



# Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

Snapshot of Plan International's Impact  
in East and Central Europe (2022-2025)

# About Plan International's Ukraine Humanitarian Refugee Crisis Response

Plan International initiated its Ukraine Humanitarian Refugee Crisis Response immediately following the escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 by setting up operations in Poland, Moldova, and Romania. The organisation established a presence within Ukraine in August 2022 and has since been amplifying civil society partners' integrated humanitarian programming in East and Central Europe (ECE).

Plan International and partners' humanitarian response aims to reduce the vulnerabilities and risks faced by refugees, displaced and conflict-affected people inside Ukraine and host countries. Whilst providing direct life-saving humanitarian assistance, Plan International's objective is also to address structural inequalities and promote social, gender, and economic justice across ECE by increasing the resilience, well-being, and agency of girls, young people, as well as minority or non-dominant groups.

By consistently maintaining partner spending above 70%, Plan International's localised and partner-led approach has ensured faster, more contextual and sustainable delivery of assistance, whilst strengthening the long-term capacity of local civil society actors in ECE. From 2022 to 2025, this approach has allowed Plan International to reach more than 1.7 million people across 65 partners and 87 projects in four countries.

## Plan International's reach by country in ECE



## Key insights

Across ECE, Plan International and partners have significantly expanded access to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services. By combining direct services and local capacity-building, partners' MHPSS work has supported recovery from the trauma of displacement by offering individuals the opportunity to rebuild self-esteem and develop coping mechanisms:

- MHPSS interventions in various formats, including group and individual therapy, enabled Plan International and partners to increase the well-being and emotional resilience of displaced and refugee

50K

people reached by Plan International and partners' MHPSS programming in ECE.

participants, including children, adolescents, and youth (CAY), in Ukraine and host countries.

- Improved psychological well-being strengthened interpersonal relationships and integration for displaced CAY and adults.

## Impact of MHPSS Interventions<sup>1</sup>

**Strengthening local capacities was key to delivering sustainable, community-based MHPSS interventions in ECE.** In **Ukraine**, for instance, Plan International's partners enhanced the knowledge and capacity of young psychologists, particularly those working in schools. Whilst this ensured they delivered effective, school-based mental MHPSS to children in need, it also led to a sustainable expansion of service availability. Teacher training to support basic MHPSS and child support at school also increased teachers' ability to engage students and build positive relationships, whilst psychological assistance provided to them contributed to a decrease in the level of burnout. Furthermore, interventions in Ukraine advanced the implementation of Plan International's **PALS** and **Parenting under Pressure** programmes by training facilitators to deliver these programmes in the regions with the greatest need.

**In Ukraine, group and individual therapy delivered through partners helped children build emotional resilience amidst ongoing conflict.** Partners' interventions have contributed to strengthening psychosocial care services in schools, improving emotional regulation, decreasing fear and anxiety, and increasing positive thinking amongst children. The supportive environment and guidance from professionals, combined with activities such as breathing exercises

and art therapy, further enhanced children's ability to navigate their feelings constructively. Over the last year, Plan International and partners' focus on MHPSS continued to be pivotal in Ukraine. Activities, including targeted sessions for children, individual counselling, and group psychological work, allowed for a targeted focus on issues of coping with grief and indefinite loss, both for the children themselves and their families.

### Plan International's approach to MHPSS in ECE

The prevalence of mental disorders in conflict-affected populations is around **22.1%**,<sup>1</sup> highlighting a critical need for support in conflict settings. People affected by the war in Ukraine are especially vulnerable due to ongoing stress, violence, and anxiety, requiring specialised care. In ECE, Plan International prioritises a holistic, life-course approach and ensures all project participants, partners, and staff have access to essential MHPSS services.

<sup>1</sup> Plan International has been using an integrated approach in its humanitarian response, working across multiple programmatic areas in projects. Whilst Plan International's entire strategy and project portfolio in ECE is humanitarian, interventions including protection and education work are humanitarian and often life-saving too.



Children take part in a group MHPSS activity in Ukraine © Voices of Children

**MHPSS interventions in various formats have also increased the well-being of participants from both refugee and local communities in host countries.**

In **Poland**, partners tailored services for children and women. Services including therapy, art and sport-based activities, as well as peer support networks, contributed to reducing stress and improving overall well-being. A referral system for specialised care was also established for severe cases, including survivors of GBV, with services available in Ukrainian and Russian.

Similarly, in **Moldova**, MHPSS services were delivered by partners through individual and group sessions, art therapy workshops, and social cohesion events. SEL and Psychological First Aid activities for host and refugee communities provided a safe space for CAY to express emotions and develop effective coping strategies. Whilst partners also supported the referral of at-risk children and relevant social assistance, the aforementioned activities significantly contributed to stress reduction and improved emotional well-being in both groups.

