Social Science & Medicine 371 (2025) 117909

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Social Science & Medicine

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/socscimed

Stressors faced by forcibly displaced Ukrainians in England within 6 months of arrival: A qualitative study

J. Whitehead [a], O. Fokaf [b], T. Deinekhovska [c], M. Egan [a], M. Seguin [a,*]

[a] Department of Public Health, Environments and Society, Faculty of Public Health and Policy, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK
[b] Health Unit, World Bank Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine
[c] Public and Patient Involvement, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Handling editor: Medical Sociology Office

Keywords:
Stress
Refugees
Mental health
Ukraine

ABSTRACT

Stressors faced by Ukrainians forcibly displaced by the 2022 Russian invasion is a relatively unexplored area. The aim of this paper is to explore stressors shaping the mental well-being of forcibly displaced Ukrainians in England. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 15 forcibly displaced Ukrainians (within 6 months of arrival) and 6 stakeholders, focusing on life experiences in England and barriers accessing critical services. We drew on the Four Core Stressors Framework to conduct reflexive thematic analysis, focusing on the following sources of stress: trauma, acculturation and resettlement. Key stressors centered on barriers in accessing housing and employment, compounded by the language barrier, family separation and ongoing war-related trauma. These stressors were perceived to contribute to feelings of fear, uncertainty, sorrow, numbness, disorientation, confusion, helplessness, and anxiety. Greater support in accessing housing, employment and language instruction would address key stressors, which may bolster mental health. Findings may be relevant to policymakers structuring the support system for forcibly displaced persons in other high-income settings.

1. Introduction

Factors shaping the mental health of forcibly displaced persons (including asylum seekers and refugees) is a key public health research priority (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007). The bulk of research on this topic focuses on the negative mental health impacts of pre-migratory trauma, including torture, violence and stress (Steel et al., 2009; Hynie, 2018). Post-migration stressors amongst asylum seekers and refugees (ASR) has received comparatively less research attention (Li et al., 2016; Miller and Rasmussen, 2017).

Hynie (2018) notes negative effects stemming from this disparity in research focus. First, an exclusive focus on flight-related trauma may perpetuate a false dichotomy between 'deserving' and non-deserving' refugees, with only those who experienced enough trauma deserving of support. Those deemed 'deserving' may be perceived as a societal burden due to the assumption that trauma constitutes a barrier to integration. Second, a focus on trauma experiences before and during flight obscures the impact of post-migration conditions (and possibly post-migration trauma) on mental health, and the imperative to address damaging conditions in which ASR find themselves (Li et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2017).

The global evidence base on the impact of post-migration stressors on mental health outcomes amongst ASR shows links between poor mental health and inadequate accommodation, language skills, employment, income, and social support, as well as confusing and/or punitive immigration policies (Hynie, 2018). Research on this topic specifically pertaining to the United Kingdom (UK) is slight. Focusing on 21 asylum seekers and refugees in England, Palmer and Ward (2007) found issues with housing, employment and the asylum process were salient stressors. Delays in accessing benefits (to which they are legally entitled) are a major stress amongst those transitioning from asylum seeker to refugee status (Strang et al., 2018), along with associated stressful life events regarding gaps in housing and welfare (Walker et al., 2021). Asylum seekers whose applications are declined face destitution as they cannot legally access state benefits, which has far-reaching negative impacts on employment and housing in England (Bloch, 2014). Quantitative research has shown these factors are significantly linked to higher rates of PTSD amongst 'failed' asylum seekers in England compared to their 'successful' counterparts (Morgan et al., 2017). Forcibly displaced persons who attain refugee status after proceeding through the asylum phase continue to face challenges adapting to UK life. Restrictive refugee policies, including temporary (rather than

* Corresponding author. 15-17 Tavistock Place, London, WC1H 9SH, UK.
E-mail address: maureen.seguin@lshtm.ac.uk (M. Seguin).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2025.117909
Received 10 July 2024; Received in revised form 27 January 2025; Accepted 1 March 2025
Available online 3 March 2025
0277-9536/© 2025 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

permanent) residency status and not feeling accepted in England were salient stressors in Stewart and Mulvey (2014) and Bogic et al. (2012); the latter found associations between these stressors and high rates of anxiety disorders. Within UK-focused studies, only two included persons originally from Ukraine (Palmer and Ward, 2007; Bloch, 2013). However, their findings are not disaggregated to show Ukrainian-specific data. Moreover, both were published before the initial Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. There is a lack of research focused on stressors amongst Ukrainians forcibly displaced to the UK due to the 2022 Russian invasion.

Stressors amongst forcibly displaced Ukrainians have been the focus of study outside the UK, including in Poland where key stressors included triggers from the war, concern about loved ones and uncertainty about the future (Rizzi et al., 2022). Evidence from the Czech Republic reveal a significant relationship between increased financial difficulties, reduced socioeconomic status, inaccessible healthcare, discrimination and isolation with poorer self-reported mental and physical health (Mazhak, 2023). Also focused on the Czech Republic, Kulhánová et al. (2024) found links between isolation, poverty and a lack of social support, and being from the eastern part of Ukraine with poorer self-rated health amongst highly-educated forcibly displaced Ukrainian women. Stressors in Denmark center on difficulties navigating the healthcare system, unsuitable housing, and a lack of support network (Vereshchakina et al., 2023).

Without downplaying the importance of trauma experienced before and during flight, there is a need to progress beyond a trauma-focused approach to explore and address post-migratory stressors. A conception of refugee mental health including not only pre-migration experiences but also the post-migratory socioeconomic environment is necessary to achieve a more comprehensive viewpoint on well-being of refugees in the longer term (Miller and Rasmussen, 2017). The aim of this paper is to explore stressors (at pre-migration, migration, and post-migration phases) shaping mental well-being of forcibly displaced Ukrainians in England. It is necessary to first outline the context of this study.

