



2024 January - June

Child Protection Monitoring Report

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Author of the photo: Photo: Luna Vieira for the IRC

12 April 2023 – Salzgitter-lebenstedt, Germany. Balloons with affirmations hand-crafted by parents of students at the Ostertaal Primary School.

It is estimated that over half of Ukrainian children have been displaced due to the war. Currently, there are **981,355** registered refugees in Poland, with **over 44%** estimated to be children.

Common potentially traumatic events (PTEs) experienced post-displacement include uncertain legal status, altered family dynamics, and insufficient social and educational support. Post-migration stress and low mental health levels are prevalent among refugee children living in host countries. Child protection is a cornerstone of support. Children's needs, as well as protective and risk factors, are highly diverse. This underscores the importance of monitoring their evolving situations over time.

In the previous cycle of Child Protection Monitoring, children's voices highlighted issues such as social isolation and a lack of friendships in Poland. Additionally, emerging risks and exacerbating factors included language barriers, increasing discrimination, and bullying. In the second report, two major risks were identified among Ukrainian children: poor mental health and psychosocial well-being, and bullying.

These same two significant risks were identified in this report. Additionally, IRC Child Protection Monitoring highlights a growing risk of child labor.

Over the six months covered by the monitoring, several significant changes affecting the situation of children have emerged, including:

- Compulsory schooling, which is a condition for receiving financial support under the 800+ program per child. From September 1, 2024, children from Ukraine are subjected to the obligation of one-year preschool preparation, compulsory education and learning in the Polish education system. The payment of the 800+ parental benefit will be tied to fulfilling this criterion.
- The introduction of Child Protection Standards (the so-called Kamilek Act). The law applies to all institutions and locations where children are present, including temporary refugee accommodations and collective housing centers. These standards are intended to guide all child-facing institutions in creating binding documents that address the identification and response to child abuse.
- An important step was the establishment of a working group for the educational integration of Ukrainian children by the Ministry of Education. The aim is to organize cross-sectoral knowledge and recommendations on educational integration. The topics include the standards of inclusive schools, the well-being of students in multicultural schools, and supporting the identity of students with migration experiences.
- Also noteworthy is the submission for public consultation of the regulation on the detailed conditions for providing support to equalize educational opportunities for children and youth from Ukraine in the 2024–2027 school years, as well as the draft law on the Government's program to equalize educational opportunities for children and youth from Ukraine, "School for All."



Photo: Tamara Kiptenko for the IRC

In addition to General Protection Monitoring activities, the IRC conducts Child Protection (CP) Monitoring. The aim of this activity is to explore the perspective of children from Ukraine (age 12-17) on their situation in Poland. An approach based on child participation allows to better understand the best interest of each individual child. Monitoring focuses on the psychological consequences of displacement for Ukrainian children, their perception of safety in Poland, their support networks (relationships with family and peers), and their integration into the host community.

From January to June 2024 IRC Protection Monitoring Team interviewed 68 children from Ukraine. Interviews took place in Warsaw (n=40), Katowice (n=17) and Gdynia (n=11).

Parents or legal guardians also complete the demographic data, including age, gender, household composition, disabilities, or chronic illnesses of the child. Interviews take place in public spaces, and parents/legal guardians are absent. The preference is for the interviews to be conducted by two interviewers (one conducting the interview, while the other takes notes). Moreover, all quotes and notes are translated into English from both Ukrainian and Russian.

- **Methods:** Semi-structured interviews, that allow for a balance between standardized questions and the flexibility to explore individual perspectives. The data analysis employed the method of thematic analysis along with qualitative coding (initial and axial).
- **Sampling:** Convenient, non-probabilistic sampling was used. Since the aim was to obtain an in-depth qualitative analysis, these results should not be generalized for the overall population of Ukrainian children in Poland.
- **Child-centered approach:** Prioritizes the perspectives, needs, and experiences of children in research or interventions. It involves actively engaging children in the process by considering their input valuable and utilizing child-friendly methods to ensure their comfort and effective communication.

The qualitative analysis is based on the social-ecological model. This model explores the complex interplay among individual, relational, community, and societal factors.

Qualitative coding was conducted based on vulnerabilities and protective factors outlined in the Child Protection Case Management Training Package for Caseworkers in Humanitarian Settings (2023) and in the Socio-Ecological Model described by UNICEF (2023).

Limitations:

- The selection of participants depends on the availability and particular characteristics of the respondents (e.g., age, nationality, specific experience, possibilities of reaching respondents). Availability also relates to the ethical principle of voluntary participation. Ensuring that participants have the freedom to choose whether or not to participate without coercion or undue influence is essential. This means respecting the availability of individuals to consent to participate based on their own circumstances and preferences.³
- All of the participants were Ukrainian citizens. There were no Third Country Nationals. Although this can be understood as a limitation, it aligns with IRC's CPM guidelines.
- The interviewer's impact and the social desirability effect (the tendency to present one's behaviors and thoughts favorably) are more prominent in qualitative research, particularly in semi-structured interviews, made by adults with children.
- Achieving complete neutrality in these interviews is challenging since the interviewer's biases cannot be eliminated.
- Lower degree of cross-interview comparability than in quantitative research: considering the interviewer and social desirability effect, but also the space and surroundings changing from interview to interview - the comparability of results in qualitative research is generally lower than in quantitative one.
- There was a discrepancy in the sampling, where most of the interviews were conducted in Warsaw (40).
- The quotes and notes are translated from Ukrainian or Russian into English, which may introduce issues related to the accuracy and nuances of the children's original expressions, potentially affecting the validity of the findings.

Demographics

In this cycle, interviews were conducted with 68 children from Ukraine aged 12 to 17.

Age

Around 47% were aged 16-17 (n=29), 38% were aged 13-15 (n=30), and 10% were 12 years old (n=9). Among them, 37 were girls and 31 were boys. Two children had disabilities, and three faced chronic illnesses.

Household composition

Most children lived in Poland with their mother and at least one sibling (18 cases). In 14 other cases, they were only with their mother. Six households included the mother and one grandparent, while nine included both parents and siblings. Two children were cared for by older siblings. The largest household had 12 people.

Place of origin

The children came from almost all regions of Ukraine. 6 of them were from the Kyiv oblast, followed by 5 children from Kharkiv and 5 from Dnipro. Others were from Zaporizhia, Rivne, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Kryvyi Rih, Kramatorsk, and Donetsk.

Time of arrival

Over 60% (41 children) arrived in Poland in March or February 2022, at the beginning of the war escalation. The remainder arrived mainly between April and December 2022, with only two arriving in 2024.

Host country

We spoke with children in three Polish towns: Warsaw, Katowice, and Gdynia. In 30 cases, children had moved at least once since arriving in Poland. In 40 cases, children lived in collective accommodation at the time of the interview.



Photo: Karolina Jonderko for the IRC

Protection Risk 1: Bullying and Peer Violence at School

In Poland, approximately 66% of children have experienced peer violence in their lives, according to [FDDS data from 2023](#) (an increase from 28% in 2013). This is the most common form of victimization faced by teenagers. Children living in urban areas experience this violence more frequently than those in rural areas. Neither age nor gender significantly differentiates their overall experiences. However, an [increase in exposure](#) to violence is noticeable as children grow older.

Following secondary data, the most common forms of peer violence in the past year were physical violence, followed by psychological violence and bullying. Among girls, the percentage of psychological violence cases was higher (51% compared to 37% among boys). Most incidents occur in school settings, though they can also take place on the way to school, online, or via mobile phones. Peer violence often happens in the presence of witnesses, who assume various roles (e.g., passive observers).

The consequences of peer violence or bullying extend beyond the direct victims, affecting all children involved. In the [2020 EU Kids Online study](#), Poland ranked first among all European countries in the prevalence of peer violence. The FDDS also highlights the overlap of different forms of peer violence, noting that children often experience it in more than one way (e.g., cyber-aggression is frequently linked with traditional forms of violence). Additionally, a significant proportion of children believe schools should include anti-discrimination education, with 80% supporting this initiative, according to FDDS findings.

Two [previous IRC reports](#) monitoring the situation of Ukrainian refugee children in Poland have already identified risks of peer violence, bullying, and forms of discrimination faced by these children.

In this cycle, **covering the period from January to June 2024**, these issues have become even more apparent. At the same time, bullying, as reported by children in IRC CP Monitoring, was the most common reason for not joining the Polish education system (often opting to remain in the Ukrainian online curriculum), leaving it altogether, or transferring to a different school—most frequently to a Ukrainian school.



In technical school I was subjected to some type of bullying, my classmates used to joke about me with all kinds of military jokes like "*careful now a bomb will fall on you*", this is because I am Ukrainian. But if I wanted, I could make friends with some Poles, nevertheless it would be a short-term friendship, not sincere one

(Male, 16, Gdynia).

