



FIVE EYES
MHRIC

A MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH AND INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE IN MILITARY, VETERAN AND FAMILY MENTAL HEALTH

Plain language summary

CRISIS IN UKRAINE: CIVILIAN COMBATANTS AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

THE ISSUE

While the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been underway since 2014, it escalated dramatically in 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine. Many civilians took up arms, joining the military or volunteering as civilian combatants. War-affected civilians are at high risk for mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. As the conflict continues with no end in sight, many civilians are experiencing long-term mental health impacts.

WHY IT MATTERS

According to World Health Organization (WHO) surveys, the mental health impacts of this conflict will be felt for a long time. Recovery from PTSD in the context of war and displacement is especially slow. The evidence points to the need to maintain military members' mental well-being, especially new recruits and civilians.

WHAT WE FOUND

Defending their country can bolster civilian combatants

By taking up arms for Ukraine, civilians may feel a strong sense of purpose. This can help protect their mental health. It may also put them at a higher risk for negative psychological outcomes.

Civilians in combat roles may feel unprepared

When civilians are quickly placed in combat roles with little or no training, they often don't have what they need to protect their mental health during exposure to trauma. They don't feel prepared. They are more vulnerable to stress, and they may feel they are not up to the task.

Civilian combatants may not be suitable for military service

When civilians join a war effort, they may not be screened to determine if they are suitable for military service. This can increase the risk of mental health problems.

New recruits may not feel part of the team

Unit cohesion can protect soldiers against PTSD. Civilian recruits may not feel the same sense of belonging and connection as long-serving military members.

Civilians may not feel ready to manage the demands of armed conflict

Professional emergency responders are less likely to develop PTSD, while civilian combatants with no high-stress, high-stakes experience are at greater risk of experiencing mental health problems.

The 5 Eyes Mental Health Research and Innovation Collaborative is composed of thought leaders from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These experts conduct research and provide advice on mental health issues to governments and other interested parties, including policymakers, practitioners, and scientists. Our shared goal is to improve mental health outcomes for past and present military personnel, veterans, and their families.

Separation from social networks increases the risk of mental health issues

Many Ukrainians have fled the country. Those who have stayed to fight are often separated from family and social networks. This puts them at a higher risk of psychological harm. Social connectedness can help protect them from the effects of stress.

KEY MESSAGES

- **Find ways to connect people in Ukraine with family and friends.** Social connectedness provides a buffer against the impacts of stress and trauma. Officials should make every effort to connect loved ones within and outside Ukraine.
- **Plan for the increased mental health demands that come from a prolonged crisis or insurgency.** Military mental health experts should collaborate with their Ukrainian colleagues to manage the mental health challenges ahead. Civilian combatants are especially at risk.
- **Use evidence-supported programs for better post-war mental health outcomes.** The aftermath of war will be felt for a long time. Early interventions that teach coping strategies to adjust to life after combat are needed.

This is a plain language summary of “Addressing the mental health needs of civilian combatants in Ukraine.”

Published: March 16, 2022 | [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(22\)00097-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(22)00097-9)

Authors: Authors: Richard A. Bryant, David Pedlar, Paula P. Schnurr