



The Impact of the Ukrainian War on Minors

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: This study aims to document and analyze the effects of the war in Ukraine on the physical and mental health of children and adolescents, including those residing within the country, refugees, and minors indirectly affected by the conflict.

MATERIAL-METHODS: A research algorithm was developed to search published studies in online databases (PubMed, Lancet, WHO, UNHCR, UNICEF) using keywords such as "Ukrainian war," "mental health," "impact," "children," and "adolescents." The main inclusion criteria were chronological (studies after 2022) and language-based (English, Greek). The analysis focused on the consequences of the war on the physical and mental health of minors. The final data collection date was 07/05/2024.

RESULTS: Data analysis revealed that the war has multiple negative impacts on children and adolescents: Physical health: injuries from explosives, infections, resurgence of communicable diseases due to interrupted vaccination campaigns, sexually transmitted infections, reduced access to medical care, and worsening of chronic conditions. Mental health: high levels of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, sleep disturbances, emotional distress, social withdrawal, and increased risk of abuse. Children who were internally displaced or fled abroad show increased vulnerability due to loss of parents, family separation, and difficulties integrating into new social environments. Additionally, exposure to digital media amplifies psychological stress and trauma in children not directly in the war zone.

CONCLUSIONS: The war in Ukraine has multi-level negative effects on the lives of children and adolescents. Addressing these impacts requires coordinated humanitarian assistance, strengthening of the healthcare system, psychosocial rehabilitation, promotion of mental resilience, and support for families and communities. Despite the challenges, the crisis also provides an opportunity to enhance health systems and improve conditions for the growth and development of children and adolescents.

KEY WORDS: Ukrainian war, children, adolescents, mental health, humanitarian crisis

Introduction

General information about Ukrainian War

On 24 February 2022, Russian troops invaded Ukraine by land, sea and air, declaring war, a situation that was the result of an escalation that had begun several years earlier (1).

Refugees and Destructions

According to UNHCR and the Migration Service (2), the Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused, among other impacts, civilian casualties and destruction of vital infrastructure, forcing people to flee their homes in search of safety, protection and assistance. The latest update on 7 May 2023 reports 8,183,357 refugees having crossed the border and taken refuge in other neighboring European countries, adding to the more than 5 million internally displaced people. It is estimated that 90% of these refugees are women and children, as the men have stayed behind to fight (3).

The devastation caused by these armed conflicts to the country's infrastructure has disrupted the lives of millions in Ukraine. Access to electricity, heating, water and telecommunications has been impossible or problematic (3).

Ukraine's already fragile health care system has been put under even more pressure following the attacks by Russian forces on hospitals, health centers, warehouses, ambulances and pharmacies. To date there have been a total of 959 health-related attacks. Of these, 859 were on health facilities, 17 on medical equipment warehouses and 257 on medical supplies, 112 were on ambulances and vehicles, 69 attacks affected medical staff and 27 affected patients. From these attacks, 101 deaths and 136 injuries have been recorded (4). Also, according to the World Health Organization, access to health services has been severely affected, both because of population displacement and difficulty in accessing them, and because of increased costs and limited availability of medicines (5),(6). In addition, there has been a worsening of pre-existing conditions affecting vulnerable social groups such as women and children, the elderly, people with disabilities or chronic diseases (diabetes, heart failure) (7).

Effects on Minors

According to the UN, serious violations of children's rights occur during wartime (8). The most serious of these are: the recruitment of children and their use on battlefields, killing and maiming, sexual violence against children, attacks on hospitals and schools, abduction of children for the purpose of trafficking, and the denial or obstruction of humanitarian aid (9). Children are increasingly exposed to malnutrition, hunger, and in conditions of extreme neglect (10). During wartime

children's mortality increases (11), (12).

The war in Ukraine is estimated to have put 7.5 million children and adolescents at extreme risk to their physical and mental health as they have been deprived of development opportunities and many of their basic needs have not met. These are none other than the need for safety, food, shelter, education and social support (12),(13),(14),(15). The purpose of this research is to identify the effects of the war in Ukraine on children and adolescents.