In this report, over 75% of Ukrainian refugee children (51 children) reported experiencing some form of peer violence or bullying at school. Analysis indicates that such incidents most frequently occur on school premises. Girls were twice as likely to experience these forms of violence. The highest number of cases was observed among 15–16-year-olds, with a slight increase compared to younger age groups.

Using the classification provided by the [Institute for Educational Research](#), various forms of violence were identified, ranging from verbal—such as name-calling, mocking, and ridiculing refugee children—to relational violence, which involved exclusion from groups, being ignored, or others being turned against refugee children. Instances of physical violence (n=6) were also reported, along with a few cases of material violence (e.g., theft or destruction of belongings) and cyber violence (e.g., negative posts on social media or public humiliation of the victim).



We have lessons about bullying in school. Before this I had a lot of problems with Ukrainian boy from my class, he steals my stuff, for example he stole my one and favorite sharpener and broke it. We even had a fight once. Some of my classmates bullied me because of K-pop. I complain to teachers always, sometimes it helps, sometimes no. I have also friends in school

(Female, 13, Katowice).

The identified cases among Ukrainian refugee children were influenced by various factors, most commonly their national and cultural background, as well as their refugee experiences. Notably, in addition to violence related to their origin, other factors played a role, such as their material situation (e.g., children living in collective accommodation centers) or worldview (in some cases, involving other Ukrainian children) or gender. Most children reported experiencing bullying from Polish peers, while only a few cases involved bullying by their Ukrainian peers.



Ukrainians communicate more to Belarusians because Polish pupils don't like that Ukrainians had some concessions and relations are not very good. **In fact, bullying occurs everywhere and always**

(Female 13, Warsaw).



However, I've faced conflicts in my Polish school, both with other Ukrainian children and Polish students, which makes me not want to continue studying her

(Male, 13, Gdynia).

The main factors triggering violence included:

- Origin and refugee experience
- Language used by children (both Ukrainian and Russian)
- Cultural stereotypes and prejudices

Children often face pressure from their peers, who insist they speak Polish or insult them for speaking Ukrainian or Russian. This behavior can create a hostile environment and further marginalize them.

This places children in a difficult position, balancing cultural identity with a demand to integrate abruptly. Many students report hurtful stereotypes and war-related jokes aimed at Ukrainians, such as references to bombs or military threats. This type of bullying not only stigmatizes Ukrainian children but also trivializes their trauma, contributing to re-traumatization for those impacted by the war. In several cases, physical violence occurs in response to language or cultural differences.



The teachers in the Polish school treated us more or less well, depends on the teacher, but the children who studied were not very good. I was in the class that was the cruelest to Ukrainians. There was also a girl from Ukraine in the class. We had conflicts with Poles, for 2 months it was horrible. I left the school, and the girl who was also from Ukraine stayed there. According to her nothing changed, the bullying continued. My dad was against me changing school, but I said no and didn't go there anymore

(Female, 16, Katowice).

In many cases, overlapping forms of relational, psychological, and even physical violence were evident. For example, the experience of a 13-year-old girl attending school in Katowice highlights these dynamics. Her story also underscores an important factor: the response of school administrators and teaching staff.

The report identified several cases (n=6) where intervention was either lacking or inappropriate and discriminatory. These insufficient responses not only failed to address the violence effectively but, in some instances, exacerbated the situation for the affected children.



There were also girls from Ukraine in our class, and I communicated well with them, but one day they stopped talking to me and started discussing my clothes, that I dressed differently and bullying me for being different. There was a girl, a Ukrainian, who was in charge of the whole "class" and made fun of me in front of the Poles in Polish. She thought I didn't understand Polish. But I knew Polish from my old school. I disliked it in the class, I told my mother about it, but she told me to be patient until the end of the school year, but I couldn't stand it, and I started skipping school. There was also a case when one of the Polish girls started swinging at me, and I couldn't stand it and grabbed her by the hair, and then one of them took my hands and the other one hit me on the cheek. After that, I went to the director and she said it was my problem and accused me of swearing at them in Ukrainian, she said, *"Do you think we don't understand anything? We learned your Ukrainian long ago"*

(Female, 13, Katowice).

The role of the teaching staff and school employees



When I talked to Ukrainians in Russian or Ukrainian language one Polish girl always told me to speak Polish because I'm in Poland. One time this girl hit me, and I couldn't stand it and hit her back, the cameras recorded it, and as a result, it was me, not her, who was called to a conversation about behavior at school, even though she attacked me first

(Female, 14, Warsaw).

Some children pointed to discriminatory responses from teaching staff, which may contribute to a permissive environment for peer violence.



The teacher responsible for Ukrainian **students yelled at me and forbade me from speaking Russian (...)**. I completed a year there and then enrolled in a private Ukrainian school

(Female, 16, Warsaw).



In Polish school, I adapted, but I still faced bullying. The other kids treat me differently because I'm not Polish, and they just don't like it. There was another Ukrainian student in my class, but he didn't like me either. **I've had to change schools three times because of bullying.** This school is better—it's a Polish school still. **There were intercultural assistants, but they didn't really protect us from bullying. Instead, they mostly discouraged us from talking about it**

(Female, 13, Gdynia).

Some teachers displayed negative attitudes, including yelling, exclusionary comments, and possible grading biases, as seen in the testimonies of refugee children. These behaviors contribute to an unsafe atmosphere and can reinforce discriminatory attitudes among peers. Perceived teacher bias toward Ukrainians, as noted by the 14-year-old, increases children's mistrust in the educational environment, driving some students to leave schools altogether.



I arrived and immediately went to a Polish school where I studied for two years. A couple of Poles in the Polish school bullied me, and I fought. The teachers mostly bullied Ukrainians as if they were paid extra for it. They did not help us. **Most of the Ukrainians left this school immediately**

(Male, 14, Katowice).



(...) The teachers told me to *"go back to Ukraine"* because I couldn't speak Polish yet. I am sure teachers were giving me lower notes on purpose

(Female, 17, Katowice).

Moreover, prohibiting the use of Russian without offering support for language learning or cultural integration creates a rigid and unsupportive environment. Such restrictions can heighten children's sense of isolation and hinder the development of bilingual skills that could otherwise foster a more inclusive school culture.

Children expect teachers to mediate conflicts and protect them from bullying. However, the absence of support—and, in some cases, active discouragement from addressing bullying, as reported in Gdynia—leaves students without effective recourse. This lack of intervention can erode children's trust in their teachers and, by extension, in the broader school system.

Despite the presence of intercultural assistants (who were largely absent in the schools of the monitoring participants), the data indicates that support measures are sometimes insufficient. In the case of one 13-year-old student, the assistants discouraged discussions about violence instead of actively addressing such situations. Children repeatedly mentioned the need to change schools due to persistent bullying, highlighting ongoing gaps in providing a safe and supportive environment within schools.

Effect of the threat

Children migrating from conflict areas often lose important social connections, which affects their emotional well-being and social integration. Building new relationships is crucial for their mental health, and relational resilience helps them cope with loss and trauma. Notably, researchers [studying peer violence](#) and the [World Health Organization](#) emphasize that peer violence is one of the greatest threats to the mental health of children and adolescents.

The consequences of experiencing peer violence and bullying, as identified in the report, include:

- Lack of continuity in education, frequent school changes, or dropping out of education. In 10 cases, bullying was the main reason for changing or leaving Polish schools among refugee children.
- Social exclusion and difficulties with integration processes. Most children reported a lack of friends from Poland.
- Impact on psycho-social well being and consequences for mental health, including depression, anxiety, and exacerbation of PTSD. This also relates to long-term consequences for mental health in adulthood¹.
- Negative school/academic performance.
- Reduced resilience and the strengthening of existing risk factors.
- In the case of physical violence, there may be direct effects on children's physical health.



Photo: Karolina Jonderko for the IRC

Protection Risk 2: Child labour²

Forcing children to work, as well as employing them in prohibited jobs or hiring children who are too young to work, is a form of harm³. In Poland, it is illegal to employ individuals under the age of 16.

The ongoing displacement crisis has left many Ukrainian refugee families in Poland grappling with financial insecurity, and for some, this burden is shared by children who have entered the workforce prematurely.

Through individual interviews with refugee children, a complex picture emerges of their motivations, work conditions, and the toll it takes on their well-being. In most cases, the intention to take up work was driven by a desire to help their families. These narratives highlight both the resilience of these young individuals and the inherent risks they face in the labor market.



Here in Poland, I mostly help my mother and work
(Female, 16, Warsaw).

In 7 cases, children had already taken up work, while in another 7 cases, they indicated an intention to seek employment and a need to earn money in the near future.



When I was working as a volunteer, I had a lot of strange situations. I changed three organizations because I was looking for better pay. The management was very strict. The girls got more money because they were thrown more into the boxes. **A lot of elderly people shouted bad things at me when I was just standing there, and they almost called the police on me to collect money.** I told the management about it, but they didn't care, I had to stand in the same place for a long time, even though I have problems with my knees in general and couldn't stand for very long. **I had been working since I was 15**
(Male, 16).