1.1. Ukrainian and British contexts

Russia's war in Ukraine began in 2014 with the invasion and annexation of the Crimea peninsula, followed by their support of pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas area, leading to a wave of internal displacement. Following the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, displacement within and beyond Ukraine escalated abruptly. As of July 2024, there were over 6 million forcibly displaced Ukrainians in European countries (UNHCR, 2024a). Recent 2024 estimates of forcibly displaced Ukrainians in the UK range from 204,000 (UK Government, 2024b) to 253,160 (Statista, 2024).

The UNHCR (2024b) defines a refugee as someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their origin country of origin because of fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. The term is also used in a more general sense to refer to someone who has left their country of origin due to war, persecution, or natural disaster, even if they have not been legally granted refugee status (Walsh, 2022). Though those who left Ukraine since the full-scale invasion are refugees in the latter definition because they left Ukraine due to war, those on the visa schemes outlined below are not refugees in the UK legal context because are not holders of refugee visas (Cuibus et al., 2023). For this reason, in this paper we use the term 'forcibly displaced' rather than refugee when referring to Ukrainians who have arrived in the UK due to the war.

The two most common visa routes for forcibly displaced Ukrainians in the UK are the Ukrainian Family scheme and the Sponsorship scheme (also known as 'Homes for Ukraine'). These visas cover 3 years of 'leave to remain' from date of issue and entitle applicants the right to work, study, and claim benefits. These schemes represented a departure from existing resettlement and asylum processes for providing accommodation. Though a previous scheme for Afghan refugees facilitated community sponsorship, the Ukrainian schemes made it possible for individuals based in the UK to directly sponsor and house forcibly displaced Ukrainians (British Red Cross, 2023). In February 2024, the UK Government announced that the Ukrainian Family scheme would close to new applications on 19 February, and those already granted visas under either scheme could extend their stay by 18 months after the original 3 years 'leave to remain' expires (UK Government, 2024a). As such, both types of visas will begin to expire from September 2026 onwards.

2. Materials and methodology

2.1. Recruitment and ethics

The senior author conducted public engagement from March to September 2022 in the form of volunteer activities at several Ukrainian 'hubs' established in London, UK in late February. Frequent interactions with forcibly displaced Ukrainians, Ukrainian expatriates, and fellow volunteers highlighted the initial challenges displaced Ukrainians were encountering upon arrival in London, which centered on barriers in accessing a range of resources to which they had legal access. These barriers led to stress. A qualitative approach was chosen to explore their challenges and generate insight on the link between stressors associated with migration (at any stage) and mental health.

We recruited adult (aged 18 and older) forcibly displaced persons from Ukraine, as well as relevant adult stakeholders. Inclusion of these two types of interviewee is consistent with the concept of 'multivocality' (Tracy, 2010). This involves the deliberate inclusion of multiple and varied voices in the data, providing space for a range of perceptions on the research topic.

Stakeholders included (i) staff at a London local authority and (ii) volunteers and staff at Ukrainian- or migration-focused charities. Staff at the London local authority were centrally involved in the Public Health team within councils, with a specific focus on migrant health. These stakeholders delivered elements of the local authority's response to the arrival of Ukrainians in their borough, under either the Homes for Ukraine or Family schemes. Due to their former work on migrant health, as well as their work delivering the Homes for Ukraine and Family schemes at the local authority level, these interviewees were knowledgeable on stressors faced by forcibly displaced persons and related mental health implications. These interviewees were recruited through the professional network of MS. Specifically, five staff were contacted via email and invited to participate in an interview, of which two accepted. Of the three who declined to participate, one was no longer involved with delivering the Ukrainian schemes, and the remaining two redirected MS to the two participating stakeholders as best placed to speak about the research topic.

Volunteers and staff at Ukrainian- or migration-focused charities, and forcibly displaced Ukrainians were recruited through contacts of two of the authors at a Ukrainian-focused charity in London, and through snowball sampling. This charity operated several 'hubs' in the months following the start of the full-scale invasion, largely driven by the Ukrainian diaspora already in London. The hubs functioned as donation points and locations where advice and support could be accessed. Many forcibly displaced Ukrainians started to volunteer at the hubs after initially receiving support from them. Activities included sorting and boxing donated goods, interacting with the public at hub entrances, assembling emergency medical kits, and giving advice on a range of topics including visa and legal issues, benefits, employment, health, and housing.

At the hubs, potential interviewees (both forcibly displaced and charity stakeholders) were told about the research study by one of two authors and asked if they would consider participating. As the research team suspected that age and gender may shape stressors and mental health, forcibly displaced Ukrainians spanning a wide age range were

invited to participate, and both women and men. As the latter were much fewer in number than women at the hubs, a mostly female sample was anticipated.

Six staff at charities were invited to participate, of which three accepted. Of the three who declined, two did not give a reason, and one had left her post at the charity. Seventeen forcibly displaced persons were invited to participate, of which sixteen accepted. Scheduling conflicts was the reason provided for non-participation. Interested potential interviewees were provided with an information sheet (in either the Ukrainian or English language depending on preference) and an interview was arranged. At the conclusion of interviews, interviewees were asked to suggest additional potential participants and contact the study authors if anyone came to mind. This snowball sampling facilitated the participation of a small number of forcibly displaced Ukrainians living outside of London.

Ethical approval was granted by the [information removed for anonymity] prior to any interviewee recruitment. Prior to their interview, participants were made aware that they could stop or pause the interview at any time should they become distressed. Forcibly displaced interviewees were provided with a participant information sheet (in Ukrainian) containing a list of mental health supports providing free psychological assistance to Ukrainians. They were also provided with a separate list of resources, including mental health support and helpful agencies within England should they become distressed because of the interview.

2.2. Interview process and topic guides

Interviews were held in September and October 2022. Forcibly displaced interviewees were given the option of conducting the interview in English, Ukrainian or Russian, with the assistance of an interpreter (TD) as needed. Interviews were conducted on charity premises and interviewee workplaces. Due to the sensitive nature of the interviews, participants were made aware at the outset that they could stop the interview at any time and were not required to answer questions which made them uncomfortable. All interviewees were offered £20 at the conclusion of their interview in recognition of their time spent participating in the research.

