engaging in **physical activity, volunteering, and using creative or intellectual outlets**. Some young men often turned to **trusted individuals**, such as **family members, romantic partners, or close friends**, for emotional support. Several adolescents reported that their **mothers** serve as their main source of comfort, although they acknowledge that caregivers themselves may be overwhelmed by the ongoing situation. Similarly, **romantic relationships** provide emotional stability for some. *"I go to my mum, tell her that I feel bad, and ask her for advice. But at such a time, you can't always do that, because mum is also a human being, and she can be overwhelmed by all this."* (17-year-old adolescent boy)

Physical activity and social engagement

serve as important stress-relief methods. Some young men reported engaging in sports, exercise, or communal activities to manage stress and stay connected. Service providers also highlight the **role of community engagement**, with one noting, "Sports help, communication with family and friends, work, and helping others through volunteering." Beyond individual coping mechanisms, some young men engage in **volunteer efforts and community support** to channel their stress into meaningful action.

Others resort to maladaptive strategies that, while providing temporary relief, have long-term negative consequences. One of the most concerning maladaptive strategies is **substance use**. Consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs has become increasingly common among young men attempting to escape the stress of war and its consequences. In addition, **escapism and social withdrawal** have emerged as common coping mechanisms. Some adolescents immerse themselves in **video games** to detach from reality. 60% of

adolescent boys and young men who responded to the survey mentioned **playing video games** online as their primary coping strategies when they were stressed or feeling unwell. This behaviour can also serve as a means of regaining a sense of control, practicing problem-solving, and finding achievement in a structured environment. At the same time, **aggression and risky behaviour** have also been reported as common reactions to stress and traumatic experiences. A particularly concerning trend is the rise in **self-harm and suicidal ideation** among young men struggling to cope with the psychological burden of war.

"They are not always ready to express their emotions; they experience everything inside themselves. Because of this, self-harm is very common nowadays." (INGO representative)

2.1.2 Social dynamics and support systems



FAMILY DYNAMICS AND CHANGING ROLES

For some young men, **family remains one of the most stable sources of support**. 70% of respondents felt that their family provides emotional support. However, relationships within households have become increasingly strained due to financial pressures, loss, and the emotional toll of the war. Some adolescent boys reported feeling closer to their parents, especially mothers, as shared hardship has fostered a deeper understanding among families. Young men, however, struggle to communicate their emotions, feeling that their problems would only add to the burdens their caregivers already bear. *"No one really discusses personal problems with mom or dad. Instead, these topics are more often discussed in ongoing relationships with a partner or within friendships."* (22-year-old young man)

Parental expectations have also intensified, particularly regarding responsibilities within the household. Some young men feel the weight of increased pressure, especially those whose fathers are absent due to the war. This pressure extends beyond career aspirations, as some young men are also expected to step up as providers and protectors within their families. A 17-year-old boy shared, "My parents have high hopes for me in terms of becoming a pilot. It is very difficult – I will need to give my absolute best to stay in university and pursue this career, and in this regard, I feel pressure and a lot of responsibility."

Although few participants explicitly spoke about personal loss, this may reflect the sensitive nature of the topic rather than an absence of such experiences. Given the context, it is likely that many adolescent boys and young men have faced family separations, **the absence of relatives engaged in various wartime roles**, or even bereavement. However, as the research was conducted in a way that aimed to avoid re-traumatisation, participants may have chosen not to disclose these experiences. At the same time, many reported that family relationships have become more egalitarian, with **traditional hierarchies shifting due to shared hardships**. The long-term impact of these changes remains uncertain, but they have undoubtedly reshaped family dynamics in ways that will continue to evolve as the war persists.



IMPACT ON FRIENDSHIPS AND PEER NETWORKS

Friendships among young men have undergone significant changes, with **polarisation emerging as a major factor in relational dysfunction**. Political divisions and attitudes toward the war have led to fractured friendships. This divide has caused young men to reassess who they associate with, often resulting in the loss of friendships.

The **displacement of peers has further contributed to social fragmentation**.

With many young men forced to relocate – either internally within Ukraine or abroad – friendship networks have been disrupted. Similarly, those who remain in Ukraine often struggle to maintain friendships with those who have left, as the realities of war create a widening gap in experiences and priorities. "Many people moved to Lviv or Ternopil, and this made it much more difficult to meet. To see each other, you have to spend a whole day waiting for hours at train stations and traveling by train." (22-year-old young man)

Additionally, several young men reported **increased emotional distance in friendships**. The ongoing attacks, frontline advances, and daily bombings – particularly targeting civilian infrastructure – have created a pervasive sense of insecurity. Young men navigate additional pressures related to financial insecurity and the possibility of mobilisation for those over 25. These stressors have led some to withdraw from social interactions. While some have found solace in online communities, others express frustration that digital connections are no substitute for in-person support.

“

They isolate themselves and are afraid to go out. They communicate with each other less than before.

”

26 yo young man



COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

The war has significantly altered young men's sense of community and belonging. While some have found **new support networks through volunteering, military service, or diaspora communities abroad**, others feel a deep sense of

disconnection. Community support structures that traditionally offered a sense of stability have weakened, particularly as **social cohesion has eroded over time.**

Young men who have remained in Ukraine sometimes **reported feeling abandoned by those who left.** Conversely, **those who relocated struggle with identity conflicts and feelings of guilt for being away.** This dynamic has contributed to growing tensions, as some young men **judge others based on their choices.** Despite these challenges, some young men have found **strength in solidarity.** Many have formed informal networks to share information and provide mutual aid.



RELATIONAL STRUGGLES AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Romantic relationships have also been significantly affected by the war, with young men facing increased challenges in forming and maintaining intimate connections. Many relationships have been disrupted by displacement, military service, or differing perspectives. The perception of **emotional vulnerability as weakness** has led to further suppression of feelings among young men, increasing their sense of isolation. *"When men ask for attention are categorized as 'whining,' which is considered unacceptable for men."* (23-year-old young man)

Breakups and divorces have become more common due to prolonged separations and emotional strain. While formal divorce rates are higher among older adults, adolescent boys and young men are affected by the dissolution of their families. A 25-year-old young man described how shifting gender dynamics have created new tensions in heterosexual relationships: *"We are having a very high divorce rate because families were separated. Women have become stronger, they have choices when men don't, and this is causing serious issues inside relationships."* Additionally, the **rapid pace of dating** has increased, as **uncertainty**

about the future makes long-term commitments feel impractical. The war has also affected sexual relationships, with increased stress impacting intimacy.

"We are very fast in what we do - relationships form fast, intimacy happens fast, and breakups happen just as fast. No one can be sure about what is going to be there tomorrow." (25-year-old young man)



GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE & ITS IMPLICATIONS

The war has contributed to an increase in gender-based violence (GBV), as mental health struggles, traumatic events, and substance abuse among men have exacerbated tensions in households and relationships. Recent data highlights a concerning surge in such incidents. According to **UN Women**, cases of domestic violence have increased by 36% since 2023 due to war-related distress. In 2023, the Ukrainian National Police reported a **51% surge in domestic violence cases** during the first five months, with figures reaching 349,355. This alarming rise is attributed to **increased stress, economic hardship, unemployment, and trauma stemming from the war.**

Some men acknowledge that trauma and unaddressed psychological distress can lead to aggressive behaviours. While few openly discuss GBV, mental health workers have noted concern about its occurrence, particularly among individuals struggling with reintegration after military service, where exposure to extreme and potentially traumatic experiences may contribute to heightened tensions.

Women have also reported **shifts in relational dynamics with men**, particularly in romantic relationships. Some noted **an increase in aggression** among men, while others described the burden of emotionally supporting men struggling with psychological effects of war and prolonged stress. One young woman observed,

"Many women whose loved ones are returning from the military are dealing with negative manifestations, previous traumas, and aggressiveness. They need to emotionally support and restore their men."

Service providers confirm the **link between prolonged stress, psychological effects of war, and increased risk of GBV**. A number of organisations working in Ukraine reported a rise in domestic violence cases but note that reporting remains low due to stigma and fear. One service provider explained, *"Mental health problems related to the war provoke aggression, sexual crimes, and violence. Also, depression, alcoholism, and anxiety."*

In response to the growing concerns, local organisations have initiated GBV prevention programs, including awareness campaigns and safe spaces for survivors. Some NGOs have emphasised the need for more **education among boys and young men to prevent cycles of violence**. One organisation stated, *"Only now, because of the war, have people started acknowledging that men can also be subjected to violence. We need to inform boys that services exist, that help is confidential and available."*

2.1.3 Barriers in accessing services & gender norms

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

One of the most frequently cited barriers to accessing MHPSS services is logistical access, particularly **in rural areas and smaller communities**. In all four countries included in the research, the majority of psychological services are **concentrated in urban centres**, leaving men and boys in more remote locations with limited or no access to professional support. While there are areas where social transportation services exist, particularly for individuals with disabilities, they are often insufficient, making it difficult for people to travel for mental health support. Service providers working with people with disabilities highlighted this challenge, emphasising that even when free transport services are available, they are often capped at a limited number of trips. This challenge is particularly pronounced in Ukraine, where war-affected areas face additional barriers due to infrastructure damage and security risks, making physical access to services even more difficult.



One of the lawyers from Ukraine working at the legal centre. © Kasia Strek, Plan International

Financial barriers further restrict accessibility, as many services – particularly those outside humanitarian-funded programs – require payment that many individuals and families cannot afford. While some free services exist, they are often limited in scope or are **not well-publicised**, leading to a **perception that mental health support is out of reach**. The lack of targeted outreach and awareness campaigns reinforces the idea that psychological support is not meant for men or that it is not a viable option for addressing distress.

Service providers working with **military personnel** note that accessing psychological support remains particularly difficult for soldiers. Some are hesitant to seek help due to stigma, fearing it might be perceived as weakness. Others struggle with logistical barriers, as those on active duty may lack time or privacy to attend therapy sessions. The need for tailored, military-specific mental health interventions was emphasised by multiple stakeholders.

Another key issue is the **general lack of information** about where to seek help. Several participants reported not knowing where to turn for psychological support. This challenge is particularly acute in smaller communities, where mental health services may be scarce or poorly advertised. Even when services are available, there is often a **lack of trust in local providers**. In tight-knit communities, where stigma around mental health remains high, individuals may **fear that confidentiality will not be respected**. In some cases, this mistrust extends to concerns that seeking psychological help could have negative social consequences, such as being perceived as weak or incapable.

"Going to a psychologist is not something common here in Ukraine, people perceive this as something strange." (25-year-old young man)

Additionally, **disruption of priorities** present a significant barrier, particularly for men engaged in work, caregiving, or volunteer efforts. Many feel they cannot afford to prioritise mental health care over their daily responsibilities. This issue is compounded by the perception that seeking psychological support requires a substantial time investment, making it a lower priority compared to immediate survival and financial stability.



STIGMA, CULTURAL BARRIERS, AND THE ROLE OF MASCULINITY

The stigma surrounding mental health remains one of the most significant deterrents to men and boys seeking psychological support. Ukrainian society has traditionally framed masculinity around emotional stoicism, self-reliance, and the suppression of vulnerability. Some men internalise the belief that seeking help is a **sign of weakness**, leading them to suppress their struggles rather than address them. A number of young men interviewed acknowledged that their peers and family members viewed therapy as unnecessary or even shameful. 56% of adolescent boys and young men surveyed indicated that the primary barrier to seeking help **was feeling ashamed and embarrassed**.

“

We always try to protect women and children, and you have to be strong. Accordingly, you have to be strong for your loved ones, and you will never tell them what's in your heart. So you have no one to share it with.

”

36-year-old man

This stigma is reinforced through **both informal social interactions and public discourse**. Online spaces, for example, play a significant role in shaping and maintaining harmful gender norms. *"There is some bullying on social media against those who do not serve [in military],"* noted a 35-year-old participant.

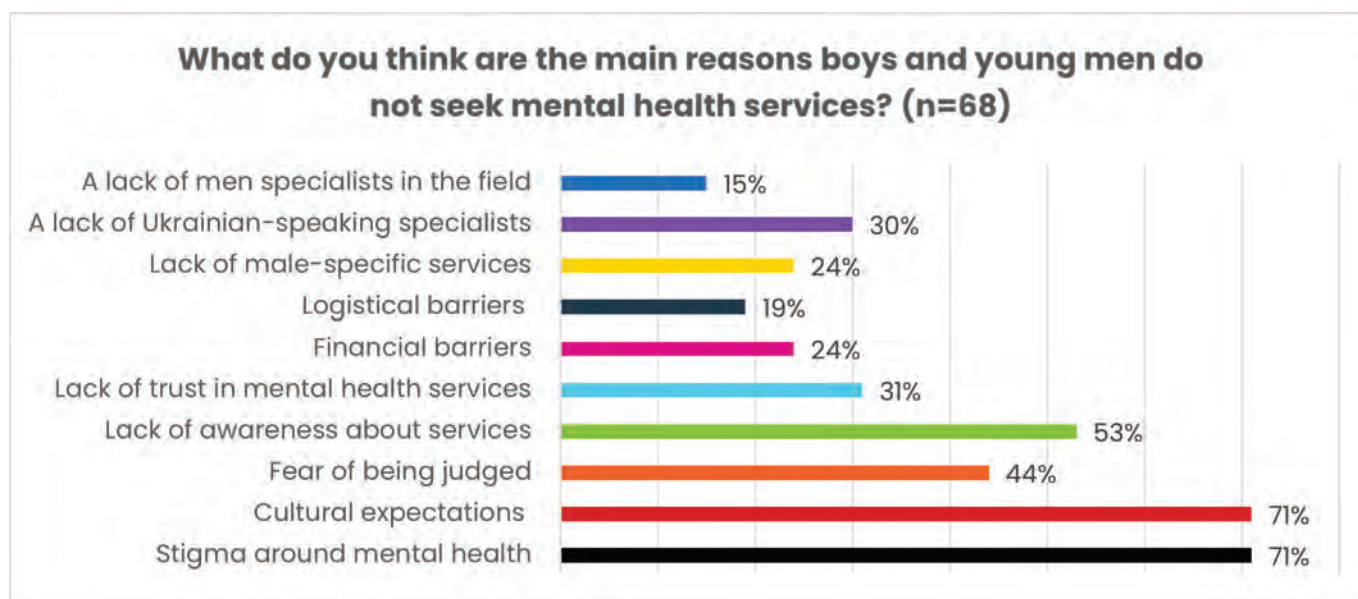
The expectation for men to be unwavering pillars of strength leaves them without spaces where they can safely express their emotions. In some cases, men who seek psychological support or display vulnerability risk social alienation, as traditional masculinity norms discourage emotional openness. Interestingly, some interviewees suggested that **while stigma persists, there has been a gradual shift in attitudes**, particularly among younger generations.

A related cultural barrier is the perception that psychological services are **unnecessary unless a person is experiencing severe distress**. This belief is reinforced by the **historical legacy of mental health care in Ukraine**, which has traditionally been institutional rather than community-based. In the Soviet Union, psychiatric institutions were not only sites of treatment, but also tools of political repression, used to silence dissidents and those deemed nonconforming. This history fostered deep distrust in mental health

services, a sentiment that persists today.

The bar chart below illustrates the primary reasons adolescent boys and young men refrain from seeking mental health services, as reported by service providers in the survey. The most significant barriers identified include **stigma surrounding mental health (71%), cultural expectations (71%), and lack of awareness about available services (53%)**. Additionally, fear of being judged (44%) and lack of trust in mental health services (31%) were notable concerns. Financial (24%) and logistical barriers (19%), along with a shortage of male-specific services (24%) and Ukrainian-speaking specialists (30%), further impede access to care.

One key informant described how mental health services were deeply embedded in the Soviet system, making people wary of seeking professional psychological support. As a result, **mental health struggles are frequently perceived as personal failures rather than responses to distress**, and some men still associate therapy with severe mental illness or institutionalisation. This contributes to a pattern in which men **delay seeking help until their mental health has significantly deteriorated**, at which point their ability to make effective decisions about their care is often compromised.



Ultimately, the combination of deeply ingrained gender norms, social stigma, and structural barriers creates an environment in which men and boys feel pressured to navigate their mental health challenges alone. While some progress is being made, particularly among younger generations, cultural expectations surrounding masculinity continue to limit access to psychological support, reinforcing cycles of silence and emotional suppression.



THE INTERSECTION OF MASCULINITY, MENTAL HEALTH & NAVIGATING EXPECTATIONS

The expectation that men should be **protectors and providers** remains a significant influence on their mental health and willingness to seek support. This belief is shaped by both societal norms and internalised notions of masculinity. The ongoing war places **pressure on young men to contribute in various ways, whether through military service for those over 25, volunteer efforts, or supporting their families**. Some interviewees described feeling an implicit expectation to prioritise their perceived duty to their country over their personal well-being. Concerns about military mobilisation for those over 25 have also emerged as a factor influencing young men's decision-making, with some limiting their presence in public spaces to avoid potential interactions with enlistment officers.

Beyond formal military obligations, young men also experience **social expectations from their peers**. The expectation to participate in the Armed Forces does not only affect decision-making – it also has emotional consequences, as men grapple with **guilt, fear, and internal conflict about their roles in the war**. This pressure often leads them to suppress their own struggles, reinforcing the belief that prioritising mental health is unnecessary.

Survey responses reinforce the societal expectations on boys and young men during wartime. **65% feel pressured to be strong and resilient**, while 53% believe they must protect their family and others. 41% feel the need to provide financial support, and 30% mentioned the expectation to hide their emotions. Additionally, 55% felt obligated to join the army or take on other roles to protect their country.

This tension between societal expectations and personal agency is evident in both large-scale decisions and everyday interactions. Several adolescent boys reflected on the ways in which masculinity norms shape their behaviour. One participant shared an anecdote about how carrying a plush capybara toy led to comments from girls about it being "unmanly," highlighting how even small acts of self-expression can be policed through rigid gender norms. Another young man recounted how, during his involvement with an organisation, he was met with disbelief when he stated that he did not intend to enlist in the military. These experiences illustrate how deeply entrenched gender norms **dictate not only career and life choices but also seemingly trivial aspects of daily life**.

The emotional toll of these expectations is significant. While some young men indicated that they feel comfortable expressing vulnerability in specific settings – such as with a psychologist or among close friends – many acknowledged that suppressing emotions is still the norm. Several interviewees noted that men often turn to substance use as a coping mechanism, with alcohol and cannabis use becoming more prevalent ways to manage stress and avoid confronting deeper emotional struggles.