Some of the refugee children described entering the workforce at a young age, often before reaching the legal working age in Poland. This is illustrated by a quote from a boy who had already been working at the age of 15, describing the demanding working conditions. Another boy, at the age of 16, worked in construction, which was not his first attempt at earning money in Poland.



I worked on a construction site for three months during the summer. Also, in summer I worked as a volunteer.⁴ I was collecting money because I wanted to earn some extra cash and treat myself to something tasty and see Warsaw. The job wasn't great, but the attitude was okay, depending on how much I earned. Working on construction sites was better than volunteering

(Male, 17, Katowice).

Another child recalled, "I was 12 years old at the time" describing a money-collection effort organized by a volunteering initiative. These stories indicate a risk where, due to economic necessity or lack of alternative income sources, children as young as 12 find themselves in work environments unsuited to their age and capabilities.



We volunteered last summer with some friends, we went out with boxes and collected money. One time we were told to go very far away, and we got lost there. **I was 12 years old at the time**

(Female, 13, Katowice).

Similarly, another child recounted working unofficially as an assistant chef, where the strain of balancing work and school meant, "*I sometimes skip school because of that. I don't have time to do homework*". Several children described unregulated and informal work environments that left them vulnerable to potential exploitation and mistreatment. Another child mentioned working first as a waitress and then in hotels for additional income, only to face challenges and conditions of exploitation.

² The International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF latest estimates indicate that 160 million children worldwide are engaged in child labour – that is, work that they are too young to perform or that, by its nature or circumstances, is likely to harm children's health, safety or morals (UNICEF, 2023). See more: [Child Labour Case Studies.pdf](#). Moreover, the Convention on the Rights of the Child serves as an essential protection for children worldwide.

³ It clearly affirms each child's right "to be shielded from economic exploitation and from undertaking any work that could be dangerous or disrupt their education".

⁴ See more in terms of Polish legislation and norms in the context of child labor: [Praca dzieci - Akty prawne - Site](#)

⁵ Children referred to their activity as 'volunteering' when describing their participation in fundraising efforts, where they collected money for charitable causes.

Protection risks



I worked in hotels for fun and additional income, since I was 15, but I received three bans from hotels due to problems in the team. Sometimes **I worked for 16 hours**, and they fed us horrible food there. Mom and grandma work, but not full-time, above 5 hours a day, but it is still not enough to make ends meet. We leave in a room in a shelter, all 3 of us

(Male, 17, Katowice).



My mom gave me small money and I found this job when I was 14, because there were no other jobs for me. I had to stand for at least five hours to collect money to the boxes

(Female, 15, Warsaw).

These examples of work environments highlight the vulnerability these children face, where they are more likely to encounter unsafe conditions, arbitrary restrictions, and an overall lack of protection. This increases the risk of exploitation, and in some cases, there are signs of heightened risks related to human trafficking, as demonstrated in the example below.



Once I almost agreed to an offer from a Telegram channel to "volunteer". Fortunately, I asked my parents for advice, and they knew everything about this situation, and they persuaded me not to do it. My friend accepted this offer and was forced to travel alone to outskirts of Katowice and suburb areas and spend a half of a day standing on the cold street, or railway station collecting money to the boxes, employer also deceived her with salary which were near 4 PLN instead of promised 15

(Female, 15, Warsaw).

The emotional strain of working in such environments is palpable in many of the children's accounts. As seen in previous example, one child reflected on the isolating experience of facing verbal abuse from passersby while collecting donations: *"A lot of elderly people shouted bad things at me when I was just standing there... and they almost called the police."*

Instances of disrespect or hostility encountered in these roles could negatively affect their mental health and sense of self-worth, as they navigate an unfamiliar environment while bearing adult-like responsibilities.

Motivations Behind Job-Seeking among Ukrainian Refugee Children in Poland

The underlying motivations for child labour within this population appear to stem largely from economic need and family obligations (5 children mentioned it directly). This reflects a shift in traditional roles, where children feel compelled to contribute to household income to achieve basic stability.



In a year I hope we will finally live in an apartment. I would like to start work, maybe in Zabka, to help grandmother to afford an apartment. I need one more year to finish my education

(Male, 15, Katowice).

Among other reasons, children mentioned the desire to become independent, move to a city for studies, fulfill smaller dreams, or seek independence and a return to normalcy, such as *"to eat something tasty outside and see Warsaw"*.

One of the teenagers, living in a collective accommodation center for two years, indicated a shift in his educational priorities due to the difficult economic situation: *"I was thinking of going to higher education in Poland, but now I am thinking more about work (...). Soon I will graduate and move to Wroclaw, and there I will work, build my life and start again"*

(Male, 17, Katowice).

The Center for Civic Education⁵ (CEO, pl. *Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej*) highlights the need for targeted support and monitoring of the situation of teenage refugees from Ukraine.

⁵ <https://ceo.org.pl/co-wiemy-o-uczniach-z-ukrainy-z-doswiadczeniem-uchodzstwa-w-polskiej-szkole/>

It points out that Ukrainian refugee students, compared to their peers, are significantly more likely to continue their education in vocational and technical schools and less often in general secondary schools. This age group also has the highest rate of school dropouts, with many not continuing their education in subsequent years. The reasons for this may vary, including language barriers, tensions in peer relationships, or more individual or cultural factors. This trend should be monitored, particularly in the context of the risk of child labour.

Effect of the Threat:

- **Educational Disruptions and Impact on Academic Performance:** Balancing work with school proves challenging, as children often skip classes or neglect homework due to work obligations. This disruption diminishes their academic performance, limits future opportunities, and potentially undermines their long-term career aspirations, which are often already tempered by financial pressures. It can also increase the risk of school dropout.
- **Vulnerability to Exploitation and Human Trafficking:** Early labour entrants often work in informal or unregulated jobs, making them vulnerable to exploitation, including low wages, excessive hours, and, in some cases, abuse. Lack of knowledge about worker rights, language barriers and limited social protections make these young workers prime targets for exploitative practices.
- **Physical and Mental Health Risks:** Physical strain, injuries or worsening of existing health issues. Moreover, it can lead to emotional stress, isolation, and lowered sense of self-worth. Additionally, some children feel compelled to work to support their families, assuming adult-like responsibilities prematurely. This shift can create additional stress, as children strive to meet family needs, impacting their social development, independence, and personal aspirations.



Photo: Karolina Jonderko for the IRC

Risk 3: Risk of Distress and Mental Health Disorders⁶

During interviews, the vast majority of Ukrainian children spoke about **daily stressors** related to language barriers and feelings of loneliness and isolation, or nostalgia while missing family and friends.

In this cycle, again children directly pointed to insecurities linked to **post-conflict displacement and exposure to trauma** related to the ongoing war. Some of the children's statements indicate experiences of potentially traumatic events (PTEs).

This time, references to these traumatic events surfaced in 18 out of the 68 interviews conducted.



Of course, the war has damaged my psyche. When I was 7 years old, a rocket fell near me it almost killed me. That's why I've seen war. People from Kyiv and Kharkov hadn't seen this before, and they experienced more stress at the beginning of the war than we did. It irritates me when people from Lviv are afraid and tell scary stories in the shelter

(Female, 16, Warsaw).



My mood became worse due to war. Yesterday my native city was under attack again. It is very sad to see such news

(Female, 12, Warsaw).

In many stories, daily life was also marked by **poor and precarious living conditions** (31 children), which were further described in the section on risk factors. Importantly, one of the biggest stressors was the situation in schools, and peer violence, experienced by the majority of children (n= 51). Children did not always explicitly state that they were dealing with inner struggles or that their mental health had deteriorated. However, in this cycle, children more frequently pointed directly to depressive states and accompanying symptoms.

Children pointed to **depressive** states often resulting from separation from one of the parents, the loss of contact with friends, and the widespread loneliness in the host country. Notably, 47 out of 68 children in this cycle reported **having no friends among Polish peers**.

Furthermore, as seen in the case of a 16-year-old who lost his father in the war, depression and anxiety were exacerbated by the trauma associated with this loss and the experience of displacement. This youth also reflects on the difficulty of pursuing previously comforting routines, such as controlling dreams, which adds to feelings of helplessness.



For two years, I just sat at home, didn't study, didn't know what to do or whom to turn to, mom was working, my brother went to school, and I was at home on remote learning but didn't do anything. My perspective changed: I used to be able to control my dreams, but after my father's death, it stopped working. It was hard to adapt in Warsaw. People talk, and you can't understand them. Food – there's enough of everything

(Male, 16, Warsaw).



In Ukraine, I had a circle of friends. When I arrived here, I experienced depression because I was alone

(Female, 12, Gdynia).