The topic guide for forcibly displaced participants focused largely on barriers experienced in accessing resources and services for themselves and dependents (including income support, education, employment and language resources, and medical services), how these barriers related to stress, and whether/how barriers shaped their perceptions of mental health status. They were also asked how they coped with challenges faced since arriving in England, though this data is not analyzed here. Demographic information (age, gender, area of origin within Ukraine) was gathered, as well as details on the dates and circumstances of leaving Ukraine and arriving in England. Topic guides for stakeholders focused on their observations of the challenges faced by forcibly displaced Ukrainians, along with stressors. They were also asked about the range of services and resources their organizations provided, and challenges they faced in best supporting forcibly displaced Ukrainians. Interviews were audio-recorded. English portions of interviews were transcribed and anonymized by the senior author, then downloaded into NVivo software.

2.3. Analytic approach

Our analytic approach was guided by elements of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2024) and 'artfully interpretative' approaches (Finlay, 2021; Braun and Clarke, 2022), as demonstrate in our flexible approach to coding. We first followed an inductive coding process which involved the lead author roughly mapping the range of stressors discussed by interviewees. This generated a plethora of stressor codes covering a time period from immediately prior to the full-scale invasion to initial months in England.

Inductive coding was followed by a phase of familiarization with theory and frameworks relevant to the interpretation of stressors due to forced displacement in the wider literature undertaken in collaboration by the lead and senior authors. Domains drawn from the constellation of displacement-related stressors introduced by Miller and Rasco (2004) were highly resonant with our data. Their taxonomy spans trauma due to experiencing and fleeing armed conflict, and also stress-inducing characteristics of being displaced, such as poverty, unemployment/reliance on aid, family conflict, perceived discrimination in host country, separation from family members, uncertainty over visa status, loss of previous support networks (and resulting isolation), and loss of previous social roles (Miller and Rasco, 2004; Miller and Rasmussen, 2017). These stressors were amalgamated by Davis et al. (2021) in the Four Core Stressors Framework, comprised of the following domains: traumatic, acculturative, resettlement and isolation stress.

Traumatic stress is a response to an intense event that threatens or causes physical or emotional harm (Davis et al., 2021). Trauma faced at each stage of the migration journey (pre-migration, migration, and resettlement) is included in this purview. Acculturation stressors stem from navigating between the new culture and culture of origin, including learning a new language (Davis et al., 2021). Resettlement stress refers to the challenges related to establishing a life in a new country, focused on barriers in finding suitable housing, and/or employment, related stressors such as poverty, and inaccessibility of key resources such as healthcare (Davis et al., 2021). Finally, isolation-related stress results from insufficient informal or formal social support from the new community, as well as perceived discrimination and stigma in the host country. The lead author undertook a phase of deductive coding which involved considering the relation between our initial inductively-derived codes to the four core stressors, guided by frequent dialogue with the rest of the research team.

The Four Core Stressors Framework was chosen to guide our analysis for three reasons. First, the initial inductively-generated themes broadly resonated with the constituent elements of the framework. Second, the framework spanned stressors experienced before, during and after flight, allowing us to encapsulate pre-migration, migration, and resettlement stressors reported in the interviews. Though this framework was developed for immigrant and refugee children and families (Davis et al., 2021), we wished to test whether its elements would also be relevant to forcibly displaced adults. Thus, the third reason was to make a conceptual contribution to the literature.

We acknowledge that Braun and Clarke (2024) warn against confusing 'themes' with 'topics' in analysis. Topics can consist of a summary of different meanings or understandings of a phenomena. For instance, research describing barriers to a particular resource may include several disparate barriers reported across the data, nonetheless brought together under the topic of barriers. In contrast, themes reflect shared meaning amongst research participants, developed from and through coding. Themes, not topics, are aligned with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2024). The Four Core Stressors Framework arguably provides 'topics' centered on four types of stress. Rather than simply organize the data under these stress categories, we were sensitive to issues encountered in relating our inductive codes to the framework elements. For instance, we noted instances where inductive codes mapped onto several framework elements, not just one. Further, we noted that few of our inductive codes related directly to social isolation stress. In response to these observations, our presentation of themes below acknowledges the interrelationship between stressors regardless of where stressors are presented within the framework. We have omitted social isolation stressors as our inductive codes related to these stressors mapped more directly onto the other three stress types.

Consistent with an artfully interpretative approach (Finlay, 2021; Braun and Clarke, 2022), we recognize the inherent subjectivity of our coding process. Rather than strive to ensure our coding is objectively accurate, we integrated 'member reflections' (Tracy, 2010) into our analytic approach to enhance the credibility of our analysis presented

below. Two authors are members of the displaced Ukrainian community. They were central in discussions related to the analytic approach and theme generation, in particular, the prominence of accommodation-related stressors and how these relate to the constellation of other stressors in the data. We have sought to provide space within our analytic approach to foster member reflection to enhance the nuance and complexity of the themes generated.

3. Analysis

Twenty-one interviews were conducted in September and October 2022: 16 with forcibly displaced Ukrainians and 5 with stakeholders. Stakeholders included 2 staff from a local authority in London with involvement in programming for forcibly displaced Ukrainians in their borough, and 3 volunteers at a Ukrainian-focused charity involved in running the 'hubs' described earlier. Two of these volunteers were Ukrainian but had lived in the UK for many years before the full-scale invasion. The average interview length was 56 min.