Materials and Methods

An algorithm was created in order to conduct research of published papers, using online databases (PubMed, Lancet, WHO, UNNCHR and UNICEF). Keywords such as, "Ukrainian war", "mental health", "impact", "children" and "adolescents" were used. The main inclusion criteria were a) chronological: research after 2022 and b) language: English, Greek. During the analysis of the studies on Ukrainian War, conclusions were drawn on the impacts of this war on the physical and mental health of minors. The final data survey date was the 07/05/2024.

Results

The analysis of research on the Ukrainian war identified effects of the war on the physical and mental health of children and adolescents, who were divided into 1. those residing in Ukraine, some of whom were displaced internally from Eastern Ukraine, 2. those who have fled to other countries, 3. and minors who did not directly experience the war.

Minors Residing Ukraine- Impacts on Physical Health

Wound infections: Children are much more at risk from explosive weapons than adults. They are much more likely to be injured in the face and head by an explosion and die or live with severe disability for the rest of their lives (7). In May 2022 alone, UNHCR reported 415 cases of children injured in war. The care of these wounds is very often incomplete due to the living conditions. The result is that the wounds have been contaminated (16).

Communicable diseases: Minors living in Ukraine have poor health supervision as the health system is tasked with caring for those injured in the armed conflicts. Thus, there is an upsurge in the transmission of infectious diseases to children. Another reason for transmission is that in the early 2000s in Ukraine there was a reluctance to vaccinate, resulting in low vaccination coverage for communicable diseases. Campaigns that launched in recent years were abruptly halted due to the war,

increasing the risk of spreading the disease (16).

Sexually Transmitted Diseases: Sexual violence is a common tactic of invaders in times of war to terrorize and displace populations more easily and it affects the physical and the mental health of the victims. Women, children and adolescents are more at risk of becoming victims of sexual violence. This can potentially cause the spread of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV (16), (12). Before the war, Ukraine ranks second in Eastern Europe in terms of HIV prevalence. After the outbreak of war, access to treatment for HIV-positive pregnant women was dramatically reduced, thereby increasing the risk of vertical transmission of the virus from mother to newborn (16).

Covid-19: Since the beginning and during the war, diagnostic tests for covid were dramatically reduced, vaccinations of the population with the third dose were stopped, while vaccines for children under 12 years of age were never supplied. It was also very difficult to adhere to preventive protection measures, as masks were in short supply and overcrowding in shelters for a long time prevented social distancing (16).

Environmental toxicity: Finally, the physical environment of war is an additional aggravating factor for the development of the child's brain. As in every war, so too in the war in Ukraine the exposure to toxic gases, carcinogenic substances and metals affects systems such as the respiratory, reproductive, hematopoietic etc (17).

Minors Residing Ukraine- Impacts on Mental Health

It is well known that children need security, stability and support in order to develop. The latter are dramatically disrupted in times of war, as they are daily exposed to danger (10).

War deprives children of predictability in their lives. The stress of such severe psychological trauma in childhood can cause neurological changes in the brain, affecting the synapses and connectivity of the various centers (17),(13) and intergenerational transmission of psychopathology in the long term (18).

Studies have shown that children who have experienced war, have high levels of insecurity about the future, anxiety about the safety of their adult caregivers, severe emotional distress (12), post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep problems, anxiety, depression, malaise, panic attacks, negative social behavior, aggression, poor school performance, psychosomatic problems and poor quality of life, some of which are likely to persist into adult life (17). One of the symptoms they may experience is withdrawal, children do not cry and do not seek attention. They may also have nightmares or regress to earlier developmental stages. In addition, parental stress can have a significant impact on children, increasing the chances of depression (17).

