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Article

Young Adults Navigating Life Amid the Pressures of War in Ukraine

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Abstract

This critical ethnographic study examines the psychological, socio-economic, and cultural impacts of the armed conflict in Ukraine on young adults (aged 18–40), focusing on resilience and coping mechanisms. Using exploratory mixed-methods, the study included a literature review, semi-structured focus group with 17 participants, and a survey of 47 respondents. Findings show that 94% of respondents reported significant stress and anxiety, consistent with trauma models of prolonged conflict. Displacement, job insecurity, and disrupted education compounded socio-economic hardship, while strong family and community networks supported resilience. The conflict's gendered nature emerged, with young men disproportionately affected by conscription pressures. The research addresses gaps in the literature by exploring how societal perceptions of mental health, displacement policies, educational access, and psychological support shape resilience during armed conflict, areas largely underexamined in Ukraine before 2022. It also situates findings within the broader socio-political and cultural context, contrasting fragmented governmental responses with emerging integrated approaches. By highlighting resilience in the face of systemic and personal challenges, this study underscores the need for targeted interventions in mental health, education, and economic recovery for young adults in conflict zones.

Keywords: young adults; socio-economic impacts; Russia-Ukraine war; displacement; coping mechanisms; mental health; trauma; post-war reconstruction; conflict-affected youth

1. Introduction

The armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, ongoing since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 [1], reached a escalated with a large-scale military offensive launched on February 24, 2022. This incursion has intensified geopolitical tensions and triggered a massive humanitarian crisis, particularly affecting civilians in Ukraine's eastern regions [2]. The armed conflict has resulted in widespread loss of life, family separation, and forced displacement. Changes to Ukraine's conscription laws have added further uncertainty, particularly for young adults, exacerbating psychological stress in government-controlled territories [3,4]. According to OHCHR's [4] 35th report, thousands of civilian casualties and numerous human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, and enforced disappearances have all been documented.

Although Russian authorities officially referred to the invasion as a "special military operation", multiple international bodies, including the UN, have recognized it as an armed conflict under international humanitarian law [5,6]. While Ukraine has invoked Article 51 of the UN Charter rather than formally declaring [7], the impact on civilians remains severe. Among the most affected groups are children and young adults, who experience disproportionate disruptions to their education, mental health, and developmental stability [8].

The psychological consequences of conflict exposure during adolescence and early adulthood are well-documented. Conflict-affected youth are at elevated risk for anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders [9–11]. Loss of educational continuity, social networks, and safety compounds

these risks. Since 2022, over 6.7 million Ukrainians have been internally displaced, including more than 2 million children. This mass movement has placed considerable strain on host countries such as Poland and Romania, stretching healthcare, education, and social systems [12,13]. Many displaced young adults live in precarious conditions, often without access to stable schooling, social support, or mental health resources.

Despite the scale of this crisis, displaced youth remain underrepresented in policy responses and research on armed conflict, particularly in relation to trauma-informed, scalable mental health interventions. In modern conflicts, nearly 90% of casualties are young adults, with many survivors enduring long-term psychosocial harm and impaired development [14,15]. Young adulthood is a key life stage characterized by identity formation, independence, and social integration [16,17]. Yet, in Ukraine, state priorities around militarization, conscription, and emergency policymaking often overlook the unique vulnerabilities of this group [18,19]. The compounded effects of conflict exposure, displacement, and socio-political pressures on young adults remain insufficiently explored. By shedding light on these issues, this research seeks to inform more inclusive, trauma-informed mental health policy and advocacy for young people navigating armed-conflict and displacement.

2. Methodology and Methods

This study adopts a constructivist epistemological stance [20], recognizing knowledge as socially constructed through lived experiences. The research is framed within a critical ethnographic approach, enabling analysis of how power structures, policies, and social contexts influence the resilience of young adults in conflict zones [21]. Displacement is examined as a key stressor disrupting access to protective factors such as education, stability, and community support. Informed by trauma and resilience theory [22], the study explores how psychosocial coping is shaped by both exposure to conflict and the availability of interventions.

This study follows an exploratory mixed-methods design [23], beginning with the release of a quantitative data collection (survey) followed by qualitative interviews via a semi-structured focus group to elaborate on findings. The study aims to identify how young adults in Ukraine and displaced abroad experience the psychological, socio-economic, cultural, and health impacts of armed-conflict, and how they demonstrate resilience in response to these challenges.