Additionally, the expectation that men should be **self-sufficient and unwavering in their resilience** extends beyond the battlefield. Some young men feel a **profound sense of responsibility toward their families and communities**, believing

that they must provide financial and emotional support despite their own struggles. The idea that "a man must be strong for his loved ones" discourages many from acknowledging their own vulnerabilities. This internalised expectation isolates men further, making it even more difficult for them to reach out for support.



GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY & RISKS

Living in an active war zone presents constant security risks for both men and women, with air raid alarms, missile strikes, and ongoing shelling shaping daily life. The unpredictability of attacks and the persistent exposure to violence create significant psychological distress, forcing individuals to navigate survival under extreme uncertainty. While men and women face different security risks during the war, **the way these risks are perceived and experienced is also influenced by gender norms**. Some men feel a sense of scrutiny regarding their role in society, with some fearing social repercussions if they do not conform to traditional expectations. Meanwhile, women face heightened risks of GBV, particularly in situations of displacement and insecurity.

One adolescent boy shared an experience that underscores these gendered dynamics: *"We were riding in an elevator with a girl who was smaller than me, so she took the key in her hands so that she could protect herself - in her fist. But I'm sympathetic to that because men have earned that reputation."* (17-year-old adolescent boy) This anecdote reflects an acute awareness among young men that women often perceive them as potential threats – a reality shaped by broader societal patterns of violence and insecurity.

2.1.4 Military mobilisation & stress factors

Having a military mobilisation policy during wartime is a standard practice and a necessary component of national defence. As in many countries with such policies, young men over 25 in Ukraine experience heightened stress and uncertainty related to potential military service, influencing their daily routines and mental well-being. Some grapple with feelings of uncertainty, fear, and pressure from both societal expectations and the broader realities of war. Beyond concerns about military service for those over 25, young men in Ukraine are living in **active war zones, facing daily air raid sirens, missile strikes, and ongoing shelling. The persistent threat of attacks heightens anxiety and contributes to a sense of constant danger** and instability.

Mental health service providers indicate that the **transition from civilian to military life is often abrupt, with many experiencing psychological distress due to prolonged exposure to combat**, separation from family, and the immense responsibility of defending their country.

For some young men over 25, concerns surrounding mobilisation have become a persistent source of stress, influencing their daily routines and movement. As one 36-year-old man shared, *"There is sometimes judgment from friends, and of course, some stress"*.

Some men who are eligible for military mobilisation speak of adjusting their daily behaviours to avoid interactions with military enlistment officers. In some cities, it has been reported that police patrols stop men on the streets and issue summonses for military registration. A 22-year-old young man highlighted how this reality influences even basic decisions like choosing transportation routes. Uncertainty surrounding mobilisation has led some to limit their presence in public spaces, which, in turn, affects their access to social and professional opportunities. For some, concerns about potential enlistment have

made them hesitant to seek employment, as formal work may require registration that could increase the likelihood of receiving a mobilisation notice.

The ongoing war has contributed to **social tensions between those serving in the military and those remaining civilians**.

While many men have enlisted voluntarily, others have sought deferments through legal deferrals, financial means, or leaving the country. This divergence has, in some cases, resulted in tensions not just between soldiers and civilians but also within families. For households that have lost a family member in combat, the grief and sacrifice may contribute to feelings of frustration toward those whose male relatives have not served, further deepening societal divisions.

This perception reveals **a complex and evolving hierarchy of masculinity**, where men are expected to contribute to the war effort in some form – whether through direct combat or financial and logistical support. Men who do not participate may feel scrutinised or judged by their communities.

Some young men reported experiencing persistent anxiety, feelings of helplessness, and difficulty planning for the future. A national hotline reported an increase in self-harm cases among young men seeking to avoid mobilisation. For adolescents and young adults, the war has significantly altered their outlook on life and personal ambitions. One member of a research institute observed a phenomenon they termed “war fatigue.” The unrelenting exposure to war – hearing explosions, witnessing destruction, and enduring repeated air raid alerts – creates chronic psychological strain.

Some young men who were once motivated to contribute are now reevaluating their options, seeking ways to maintain stability amidst ongoing uncertainty. For some, this means postponing education, delaying career plans, or even considering emigration. Several express concerns related to the

uncertainty of their career paths, fearing that any plans they make could be upended.

This uncertainty affects not just young men themselves but also their families. Mothers play a significant role in influencing their sons’ decisions about mobilisation:

“Mothers are very scared of their sons being conscripted and put pressure within the family.” (representative of an INGO)

The war has also intensified risks in the digital sphere, with online harassment becoming a common stress factor. A number of young men reported encountering bullying from individuals they identify as Russian users in online spaces, while others have noted an increase in targeted misinformation. Another young man noted that avoiding confrontation online has become a necessary survival tactic. Beyond online harassment, **the digital space serves as a constant reminder of the war with the real-time alerts about missile strikes and casualties**.

2.1.5 Education & employment



ACCESS TO EDUCATION

The education system in Ukraine has been significantly affected by the war, with many students experiencing periods of online and hybrid learning due to safety concerns and displacement. Some schools have managed to maintain a structured approach, blending online and in-person classes to accommodate students both inside Ukraine and abroad.

Despite these efforts, **learning disruptions** remain a significant issue. Some students reported falling behind academically, particularly during transitions between online and offline education. Lack of motivation and difficulty concentrating were frequently cited issues. 15 and 16-year-old students noted how the initial period of war, coupled with the earlier

COVID-19 lockdowns, negatively impacted their academic performance. *“When you go to school, you feel much better about learning” (15-year-old adolescent boy)*

Several students struggle to maintain focus and motivation amid the instability of war. Some interviewees expressed how anxiety, stress, and uncertainty about the future have made it difficult to engage with academic work. Additionally, some university students expressed concerns about the increasing militarisation of student life. *“I would prefer to immerse myself in scientific activities, in research (...) the combination of educational process with militarisation prevents me from learning, building and planning a future such as applying for a postgraduate program” (22-year-old male student)*

“

I study full-time, but my anxiety gets in the way, and we also study on Saturdays, only online. The 10th grade was fine, but in the 11th grade, I had a lot of tutors, plus anxiety, a lot of things affect you during the war. It's hard at the university too, but I'm coping.

”

18 yo young man



Bright classroom ready for classes at the “Let’s go” children centre in Kyiv.
Photo © Mishchenko Mikhailo, Plan International



SHIFTING EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND CAREER PLANS

The war has influenced how young men perceive their future careers, often reinforcing a sense of urgency to acquire practical skills that can be applied either in Ukraine or abroad. Some developed a growing interest in professions related to security, technology, or international opportunities. However, finding stable employment has become increasingly difficult, not just because of economic instability but also military mobilisation concerns for those over 25. Interviewees noted that some employers hesitate to hire young men without military deferrals, leading some to avoid formal employment altogether.

This structural barrier has pushed some young men into **informal or freelance work**, sometimes in roles that do not align with their professional aspirations. Some are also opting for entrepreneurship or online work to maintain some level of stability.

Despite the many obstacles, **young people in Ukraine remain resilient and continue to pursue education and career paths**. However, the war has introduced a significant degree of uncertainty, forcing them to rethink traditional trajectories and explore alternative opportunities. The desire for stability, security, and professional fulfilment remains, but achieving these goals has become more complex. For many young men, the challenge is not only to adapt to the present but also to envision a future where they can thrive – whether within Ukraine or beyond its borders.

2.1.6 Effectiveness of MHPSS interventions & gaps



THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES AND COMMUNITY-BASED SUPPORT

MHPSS interventions in Ukraine have been implemented through various therapeutic approaches and community-based support mechanisms. The therapeutic methods and service delivery formats mentioned by NGOs and mental health service providers in this research include **psychological first aid (PFA), cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), trauma-focused CBT, Gestalt, psychodrama, art therapy, family counselling, group therapy, and mobile teams providing counselling services**. These approaches have been employed to address processing of traumatic experiences, anxiety, depressive symptoms, coping mechanisms, and stress-related disorders in adolescents and young men affected by the escalation of war.

Community-based support plays a vital role in MHPSS services, particularly in settings where formal psychological services are either unavailable or inaccessible. **Peer-to-peer support groups, veteran support programs, and informal social networks** provide much-needed psychosocial support. Mobile teams have also played a crucial role in reaching displaced populations and individuals in remote areas. These teams offer psychosocial support in displacement centres, hospitals, and other settings where people affected by war seek assistance. **Family counselling** is another key aspect of MHPSS interventions, especially in helping parents support their children's emotional well-being. Psychologists work with parents to educate them on emotional regulation and mental health needs.

Additionally, specialised psychological support for veterans has been developed to address trauma and reintegration challenges. According to mental health service providers, some veterans prefer

working with **psychologists who have military experience**. **Confidentiality** is particularly crucial for men and adolescent boys seeking psychological support. Many are hesitant to openly access services due to stigma and societal expectations around masculinity. Anonymous services, such as hotlines, have been an essential resource.



CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION

Despite the existence of various MHPSS interventions, multiple challenges hinder their effective implementation. A primary issue is the lack of accessibility to specialised professionals. Many psychologists and psychiatrists are concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural and war-affected regions underserved. *"Although there are psychologists and psychiatrists in Ukraine, they're difficult to find. One of the biggest challenges is not only the recruitment but also the training. They are not very well equipped when it comes to humanitarian interventions."* (INGO representative)

Furthermore, **adolescence remains one of the most neglected age groups in MHPSS programming**. As one informant pointed out: *"Adolescence has always been one of the dropped age groups. You get the response where you're dealing with children and the response where you're dealing with adults, but adolescents are always overlooked."* (mental health service provider)

The ongoing security situation presents additional challenges. Air raids, displacement, and infrastructural destruction disrupt the continuity of care, making it difficult to maintain long-term psychological support programs.



COLLABORATION ACROSS THE ECOSYSTEM

Collaboration between national and international organisations, government

agencies, and community-based initiatives plays a crucial role in delivering MHPSS services effectively. However, multiple challenges persist in ensuring a coordinated response, particularly when it comes to reaching vulnerable populations, including adolescent boys and men.

A key issue is the lack of trust in government services, as noted by some service providers. Many organisations prefer to work independently or in partnership with INGOs rather than with state institutions, which are often perceived as bureaucratic and slow to respond. Additionally, some organisations experience difficulties in gaining approval to operate within educational settings, due to administrative barriers.

On a positive note, coordination through the MHPSS technical working groups and protection clusters has facilitated a level of **systemic collaboration**. These platforms allow organisations to share resources and coordinate referrals. However, challenges remain in ensuring a streamlined and comprehensive referral system. *"We don't know who we can refer to. Because of social mistrust, not everybody believes in or trusts these services. (...) There is also a short-term nature to many MHPSS programs, which contributes to mistrust."* (INGO representative)



MHPSS SERVICE MAPPING

Service mapping has been identified as an essential tool for improving MHPSS accessibility and referrals. Various platforms have been developed to address gaps in coordination, yet service availability remains inconsistent across regions. The **UNHCR MHPSS service mapping** provides an extensive list of available services, but there are challenges in keeping the information updated and ensuring that all service providers are included, especially considering a number of MHPSS services have been short term in nature and dependant on project cycle funding.

Additionally, the ["How are you?"](#) platform, initiated by Ukraine's First Lady, has improved awareness and access to mental health services. However, the service uptake among men and adolescent boys remains significantly lower than among women, reflecting broader barriers to mental health engagement within this group.

Regional differences further complicate access to services. In frontline areas, short-term emergency interventions are prioritised due to ongoing hostilities, whereas in western Ukraine, longer-term resilience-building programs have been more feasible. *"You need to take into consideration that the closer you are to the front line, the shorter the interventions will be. The further west, you have an opportunity for longer-term interventions"* (INGO representative)

Another significant gap is the **lack of specialised services for adolescent boys and young men**, particularly in rural and war-affected areas. While there are initiatives targeting children and adults, adolescent boys often fall between the cracks. Many service providers reported difficulties in identifying appropriate referral pathways for this group, and some even avoid working with them due to a lack of training or resources.

One of the most persistent challenges in MHPSS implementation is the **low uptake of services among men and adolescent boys**. Many young men are hesitant to access MHPSS, with stigma playing a significant role, alongside other barriers. A service provider noted: *"They're not coming. They are literally rare visitors. Half of them are afraid to leave the house. A quarter are already conscripted into the army. Some have left before the war and never came back."* (mental health service provider)

Another major concern is **confidentiality**. Many adolescent boys and men are reluctant to seek mental health support in settings where they may be recognised. This is particularly relevant in small

communities, where privacy is difficult to maintain. Online services and mental health hotlines have proven to be more effective in reaching this group, as highlighted by an INGO representative.

Successful approaches to increasing male engagement include **peer-to-peer support groups, anonymous helplines, and mobile psychosocial support teams that reach out to rural or hard-to reach communities**. Additionally, some organisations have noted that integrating mental health support into vocational training programs or employment services has been an effective way to engage young men in MHPSS services without directly labelling them as mental health interventions.

“

Confidentiality is key because many young men are hesitant to openly seek support. This is why online and hotline-based interventions have been particularly effective.

”

INGO representative

2.1.7 Minority & intersectional experiences

The mental health needs of adolescent boys and young men in Ukraine is shaped by multiple intersecting factors, including ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and socioeconomic status. These factors influence both the accessibility of MHPSS services and the way young men perceive and engage with mental health support.

While ethnicity is not generally perceived as a major barrier to accessing mental health services in Ukraine, specific groups – such as the Roma community – face significant obstacles. Some Roma individuals lack official documentation,

limiting their access to healthcare, education, and employment. This structural exclusion exacerbates mental health vulnerabilities and creates barriers to seeking support.

Additionally, IDPs from ethnic minority backgrounds face compounded challenges due to displacement, economic instability, and social stigma. In western Ukraine, where the Roma population is more concentrated, organisations struggle to deliver outreach services due to distrust in institutional support structures. Despite these challenges, some initiatives, such as community-based interventions and mobile psychosocial support teams, have improved accessibility for ethnic minorities. However, these efforts remain fragmented, and there is no standardised approach to ensuring culturally sensitive care.

LGBTQIA+ youth continue to experience stigma and discrimination, which act as barriers to seeking mental health support. While some service providers argue that attitudes have improved since the escalation of war, others highlight ongoing challenges. Young men who are part of the community are often reluctant to seek support due to fears of discrimination from both peers and mental health professionals. Some psychologists and counsellors are not adequately trained to work with LGBTQIA+ individuals, reinforcing hesitancy to engage with services. Efforts to integrate LGBTQIA+ sensitivity into mental health services have been sporadic. Some NGOs offer safe spaces and online support groups, which have proven more accessible and confidential. However, there remains a

“

Some specialists are trained to work with LGBTQIA+ youth, but many are not. This creates a gap in inclusive MHPSS services.

”

mental health service provider

pressing need for targeted outreach and professional training to ensure inclusive care. Increased understanding of the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ youth – such as heightened risks of social isolation, family rejection, and discrimination – would help bridge the gap between available services and those in need of support.

Young men with disabilities face distinct challenges in accessing mental health services. Physical barriers, a lack of specialised providers, and social stigma contribute to their exclusion. *“Boys with physical disabilities can become targets of bullying, ridicule, or humiliation. At this age, they are very sensitive to peer perception, which can lead to self-esteem issues and social withdrawal.”* (research institute representative)

Mental health support for individuals with disabilities is often limited by resource constraints and inadequate training among professionals. While some organisations offer tailored services, these are not widely available, particularly in rural and frontline areas.

“When working with young men with disabilities, we need to consider accessibility, communication methods, and individualized support. Many services are designed for the general population, which excludes those with specific needs.” (mental health service provider)

2.1.8 Visions for the future



YOUTH ASPIRATIONS

The responses from young men and adolescent boys in Ukraine reveal a diverse range of perspectives regarding their future and well-being. **84% of respondents** of the surveys (adolescent boys and young men) shared that **either their goals have changed due to the war or that they are uncertain** about their plans for the future. Some participants expressed uncertainty, while others had

concrete suggestions for systemic improvements that could support mental health and psychosocial well-being.

A recurrent theme among participants was the need for **mental health support** to be more visible and accessible. Some emphasised the importance of **public awareness campaigns** that normalise seeking psychological help. A 17-year-old participant noted that existing advertisements often depict "soft men" seeking help, which may not resonate with those who perceive themselves as traditionally masculine. He suggested a reframing of messaging to ensure that men from different backgrounds and personalities see themselves represented. Another participant highlighted the **need for anti-suicide campaigns**, crisis helplines, and public messaging that reduces stigma.

Several young men emphasised **the role of psychoeducation and resilience-building programs**. A 22-year-old participant stressed the importance of psychoeducation and discussions led by psychologists. He noted that exposure to different perspectives and therapeutic approaches could help young men reshape their understanding of themselves and their relationships. Other participants underscored the **importance of sports, physical activity, and structured programming** in supporting well-being.

They suggested that initiatives focused on sports clubs and training camps could play a role in strengthening resilience and social cohesion. A few respondents pointed to **religious institutions** as a potential support system, advocating for a stronger role of church communities in mental health support and social integration.

In contrast, some young men expressed a lack of clarity about the future, with several respondents saying they did not know what a supportive future would look like. The uncertainty of war and the continued threat of mobilisation added layers of stress and unpredictability to their long-term planning.

2.2 ROMANIA

2.2.1 Mental health needs & well-being

The early maturing of adolescent boys and young men has been one of the most significant impacts of displacement to Romania, forcing many to transition abruptly from childhood to adulthood in a foreign country. While Romania has provided safety, it remains a locale of displacement rather than home. The experience of displacement has led many to take on responsibilities beyond their years, supporting their mothers and siblings financially. Beyond contributing to household income, they feel a strong sense of protectiveness toward their families, often stepping in to help with daily tasks. *"Now I work to help my family with money because I managed to learn some Romanian quickly. My mother would have no way to take care of my siblings and work". "I don't have as much free time as I used to, now I'm staying to learn English to go to a country in Europe and survive there".*

Although early maturation is often perceived as a source of stress, for some, it has also brought newfound opportunities: *"We are freer," "We can make decisions about ourselves," "We can go to colleges we would not have had access to before," "We can discuss our sex life more freely," "We can go to clubs," "We can have our own money," "We can move around Europe."* However, for others, this transformation has had a negative impact, as they navigate the challenges of growing up away from home. Some expressed feelings of isolation, increased familial responsibility, and frustration over their inability to return and fight for their country: *"We don't have as many friends," "We are aware that we have more responsibilities toward our families," "We are frustrated that even though we are adults, we can't go and fight for our country."*

The disruption of daily routines brought about a range of emotions, including anxiety, mental discomfort, and fear. A 19-year-old young man described the contrast between his life before and after displacement: *"Before the war, I used to go for walks with friends and neighbours, I did a lot of sports and went to many clubs with colleagues and friends. Since coming to Romania, I haven't been able to join sports clubs or participate in any other activities."* Most respondents echoed this sentiment, highlighting that their access to sports and recreational activities in Romania has been significantly reduced compared to what they had in Ukraine.