A common tactic in times of armed conflict is rape. Victims of sexual violence are likely to experience anxiety

disorders, depression, PTSD, suicidal ideation and substance abuse. In addition, they experience stigmatization and social isolation and are more likely to suffer gender-based violence in their adult life. Finally, children born from a pregnancy resulting from sexual violence are at increased risk of abandonment and of becoming victims of violence themselves (19). A Research about the impact of war on adolescents showed that psychological trauma caused by the war and daily stress is higher in children living in the war zone in Ukraine than in those living in more remote areas of the country. They also have an increased risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (OR 4.11, 95% CI 2.37-7.13), anxiety (OR 3.10, 95% CI 1.83-5.27) and depression (OR 2.65, 95%CI 1.79-3.92) (20). On the other hand, people who have been forced into internal displacement in Ukraine due to war conflicts, have suffered high levels of psychological trauma which, combined with unemployment, social isolation and lack of social support, lead to the development of mental disorders such as anxiety and depression. This increases the likelihood of alcohol misuse [(OR) 2.35, 95% confidence interval (CI) 1.33–4.16]]and especially by young adults which seems to lead to difficulty or refusal to seek care from health services. This creates a vicious circle that makes the situation even worse (20), (21).

It is worth noting that increased vulnerability is shown by people who already had mental and neurodevelopmental disorders. Given the timing of this war, immediately after the covid-19 pandemic and the quarantine periods, children and adolescents are likely to show reduced mental resilience and therefore greater vulnerability to trauma, worsening of symptoms and relapses (6). A special reference group are children with or without disabilities who live in an institution either because they have no parents or because their parents are unable to care for them due to poverty or incapacity. These children are particularly vulnerable as they are more likely to be negatively affected by the effects of war. In addition, the number of children living in institutions is expected to increase dramatically due to the loss of one or both parents in armed conflict, but also due to the long-term socio-economic impact on families' ability to care for their children (22). This is important as it seems that whether and to what extent children will be able to survive and overcome the traumatic experience depends to a large extent on the adult caregivers they have by their side (12).

However, the negative impact on children's mental health could be mitigated by focusing on mental resilience, adaptability and the ability to heal and recover (17).

Refugee Minors

From the first months of the war, many children and adolescents were forced to move to neighboring countries in order to find safety. This movement has led to a gap in health monitoring in the host countries. At the same time, the health systems in the host countries are in many cases under considerable pressure and find it difficult to meet the increased demands, thus lowering the level of care provided (23).

Host country records give an overview of the most common issues for which minors visit hospital facilities. As found in the records of Poland and Moldova these are mainly infectious and parasitic diseases, respiratory problems discontinuation of medication. It is estimated that this is due to the difficult conditions of war, the movement of the people, and the lack of vaccination coverage for children combined with the inability to receive effective treatment (24),(25). Finally, there is a need to continue to provide medical care for children suffering from chronic communicable and non-communicable diseases such as HIV and various forms of cancer in the host countries as well (26).

Forced displacement of children in Ukraine, separation from the family and forced migration are factors that aggravate the mental health of unaccompanied minors (13),(27). Other problems they have faced include difficulty in accessing support and health services due to language restrictions. They also experience isolation due to socio-cultural differences in host countries, and separation from family and friends (10), (28). The most common mental health problems experienced by Ukrainian refugee children are PTSD, depression and anxiety disorders (29). In some more serious cases, it is possible that specialist psychiatric intervention may be needed to address the problems that have arisen. Therefore, minors may need psychiatric monitoring or counselling in outpatient psychiatric clinics, or even hospitalization (30).

Risk factors that may affect the mental health of Ukrainian refugee minors include the loss of one or more family members, exposure to violence and abuse, the long duration of the journey under adverse conditions, long delays in settling and obtaining asylum in host countries, financial difficulties, and difficulty in communicating with family, absence of quality time and common activities (31),(32).