2.1. Research Questions

The main research question was how do young adults describe their experiences of the psychological, socio-economic, cultural, and health impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and how do they demonstrate resilience?

This question was augmented by several sub-questions, including:

- How do young adults perceive the effectiveness of resilience-oriented support efforts?
- How do governmental and non-governmental efforts align with youth experiences and needs during the invasion?

2.2. Participants and Sampling

Participants were aged 18–40 and either directly or indirectly affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Snowball and purposive sampling were used to recruit individuals through NGOs, educational institutions, and online platforms (Telegram, X, etc.). Inclusion criteria included:

- Being between 18–40 years old;
- Having direct experience with the armed-conflict or displacement;
- Residing in or having fled conflict-affected regions;
- Ability to communicate in English; and
- Willingness and ability to provide informed consent.

This study defines “young adults” as individuals aged 18–28. However, the participants of the study also included people aged 18–40 to capture the current and retrospective accounts of young

adults affected by the conflict since 2014. Drawing on trauma theory and the concept of cumulative stress [22], this expanded age range reflects the extended disruption of developmental milestones due to ongoing instability.

2.3. Quantitative Data Collection

This mixed-methods study addresses this gap by examining how the psychological, socioeconomic, and health impacts of armed-conflict influence coping and resilience among displaced Ukrainian young adults. While snowball sampling enabled diverse participant recruitment, it may have introduced selection bias, potentially underrepresenting isolated voices. In particular, many of the participants were university students or university educated. A 24-question survey was developed and distributed via SurveyMonkey, focusing on well-being, support systems, economic hardship, identity, and resilience strategies. Survey questions were adapted in consultation with a trauma-informed counselor to ensure sensitive framing of the questions [24]. Demographic diversity was sought across gender, ethnicity, education, and region. Data were anonymized and securely stored.

2.4. Qualitative Data Collection

Seventeen semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted online or in-person with participants inside and outside Ukraine, focusing on lived experiences, support networks, and coping strategies. As travel to Ukraine was unsafe, in person interviews were held in neighbouring Poland. Interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol to allow deeper insights into the psychological and socio-cultural effects of armed-conflict. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure diversity in gender, geography, and displacement status [25]. Reflexivity was embedded throughout to minimize researcher bias.

2.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize demographics and compare responses across groups (i.e., age, gender, education) using comparative analysis.

Qualitative data were thematically analyzed using an ethnographic lens and following Creswell's process [25], including: data organization, reading, coding, theme identification, and interpretation. Emic and etic perspectives [26] were integrated to deepen contextual understanding.

Triangulation of both datasets enabled a comprehensive, cross-validated interpretation of findings and informed the development of a coherent narrative grounded in participant voices [27].

2.6. Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board (August 11, 2024). All participants gave informed consent in their language of choice, with ongoing consent checks. Interviews included debriefing, withdrawal options, and emotional support referrals. Data were securely stored, anonymized, and participants' privacy was prioritized. Virtual interviews were chosen for safety due to conflict-related travel risks.

All protocols followed the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS). Participants retained ownership of their data, and findings are intended to support community-led resilience initiatives and advocacy.

2.7. Research Limitations

This study provided rich data that adds to literature in this area; however, several limitations should be named. The sample size of the survey and the focus group interviews were small. Despite this, saturation was reached. While efforts were taken to ensure participants represented diverse demographic characteristics, self selection to participate could have introduced sample bias. One example of this is that focus group participants were all university students, and most were living in

Poland. Despite these limitations, the study offers relevant context for understanding the psychological, socio-economic, cultural, and health impacts of this conflict on young adults.

3. Results

The findings from the online survey and the semi-structured focus group and individual interviews explored psychosocial, socioeconomic, cultural, demographic, and health-related experiences among displaced youth, primarily Ukrainians, in Poland. The goal was to understand how these factors shape coping mechanisms and resilience. Forty-seven individuals participated in the survey (91% Ukrainian, 9% other), and 17 students (15 Ukrainian, 2 Polish) took part in the focus group or individual interviews. Most had experienced displacement due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

3.1. Focus Group Interviews

Initially planned as individual interviews, the unexpectedly high turnout led to a focus group that encouraged peer dialogue and emotional connection. Held in Poznań, Poland, with two participants joining remotely from Ukraine separately, the session generated personal reflections on trauma, identity, and adaptation. Participants described life before 2014 as relatively stable, though many from Donbas recalled rising insecurity. Participants shared that by 2022, anxiety intensified as military activity escalated. The interviews highlighted experiences of personal loss, cultural transformation, and emotional upheaval.