The worsening of mood after arriving in Poland (or more recently, depending on the children's accounts) was also linked to following the situation in their country of origin and the stress associated with the protracted conflict and resulting displacement.

⁶Importantly, all the identified risk factors (in the next section) can contribute to the risk of distress and mental health disorders.

Protection risks



My mood has changed, at first, it was scary, I was in a bad mood, constantly checking the news, always some information, watching something, I cried at night. Then over time, I didn't watch the news as often. To not clutter my mind with it, I monitor the main events, but I don't follow everything. Now I feel better because I read fewer news

(Female, 17, Warsaw).

Once again, feelings of sadness and dejection were reported by children in the context of abandoned passions and the lack of opportunities or motivation to pursue them (36 participants).



I was dancing in Ukraine, and I've been doing it since I was about two years old. We performed shows and so on. But here it is very expensive, they ask 60 zloty for one lesson. Also, I don't have much time left for dancing

(Female, 16, Katowice).



Back in Ukraine, my days were great. I lived in a separate apartment with my aunt, and my mother was nearby on a different floor. I was more engaged in my hobbies. I used to enjoy drawing when I was in Ukraine but have stopped since moving to Poland

(Female, 14, Gdynia).

Fourteen children reported experiencing sleep problems, though many noted that these issues gradually subsided over time. Sleep disturbances were most commonly reported during the initial period following their stressful relocation to Poland and their displacement.



Sleep changed for the worse here **(Female, 17, Warsaw).**



My sleeping became just worse, by itself, after we ran away **(Male, 13, Katowice).**

Moreover, the children's lack of comfort in sharing their feelings with trusted adults or professionals highlights an unmet need for relational support. It was visible in 10 children's stories, where they pointed out that they **don't communicate with the family or friends**, and emphasized the inclination to handle issues independently. Moreover, several children expressed by themselves a reluctance to seek mental health support, indicating a belief that mental health issues are either non-existent or that professional help is unnecessary.



I don't turn to anyone for support. All my problems arise in my head, and I solve them there, by myself. With psychologist I spoke once, but I don't really understand whether it is useful for not

(Male, 12, Gdynia).



I didn't have a word about my feeling in 2 years now **(Male, 14, Katowice).**



I have emotional rollercoaster. I attended psychologist and she said that it's because I am a teenager. I would like to change my character completely, I would like to be calmer and don't feel anything, to be like a stone, impassive. I think that now I became a sociophobe, and I am afraid of what people think about me

(Female, 12, Katowice).



I don't turn to psychologists or organizations if I need any support, my brain is fine. I don't need a psychologist

(Male, 13, Gdynia).

Refugee children face additional barriers to mental health care, including language, lack of awareness, or cultural insensitivity within the MHPSS services. These quotes suggest that systemic barriers could be limiting children's ability to access or feel supported by these services, highlighting an area for further development in both policy and programmatic approaches to refugee mental health.

Effect of the threat:

- **Long-Term Mental Health Disorders:** Without timely intervention, unresolved distress can solidify into chronic mental health disorders like depression, anxiety, or PTSD. This places children at a higher risk of lifelong mental health issues, affecting their capacity to lead fulfilling lives, form stable relationships, and achieve personal and professional goals.
- **Increased Vulnerability to Risky Behaviors:** Feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and low self-worth heighten the risk of children engaging in risky behaviors, such as self-harm or substance misuse, as coping mechanisms. The Q2 General Protection Monitoring Report notes qualitative findings from local NGOs on suicidal attempts among young refugees, underscoring the severe impact of these unmet mental health needs.
- **Academic Underachievement:** Mental health struggles such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances directly impact children's motivation in school. These challenges can lead to poor academic performance, school absenteeism, and a loss of interest in education, which reduces their future opportunities.



Photo: Karolina Jonderko for the IRC

The Socio-Ecological Model

The socio-ecological model enables the identification of factors shaping the situations of refugee children in Poland. These encompass protective factors occurring across various levels (individual, family, community, and societal, including societal norms), as well as risk factors and protection concerns. Many of these serve as both protective factors when present and as risk factors or protection concerns when absent in children's lives. The list includes factors identified during the interviews. Below are descriptions of those most frequently mentioned in the children's responses.

Individual:

- Depression and unmet mental health needs
- Language barriers
- Post-conflict displacement and insecurity
- Exposure to trauma (witnessing and experiencing)
- Discrimination due to minority/refugee status
- Childhood neglect

Family:

- Separation from parents/family
- Household composition (siblings, caregivers)
- Abuse and neglect in the family
- Caregiver trauma experiences/poor mental health
- HH economic stress
- Alcohol and substance use within the family
- Loss of a caregiver/family member

Community and school:

- Discrimination, stigma and bullying
- Cultural norms and concepts
- Disruption of social networks and loneliness
- Violence experienced at school
- Lack of access to inclusive educational opportunities

Macro level:

- Displacement status (refugees)
- Ongoing conflict in the country of origin
- Housing and settlement options (temporary in nature, inadequate)

Youths who have **witnessed traumatic events and experienced displacement** may carry emotional burdens that hinder adaptation, such as changes in sleep and social engagement patterns. An important theme is the vivid recollection of traumatic events, such as bombings, near-death experiences, and the loss or imprisonment of family members, which contribute to long-term psychological strain.



My godfather was taken prisoner (he was a soldier), I couldn't sleep at all. He is still in captivity

(Male, 14, Warsaw).

One account recalls a childhood incident where a rocket almost struck them, highlighting how war trauma has roots in their early life and continues to influence their psyche.



On October 10, I was going to school when rockets started flying above me. We went to Poland with my godfather and brother. My parents were already in Poland

(Female, 17, Warsaw).

This early exposure has conditioned some to cope differently with stress but has also heightened emotional reactivity toward seemingly minor triggers, like hearing certain sounds or encountering similar stressful situations in Poland. The children's mental and physical health is also affected **by the prolonged conflict in their country of origin**. Some of the children have already experienced the war directly since 2014.

Risk factors



I miss Ukraine very much, don't know when I will return. It is very difficult for me to see how rockets fly there and how people die

(Female, 15, Gdynia).



I haven't encountered any problems here, but I worry about the situation in Ukraine

(Male, 13, Warsaw).

This trauma intersects with the instability of displacement, making it harder for children to find a sense of normalcy in their new environment.



My mood changed upon arrival, at first it was very difficult, because it was a period of adaptation. I wanted not so much to go to Ukraine, but just to my dad, to my family. In Poland I became lazier, in Ukraine I was more active. My sleep changed, I started sleeping during the day, sometimes I come from school and go to bed, in Ukraine I didn't sleep during the day.

(Female, 15, Warsaw).



In the beginning, I felt lost and subdued. I would often ask my grandmother to take me back home, sometimes with tears in my eyes. I was depressed. Everything around me looked beautiful— the gallery, the city center — but my grandmother was the only person I knew. I had no friends, and the language barrier made things harder. Then, we returned to Kriviy Rih for nearly a month, and I was overwhelmed with positive emotions. That's my home, where my family and friends are. They met me right at the railway station! But the air raid sirens were incredibly stressful

(Male, 15, Katowice).