Of the 16 forcibly displaced participants, ages ranged from 28 to 66. Ten were married, and six had children aged 18 or younger. Five had adult children, who in some cases invited their parents to come to the UK under the Family scheme. Nine were living in Kyiv at the start of the full-scale invasion, though one of these interviewees had been displaced to Kyiv after the initial Russian invasion in 2014 drove her to leave her home in Luhansk oblast. Others were from the cities of Vasylkiv, Chernihiv, Zhytomyr and Irpin. Most left Ukraine in early March 2022. Nine had arrived under the Homes for Ukraine scheme and were living with hosts at the time of the interview. Fourteen were living in London, more specifically, across 4 local authorities. Two were living outside of London: 1 in Cambridgeshire and 1 in Buckinghamshire, both in relatively rural areas. Consistent with the demographic breakdown of forcibly displaced Ukrainians in the UK, all but 1 forcibly displaced participants identified as female. On average, these interviewees had been in England for 4.5 months at the time of their interview. Eleven interviews were conducted in Ukrainian with the assistance of TD, and ten in English. Four forcibly displaced interviewees who were fluent English-speakers preferred to be interviewed in English. Below, findings are arranged according to three domains of the Four Stressors Framework (Davis et al., 2021) (excepting social isolation). All interviewee names (for both stakeholder and forcibly displaced participants) are pseudonyms.

3.1. Traumatic stress

We have drawn on Davis et al. (2021)'s conceptualization of traumatic stress is as a response to an intense event that threatens or causes physical or emotional harm. Stakeholder and especially forcibly displaced interviewees recounted many aspects of trauma experienced from 24 February onwards. Many of the latter interviewees endured days or weeks of tension in Ukraine prior to leaving, and in some cases were proximal to combat activities. Ionna, from Chernihiv, was entrapped under Russian occupation for 1 month. She and others described constant shelling, seeing military airplanes and helicopters overhead, and sheltering in overcrowded basements and metro stations.

Many described long, harrowing journeys into western areas of Ukraine by bus, car and train. Klavdiya described the chaos and fear of leaving by car for the Moldovan border, recounting:

> We left, we drove westwards, we didn't know where we were heading, but we were leaving the city. […] There was a huge traffic jam leaving the city. The tanks were heading in the opposite direction and the terrible thing was, that we were not sure of, whose tanks were those? I mean, where those Ukrainians or not?

After crossing the border, these interviewees described overcrowded housing arrangements and an overwhelming feeling of uncertainty over next steps.

Traumatic stress was experienced by participants via learning about the trauma of others as war-related events became clearer. For instance, Halya's brother had intended to assist a friend's family to flee Hostomel, but he had not managed to make it there. The family had survived but had been under Russian occupation and had witnessed the traumatic death of a man from the community. Though Halya had not been there, these details weighed on her after she learned of the atrocities committed by the Russian soldiers after they left Hostomel. She reflected, "That was terrible. That's not an invented story. It's a story from people you know."

In addition to the on-going effects of personal trauma experienced whilst in Ukraine, and hearing about others' trauma, separation from family (especially husbands and parents) were powerful sources of stress at the time of the interview. Forcibly displaced and Ukrainian stakeholders were fearful for the well-being of family members in Ukraine in the face of frequent attacks. Participants who had relations on the front line noted the unique mental health impacts of this stress. Anastasia, a 62-year-old widow, explained:

> My son is at war, near Bakhmut, on the front line. My second son has been called for conscription at the end of the month. Most likely, starting from April [2023], he will join the army too. It's difficult. In the evening, I may study things, learn things, but in the morning, I cannot remember it. I just forget everything I know. My son is 3 days on the front line, then he has 3 days of rest. Three days I live, and the other 3 days, I just [trails off].

Many interviewees emphasizes that the stress of being separated from loved ones in Ukrainian military made it difficult to focus on resettlement and/or acculturative activities, such as learning English, applying for jobs, or planning for longer-term housing.

3.2. Acculturative stress

Acculturation stress results from encountering a new culture, including challenges due to learning a new language. Daniela described the challenges of learning about the resources available to them and understand the bureaucracy: "It took a long time to get an idea of the British system. Of universal credit, child benefits, national insurance number, the NHS." Veronika recalled that the system of benefits was confusing at first. In particular, she felt like the term 'universal credit' implied that the money received needed to be paid back to the state, leading some acquaintances to not apply for it.

Though many of those living with hosts under the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme described their hosts as supportive, there were nonetheless difficulties associated with living with strangers and encountering a different culture and language. Many also felt a loss of independence and an inability to live freely and express their views due to their dependence on hosts for shelter. Those with children described the additional strain of trying to make sure that their children's energetic behavior did not annoy their host and jeopardize their housing arrangements. In several cases, living arrangements didn't work out and forcibly displaced interviewees were asked to leave before 6 months had passed. In some situations, this was because of a change in the host's life situation but in others, it was the result of tension between the interviewee and host. Reasons included a breakdown of communication due to differences in culture and language. John, a stakeholder with Ukrainian heritage volunteering at a donation hub, described the dynamic from the point of view of hosts:

> People are empathic, right? On the spur of the moment, they say, there's a big issue in Ukraine, we have a spare room, we'll house a family. They've never had experience of dealing with another culture, they don't have any experience of someone else living in their house. Then people arrive, without the ability to communicate, and it just leads from one thing to another, different cultures, leading to

conflicts, since there is no communication conflicts do not get resolved, things explode and people are on the street.

Forcibly displaced participants were actively trying to address the language barrier by attending English language courses. However, several participants experienced barriers in accessing these courses. Some were overbooked, leading to long wait times to start. Others, such as Daniela, observed that the timings of the courses were not convenient. She arrived in mid-May 2022. By the time she understood which courses were on offer in her area, they were about to cease instruction until the autumn as most courses were not offered over the summer. She anticipated that the courses would resume at approximately the same time that she intended to move from her host's home into rental accommodation. She had hoped to improve her English before this move, but it seemed unlikely due to the course timings.

The language barrier also led to issues outside hosts' homes. Forcibly displaced participants described not understanding announcements made on public transport, decreasing their confidence to travel independently. Some gave examples of having to cancel medical appointments due to lack of medical interpreters. The language barrier also negatively impacted their ability to communicate with staff at local authorities, which made it difficult in some cases to access resources and services to which they were legally entitled. For instance, one forcibly displaced participant recounted that her daughter (who had a better understanding of English than the participant) had to accompany her to the council offices on several occasions to address a problem with her Universal Credit payment. Notably, it decreased their ability to understand housing-related options facilitated through the council, as discussed more fully in the next section.

