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What Ukrainian Teenagers Know (and Think They Know) About Work in Germany

A baseline assessment in the context of the ESF+ SII project[1], "Stepping into the Job"[2]

Draft for Discussion

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[1] Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Social Fund Agency. Neither the European Union nor the Granting Authority can be held responsible for them.

[2] Project number: ESF-SI-2024-UA-01-0089, "Project title: Vstupayuchy na robotu (Stepping into a job): Helping Ukrainian Refugee Teens Enter the Central European Labour Market Safely and Legally, and Weighing the Trade-offs with Education". Call number: ESF-SI-2024-UA-01, Call title: Innovative Approaches to Mitigate the Societal Consequences of Russia's War of Aggression Against Ukraine within EU countries. Granting Authority: European Social Fund Agency. Project partners: Centrum Organizowania Związków Zawodowych, Warsaw, Poland; Fundacja Pro Futuro, Warsaw, Poland; and UNI Europa, Brussels, Belgium. Project starting date: 12/05/2025 Project end date: 12/11/2026.

Executive Summary

The influx of Ukrainian youth into Germany since the outbreak of the war has created a significant demographic group navigating education, integration, and potential entry into the labor market. While much attention has been given to adult Ukrainian refugees and their employment patterns, far less is understood about how Ukrainian teenagers perceive and engage with work opportunities in Germany. With the support of the European Social Fund (ESF+) Social Innovation+ Initiative[3], a team of psychologist, development economist and labor market researcher from Centrum Organizowania Związków Zawodowych[4] and University of Warsaw Faculty of Economic Sciences carried out focus group discussions with 118 Ukrainian refugee youths aged 15-19 years in Wiesbaden, Düsseldorf, Bremen, Hamburg, and Berlin during June and July, 2025. The purpose of the focus groups was to assess Ukrainian refugee teens in Germany with respect to their attitudes toward work and careers, personal experience with working for pay in Germany, work-study balance, household and personal stress factors, and knowledge of the rights and protections of workers in Germany. The assessment reveals several critical dilemmas facing Ukrainian youth in Germany, including acute difficulty for many in study and foreign language-learning, ignorance of basic labor rights and protections, and feelings of burnout and high levels of stress.

This assessment forms the baseline analysis for the ESF+SII project, "Vstupayuchy na robotu (Stepping into a job): Helping Ukrainian Refugee Teens Enter the Central European Labour Market Safely and Legally, and Weighing the Trade-offs with Education",[5] with the co-participation of Fundacja Pro Futuro and UNI Europa. Responding to the vulnerabilities and knowledge-gaps identified in these focus groups and a parallel assessment in Poland, the project consortium will adapt a career guidance and learning platform for Ukrainian youth to the specific needs in Poland and in Germany, and will implement workshops, a help hotline, and a career guidance call center.

[3] Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Social Fund Agency. Neither the European Union nor the Granting Authority can be held responsible for them.
[4] Centrum Organizowania Związków Zawodowych (COZZ), established in 2016 by UNI Europa, is a labor rights education foundation in Warsaw with operations in Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine.
[5] Project number: ESF-SI-2024-UA-01-0089, "Project title: Vstupayuchy na robotu (Stepping into a job): Helping Ukrainian Refugee Teens Enter the Central European Labour Market Safely and Legally, and Weighing the Trade-offs with Education". Call number: ESF-SI-2024-UA-01, Call title: Innovative Approaches to Mitigate the Societal Consequences of Russia's War of Aggression Against Ukraine within EU countries. Granting Authority: European Social Fund Agency. Project starting date: 12/05/2025 Project end date: 12/11/2026.

Introduction

The arrival of Ukrainian refugee youth in Germany since the onset of the war has added a new layer of complexity to the country's education and labor market systems. While much attention has focused on integrating Ukrainian adults into Germany's housing, healthcare, and employment structures, the situation of refugee teenagers, especially those aged 15 to 19, remains far less visible. Yet this age group faces a critical juncture in their personal, academic, and professional trajectories, and how they are supported during this period may significantly affect their long-term opportunities in Germany and beyond.

Figure 1: Focus Group of teens share background about themselves via Mentimeter in Wiesbaden on 23 June 2025.

