

# Civilian and Military Mental Health Concerns in Ukraine

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## Abstract:

The intense warfare within the borders of Ukraine has caused severe disruption to the lives of refugees, the citizens remaining in the country and the military engaged in the fighting. The invader's targeting of residential areas and supporting infrastructure is negatively impacting the mental health of civilians and military personnel. The international efforts to rebuild the nation at the conclusion of the hostilities must include a focus on rebuilding mental health diagnostic and treatment capability.

## Introduction

The most recent stage of the war in Ukraine began in February 2022 with the invasion by Russian military forces into the independent nation. In addition to the conflict between the invading forces and Ukrainian military, the civilian

population of Ukraine has been impacted by direct attack on residential, commercial, educational and health care facilities by the invading forces. More recent attacks on the nation's energy infrastructure are to the detriment of both the civilian and military population. Sources of

heating fuels, electricity, clean water and cell phone connectivity make daily life in Ukraine more harsh. Rocket and artillery attacks on nuclear power plants pose further dangers. Rather than focusing on military targets, the invading forces have also concentrated on civilian targets in an effort to demoralize the population.

### Defining The Crisis

As of mid-November, 2022 Statista reported on civilian casualties as verified by the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights. The verified counts were 6,557 deaths which included 408 children and 10,074 injured including 750 children. The hostilities also impact both the civilian population and Ukrainian military fighting to defend their homeland. Quirke et al (2022) write that the armed conflict has had “wide-ranging” consequences; “It has emphasized the need for comprehensive and sustainable reform of the Ukrainian mental health system.”

The Ukrainian Ministry of Health has estimated that 15 million people may be in need of professional help because of the war. Previous studies have indicated that certain segments of the population are more susceptible to mental health issues and that people in war zones are almost three times more affected by mental illness (trtworld 2022). For instance, 7.6 million refugees have left Ukraine and another 7 million have been internally displaced within the country. Children are affected by the violence including use of explosive devices in urban areas.

The elderly are impacted and their mental health issues are often influenced by physical health problems as well. The elderly may suffer because they feel unable to flee or because they cannot envision leaving their homes at an advanced age. With men summoned for, or volunteering for combat duty, women are often left in roles as head of households, fighting for themselves and the safety and well-being of their families.

A severely damaging aspect of war is the impact on mental health. Not since the end of World War II has Europe experienced such severe impact. The World Economic Forum (2022) predicts that 22% of the population in the area of conflict will experience a “mental health challenge” sometime within the next 10 years to include: acute stress; anxiety; depression; sub-

stance abuse; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The publication also estimates that 10% of these will suffer from a moderate or severe condition such as depression with “suicidal behavior or psychosis.” Gen. Mark Milley, one of America’s highest ranking military officers estimates that Russia and Ukraine have each suffered 100,000 troops killed or wounded. (Lock, 2022)

The Ukrainian conflict also causes concern for the mental health of military combatants, many of whom were civilians who volunteered for armed conflict. They had to leave their families and civilian occupations with short notice and many had little formal military training before joining tactical combat units. Audriy Sadoyvi, the Mayor of Lviv said: “Psychological support is crucial and it is one of the most critical needs right now.” (BMJ, 2022). Since 2015, many Ukrainian combat veterans have committed suicide, and a Ukrainian public health survey in 2020 found that 57% of military veterans needed psychological support according to Sadoyvi (ibid).

A contributing factor to the mental health of Ukrainian civilians and military is psychological warfare, the dissemination of misinformation or disinformation to targeted audiences with the goal of diminishing morale and weakening resolve (Abrams, 2022). Known as propaganda, earlier efforts made use of short-wave radio broadcasts aimed at civilian and military populations, but modern technology has facilitated the spread of propaganda through the use of social media platforms.

### Conclusion

The mental health situation in Ukraine will not come to an end when the hostilities conclude. The World Economic Forum also believes that people “with pre-existing mental health conditions who previously relied on public mental health and social care facing additional challenges in accessing the services they need.”

Ukraine has begun using Community Mental Health Teams (CHMTs) with support provided by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022). Although 65 such teams were in place at the start of the invasion, many more such teams would be needed to make a significant impact in Ukraine (ibid).

Institutional mental health facilities have also been impacted during the armed conflict. Smaller

facilities began to evacuate patients and staff to larger hospitals as hostilities intensified in certain parts of the country. In addition to receiving transferred patients from other facilities, hospitals like Lviv Regional Psychiatric Hospital have begun receiving civilians and military from the front lines of the war which experts say “is creating additional mental health scars that threaten to push Ukraine’s fragile health care system into a lasting crisis.” (MacDonald, 2022).

The effort to increase mental health treatment capability would seemingly require strong international support in the shorter term while the hostilities continue and in the longer term as the country attempts to rebuild.

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