Many of the adolescent boys and young men who participated in the study reported experiencing persistent **physical and mental fatigue** since arriving in Romania. Several factors contribute to this exhaustion. Some struggle with the language barrier, expending significant effort to learn Romanian, while others balance school with multiple NGO-organised activities. Additionally, ongoing stress and concern about the situation in Ukraine weigh heavily on their mental well-being. For some, fatigue stems from the demands of studying or working, leading to heightened stress levels. Others attribute their exhaustion to difficulties in securing quality rest, either due to persistent worries or inadequate living conditions.

Some adolescent boys and young people expressed difficulty in coming to terms with the prolonged nature of the war, describing a deep sense of **uprootedness**. As time passes, many have come to realise the extent of their separation from their home country and the uncertainty of their future, which has taken a toll on their emotional well-being. One 15-year-old participant shared, "I thought I was coming to Romania for a few weeks, not more than three years. This makes me despair sometimes, lose hope, and puts me into depression."

Managing emotions and empowerment: Since arriving in Romania, adolescent boys

and young men have taken on increased responsibilities and concerns, contributing to a sense of premature maturity. In Ukraine, their primary focus was on school or everyday choices, while their parents managed broader family concerns. Now, they find themselves preoccupied with the situation in Ukraine, experiencing anxiety for the safety of their parents, grandparents, and extended family members who remained behind.

In addition to these emotional burdens, several adolescent boys have assumed new responsibilities, seeking ways to support their mothers and families in Romania – whether by contributing financially or ensuring the well-being of their siblings. Some have rapidly acquired Romanian language skills to assist their mothers in navigating essential services, including interactions with authorities, healthcare professionals, and other service providers. As a result, many have taken on the role of translators for their parents and other displaced Ukrainians, further highlighting the shift in their familial responsibilities.

Service providers observed that boys from Ukraine appeared to take on more responsibilities compared to their peers in Romania. The onset of war forced many to step into supportive roles within their families. While this sense of responsibility fostered maturity, it also contributed to emotional withdrawal, making them less likely to seek help or openly discuss their struggles.

One of the mental health service providers interviewed noted that some Ukrainians may experience internal conflict due to their political beliefs and personal principles. Many expressed feelings of guilt for various reasons. Some struggled with the reality that they could not fight on the front lines due to personal constraints, while others, such as sailors, remained in Romania as their roles were deemed critical to Ukraine's economy. Despite their contributions, they often felt conflicted, believing that they were not doing enough compared to those actively engaged in

combat.

A young man who turned 18 in Romania expressed a strong desire to join the army in the front lines, but his parents opposed this decision. Following this disagreement, he became increasingly withdrawn, and professionals working with him observed changes in his mood and behaviour, identifying possible signs of depression. While it is difficult to determine whether this specific conflict was the sole cause of his distress, it was noted as a significant contributing factor within the broader context of war-related stressors and emotional strain.

Several examples were provided in which the desires and decisions of children and young people diverged from those of their parents, leading to tensions within families. These situations often resulted in conflict, anxiety, isolation, and emotional stress.



COPING MECHANISMS: ADAPTIVE VS MALADAPTIVE

Art and various personal skills, including communication, adaptability, autonomy, responsibility, and social connection, have played a crucial role in helping respondents adjust to their new environment. These skills not only facilitated self-expression but also provided a means for young people to process their emotions and experiences. Additionally, friendships formed within the Ukrainian community have significantly contributed to their sense of belonging and adaptation.

Sport was frequently highlighted as an essential aspect of young people's lives, serving as both a coping mechanism and a key part of their routine. Many adolescents and young men described sports as a vital outlet for stress relief and maintaining a sense of normalcy. However, both teenagers and young adults in Romania reported limited access to sports activities, clubs, and organised programs. Some also expressed concerns about participating in team sports due to language barriers,

leading them to consider individual sports as a more accessible alternative.

Some adolescent boys and young men noted that they had observed peers engaging in increased **alcohol consumption, substance use**, or spending **excessive time online**, whether on social media, gaming platforms, or their phones. In Romania, minors are reportedly able to purchase and access alcohol, despite legal restrictions. Some adolescents shared concerns that they had been offered banned substances by Romanian peers, with some feeling pressured or misled into experimenting with drugs.

Additionally, service providers highlighted an increase in risky behaviours among adolescents and young men, including substance use, alcohol consumption, and excessive engagement with online platforms. Economic stress, displacement, exposure to distressing news, and limited access to mental health support may contribute to these coping mechanisms. While young people themselves may not always recognise the potential harm of these behaviours, service providers interviewed for this study noted that there is a clear need for targeted support and interventions.

Aggression: Some adolescent boys and young men struggled with emotional regulation in the early stages of displacement. Service providers observed that some exhibited frustration, anger, or withdrawal, at times leading to outbursts or refusal to engage with others. Young women noted that some Ukrainian boys have exhibited heightened aggression or negative behaviour toward them, which they attributed to the psychological strain of the war, displacement, and related challenges experienced in Romania.

Social isolation: Many focus group participants shared that, for a long time, they preferred to withdraw from both the Romanian and Ukrainian community. They only recently began to socialise more. They spent much of their time online, staying

connected with family and friends in Ukraine. According to participants, this isolation was driven by a range of factors, including self-reported depression, anxiety, mistrust, feelings of insecurity, guilt over not being able to support their country or family, and anger.

However, physical isolation from their immediate surroundings did not always equate to complete social isolation. Some young people, unfamiliar with anyone in Romania, chose to limit in-person interactions while maintaining close online connections with their families and communities in Ukraine. Others reported feeling disconnected from their loved ones at home, as they had not been able to return to Ukraine or see their relatives for more than two years.

2.2.2 Social dynamics and support systems



CONNECTION WITH FAMILY

The experience of displacement has significantly disrupted family dynamics for adolescent boys and young men, particularly in cases where families were forcibly separated. Many young people reported that the war has strained relationships with fathers who remained in Ukraine, either due to military service or pre-existing family tensions that limited contact even before the war. Others described increased emotional distress due to prolonged separation from their extended families. While some felt their family bonds had strengthened through shared hardship, others experienced heightened anxiety and uncertainty, particularly a deep fear of losing family members.

Beyond immediate family challenges, a number of adolescent boys and young men feel **judged by relatives who remained in Ukraine**, such as uncles, aunts, cousins, or grandparents. This social pressure discourages them from openly discussing

their experiences in Romania, fearing that acknowledging any sense of stability or well-being might be seen as disloyal. *"The feeling of guilt is very well maintained by our culture. We are taught that we must be unhappy, that it's not good to enjoy ourselves because others are suffering."* (17-year-old adolescent boy)

The pressure to minimise one's well-being is also evident in **online interactions**, where some youth men **avoid posting photos or updates** about their lives in Romania. Those whose fathers relocated with them while other male relatives remained in Ukraine reported even greater scrutiny. These pressures contribute to **increased emotional strain, guilt, and isolation**, impacting the mental well-being of displaced adolescent boys and young men, as confirmed by girls as well.

"Grandma no longer talks to us; for dad, everything is fine here in Romania, while my uncle, my father's brother, is at the front. She didn't even congratulate us on our birthday." (15-year-old, adolescent girl)



CONNECTION WITH PETS

For many children and young people, one of the most emotionally distressing aspects of displacement has been the inability to bring their pets with them to Romania. In addition to the broader hardships of war, this loss has had a significant emotional impact. A key challenge is that rental accommodations in Romania often do not allow pets, which has been a source of distress for many. Only a small number of young people were able to bring their pets with them, while others were forced to leave them behind due to logistical constraints such as lack of space, financial limitations, or unfeasible travel conditions at the time of their departure. As one participant shared: *"I liked walking with my dog in the forest; those walks calmed me a lot and brought me a lot of joy. I became depressed because I could not take him with me; I miss him every day, and unfortunately, I worry about his life."*



ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Discussions about intimate relationships remain largely confined to peer groups, as topics related to sexual identity and relationships are still considered taboo within Ukrainian families. Some adolescents noted that while Romania is perceived as more tolerant toward LGBTQIA+ individuals, many still do not feel comfortable openly discussing their identities. *"Regarding sexual identity, this topic is even more delicate to discuss with parents and especially in the Ukrainian community."* (16-year-old adolescent boy)

Adolescent girls and young women reported mixed experiences in their interactions with Ukrainian young men in Romania. Some described them as more withdrawn or emotionally distant due to stress and displacement, while others noted a shift in gender dynamics, with some young men becoming more respectful in their interactions.



CONNECTION WITH UKRAINE

Many displaced adolescents have experienced a disruption in their social connections. While some continue to maintain contact with friends and classmates in Ukraine through online platforms, others have lost touch entirely, particularly with neighbours and peers who remained in Ukraine or relocated to different regions and countries.

For those attending online Ukrainian schools, social networks provide a means of staying in touch with classmates, though discussions are often limited to academic topics. In Romania, the majority of young people reported having formed new friendships, primarily with other Ukrainian peers they meet at school, NGO activities, or within their residential centres. However, some described feelings of isolation, particularly in the early stages of displacement. One young man reflected on

the emotional toll of separation:

“

Unfortunately for me, leaving Ukraine also meant leaving my girlfriend and that made me very sad. For a year and a half, I didn't want to talk to anyone, I didn't have any motivation and preferred to isolate myself. Now I'm better and I realise that it's important to go out and meet new people

”

24-year-old young man

Additionally, some young men noted tensions in their relationships with those who remained in Ukraine. One participant shared that friends occasionally expressed resentment toward those who left, perceiving them as “cowards” for having fled the country. These dynamics have added complexity to maintaining cross-border friendships.



CONNECTION WITH THE HOST COMMUNITY & INTEGRATION

Several participants expressed feeling welcomed in Romania, often noting that they had not expected such empathy, support, and friendship. Some young people reported feeling safer in Romania than in other countries, describing how they can ride their bikes in the evening without concern and use public transportation without fear of incidents. While some still maintain connections with friends in Ukraine, others have built new social circles exclusively in Romania.

For many adolescents, **community hubs** have become key spaces for social interaction, yet participants emphasised the need for more hubs specifically designed for young people – particularly those

offering free internet access. Despite their interest in youth clubs, educational hubs, and sports programs, they reported limited access to such opportunities. While NGOs have primarily focused on supporting children and the elderly, young people felt that fewer tailored programs – such as language courses or professional training – were available to meet their needs.

Respondents reflected on their displacement as both a challenge and an opportunity. Several young people stated that they do not intend to return to Ukraine for various reasons: some wish to avoid military involvement, others see greater economic and educational opportunities in Romania, and some are reluctant to undergo another major transition. *“I cannot go back to Ukraine. I don't want to lose what I've done and got. Maybe before the war I felt better in Ukraine but now it's better here”.* (26-year-old, young man)

Many young people expressed a strong desire to find employment and gain financial independence. Some aim to rent apartments or even invest in property, though a lack of information about legal restrictions has been discouraging. As Romanian law does not currently allow non-citizens to purchase property or vehicles, some respondents felt uncertain about their long-term financial plans.

Service providers noted that younger children tend to adapt more easily to displacement, whereas adolescents face additional challenges due to the emotional and social complexities of their developmental stage. Adolescence involves significant personal transformations, integration into peer groups, and evolving family dynamics, all of which are disrupted by forced migration.

Many participants formed new friendships, primarily with fellow Ukrainian refugees, while some connected with Romanian youth. However, language barriers remain a key challenge, making social integration difficult. Many adolescents found it easier to bond with Moldovan peers due to linguistic and cultural similarities, while

others avoided social interactions out of concern about being misunderstood.

Emotionally, many young people initially struggled with shock, sadness, and reluctance to engage in activities. Over time, however, they have become more open to participating in events – both with other Ukrainians and members of the Romanian community.

2.2.3 Barriers in accessing services & their intersections with gender norms

Refugees from Ukraine face multiple interlinked barriers to integration, which include social, structural, financial, cultural, and informational obstacles.

Social barriers: Among the most frequently reported challenges are **discrimination, stigmatisation, and limited social networks**. Initially, many refugees felt welcomed in Romania, but after three years, there is a perceived decline in acceptance. Both adolescents and adults reported difficulties in forming connections with the local population, attributing this not only to community attitudes but also to their preference for socialising within Ukrainian circles. Additionally, some refugees feel they are viewed negatively due to stereotypes associated with their ethnicity or refugee status.

In regard to **structural barriers**, language barriers are often noted by adolescent boys and young men. Compared to younger children, who tend to acquire new languages more quickly, adolescents and adults struggle with Romanian, complicating their integration into schools and the wider community. The need for translation when accessing psychological support further discourages service use, as many are reluctant to involve a third party interpreter in discussions about their mental health. Language difficulties also impede access to healthcare, education, and social services.

A lack of sufficient services remains a critical structural barrier. Even prior to the refugee crisis, Romania faced shortages in key social services, and as international organisations scale back humanitarian funding, available resources for refugees are further constrained. Many displaced individuals reported difficulty in securing adequate support, particularly those in vulnerable situations.

Financial barriers due to the high cost of private mental health services presents another significant challenge. With limited NGO funding to cover psychological support, many refugees find it financially impossible to access mental health services, as private consultations can exceed €50 per session.

Cultural and personal barriers also influence access. Professionals and focus group participants noted that psychological support in Ukraine is still associated with stigma, often being equated with psychiatric treatment. As a result, many individuals hesitate to seek help, preferring to manage their psychological distress independently. While some recognise symptoms of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, or depression and express a willingness to discuss them, others choose to suppress their emotions due to ingrained cultural norms.

A widespread **lack of awareness and information** about available services further limits access. Many refugees are unaware of their rights in Romania or how to seek psychosocial support, integration assistance, or legal aid related to asylum, citizenship, or temporary protection. Without clear guidance, they struggle to navigate the systems in place, further exacerbating barriers to accessing essential services.



MASCULINITY AND GENDER EXPECTATIONS

In the focus groups, many adolescent boys and young men expressed a sense of reluctance or "shame" when discussing

gender expectations. Some described feeling that they should not complain about their situation, as they are in relative safety while others remained in Ukraine. This study highlights the internal conflict some boys and men experience when unable to conform to traditional masculine roles, particularly those related to being protectors and defenders of their country.

One of the main reasons many boys and young men do not seek psychological support is the belief that they must handle their struggles independently to uphold societal expectations of masculinity.

“

These are my problems. I have to solve them by myself.

”

15-year-old adolescent boy

Many fear burdening their mothers, who already face significant challenges, and do not want to appear incapable of fulfilling their expected role as family protectors.

The result of the analysis shows that it is considered that being a man in Ukraine means ensuring the family's material well-being, protecting the family and fighting for the country if necessary. In the Ukrainian society, masculinity is closely linked to financial provision, family protection, and, if necessary, military service. Some adolescent boys also believe it is their responsibility to protect girls.

For younger siblings, this protective instinct extends to shielding them from potential dangers in the host country, such as bullying, discrimination, or aggression. Professionals observed that many boys attempt to project bravery, avoiding expressions of vulnerability. However, the effects of emotional suppression were evident, as many preferred to confide in

peers rather than family members or professionals. This reluctance to seek help was reinforced by stigma around mental health services. *"Here you are considered crazy if you see a psychologist."* (17-year-old adolescent boy)

Service providers found that engaging young people in **group activities** was an effective way to build trust. Once a rapport was established, some adolescents became more open to individual counselling. While there are psychologists in Ukrainian schools, professionals suggested that the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic may have limited children's engagement with these services.

This could explain why some young people in Romania are gradually becoming more receptive to mental health support.

2.2.4 Stress factors

In addition to daily stressors, individual pre-existing factors – such as personal histories and the emotional burdens refugees carry – must also be considered. While some faced significant challenges adapting to life in Romania, for others, leaving the war zone represented a new beginning and an opportunity for a fresh start.



Train carrying Ukrainian refugees to Bucharest. Photo © George Calin, Plan International

Feeling of insecurity: Many adolescents and young men in the study recalled the fear and distress caused by the bombings and shootings they experienced in Ukraine. The abrupt transition from a war zone to the relative calm of Romania was particularly jarring:

“

You can't sleep for months after you hear a bomb explode next to you, and especially when you arrive in perfect silence in Romania, but your family is there between life and death

”

19-year-old, young man

For others, the process of displacement was marked by uncertainty and hardship. A 22-year-old student described living for over a year in fear of bombings before ultimately leaving Ukraine alone, without his parents or financial security. Now in Romania, he has adapted to his new environment, secured a scholarship, and is actively working to overcome barriers, all while supporting his family from afar.

While only a small number of participants openly discussed experiences of domestic violence or gender-based violence, some acknowledged its presence in the communities around them. They noted that the topic remains largely taboo in Ukraine and is not openly addressed. Some adolescents shared that their mothers had experienced abuse from their husbands or grandparents. For some mothers, displacement to Romania was not only a means of escaping the war but also a way to seek safety from abusive relationships – a reality echoed by several mothers who participated in the focus groups.

Several young people over 25 expressed concerns about returning to Ukraine for family visits, fearing they might not be able to leave again. Most study participants avoided discussing martial law, with some

denying its impact on their lives. However, four men and adolescents interviewed in Romania openly addressed its effects, describing how it shaped their sense of security and personal agency.

Despite these challenges, some remain determined to rebuild their lives and support their families: *“For three years I have not had a single day without pain, but I have not given in to despair. I have worked to support my family; I try to help others too.”* (42-year-old man) However, their lack of official documents has significantly hindered their integration, preventing them from securing legal employment or building stability in their host country.



HOST COMMUNITY & ONLINE SAFETY

Some adolescent boys reported **not feeling entirely safe in their host communities**, while also acknowledging that the situation may be even more challenging for girls. One significant concern raised was related to the 50/20 program, which provides financial assistance to refugees from Ukraine by compensating hosts for housing and food expenses. While the program has been beneficial for many, cases of exploitation and misuse have also been reported.