3.1.1. Gender and Social Dynamics

The conflict strengthened participants' Ukrainian identity, especially in Donbas, where speaking Ukrainian became a political act. Cultural identity emerged as a key element of emotional survival. Some respondents experienced tension with family members who supported Russia, deepening emotional strain. Gender influenced how participants expressed or managed displacement. Female participants described carrying both their own emotional burden and that of their families. One participant reflected, "I came here [Poland] and left everything... My feelings couldn't fit in one sentence. It's frustrating every day."

Many women spoke of the emotional toll of being separated from male relatives still in Ukraine. One noted, "all my family is in Ukraine. The distance is a huge barrier for being close with them as it used to be before." This separation was not only a result of forced migration but was also shaped by policy frameworks, as under martial law, most men 18-60 were prohibited from leaving Ukraine potential conscription. For many participants, this meant that husbands, brothers, and fathers remained in conflict zones, intensifying anxiety and grief for their family members. Resilience was often sustained through connections with diaspora communities. Cultural practices, such as art, faith, and media engagement, offered a sense of continuity. While support services existed, mental health stigma limited help-seeking. One participant said, "I knew therapy was there, but I didn't go. It's not something we talk about." This reflects existing research on mental health stigma among displaced Ukrainians [28].

3.1.2. Socioeconomic Disruption

Respondents frequently cited the loss of employment, housing, and education. These disruptions were especially severe for those from eastern and southern Ukraine. One participant shared, "my husband and I were literally starving... nothing to eat, nothing to sleep on". Food insecurity left lasting psychological effects. One student explained, "Kyiv was partially surrounded... we didn't have food... After, I gained weight because I can't refuse food anymore. I'm afraid it won't be there tomorrow."

Poland offered relative safety, but economic strain continued. Participants described budgeting strategies and difficulties adjusting to unfamiliar labor markets. One stated, "since the war began,

I've had to be extra careful... cooking at home, picking up second-hand items." Many called for more accessible language training to support their employment prospects, such as "more professional English classes." These experiences are consistent with data from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [14], which shows that over half of Ukrainian refugees face severe financial stress.

3.1.3. Impacts of Armed-Conflict

Even those far from active combat zones were affected by the armed-conflict. One participant recalled, "my city was occupied for the first three days... I saw Russian soldiers. It was mental stress and depression." Participants described engaging in constant media monitoring as both a coping strategy and a source of exhaustion. One said, "I check the news every day. But there's so little good news". Another reflected, "news is my coping and my stress".

Family separation remained a major source of distress. "Even living in safety... you worry constantly about those who remained in Ukraine." Despite this pain, participants expressed strong (and increased) national pride. Statements such as "I'm proud of being Ukrainian as never before" and "I feel that I hold responsibilities for being a Ukrainian" echoed recent national identity research [16,29], while cultural and linguistic affirmation became a key part of resilience.

3.1.4. Mental Health and Psychological Consequences

Anxiety, depression, and disrupted life plans were central themes. One participant said, "in 2022, it was a depression... broken life plans... you don't see your future". Stigma, cost, and mistrust were common barriers to accessing mental health care. Some rejected therapy outright. "I don't think this will help." "All you do is talk." "It's expensive." Others voiced the need for more accessible support. Suggestions included "more online counselling" and "free mental health centres". A moment of shared disclosure from the researcher about personal loss and the role of therapy encouraged discussion among participants about the value of mental health support. Participants noted there was insufficient support for mental health.

Respondents also referenced organizations that provided help such as the Ukrainian Red Cross Society and Come Back Alive, though these were seen as insufficient to meet current needs. Some participants coped through community and cultural engagement. "My treatment was joining the local Ukrainian community as a volunteer." "Knowing I'm not alone gives me strength." Although international and local aid was appreciated, many participants described ongoing emotional wounds. The findings are consistent with research showing long-term psychological consequences of conflict and displacement [3].

3.1.5. Summary of Qualitative Data

These results highlight a complex mix of trauma, resilience, and identity among displaced youth. Cultural pride and community support served as protective factors, while stigma, economic hardship, and fragmented families created ongoing challenges. Despite hardships, participants demonstrated remarkable strength and a desire for recovery, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive and accessible mental health services.