3.3. Resettlement stress

Resettlement stress results from challenges related to establishing a life in a new country, and can include barriers in finding suitable housing, and/or employment. Despite the acculturative stress associated with living with a host family, interviewees recognized that moving on to different accommodation would be a challenge. The prospect of arranging longer-term accommodation was one of the most salient stressors in the data, mentioned by both stakeholders and forcibly displaced participants. Even those forcibly displaced Ukrainians who lived with supportive hosts, or with family members who offered accommodation beyond 6 months, felt their long-term accommodation was uncertain and a follow-up living arrangement needed to be found.

Barriers in finding accommodation independent of hosts and family sponsors were discussed at length in many interviews. Some forcibly displaced participants had already started to plan their next step. Daniela outlined 3 options. The first was finding another host, which she did not think was feasible. The second was social housing, but remarked, "it seems like it's just a formality, it exists on paper but in fact you can't access this option. There's not enough social housing, and there's a queue that can make you wait years." As these options were essentially inaccessible, Daniela, like many other forcibly displaced interviewees, was planning on renting an apartment. Under 'Housing benefit,' part of the rent could be covered by her local council. Still, she was anticipating barriers in accessing rented accommodation. She commented, "as far as I know, landlords have rather strict requirements. You must be employed, you must show a good credit history, and they're not really willing to give apartments to rent to refugees." Others noted that landlords typically required a guarantor who would pay the rent if they failed to do so, which was impossible for forcibly displaced participants who did not have English contacts to ask. In the absence of a guarantor, participants recounted being asked for 6 months of rent (plus deposit) upfront, which was not within the reach of most participants. Most were on Universal Credit and had no way to build up significant savings within the few months of their arrival in England. On the barriers of renting, stakeholder John commented,

> The situation in London, the rents went up [recently] by 30%, 50%? And availability is very low. When you get [forcibly displaced] Ukrainians, it's usually mothers with children, who don't have a credit history, who don't have a good job, on Universal Credit. There is already a line-up of candidates to grab the space, and they are at the end of the queue, if they are in the queue at all.

The need to pay for rent (and, in many cases, a large lump sum in the absence of a guarantor) made employment critical for participants. Major barriers to attaining employment were the language barrier, non-transferability of Ukrainian qualifications, and the lack of affordable childcare. Although many participants had a basic knowledge of English and (in many cases) were enrolled in English language courses at the time of their interview, their English skills were insufficient to gain employment similar to former roles held in Ukraine. Many forcibly displaced participants were highly educated and had worked in well-paid professions but felt compelled to accept low-skilled work in the cleaning or service industries which did not reflect their education or experience. Natasha, who previously worked as a professional translator, commented "People are really anxious to work. But the array of jobs is really limited if you don't speak English, so it's mostly cleaning." She further explained:

> I thought my services would be helpful as many Ukrainians are arriving, but I researched and realized that I would have to prove my qualifications and take a course which is quite lengthy, like 3 or 4 months, and the cost is about 500 pounds. And the job center wouldn't cover the cost.

Women who managed to receive job offers despite the language barrier and non-recognition of credentials faced the lack of affordable childcare as an additional employment barrier. Childcare provision in England was sharply contrasted with that available in Ukraine, which was less expensive and had more availability. Yana, who had a 3-year-old son at the time of her interview, explained the difference: "It's not so expensive, you just have to pay for the food. The other money, the government covers. It's a very small amount. To put it in British currency, approximately £20 per month." The expensive and sparse availability in England prevented some interviewees from taking on full-time work. Aleksandra, who turned down a full-time job for this reason, noted, "Even if you speak English, you have kids. You can't just leave them alone, and not every employer wants to adjust to your timing."

Many forcibly displaced participants outlined a dilemma between investing considerable effort and expense into settling into England (learning English and having qualifications transferred) versus taking on low-skilled positions if their stay was to be temporary. As most voiced their intention to return to Ukraine after the war ended, the investment needed to transfer qualifications or reattain various professional standards was difficult to justify.

3.4. Mental health impacts of traumatic, acculturative and resettlement stress

The stressors described above had compounding mental health impacts. Impacts of traumatic stress included insomnia, intense fear (for oneself and family and friends), uncertainty and sorrow, feeling 'lost,' numb, and being unable to process information and make decisions. For instance, Halyna spoke about the mental health impacts of frequent shelling prior to leaving Ukraine, recalling "the fear was intense." Though most of these traumatic stressors were associated with experiences in Ukraine before and during flight, this was not always the case. Traumatic stress was experienced via others' accounts of traumatic experiences living in Ukraine even after the interviewee had left, and through news. Thus, the mental health impacts of this trauma were experienced on top of acculturative and resettlement stress.

Notably, alongside narratives of incredible stress and fear, both forcibly displaced and Ukrainian stakeholders recounted many instances

of remarkable kindness from strangers both within Ukraine and in European countries which eased their initial experience of displacement. Despite the often-warm reception, forcibly displaced interviewees described feeling numb and unable to sleep or concentrate in the early days of the war. Halya described,

> I couldn't sleep at all, I could only sleep an hour or a couple of hours. You are following the news. You are checking your regions, where the explosions were, because my parents live close to the Belarus border and my brother is in Kyiv and those were the places where it all started.

Veronika explained how the emotional and mental stress of the war led to feelings of being 'lost.' She explained,

> People were leaving the country not going for a walk. They were under stress when they were leaving the country, I felt it in myself and I saw it in other people, even very young ones. It's like you are lost. And it prevents you from thinking, from processing information. And to decide what to do. To decide on the steps that you should take."

Nadiya described a feeling of adrenalin: "You're in a race. And the stake is your survival."