In some respects, Ukrainian youth in Germany benefit from comparatively strong institutional support. Government-led initiatives and municipal programs have enabled many teens to access schooling, health care, and stable housing. Integration has proceeded with considerable success in terms of social services enrollment and German language instruction. However, our focus group discussions with Ukrainian teens across several German cities reveal a subtler, more complex picture. Behind official indicators of integration lie deeper psychosocial tensions, unmet aspirations, and an undercurrent of confusion about the path forward, especially in relation to employment and career planning.

Compared to their peers in Poland, Ukrainian teens in Germany face different, yet equally challenging, barriers to integration. About one-third of teen participants, particularly in Düsseldorf and Bremen, reported high levels of stress and exhaustion related to the pressure of combining school obligations with family duties and personal adjustment. By contrast, two-thirds of participants indicated very little academic stress. Rather, they reported spending very limited time on focused academic tasks outside the classroom. Alarmingly, this group said they spent less than 20 minutes per day on homework or reading. This under-investment in self-guided study time, often displaced by phone use, social media, and messaging, raises concerns about how teens perceive the value of learning, especially as it relates to their future in Germany's competitive labor market.

The family context in Germany is another important variable shaping teen experiences. Most teens described cooperative family dynamics, but in many cases, they bore heavy responsibilities at home, such as caring for siblings or managing household tasks, especially in single-mother

households. While these obligations fostered resilience and maturity, they also contributed to a sense of social isolation and emotional strain. Teens frequently reported loneliness and the absence of strong peer or community support structures.

Unlike in Poland, where some teens turn to informal jobs under pressure, German teens show far less urgency to find paid work in the short term. This may be due to stricter legal enforcement of labor standards, fewer informal job pathways, and cultural expectations of more time spent exclusively in study.

Yet paradoxically, while few Ukrainian teens in Germany are currently employed, most view employment as essential to their future. When asked about their long-term goals, participants expressed ambitious aspirations, ranging from becoming engineers to entrepreneurs, influencers and crypto traders. However, many had only a vague understanding of how to achieve these goals. Few could articulate concrete steps or career pathways, and a majority had not researched vocational or academic requirements. Many were unaware of job-search platforms or formal job application processes and instead assumed that work opportunities would come through family networks or community contacts.

Even more troubling were widespread knowledge gaps around labor rights and obligations. In gamified quizzes and informal discussions, most teens failed to correctly identify basic workplace protections, such as minimum wage, probationary contract conditions, or employer obligations around health and safety. This legal blind spot leaves teens particularly vulnerable as they transition from school to work, especially in sectors where exploitation can occur subtly, under the guise of internships, short-term gigs, or part-time student jobs.

Figure 2: Teens share misgivings about working in open discussion at focus group in Dusseldorf on 24 June 2025.

Despite these challenges, the project team found that many teens in Germany are eager to engage with material about employment rights, especially when the content is interactive, visually engaging, and tied to their own goals. A key insight from the focus groups is the potential of educational gamification: teens responded positively to scenarios where they could imagine avatars, set goals, earn progress badges, and visualize concrete career milestones. This opens the door for interventions that are both educational and motivating, helping teens shift from vague ambition to informed decision-making.

How will today's dishwashers, packers, babysitters, and cashiers in Germany find their way toward becoming the professionals, entrepreneurs, or skilled specialists they hope to become?

Based on focus group discussions with young Ukrainian refugees in Germany, the following key needs and design recommendations will guide this project:

1. Teens need to develop better awareness of how to balance academic pathways with the reality of wage-earning needs. Many participants in Germany reported a strong preference for wage-earning over study, with little awareness of how current educational efforts can translate into long-term employment opportunities. There is a need to clarify the return on investment of continued learning, particularly language acquisition, and support teens in making informed choices about parallel education and work.
2. Teens need to understand and manage the stressors of integration. A large number of teens reported feeling overwhelmed, under-rested, and emotionally isolated, especially those managing both language integration and wage-earning. Interventions should aim to improve stress management, promote mental health resources, and offer peer support networks to alleviate the burden of adapting to a new system alone.
3. Teens need clearer guidance on the academic value of integration programs. Many youths in German integration schools struggled to see the purpose or outcome of their coursework. Programs should improve transparency about learning outcomes and better connect curriculum to concrete skill development, future earnings, or vocational pathways. Teens should not leave these programs feeling that school is a dead-end or "not worth the time."
4. Teens need structured opportunities to explore job readiness and build practical skills. Focus group participants indicated that practical, job-oriented learning, especially through work experience or self-guided projects, was more valued than abstract school learning. Programs can build on this preference by incorporating internships, simulated work environments, or hands-on training tied to real-world applications.
5. Teens need support in building self-awareness and confidence in career decision-making. Many of the more isolated or older teens expressed high levels of loneliness, responsibility, and career uncertainty. Supporting teens through counseling, mentorship, or peer-led initiatives can help them reflect on their interests, visualize career paths, and articulate actionable goals.
6. Teens need help managing time effectively, especially when studying and working simultaneously. The focus groups revealed that many teens are working significant hours outside school but still expected to perform academically. Teens would benefit from practical time management tools, school flexibility, and family or community support to avoid burnout and improve their performance in both domains.

In response to these findings, the "Stepping into the Job" project team is now designing targeted educational tools tailored for Ukrainian refugee youth in Germany. These tools include an adapted digital platform for labor rights education, career pathway planning, and time management support, as well as interactive simulations of real-life job search scenarios. Pilot testing with enthusiastic teen participants is scheduled for fall-winter 2025, and the platform will draw on both youth feedback and best practices in integration pedagogy. With the right tools and support, Germany's Ukrainian teens can transform their current uncertainty into a foundation for sustainable, rights-based inclusion in the German labor market.

Background and Context

Demographic Context

As of 2023, approximately 94,805 Ukrainian teenagers aged 15-19 were residing in Germany under valid permits or temporary protection status. Unlike in Poland, where Ukrainian refugees are more widely distributed across the country, the Ukrainian population in Germany is heavily concentrated in major urban centers. The cities with the highest Ukrainian populations include Berlin (71,835), Hamburg (34,625), and Munich (25,175). These cities serve as key hubs for education and employment opportunities, but also pose integration challenges due to differences in labor market structures and social policies.[6,7]

Youth Employment Patterns in Germany

Germany has a well-established youth employment system, reflected in the relatively high employment rate for teenagers aged 15-19. As of 2023, 28.2% of German youth in this age group were formally employed—far higher than the 5.0% rate observed in Poland.[8] This suggests that Ukrainian teenagers in Germany may have more opportunities for structured and legal employment compared to their peers in Poland.

Despite this, the overall employment rate of Ukrainian refugees in Germany remains significantly lower than that in Poland. Only 18% of working-age Ukrainian refugees (18-64) in Germany have found employment.[9] This lower employment rate may influence Ukrainian teenagers, as they are part of a broader refugee population that faces barriers to labor market entry, including language requirements, bureaucratic hurdles, and access to vocational training.

Employment Conditions and Contract Types

Among employed Ukrainian refugees in Germany:

- 39% work full-time
- 37% work part-time
- 18% take on odd jobs, often without stable contracts
- 5% are engaged in vocational training programs.[10]

For teenagers, part-time work and "mini-jobs" (low-paying, tax-exempt jobs) are the most common forms of employment. In Germany, "mini-jobs" allow individuals to earn up to €538 per

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[6] Eurostat Dataset. (2025). Europa.eu. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asytpfq__custom_15655924/default/table?lang=en

[7] *GENESIS-Online*. (2025). Destatis.de. https://www-genesis.destatis.de/datenbank/online/statistic/12521/table/12521-0041/search/s/dWtyYWluZQ==

[8] Eurostat Dataset. (2025). Europa.eu. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/yth_empl_010/default/table?lang=en

[9] Frymark, K. (2023, August 25). *Ukrainians are slowly adapting to life in Germany*. OSW Centre for Eastern Studies. https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-08-25/ukrainians-are-slowly-adapting-to-life-germany

[10] Ibid.

month without contributing to social security.[11] This structure provides a legal entry point into the workforce for Ukrainian teenagers but may also limit their access to long-term employment protections and career progression.

