

POLICY REPORT
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Preventing a Lost Generation in Ukraine

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Cover Image: Sunset over Kyiv, Ukraine.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The war in Ukraine has inflicted unprecedented trauma on the country's children and youth, disrupting education, displacing millions, and shattering families and communities. Approximately half of all displaced Ukrainians are children, with roughly 4 million experiencing interrupted education and hundreds of thousands unable to attend in-person classes. Exposure to violence, loss, and instability has led to widespread psychosocial distress, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress, risking a "lost generation" with long-term psychological, social, and educational deficits. This report outlines four interlinked policy priorities to protect and support conflict-affected youth: strengthening mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) systems; providing trauma-informed and flexible education; keeping families together and supporting reunification; and locating, protecting, and reintegrating abducted children. Each recommendation emphasizes evidence-based, child-centered approaches, integrating services across schools, clinics, and communities, and addressing the unique needs of displaced, separated, and vulnerable children.

“Investing in children’s recovery is investing in Ukraine’s resilience and future. Evidence shows that early psychosocial support and continuous education significantly reduce long-term costs – in health, social welfare, and even security – that unchecked trauma would otherwise cause.”

The war in Ukraine has taken a severe and complex toll on children and youth. Across the country, childhood has been shattered – schools and hospitals have been bombed, families displaced, and normal routines disrupted.¹ Millions of Ukrainian children have been forced to flee their homes; UNICEF estimates that roughly half of all the country's displaced are children.² Many have lost family members, homes, and community support. Education – a vital source of stability and social connection – has been disrupted for about 4 million school-age children, with around 600,000 unable to attend in-person classes at all.³ In a context already ravaged by post-2014 armed conflict, these new attacks have caused unprecedented trauma: U.N. monitors confirmed that as of mid-2024, hundreds of children had been killed or injured, and the numbers have only increased as fighting continues.⁴ UNICEF warned that Ukraine's children are being “robbed of stability, safety, school, friends, and family,” and without urgent attention to these invisible mental wounds, they will carry them for years.⁵

These four objectives – child mental health, trauma-informed education, family reunification/care, and abductee prevention/reintegration – are closely connected. A safe school offers therapeutic support and a path to social reintegration, just as a strong family environment helps a child's emotional healing. An abducted child requires both legal protection and loving care to recover, linking justice measures to community support services. International agencies stress that child protection must be comprehensive: UNICEF's armed conflict plan calls simultaneously for mental health services, reintegration, and ending child abductions.⁶ Likewise, the trauma children carry can only be addressed through coordinated responses – medical, educational, and social – that honor each child's unique story and resilience.

Investing in children's recovery is investing in Ukraine's resilience and future. Evidence shows that early psychosocial support and continuous education significantly reduce long-term costs – in health, social welfare, and even security – that unchecked trauma would otherwise cause. As one Lancet editorial bluntly reminds us, “the children in Ukraine today are tomorrow's future of Ukraine.”⁷ Ensuring they emerge from this war as healthy, educated, and well-supported individuals is not optional; it's a strategic necessity.

1 UNICEF, *War in Ukraine: Support for children and families*, updated Aug. 14, 2025. <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/war-ukraine-pose-immediate-threat-children>

2 UNICEF, *Ukraine Crisis: Children at Risk*, 2022 update.

3 Regina De Dominicis (UNICEF), “Ukraine's recovery is dependent on the recovery of children's education,” UNICEF Press Release, June 12, 2024. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/ukraines-recovery-dependent-recovery-childrens-education>

4 *Children in Ukraine*, Lancet Regional Health – Europe Editorial, May 2022.

5 UNICEF, *War in Ukraine: Support for children and families*, updated Aug. 14, 2025. <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/war-ukraine-pose-immediate-threat-children>

6 UNICEF, *Children and Armed Conflict Agenda for Action*, 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/children-under-attack>

7 *Children in Ukraine*, Lancet Regional Health – Europe Editorial, May 2022.

The international community – donors, U.N. agencies, and governments – should therefore prioritize child-focused recovery funding within Ukraine’s humanitarian and reconstruction plans. By doing so, we not only uphold children’s rights but also help lay the foundation for a stable, prosperous Ukraine once peace returns. A holistic, child-centered approach to healing, learning, and family support will bring benefits for national recovery: a generation that can rebuild schools instead of witnessing their destruction, that can learn and work instead of reliving trauma, and that can raise the next generation strong. In policy terms, there is no higher-return investment than in the health, education, and protection of Ukraine’s children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations are trauma-informed, evidence-based, and focused on resilience and reintegration for affected youth in conflict settings. Each recommendation aims to be actionable, measurable, and aligned with postconflict recovery efforts.