3.2. Survey Results

3.2.1. Demographics

The age distribution of respondents showed that 38% were aged 18–24, 5% were aged 25–30, and 41% were aged 30–40. Given the study focused on experiences of the conflict during early adulthood (ages 18–28), this distribution underscores the protracted nature of the conflict. Their accounts illustrate young adults have borne the brunt of its impact, a key concern highlighted by Cockburn [30] in her analysis of gender and war. Cockburn argues that long-term conflict not only disrupts individual lives but also shapes societal roles of young people, particularly through

processes of militarization. This study has shown young adult respondents are both directly and indirectly affected by the enduring conflict, whether in their home country or within the diaspora.

The gender distribution revealed that 39% of participants identified as male and 61% as female, reflecting the gendered nature of the conflict, with young men disproportionately affected by conscription and thus less able to leave the country. This gender disparity aligns with Cockburn's [30] assertion that wars often reinforce traditional gender roles, where men are predominantly combatants and women non-combatants, despite women's increasing involvement in conflict. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, as Cockburn [30] suggests, also exacerbates the intersectionality of gender and war, affecting individuals differently based on gender, age, and other social factors.

3.2.2. Education and Geographic Diversity

Regarding educational attainment, 85% of respondents held at least a bachelor's degree or higher, 11% completed secondary education, and 2.9% had vocational training. Despite the conflict, most respondents maintained relatively high educational levels, reflecting both the resilience of educational systems during war and persistent inequalities in access. UNESCO's [30] report on education in emergencies highlights how protracted conflicts disproportionately impact educational opportunities, especially for youth in violence-affected areas. While most respondents completed or continued their education, disparities remain for those displaced or in more heavily impacted regions.

Respondents originated from a diverse set of geographic locations, primarily from Central and Eastern Ukraine (Kharkiv, Kyiv, Kremenchuk, Chernihiv, Kryvyi Rih) as well as Polish cities such as Mysłowice, Katowice, and Ruda Śląska, reflecting displacement patterns within the Ukrainian diaspora. This geographic diversity illustrates the widespread impact of the conflict and the gendered nature of displacement. Cockburn [30] notes that displacement can shift power dynamics and create new vulnerabilities, particularly for women and children. Here, respondents' geographic spread signaled the conflict's international dimension and the ongoing struggle to rebuild amid instability.

3.2.3. Conflict Impacts

The invasion of Ukraine has severely disrupted young adults' daily lives, with far-reaching consequences for their socio-economic well-being and psychological health. While 14% of respondents were not directly displaced, 86% reported forced relocation, underscoring the widespread impact of displacement. Even those remaining in Ukraine experienced interruptions in daily routines, such as the shift to remote university courses due to bombings and restricted social interactions for safety, echoing Ishiyama and Breuning's [32] findings on conflict-related disruptions to education and youth development.

Respondents recalled a "normal" life prior to 2014, with growing tensions beginning then and intensifying in 2022. One respondent reflected, "we didn't understand what was going on" in 2014, but by 2022, rumors of conflict had become daily concerns, escalating to fuel shortages, factory closures, and increased militarization that ultimately forced many to flee to Poland.

3.2.4. Lived Experiences

Respondents shared vivid firsthand accounts illustrating the intensity of their struggles: daily survival became the priority, frequent bomb shelter visits, disrupted sleep, and constant vigilance during air raids. Some described direct violence and trauma, such as being kidnapped and detained by authorities or witnessing factories converted into sites of imprisonment and torture (i.e., "Izolyatsia"), linking to documented war crimes by the International Society for Human Rights [33]. These experiences reveal the multilayered instability faced not only from invasion but also from increasing militarization and authoritarian governance within Ukraine. One respondent lamented life what they perceived as a 'dictatorial regime', noting frustration that it received little attention

from democratic countries. This reflects individual perceptions in complex political landscapes alongside ongoing conflict.

3.2.5. Socioeconomic Dynamics

The invasion strained social relationships and economic stability. Among 47 participants, 65.7% found maintaining social connections more difficult, 22% saw no change, and 8% found it easier. Displacement and family separations were common, weakening some romantic relationships but often strengthening immediate family bonds. This echoes Aldrich's [34] argument that social capital, especially familial and community ties, is critical for post-disaster recovery. Economically, 70.5% experienced increased living costs, while 38% reported income reductions. Strategies to cope varied from reduced spending and increased work hours to financial support from family or partners, illustrating the role of social capital in mitigating economic hardship.