Some landlords secured financial aid from the government but either failed to provide adequate living conditions or forced refugees to cover additional expenses, such as utilities. In other cases, overcrowding was an issue, with multiple people housed in a single room, sometimes among strangers, making adaptation difficult. There were also reports of landlords withholding access to electricity, hot water, or the internet while still collecting government subsidies. The lack of internet access was particularly distressing for refugees, as it limited their ability to maintain contact with family and friends in Ukraine.

Additionally, some expressed discomfort with the way they were perceived by members of the host community. While many Romanians offered support, some felt that they were treated with pity rather than genuine empathy and respect, which affected their sense of dignity and belonging.

Some young people reported experiencing conflicts with local youth in Romania, in some cases escalating to incidents that required police intervention. One such incident occurred at an ice rink, where a misunderstanding arose due to language barriers – Ukrainian adolescents were unable to respond to questions in Romanian, which led to tensions. While the police responded, the young people felt that communication difficulties with the authorities limited the support they received. Instead, they found greater reassurance by discussing the situation among themselves and seeking advice from friends from Ukraine.

Several participants stated that they had not encountered discrimination and generally felt safe in public spaces, including at school, on the streets, and while attending events. However, some adolescents noted a shift in attitudes from the host community over time. While initial support for Ukrainian refugees was strong, many felt that Romanian society's interest in their situation had declined. This shift has left some young people feeling less welcome, reinforcing a sense of uncertainty about their future. As one 16-year-old adolescent boy expressed, *"Romanians must understand that Ukraine is at war, and we have nowhere to return."*

Financial instability remains a significant challenge for many Ukrainian refugees, as they no longer receive financial support from Ukraine, and employment opportunities in Romania are limited. With the **reduction or termination of NGO assistance**, more families are struggling to meet their basic needs. Some young people expressed concerns about their mothers' inability to find work, while others are considering leaving school to enter the

workforce and support their families.

A number of young people **expressed frustration over the lack of accessible and reliable information about their rights and available services** in Romania. They reported difficulties in finding guidance on essential matters such as education, healthcare, and legal processes. One recurring concern was the lack of clear information on obtaining Romanian citizenship or identity documents, particularly for those reaching the age required to receive their first identity card.

Online safety: Telegram remains the most widely used social media platform among Ukrainian adolescents and young men, with both children and adults engaging in various online groups. However, participants expressed concerns about the lack of moderation in these spaces, noting that discussions often fail to consider the presence of younger users. Some conversations include inappropriate content, making these groups unsuitable for adolescents.

Additionally, many adolescent boys and young men spend extended periods online, often in isolation, engaging in gaming or social interactions without parental oversight. This high level of exposure to digital spaces has increased their vulnerability to online risks. Professionals and young people alike highlighted the challenges of navigating social media, particularly on Telegram, where verbal aggression and online harassment are prevalent. Without adequate regulation or intervention, many young people find themselves exposed to harmful interactions.

2.2.5 Education & employment

Education emerged as the primary concern among adolescent boys and young men, with participants expressing uncertainty about access to education, its quality, and future opportunities. Many continue their studies through Ukraine's online education system, while a smaller number have

integrated into the Romanian school system. Language barriers were the most frequently mentioned obstacle, followed by concerns that without adequate support, full integration into the Romanian education system would remain out of reach. For many, these challenges compound existing disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and displacement, further limiting their perceived opportunities in the labour market.

Some young people have been unable to resume their education at all, falling outside both Ukraine's online system and Romania's formal education structure. Others deliberately choose to continue online schooling in Ukraine, believing they will return home after the war and fearing that Romanian diplomas may not be recognised. However, some prefer to enrol in Romanian schools, motivated by the opportunity to learn the language, assist their families as translators, or build a future in Romania.

For those who have entered higher education, experiences have been more positive. Ukrainian students attending Romanian or English-language universities reported feeling well-supported, with scholarships playing a crucial role in their integration. Some described university environments as inclusive, with Romanian peers offering guidance and assistance.

However, challenges remain for younger students. Many Ukrainian adolescents struggle with integration into the Romanian school system due to language barriers, lack of tailored educational support, and limited accommodations for non-native speakers in national exams. They expressed a need for designated school placements for refugee students and extended time for standardised tests. Some reported experiencing bullying – primarily from teachers rather than peers – leading to feelings of discrimination and isolation.

A lack of in-person socialisation, particularly for those studying online, has negatively impacted mental well-being. Educational hubs, primarily run by NGOs,

have played a crucial role in providing opportunities for social interaction and learning. However, these hubs are currently attended only by Ukrainian students. Mixed hubs incorporating both Ukrainian and Romanian youth could enhance integration efforts, fostering connections between refugee and host community students.

2.2.6 Effectiveness of MHPSS interventions and systemic gaps

Access to MHPSS remains a significant challenge for adolescent boys and young men, with barriers including language difficulties, financial constraints, and a lack of tailored services. Many participants expressed a need for psychological support but found it difficult to access due to the very limited availability of Ukrainian-speaking professionals and the discomfort of communicating sensitive issues through a translator. Financial costs also pose a significant barrier, particularly as free services provided by NGOs at the start of the war have become increasingly scarce.

Professionals emphasised the effectiveness of **creative arts therapies**, particularly for refugees and war-affected individuals. Interventions incorporating music, visual arts, dance, role-playing, and movement helped participants express emotions without relying solely on verbal communication, bridging both trauma-related and language barriers. Programs that preserved cultural identity – such as listening to Ukrainian music, engaging in traditional arts, and participating in exhibitions – helped young people maintain a sense of connection to home. However, experts noted that

framing these activities as "therapy" or "counselling" often discouraged participation due to stigma. Instead, integrating psychosocial support within practical or recreational activities proved more effective in engaging young men.

Group-based activities such as carpentry,

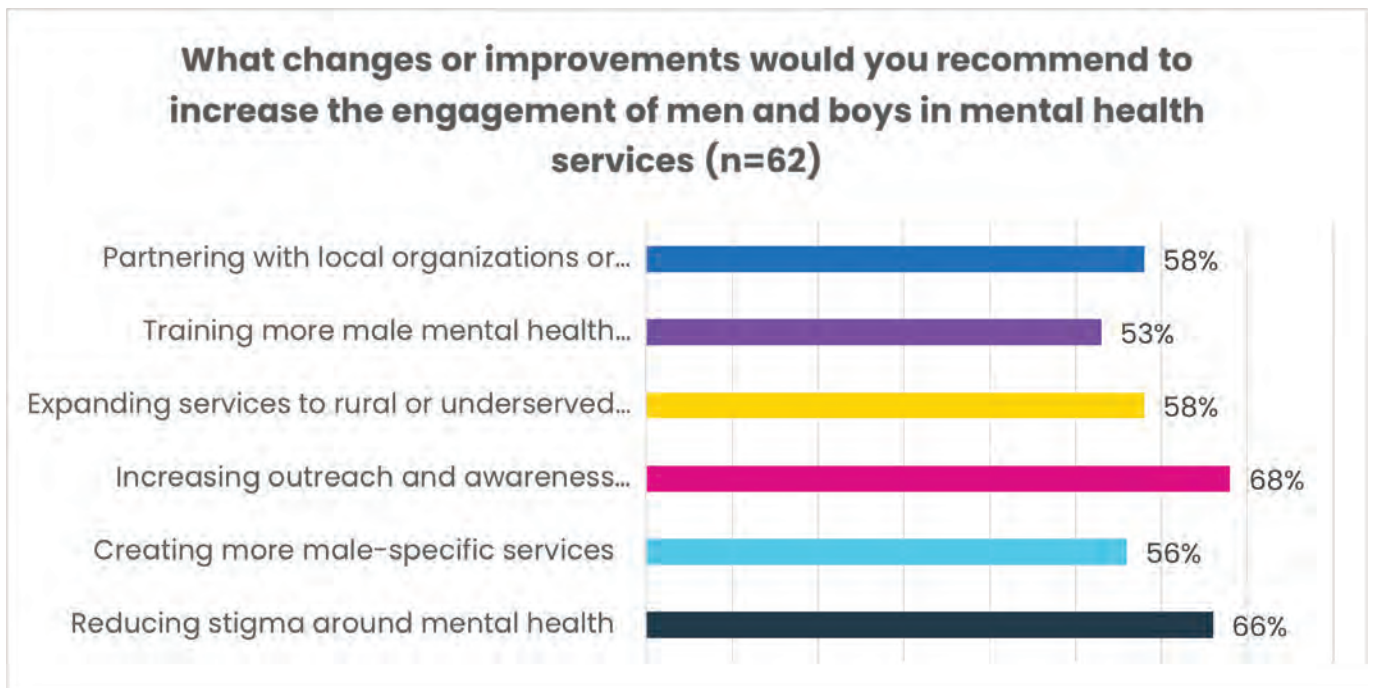
robotics, computer science, and sports provided alternative avenues for emotional expression and mental well-being. Educational hubs offering human rights workshops, public speaking training, and violence prevention programs were particularly well-received. Language courses in Romanian and English were also highly valued, as they improved integration opportunities.

A strong desire to **engage in meaningful activities** emerged among male refugees. Professionals observed that young men, like other displaced individuals, benefited from a sense of self-efficacy – actively contributing to their communities through volunteering, learning new skills, or engaging in structured programs. Participation in daily activities at transit centres, community hubs, or local initiatives improved emotional well-being. For some, **contributing to the host society** – even in small ways like teaching peers how to ride a bicycle – provided a sense of purpose

and stability in an otherwise uncertain environment. Below is a bar chart presenting the responses from service providers on strategies to improve male engagement in mental health services. Key recommendations include **reducing stigma (66%), increasing outreach campaigns (68%), and expanding services to rural or underserved areas (58%).**

2.2.7 Visions for the future

Many adolescent boys and young men recognise that even after the war ends, returning home will be challenging. As a result, they see the importance of learning Romanian and integrating academically and professionally, at least in the short term. However, access to Romanian and English language courses remains inconsistent, with some young people unable to access free classes in certain counties.



Uncertainty about the future weighs heavily on many participants. Some young men expressed reluctance to make long-term plans, citing past experiences where the war upended their dreams and aspirations. While a few are considering returning to Ukraine after the war, most are preparing for opportunities elsewhere. Many envision careers in IT and programming, while others aspire to work in hospitality, real estate, sports, dentistry, telecommunications, or the arts. Some hope to complete their education in Romania before seeking better-paid opportunities in other EU countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Austria, and the Czech Republic.

Despite the challenges, many young people expressed a desire to have their voices heard and be actively included in shaping their futures. They emphasised the need for youth participation in decision-making, particularly in discussions about integration, education, and long-term opportunities. Some also noted disparities in support systems, such as the lack of scholarships for those whose parents are at the front but who live outside Ukraine.

"There are problems, it's true, but we also have many good things. We live in a safe country, it could have been worse. It's good to be heard, to receive a helping hand, concretely. Children in Ukraine receive merit scholarships if their parents are at the front and they are also in Ukraine, but those of us who have parents at the front but live in Romania do not receive any help. After all, we are the children of Europe, it would be natural that we should be helped!" (17-year-old adolescent boy)

“

I wish that in the future we could have discussions like this, to talk freely about the future, to get help, to talk about conflicts and solutions.

”

17-year-old adolescent boy

2.3 POLAND

2.3.1 Mental health needs & well-being



THEN VERSUS NOW

The escalation of war led to profound changes in how Ukrainian boys and young men in Poland experienced daily life, influencing their mental health, sense of identity, and overall well-being. Teachers and mental health workers noted that many adolescent boys had an **increased sense of responsibility**, often taking on adult roles within their families earlier than expected. This shift in responsibility was especially noticeable among those whose fathers remained in Ukraine or who had to support younger siblings. While these new responsibilities **created pressure, they also fostered resilience and adaptability**. Some young men embraced these challenges as a means of developing independence and leadership skills.

Adolescents described how, at first, they struggled to adapt to unfamiliar environments, especially in school settings. Some reported that integration was relatively easy, particularly when they had access to supportive coaches or peer groups. Others found it overwhelming and isolating.

Family dynamics also underwent significant transformations. Some boys and young men took on the role of primary caregivers or **emotional anchors within their families**. This shift often forced them to grow up quickly, as they assumed responsibilities typically associated with adulthood. This sudden change, while empowering for some, left others feeling **trapped between their desire for independence and the realisation that their families depended on them**. A service provider summarised the situation as follows:

“

For young men, it was a struggle to find a place. They felt the pressure to be responsible for the whole family, to step into their father's role. This created a lot of internal anger and confusion.

”

Local NGO

The absence of male role models further complicated these experiences. Many boys have been growing up in predominantly female environments after fleeing with their mothers and/or grandmothers. Teachers and psychologists noted that, without male figures to emulate, boys **struggled with their sense of identity**, leaving them unsure of how to define manhood in this new context. Changes in family roles emerged as a consistent theme, particularly for adolescent boys who found themselves navigating a tension between their growing desire for independence and the responsibilities they felt toward their families. This duality often led to confusion and frustration as they attempted to reconcile these competing demands.

On the other hand, some boys remained highly dependent on their parents, with this dependency becoming a source of tension within families. In the FGDs with parents, several participants described how their children struggled to make independent decisions and had difficulties facing and accepting changes.

Interestingly, a few parents highlighted moments of improved family relationships when their sons returned to Ukraine. The familiar environment seemed to restore a sense of stability and autonomy for these boys, which had a positive impact on their connection with family members. One parent shared: *“We returned to Ukraine, and our relationship with my son began to improve. He decided to stay in Ukraine, although he had the opportunity to live in Poland.”*



IMPACT & TYPE OF MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES

The war and displacement disrupted not only routines and social structures but also boys' and young men's emotional worlds, creating new layers of mental health challenges. The most observed issues included **emotional dysregulation, difficulties in expressing emotions, and a noticeable decline in motivation or engagement with life**. Parents and service providers described how boys oscillated between withdrawal and frustration, reflecting challenges in processing their experiences.

Several boys experienced emotional detachment and struggled to reconnect with their sense of purpose. Some boys faced challenges in imagining future opportunities, highlighting the need for supportive environments that foster hope and agency. This was accompanied by low self-esteem and a sense of uncertainty about their ability to navigate and succeed in their new environments.

Several young men navigated complex emotions, including guilt and societal expectations, as they adjusted to their new realities. Some expressed guilt for not being in Ukraine to support their families or join the Armed Forces, while others struggled with the stigma of being seen as **"outsiders" in host countries**. One 36-year-old man described how this guilt became less intense over time, but never fully disappeared: *“The feeling of guilt never leaves you. It was very pronounced in the first and second year. When you're actually working, you seem to get used to it, and life stabilises. But it's always there.”*

The type of mental health issues also varied by age and family situation. Adolescents were more likely to show signs of **emotional withdrawal and loss of interest in previous hobbies or social activities**. Young men, on the other hand, exhibited greater frustration and a loss of purpose, particularly when they lacked opportunities to work or study.

“The interests I had are gone. I can’t say that I’m interested in anything now. I think what’s going on has made a lot of people, including me, a little bit angrier. I’ve become less of a benevolent person than I was before.” (19-year-old young man)

The mental health challenges experienced by boys and young men manifested through a wide range of symptoms, often reflecting deeper emotional struggles. Teachers, parents, and service providers observed symptoms such as **emotional withdrawal, impulsivity, and psychosomatic disorders**. Several service providers noted an increase in **tics and anxiety-related physical symptoms** such as sleep disturbances and headaches. One school counsellor described how these symptoms evolved over time: *“At first, boys would start fights constantly, but over time they settled and became more cooperative. The symptoms became milder, but it remained a challenge to regulate emotions.”*

Older boys often navigated emotional

challenges by turning to **online communication, relying on digital spaces for connection and familiarity**. Parents noted how their children preferred engaging through social media or gaming platforms rather than in-person interaction. Rather than detachment, these digital interactions became alternative ways of maintaining social bonds, reflecting their adaptation strategies in unfamiliar environments.

“My son almost never leaves the house. Everything he did in Ukraine became uninteresting. He meets his classmates through games and has no common topics of conversation with those nearby.” (parent)

Apathy and emotional numbing were also frequent symptoms. Some boys simply stopped caring about the future, unable to imagine a life beyond their current circumstances. This was accompanied by low self-esteem and a deep uncertainty about their ability to navigate and succeed in their new environments.



*Schools in Moldova have welcomed children from Ukraine.
Photo © Tatiana Sultanova, Plan International*

By accepting the psychological and anatomical changes associated with adolescence, boys understand that they are different. They see themselves as faulty creatures and think they are unlikely to succeed in their host country.” (school counsellor)

Below is a bar chart presenting the survey responses from Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men on the biggest challenges they face regarding their emotions and well-being. Key issues include **fear of the future (51%), feelings of anxiety (43%), and difficulties discussing emotions (39%)**.

