

## CRISIS WATCH: Ukraine

### Key Takeaways for Service Providers

It is important for providers to have a contextual awareness of the experiences of Ukrainian children and families so that responses can be supportive and trauma-informed:

- Treatment considerations should take into account the reality that many children and families have been separated from their fathers, grandfathers, brothers, uncles and other male relatives between the ages of 18 and 60 due to national conscription laws. This has created additional stressors for female headed households and families facing the uncertainty of safety for their loved ones.
- Mental health interventions had been used as a tool of repression during the Soviet era and has understandably led to a high degree of mistrust of the mental health system and stigma, especially among elders. Providers should discuss symptoms, not diagnosis, and explain their role and scope, to promote transparency and trustworthiness.
- While almost all Ukrainians speak and understand Russian as a second language, providers might choose to speak or use Ukrainian interpretation to establish better trust with the client. It is recommended that all providers approach the subject of language with care and understanding, ensuring appropriate interpretation is available for all migrants.
- Although attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ relationships and identities have been improving, homophobic and transphobic beliefs are still widespread. LGBTQIA+ refugees may experience more anxiety and grief about their peers left in Ukraine, fearing severe human rights violations and persecution if Russia succeeds in occupying the country. It will be important for providers to explain safety and non-discrimination in services and with interpretation.

On February 24, 2022, the Russian military invaded Ukraine. The ongoing violence and destruction in Ukraine is becoming one of the worst humanitarian crises in Europe since World War II, with millions of people being forcefully displaced, both internally and internationally. As of June 2022, UNHCR estimated that more than 5 million people have<sup>i</sup> fled to neighboring countries in Europe. The U.S. pledged in March 2022 to welcome more than 100,000 Ukrainians displaced by the conflict.<sup>ii</sup>

## Background

The current conflict in Ukraine is a continuation of almost a century of struggle for Ukrainian independence. This means that many Ukrainians have experienced historical trauma, or group trauma across multiple generations that can result in strengths, but also cumulative emotional and psychological impacts. This includes forced starvation from 1932-1933 resulting in over three million Ukrainians killed; five to seven million Ukrainians killed during World War II, including more than 1.5 million Ukrainian Jews who were shot to death and whose bodies were dumped in ditches, ravines and forests; and large-scale oppression and repression during the Soviet Era.

In 2013 and 2014, Ukrainians engaged in mass protest to overthrow then President Viktor Yanukovich, who was attempting to align Ukraine with Russia in the Eurasian Economic Union instead of the European Union (EU). Known as the Maidan Uprising or Revolution of Dignity, this mass protest resulted in the President being removed from office, which was then followed by Russia invading and annexing the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea.

## Current Crisis

In 2021, Russia began massing troops near Ukraine's borders in what it described as training exercises. In late February 2022, under the guise of conducting a "special military operation" intended to "denazify" and "demilitarize" Ukraine, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, striking major cities with missile and artillery attacks.

Russian forces continue to launch large-scale rockets and other munitions that are banned under international treaty at several Ukrainian cities causing widespread and indiscriminate damage to civilians and civilian areas. As of mid-June 2022, according to Reuters, the conflict has displaced more than 15 million people and caused 47,000 deaths including more than 4,000 civilians. Thousands of residential structures have been destroyed and certain cities and towns have been almost completely turned to rubble. Human Rights Watch, the United Nations and other organizations have documented significant human rights violations including sexual assault, summary executions and torture. Civilians in areas of conflict face major food and water shortages, and considerable barriers to receiving medical care or needed medication.

Men ages 18-60 have been barred from leaving Ukraine due to possible conscription; therefore, the vast majority of people that have left the country are women, children and people over the age of 60.

## U.S. Context

Ukrainians who were visiting the U.S. when the conflict erupted have been allowed to file for Temporary Protected Status (TPS), allowing them to stay legally in the U.S. for a designated period of time and apply for [employment authorization](#). Between the start of the conflict and April 2022, an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 Ukrainians including a small number of unaccompanied minors crossed from Mexico into the U.S., receiving [humanitarian parole](#) at the border. On April 21, 2022, the Biden Administration launched [Uniting for Ukraine](#), a program that allows U.S.-based supporters to sponsor Ukrainians for admission in the U.S. via

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humanitarian parole. The U.S. government also allowed for new applications for Ukrainians under the [Lautenberg Amendment](#), providing access to refugee processing for persecuted religious minorities to come to the U.S. to rejoin close family members.

