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## **Children of war: understanding the social impact on and the needs of children affected by the Russian War in Ukraine<sup>1</sup>**

### *Introduction*

Sociological and psychological research can contribute significantly to our understanding of the specific needs of children affected by war. Studies on psychosocial effects, displacement, personality development, education, and social assistance systems highlight the challenges faced by these children and provide valuable information for developing targeted programs to support them during the Russian war in Ukraine. The formation of a child occurs primarily through social interactions with peers and significant others (Mead, 1934), as well as through the favorable social environment, and a full-fledged education that should serve as a mechanism of social integration and transmission of cultural values (Durkheim, 1977), and this is what children are partially deprived of during the war. The challenges of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine create a completely new context for understanding how Ukrainian children's childhood is spent when the war affects every region and has a very large scale impact on society. New empirical data from wartime research sheds light on the specific manifestations of the war's impact on Ukrainian children and social trends in their development. The analysis in this article is largely based on a special study "Problems of Ukrainian children in conditions of war" conducted by the Sociological Group "Rating" among mothers about the problems of Ukrainian children after a year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but is not limited to this study.

*Limitations of the analysis:* The main focus is children who can be reached by research today in Ukraine when parents and children are relatively safe and ready to talk about their lives in a survey. Whereas many children have been deported and remain under occupation and it is still impossible to reach them, and at the same time, the Russians commit an incredible number of war crimes against them every day (NGO "Kharkiv Institute of Social Research", 2022). Therefore, the complete extent of children's trauma and the impact of the war on them only will be known after the libera-

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tion of the entire territory and the safe return of children to their homes, but now the work should be done with the current data in mind and build an understanding of what the future development of children of this war may be.

### *Interruption of the Educational Process*

Engagement in the educational process is very important in the process of adapting a child to the conditions of life during the war. The theory of social reproduction developed by P. Bourdieu suggests that educational systems play a crucial role in maintaining the existing social order (Bourdieu, 1977). Also, if we analyze learning in the context of wartime conditions, according to the theory of social context by J. Garbarino (Garbarino, 1999) one of the most important points is the restoration of a normalized social environment to support children's development and rehabilitation after experiencing war. Such an environment for a child is his or her usual circle of friends, classmates, and the learning process that reminds them of the calm pre-war school days. Access to education is a key factor in children's resilience during war (Prince-Embury et al., 2013), as it promotes positive self-identification and adaptation to war-affected contexts. At the same time, in Ukraine, during the war, according to a study by the Sociological Group "Rating", only 26% of people regularly attend educational institutions, while most others study either online or in a mixed form (Sociological Group "Rating", 2023c). And yet, according to this study, it is among those who study online that parents observe the greatest deterioration in their children's mental and physical health compared to the pre-war period. According to previous international studies (Christensen et al., 2008), children's relationships with peers and the expansion of communication networks play an important role in mitigating the negative effects of war and developing children's resilience and psychosocial recovery. Therefore, personal physical interaction with peers and teachers in the process of integration and learning directly at school or kindergarten is the most critical for full development and socialization, for leveling psychological trauma.

Also, among those who mostly study online, compared to the pre-war period, children's academic performance and the quality of education according to their mothers (Sociological Group "Rating", 2023c) have also deteriorated. This change has occurred for all forms of education, but it is greater for those who study online. One of the reasons is also more frequent absenteeism, which is higher among those who study online. Also, among those who study online, nearly one-third report that there are not enough devices for their child's education (Sociological Group "Rating", 2023c), which is a barrier to successful learning because not everyone has access to high-quality gadgets with full online access.