1 STRENGTHEN MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR CHILDREN

43% OF CONFLICT-AFFECTED CHILDREN IN SAVE THE CHILDREN’S PROGRAM SUFFER PSYCHOSOCIAL STRESS

27% OF UKRAINIANS, INCLUDING CHILDREN, ARE AT RISK OF MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

4M CHILDREN HAVE HAD THEIR EDUCATION DISRUPTED

Source: Save the Children

This mounting psychosocial crisis underscores the first policy priority from international communities: strengthening mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) systems for children. Data collected from individual cases shows the urgency of this need: Save the Children found that by late 2024, 43% of conflict-affected children in its program were suffering severe psychosocial distress.⁸ Symptoms include anxiety, nightmares, concentration problems, and even physical manifestations of stress (some children under constant bombardment in Kharkiv developed graying hair).⁹ Adolescents exposed to war are significantly more likely to suffer depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, and experts warn that without intervention, “a generation of children [will be] scarred by the conflict.”¹⁰

Responsive policy must build on Ukraine’s emerging National Mental Health Action Plan: expanding training for child psychologists and social workers, integrating MHPSS into primary health clinics and schools and funding community mental health teams that reach displaced families and frontline towns.

The World Health Organization reports that Ukraine has developed a “target model” for psychosocial support and oblast-level plans to extend care, but these must be rapidly funded and linked to child protection and educational services.¹¹ For example, mobile child protection teams and helplines could be scaled up, and school counselors embedded in classrooms to identify and assist traumatized students. Crucially, mental health investment is an investment in all other objectives: Children who receive counseling learn better in class, recover faster at home, and reintegrate more fully if displaced or returned after abduction.

Prioritizing MHPSS for Ukraine’s children is both a humanitarian duty and a key to recovery and resilience. Without swift investment, war-related trauma could deepen, leading to prolonged cycles of distress, educational setbacks, and social instability. By quickly expanding MHPSS programs – integrating services into schools, clinics, and communities – international partners can help secure

8 Save the Children International, “Mental health toll of war leaves children with speech defects, twitching, and sleep disorders,” Dec. 9, 2024. <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/ukraine-mental-health-toll-war-leaves-children-speech-defects-twitching-and-sleep-disorders>

9 Save the Children International, “Mental health toll of war leaves children with speech defects, twitching, and sleep disorders,” Dec. 9, 2024.

10 UNICEF, *War in Ukraine: Support for children and families*, updated Aug. 14, 2025. <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/war-ukraine-pose-immediate-threat-children>

11 WHO Europe, “Three years of war: rising demand for mental health support, trauma care and rehabilitation,” Feb. 24, 2025. <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/24-02-2025-three-years-of-war-rising-demand-for-mental-health-support-trauma-care-and-rehabilitation>

2 PROVIDE TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATION FOR WAR-AFFECTED CHILDREN

a future for this generation. Protecting children’s mental health today is crucial for rebuilding Ukraine’s human capital, social structure, and hopes for peace in the future.

Education and psychosocial support should go hand-in-hand. The second policy recommendation is to provide continuous, flexible, and trauma-informed education for displaced and war-affected children. According to UNICEF, schools are not only places of learning but also “provide a crucial sense of structure and safety” for children, yet in Ukraine, they have been transformed into sites of danger or emergency shelter.¹² The numbers are stark: Roughly 4 million children have had their education disrupted by the war, and hundreds of thousands remain out of school. Thousands of school buildings have been damaged or lack shelters.¹³

To prevent a lost generation, education programs must be trauma-sensitive and fully child-centric. This means repairing and retrofitting schools (with shelters and psychosocial support spaces), as well as expanding nonformal and catch-up schooling to reach displaced or refugee children. Teachers and staff should be trained in trauma-informed pedagogy so that classrooms becomes a safe haven where counselors and social workers collaborate with educators. International partners already point to “trauma-sensitive education” as essential to building resilience;¹⁴ initiatives such as temporary learning centers, hybrid online-offline curricula, and school-based mental health activities should be scaled up. Scaling these localized programs will ensure more people are served while maintaining (or improving) quality and effectiveness.

Indeed, UNICEF notes that investing in safe, quality schooling – especially now – “minimizes the negative long-term effects of war and displacement” and helps rebuild Ukraine’s human capital.¹⁵ In practice, this could involve grants for psychological first-aid kits in schools, remote mental health support for homebound students, and special tutoring programs that foster both learning and peer connection. By knitting together education and well-being, policymakers can ensure that as children return to classrooms, they also find the emotional support they need to heal.

3 KEEP FAMILIES TOGETHER AND QUICKLY REUNITE SEPARATED ONES

A third policy recommendation is to keep families together and quickly reunite those separated. The chaos of war has left many Ukrainian children without parents or usual caregivers. UNICEF guidance emphasizes that unaccompanied or separated minors should be presumed to have living relatives, and every effort must be made to reunify them with family.¹⁶ Indeed, international reports show that thousands of Ukrainians have submitted family tracing requests – a significant demand for cross-border cooperation.¹⁷

Emergency systems like UNICEF/UNHCR “Blue Dot” centers have helped identify unaccompanied children at borders, but a formal child-tracing mechanism is needed both domestically and internationally. Ukraine’s government, with support from donors, should empower social services and nongovernmental organizations to track separated children, verify guardianship, and facilitate cross-line family visits or temporary foster placements.