Mental health impacts of acculturative stress included feeling overwhelmed and confused by bureaucracy and resources available and feeling unable to navigate a new culture with weak English language skills. Living with near-strangers under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, or with family in often crowded circumstances led to tension and a yearning for independence. Forcibly displaced interviewees commented on feeling trapped in unsuitable housing situations as it was preferable to housing instability.

Stress over housing was also conceptualized as contributing to resettlement stress as interviewees examined longer-term housing options. This prospect was a salient source of anxiety. Barriers in accessing alternative housing had already been identified by some participants, leading to feelings of helplessness and despair, and uncertainty about the future. The issue of how much one should invest in learning English and attaining credentials recognized in England was inextricably linked to longer-term planning, itself linked to expectations on the length of the war. As the length of the war could not be predicted, interviewees were uncertain about how much to invest into their resettlement.

4. Discussion

This paper interprets stressors shaping mental well-being of forcibly displaced Ukrainians in England through the Four Stressors framework (Davis et al., 2021). This framework focuses not only on the trauma faced at each stage of the migration journey, but also stressors due to acculturation and resettlement in the post-migration phase. As the forcibly displaced interviewees had been residing in England for less than 6 months, the trauma experienced since the outset of the full-scale Russian invasion was palpably raw. In addition to this burden, forcibly displaced participants were grappling with acculturation and resettlement stressors as they adapted to living in England. The Four Stressors framework allowed us to account for stressors experienced spanning the immediate pre-war period to the first few months of living in England.

The application of the Four Stressors framework was a complicated endeavour at some points. Several of the most salient stressors could be categorized under 2 or more domains of the framework. For instance, we categorized separation from family members as traumatic stress. However, this separation can lead to feelings of isolation and may be justifiably categorized under social isolation. The language barrier had caused and worsened elements of both acculturative and resettlement stress. It amplified acculturative stress by making communication with hosts and members of the public difficult. It made attaining a well-paying job difficult, increasing stress pertaining to accommodation options. Despite the 'blurriness' between the constituent stressor categories of the framework, it seemed appropriate to use it in research focused on adults though it was developed for refugee children and families.

We omitted social isolation stress in our utilization of the Four Core Stressors framework due to this blurriness. In our estimation, the few comments related to social isolation mapped more directly onto acculturation and resettlement stressors. It is possible that the relative lack of stress due to social isolation is due to our recruitment strategy, which focused on forcibly displaced Ukrainians involved in volunteering at charitable 'hubs.' It is plausible that they are more socially connected and less isolated than other forcibly displaced Ukrainians who are not involved with a hub. For instance, Tsybuliak et al. (2024) observed a high degree of social isolation amongst forcibly displaced Ukrainians within Ukraine. Expanding the focus to include forcibly displaced Ukrainians with less access to 'hubs' would strengthen future research and provide new insight on social isolation stressors.

Sources of traumatic stress reported by interviewees for this study resonate with accounts of forcibly displaced Ukrainians in other European countries. Trauma experienced in Ukraine reported here, such as experiencing shelling, taking cover underground, as well as harrowing journeys to and over borders are reflected in accounts of forcibly displaced Ukrainians in Poland, Italy and Spain (Oviedo et al., 2022). Separation from relatives, including husbands and aged parents was a major source of stress amongst forcibly displaced Ukrainians in Poland (Dryjanska et al., 2024) and elsewhere, contributing to feelings of uncertainty and symptoms of depression (Oviedo et al., 2022).

Both forcibly displaced and stakeholder interviewees identified the challenge of finding accommodation was one of the most prominent stressors faced by forcibly displaced Ukrainians in England. This observation is likely partly due to the timing of the interviews. For forcibly displaced participants, the average length of time residing in England at the time of the interviews was 4.5 months. As many of these interviewees were living with hosts, with a suggested timeline of 6 months, a housing 'cliff edge' was looming and many participants had started looking into options. Though the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme was unusual in the UK because it provided accommodation for forcibly displaced persons at private homes rather than through the state, these arrangements were not meant to be a long-term solution for the accommodation needs for displaced Ukrainians. As such, many of their concerns voiced about housing resonate with previous research on the housing-related challenges of other displaced groups in the UK. For instance, in their qualitative paper on refugees and asylum seekers in London, Palmer and Ward (2007) noted that all 21 participants spoke about housing problems, which was cited as one of the major causes of mental health problems. In particular, overcrowding, lack of privacy, inadequate facilities and other issues such as frequent moving are associated with stress (Palmer and Ward, 2007).

Due to the barriers in accessing second hosts, council housing, and rental accommodation, many forcibly displaced Ukrainians may in future be housed in temporary accommodation. This accommodation type is defined as short-term housing provided or arranged by local authorities for people who have become homeless (Bosetti et al., 2022). A Red Cross report published a year after the start of the full-scale invasion revealed that 60% of all Ukrainian households in England were at risk of homelessness, largely due to the high rents/deposits and inability to provide a guarantor (2023). Temporary accommodation, as well as unsuitable housing more widely is linked with poor mental health amongst refugees and asylum seekers in the UK (Croft et al., 2021; Campbell et al., 2018). The risk of being housed in temporary accommodation is especially high in London, where 59% of all English households in temporary accommodation are located (Bosetti et al., 2022). Longitudinal research is needed to see how enduring housing-related stressors are for forcibly displaced Ukrainians as they transition from hosts' homes to alternative accommodation.

Related to accommodation-related stressors were issues with language acquisition and gaining employment. Similar findings have been

reported in other work focused on displaced Ukrainians in the UK (British Red Cross, 2023) and in other European countries (Dryjanska et al., 2024; Paoletti et al., 2023), as well as among other forcibly displaced groups in the UK (Palmer and Ward, 2007). Stressors related to language and employment acquisition been linked to poor emotional well-being (Campbell et al., 2018).