Also, one of the key factors that contribute to other problems (including lack of access to education) is the proximity of the child's place of residence to the frontline area. For example, in the frontline regions (Kharkiv, Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, Kherson, and Odesa), every tenth adult said that their child does not study anywhere, which is different from the Central and Western regions, where there are fewer such children (Sociological Group "Rating", 2023c). Among those who do not have such an opportunity, the main reason why their child does not study is that the school or kin-

dergarten is not working because of the war. Moreover, in the frontline settlements, the vast majority (79%) of those who study — do it exclusively online without the possibility to attend an educational institution permanently or in a mixed form, while in other regions, even in the de-occupied ones, the rate of online learning does not exceed half of the respondents, and in the western regions, it is only 10% (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c). The choice of online education in schools in these regions is understandable, because according to a study among school administrators, while in most regions the main factor for choosing the form of education was the opinion of parents or the availability of shelters, in the eastern region this decisive factor was the security situation on the ground (The State Service of Education Quality of Ukraine, 2023). In addition, in the frontline and de-occupied territories, the lack of teachers is more often reported than in other regions (because these are the regions where the most IDPs have left), as well as the lack of electricity and the Internet (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c). Accordingly, this has influenced the fact that the quality and success of children’s education in the frontline areas has deteriorated more than in other regions, according to parents.

Even for those who are able to continue their online or offline education, the war creates additional obstacles. More than half of the surveyed mothers of children enrolled in schools/kindergartens said that air alerts, power outages, or lack of internet were the reasons for their children’s absences from school almost every day or several days a week (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c). Interruptions to the learning process can have negative psychological and emotional consequences for children. Full lessons provide a sense of structure, routine and intellectual stimulation, which is crucial for a child’s cognitive development and psychological well-being. When this process is constantly disrupted, children can experience increased levels of stress, anxiety, and frustration, which can negatively impact their motivation, engagement, and overall mental health. Therefore, for mothers, taking their children abroad can be not only a way to save their children from war, but also to protect them from the lack of a proper education and a favorable environment. This is one of the reasons why refugees abroad with young children, especially those of school age, may be less likely to consider returning to Ukraine. Although refugees assess the level of education in Ukraine as good, in some countries, such as the UK, Germany, and the US, refugees rated education in that country of residence rather better than in Ukraine, according to a Rating Online survey abroad (Opora, 2023). In another separate survey conducted by the Educational Ombudsman Service among refugees whose children are studying abroad, they rated teachers’ attitudes toward children, respect for rights, professionalism of teachers, greater relevance of education abroad to real life, and respect for children better than in Ukraine (Educational Ombudsman of Ukraine, 2022). Of course, the main problem for children studying abroad is the language barrier, but many countries are trying to integrate Ukrainian schoolchildren by creating integration classes for them (Dembitskyi et al., 2022), in such classes children of all ages have the opportunity to learn the local language.

Interestingly, women with children (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023b) are the most tolerated among the categories of those who left Ukraine, which means that these women may feel less social pressure to return because they are protecting their

children while abroad. The factor of having a child may even outweigh the presence of a partner in Ukraine, when the desire to secure the child's future abroad is greater than the desire to return to the family at home. Child safety is a special area of responsibility for parents. And in Ukraine, everything related to children has a different perception for parents, because if they can ignore anxiety themselves, they take it more seriously when they are with their children, because they are responsible for them (Sociological Group "Rating", 2023a). As for the future for war refugees, in the Rating Online survey abroad, we also see that while 42% of refugees definitely see their future in Ukraine, only 24% of those with children definitely see a future in Ukraine (Opora, 2023), which indicates that many are not ready to return home because of the threat and lack of vision of opportunities for child development in Ukraine.

### *Age Differences*

Of course, the chaotic lifestyle and living conditions and the atmosphere of suffering during the war have a great impact on the psychological state of children. In general, mothers in Ukraine rated their children's psychological state before the war as very good by 35%, while now during the war, the rating is three times lower — 11% (Sociological Group "Rating", 2023c). Speaking about the change in academic performance during the war in this study, it is interesting that the change in academic performance was greatest for junior and middle school students, while for senior students, the weakening of results in the final grades was probably unacceptable, so this drop is less noticeable there. On the other hand, the biggest deterioration in psychological state was among the oldest children (16-17 years old) (Sociological Group "Rating", 2023c). Also, according to the study, among those who were forced to change their school class, it was high school children who had the hardest time adapting: among high school students, half as many children feel very good in their new school as among junior high school students (rating). This can be partially explained by the concept of role tension (Merton, 1957), which occurs when people have difficulty fulfilling the expectations and demands of their social roles. These future graduates may face pressure when they are at a crucial stage of their educational journey, preparing for exams and making important decisions about their future, while the social conditions, contexts, and expectations they built before the war may now have changed dramatically. The war destroys their academic environment and creates additional stress, the need to find new solutions for the future of the educational institution, and creates additional uncertainty. Quite often, war also causes adolescents to distrust the whole world and lose their illusions (Zhdan et al., 2022). Also, for the oldest children, war can impose responsibilities, such as family support, care for younger siblings, or for boys, thoughts of coming of age and future military service. In addition, older children are more fully engaged in social processes in the large-scale transformations taking place in Ukraine and are better able to realize the seriousness of the war and its potential long-term consequences, and to experience increased anxiety, fear and uncertainty about their future prospects and the stability of their society. It is among the oldest children that most parents recognize that their children need psychological help (So-

