

Letter to the Editor

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The New Humanitarian Crisis in Ukraine: Coping With the Public Health Impact of Hybrid Warfare, Mass Migration, and Mental Health Trauma

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Abstract

One of the largest mass movements of displaced people from their homelands in recent history must be recognized and assisted by the Free World. The unprovoked Russian attacks on Ukraine beginning in February 2022 will leave long-lasting devastating effects on millions of innocent victims. Nations worldwide, especially NATO member countries, will need to intervene to ameliorate the situation. This letter describes major public health issues apart from the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic that are emerging concerns, such as shortages of health-care professionals, chronic care treatments and health prevention services, disinformation communication campaigns affecting the health-care infrastructure, and the generational impact of the conflict on people's mental health. A global response and public health support need immediate action, including humanitarian assistance, food security, clean water supplies, adequate shelter, and safe transportation out of the active military zones.

Bombs detonated near the Kyiv airport during the morning of February 24, 2022, as an onslaught of premeditated strikes by Russian forces were orchestrated around strategic sites across Ukraine. Thousands of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians have been killed during the first weeks of fighting, and millions of innocent Ukrainians forced to shelter or flee to Western Ukraine and neighboring NATO-member countries such as Poland and Hungary.¹ The large-scale of these unprovoked attacks are unprecedented since World War II and have produced one of the largest mass movements of displaced people from their homeland in recent history, creating a new humanitarian crisis in Ukraine with short- and long-term public health concerns.

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has roots beyond the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 but has quickly manifested with shortages of health-care professionals and resources along with disinformation communication campaigns affecting the health-care infrastructure.² For example, a disinformation campaign was carried out during the early COVID-19 pandemic to disrupt the health-care infrastructure and the national preparedness program.³ Conflict tends to increase pre-existing public health issues despite the priority being focused on armed war and physical safety of communities. The damages by the attacks can amplify food and water insecurity along with environmental security issues. For example, some of these issues include discharges and fires from bombed industrial sites, water dam destruction, leaking fuel and hydrocarbons from areas of combat, combustion of ammunition, flooding in underground mines with leaching of chemical wastes, heavy metals, and radioactive materials into drinking water supplies.

There are urgent short- and long-term effects on mental and physical health that must be addressed alongside the conflict and mass migration. In the short term, chronic care treatment and health prevention services, such as diabetes, cardiac disease, or cancer screening, will be neglected. An increased spread of infectious diseases, including COVID-19, tuberculosis, polio, and measles will be challenging to control with outbreaks ensuing due to overcrowding in refugee containment areas and disruption of immunization programs. The long-term mental and physical health effects, such as depression, separation anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorders will affect many generations to come, especially with mental health consequences that have already been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴

Historically, from the start of the conflict in Donbass to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, over 1.5 million individuals have been internally displaced (IDPs). The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has assisted partner organizations to provide

humanitarian support and protection of human rights.⁵ The recent invasion by Russia and its impact will heighten the behavioral health issues, such as substance and alcohol use disorders. The maladaptive coping mechanisms of substance and alcohol use are a result of the conflict and subsequent trauma experienced. Funding and research focused on populations affected by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War is desperately needed for those who have fled, and for those who remain to fight. A global response and public health support need immediate action to supplement the resiliency of the Ukrainian citizens.

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Conflict(s) of interest. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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