Minors who did not experience the war directly

According to Save the Children, even children living in countries far from Ukraine may be affected by the Ukrainian crisis. First, there is the risk of famine as Ukraine is one of the largest wheat producing countries. Equally important is the risk of an energy crisis following the disruption of oil and gas supplies from

Russia to the countries of Europe in particular (33). Another fear that the inhabitants of the countries neighboring Ukraine have is that of an escalation of the conflicts and their expansion. The threat of the use of nuclear weapons and the possibility of third countries becoming involved in the conflict increases the feeling of anxiety and insecurity (34).

In addition, children's access to information through digital media and social media exposes them to harsh images and information about war and its consequences, information that they often find difficult to cope with and that creates psychological trauma. The consequences of this trauma on children who have been directly and indirectly exposed to war is estimated to be like those of the Second World War, mainly due to the frequent and widespread reproduction of the horrors of war by the mass media (17).

Similar post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression due to the war may also be experienced by residents of other European countries, especially those bordering Ukraine. For example, the people of Poland, which is a country that has received the largest wave of refugee flows from the affected areas. Similarly, young people in the Czech Republic and Slovakia experience high rates of being concerned, anxiety and depression, especially those who receive more information about the war on TV or digital social media. (35) However, something similar can also happen to residents of countries that are far from the focus of the war but face similar problems and threats, such as the people of Taiwan who fear a similar attack by the Chinese military forces (35), (36).

Of particular interest is the way in which volunteering is related to the infliction of psychological trauma. It seems that the more one is involved in acts of solidarity and assistance in a time of war, the more anxiety and sense of threat one may feel. At the same time, however, these people also feel a moral satisfaction through this process (37).

Data for Greece

The data available for Greece are limited. According to the United Nations, until 31/3/2023, 22,704 refugees from Ukraine arrived in Greece (38). From research concerning the wave of immigrants of 1990-2000 (39), and one concerning recent inflows (40), it can be seen that both citizens and the country's policy is friendly to Ukrainian immigrants. The two countries have always had friendly relations, mainly due to a common religion, so the integration of immigrants in Greece was easy. There is no data on the effect of the war and refugee influx on children and adolescents in Greece, but it would be interesting

to study their attitudes in relation to this issue.

Discussion

Children and adolescents are at a critical and sensitive time in their lives, each age group with their own needs. In recent years the global context has become increasingly uncertain and threatening. The economic crisis, climate change, the covid-19 pandemic and now war, are disrupting the stability and security that minors need in order to develop into healthy and functional adults (41).

The research revealed the multi-level impact of war in Ukraine on the lives of minors, both those who have experienced war directly and those who have had indirect experience. The findings align with evidence from prior studies conducted in other armed conflicts, such as those in Africa or the Middle East. At this point it is appropriate to make some suggestions, which will contribute to the smoothest possible development of minors.

Humanitarian and financial assistance should be ensured in the countries involved to meet the immediate health and security needs of the citizens (7). With the end of the war, Ukraine's health system need to be strengthened and adapted to the new increased needs. Strengthening primary health care and developing telemedicine are some of the interventions deemed necessary (42). Also, special attention should be paid to the educational system.

Interventions for the psychosocial rehabilitation of children affected by the consequences of war should be geared towards their needs, focus on the immediate healing of the psychological trauma they have suffered and give emphasis on the development of psychological resilience, empowerment, adaptability and the development of social emotional skills (13),(7). Research has shown that among the factors that help manage trauma in children exposed to war are skill development, strengthened relationships, problem-solving abilities, and the development of one strong therapeutic relationship. Also, the strengthening of the family and the resilience of the community (17).

Limitations

An important limitation of the present review concerns the lack of empirical evidence regarding the reception and integration of Ukrainian adolescent refugees in Greece. Future research addressing this gap would provide valuable insights.

Conclusions

Despite the great difficulties and problems that the war has caused at many levels, it is still, like every crisis, an opportunity for improvement and change. The recent pandemic gave us an idea of what the global community

can achieve by acting in cooperation and solidarity to serve a common purpose for the good of all. So now is an opportunity to further strengthen countries' health systems, placing greater emphasis on improving the health of children and adolescents and ensuring better conditions for their growth and development.

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