
From Uncertainty to Perspective: the mental wellbeing of Ukrainian young people in the Netherlands

A qualitative study of experiences, needs and solutions from the perspective of Ukrainian young people themselves

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Colophon

The insights in this report can be shared thanks to the 62 Ukrainian young people who took part in this study. We would like to thank you for your trust and for sharing your experiences, your personal stories and your creative solutions.

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Summary

Both existing research and signals from the day-to-day practice of civil society organisations, reception centres and municipalities point to the mental health of Ukrainian young people as an urgent issue. This two-part study places the perspective of Ukrainian young people themselves at its centre. How do they experience their mental health? And what do they themselves see as solutions for improving access to mental support and mental health care?

Design and methodology

To gather the perspectives and experiences of Ukrainian young people, OpenEmbassy organised two rounds of expertpools in collaboration with the Loket Ontheemden Oekraïne Psychosociale hulp (LOOP), commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and Safety (JenV). The expertpool is a qualitative research method developed by OpenEmbassy, in which young people come together in a safe and culturally sensitive group setting. Part 1 of the study focused on gathering the experiences of Ukrainian young people in relation to their mental health. In part 2, we worked with young people to design concrete solutions that fit their perspectives and their everyday world. The expertpool sessions took place in Beek, Rotterdam and Zwolle. In total, 62 young people took part in the first part of the study and 42 young people took part in the design sessions in part 2.

Experiences of Ukrainian young people - key findings

The study points to the following overarching findings.

Uncertainty, instability and the loss of future perspective

The study shows that many young people experience prolonged uncertainty about their future, their residence status, their education and their housing situation. The war, worries about family members in Ukraine and the sense that their plans for the future have been abruptly interrupted create a great deal of mental pressure. Young people say they find it hard to make plans for the future, because they don't know what their situation will look like in a few months or a few years. The uncertainty about staying in the Netherlands in particular has a major impact on their sense of stability and of control over their own lives. In addition, many young people experience sadness and grief over the life they left behind in Ukraine and over the plans they have had to change.

Financial pressure and responsibilities

Financial pressure plays a major role in young people's daily lives. Many young people see income and work as necessary conditions for solving other problems, such as finding a place of their own, being able to pay for higher education or supporting their family. Some young people already carry considerable responsibility within the household at a young age, which can lead to stress, tension and to prioritising work over other needs and wishes, such as pursuing further education, making friends or spare time and relaxation.

Social connections as an important source of both support and tension

Social connections turn out to be one of the most important sources of support and resilience in the lives of the Ukrainian young people taking part in the study. However, the research shows that many young people experience feelings of loneliness and social isolation. The majority of participants say that they have built few or no new friendships since arriving in the Netherlands, either with Dutch or Ukrainian peers. They say they would like to have more social contact with peers and that they need support with this, for example in the form of activities that make low-threshold encounters possible.

A worrying signal emerging from the study is that many of the participating young people have experienced bullying, exclusion, prejudice or comments about their background, their accent or their language level. They do not always feel that teachers are able to support them with this. At the same time, the study shows that schools can also be an important source of support. According to young people, positive relationships with teachers and mentors contribute to their sense of safety and to their personal development.

The role of parents is also decisive for the mental wellbeing of Ukrainian young people. Daily contact with parents or other family members helps some young people cope with stress, uncertainty and feelings of loneliness. Young people say that emotional support and the feeling that their family is proud of them have an important positive influence on their mental wellbeing. But the study also shows that not all young people can fall back on support from their family. Some young people experience tension or a lack of support from their parents, which reinforces feelings of loneliness and mental pressure.

A lack of privacy at reception centres plays an important role

The study identifies both reception centres and schools as important living environments that influence young people's mental wellbeing. Most of the young people taking part in the study experience life in a reception centre as stressful because of the lack of quiet, privacy and personal space. Young people say that it is difficult for them to withdraw in order to process emotions, which also stands in the way of access to certain forms of mental support or self-regulation. For many young people, the lack of any prospect of independent housing is an important source of stress.

Solutions and recommendations from young people themselves

The following overarching recommendations from young people themselves emerged from the design-oriented expertpool sessions.

→ Organise and facilitate more accessible activities for young people that connect with their everyday world and perspectives

Young people emphasise the importance of activities that match their interests and their everyday world, so that they can meet peers through a shared interest or activity. Young people themselves would like to play an active role in organising activities, and want to be supported and guided in doing so. Important preconditions are transport, accessibility and attention for young people living in smaller municipalities where fewer activities are available.

→ **Make information about mental health visible and accessible, and share it in a way that matches how young people find and process information**

According to the young people taking part in the study, there is a need for information about mental health so that young people can better understand their own mental situation, know what forms of mental support exist and know how they might gain access to them. Using the social media platforms young people already use (such as TikTok, Instagram and Facebook) rather than formal channels alone means information will reach young people more quickly, without them having to go looking for it deliberately. Short videos and informal forms of communication, such as the use of memes, are named by young people as effective ways of reaching them. They do stress, however, that there should always be a mix of informal channels and information shared by formal organisations, for example by schools, the municipality or the reception centre.

→ **Young people ask for attention to greater privacy and personal space as a condition for improving mental wellbeing at reception centres**

The lack of privacy and of a space of their own in which to withdraw, process emotions or hold online conversations with a psychologist stands in the way of young people's access to mental support and coping mechanisms. They need more privacy, for example through the use of partition screens where individual rooms are not possible, and rooms for specific purposes: such as a recreation room for young people, a quiet study space or a separate room for making calls for personal conversations or (online) mental support.

→ **Invest in the preconditions for integration and offer perspective for the future**

The uncertain outlook for their future and the uncertainty about their residence status are the greatest obstacles for young people in making plans and experiencing more stability. The young people taking part in this study therefore say that, for their mental wellbeing, it is important to invest in the preconditions needed to build a life in the Netherlands: clarity about their residence prospects, access to (further) education, access to language education, guidance and support in finding their way in the Netherlands, and entry to the Dutch housing market are important points of attention.

Finally: involve young people actively in policy and its implementation

The most important conclusion of the study is that young people do not only want to receive support, but also want to contribute actively to solutions. They want to help think through information campaigns, to be actively involved in their reception centres, to organise activities and to share their perspectives on policy that affects their daily lives and their future prospects.

Young people stress that solutions work better when they connect with their everyday world. This underlines the importance for municipalities, reception centres, civil society organisations and schools to enter into conversation with young people and to see them as an essential part of designing the solutions needed to improve their mental wellbeing. The central call of this report is therefore: involve Ukrainian young people actively, from the outset, in the design, implementation and evaluation of policy and interventions that apply to them.