3.2.6. Identity and Nationalism

The conflict catalyzed a pronounced cultural shift, with 68.9% noting a stronger embrace of Ukrainian heritage, interpreted through Smith's [35] theory of nationalism as "ethno-symbolic" identity rooted in shared cultural memories and narratives. War heightened national identity and pride, shifting many from Russian to Ukrainian language use and prompting deeper engagement with Ukrainian history and identity.

At the same time, complexities emerged: some respondents distanced themselves from the "Ukrainian project" associated with the government, despite maintaining Ukrainian identity, reflecting tensions between personal identity and political realities. Respondents also reported increased solidarity with Ukrainian and Polish communities alongside distrust toward Russian-affiliated family or friends. The visible growth in Polish support and the spread of Ukrainian language in Polish cities marked significant social and cultural transformations, although demographics that fled Ukraine did mention difficulties settling in Poland, with negative stereotypes attached to Ukrainians, such as feelings of mistrust expressed towards them.

3.2.7. Resilience

Aldrich's [34] distinction between "bonding" (solidarity among similar individuals) and "bridging" (linkages to external resources) social capital helps explain how young Ukrainians navigate conflict. Many found solace in close relationships, while others leveraged broader cultural and community networks. Smith's [35] framework highlights how nationalism in conflict zones functions as both a coping mechanism and collective action, fostering psychological resilience and national unity.

3.2.8. Summary of Quantitative Data

Overall, it was clear from the survey results that the participants felt the Russian invasion of Ukraine has created a multifaceted crisis of socio-economic hardship, psychological trauma, and cultural reaffirmation among young adults in Ukraine and its diaspora. These compounded challenges threaten long-term well-being and economic prospects. However, the strengthening of social networks and national identity underscores critical resilience factors. Supporting these young adults requires addressing both mental health needs and socio-economic vulnerabilities while acknowledging the powerful role of cultural identity and social capital in conflict recovery.

4. Discussion

4.1. Health Services and Interventions

Armed conflicts profoundly impact civilian mental health. Carpiniello [36] notes that civilians, especially youth, face heightened anxiety, depression, and PTSD, effects intensified in Ukraine by

direct violence, disrupted services, and difficulties accessing care. Although humanitarian resources exist, participants reported they were often inaccessible, poorly understood, or hindered by logistical and bureaucratic barriers. War-related trauma also fostered denial, with some preferring help from trusted community members over unfamiliar organizations.

One survey respondent, a psychotherapist, reflected:

“I am a psychotherapist and I have a lot of colleagues and friends who are psychotherapists. We stayed together online even though we were in different situations. I conducted support groups, and this also helped me to unite Ukrainians who left and who continued to live in Ukraine within me. Relationships with friends deepened and underwent changes. We had to learn to communicate at a distance. Our needs changed. I am learning to live in a new way abroad. They continue to develop in Ukraine, but all the time under bombs. But relationships with my parents have also changed. We became closer, then further, now somewhere in the middle. Everyone has their own emigration, and it is difficult. I want it to be like before, but it is impossible.”

In this study, 94.2% of participants reported anxiety, depression, or stress from the war, aligning with Carpiniello’s [36] observation that civilians in conflict zones are at higher risk due to violence, loss, displacement, and social collapse. Chronic anxiety, panic attacks, and feelings of despair were common, compounded by shelling and uncertainty.

Resilience also emerged as a theme. Many coped through running, gym exercise, meditation, avoiding conflict content online, breathing practices, grounding exercises, retreats, hobbies, and walks in the fresh air. Such adaptive strategies mirror Carpiniello’s [36] emphasis on coping mechanisms that restore agency. However, respondents also noted system strain — “hospitals are crowded with injured citizens” — and called for comprehensive recovery efforts spanning mental health, economic support, and environmental care.

The conflict also reshaped gender roles and family dynamics. Separation from deployed men left women and children to manage households alone; some mothers fled abroad, straining relationships. Grief and loss were pervasive, with many mourning both loved ones and disrupted family structures. While 63% of participants reported no major obstacles to care, 28% cited stigma, cost, or language barriers, issues amplified by the destruction of healthcare infrastructure and displacement of professionals. Participants urged targeted support for military personnel and veterans, greater international assistance, and broader youth opportunities such as exchange programs and entrepreneurship grants. Some, however, reported seeing no such programs and cited expenses as the main barrier.