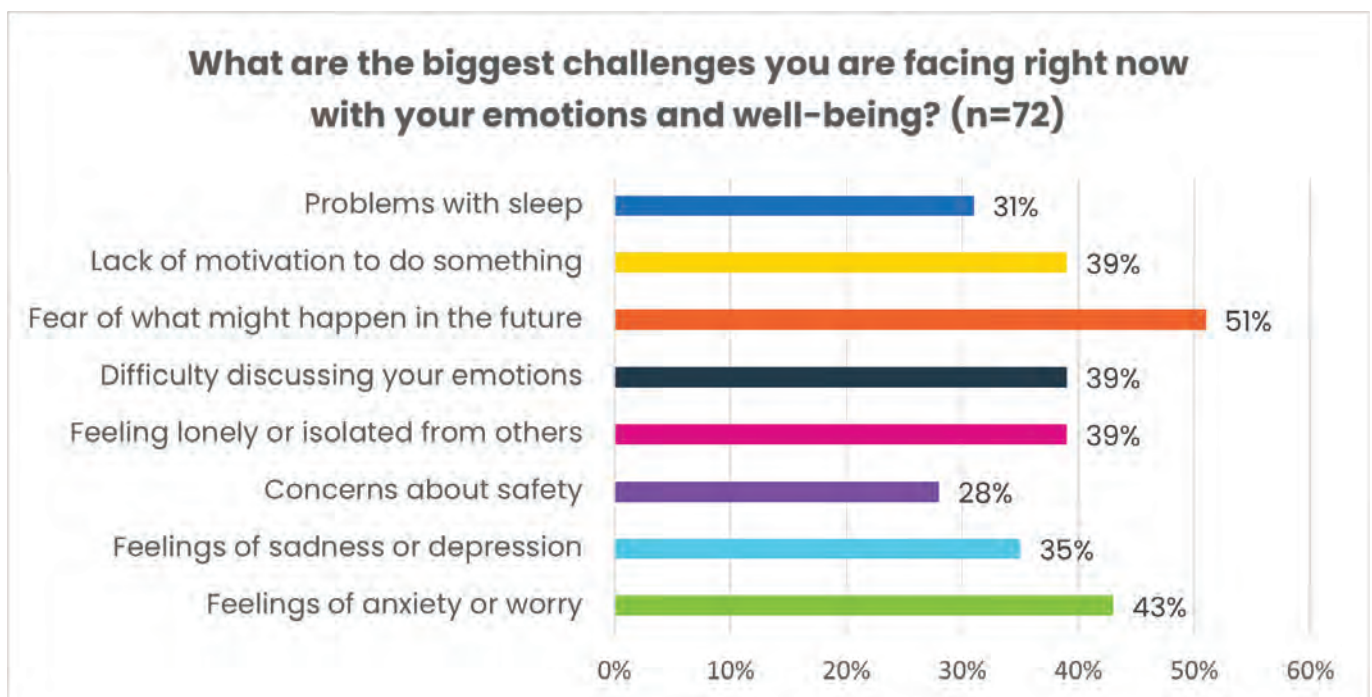
 **DIFFERENTIATED IMPACT ON BOYS/MEN**

The impact of displacement and the Russian Ukrainian war was highly differentiated by age, highlighting how developmental stages and family circumstances shaped boys’ and men’s mental health experiences. For some adolescent boys (15-17-year-olds), **the primary challenges were emotional regulation** and adapting to new social environments. Several younger boys were

particularly vulnerable due to their developmental stage, which made them more susceptible to emotional outbursts and difficulty regulating their behaviour. Disconnected from familiar support systems, many became anxious or aggressive, struggling to find stability in their new surroundings.

Some older adolescents and young men (17-25-year-olds) experienced **significant identity confusion**, caught **between the responsibilities of adulthood and the developmental stage of late adolescence**. For several, displacement created an opportunity for **growth and self-discovery**; for others, it led to a profound crisis of identity.

These young men often found themselves in liminal spaces: expected to contribute to their families, while still figuring out their own lives. The burden of responsibility clashed with their developmental stage, forcing them to negotiate new social roles in unfamiliar cultural contexts. One service provider described the balance they navigated: *“I feel like a child, but I can’t be a child because the circumstances are such that I have to be an adult.”*



Without consistent male role models, many **boys struggled to construct a positive sense of masculinity**. Some boys coped by taking on premature responsibilities, while others withdrew, struggling to find their place. In their search for belonging, some gravitated toward harmful masculine norms rooted in emotional suppression and aggression, while others withdrew completely, unsure of how to express their identity in this new context. Educators and school counsellors observed that boys often polarised into two groups: those who became prematurely responsible and decisive, and those who became disoriented and socially detached. The absence of healthy models of masculinity left many boys without guidance on how to process their emotions and experiences constructively.

For young men, especially those in their 20s, the challenges were more existential. Some felt trapped in liminal spaces, without clear goals or opportunities. Feelings of guilt and purposelessness were common, particularly among those who felt stuck between two worlds. One young man explained how his move to Poland **disrupted his sense of direction**: *“Before the war, the goal was to study in order not to get into the army. Now I don’t have a goal. I need to become a little more complete than I am now.”* (19-year-old man)

Service providers also highlighted how some **young men grappled with their legal status and struggled with self-identification**. Feeling politically and socially displaced, these young men described themselves as “outlaws” or “outcasts,” caught in a space where they felt they did not fully belong anywhere. This fragmented sense of identity left some young men hesitant to seek support or integrate fully into their new environments, compounding their feelings of isolation and uncertainty about the future.



COPING MECHANISMS: ADAPTIVE VS MALADAPTIVE

Boys and young men employed a range of coping mechanisms to manage stress and emotional challenges. While some found healthy ways to adapt, others resorted to maladaptive behaviours that risked exacerbating their struggles. The coping strategies varied across age groups, reflecting different stages of emotional maturity and access to support systems.

Physical activity emerged as one of the most common adaptive coping strategies. Many boys and young men turned to sports, martial arts, or other physical hobbies like swimming to release tension and manage emotional regulation. These activities provided structure and a sense of accomplishment.

“I like to do sports. I regularly go to the gym, play tennis, and swim. It doesn’t feel that bad if you keep yourself busy.”
(26-year-old young man)

Social connections played a crucial role in resilience. For many boys, peer support – whether in person or online – was an essential part of coping. Maintaining friendships through gaming and online communities provided continuity and comfort in an otherwise unfamiliar world.

However, some boys and young men also relied on maladaptive coping mechanisms that provided temporary relief but ultimately deepened their emotional struggles. A significant number of boys and young men resorted **to avoidance behaviours such as excessive gaming, isolation, and substance use**. For some, these behaviours became entrenched, reinforcing their disconnection from reality.

Alcohol consumption, while not universally observed, was mentioned as a common coping mechanism among adult men. It was often framed as a way to manage social anxiety or emotional stress.

Avoidance also manifested in extreme forms of escapism, such as over-practicing

sports to the point of exhaustion or binge-watching shows for hours without engaging in real-world activities. Others described **emotional withdrawal or living "in the past,"** reflecting a deeper struggle to process displacement.

Parents and school counsellors noted that self-destructive behaviours like excessive gaming, pornography, and unhealthy eating patterns were often warning signs of deeper emotional issues. Some adolescents struggled to confront these feelings, turning instead to fleeting distractions. *"At this age, they try to waste time. It's not about doing something; it's about not doing."*(school psychologist)

Cyber addiction, combined with withdrawal from real-life interactions, was also a recurring theme. Many boys found it easier to stay online, maintaining connections with their peers in Ukraine while struggling to build relationships in host communities.

2.3.2 Social dynamics and support systems



FAMILY DYNAMICS AND CHANGING ROLES

The experience of displacement led to notable shifts in family roles, particularly for boys and young men, who often found themselves taking on more responsibilities within their families. In many cases, the absence of fathers placed additional pressure on adolescent boys to contribute emotionally and practically. Some boys described this transition as a **natural consequence of growing older, while others felt it was accelerated by the situation they found themselves in.** *"It seems to me that everything has really changed because of the war. In Ukraine, I was just 17, and no one said anything to me about taking responsibility. But now, everything depends on me. I have to become the head of the family."* (20-year-old man)

This shift in roles often created a tension between **their desire for independence and their responsibility to support their families.** Adolescents spoke about wanting to live separately but recognising that their families relied on them. This internal conflict left many boys in a liminal state – no longer children, but not fully adults either: *"I wanted to live separately, but now I realise that if I don't help, it will be very difficult for my family. So, we have to stick together somehow."* (20-year-old man)

This dynamic led to what school counsellors describing as "early adulthood," where boys prematurely take on adult roles in response to the distress and instability of displacement. **While these roles could build resilience, they also came at the cost of lost childhoods** and increased mental health risks.

Survivor's guilt was mentioned by some young men in Poland, who expressed feelings of unearned privilege and responsibility toward those who remained in Ukraine. They described struggling with the knowledge that they were living in relative safety while friends and family members continued to endure air raids and hardship. This sense of guilt added to their emotional burden, compounding existing pressures related to family responsibilities and adjusting to displacement.



IMPACT ON FRIENDSHIPS AND PEER NETWORKS

Friendships, often a cornerstone of adolescent development, were severely disrupted by displacement. Many boys and young men lost longstanding social networks, **struggling to maintain connections across borders.** For some, friendships dissolved due to the physical distance and the absence of shared experiences: *"Since I stopped interacting with friends, I can ask them once a year how they are doing, but that's where it stops."* (20-year-old man)

Others found new friendships in their host communities, especially through shared activities such as sports. Digital communication also played an important role in helping boys stay connected with friends both in Ukraine and their new environments.

However, **forming deeper connections with local peers** was often difficult due to language barriers and cultural differences. While many boys experienced kindness from individuals in the host community, some noted that communication rarely went beyond surface-level interactions. Others described moments of discomfort when their presence was questioned by locals. *“A week ago, I was in a nightclub, and a Pole asked me why I wasn’t fighting for my homeland. Everyone has the same question.” (35-year-old man)*

This scrutiny often compounded feelings of guilt that some boys and young men already carried for having left Ukraine. It reinforced a sense of being **caught between two worlds** - neither fully belonging to the host community nor able to return home. These experiences shaped how boys perceived their integration into the host community, with some feeling welcomed and others maintaining a more cautious distance.

For those who did succeed in forming connections, **sports and school activities** played a crucial role. Shared hobbies created common ground, even when language was a barrier. One 15-year-old boy reflected that participating in basketball helped him feel part of a larger community. At the same time, peer networks were not always welcoming. Several boys described moments of rejection or subtle hostility from local peers, often rooted in cultural misunderstandings or assumptions about their status as refugees. This rejection led some boys to withdraw further into themselves, limiting their social interactions to online spaces or other Ukrainian boys.

Community integration and belonging The experience of integration was closely tied to several factors, including language skills,

financial stability, and access to community resources. Adolescents who participated in school sports or community activities were more likely to feel connected, while others struggled to establish a sense of belonging. *“To be honest, I didn’t really feel like a part of the new community.” (15-year-old adolescent boy)*

For some, **financial stability** was seen as essential for successful adaptation. Boys who had access to the same resources and lifestyle they had in Ukraine felt more comfortable integrating. One young man noted how financial resources, and support played a key role in easing the transition: *“There’s no problem with adaptation if you have money to rent the housing you want, eat the way you used to, and attend the events you used to attend. The issue here is financial support.” (26-year-old young man)*

Community centres, sports clubs, and youth spaces were highlighted as valuable for promoting integration. Service providers pointed out that these spaces allowed boys to socialise and engage with peers in a more relaxed setting, which helped them feel more at ease. However, some boys still felt that these connections lacked the depth and understanding they had with their peers from Ukraine. *“They might not be aware of the struggle. It’s nice that there are spaces to connect, but I feel like these young men still carry an internal fight that others don’t fully understand.” (mental health service provider)*

For many boys, connection to other Ukrainian adolescents or young adults who shared similar experiences was more meaningful than connecting with local peers. This peer support helped them navigate the complexities of adapting to a new life while maintaining ties to their identity.



Children have fun together at Ludobus play session in Moldova. © Plan International

2.3.3 Barriers in accessing services & their intersections with gender norms

Structural barriers: logistical, financial, and language challenges Structural barriers to accessing mental health services were pervasive across different contexts.

Participants frequently highlighted **logistical hurdles** - such as the limited availability of specialists and the inability to find services in Ukrainian or Russian - as significant obstacles. These issues were especially **pronounced in smaller towns**, where mental health professionals were scarce, and services were not adapted to the needs of refugees from Ukraine.

“It’s not just about speaking the local language. It’s about having someone who understands what it’s like to experience war and migration.” (37-year-old man)

Affordability compounded these issues.

For many participants, accessing private mental health services was not a viable option. Even when free services were available, they were often **under-advertised and difficult to navigate**. *“There’s a portal with 10 free online consultations, but that’s not enough. If you live in a smaller city, you won’t find anyone who can help without exposing yourself to stigma.” (local NGO representative)*

The pressure to **prioritise immediate needs such as housing and employment often pushed mental health support to the background**. Several participants expressed that psychological support came only after basic survival concerns were addressed. *“First, you need to solve the housing and work problems. Only after that do you even start thinking about mental health.” (33-year-old man)*

STIGMA AND CULTURAL BARRIERS

Stigma emerged as a dominant theme, particularly for men and boys. Seeking mental health support was frequently described as a **sign of weakness or failure**. Cultural expectations of stoicism and self-reliance were deeply ingrained, often reinforced by older generations, shaped their own reluctance to engage with mental health services. Many men preferred to “keep everything to themselves,” reflecting a broader reluctance to engage with mental health services. 46% of adolescent boys and young men who completed the survey identified cultural expectations as a key barrier preventing them from seeking help with emotional problems, making it the second most commonly mentioned factor.

“Honestly, I’ve never looked for such services. I think that the male side has such a thing as pride and can be stubborn that all problems can be solved on their own. And so, I think that’s the main reason why so few people apply.” (20-year-old man)

Below is a bar chart showing the survey responses from adolescent boys and young men regarding what they believe prevents them from seeking help for emotional problems. Key barriers include **feelings of shame (56%), cultural expectations to be tough (46%), and fear of being judged by others (32%).**

During FGDs and interviews, the fear of being perceived as “mentally unstable” or weak was significant. This was further complicated by a **lack of trust in institutions** and a belief that services would not be effective. *“They think it doesn’t work. They don’t want to share their experiences with a stranger, and they don’t see it as necessary.” (19-year-old man)*

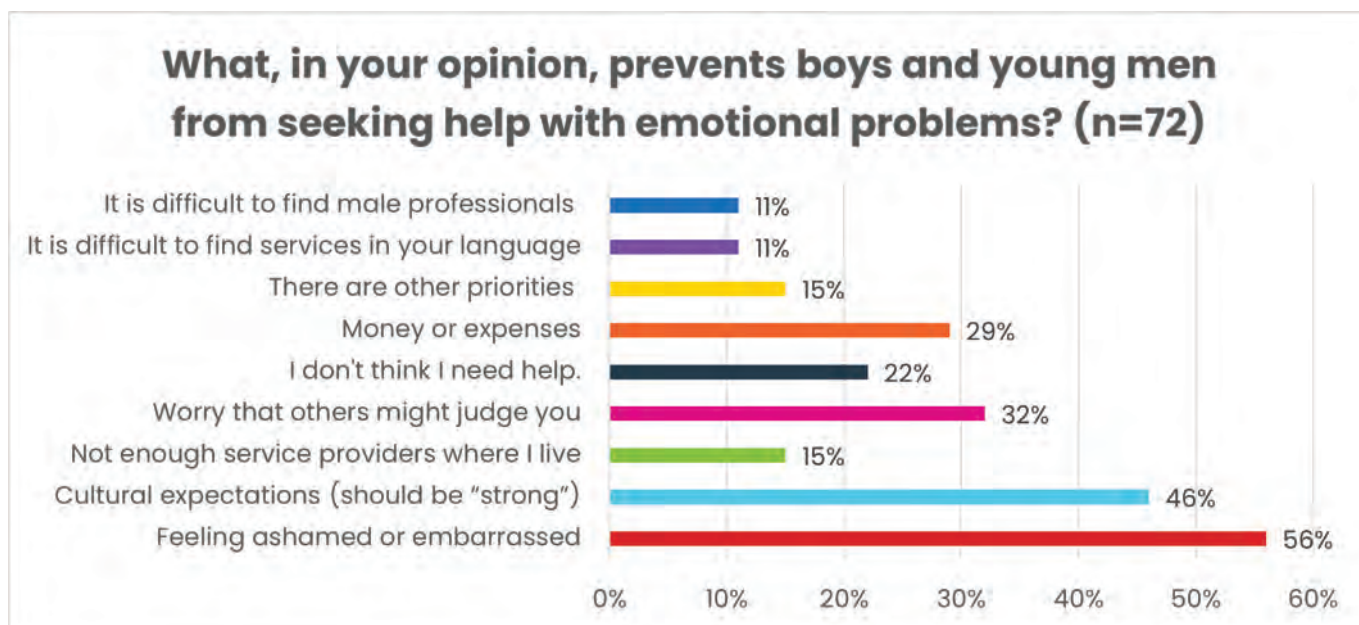
The distrust extended beyond the mental health system to broader institutions. Some participants felt judged or scrutinised by host communities and institutions, reinforcing their reluctance to seek help. *“In some places, there’s this unspoken judgment - like, why are you here and not fighting in Ukraine?” (service provider, recounting community narratives)*



THE INTERSECTION OF MASCULINITY, MENTAL HEALTH & NAVIGATING EXPECTATIONS

For boys and young men, societal and family expectations created significant psychological burdens. Some described a strong **sense of responsibility** to protect and provide for their families, particularly in the absence of fathers. Young men often found themselves caught in an internal conflict regarding their role as protectors and the fear of being perceived as weak for not participating in the war effort. *“You bully yourself because you’re not serving, not fighting. And honestly, it’s scary to go back - I don’t want to die. I want everyone to live” (35-year-old man)*

The reality of the military mobilisation remained a source of anxiety for young men over 25 living abroad. Some avoided visiting their families in Ukraine, fearing that they would not be allowed to leave again if they returned. Others distanced themselves from news about Ukraine to



reduce their stress, while some sought ways to **contribute from afar** without directly participating in the war.

Some men in Poland felt judged for not joining the Ukrainian Armed Forces. This external judgment compounded their internal struggles, creating a deep sense of inadequacy and guilt. However, for others, this pressure resulted in a sense of identity crisis and loss of direction. The tension between their desire to protect and their reluctance to engage in direct military action left some men struggling with complex emotions of fear, loyalty, and guilt.

Several service providers pointed out that interventions were often designed to be gender-neutral, which sometimes led to a lack of targeted support for adolescent boys and young men. Programs focusing on general well-being did not always account for the specific mental health needs of this group, which may have contributed to lower engagement. Additionally, the absence of designated spaces where young men felt comfortable expressing their emotions further reinforced their isolation.

Sports and physical activities were often the most socially acceptable outlets for stress and anxiety. However, despite their familiarity with these activities, some young men were hesitant to seek out structured sports programs or recreational spaces in Poland. A mental health service provider explained that while **informal games felt comfortable**, organised settings posed challenges: *"They come to play volleyball or basketball because it feels familiar, but they won't seek out spaces where they can practice these skills in Poland. The language barrier makes it too hard."*

School counsellors and service providers also noted that adolescent boys **lacked awareness about mental health and available support**. Education around mental health remained limited, leaving many unable to recognise when they were struggling.

“

There's very little education about mental health among young men. Nobody asks them, 'Is something wrong?'

”

mental health service provider

This gap in awareness was compounded by cultural norms that discouraged emotional expression. Boys were rarely encouraged to share their feelings, leaving them to cope silently. At the same time, service providers and counsellors noted that existing interventions **were not always designed with adolescent boys and young men in mind**, limiting their effectiveness in addressing their specific needs.