ciological Group “Rating”, 2023c). It is important that in Ukraine, as a country with a weak culture of visiting psychologists, today every fifth person in general and every third among young people says that psychosocial support is the most necessary (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023a). This indicates the readiness of the population to work with psychological health.

For children of all ages, the war had traumatic consequences, but these traumatic events can have different forms and depths of impact for different ages. Among the factors that caused traumatic psychological conditions in children, mothers most often reported fear of loud noises. This is generally the most frequently reported problem, as 55% of mothers said they had experienced this problem, and this is especially true for the youngest children under 9 years of age (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c). While among middle and high school-age children, parents recorded irritability and apathy, indifference to learning and past hobbies relatively more often. Signs of anxiety such as fear of the future, sleep problems, nightmares, memory and concentration problems, and withdrawal were also more often recorded in older children. But the reflection of traumatic events in games and creativity is observed among the youngest (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c). It is not surprising that playing at the military or giving to charity has also become a common pastime for many children during the war, as another survey found that half of children and youth currently spend their savings on charity (National Bank of Ukraine, 2023). In general, the reflection of traumatic events in play and creativity among young children can be seen as a form of symbolic expression, where they use symbols and play to recreate or rethink their experiences. With the help of these symbolic representations, children can try to understand events, gain a sense of control and find ways to cope with their emotions, such symbolic play, according to psychologists, can help children to survive their traumatic experience and regain a sense of control over their lives (Salmond et al., 2011). In addition to these problems, outbursts of anger and aggression were also a relatively frequent problem, regardless of age, which is not surprising given that an increase in the emotion of anger is observed among Ukrainians in general during the war (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023a). The manifestations of increased anxiety among children were confirmed by teachers in the survey (GO Global, 2023).

Interestingly, the regional dependence on psychological and traumatic consequences is weaker than in the context of learning and health problems. Only the West is characterized by a lower level of problems that bothered the child, in particular, among the Western regions, the rate of children being afraid of loud sounds is significantly lower compared to other regions (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c). At the same time, of course, there is also a certain difference in the degree of traumatic events experienced, as among the western regions, the fewest children have experienced relocations, and among the western and central regions, fewer children have witnessed shelling, bombing, and occupation. A relatively common traumatic event that does not have very large differences across regions is separation from relatives — about a third of children experienced this regardless of the region of residence, as it can be a consequence of their own relocation or the departure of other relatives and friends from their homes.

### ***Traumatic Events and Forced Displacement***

The main cause of significant psychological consequences is, of course, the experience of traumatic events. According to the results of the survey of mothers, 60% of children witnessed or participated in some war-related events (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c). Most often, according to mothers, children were separated from their families and relocated to another region of the country (28 and 25%, respectively). The figure of 24% of respondents who said that their children had witnessed shelling and bombing is also very significant. Prolonged stay in a cold room was experienced by 17%, moving abroad and returning — 11%, being under occupation — 8%, witnessing the death of relatives or friends — 6%, losing housing — 5%, experiencing hunger and lack of water — 5% (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c).

A very significant factor of the war’s impact on children is moving and changing their place of residence, as even among those children who stayed in Ukraine, a quarter to a third were forced to leave their homes and move (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c). Forced migration is a contributing factor to the emergence of maladaptive states, and according to psychologists, it can also be a provoking factor for mental illness (Halchenko et al., 2019). In addition to the trauma of displacement itself, children are also stressed by their parents, who are experiencing many problems due to displacement: according to a study of the situation of IDPs with children, the main problems for parents are finding a job, finding housing, and many had to live in less than comfortable conditions conducive to learning and development: for example, a significant number of IDPs with children live in a dormitory, hostel or temporary camp for displaced persons (SOS Children’s towns in Ukraine, 2023).