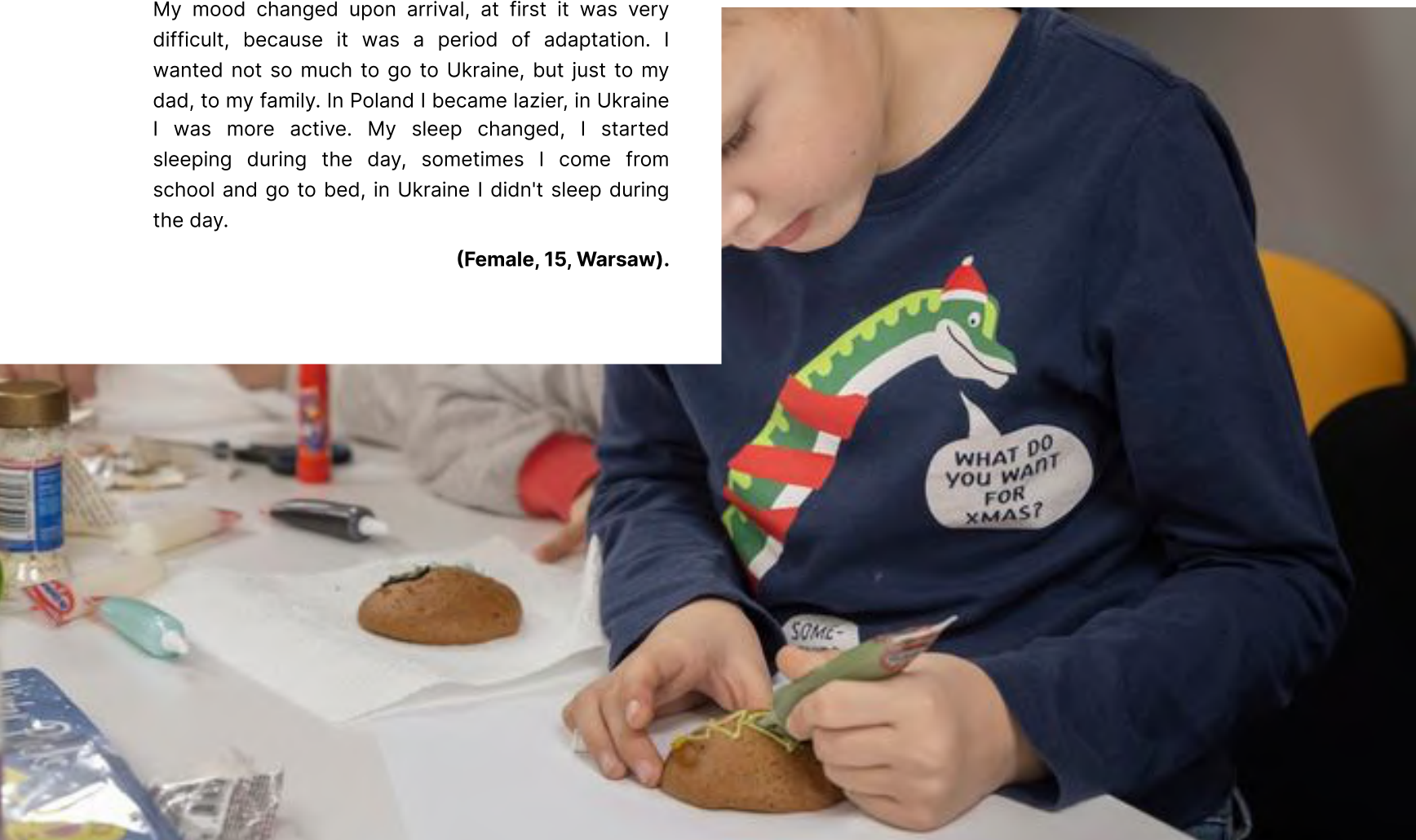


Photo: Karolina Jonderko for the IRC

Language barriers



The first six months were tough because I had no friends, stayed home, there were no Ukrainians around, and I didn't know the language

(Female, 16, Gdynia).

For 15 children, language barriers remained a significant challenge. Nearly half of the respondents indicated that continuing language learning is very important to them. These barriers affect their access to opportunities for pursuing their passions, inclusive education, and its effectiveness. In the school context, children highlighted the difficulty of fully understanding lessons, particularly in science subjects such as biology, chemistry, and physics.



I had bad grades in Polish school because I didn't understand Polish well, I couldn't understand what was being said to me in chemistry, biology and history classes. Teachers helped me with translation, but it was still difficult for me

(Female, 12, Katowice).

In two cases, the children indicated that language barriers were the reason for not attending the Polish education system.



I study online in Ukrainian school. My mother decided not to enroll me in a Polish school because I can't communicate well with peers, it's difficult to me to contact with other people and we are afraid that I will not adopt there

(Female, 17, Warsaw).

Language barriers also significantly impact peer interactions and the ability to form friendships. In several cases, children explicitly pointed out that language challenges limit their ability to connect with peers and establish relationships in Poland. Some children who speak English attempted to communicate in that language to avoid feeling "left out".

Only 7 out of 68 cases mentioned the presence of an intercultural assistant providing support to foreign children (5 cases in Warsaw, 1 in Gdynia, and 1 in Katowice).



In Poland, there are some Ukrainians in my class, like one girl. I still don't speak Polish, so if there are any problems, I try to speak English, also not to be left out

(Female, 17, Warsaw).



On the street I am afraid to say something wrong, also I am afraid to speak Ukrainian, the police are always for Poles, not for us, whatever you do they will be on their side. But in general, I feel safe

(Female, 16, Katowice).



I know many stories when in stores sellers refused to serve Ukrainians because of their nationality. Then such a story happened even with my mother, when we went into a store, speaking Russian among ourselves, they shouted something like "You are bad Ukrainians" and refused to sell us products. (...) In the store I try to speak even with Ukrainians in Polish

(Female, 16, Katowice).

Risk factors

It is essential to highlight that bullying, peer violence, and discrimination — both within and outside of school — are significant factors impacting the mental health challenges experienced by children. In this cycle, 27 children reported experiencing some form of discrimination.



In the beginning, everything was good, but now there is some negativity towards Ukrainians, and it can be felt. We are not Poles, and we're strangers to them

(Female, 15, Katowice).

In several cases, children noted shifting attitudes among the host community towards foreigners, particularly Ukrainians, which also affects the mental health and well-being of refugee children.



I try not to talk on the street or in crowded places. There was an incident when a drunk Pole approached us, yelling for us to go back to Ukraine, asking what we were doing here, and so on

(Female, 14, Warsaw).



At first, I felt okay because Poles were supportive of Ukraine, but now some have started to treat us differently because some Ukrainians began to act boldly, and there were fights among them. But overall, I feel fine. Just a slight discomfort

(Female, 17, Katowice).

Changes in children's emotions were shaped both directly and indirectly through media exposure. For instance, the farmers' protests in Poland [summer 2024] received significant media attention and were frequently mentioned by children. This highlights how socio-political developments can influence children's sense of safety and well-being.



I feel safe, even though there are protests and some attitudes towards Ukrainians lately. Knowing Polish helps me address any questions or issues directly now

(Male, 16, Warsaw).



I feel safe, but recent farmers' protests with sirens reminded me of the war in Ukraine

(Male, 16, Warsaw).



With the recent events, it is better to be quiet on the street and not show that you are Ukrainian, but other than that, I feel safe

(Female, 17, Gdynia).



I feel safe in Poland if I don't read the news, but if I listen to the news, I feel less safe. There are these protests [farmers], a Belarusian girl got raped, anyway, the situation is escalating, and I'm a little scared. Perhaps in America, I would feel safe? Sometimes people ask my mom and me why we speak Russian. There have been complaints about our language on the street. But it didn't start right away; it's been happening recently. Older people on the street sometimes now come up to us and say something not very polite

(Female, 16, Warsaw).

Disrupted social relationships

Among the accounts of 38 children, the impact of **disrupted social relationships** in the new country was evident. Most commonly, this involved severed ties and lost contact with friends. Additionally, 21 children reported being separated from family members, including grandparents or parents. In some cases, the separation was temporary, with grandparents joining the children several months after the escalation of the conflict.

Risk factors



I spend so much time on TikTok or Telegram because of the lack of friends here

(Female, 15, Katowice).



I miss my friend who stayed in Kramatorsk and couldn't leave Ukraine

(Female, 17, Gdynia).



I have no more friends left in Ukraine. The last one was taken away; everyone went somewhere else, not to Poland

(Male, 12, Warsaw).



In Ukraine, I had a group of friends. When I arrived here, I was totally depressed because I was alone

(Female, 12, Warsaw).



My father and grandmother are in Ukraine. I don't talk with them often

(Female, 13, Katowice).



Since my parents live in the occupied area, it is impossible for us to visit each other

(Female, 16, Gdynia).

Nostalgia and homesickness

Nostalgia and homesickness were more pronounced during this cycle, likely linked to the effects of protracted displacement and crisis. 17 children directly referenced feelings of longing and nostalgia, particularly for their homes, fathers (often serving in the military), and grandparents.



I miss my father and my friends. My phone is broken, so I can't talk with him. I miss my family very much. My father is in the military; I miss him. We met a couple of times in Ukraine, for a weekend, when he managed to come home

(Male, 13, Warsaw).



I arrived from Kherson with my older brother, who is also my guardian. Our parents stayed in Ukraine

(Female, 16, Katowice).

Children also expressed longing for their country, familiar routines, and cultural elements like food. Frequently mentioned were the tastes of borscht and Ukrainian sweets, as well as activities like following hobbies or spending time in cherished places from their childhood, such as playgrounds and favorite stores.



On one hand, my psychological state has improved here, but on the other hand, I have no hobbies here. I miss that and feel very nostalgic about Ukraine

(Male, 17, Warsaw).



Cookies are better in Ukraine. Everything tasted better in Ukraine

(Female, 16, Gdynia).



I would like to take some things from home, like a photo album, back here from Ukraine— as a memory

(Female, 15, Katowice).

Risk factors

These feelings of nostalgia, loneliness, and longing for familiar routines or cultural items highlight the emotional toll of displacement, which can lead to persistent mental distress, such as anxiety, depression, or hopelessness. For children, this can hinder their development and ability to integrate into new environments. A fractured sense of identity may emerge, especially when displacement becomes prolonged. Separation from familiar social networks often results in feelings of isolation and lack of support, further increasing vulnerability to bullying and discrimination.

Household economic stress



My mood got worse a lot here. I constantly have to take care of my siblings and other children, and I can only go out if I argue with my family and leave. They are never there. I feel worse than I did in Ukraine

(Female, 14, Warsaw).