Cultural expectations around masculinity played a central role in shaping boys' and men's experiences. While **some saw these expectations as sources of strength, others found them suffocating and isolating**. The idea that men should protect and provide at all costs was a recurring theme. This hyper-masculine ideal left little space for vulnerability or emotional support. Many boys and men felt trapped by societal expectations, unable to acknowledge their struggles or seek help. *"It's a strong message: a man should protect the family. There's no room for weakness."* (mental health service provider)

Beyond the fear of being judged for seeking mental health services, several men highlighted that even **accessing basic social support carried a significant stigma**. Some felt ashamed to receive welfare or assistance, as it clashed with their self-image of independence and strength. *"I didn't receive any of these social benefits because I was ashamed to go to the volunteer centres."* (35-year-old man)

Amid the challenges of displacement, many boys found a renewed sense of strength and identity through symbols of resilience in Ukrainian society. For some, Ukrainian soldiers became powerful role models - embodying strength, perseverance, and a deep connection to their homeland. This identification with military figures offered a way to process their experiences and define masculinity in the context of war and displacement. *"They treat these soldiers as role models. They've become stronger and more tolerant but also more vulnerable in ways they don't always show."* (school counsellor)

For many, the interplay between masculinity and mental health was complex. The same cultural values that promoted resilience also contributed to stigma and reluctance to seek help. Some participants expressed a desire for more gender-sensitive support systems - spaces where men could connect without fear of judgment. *"Men don't show themselves. They need separate support groups, free from judgment and with clear communication channels."* (mental health service provider)



GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY & RISKS

Adolescent boys and young men were more likely to emphasise the relative comfort of their host environment, citing fewer concerns about physical safety. *'In Poland, it is much more comfortable to move around the city than in Ukraine, which is obvious,'* noted a 26-year-old man. In contrast, young women expressed more concerns related to movement and security. Safety and mobility restrictions were a consistent concern for them, highlighting the gendered nature of safety perceptions. *'I always share my geolocation when going to an interview – just in case,'* shared a 24-year-old woman.

Additionally, service providers highlighted the **increased vulnerability of children and youth in collective shelters**. These

environments often lacked safeguarding standards, leaving children exposed to higher risks of violence and neglect. *"Children in collective shelters experience violence from peers or parents, but no one reports it."* (INGO representative). While this issue affects all children, adolescent boys may be particularly at risk of unreported abuse due to gendered norms discouraging them from speaking out.

2.3.4 Education & employment

Displacement profoundly **disrupted the educational trajectories** of Ukrainian adolescents and young adults, bringing new obstacles such as language barriers, systemic differences, and bullying. While some students managed to adapt with support from teachers and peers, others found themselves excluded or disillusioned. Bullying and rejection were widespread. Reports of physical aggression, derogatory remarks, and a general lack of empathy from both teachers and students created an atmosphere of alienation. *"The school director even asked my son why he wasn't at war. He was treated as a fugitive and a traitor."* (parent)

This sense of rejection led to **high levels of stress, low self-esteem**, and an increased risk of dropout. Some students left school entirely due to bullying and the overwhelming pressure to adapt to an unfamiliar system. *"There is a lot of bullying towards children, especially in the last six months. They don't want to make friends. Many leave school."* (mental health service provider)

For those who persevered, adaptation remained uneven. A lack of tailored educational support, coupled with **the need to balance multiple school systems**, left students feeling neglected and demotivated. *"The quality of distance learning is terrible. I feel like I haven't learned anything in two years."* (19-year-old student)

Teachers and school counsellors that recognised **the impact of traumatic**

experiences on cognitive function emphasised the importance of addressing emotional stability before engaging in formal learning. *"Under stress, cognitive capacities don't function well. It's essential to create environments where participants can regain emotional stability before focusing on learning."* (school counsellor). **Incorporating mental health support into educational settings** became an essential strategy for improving outcomes.

The devaluation of Ukrainian qualifications and work experience permeated the educational space as well, **affecting students' self-esteem and sense of purpose**. Seeing their parents struggle to find work that matched their qualifications, some young people questioned the value of their education. *"Why study if we are not accepted as specialists later?"* – service provider.

This systemic devaluation discouraged long-term aspirations and reinforced a sense of disillusionment. For some adolescents, **the need to feel competent and valued was profoundly affected by these experiences**, especially when they encountered stereotypes that discredited their potential. Some Polish children did offer help, yet the broader environment often failed to foster belonging and recognition. *"Polish classmates helped with homework sometimes, but the feeling of being 'second-rate' lingered."* (parent)

The upheaval of war and displacement forced many young people to reassess their career goals. While some gave up on their original aspirations due to language barriers, others found unexpected opportunities to explore new paths. In contrast, others were caught in limbo, struggling to find direction in the absence of clear opportunities.

These educational and employment challenges were observed across the ecosystem - from local NGOs and teachers to INGO stakeholders. Bullying, exclusion, and systemic gaps highlighted the urgent need for better integration policies, mental health support, and career guidance

tailored to displaced young people.

Teachers and school counsellors emphasised the importance of inclusive education and the role of peers in helping Ukrainian students integrate. Staff of local NGOs noted the rise in peer violence and the lack of motivation among boys. Adolescents and young adults face additional pressure from cultural expectations to work and contribute financially, which sometimes leads them to prioritise work over education, risking long-term personal and professional development. *"Teenagers from 16 years old are already trying to support their families,"* shared a local NGO representative.

Despite these challenges, **resilience remained a defining characteristic for many young people**. Some found strength in adapting to new cultural contexts, while others leveraged international educational opportunities to forge new paths.

2.3.5 Effectiveness of MHPSS interventions and systemic gaps



THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES AND COMMUNITY-BASED SUPPORT

The mental health service providers who participated in the qualitative side of this research shared their experiences using a range of methodologies and therapeutic formats, including **CBT, Schema therapy, mindfulness, art therapy, movement therapy, and Problem Management Plus (PM+), in individual counselling settings as well as family therapy**. These methodologies informed their approaches to working with displaced boys and men, with an **emphasis on practical, structured interventions and building autonomy and resilience in their clients**. Providers highlighted the importance of family involvement and facilitating a **transition from being helped to becoming helpers themselves**,

which promoted empowerment, self-efficacy and long-term well-being.

Service providers emphasised the effectiveness of PM+ and practical, action-based interventions, especially for male participants. PM+ was widely regarded as a successful approach because of its structured nature and emphasis on problem-solving, goal-setting, and practical coping mechanisms. *"PM+ works because it's practical. Men prefer something structured that gives them specific steps to follow."* (mental health service provider)

Community-based initiatives that focused on **autonomy and purpose** were also praised. These programs encouraged participants to create, build, and teach others, promoting both healing and social integration. Art therapy, woodworking, and sports programs provided essential emotional outlets and opportunities for social connection. *"In one program, participants created items they could sell. It gave them dignity and made them feel part of society."* (mental health service provider)

Family counselling was particularly impactful, as involving parents and siblings often improved outcomes for boys and young men. Some providers noted that when the entire family participated, the therapeutic process became more effective and sustained. Mindfulness and movement-based therapy also proved effective, particularly with younger adolescents. Movement-based activities allowed boys to release tension and express emotions in a less stigmatised environment. *"(with boys) activities like sports and movement-based therapy work better than arts-based approaches. It's less intimidating and helps them release tension."* (mental health service provider)



CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION

Despite the success of many therapeutic approaches, several challenges persisted in implementation. One recurring theme was **the difficulty in reaching boys and young men**. Another key challenge was the lack of male facilitators and role models, which limited boys' willingness to engage. Service providers noted that male participants responded better when they had male role models who could demonstrate vulnerability and emotional expression.

“

It was so important for them to have a male facilitator who could show it's okay to be frustrated, to be emotional, or to just relax.

”

mental health service provider

Resource limitations also constrained the delivery of services. In smaller towns, the absence of psychiatrists and multidisciplinary teams reduced the range of available support. Several providers expressed **frustration with the short-term nature of funding**, which limited their ability to develop long-term programs. *"Funding has decreased significantly, but the war continues, and people still need help."* (local NGO representative)

Several gaps emerged in the provision of MHPSS services, highlighting areas for improvement. First, there was a strong need for preventive mental health care, with a **focus on building resilience rather than waiting for crises to occur**. *"Mental health should be part of everyday life, not just a last resort."* (local NGO representative)

The lack of multidisciplinary approaches - combining physical, psychological, and social support - was another significant gap. Providers called for greater collaboration with psychiatrists to ensure that individuals with complex needs received comprehensive care. Service providers also emphasised the importance of **choice and agency for boys**, advocating for the right to choose their psychologist or counsellor.

Below is a bar chart showing the main barriers faced by organisations in delivering mental health services to boys and men, according to the survey. Key challenges include **lack of funding (45%)**, **cultural norms (45%)**, and **difficulty engaging adolescent boys and men (41%)**.



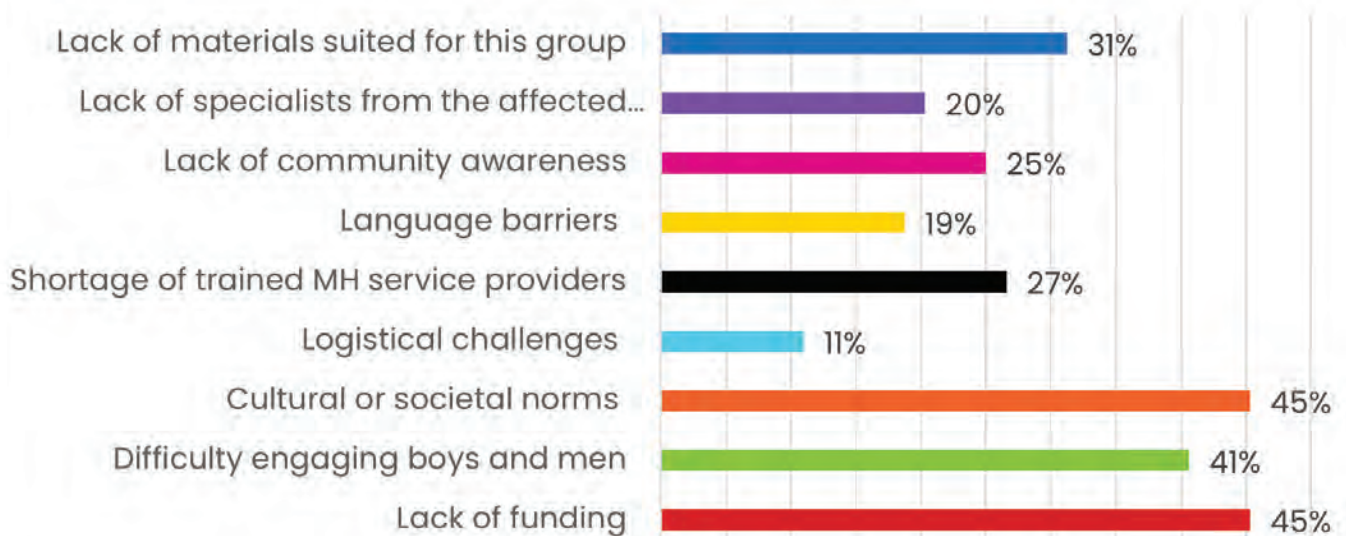
COLLABORATION ACROSS THE ECOSYSTEM

Collaboration across NGOs, schools, and community organisations was seen as

crucial but uneven and often underdeveloped. Effective programs integrated MHPSS activities into schools, libraries, and community centres, which allowed participants to engage without the added burden of seeking external services. However, many providers cited the lack of formal coordination between organisations and government institutions as a continual challenge. Informal partnerships worked well in some cases, but they often depended on individual efforts rather than systemic support.

Additionally, **funding cuts and limited resources reduced the capacity of many organisations**, forcing them to prioritise immediate needs over long-term planning. Providers called for more cross-sectoral collaboration and participatory program design to ensure that interventions met the real needs of boys and young men. *"We need to co-design interventions with youth. Give them a say, and you'll see greater engagement and better outcomes."* (INGO representative)

What are the main barriers your organization faces in delivering mental health and psychosocial services to boys and men? (n=64)



2.3.6 Minority and intersectional experiences



ETHNIC MINORITIES, LGBTQIA+ YOUTH, AND YOUNG MEN WITH DISABILITIES – INTERSECTIONAL BARRIERS

For ethnic minorities such as Roma youth, integration was particularly difficult due to systemic discrimination. Some Roma refugees were rejected by collective shelters and left at risk of homelessness. Service providers noted that these shelters often lacked proper safeguarding standards, leaving children and youth vulnerable to violence and neglect. *"Some part of the Roma refugees from Ukraine, especially children and young people, are very vulnerable. Most shelters don't want to accommodate Roma communities, so they are forced to leave and risk homelessness."* (INGO representative)

Additionally, service providers emphasised the need for linguistically and culturally adapted interventions for Roma boys. Some Roma youth did not speak Ukrainian, requiring resources in Romani or Hungarian. For boys with lower literacy levels, audio-based materials were seen as a practical solution for better engagement.

The barriers for children with disabilities were similarly pronounced, especially in rural areas where access to mental health services was severely limited. Families with fewer financial resources often found themselves living in isolated locations, where support systems were almost non-existent. This left children with disabilities without adequate educational or psychological support. *"In rural areas, access to MHPSS is much lower than in cities. Families living there receive less support from schools and NGOs, making the process of integration even more difficult."* – mental health service provider

For LGBTQIA+ youth, displacement

increased their vulnerability. The stress of war and forced migration compounded the challenges they already faced, such as fear of stigma, rejection, and isolation. Service providers described how LGBTQIA+ individuals often struggled to find safe spaces to express themselves or access appropriate mental health support. *"It's difficult for LGBTQIA+ individuals to be understood even in stable contexts. During war, the stress increases enormously, and these individuals suffer disproportionately."* (mental health service provider)

Parents also recognised the importance of mental health support for their children navigating complex aspects of identity. One parent shared their experience of encouraging their daughter to seek counselling after she started dating another girl, highlighting the role of mental health professionals in creating a safe space for exploration and self-acceptance.

2.3.7 Visions for the future

The interviews and focus group discussions revealed varied aspirations for the future among boys and young men. Many expressed uncertainties due to the ongoing escalation of war, while others clung to hopes of stability and self-realisation. Although dreams and visions differed, **the need for supportive environments - rooted in practical resources, emotional well-being, and community integration - was a unifying theme.**

For many adolescent boys and young men, the desire for stability and a "normal life" was central. While some dreamed of returning to Ukraine, others saw potential in rebuilding their lives abroad. The overarching theme was the hope for a stable, peaceful future, where they could pursue meaningful careers, education, and personal growth.

The uncertainty of displacement left many unable to formulate long-term plans. As one young man explained: *"It all depends*

on the conditions and when the war will end. Of course, everyone would like to return home, but no one knows what will happen tomorrow." (26-year-old young man)

Others highlighted the importance of creating spaces for young people to reconnect and support each other through shared experiences, emphasising the value of socialisation and community-building activities.

2.4 MOLDOVA

2.4.1 Mental health needs & well-being

The analysis of qualitative data highlights several key stress factors affecting adolescent boys and young men in Moldova. These include the disruption of daily life caused by displacement, political instability in both Ukraine and Moldova, concerns about community safety, and financial insecurity.

Early maturity: One of the most significant impacts of displacement in Moldova has been the accelerated transition to adulthood for many adolescent boys and young men. Having left Ukraine as children, they now find themselves assuming adult responsibilities in a foreign country. Many feel **a strong sense of duty to support their mothers and younger siblings, often describing their mothers with great admiration and respect.** They recognise the emotional and physical toll of displacement on their mothers, who they see as the backbone of the family, and feel a personal obligation to provide protection and assistance.

“

When we were in Ukraine, I lived like a child, without worries, not thinking about how things were going. Now I feel like I have to be mature, I have many responsibilities, I have to help my family, my mom, my younger siblings.

”

17-year-old adolescent boy

"It was kind of hard when I came to Moldova, I didn't know how long we would stay here. Now I've gotten used to the new life, but I still feel like I've lost my childhood." (16-year-old adolescent boy)

Mental health service providers noted that Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men often appear more responsible than their Moldovan peers due to their early exposure to adult responsibilities. However, this responsibility also comes with challenges – they are often more reserved, less willing to ask for help, and hesitant to discuss their emotions.

The displacement to Moldova has significantly **changed the daily routines** of many adolescent boys and young men, bringing heightened emotional distress. Respondents described experiencing **intensified emotions, including persistent worry, psychological discomfort, and fear.** *"The emotions and feelings I had in Ukraine are now three times stronger. I worry more about everything than before." (17-year-old adolescent)*

A key challenge for many was the stark contrast between their previous urban lifestyles in Ukraine and their current living conditions in Moldova. Many young people who had lived in large cities now find themselves in small towns or refugee centres, with limited opportunities for social, recreational, and sports activities. Several participants expressed **frustration over the lack of familiar leisure options,**

noting that even when such activities exist, the conditions do not match those they had at home. The absence of these outlets has further contributed to feelings of isolation and difficulty adjusting to their new environment.

Several adolescent boys and young men in the study recalled the distressing moments when they first heard bombings and gunfire around them, highlighting the persistent sense of insecurity they experienced before displacement. *"I lived for two and a half years with the fear of being killed by a bomb or a missile, but I stayed there with my family. At one point, we had to leave without my father, without financial security."* (16-year-old adolescent)

Psychological distress remains a significant challenge for many respondents. Some reported experiencing **persistent fear and emotional exhaustion**, while others self-recognise symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress. Feelings of isolation were commonly discussed, both as a response to trauma and as a factor that exacerbates distress. While some young people acknowledge their struggles and

express a willingness to talk about them, others prefer to remain silent and attempt to manage these emotions on their own.

psychological benefits. Many Ukrainian adolescents and young men expressed a strong desire to participate in activities such as basketball, volleyball, martial arts, swimming, and football. For many, **sports** serve as both an emotional outlet and a key part of their daily routine. However, respondents frequently noted a lack of accessible sports programs and facilities, limiting their ability to fully engage in these activities in Moldova.



COPING MECHANISMS: ADAPTIVE VS MALADAPTIVE

Both mental health service providers and young people emphasised the role of **art and cultural activities** in maintaining a connection to their home country while also serving as a bridge for integration into the host community. Engaging in familiar cultural practices provided comfort and a sense of belonging, easing the emotional strain of displacement.