In **Romania** too, MHPSS interventions enabled CAY to access therapy to process trauma and develop coping strategies. For instance, partners supported Ukrainian and Romanian adolescents through daily-access youth spaces and trauma-informed programming. This addressed emotional challenges such as anxiety, guilt, and identity fragmentation, especially amongst boys.

In addition to CAY, interventions also addressed the psychosocial well-being of adults. In **Romania**, for instance, parents were provided with opportunities to alleviate stress and improve their well-being and communication with their children. Given the financial, bureaucratic

and social challenges they faced as they became heads of households, ongoing psychological support was specifically beneficial for women with children, as it contributed to their adoption of healthy coping mechanisms.

**Enhanced psychosocial well-being has also led to improved interpersonal relationships and integration for displaced CAY and adults.** For instance, in a project implemented in schools in **Ukraine**, group sessions increased children's openness and their willingness to socialise and improve relationships with classmates and friends. Similarly, a project providing Art Therapy boxes to children in Ukraine also had a positive effect on relationships within households by improving children's well-being and creating opportunities for caregivers and children to spend quality time together. Over the last year, the rollout of the **PALS** training further supported parents and children to navigate relationships and use healthy coping mechanisms to communicate in the high-pressure wartime context.

**In host countries, MHPSS interventions have also supported social cohesion and the integration of refugees into their new communities.** MHPSS sessions for refugee women from Ukraine in **Poland** have improved their psychological well-being. Whilst the sessions encouraged them to share this knowledge within their households, they have also contributed to women's integration by fostering support systems with other refugee peers and Polish individuals. In **Moldova** and **Romania** too, the provision of safe spaces for open communication during group MHPSS sessions or for intercultural activities, such as cooking workshops and art therapy, created a sense of solidarity between host and refugee communities.



# What are the key MHPSS needs and challenges in ECE?

## Selected findings from Plan International's research

The ongoing war in Ukraine has seriously affected CAY's mental health and psychosocial well-being. As Plan International's research shows,<sup>ii</sup> the emotional burden of displacement, losing family members and friends, as well as disruptions to education, have all deeply impacted CAY from Ukraine.

### Stress and anxiety caused by war experiences

Findings from Plan International's research in ECE highlight that adolescents from **Ukraine** demonstrate signs of **lasting psychological effects** from their experiences of the war, including high levels of stress and anxiety, sleep difficulties, and fluctuating emotions. Adolescents in areas under attack or on the frontline are deeply affected by the **constant threat of danger**. The ongoing stress and worry have increased their levels of tension. Whilst managing these circumstances often requires psychological support, adolescents and caregivers report a significant gap in access to essential specialist mental health services in Ukraine.

In **host countries**, many adolescents reported feeling **increased stress and pressure** due to having family members remaining in Ukraine. Many children from Ukraine reported feeling stressed in their daily lives and worried about their families' financial and housing issues. For adolescent boys, personal survival and societal expectations add to their emotional distress.

### Challenges for vulnerable groups

Research conducted by Plan International indicates that **adolescents with disabilities** affected by the war face increased levels of stress and anxiety due to existing barriers, such as social exclusion and limited institutional capacity to offer specialised support. The disruption caused by the war to consistent support systems, social networks, and essential services, such as regular therapy sessions, can all harm their mental health.

**Adolescents from the LGBTQI+ community** also encounter specific psychosocial challenges due to the hostility they faced before the war began. Fear of stigma and discrimination can deter adolescents from

seeking mental health support and can worsen feelings of isolation and harmful coping mechanisms.

Additionally, according to young people involved in Plan International's research on Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery, **soldiers and veterans** also urgently need mental health and psychosocial support. Reintegration into everyday life will be highly challenging for soldiers, and implementing reintegration programmes will be essential to support both veterans and their families.

### Difficulties for adolescents in host countries

Whilst refugees from Ukraine were very warmly welcomed in host countries at the beginning of the response, **anti-migration narratives** are escalating at an alarming rate. In this context, Plan International's research findings show that adolescent girls experiencing displacement in **Romania** and **Poland** are increasingly the targets of hate speech and harassment based on their nationality. Differences in cultures and perspectives in host countries also influence their integration. For example, adolescent girls in Poland expressed a particular distance from their local community counterparts due to language barriers and cultural differences.

Similarly, displacement has fractured friendships and peer groups, with many adolescent boys and young men struggling to build new connections due to **language barriers, cultural differences, and emotional withdrawal**. Some report experiencing survivor's guilt, feeling a sense of unearned privilege compared to peers who remain in Ukraine. Whilst some young men feel welcome and safe in their host countries, others perceive increasing hostility and feel pressure to return to Ukraine despite the risks.