Economic hardship

Children facing **economic hardship**, such as having to forego meals or take on family responsibilities, report increased distress and feelings of isolation, potentially contributing to a heightened risk for mental health disorders. This lack of psychological support and social connection can lead to anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges. Moreover, economic deprivation can exacerbate social exclusion, as children lacking resources (such as basic school supplies, meals, or recreational items) may be singled out or marginalized.



You have to pay for meals, so I don't eat at school

(Male, 14, Warsaw).



In Ukraine I had a bike, but here I don't. It is expensive to buy and you have to keep an eye on it, to make sure it doesn't get stolen

(Male, 16, Warsaw).



Sometimes it is difficult to find help here. We have been in Administrative Offices (*pl. Urząd*) many times, because I didn't receive the 800+ for more than a year.

We have turned to different lawyers, but the rules are changing all the time, and we stopped trying

(Male, 16, Warsaw).

Economic stress often pressures children into taking on work or supporting their families financially, whether formally or informally, as confirmed in the section on child labour risk.

A lower parental income increases the likelihood of child labour. Another factor increasing the risk is remaining outside the school system or the previously described exclusionary and often unsafe school environment. Researchers also point to age of arrival as a factor exacerbating the risk. Children who arrive in the host country after the age of 8 are significantly more exposed to child labour (all our respondents arrived after the age of 8). Therefore, identifying the situation of children over the age of 12 was an important focus of this monitoring.

When assessing risk, it is essential to consider households headed by single mothers as a significant risk factor (in this cycle, this was the situation for 32 children, nearly 50% of respondents). Other factors shaping risk in relation to household composition include the number of siblings (15 participants in the monitoring had more than two siblings, with the largest family consisting of 11 members), the presence of elderly family members (11 families), and the absence of one parent (only in 9 cases were children in Poland with both parents).

It is also important to consider the legal framework, which, while not vastly different between Poland and Ukraine, does present certain differences, particularly in practice, as confirmed by the accounts of refugee children:



In Poland I have to wait till I am 16 years old to work, in Ukraine it would be 14

(Male, 15, Gdynia).

Housing and settlement options

In most cases, economic hardship was linked to inadequate, unstable, or **temporary housing**. More than 31 children reported issues in this regard (16 of whom were currently living in collective accommodation centers, while most of the remaining children had experienced living with Polish families under the 40+ program or in collective accommodation at some point).

Unstable housing, compounded by financial insecurity, fosters uncertainty, fear, and chronic stress, further affecting mental health. A child's account of potentially losing shelter — *"If the hostel will close, I don't know... we don't have enough money for that"* (Female, 16) — illustrates the constant strain of not having a secure home, which can aggravate anxiety and lead to a distrust in social support systems.



Now when my grandmother died, we are renting room with mother. My mum doesn't have consistent work. She used to work in the shelter, but they refused to pay her

(Female, 17, Warsaw).



Our father is renting other housing now, because prices in this shelter are not affordable for him, so I live only with my mother and brothers, because there is no payment for children in the shelter

(Female, 17, Warsaw).

Many children report having lived in **multiple temporary accommodations**, including shelters, hostels, family homes, and church-like facilities. Frequent moves are often the result of shelter closures or temporary housing arrangements expiring (like to closure of 40+ program) or of difficulties with affording the rent. In this group of respondents, **30 of children reported that they moved from the city, or one place to another at least once**, since they came to Poland.



I have moved from one apartment to another a lot of times here in Poland

(Male, 13, Gdynia).



We were living with a Polish family at the beginning, then we moved few times to different shelters

(Female, 17, Katowice).

This pattern of instability disrupts children's routines, which can impede their ability to form social connections, adjust to school, and establish a sense of normalcy. For children, a lack of stability increases feelings of insecurity and can lead to emotional distress, as they are repeatedly forced to adapt to new environments and expectations.



We moved to a shelter and after some time to this shelter. This shelter is also closing now so we have to move again. We can't afford an apartment, and we proposed to move very far away from here, to another shelter again. If we live there, I will have to wake up at 5 o'clock to get to my technicum

(Male, 15, Katowice).



I don't have a personal room, and I live in the living room, it's like a corridor, so I don't have any personal space

(Female, 13, Katowice).



After my parents came to Warsaw, we started to live together in this shelter. We all leave in one room; it is very difficult. My only wish is to have some personal space

(Male, 15, Warsaw, Shelter).

Risk factors

Overcrowded living conditions, with multiple families or individuals sharing single rooms, emerge as a recurrent issue. This lack of privacy and personal space can restrict children's autonomy, contributing to feelings of frustration, powerlessness, and stress. Such conditions make it challenging for children to have areas for personal development, such as study or recreation, which are crucial for their mental and emotional health. Overcrowding also amplifies exposure to conflicts, as children are often in close quarters with unfamiliar individuals or families, sometimes resulting in tensions based on territorial origins or personal space encroachments.



We all live in one room in the shelter with one more family. There are five people and two pets in one room. We had our chinchilla before, but it died. They wanted to get rid of the bedbugs in the hostel, and the chinchilla apparently ate the poison, so we decided not to have pets before we will have finally a permanent housing

(Female, 14, Warsaw).

Several children mention **limited or substandard cooking facilities and shared or inadequate bathroom facilities**. The scarcity of fully functional kitchens often results in reliance on pre-prepared or packaged foods, which can be nutritionally insufficient, affecting children's physical health. Additionally, shared and restricted bathroom access can compromise hygiene, a critical factor for children's overall health and well-being.



There is a kitchen in shelter but without a stove. So, my mother can cook rarely and something which doesn't need to be cooked on the stove. We eat a lot of prepared food from supermarkets. I miss homemade food

(Female, 13, Warsaw).



I couldn't eat here. I've lost here 5 kg, then we moved to other shelter, and it became a bit better

(Female, 15, Warsaw).

Furthermore, a lack of extracurricular or social activities within the shelters restricts the **"third space" that children reference**, typically a place where they can pursue interests, socialize, and feel at ease outside home and school. Without this outlet, children are left "wandering around the corridors".



It's lack of additional activities for children here. I have heard "a theory of three places": its home – where you live, work or educational institution – when you put efforts, and the third place is for soul, for hobby and switching from school and home. I think we don't have the third place and children are just wandering around the corridors of the shelter

(Female, 17, Warsaw).

Importantly, economic hardship and unstable housing put refugee children, especially girls, at a greater risk of **gender-based violence**. Shared accommodations with minimal privacy often mean that children are in close quarters with unrelated adults and other families, sometimes with limited oversight and protection. This lack of privacy can create an unsafe environment, as it increases children's exposure to potential perpetrators. It was proved in one of the cases reported in this cycle.

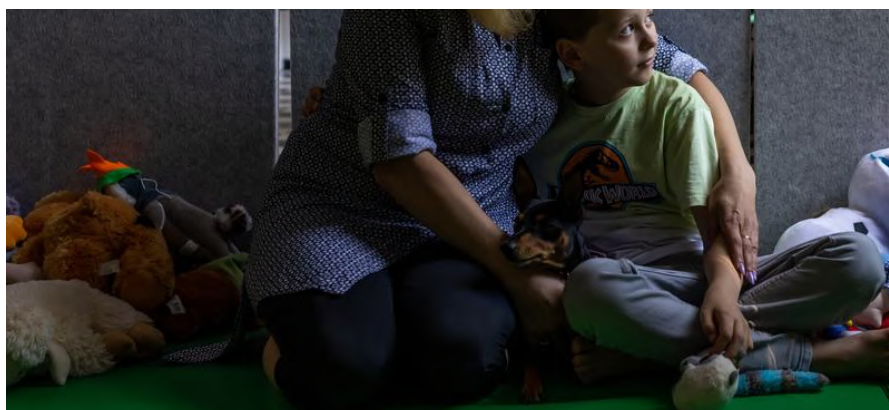


Photo: Anna Liminowicz for the IRC

Perception of safety



I feel safe when nothing threatens my life

(Female, 16, Warsaw).

The data reflects that refugee children's perceptions of safety are multifaceted, combining physical, social, and emotional dimensions. Poland generally provides a sense of physical safety compared to Ukraine (just 3 children mentioned otherwise), but social interactions, companionship, and environmental factors significantly shape these children's day-to-day sense of security. The perception of children's sense of security very often overlapped with the area of identified risks.

Children associated safety often with stable living conditions and access to basic needs: *"Safety is when you feel warm. Really, in Bialystok at home it was very cold. Safety is also when you have a normal condition of life"*

(Male, 15, Katowice).

Consistent with identified risks, some children mentioned interactions with locals or Polish peers that negatively impact their feeling of safety. Some responses touched on specific concerns in public spaces, such as encountering people under alcohol, or walking on the street late. For some safety was conditional upon the presence of people around. This is also influenced by whether they are alone or with trusted individuals "safety is when I am not alone" and feeling safer with family and friends.