Nikita, 14, draws the Ukrainian flag in a heart on t-shirt. © George Calin, Plan International

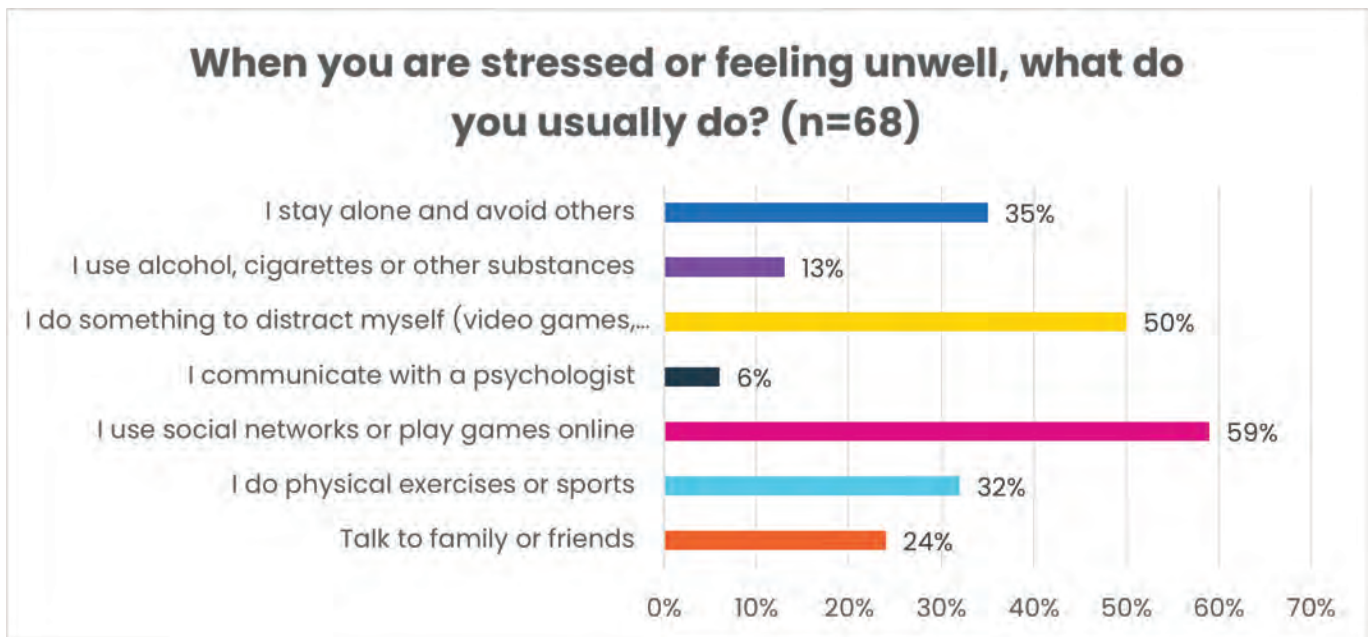
Sports also emerged as a critical coping mechanism, offering both physical and psychological benefits. Many Ukrainian adolescents and young men expressed a strong desire to participate in activities such as basketball, volleyball, martial arts, swimming, and football. For many, **sports** serve as both an emotional outlet and a key part of their daily routine. However, respondents frequently noted a lack of accessible sports programs and facilities, limiting their ability to fully engage in these activities in Moldova.

Some adolescents and young people in the focus groups reported observing peers engaging in **alcohol consumption or spending excessive time online**, often using digital platforms. Service providers also noted an increase in risky behaviours, including substance use, smoking, and social media overuse among both adolescents and young adults. While some young people may not recognise these behaviours as problematic, professionals emphasised the need for targeted support. A psychologist highlighted the challenges faced by parents in addressing these issues, noting that many are struggling with

their own psychological distress, making it difficult for them to intervene effectively. *"The problem with the boys is smoking. Parents can't stop this behaviour because they themselves are psychologically affected and unable to handle the challenges."* - mental health worker

The chart below illustrates the survey responses from adolescent boys and young men on what they typically do when stressed or feeling unwell. The most common coping mechanisms include using **social networks or playing online games (59%)**, **distracting themselves with hobbies or video games (50%)**, and **engaging in physical exercise (32%)**.

Some Ukrainian children and young people **struggled to manage their emotions at the onset of the war**, displaying behaviours such as outbursts of anger or social withdrawal. Their frustration and unwillingness to be in Moldova, combined with the inability to process the war's impact, contributed to these reactions. Specialists confirmed that these responses stemmed from difficulties in managing anger and frustration in an adaptive way.



2.4.2 Social dynamics and support systems

INTEGRATION IN THE HOST COUNTRY

Isolation: Many focus group participants shared that they initially avoided socialising with the local community, believing their stay in Moldova would be temporary. Instead, they **sought refuge in online spaces**, often due to feelings of guilt and helplessness over their inability to support their country or family. However, physical isolation from the host community did not necessarily mean complete social withdrawal, as some **young people maintained virtual connections with friends and family** in Ukraine.

Several participants expressed feelings of isolation from their families and communities, as they have been unable to return to Ukraine or see their relatives for more than two years. Additionally, the uncertainty surrounding their legal status in Moldova¹ has made some men reluctant to leave their homes. Service providers in Moldova noted that engaging Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men – particularly in mental health services – has been one of the most significant challenges. Furthermore, some mothers believe that integrating into Moldova is not a viable strategy, fearing the possibility of the war expanding into the country – a concern echoed by some young people as well.

Uprooting: Many young people feel a profound sense of loss, believing they have left behind everything they once had in Ukraine while struggling to integrate into Moldova. The realisation that they are **disconnected from their home country, with no clear timeline for return**, has had a significant impact on their mental well-being. *"I am no longer Ukrainian, nor Moldovan; I don't know what future I have here, nor there; my luck is that I speak English, and I can go anywhere."* (20-year-old male student)

Sentiment of insecurity in the community: The majority of respondents reported feeling significantly safer in Moldova compared to the dangers they faced in Ukraine. Adjusting to this new sense of security, however, took time.

“

When I arrived in Moldova, it took me two weeks to get used to sleeping at night without waking up from the slightest sound and without the fear of sirens.

”

16-year-old adolescent boy

"I feel like I'm in paradise here. In Ukraine, I endured missile attacks several times. The last time I was at the train station when a missile hit and killed many people around." (16-year-old adolescent boy)

Exposure to violence or aggression in the host country: Some adolescent boys in the focus groups reported experiencing **conflicts with local Moldovans**, though these incidents were resolved without major complications. Many adolescent boys and young men expressed concerns that girls might be more vulnerable to violence, leading some to feel an increased sense of responsibility to protect them in a foreign country. However, the majority of respondents stated that they feel safe in Moldova – both in public spaces and at school – reporting no incidents of violence. They described being able to walk freely, go shopping, and participate in various activities without fear.

Many participants reported forming **new friendships**, primarily with fellow Ukrainian refugees, though some have also built relationships with Moldovan peers. A key factor facilitating social integration is the **linguistic and cultural similarities** between Moldova and Ukraine which eases communication for many displaced young people.

Most respondents noted a warm reception in Moldova, expressing appreciation for the unexpected empathy, support, and sense of community they encountered. Some young people feel more comfortable in Moldova compared to other host countries, as they can navigate daily life without needing to learn a foreign language. Many also cited feeling safe while walking in public spaces or using public transportation.

Host families and community members play an essential role in the integration process. Some adolescent boys and young men noted that building close personal relationships, including romantic ones, can also contribute to a sense of belonging in the host country. Service providers and parents highlighted that younger children tend to adapt more easily than adolescents, who must navigate the additional complexities of emotional and physical changes, peer relationships, and family dynamics. A significant number of male refugees expressed a strong desire to engage in activities within the host country. Mental health workers observed that both men and women sought opportunities to contribute, as a sense of usefulness played a crucial role in fostering integration and encouraging employment.



CONNECTION WITH LOVED ONES

Family connection

Most respondents reported maintaining regular contact with their families in Ukraine. However, for those who left their fathers behind, the inability to reunite remains a source of distress, as returning to Ukraine is not an option for them. Social pressure on refugees is significant, both from their families and the host community. Some Moldovans express the belief that Ukrainian youth, particularly young men, should be in Ukraine defending their country. Many respondents perceive that Ukrainian boys have taken on greater responsibilities compared to their Moldovan

peers, as the war has compelled them to support their mothers and siblings.

For children from families that had separated before the war, maintaining a connection with one parent has become even more difficult according to some adolescent boys. Conversely, for some, the war has strengthened family bonds. However, similar challenges are faced by children from non-divorced families where fathers remained in Ukraine, further intensifying emotional strain and family separation.

Specialists also noted that, for some refugees, family separation has had a positive impact on mental well-being. Women who fled abusive relationships have been able to start new lives free from violence, which has also positively influenced the emotional well-being of their sons and daughters.

Romantic relationships

Adolescents and young people discuss their intimate lives primarily with friends, as it remains a taboo topic that they do not openly share with parents or other adults. **Boys in the study noted that communication** with girls can be challenging, as they perceive them to be more independent and confident – an observation they emphasised was not specific to displacement but rather a dynamic that existed in Ukraine as well.

Most adolescent boys and girls in the study expressed that **romantic relationships are not a priority** at this time. However, they believe that displacement has added complexities to forming connections, as they perceive girls to be more responsible in all aspects of life, making interactions more difficult.

Connection with friends, classmates, and neighbours back home

Many young people who left Ukraine have lost contact with their former neighbours,

classmates, and friends, which has had an emotional impact on them. However, many have also managed to build new friendships in Moldova. *"I didn't keep in touch with my friends, classmates, or neighbours because they either moved to other countries or stayed in Ukraine and have other concerns."* (16-year-old adolescent boy)

Some adolescents still maintain contact with friends in Ukraine through online communication, but for most, their social circles have shifted to Moldova. Those enrolled in online schooling in Ukraine continue to see their classmates virtually, while social media remains the primary means of staying connected.

For some respondents, the war has **intensified their fears** due to the presence of family members on the front lines. *"My uncle is fighting in the war; we are worried about his life. My grandparents are in Ukraine, but we don't talk to them about the war. Only once did a friend of my grandmother reproach me for fleeing and not defending my country."* (16-year-old adolescent boy)

Additionally, some participants mentioned that maintaining ties with friends and relatives in Ukraine has become increasingly difficult, particularly as many have relocated to other European countries, making integration more challenging for those outside Moldova. Young respondents noted that their families and friends generally did not criticise them for not staying in Ukraine to fight; instead, such remarks typically came from strangers, including members of the host community in Moldova.

2.4.3 Barriers in accessing services & their intersections with gender norms

Refugees face multiple, interconnected barriers to integration in Moldova, including social, structural, financial, cultural, and informational challenges.

Social barriers were frequently cited by young people, adolescents, and service providers. The most commonly mentioned issues included **stigmatisation of mental health, rigid masculinity norms, and discrimination**, particularly against the Roma community. Some refugees expressed concerns about being perceived negatively by the local population, especially by Russian-speaking Moldovans or those with pro-Russian views.

Structural barriers related to legal frameworks and the lack of services in rural areas were also highlighted. Access to medical and social services is hindered by logistical difficulties, limited information, and insufficient qualified staff, particularly as international funding for refugee support in Moldova has decreased. **Financial barriers** remain a significant obstacle, with many refugees unable to afford private psychological services, and NGOs having fewer resources to cover these costs. While many respondents expressed interest in youth clubs, educational hubs, and sports programs, such services are scarce or inaccessible. Additionally, many refugees struggle to navigate service access due to a lack of information about their rights and available resources.

Cultural and personal barriers further restrict access to services. Both professionals and refugees noted that seeking psychological support is still stigmatised in Ukraine and Moldova, with mental health services often misunderstood as equivalent to psychiatry. Many respondents self-reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress, including anxiety and emotional distress, yet some preferred to cope privately rather than seek help.

Lack of information was a recurring theme, with refugees frequently unaware of their rights, how to access integration support, or how to navigate legal processes such as asylum, citizenship, or extending temporary protection. *"We have many problems with information because we don't know where to get useful information for school, healthcare, or other things."* (20-year-old young man)

Gender norms and mental health

barriers were also noted. Many adolescent boys and young men avoid psychological support, believing that seeking help contradicts traditional masculine roles of self-reliance and family protection. The perception of masculinity remains consistent between Ukraine and Moldova, where being "a man" is associated with financial provision, family protection, and – if necessary – military service. *"Anyway, they can't help me. I have to solve my problems by myself."* (20-year-old young man)

Language barriers in mental health services were less pronounced in Moldova, as many professionals speak Russian. However, some psychologists noted that using Russian – the language of the aggressor – could deepen trauma or complicate therapy. *"When we first contacted refugees, we greeted them in Russian to see how they would react. If they responded in Russian, we knew we could communicate in that language. However, we also had cases where it was clear that speaking Russian was not comfortable for them."* (mental health worker)

2.4.4 Stress factors

Political instability in Ukraine and Moldova: Many young people from Ukraine expressed concerns about political instability, particularly its impact on their ability to visit family and friends. For those who left Ukraine illegally worry about potential legal repercussions, even after the war ends. Another concern raised by displaced individuals is the possibility of pro-Russian political forces gaining power in Moldova, which they fear could lead to further persecution of refugees from Ukraine.

With prolonged isolation and limited in-person socialisation, many adolescents and young men have spent significant time online, often with little parental supervision. This increased digital engagement has heightened their **exposure to online risks**,

including scams, cyberbullying, and the potential for sexual violence. While some Ukrainian adolescents are accustomed to navigating these challenges, they expressed greater uncertainty about online safety in a foreign country, where they feel less familiar with potential threats. Additionally, some young men voiced concerns about digital surveillance, fearing that their online conversations might be monitored.

A number of adolescents and young people reported experiencing discrimination, particularly due to Romanian language barriers that limit their access to information and opportunities available to the local population. In school settings, some have faced challenges integrating with peers, sometimes encountering exclusion or unwelcoming attitudes. While these experiences are not universal, they highlight difficulties in social adaptation and the broader challenges of navigating a new environment. Over time, some young people have managed to build connections, but for others, the sense of being treated differently remains a concern.

Financial insecurity remains a significant challenge for many refugee families. The financial support they receive from Ukraine is often insufficient, and aid from UNHCR and other organisations has decreased or ceased altogether. As a result, more young people are actively seeking employment to support their families. For both refugees and Moldovan citizens, low wages present a major obstacle. Even when refugees find work, salaries in Moldova are often inadequate to cover rent and basic living expenses. The lack of stable, well-paid jobs continues to be one of the most pressing concerns for displaced persons from Ukraine.

2.4.5 Education & employment

Education remains the primary concern for all adolescents and young people involved in the study, with participants expressing

anxiety about their access to education, the studies through Ukraine's online education system, only a small number have integrated into Moldova's education system. The most frequently cited barrier is the language difference, followed by concerns that, without adequate support, integration into the local education system would be nearly impossible.

With the escalation of the war and displacement to Moldova, some adolescents have been unable to resume their education, neither enrolling in Ukrainian online schooling nor attending Moldovan schools. Parents in focus groups emphasised their preference for Ukrainian online schooling, as they hope to return home after the war. However, both young people and parents acknowledged that **online education has significantly reduced the quality of learning** and created uncertainty about graduation processes. Despite these challenges, some respondents noted that online learning offers flexibility in scheduling and daily routines.

A number of participants have enrolled in Moldovan universities, studying in either Russian- or Romanian-speaking faculties. This group reported feeling the most integrated, describing their Moldovan classmates as supportive and welcoming.

According to mental health service providers, some refugee students feel uncomfortable at school, particularly due to the additional attention they receive from teachers, which can make them feel **singled out or overprotected**. A school psychologist explained: *"Although teachers are well-intentioned and strive to help refugee students integrate, the effect can be counterproductive. As specialists, we need to guide educators how to navigate this."*

Several participants expressed their desire to continue their studies and pursue higher education but stressed the need for greater acceptance within the Moldovan education system. They highlighted the need for designated placements in high schools, as

they struggle to meet the same academic requirements as Moldovan students due to language barriers. Participants also emphasised the importance of additional Romanian and English language courses to support their integration.

Furthermore, both young people and parents expressed concerns about the fairness of national examinations, arguing that Ukrainian students are expected to take the same tests as Moldovan students despite not having sufficient proficiency in Romanian. Some respondents stated that their only pathway to university was through Russian-language courses.

For students enrolled in online education, the lack of social interaction negatively impacts their mental well-being and academic experience. Mental health workers emphasised that attending school in person is crucial for better integration, as it provides access to structured learning environments, social opportunities, and professional support from educators and psychologists. A school psychologist noted: *"Attending school is absolutely essential for the well-being and integration of children and adolescents."*

Language remains the most significant challenge for displaced students in Moldova. Although many Moldovans speak Russian, this is insufficient for full integration into the education system, which is predominantly Romanian speaking. The younger generation in Moldova has less proficiency in Russian, further complicating communication.

Additionally, some young people expressed frustration that the Moldovan education system focuses exclusively on the history and culture of the host country, without incorporating Ukrainian history or cultural studies. Two participants shared experiences where they were required to attend classes that covered Russian history, which they found distressing,

2.4.6 Effectiveness of MHPSS Interventions and Systemic Gaps

According to specialists, the provision of MHPSS services for refugees in Moldova has been relatively extensive, with interventions provided by both NGOs and governmental authorities. Some professionals believe that refugees have more opportunities to access these services compared to the local population.

In the Transnistrian region of Moldova, access to MHPSS services remains significantly limited. The **restricted presence of NGOs and the lack of sufficient resources** from the local authorities hinder service provision, leaving many refugees without adequate psychological support. Additionally, some respondents expressed reluctance to seek help, citing concerns about service quality or doubts about the effectiveness of counselling in improving their well-being.

Professionals also noted that the mobility of refugees – many frequently traveling between Moldova and Ukraine – often disrupts psychological support services, leading to inconsistent counselling and limiting the effectiveness of long-term interventions.

Specialists in the study reinforced findings from broader research, which indicate that **creative arts therapies** are particularly effective in working with refugees and individuals experiencing trauma due to war, abuse, or displacement. These therapies emphasise non-verbal expression through music, visual arts, dance, role-playing, and movement, providing a means for individuals to process emotions without the barriers of language. Many NGOs have adopted this approach in their interventions, reporting visible positive outcomes. Importantly, professionals highlighted that avoiding terms such as “therapy” or “counselling” increased participation, as these words often triggered distrust or discomfort among adolescent boys and young men. Activities rooted in cultural expression, such as listening to Ukrainian music, traditional

dance, and engaging in artistic projects, have helped young men maintain a sense of connection to their homeland and loved ones.