A key difference between the findings presented here versus the UK evidence base is the relative lack of stress forcibly displaced Ukrainians expressed about the legality of residing in the UK. As shown by Palmer and Ward (2007), the asylum process itself is a major stressor for other forcibly displaced groups in the UK. The transition from asylum seeker to refugee status is a particularly stressful period, due to the sudden need for post-asylum accommodation and the delay in being granted access to benefits (Strang et al., 2018, Walker et al., 2021). As the sample in this paper were, on average, 4.5 months into their 3-year visas, it may be the case that stress due to imminent visa expiry is yet to come, and/or that other stressors took precedent during this initial phase in the UK. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine whether this stressor will arise as visa expiration dates approach.

The barriers faced by forcibly displaced Ukrainians in accessing long-term housing beyond sponsors and family members demonstrate the need for improved housing supports through local authorities. Easing the transition into rented accommodation or council housing would be protective for mental health for this displaced population. Such assistance could involve councils acting as guarantors and/or providing monetary support for rental deposits. Though these resources are available to some forcibly displaced Ukrainians, not all areas offer this support. In situations where sponsors and displaced Ukrainians are amenable, support for sponsors to continue to accommodate displaced Ukrainians should be extended considering the shortage of housing stock in many areas of the UK. Beyond enhancing housing access, improving the provision of childcare and language instruction for forcibly displaced persons in the UK would support their mental health.

4.1. Limitations

Like much of the research on stressors amongst forcibly displaced persons, this paper relies on cross-sectional data. This has been noted as a limitation across the evidence base (Li et al., 2016), as it precludes understanding of shifts in stressors in response to environmental changes. Future research is needed using longitudinal approaches to examine how stressors change over time (Allsopp et al., 2014).

The body of research on mental health amongst forcibly displaced populations is heterogeneous, representing a plurality of nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, and levels of traumatic experiences. This is a small study which relied on convenience and snowball sampling in a limited geographic area within England. As such, findings from this study may not resonate with other populations, even in the UK, and may well differ from the experiences of forcibly displaced Ukrainians living elsewhere.

The senior author did not share a language with most forcibly displaced participants. This made interpretation critical to conducting the interviews, which changes and may hinder interaction between the interviewer and interviewee. Subtle meanings may have been lost, both in the interview process, and in the transcription. Though MS assured forcibly displaced participants that they were free to criticize the UK if they had experienced barriers accessing support, they may have felt reluctant to do to in front of someone who was not also a forcibly displaced Ukrainian.

5. Conclusion

In the initial months of their displacement in England, forcibly displaced Ukrainians have grappled a network of interrelated stressors involving the language barrier and challenges finding employment and long-term housing beyond initial arrangements, compounding the effects of previous and current trauma due to the on-going war. In future, it is reasonable that housing challenges will become an even more pressing issue as forcibly displaced Ukrainians transfer out of initial accommodation arrangements, with many likely facing temporary accommodation due to the lack of second hosts, council housing, and private renting options. Due to 'dispersal' policies of most local authorities, those placed in temporary accommodation may find themselves in remote areas far away from newly-established support systems, leading to new resettlement stressors and possibly increased isolation. As the September 2026 visa expiry date looms closer, stress over the legalities of staying in the UK will almost certainly increase, especially if the war has not ended by then. Continued long-term research is needed to continue to focus on the stressors for this forcibly displaced group, and how stressors shift over time in response to the post-migration environment.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

J. Whitehead: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **O. Fokaf:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Investigation, Formal analysis. **T. Deinekhovska:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **M. Egan:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **M. Seguin:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Ethics approval

Ethical approval has been granted by the Research Ethics Committee at the [institution anonymized], reference 28059-4.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the interviewees for sharing their accounts with us.

This work was supported by the COVID-19 Response Fund, administered by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

The paper led to MS being awarded a Fellowship (MH056) which was funded as part of the Three NIHR Research Schools Mental Health Programme. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

References

Allsopp, J., Sigona, N., Phillimore, J., 2014. Poverty among refugees and asylum seekers in the UK: an evidence and policy review. In: IRiS Working Paper Series. Institute for Research into Superdiversity, Birmingham, UK.

Bloch, A., 2013. The labour market experiences and strategies of young undocumented migrants. Work. Employ. Soc. 27, 272–287.

Bloch, A., 2014. Living in fear: rejected asylum seekers living as irregular migrants in England. J. Ethnic Migrat. Stud. 40, 1507–1525.

Bogic, M., Ajdukovic, D., Bremner, S., Franciskovic, T., Galeazzi, G., Kucukalic, A., Lecic-Tosevski, D., Morina, N., Popovski, M., Schutzwohl, M., Wang, D., Priebe, S., 2012. Factors associated with mental disorders in long-settled war refugees: refugees from the former Yugoslavia in Germany, Italy and the UK. Br. J. Psychiatr. 200, 216–223.

Bosetti, N., Urquijo, D., Harding, C., 2022. Temporary Accommodation: London's Hidden Homelessness Crisis. Centre for London, London, UK.