Comparisons between Poland and Ukraine surfaced in various responses. Some children report feeling safer in Poland due to the absence of war-related dangers, but others mention the familiarity and smaller community size in Ukraine as factors that made them feel secure.



My sense of safety was shaken when we had to leave Ukraine due to a nearby explosion

(Male, 15, Katowice).

For a few children, safety was closely tied to emotional states like feeling "calm" or "without anxiety". This reflects a mental and emotional aspect of safety.



Safety is when I feel no anxiety. In Ukraine I used to have it, now I don't

(Female, 17, Gdynia).



Safety is when you are near to the person you trust. I feel this way near my mother

(Female, 12, Warsaw).



Photo: Anna Liminowicz for the IRC

Protection factors

The list includes factors identified during the interviews. Below are descriptions of those most frequently mentioned in the children's responses.

Individual:

- Hobbies and passions
- Supportive and inclusive learning pathways
- Individual agency/locus of control
- Civic engagement
- Self-esteem

Family:

- Quality of home environment
- Positive family functioning
- Parental support and parental monitoring

Community and school:

- Community acceptance
- Peer social support
- Teacher social support
- Access to care and support services

Macro level:

- On the move support

Resilience arises from a mix of protective factors, as neither personal traits nor social environments alone can guarantee positive outcomes for children. Commonly cited, evidence-based protective factors include self-regulation, family support, school support, and peer support. This report focuses on those factors that were most frequently highlighted in the children's stories.

In 27 accounts, a visible strengthening factor was children's **passions and hobbies**. Many refugee children continue to engage in hobbies they enjoyed back in Ukraine, such as drawing, playing musical instruments, or participating in sports. These activities serve as anchors, helping them preserve a sense of identity and stability amidst the upheaval of displacement.

At the same time, their stories highlight how involvement in group activities, like playing volleyball or attending dance classes, not only provides enjoyment but also fosters friendships and facilitates integration into their new communities.



I like playing tennis, we did it in both Polish schools. In the previous school, they played tennis better than in this one, but we have a nice group here

(Male, 12, Warsaw).



My hobbies haven't changed much since Kyiv. I still enjoy drawing. I frequently visit "Vchasno" in Gdynia, where we make bracelets, draw, and play games. Back in Kyiv, I participated in similar activities. I feel like I have everything I need here. It is great

(Female, 13, Gdynia).



My hobby is playing basketball. I wake up and attend online classes in Ukraine, here in Poland sometimes we play basketball in the yard with a group of friends just like I did in Donetsk for 6 years and now I continue it here

(Female, 16, Warsaw).

For many, these hobbies also play a vital role in emotional regulation and stress relief. Creative pursuits — such as drawing, writing poetry, making music, or gaming — offer a therapeutic outlet, helping children process their emotions and find moments of calm. Beyond emotional support, hobbies like programming, art, and learning new languages contribute to personal development, equipping children with skills that align with their aspirations and future goals.

Protection factors



Playing music or sleeping there are the 2 things that are supportive. It calms me down

(Female, 12, Katowice).



My hobbies in Warsaw are the gym, swimming, video games, and I'm slowly starting to learn programming. I am interested in studying it in the future

(Male, 16, Warsaw).

Physical activity and an interest in sports also emerge as significant aspects of children's lives in Poland. Engaging in activities such as karate, football, or working out at the gym not only can promote physical health but also can support mental well-being through an active lifestyle.

Notably, some children have embraced entirely new hobbies since arriving in Poland, exploring new interests and discovering passions.



I have already found Korean language courses and attend them, I like it very much here

(Female, 17, Warsaw).

Supportive and inclusive learning pathways were most often associated with learning the Polish language. While children benefited from Polish lessons provided at school, they more frequently mentioned attending extracurricular Polish language classes, often organized by NGOs either in-person or online.



I attend Polish language courses at the community center, that's how I've learned

(Male, 12, Gdynia).

A total of 26 children directly mentioned active participation in **Polish language learning**, and 16 highlighted the benefits they gained from it. In some cases, the support of parents and friends was also evident.



My father taught me how to construct phrases in Polish, and it helped me a lot. I also had a Russian-speaking classmate (he is from Poland, but knows Russian), we were friends, and he also helped me a lot with school and translation

(Male, 15, Warsaw).



I understand Polish language better than my parents which have been here longer than me. They always ask me to translate something, I don't know how they work with Polish people and still know the language worse than me

(Female, 12, Katowice).

In a few cases (n=5), children mentioned learning the Polish language independently, highlighting the perseverance required in the process.



I learned Polish on my own, without any courses

(Male, 15, Gdynia).

Another form of support in learning pathways, though rarely mentioned, was the presence of **intercultural assistants**. Only seven respondents noted encountering such assistance at some point during their education in Poland. It was also indicated that these assistants primarily helped with homework and were rarely present during lessons.



There was an intercultural assistant, and it was very important to have someone who speaks Ukrainian and can explain everything during lessons conducted in Polish

(Female, 16, Warsaw).



We have intercultural assistant, but he appears rarely. I understand Polish well, I had courses for that, and I've learned it in school too

(Female, 16, Warsaw).

Protection factors



Here at school is different, I can ask questions, and talk. I don't know why is so different, but I do communicate well with teachers

(Female, 17, Warsaw).

A few children (n=6) highlighted the support (including social and emotional) they received from teachers.



If I need some advice, I would go to the class teacher (a woman from Poland) that we had last year. She is young and kind and she always supported me, I miss her. Here you can see that's a picture of her with our class

(Female, 15, Warsaw).

In two stories, the support they received from teachers determined that *"it was easy to adapt to the Polish school,"* as noted by a 13-year-old student from Gdynia.

In several instances, children also mentioned that teachers made efforts to explain everything clearly and were helpful if foreign children needed further clarification, which made them feel *"safer"* at school.

Peer Social Support

In both the context of school challenges and general support, children also emphasized the importance of their friends. **In over 30 cases, they mentioned turning first to their friends (often including those who remained in Ukraine) for help.** These bonds provided stability in navigating the uncertainty of displacement, while peers also facilitated problem-solving and emotional validation.



When something happens in my life I share it with friends immediately. How many friends do I have? It's never too much of friends

(Female, 14, Warsaw).

In 29 cases, children pointed to their family and parents, predominantly their mothers. Some also rely on siblings and other family members (grandparents, cousins) when available. A smaller group turns to psychologists or as previously mentioned, teachers, while others remain self-reliant.



I will turn to my mother for support. Depends on the situation, but my mom and I have a trusting relationship

(Female, 13, Katowice).



When something good or bad happens in my life I share it with family and friends immediately. If I need some advice, I would go to Google first of all, then I would ask friends, parents, everyone and make analysis of all advice and will take my own decision

(Female, 14, Warsaw).

As a protective factor, **parental support and parental monitoring** were particularly evident in 18 children's stories.



I turn to my mom, she notices when I am in a bad mood, she calms me down and always gives me advice

(Female, 12, Katowice).

When children referred to positive aspects of their **home environment**, they most often highlighted having their own space and room.



Now I have my own personal space, I have my own room

(Female, 14, Gdynia).

Protection factors

In several instances, discussions about supportive environments around children involved the openness of the host society in Poland. In four cases, children noted the **positive reception they experienced from Poles**. They also mentioned the opportunities for staying in Poland and the possibilities connected to their education.



I think that life in Poland gives more perspectives. It is more pleasant and safer. People here are more tolerant. It is nice to be here, and it is not scary to stand out

(Female, 17, Warsaw).

A supportive environment for some children also meant **predictable routines** and more time for rest (in the case of children attending the Polish education system). As in previous cycles, they mentioned having more free time for self-development and rest, due to the absence of homework. A positive assessment of predictable routines was **particularly noticeable among children who did not live in collective accommodation centers**. It was most commonly noted by children living with their parents in rented apartments, attending Polish schools, having time to pursue their hobbies, and spending time with friends.

Thinking about the future and plans related to education also emerged in the context of **seeking information about the availability of universities and studying opportunities in Poland**. This concerned several 17-year-olds. Doubts and information needs in this area related to entrance exams, the application process timeline, required documentation, and the admission requirements for universities. The children indicated that the application process was not entirely clear to them.



Informational needs: I want to get into the Polytechnic, but I don't know the exact entrance score required there. I seek information mainly myself online, with specific interests in academic opportunities

(Male, 16, Warsaw).

Children didn't discuss any protective factors on the macro level. However, over the months in Poland, there have been significant changes in Child Protection that could serve as protective factors for refugee children. The most important of these was the so-called Kamilka Act, which introduced the obligation for all institutions dealing with children to adhere to Child Protection Standards.



Photo: Karolina Jonderko for the IRC

Conclusions

The Child Protection Monitoring Report focuses solely on the voices and perspectives of children.