Sports have also played a crucial role in promoting well-being among displaced youth. Many adolescents and young people from Ukraine expressed a strong interest in participating in sports activities, including basketball, volleyball, martial arts, swimming, and football. However, opportunities to engage in organised sports remain limited.

Professionals observed that **group activities** provide an effective entry point for psychosocial support. Once trust is established in a collective setting, young people are often more receptive to seeking one-on-one psychological support.

A sense of purpose, usefulness and contribution has been particularly significant for the well-being of displaced adolescents, young people, and their families. Many young participants expressed a desire to engage in meaningful activities within their host communities, such as **volunteering** to support fellow Ukrainians. Both boys and girls in focus groups emphasised the importance of contributing to society through employment, volunteering, or community engagement, as these activities foster a sense of agency and belonging.

2.4.7 Visions for the future

Most adolescents and young people who participated in the focus groups expressed reluctance to make future plans, as past aspirations were disrupted by the war. The uncertainty surrounding the duration of the war has left many feeling hesitant about planning for the future, both for themselves and their families.

Despite these uncertainties, some young people still consider short-term goals, even if they avoid making long-term commitments. Some stated that they do not

intend to return to Ukraine immediately after the war ends.

*"I want to finish university and look for a remote job, learn English well, and then go to a country where I can earn more."
(21-year-old student)*

*"I felt forced to leave for the safety of my family, and I understood that everyone does what is best for them. I work remotely, and this helps me pay for life in Chişinău."
(25-year-old young man)*

3 Comparative analysis & thematic trends



The experiences of Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men across Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Moldova reveal both shared challenges and country-specific factors that shape their mental health, social integration, and access to services. While all four countries grapple with the impacts of war-related displacement and the psychological toll of uncertainty, differences in **legal protections, societal attitudes, and available support services** lead to varied outcomes for young men navigating these difficult circumstances.



COMMON BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES ACROSS COUNTRIES

One of the most persistent challenges across all four countries is **the stigma surrounding mental health and reluctance to seek psychological support**. Some Ukrainian boys and young men are often hesitant to access MHPSS services due to deep-seated cultural norms that associate emotional vulnerability with weakness. Many prefer to cope on their own rather than seek professional help, reinforcing patterns of isolation and untreated psychological distress. In all four countries, service providers reported that young men are less likely than women to engage with psychosocial support initiatives unless these are structured around informal activities such as sports or volunteering.

Another widespread challenge is **the sense of displacement and loss of identity**. Across Ukraine and host countries, young men express feelings of detachment from their former selves, **struggling to reconcile their pre-war aspirations** with their current realities. Many were in the process of forming their identities when the war disrupted their lives, forcing them into roles of increased

responsibility. This premature maturity often leads to **emotional numbness, loss of motivation, and increased anxiety about the future**.

Military mobilisation concerns are another unifying theme for those over 25, though its intensity varies depending on location. In Ukraine, some young men feel the weight of expectations to join the Armed Forces, facing both external pressure and internal conflict about what it means to be "a man" in wartime. Others struggle with guilt if they seek ways to avoid mobilisation. In Moldova, adult male refugees from Ukraine fear forced return to Ukraine, leading some to limit their public presence and interactions. In Poland and Romania, young men experience similar pressures, with several feeling torn between their obligations to Ukraine and their attempts to build stable lives abroad.

Social isolation and digital escapism also emerge as common coping mechanisms. Several young men withdraw from in-person social interactions, preferring to spend time online, whether gaming, maintaining virtual friendships with those still in Ukraine, or engaging with news and social media about the war. While digital spaces offer connection, they also reinforce detachment from their host environments and exacerbate loneliness.

Lastly, **barriers in education and employment** significantly affect young men's sense of stability. Language barriers in Romania and Poland pose significant obstacles to academic and professional integration, while bureaucratic challenges and limited legal protections leave many in precarious employment situations. Even in Ukraine, where formal education is available, disruptions caused by the war – displacement, loss of internet access, or emotional distress – prevent many young men from fully engaging in their studies.



Ukraine

In Ukraine, the mental health impact of war is immediate and profound. **Adolescent boys and young men are directly experiencing the realities of war**, including air raids, displacement, and the loss of family members and friends. The psychological toll of this exposure manifests in **emotional detachment, grief, exhaustion, and persistent anxiety**. Unlike their peers in host countries, young men in Ukraine **face ongoing uncertainty about their futures**, particularly as they approach the age of military mobilisation.

One of the most striking findings from Ukraine is the **fragmentation of friendships**. Some young men reported that **their social circles have become polarised**, divided between those who strongly support Ukraine's defence efforts and those who struggle with **moral, personal, or practical dilemmas regarding military service**. These divisions extend beyond individual relationships, shaping **broader social and family dynamics** and adding to the psychological stress young men face.

According to mental health service providers, among those **who have served in the military**, the psychological burden is particularly intense. Some have **witnessed loss, violence, and extreme distress**, leading to **severe emotional strain, difficulties with reintegration, and heightened mental health risks**. Some **experience alienation upon returning to civilian life**, struggling to relate to peers who were not in combat. Others reported feeling **guilt or frustration** toward those who were not mobilised, further deepening social divisions.

Despite these challenges, some young men have found **resilience through volunteerism and community engagement**. Some channel their energy into supporting displaced families,

participating in mutual aid initiatives, or assisting in logistical support roles. These activities provide structure, a sense of agency, and a way to contribute meaningfully. However, the strain on MHPSS services in Ukraine remains. While some young men actively seek support, stigma and logistical barriers continue to deter others from accessing the help they need.

Romania

Romania provides **relatively stable but limited support**, with a strong NGO presence helping refugees access services. However, **language barriers hinder education and employment integration**. Many Ukrainian boys and young men continue online schooling, limiting their social engagement. Mental health services exist but are **underutilised** due to stigma and lack of outreach. **Economic instability and informal labour** leave many in vulnerable work conditions. **Discrimination in schools and workplaces** further reinforces feelings of alienation. While mental health services exist, **stigma prevents many from seeking help**, pushing them toward **avoidance strategies like gaming and emotional withdrawal**.

Poland

One of the most significant issues for Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men in Poland is **social isolation and difficulties forming meaningful social connections**. Some reported they struggle to make Polish friends and feel a sense of exclusion from peer groups. Language barriers, cultural differences, and the perception that their stay in Poland is temporary all contribute to a sense of detachment. In response, **some retreat into digital spaces**, engaging primarily in **gaming, social media, and online interactions**.

Social expectations and internalised guilt play a role in the challenges young Ukrainian men face in Poland. Some

experience pressure from their families or social circles to eventually return to Ukraine and contribute to the war effort. Others feel guilt for leaving, particularly if they have peers or family members who remain in Ukraine. This internal conflict can lead to emotional distress, making it difficult for them to fully invest in their lives in Poland.

Moldova

Moldova presents **unique challenges**, including **legal insecurity and economic hardship**. Unlike other host countries, Moldova grants temporary protection only to Ukrainians with valid documents, excluding men with third-country nationality

or those who are undocumented. As a result, many remain in legal limbo.

The **Transnistrian region is outside the control of the Moldovan authorities**. However, refugees residing there can obtain temporary protection status and receive support in the territory controlled by the government from Chisinau, on the right bank of the Nistru river.

While cultural similarities ease some aspects of integration, **pro-Russian sentiment and tensions in parts of the country create occasional hostility**. **Mental health services are underfunded**, and many young men remain **reluctant to seek support**.

4 Recommendations



For governments and policymakers

Expanding access to mental health services and addressing funding gaps

- **Increase government investment in national MHPSS frameworks**, ensuring equitable access to mental health services in both urban and rural areas.
- **Ensure mental health services are included in public healthcare schemes**, removing financial barriers for refugees and displaced persons.
- **Increase funding for awareness-raising among mental health professionals on the gendered aspects of war-related distress**, ensuring targeted services for adolescent boys and young men. This includes training on the specific psychological impacts of displacement, military-related stress, and loss.
- **Ensure outreach efforts specifically target underrepresented and underserved groups**, including adolescent boys, young men, LGBTQIA+ youth, and those with disabilities, to increase access to mental health services.
- **Increase financial support for NGOs and community-based mental health initiatives**, ensuring they have the resources to continue providing essential services.

Strengthening employment protections and economic stability

- **Simplify bureaucratic processes for employment and vocational training**, ensuring that young men can transition from informal, low-wage work to stable employment.
- **Expand language training programs linked to job opportunities**, ensuring that young men are not excluded from employment due to **linguistic barriers**.
- **Ensure asylum and residency policies adopt an intersectional approach** that recognises the heightened risks faced by **LGBTQIA+ youth, Roma youth, and young men with disabilities**.

Mainstreaming gender-responsive approaches in humanitarian response

- **Recognise that emergencies can serve as opportunities to reshape gender norms positively**, promoting policies that encourage **shared caregiving responsibilities, emotional openness, and gender equity in access to services**.
- **Ensure interventions adopt an inclusive gender perspective**, recognising the distinct challenges and needs of all individuals, including men and boys, in humanitarian responses.
- **Promote gender-transformative programming**, ensuring that MHPSS services, economic inclusion programs, and protection mechanisms **account for the evolving roles of both men and women in crisis settings**.

Ensuring long-term legal protections and stability for displaced young men

- **Extend and stabilise legal protection mechanisms** for refugees from Ukraine, ensuring that young men do not face forced return or legal insecurity that exacerbates mental health distress.
- **Develop clear and accessible long-term residency and citizenship options** for displaced Ukrainian men in host countries to mitigate uncertainty and promote stability.

For MHPSS service providers

Developing gender-sensitive and trauma-informed mental health services

- **Train mental health professionals in gender-sensitive approaches**, ensuring they recognise the **specific ways masculinity norms shape help-seeking behaviours** and emotional expression.
- **Incorporate sports, recreational activities, and peer-led engagement** as entry points to MHPSS, lowering barriers and creating informal opportunities for young men to connect with mental health support.
- **Develop targeted mental health interventions** addressing **war-related trauma, grief, and survivor's guilt**, ensuring that adolescent and young men have access to specialised support.
- **Strengthen outreach to young men in vulnerable conditions, particularly those isolated due to legal status, substance use, or social withdrawal.**

Expanding and diversifying MHPSS access points

- **Integrate MHPSS services into educational, employment, and humanitarian programs**, ensuring adolescent and young men can access psychological support in trusted environments.
- **Expand teletherapy, mobile mental health units, and peer support networks**, recognising that many young men avoid formal psychological services.
- **Develop sports and arts-based therapy programs**, recognising that physical activity, creativity, and structured group activities offer **accessible, stigma-free mental health support**.
- **Train mental health professionals in intersectional approaches**, ensuring services are accessible and responsive to the needs of LGBTQIA+ youth, ethnic minorities, and those with disabilities.

For humanitarian and development organisations

Improving integration pathways and support networks

- **Expand structured mentorship and peer-support programs**, connecting displaced Ukrainian young men with role models and social networks in host communities.
- **Develop culturally competent integration programs**, ensuring that displaced young men feel included in education, employment, and social life rather than treated as temporary outsiders.

- **Increase funding for youth-led initiatives**, ensuring that adolescent boys and young men can engage in volunteering, civic participation, and leadership roles within host communities.

- Develop targeted outreach programs for young men facing **multiple layers of marginalisation** – such as LGBTQIA+, Roma, or youth with disabilities - **proactively addressing the heightened barriers they face in accessing mental health, education, and employment services**. Ensure that services are not only inclusive but also designed to meet their specific needs, fostering accessible and culturally responsive interventions.

Addressing digital isolation and social exclusion

- **Create structured opportunities for social interaction**, ensuring that young men do not remain **isolated within digital communities**.

- **Develop mental health literacy campaigns tailored to young men**, using **social media, gaming communities, and digital content** to encourage emotional awareness and help-seeking behaviours.

For host communities and civil society

Reducing stigma and promoting community inclusion

- **Launch public awareness campaigns** to challenge mental health stigma and promote **healthy expressions of masculinity**, encouraging young men to seek help.

- **Develop cultural exchange programs and social activities** to bridge divides between displaced young men and host communities, particularly in **education and workplace settings**.

- **Foster inclusive environments in schools, workplaces, and sports teams**, ensuring that Ukrainian young men are not **excluded or treated as outsiders**.

- Promote **safe spaces and peer-support initiatives that foster inclusion for minority and LGBTQIA+ youth**, ensuring they can access community networks without fear of stigma or violence.

Strengthening family and community-based support systems

- **Create family-centred MHPSS programs**, equipping parents and caregivers with tools to support young men experiencing psychological distress and reduce stigma.

- **Strengthen community-led interventions**, including faith-based and neighbourhood initiatives that integrate mental health education into existing structures.



The research presented in this report highlights the **complex mental health and psychosocial challenges** faced by Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men amidst the ongoing war. The intersection of **displacement, family separation, disrupted education and employment, financial instability, and societal expectations** – particularly linked to **masculinity** – has contributed to **widespread psychological distress**. Many experience **emotional numbness, grief, exhaustion, and identity conflicts**.

Despite these adversities, young men also demonstrate resilience through **adaptive coping mechanisms, including volunteering, peer support, physical activity, and digital engagement**. However, **gaps in MHPSS service provision persist, with language barriers, financial constraints, limited tailored services, and stigma** hindering access to support. Many mental health interventions remain gender-blind, failing to account for the specific needs and social pressures that shape adolescent boys' and young men's experiences.

Addressing these challenges requires an integrated, gender-sensitive approach that not only expands access to **mental health services** but also considers social inclusion, **economic opportunities, and long-term reintegration strategies**. Prioritising adolescent boys and young men in **humanitarian response and development programs** is critical, ensuring they receive adequate **psychosocial support while fostering their ability to contribute positively to their communities**.

Final reflections on key findings



Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men experience **widespread psychological distress**, including **emotional numbness, grief, exhaustion, difficulties concentrating, identity struggles, and uncertainty about their future**.



Displacement has reshaped family dynamics, with many young men assuming increased responsibilities, supporting their mothers and siblings in the absence of their fathers. While some have found strength in these roles, others experience **pressure and social isolation**.



Friendships and peer networks have been fractured, with many young men feeling disconnected from both their Ukrainian and host communities. Some **struggle to form social bonds** due to language barriers and cultural differences, while others **face survivor's guilt** over their relative safety abroad.



Barriers to mental health services remain significant, including limited availability of tailored MHPSS services, financial constraints, mental health stigma, and logistical difficulties.

Language barriers further hinder access, especially for those needing professional psychological support.



Despite these challenges, young men employ various coping mechanisms, including volunteering, sports, creative outlets, and peer support networks.

However, digital escapism, substance use, and social withdrawal remain **common maladaptive coping mechanisms.**



Gender-sensitive interventions are urgently needed, as traditional masculinity norms discourage help-seeking and reinforce emotional suppression. Addressing **harmful gender norms** while **leveraging positive aspects of masculinity** is key to fostering long-term mental well-being.

Call to action for stakeholders

1. Prioritise mental health in humanitarian and national agendas

Stakeholders should increase investment in accessible, youth-friendly, gender sensitive and culturally sensitive MHPSS services tailored to adolescent boys and young men

while integrating mental health into national recovery plans, education systems, and community-based programs.

2. Expand and diversify service delivery

Efforts must focus on developing mobile outreach teams, digital platforms, and hotlines to reach underserved, rural, and war-affected areas while ensuring services are free or low-cost, considering transportation and accessibility barriers.

3. Combat stigma and promote healthy masculinity

It is essential to implement awareness campaigns that challenge harmful gender norms, encourage emotional expression and help-seeking, and engage male role models, community leaders, and peers to foster supportive environments.

4. Enhance youth engagement and participation

Adolescent boys and young men should be involved in designing and implementing mental health programs to reflect their voices and needs, with strong support for youth-led initiatives and peer support networks to strengthen resilience and agency.

5. Improve coordination and information sharing

Stakeholders must strengthen collaboration among government bodies, NGOs, schools, and healthcare providers to create integrated support systems while maintaining up-to-date service mappings and streamlining referral pathways to improve access to care.

6. Address intersectional needs and vulnerabilities

Efforts should provide targeted support for marginalised groups, including LGBTQIA+ youth, ethnic minorities, and young people with disabilities, ensuring that services remain culturally sensitive and linguistically accessible to all communities.

7. Invest in capacity building for service providers

Investing in the capacity of MHPSS professionals requires training in

gender-sensitive approaches, trauma-informed care, and youth-friendly service delivery, alongside continuous learning opportunities and support systems to prevent burnout among frontline workers.

By acting swiftly and collectively, stakeholders can foster resilience, promote emotional well-being, and ensure no young person is left without the mental health support they need. Together, we can build a more inclusive and supportive environment for Ukrainian adolescent boys and young men – their mental health and future depend on it.



About Plan International

Founded in 1937, Plan International is a development and humanitarian organisation that works together with children, young people, supporters and partners to strive for a just world, where we are all equal.

To do this we tackle the root causes of the challenges and inequalities that children and young girls face. We're there for children from birth until adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity.

Plan International Eastern and Central Europe has worked in Ukraine since August 2022 to deliver immediate humanitarian aid to children and their families affected by the war that has caused thousands of civilian casualties, widespread destruction and has forced millions to flee their homes. Our work in Ukraine is a part of regional response to the Ukraine crisis which also includes programmes in Poland, Moldova and Romania.

About The Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations for Children (FONPC)

Founded in 1997, FONPC exists with and for its members, about 75 NGOs, for the benefit of children and the community, guided by the principles and statutory provisions and promoting the following values: identity/ autonomy of members, effectiveness in communication and action, democratic decision, solidarity, openness, trust, mutual respect, equity, consistency/ continuity, partnership, transparency, participation and involvement. In order to achieve its objectives, FONPC works in close partnership with donors, funders, local and national authorities and non-governmental organisations, international organisations, European institutions, civil society, the community and other actors involved in promoting respect for children's rights.

About CARE International

CARE International is a humanitarian organisation leading the fight to end poverty in the world's most challenging situations. Women and girls are at the centre of our work, because we cannot overcome poverty until all people have equal rights and opportunities. We know that when a crisis erupts, women are often the first to pick up the pieces, so we work alongside women so they have the power to make change where it's needed most.