### Adolescents' coping mechanisms

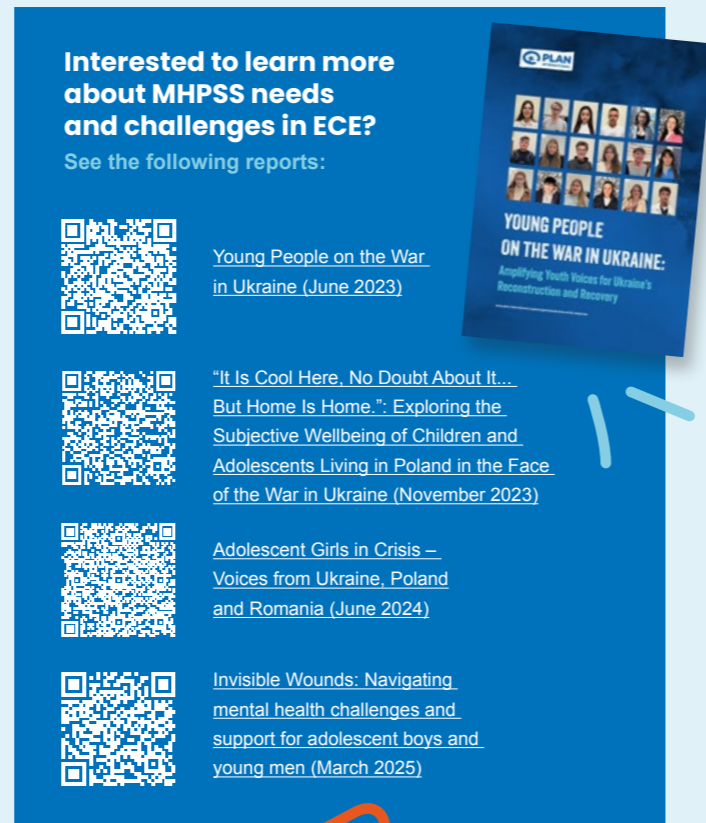
Family and friends can help reduce anxiety in adolescents, as a **trusted social environment** provides emotional comfort. To cope with the harsh realities of war and to foster a sense of normalcy and calm, adolescents also engage in activities such as reading, listening to music, drawing, playing sports, and walking with friends in nature.

However, according to Plan International's research, adolescents are also resorting to **harmful coping mechanisms** to handle stress and anxiety caused by the escalation of the war. In **Ukraine**, for instance, caregivers reported a noticeable rise in the use of electronic cigarettes and prolonged internet usage. Adolescent boys may also isolate themselves socially, engage in risk-taking behaviours, or use alcohol and online gaming as a means of escape. This underscores the need for MHPSS interventions that offer healthier alternatives for managing stress.

**Barriers to accessing MHPSS services**

The **lack of accessible information** about free mental health services and financial constraints related to private psychological support are common barriers preventing adolescents from knowing where to seek help, both in Ukraine and host countries. However, adolescent boys and young men face additional social and cultural obstacles that hinder their access to MHPSS services. As **traditional masculinity norms** discourage vulnerability and help-seeking behaviour, many suppress emotions to avoid appearing weak, thereby reinforcing their isolation and reluctance to seek mental health support.

**Interested to learn more about MHPSS needs and challenges in ECE?**  
See the following reports:



- Young People on the War in Ukraine (June 2023)
- "It Is Cool Here. No Doubt About It... But Home Is Home.": Exploring the Subjective Wellbeing of Children and Adolescents Living in Poland in the Face of the War in Ukraine (November 2023)
- Adolescent Girls in Crisis – Voices from Ukraine, Poland and Romania (June 2024)
- Invisible Wounds: Navigating mental health challenges and support for adolescent boys and young men (March 2025)



Adolescent girl at the Bucharest train station waits to board a train to Hungary © Plan International/George Calin

# References

- i Charlson, Fiona et al. (2019) "New WHO prevalence estimates of mental disorders in conflict settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis", The Lancet, Volume 394, Issue 10194, 240 – 248. [https://www.thelancet.com/journal/S0140-6736\(19\)31111-1](https://www.thelancet.com/journal/S0140-6736(19)31111-1)
- ii Plan International (2023) Young People on the War in Ukraine. Available at: <https://plan-international.org/publications/young-people-on-the-war-in-ukraine/>; Plan International (2023) "It Is Cool Here, No Doubt About It... But Home Is Home.": Exploring the Subjective Wellbeing of Children and Adolescents Living in Poland in the Face of the War in Ukraine. Available at: <https://plan-international.org/uploads/sites/98/2023/11/It-is-cool-here-no-doubt-about-it.-but-home-is-home.pdf>; Plan International (2024) Adolescent Girls in Crisis – Voices from Ukraine, Poland and Romania. Available at: <https://plan-international.org/publications/girls-in-crisis-ukraine/>; Plan International (2025) Invisible Wounds: Navigating mental health challenges and support for adolescent boys and young men. Available at: <https://plan-international.org/ukraine/publications/invisible-wounds/>.



# About

## Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge.

For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

**We won't stop until we are all equal.**




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