Nonetheless, when reading this report, it is also valuable to refer to information on the situation of children in the IRC Protection Monitoring Report and other local publications which provide a broader view of the overall situation of refugees in Poland.

In the IRC PM Q2 cycle, there was an increased focus on the rising number of reports about children experiencing suicidal thoughts and making suicidal attempts. This issue was particularly highlighted by non-governmental organizations specializing in MHPSS for foreign children.

In 2021 and 2022, Poland saw an increased number of identified suicide attempts and suicides among children. However, the latest data from 2023 indicates that this upward trend has now stopped, and the dangerous rise has been halted, as confirmed by suicidologists. These experts⁷ also emphasize the need to avoid sensationalist headlines, warning against the counterproductive effects of reporting "negative statistics," referring to the "Werther effect," which can contribute to an increase in suicide attempts.

Highlighting these risks in IRC reports aims to pinpoint areas that require monitoring and specific solutions, considering feedback from local activists and experts, as well as the identified mental health risks for children in this report. State statistics do not disaggregate data by origin and refugee status, which is crucial when addressing the particular situation of refugee children in planned mental health initiatives and the subsequent prevention of suicidal behavior.

In this context, attention is also drawn to the role of peer violence — highlighted in this report — and its increase in recent years. Children who have experienced peer violence are statistically seven times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers who have not had this experience⁸. Hence, monitoring the situation of refugee children in terms of this potential effect is particularly important⁹. In the context of schools, which are highly visible in children's stories, the CEO points out that *the crisis response time to the presence of foreign children in schools has already passed*.

This is also confirmed by the findings from the 2024 report by the Council of Europe and the Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU). Polish schools have become multicultural, with one in every 15 students being of a nationality other than Polish. Over the course of more than two years since the escalation of the war in Ukraine, Polish schools have permanently integrated approximately 134,000 children and youth from Ukraine into the Polish education system (making up 7% of all students in Polish schools). The protective factors identified by IRC, as well as reports from other organizations, show that children are increasingly adapting to the Polish school system and its formal and informal rules.

Despite this, reports from the last school year (2023/2024) confirm IRC's findings about the limited integration of Ukrainian students. In practice, separate student communities are often observed, functioning parallel to each other with noticeable divisions. Discriminatory behaviors among Polish students have also become more apparent. Attention is drawn to the normalization of the presence of Ukrainian students in schools, which has become part of everyday life. Nevertheless, one consequence of this is the absence of multiculturalism in school management. The CEO points out the ongoing duality of this issue, which, while theoretically recognized as valuable, is often replaced in practice by more assimilation-focused actions.

Another challenge is the inconsistency of data and the lack of reliable sources regarding the number of Ukrainian children in Poland and in Polish schools. This issue also extends to children "falling out of the system," who do not continue their education in subsequent years. Experts emphasize the need to focus on this group of students, particularly given the identified risk of child labour. This concern is echoed in the UNHCR report on the education of Ukrainian children in the region, which highlights risks such as being out of school, lower chances of completing secondary and higher education, and increased vulnerability to sexual exploitation and gender-based violence.

Conclusions

In June 2024, UNICEF published a report on adolescents' attitudes toward MHPSS in Poland, aligning with several findings from IRC PM. The report highlights that Ukrainian adolescents are more likely to seek MHPSS if they hold positive attitudes toward these services, while negative social norms and self-stigma, shaped by societal and personal views, act as barriers. Peer support and gender also influence stigma levels, with friends' involvement in MHPSS reducing stigma and females reporting less self-stigma than males. Those who have accessed MHPSS show higher awareness of stigma, underscoring the need for tailored interventions. Recommendations include promoting MHPSS by emphasizing personal benefits, educating parents, engaging genders through targeted strategies, fostering peer support networks, designing gender-sensitive programs, conducting pilot studies to assess interventions, and supporting research to enhance stigma reduction and effectiveness.

Considering secondary data, the identified risks and visible protective factors in the stories of children, IRC has developed a set of recommendations.



Photo: Karolina Jonderko for the IRC

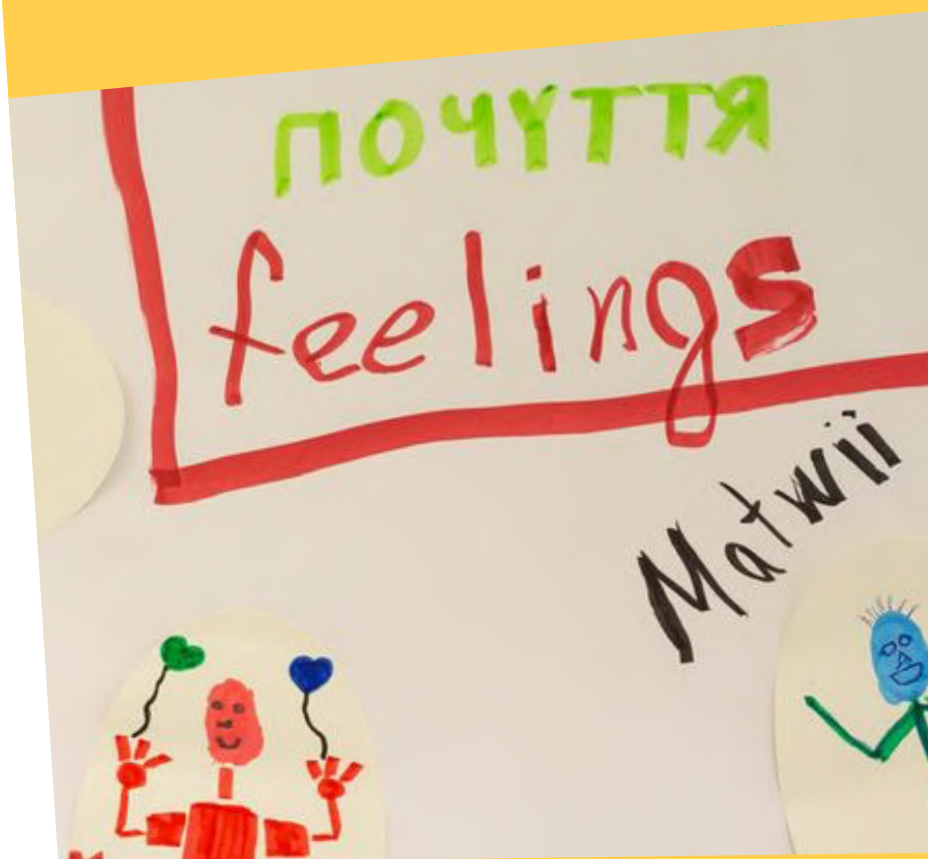
RECOMMENDATIONS

Government of Poland, especially Ministry of Education, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy

- **Anonymous Reporting Mechanisms:** It is essential to establish child-friendly mechanisms for students to report cases of violence and any harm anonymously and the procedures of responding to those, as required by the Kamilek Act, which comes into effect on August 15. These mechanisms should take into account the specific circumstances and needs of refugee and migrant children in Polish schools and ensure equal accessibility for all.
- **Improvement of Data Quality and Accessibility Regarding Peer Violence:** This includes continuous monitoring of the issue and the development of a consistent methodology for systematically collecting data to facilitate case reporting and the implementation of appropriate solutions.
- **Anti-Violence Policy in Schools:** Establish and enforce clear policies to prevent and address peer violence in schools.
- Monitoring cases of children dropping out of school and developing responsive mechanisms to address the issue.
- **Information Provision Sessions:** Introducing information sessions to children about the labour market and risks of labour exploitation, tailored to children's needs, as well as the information about the academic steps.
- **Raising Legal Awareness:** Implement activities aimed at raising legal awareness and facilitating the responsible adaptation of adolescents to the labour market, targeting both children and their parents.
- **Monitoring the Situation of Children in Collective Accommodation:** Ensure that children in collective accommodation are properly monitored and supported.
- **Education Support and Transition Assistance:** Focus on and provide targeted support to secondary schools and youth transitioning out of primary education.
- **MHPSS:** Increase access to specialized, free mental health care and raise awareness and share reliable information about the availability of these services.

Humanitarian Sector

- **Child-Led Advocacy:** Facilitate safe, inclusive, and child-friendly environment in which refugee children are empowered and provided tools to speak up about the issues and obstacles they face in Poland as well as express their perspectives regarding possible solutions they see appropriate.
- **Information Provision Sessions:** Introduce sessions for children about the labour market and risks of labour exploitation, tailored to their needs.
- **Raising Legal Awareness:** Plan activities to raise legal awareness and support adolescents' responsible transition to the labour market, targeting both children and parents.
- **Monitoring of Refugee Children and Their Protection:** Focus on the protection and well-being of refugee children, particularly in collective accommodation settings.
- Inform about opportunities of existing support like infolines, Children Rights Ombudsman channels, etc.
- **Advocacy:** Advocate on improved access to inclusive mental health services for refugee and migrant children.



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