Overall, the findings echo Carpiniello’s [36] conclusions that war has severely damaged youth mental health, access to care is uneven, and resilience coexists with significant unmet needs. Addressing the crisis requires both immediate mental health interventions and long-term social and economic rebuilding to restore the well-being of Ukraine’s young people.

4.2. Resilience and Gender

These findings underscore the necessity of context-sensitive resilience frameworks that address both the psychological needs of at-risk individuals and the gender-specific vulnerabilities evident in conflict and post-conflict settings. The integration of gendered peace and security frameworks is essential to ensuring that the needs of women, girls, and marginalized gender identities are met in ways that foster empowerment and equitable recovery [37]. Recognizing the role of gender in shaping both vulnerability and resilience enables the development of interventions that inclusively support all individuals navigating the complex processes of displacement and rebuilding.

Psychologically, the conflict has pushed many young adults to the brink. Consistent with Litz’s [31] Navy and Marine Corps Stress Continuum Model, 74% reported significant emotional distress (in Orange and Red zones), with another 20% noting moderate increases in stress. The constant fear, loss of motivation, and “psychological rupture” described by Fosters highlight the enduring toll of

prolonged conflict. Uncertainty around futures, especially for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), has exacerbated feelings of disempowerment and hopelessness.

Emotional responses from the participants ranged from fear and anger to profound betrayal, related to family members with differing political perspectives. Economic instability compounded these stressors: workplaces destroyed or repurposed for military use, scarcity of jobs, and heightened safety risks including air raids and conscription pressures mirrored Ishiyama and Breuning's [32] observations on the economic strains of conflict. In the diaspora, economic hardships were intensified by ongoing concerns for loved ones, aligning with Matheson et al.'s [29] findings on how trauma from displacement erodes resilience and social supports.

4.3. Implications for Interventions for Individuals and Communities

Resilience within displaced populations emerges as a dynamic process shaped by intersecting individual, familial, and community factors. Effective interventions must balance the provision of immediate psychological relief with long-term recovery objectives, placing emphasis on empowerment, community reconstruction, and the socio-political contexts in which displacement occurs. The literature reflects a notable shift from an exclusive focus on individual coping mechanisms toward the recognition of systemic determinants, such as family cohesion, in influencing resilience [25]. While short-term coping strategies can be adaptive, they remain insufficient without complementary long-term approaches to healing and sustainable reintegration.

4.4. Religious and Historical Narratives

Religious faith and historical narratives provide critical interpretive frameworks through which displaced individuals endure and process traumatic experiences. In Ukraine, religious belief has served as a protective factor, sustaining hope and reinforcing a shared sense of identity, while historical narratives tied to national identity have galvanized aspirations for return and recovery [23]. The deliberate incorporation of culturally and religiously congruent elements into mental health interventions increases both their resonance and their capacity to facilitate long-term recovery.

4.5. Community Cohesion

Community networks, whether familial, religious, or peer-based, remained consistent protective factors that mitigate the psychological impact of conflict. These networks provide emotional and practical support, enabling displaced individuals to manage stress and adapt to new environments. In Ukraine, the "Landscape of Service" and "Landscape of Care" models illustrate the central role of community structures in sustaining coping mechanisms [23]. Given that displacement often disrupts such networks, interventions must prioritize the restoration or recreation of these connections, whether through secure physical spaces or virtual platforms designed to maintain bonds between dispersed individuals.

5. Recommendations

Clear recommendations came to the fore when conducting the analysis and triangulation of the findings from focus group interviews, the survey and the literature review.

5.1. Policy Recommendations

For policymakers, an emphasis on community-led recovery initiatives that restore familial and communal ties is critical, with local leadership empowered through targeted training [3,38]. Culturally grounded mental health services that incorporate local healing rituals, as demonstrated in Kyrgyzstan, have proven more sustainable [39]. Avoiding premature return policies is essential, as such measures can exacerbate trauma if reintegration support is inadequate [27]. Digital mental health platforms should be prioritized in regions lacking traditional services, while mental health programming should be systematically linked to housing, education, and livelihood opportunities,

as seen in Kosovo's structured reintegration frameworks [40]. Lessons from the Syrian crisis response illustrate the necessity of embedding mental health into all humanitarian sectors to ensure its recognition as a core component of recovery [41].