New Ukrainian arrivals join more than a million Ukrainian Americans citizens across the U.S. Because there are different ways Ukrainians fleeing the conflict are entering the country, they may have differing documentation and benefit eligibility, contributing to confusion of providers and to those arriving. In response, the IRC, in partnership with Loyal Source, launched the [Uniting 4 Ukraine Support Line \(U4USL flyer\)](#). Ukrainian humanitarian parolees in the United States can call the hotline at (407) 591-3969, Monday through Friday [9am-5pm EST](#) to speak with a bilingual Ukrainian/English-speaking navigator to find resources in their community and access Office of Refugee Resettlement benefits, as applicable. The Office of Refugee Resettlement has issued a [fact sheet](#) that outlines benefits and services for Ukrainian humanitarian parolees. The fact sheet, featured on the [ORR homepage](#), is in English but you can use the website's translation feature in the top right-hand corner which includes Ukrainian and Russian translation features.

### **Mental Health**

During the Soviet Union, [psychiatry was used as a tool of repression](#) and people who were opposed to the Soviet Union and its policies were sometimes considered mentally ill and remanded to psychiatric hospitals where they were held against their will and at times underwent treatment that would be considered torture. This has understandably led to a high degree of mistrust of the mental health system and stigma, especially among elders.

In comparison to other European countries, Ukraine has a [high burden of mental health conditions](#) and a particularly high prevalence of depression, substance use disorders and suicide. Awareness of mental health symptoms and conditions and access to quality community-based treatment was historically low, and in 2021 Ukraine launched a new mental health service model called Community Mental Health Teams in partnership with the World Health Organization. Since the beginning of the war, these Teams have work to provide phone or remote consultations to people in Ukraine and neighboring countries.

Research shows that war and forced displacement have a wide range of negative mental health impacts, both short and long term. [Médecins Sans Frontières \(MSF\)](#) conducted over 1,000 interviews with Ukrainians that illustrate in people's own words their sense of fear, panic, isolation, and uncertainty about the future. While these reactions are normal, it is also well-established that trauma has a dose-dependent nature on mental health conditions, meaning that the more traumatic events one has the more likely one is to develop a mental health condition.<sup>iii, iv</sup>

Many Ukrainian Americans have extended family and loved ones in Ukraine and may be worried about their safety. They may also be seeing pictures of their country of origin destroyed, including familiar landmarks or even hometown neighborhoods. They may be receiving calls from friends and family requesting support or expressing fear or describing the conflict. All of this can lead to a sense of helplessness, fear, despair and overwhelm. For

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those new to the United States, this may also be coupled with recent war experience and feelings of guilt and even shame about leaving Ukraine. Newly arrival individuals and families can be simultaneously experiencing this distress while trying to learn how to navigate a new country, get a job, learn the language, and adjust to a new community.

It's important for providers to understand common reactions to war, forced displacement and adjustment stress, and be careful not to pathologize intense but normal reactions to abnormal circumstances. A brief guide for providers on how humanitarian agencies approach mental health may be useful and can be found [here](#).

**For more information on additional considerations, such as cultural factors, physical health, language, and LGBTQIA+ and other marginalized communities, you can read the full [Ukrainian Backgrounder](#) prepared by the IRC.**

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<sup>i</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/24/fact-sheet-the-biden-administration-announces-new-humanitarian-development-and-democracy-assistance-to-ukraine-and-the-surrounding-region/>

<sup>iii</sup> Mollica RF, McInnes K, Poole C, Tor S. Dose-effect relationships of trauma to symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder among Cambodian survivors of mass violence. *Br J Psychiatry*. 1998 Dec;173:482-8. doi: 10.1192/bjp.173.6.482. PMID: 9926076.

<sup>iv</sup> Steel Z, Chey T, Silove D, Marnane C, Bryant RA, van Ommeren M. Association of Torture and Other Potentially Traumatic Events With Mental Health Outcomes Among Populations Exposed to Mass Conflict and Displacement: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *JAMA*. 2009;302(5):537–549. doi:10.1001/jama.2009.1132