Another important fact is that among children who currently live outside their homes, 40% were forced to change their educational institution (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c). Moving and changing the environment have an impact on child development, in particular, among children of internally displaced persons, parents notice a change for the worse in their child’s academic performance, physical and psychological health. There is also a higher rate of those who, according to their parents, need psychological help, and not only those who still live outside their homes but also those who have left and returned (including Kyiv residents) — for both categories, about 17-18% declare the need for such help, while among those who have not changed their place of residence, it is 10% (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c). It is also often not only a consequence of moving but also a consequence of trauma due to events that forced parents and families to leave their homes: while 8% of children in general have experienced the occupation, among IDP children, it is one in four (24%) (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c) who was forced to live in the occupied territory before leaving for a safe area.

This dependence also applies to the loss of housing and home: 22% of IDP children have experienced such a loss, while among others it is only 1-2% (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c). In general, the loss of a home significantly correlates with the need for psychological assistance: among those who have lost their homes, 30% of parents say their child needs psychological support, although among all of them, it is only 13% (Sociological Group “Rating”, 2023c), and this category also has a greater difference



between the child's mental state before and during the war. Loss of housing means disruption of the physical and social environment with which children are familiar. Housing provides a sense of security, belonging, and stability, and its loss can create a state of turmoil, uncertainty, and loss of involvement in society. In social psychology, the severity of the home loss is explained by the fact that children rely on stable and familiar environments to develop a sense of identity, establish routines, and create social bonds (Kreps, 1981). When children lose their homes, they are not only deprived of physical shelter, but also of the social networks and support systems associated with their former residence. This change can contribute to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and insecurity, which can have a significant impact on a child's psychological well-being.

Children are also very traumatized by the war when they witness the death of people, and witness suffering and cruelty with their own eyes. It is among children who have had such traumatic experiences that parents are more likely to assess their children's signs of fear of the future, nightmares, and fright from loud noises (Sociological Group "Rating", 2023c). In addition, in war conditions, the failure to meet basic needs (poor nutrition, significant physical activity, lack of a sense of security, love and affection) can be a serious traumatic factor (Chuiko et al., 2019). In particular, according to the study, among children who were forced to experience hunger or lack of water, the rate of indifference to past hobbies, irritability, outbursts of anger, and fear is also quite high (Sociological Group "Rating", 2023c). To a somewhat lesser extent, but there is a similar trend among those who experienced cold by staying in a cold room for a long time. Interestingly, when comparing such traumatic events as moving to another region and moving abroad, moving within Ukraine is a more traumatic experience, because the child still remains in the war environment under shelling and anxiety, in particular, the fear of loud noises is significantly higher, and there are more people in this category who left the hottest spots close to the front line.

On the other hand, it is important to note that although there are differences in the severity of certain problems depending on the specific traumatic experience, at the same time, any traumatic experience, whatever it was, caused significantly more harm (especially in terms of fear of loud noises and sleep problems) compared to those who were lucky enough not to have experienced any of these events (Sociological Group "Rating", 2023c): among those children who avoided any traumatic experience, the index of distress for these psychological and behavioral problems does not exceed 1.4 on average (the index ranges from 1 to 5, where 1 is "not at all disturbed" and 5 is "very disturbed" by a particular problem) and 1.8 for the most common problem of fear of loud noises, while for those who unfortunately had any of the negative experiences, this index of fear of loud noises is 2.5, and for the most traumatic experiences it is higher.

### *Conclusion*

The findings of the research underscore the huge importance of addressing the needs of war-affected children especially in the context of education and social integration. The accessibility to full-fledged education during war is a significant factor in promoting children's resilience, and the physical interaction with peers and teachers

is especially important for child development and psychosocial recovery, in contrast to online education, which provides fewer such opportunities.