5.2. Military Recommendations

Military actors must receive specialized training to identify psychological needs and to coordinate effectively with humanitarian agencies. Experiences in Montenegro and Bosnia demonstrate how aligning military operations with humanitarian objectives can foster trust and contribute to sustainable recovery [21,42]. The integration of psychosocial considerations into military operations in Ukraine would enhance the effectiveness of both security and recovery efforts.

5.3. Research Recommendations

Further research should adopt longitudinal approaches to track resilience trajectories in post-Soviet contexts, with a particular focus on how early coping strategies, stigma, and digital mental health interventions influence long-term recovery outcomes [5]. Greater exploration of the integration of religious and cultural practices into mental health interventions is warranted, as evidenced by positive outcomes in Tajikistan [43]. Gender-sensitive resilience programming, particularly for survivors of gender-based violence, remains a priority [44]. The piloting of adaptive, joint military–mental health response models that integrate real-time feedback from affected communities, as suggested by Heijmans [45], would also strengthen intervention effectiveness.

5.4. Operational Priorities for Ukraine

In Ukraine, the establishment of Mental Health–Military Liaison Teams, coupled with the expansion of mobile health units, should align with the National Mental Health Action Plan and the reintegration strategy of the Ministry for Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories [46,47]. Full compliance with Law No. 1706-VII and Article 49 of the Constitution, both of which guarantee the right to health care for internally displaced persons, must be ensured [32,48]. The deployment of digital monitoring tools can facilitate ongoing evaluation, provided such initiatives comply with data protection laws [9,49]. Structural barriers to reintegration, including outdated property and residency laws, should be addressed through legal reforms, with modernization of the 1983 Housing Code representing a critical step toward equitable housing access [50–52].

5.5. Addressing the Legal Gap

Currently, no nationally unified, legally binding mechanism mandates inter-ministerial collaboration on young adult–focused psychosocial programming. Embedding such provisions within national legislation, leveraging Ukraine's digital governance infrastructure, and positioning young adults as rights-holders rather than passive recipients of aid would address policy fragmentation and strengthen national resilience. By grounding these proposals in law and institutional mandate and ensuring their alignment with broader post-conflict governance priorities, Ukraine can move beyond aspirational policy toward an enforceable framework for recovery, one that situates psychosocial well-being at the core of both public health and reintegration strategies.

6. Conclusions

This study highlights the profound psychological, socio-economic, and cultural impacts of the armed-conflict in Ukraine on young adults. Elevated rates of PTSD, anxiety, and depression are compounded by displacement, disrupted education, economic hardship, and fractured community ties. Despite these challenges, many young adults demonstrate remarkable resilience, drawing strength from family, mutual aid, digital platforms, and civic engagement.

The long-term disruptions pose significant risks to sustainable peacebuilding, as ongoing displacement and socio-economic instability may entrench cycles of vulnerability and

intergenerational trauma. Without targeted mental health and reintegration efforts, post-conflict recovery risks being fragile and uneven. Using a human security framework, this research centers the lived experiences of displaced and conflict-affected individuals, emphasizing that peace extends beyond the absence of violence to include psychological safety, economic opportunity, education, and community belonging. While this approach foregrounds grassroots realities, future research could better integrate these insights with broader political and military dynamics for a more comprehensive understanding.

As the conflict evolves, the findings remain relevant highlighting the ongoing and cumulative nature of challenges, as well as the dynamic, socially constructed nature of resilience. Supporting young adults through coordinated, multi-level interventions that integrate mental health, housing, employment, and community peacebuilding is essential. Such investments offer a pathway to healing the impacts of the conflict and building a more inclusive, stable, and lasting peace.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/392203195_Caught_in_the_Crossfire_Exploring_Impacts_on_Young_Adults_in_Russo-Ukrainian_Conflict_Zones?channel=doi&linkId=68391fa26b5a287c304828ac&showFulltext=true

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Informed Consent Statement: All participants consented to the publication of de-identified data. No identifying personal information is included in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement: Given the sensitivity of this research, the privacy and confidentiality of participants were prioritized at every stage and have not been made public.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
IDP	Internally Displaced Person/People
DMHI	Digital Mental Health Intervention
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization

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