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The impact of housing conditions and nutritional quality on the psycho-emotional state of young internally displaced persons during the Russo-Ukrainian war: The role of secondary stressors

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Dear editor,

The full-scale war in Ukraine has triggered one of the largest waves of internal displacement in modern European history. Youth represent a particularly vulnerable category in this context, as their socialization and professional development have been disrupted by traumatic experiences (Zhdan et al., 2022; Kydon et al., 2024). While the mental health of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is traditionally examined through the lens of direct exposure to combat, contemporary psychological and psychiatric science increasingly emphasizes the critical role of secondary stressors – the environmental conditions individuals encounter following evacuation (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017; Herasymenko et al., 2020). The scientific novelty and relevance of this study stem from the necessity to re-evaluate the hierarchy of psychotraumatization factors. For young people who have lost their familiar environment, housing conditions and nutritional quality cease to be merely socio-economic indicators; they become fundamental determinants of psychological

resilience. A lack of private space, prolonged stays in collective centers (shelters), or substandard sanitary and hygienic conditions exacerbate feelings of depersonalization and a loss of control over one's life (Riva et al., 2022). For youth striving for autonomy, these factors serve as potent triggers for depressive states. Stable access to high-quality nutrition is not only a physiological necessity but also a cornerstone of stability (Horovitz, 2025). Disruptions in dietary patterns or nutritional deficiencies, combined with chronic stress, activate anxiety mechanisms and deplete the cognitive resources required for adaptation in a new location (Tsuber et al., 2014).

The aim of the study is to establish the impact of housing/living conditions and nutritional quality on the psycho-emotional state of young internally displaced persons during the Russo-Ukrainian war.

The study involved 97 young women and men with the status of IDPs. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 24 years, with a mean age of 20±2 years.

Table 1. Correlation between environmental factors and psycho-emotional state (Spearman's ρ)

Environmental factors (proprietary questionnaire)	Anxiety (HADS-A)	Depression (HADS-D)	PTSD (PCL-5)
Lack of housing privacy	0.68	0.54	0.61
Inability to cook food independently	0.59	0.48	0.39
Instability of access to hot meals	0.42	0.37	0.31
Unsatisfactory thermal conditions	0.35	0.29	0.44

Regarding their pre-displacement background, 58 individuals (59.79%) lived in urban areas, while 39 individuals (40.21%) lived in rural areas. Family status analysis showed that 85 individuals (87.63%) were raised in two-parent families, 10 (10.31%) in single-parent families, and 2 (2.06%) were raised without parents by extended relatives. The sample was further divided into subgroups based on their current housing type:

Group 1: 82 individuals (84.5%) residing in collective centers (dormitories, shelters). Group 2: 15 individuals (15.5%) renting private accommodation.

Assessment Tools:

- Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS): To detect the level of emotional distress.
- PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5): To assess specific symptoms of trauma caused by the war.
- Proprietary Environmental Questionnaire: Designed to assess housing privacy, thermal conditions, stability of access to hot meals, and the ability to prepare food independently.
- WHO Quality of Life Scale (WHOQOL-BREF): Specifically the "Physical Environment" domain.

Relationships between environmental parameters and psychotraumatization levels were established using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. Results were considered statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

Analysis using the HADS scale revealed statistically significant differences in the psycho-emotional state of respondents based on their living conditions. In Group 1 (collective centers, $n=82$), the mean anxiety score was 12.4 ± 2.1 , indicating clinically significant anxiety, whereas in Group 2 (private rental, $n=15$), this figure was significantly lower at 7.2 ± 1.8 ($p < 0.05$).

Results from the PCL-5 indicated that a lack of privacy and the inability to control the housing microclimate (thermal conditions) act as powerful re-traumatizing factors. Young IDPs in shelters exhibited higher levels of hyperarousal and tension symptoms. According to the "Physical Environment" domain of the WHOQOL-BREF, the lowest scores were recorded for "daily safety" and "opportunity for recreation," confirming that for the 18-24 age group, the absence of personal space is perceived as a loss of social status and agency.

To establish the depth of the relationship between secondary (domestic) stressors and mental health, a correlation analysis was conducted, which is presented in Table 1.

It was established that the ability to prepare meals independently has a significant inverse correlation with depression levels ($p = -0.48$). For displaced youth, cooking serves as an adaptive coping strategy that restores a sense of control over basic aspects of existence. Conversely, forced consumption of prepared rations in shelters exacerbates the state of "learned helplessness".

In summary, young IDPs living in collective centers (84.5% of the sample) exhibited anxiety levels 42% higher than those in individual housing. A strong direct correlation was found between the lack of personal space and the severity of PTSD symptoms ($p = 0.61$), highlighting the importance of privacy for this age group. Furthermore, restrictions on food choice and preparation were significant predictors of depressive states.

The findings confirm the primary hypothesis: for young IDPs aged 18-24, secondary stressors related to domestic instability have an impact on mental health no less significant than the primary military trauma. The high level of anxiety in Group 1 (12.4 ± 2.1 on HADS) can be explained through the concept of «loss of private boundaries». For individuals in emerging adulthood, housing is a tool for self-actualization. Residing in collective centers blocks the possibility of solitude, which correlates with high PTSD scores ($p = 0.61$). These results resonate with European refugee studies where prolonged stays in camps led to «lost future syndrome».

The correlation between food autonomy and reduced depression ($p = -0.48$) is of particular interest. In wartime, when the external world is unstable, control over dietary behavior becomes a vital form of manifesting one's authenticity. Group 2 exhibits higher psychological resilience due to the preservation of «domestic rituals» acting as grounding practices.

This study demonstrates that young IDPs are more sensitive to the "Physical Environment" domain than older groups. For youth, domestic comfort is not merely about convenience but also social presentability. The inability to maintain a standard of living (hygiene, nutrition, privacy) leads to depersonalization.

Thus, the type of accommodation is a key predictor of the psycho-emotional state of young IDPs: living in collective

centers statistically increases the risk of clinical anxiety and PTSD compared to private rentals. Housing privacy and nutritional autonomy are fundamental factors for psychological recovery. A lack of personal space correlates with hyperarousal symptoms, while the inability to cook independently correlates with depressive manifestations. To minimize the negative effects of psychotrauma in youth, social policy must aim for a rapid transition from shelters to individual housing forms to restore basic psychological defense mechanisms and agency. The data confirm that the level of nutritional stability is a significant predictor of emotional equilibrium in young IDPs ($p < 0.05$). Housing and living dissatisfaction act as a mediator between war-related stress and current depression levels, confirming the critical role of secondary stressors in secondary traumatization.

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