Thus, the research also reveals challenges in providing education to war-affected regions. The residences close to the front-line territories mean closure of educational institutions, and the lack of resources such as teachers, electricity, and internet connectivity, what significantly hinder their access to quality education. The disruptive nature of war, including air strikes, occupation, migration, power outages, changing schools, and internet disruptions, further escalate the difficulties faced by children, leading to increased stress and frustration in facing the future. The chaotic conditions during war negatively impact children's psychological well-being and their academic performance. Refugee children, particularly those who have experienced trauma, also often struggle with disrupted social structures, loss of community support, and a bigger need for mental health services.

The analysis also highlights the concerns of parents regarding the future prospects of their children, since part of refugees abroad expressed a reluctance to return to Ukraine due to limited opportunities for child development in the future. Child safety becomes a paramount concern for parents, often outweighing other factors in the decision to return. Trauma events also can have a lasting influence on children. The impact of war trauma can vary depending on the age of the child, with younger children often experiencing difficulties in emotional regulation, fear of loud noise, behavior, and cognitive development, while older children may face psychological challenges, apathy, and challenges of identity formation during the entry into adulthood, having a greater burden of awareness of the consequences of war. Understanding the specific challenges faced by children of different ages is crucial for providing effective support.

While some progress has been made in the field of war trauma research, there is still a need for further investigation. Continued research efforts can help deepen our understanding of the long-term war effects on children, identify effective support strategies and programs aimed at mitigating the impact of trauma, especially such harmful effects due to research experience as losing one's home, and also occupation, witnessing deaths, air strikes. Outcomes for children who have experienced traumatic events can be investigated through research to promote their overall well-being, provide psychological help and predict future needs. It is important to recognize that trauma is a complex issue, and each child's experience is unique. Individualized approaches that take into account the child's age, developmental stage, regional background, and personal circumstances are essential for addressing the diverse needs of children who have experienced war. This research emphasizes the urgent need for targeted interventions and support programs to address the specific needs of war-affected children in Ukraine. By providing access to education, facilitating social integration, and prioritizing their psychological well-being, their resilience can be fostered. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this study is only the beginning of understanding the challenges faced by Ukrainian children. Further research and expanded efforts are necessary to ensure that the field of sociology listens to children of war voices and addresses their specific needs.



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## ТЕТЯНА СКРИПЧЕНКО

### Діти війни: розуміння соціального впливу та потреб дітей, які постраждали від російської війни в Україні

У статті розглядається вплив російської війни в Україні на дітей. Досліджуються проблеми, з якими стикаються діти, та потреби цільової підтримки їх. Спираючись на соціологічні дослідження, автор робить наголос на порушенні соціальних взаємодій, руйнації навколишнього середовища та неповноцінності освіти, спричинених війною, а також аналізує вікові, регіональні та міграційні відмінності щодо соціально-психологічних наслідків та потреб дітей. На підставі емпіричних даних та спеціального дослідження Соціологічної групи «Рейтинг» серед матерів у статті висвітлюються конкретні прояви впливу війни на українських дітей. Дослідження увиразнює необхідність індивідуального підходу для підтримки стійкості дітей під час війни з урахуванням конкретного досвіду травматичних подій, а також важливість задоволення унікальних потреб дітей різних категорій під час війни для сприяння їхньому розвитку.

**Ключові слова:** діти війни; російська війна в Україні; соціологічні дослідження; психологічні дослідження; психологічна травма; освіта; міграція; ВПО; соціальні взаємодії; емпіричні дані; стійкість

## TETIANA SKRYPCHENKO

### Children of war: understanding the social impact on and the needs of children affected by the Russian War in Ukraine

*The article examines the impact of the Russian war in Ukraine on children, explores the challenges they face, and the need for targeted support. Drawing on sociological research, the author highlights the disruption of social interactions, the environment, and poor education caused by the war. She also analyzes age, regional, and migration differences in socio-psychological consequences and needs. Based on empirical data and a study conducted by the Sociological Group “Rating” among mothers, the article underscores specific manifestations of the war’s impact on Ukrainian children. The study emphasizes the importance of an individualized approach to supporting children’s resilience in times of war, taking into account their unique traumatic experiences and emphasizing the importance of addressing their specific needs to foster their development.*

**Keywords:** children of war; Russian war in Ukraine; sociological research; psychological research; psychological trauma; education; migration; IDPs; social interactions; empirical data; resilience