At the same time, social safety nets must support vulnerable families to prevent separation in the first place. Human Rights Watch and UNICEF recommend measures such as child-focused cash assistance, food support, and par-

12 UNICEF, *War in Ukraine: Support for children and families*, updated Aug. 14, 2025. [UNICEF War in Ukraine: Support for children and families, updated 14 Aug 2025.](#)

13 Regina De Dominicis (UNICEF), “Ukraine’s recovery is dependent on the recovery of children’s education,” UNICEF Press Release, June 12, 2024. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/ukraines-recovery-dependent-recovery-childrens-education>

14 Plan International, “Ukraine Crisis Response,” March 2025. <https://plan-international.org/emergencies/ukraine-crisis-response/>

15 Regina De Dominicis (UNICEF), “Ukraine’s recovery is dependent on the recovery of children’s education,” UNICEF Press Release, June 12, 2024. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/ukraines-recovery-dependent-recovery-childrens-education>

16 UNICEF, *Children’s rights in return and reintegration*, Guidance Note, 2023.

17 UNICEF, *Children’s rights in return and reintegration*, Guidance Note, 2023.

A Russian attack that hit a children's hospital in Kherson, Ukraine, on Oct. 29, 2025, caused significant damage to the hospital and wounded four young patients. (Volodymyr Zelenskyy's social media account (handout) / Anadolu via Getty Images)



enting programs so that financial hardship does not force caregivers to make “orphanage evacuation” decisions.¹⁸ When institutional care is unavoidable, such as for disabled children whose parents have died, it should be temporary and fully connected to community networks.

Ukraine's EU accession and child reform plans have explicitly endorsed transitioning from orphanages to family- and community-based care; donors should align with these objectives by funding foster care programs, kinship grants, and the development of the child protection workforce.¹⁹ Importantly, all relocation or evacuation procedures must keep siblings together and respect the child's identity and nationality.²⁰ Doing so will lessen additional psychological trauma linked to separation and the challenges of acculturation. In summary, a strong family reunification strategy – including legal guardianship, proper records, and psychosocial support for caregivers – is as vital as any clinic or classroom for a child's recovery.

4 FIND AND REHABILITATE ABDUCTED CHILDREN

The fourth recommendation tackles a serious, specific problem: the abduction and illegal deportation of children. Independent and government sources report that tens of thousands of Ukrainian children were forcibly taken to Russia or occupied Crimea during the conflict.²¹ One investigative report estimates about 20,000 children have been taken since 2022, with only a few hundred recovered through NGO efforts.²² Many arrived with forged documents and were even placed for adoption.²³

18 Human Rights Watch, “Key recommendations on the reform of Ukraine's child protection and care system,” 15 June 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/15/key-recommendations-reform-ukraines-child-protection-and-care-system>

19 Human Rights Watch, “Key recommendations on the reform of Ukraine's child protection and care system,” 15 June 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/15/key-recommendations-reform-ukraines-child-protection-and-care-system>

20 UNICEF, *Children's rights in return and reintegration*, Guidance Note 2023.

21 The Guardian (C. Higgins), “I Will Return: play brings to life stories of Ukrainian children taken by Russia,” Oct. 12, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/12/i-will-return-play-brings-to-life-stories-of-ukrainian-children-taken-by-russia>

22 The Guardian (C. Higgins), “I Will Return: play brings to life stories of Ukrainian children taken by Russia,” Oct. 12, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/12/i-will-return-play-brings-to-life-stories-of-ukrainian-children-taken-by-russia>

23 The Guardian (C. Higgins), “I Will Return: play brings to life stories of Ukrainian children taken by Russia,” Oct. 12, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/12/i-will-return-play-brings-to-life-stories-of-ukrainian-children-taken-by-russia>

The international community has condemned this as a severe rights violation – in fact, the International Criminal Court has indicted Russian officials for these deportations – but the main challenge remains: locating the missing children and aiding those who return. Policymakers should therefore invest in cross-border family tracing and legal advocacy (collaborating with the Red Cross, the U.N. Missing Children project, and other relevant agencies), as well as documenting and tracking every known case.

Regarding reintegration, the needs are complex: returning children will need immediate psychological support, language or educational assistance if they experienced a different curriculum, and careful reintegration into their local communities. Schools and child protection agencies must be ready to give these children additional support – such as tailored counseling and peer support groups – since they might face identity issues or stigma.

In many ways, this abduction issue connects back to earlier themes: A child's successful reintegration depends on family and community backing (making the roles of child protection caseworkers, social services, and foster families crucial) and on closing gaps in education and mental health services. Donors should fund specialized reintegration initiatives alongside legal and diplomatic efforts to stop further abductions, fulfilling U.N. mandates to "support reintegration" when children emerge from conflict.

AUTHOR



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