Braun, V., Clarke, V., 2022. Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide. Sage Publishing, Thousand Oaks, USA.
Braun, V., Clarke, V., 2024. Supporting best practice in reflexive thematic analysis reporting in Palliative Medicine: a review of published research and introduction to the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG). Palliat. Med. 38, 608–616.
British Red Cross, 2023. Fearing, Fleeing, Facing the Future: How People Displaced by the Conflict in Ukraine Are Finding Safety in the UK. British Red Cross, London, UK.
Campbell, M., Mann, K., Moffatt, S., Dave, M., Pearce, M., 2018. Social determinants of emotional well-being in new refugees in the UK. Public Health 164, 72–81.
Chen, W., Hall, B., Renzaho, A., 2017. Pre-migration and post-migration factors associated with mental health in humanitarian migrants in Australia and the moderation effect of post-migration stressors: findings from the first wave data of the BNLA cohort study. Lancet Psychiatry 4, 219–229.
Croft, L., Marossy, A., Wilson, T., Atabong, A., 2021. A building concern? The health needs of families in temporary accommodation. J. Public Health 43, 581–586.
Cuibus, Walsh, Sumption, 2023. Briefing: Ukrainian migration to the UK. The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, Oxford, UK.
Davis, S., Winer, J., Gillespie, S., Mulder, L., 2021. The refugee and immigrant core stressors toolkit (RICST): understanding the multifaceted needs of refugee and immigrant youth and families through a four core stressors framework. J. Technol. Behav. Sci. 6, 620–630.
Dryjanska, L., Sanchez, J., Hagues, R., 2024. Resilience against all odds: how refugee women from Ukraine find courage through transnational families. Glob. Netw.: J. Transnatl. Aff. 25, e12497.
Finlay, L., 2021. Thematic analysis: : the 'good', the 'bad' and the 'ugly. Eur. J. Qual. Res. Psychother. 11, 103–116.
Hynie, M., 2018. The social determinants of refugee mental health in the post-migration context: a critical review. Can. J. Psychiatr. 63, 297–303.
Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007. IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings. IASC, Geneva, Switzerland.
Kulhánová, I., Lustigová, M., Drbohlav, D., Leontiyeva, Y., Dzúrová, D., 2024. Determinants of self-rated health among highly educated Ukrainian women refugees in Czechia: analysis based on cross-sectional study in 2022. BMC Womens Health 24, 206.
Li, S., Liddell, B., Nickerson, A., 2016. The relationship between post-migration stress and psychological disorders in refugees and asylum seekers. Curr. Psychiatry Rep. 18, 1–9.
Mazhak, I., 2023. Social determinants of health of Ukrainan female refugees in the Czech Republic. NaUKMA Res. Papers Sociol. 6, 60–71.
Miller, K., Rasco, L., 2004. An ecological framework for addressing the mental health needs of refugee communities. In: MILLER, K., RASCO, L. (Eds.), The Mental Health of Refugees: Ecological Approaches to Healing and Adaptation. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, London, UK.
Miller, K., Rasmussen, A., 2017. The mental health of civilians displaced by armed conflict: an ecological model of refugee distress. Epidemiol. Psychiatr. Sci. 26, 129–138.
Morgan, G., Melluish, S., Welham, A., 2017. Exploring the relationship between postmigratory stressors and mental health for asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers in the UK. Transcult. Psychiatry 54, 653–674.
Oviedo, L., Seryczyńska, B., Torralba, J., Roszak, P., Del Angel, J., Vyshynska, O., Muzychuk, I., Churpita, S., 2022. Coping and resilience strategies among Ukraine war refugees. Int. J. Environ. Res. Publ. Health 19, 13094.
Palmer, D., Ward, K., 2007. 'Lost': listening to the voices and mental health needs of forced migrants in London. Med. Conflict Surviv. 23, 198–212.
Paoletti, P., Perasso, G., Lillo, C., Serantoni, G., Maculan, A., Vianello, F., Di Giuseppe, T., 2023. Envisioning the future for families running away from war: challenges and resources of Ukrainian parents in Italy. Front. Psychol. 14, 1122264.
Rizzi, D., Ciuffo, G., Sandoli, G., Mangiagalli, M., De Angelis, P., Scavuzzo, G., Nych, M., Landoni, M., Ionio, C., 2022. Running away from the war in Ukraine: the impact on mental health of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees in transit in Poland. Int. J. Environ. Res. Publ. Health 19.
Statista, 2024. *Estimated Number of Refugees from Ukraine Recorded in Europe and Asia Since February 2022 as of March 2024, by Selected Country* [Online]. Statista Inc. Available, New York, USA. https://www.statista.com/contact/. (Accessed 22 April 2024).
Steel, C., Silove, Marnane, Bryant, Ec Van Ommeren, 2009. Association of torture and other potentially traumatic events with mental health outcomes among populations exposed to mass conflict and displacement A systematic review and meta-analysis. J. Am. Med. Assoc. 302, 537–549.
Stewart, E., Mulvey, G., 2014. Seeking safety beyond refuge: the impact of immigration and citizenship policy upon refugees in the UK. J. Ethnic Migrat. Stud. 40, 1023–1039.
Strang, A., Baillot, H., Mignard, E., 2018. 'I want to participate.' transition experiences of new refugees in Glasgow. J. Ethnic Migrat. Stud. 44, 197–214.
Tracy, S., 2010. Qualitative quality: eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. Qual. Inq. 16, 837–851.
Tsybuliak, N., Popova, A., Lopatina, H., Suchikova, Y., 2024. In a stranger's house: social isolation of internally displaced people in Ukraine during wartime. Hum. Aff.: Postdiscip. Humanit. Soc. Sci. Q. https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2024-0027.
Uk Government, 2024a. *Guidance: Ukraine Permission Extension Scheme Information* [Online]. Government of the United Kingdom, London, UK. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukraine-permission-extension-scheme-information. (Accessed 28 March 2024).
Uk Government, 2024b. In: Ukraine family scheme, Ukraine sponsorship scheme (homes for Ukraine) and Ukraine extension scheme visa data [Online]. UK Government, London, UK. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukraine-family-scheme-application-data/ukraine-family-scheme-and-ukraine-sponsorship-scheme-homes-for-ukraine-visa-data–2. (Accessed 22 April 2024).
Unhcr, 2024a. Europe Situations: Data and Trends. UNHCR, Geneva, Switzerland.
Unhcr, 2024b. In: Who is a refugee? [Online]. UNHCR, Geneva, Switzerland. Available: https://www.unhcr.org/refugees. (Accessed 26 March 2024).
Vereshchakina, V., Castaner, M., Schonemann, A., Norredam, M., 2023. (Year) Published. Understanding Ukrainian refugees' wellbeing and adaptation in Denmark. In: European Public Health Conference. Dublin, Ireland.
Walker, S., Von Werthern, M., Brady, F., Katona, C., 2021. Mental health of forced migrants recently granted leave to remain in the United Kingdom. Int. J. Soc. Psychiatr. 67, 188–196.
Walsh, P., 2022. Briefing: Asylum and Refugee Resettlement in the UK. The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, Oxford, UK.