



Research paper

(Complex) PTSD in Ukrainian refugees: Prevalence and association with acts of war in the Danish refugee cohort (DARECO)

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ABSTRACT

Background: The Russian invasion of Ukraine has driven millions of Ukrainians away from their homes. Among these, the majority have likely experienced war-related potentially traumatic events, and some will experience symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The aims of the study are to estimate the prevalence of PTSD and Complex PTSD (CPTSD) in displaced Ukrainians and examine associations between war- and other potentially traumatic exposures and (C)PTSD.

Methods: Questionnaires were distributed to all registered adult Ukrainians (18+) who arrived in Denmark between February 24th 2022 and February 15th 2023 ($N = 18,389$). We estimate the prevalence of war exposures, other potentially traumatic exposures, and (C)PTSD. In logistic regression analyses, we test if exposure to war and other potentially traumatic events are associated with PTSD and CPTSD.

Results: The final sample size was 6993 (38.0 %). Responders were more likely to be female and younger than non-responders. Prevalence of PTSD and CPTSD was 15.9 % and 13.5 %, respectively. Female gender, high education, and loss of a relative due to the war were associated with (C)PTSD. Direct and indirect exposure to war and combat was related to PTSD but not CPTSD, while exposure to war prior to the 2022 invasion was related to CPTSD but not PTSD.

Limitations: The study is cross-sectional and based on self-report.

Conclusion: Close to one third of the sample fulfill the criteria of PTSD or CPTSD. War exposures are differentially related to PTSD and CPTSD. The findings illustrate that trauma-related psychopathology is a pertinent problem in displaced Ukrainians.

1. Introduction

Individuals fleeing war are often exposed to potentially traumatic events, which increases their risk of developing mental health problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Bogic et al., 2015; Johnson and Thompson, 2008; Mellor et al., 2021; Steel et al., 2009). Separation from family, living conditions on arrival in a new country, and challenges of cultural adaptation can also contribute to negative mental health outcomes (Porter and Haslam, 2005; Posselt et al., 2020; Robjant et al., 2009). Characteristics of the traumatic exposures are expected to influence both the prevalence of PTSD and specific trauma-related symptoms, such as disturbances in self-organisation (DSO), a symptom cluster characterizing the ICD-11 diagnosis Complex PTSD (CPTSD;

Cloitre, 2020; World Health Organisation, 2019). However, we currently lack knowledge on the prevalence of (C)PTSD in refugee populations, and on whether and how trauma exposures relate differentially to PTSD and CPTSD. Such knowledge will reveal the scope of mental health problems in refugees and enhance our abilities to target and shape interventions for refugees with PTSD and CPTSD.

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2022, millions of Ukrainians were displaced internally as well as across Europe. >6 million Ukrainians are currently registered as refugees across Europe (UNHCR, n.d.). With the high likelihood of potentially traumatic exposures, such as direct exposure to war and atrocities, this large population will likely contain a substantial number of individuals who have developed, or will develop, symptoms of (C)PTSD. A recent study of

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