Unlike in Poland, where civil contracts are common among Ukrainians, German labor regulations ensure that even part-time and temporary workers receive some form of labor protection. However, Ukrainian teenagers may still face disadvantages compared to their German peers, as they are more likely to work in unstable, short-term, or low-skilled jobs due to language barriers and a lack of local work experience.

Figure 3: Focus group teens vote with their mobile phones to score their relative priorities in Bremen on 25 June 2025.

Factors Influencing Teen Employment in Germany

Several key factors influence the employment patterns of Ukrainian teenagers in Germany:

1. **Stronger Social Support Systems**: Germany provides extensive financial and social benefits to Ukrainian refugees, reducing the immediate economic necessity for teenagers to seek employment. This differs from Poland, where fewer social benefits often push refugees, including teenagers, into the workforce.
2. **Vocational Training Opportunities**: Germany has a strong apprenticeship system that integrates young people into the workforce through structured vocational training programs. Ukrainian teenagers may have the opportunity to enter these programs, but their participation depends on their education level, language proficiency, and access to guidance on career pathways.
3. **Regulated Youth Employment Market**: Unlike Poland, where informal employment is more prevalent, Germany's labor market is more structured, with clearer legal pathways for teenagers to work part-time while pursuing education.

While Germany offers more formalized and structured opportunities for teenage employment than Poland, Ukrainian teenagers face unique barriers to labor market participation. Their

[11] *Startseite*. (2025). Minijob-Zentrale.de; MJZ. https://www.minijob-zentrale.de/DE/home/home_node.html

employment prospects are shaped by the broader employment trends of Ukrainian refugees, the availability of social benefits, and the highly regulated German labor market. Unlike in Poland, where economic necessity often drives teenage employment, Ukrainian teenagers in Germany are more likely to enter the workforce through part-time work, mini-jobs, or vocational training programs. Understanding these dynamics is essential for evaluating how Ukrainian teenagers perceive work in Germany and what challenges they may face in securing stable employment opportunities.

Objectives of the "Stepping into the Job" Project

Against this backdrop, the "Stepping into the Job" project is implemented from May 2025 to November 2026 with the co-funding support of the European Social Fund (ESF+) Social Innovation+ Initiative. The project aims to support Ukrainian refugee teens at a critical juncture in their education-to-career pathway in Poland and Germany, starting from a baseline needs assessment, and then tailoring a career development platform to their specific needs, arranging workshops, providing a hotline and a call center support. The project brings together the expertise of three partners in its consortium: Centrum Organizowania Związków Zawodowych, a labor rights educational foundation operating across Central Europe; Fundacja Pro Futuro, a Ukrainian-led education innovator focused on adolescent learning; and UNI Europa, part of the UNI Global trade union federation, a committed advocate for workers' empowerment. The project aims to reach about 4000 Ukrainian teenagers and their parents, and to develop tools and resources for newly arriving teens in Poland and Germany that can be used much more widely.

As a first step, the project sets out to learn from Ukrainian teenagers about their attitudes toward work and careers, personal experience with working for pay, work-study balance, household and personal stress factors, and knowledge of the rights and protections of workers in Poland and Germany. Observations and problems identified during the assessment phase will guide the next steps in the project. This assessment also provides valuable inputs to policy discussions in Poland and Germany about steps that educators, employment services and government authorities should take to help teenagers on their pathways toward productive careers.

Focus Group Discussions in Germany, June-July 2025

Based on an initial, focus-group assessment, the project team identifies the critical dilemmas facing Ukrainian youth in the two countries, sharing these lessons with educators, social protection officers, organizations supporting migrants and youth, and of course with the coders and courseware developers at Pro Futuro. As next steps, the project team adapts a career guidance and learning platform specifically for Ukrainian youth in Poland and in Germany. The project team also tailors training to the challenges and knowledge-gaps identified in the assessment phase, and rolls out a series of in-person workshops in ten cities in Poland and Germany. The project team also provides Ukraine teens in the two countries with a workers' help hotline and a career guidance call center, offering just-in-time support to cope with problems at work as well as longer-range counselling to plan for advanced education and career goals.

Design and Methodology

The design of the assessment phase has been informed by a collaboration with graduate student researchers from the IZA Institute of Labor Economics in Bonn, Germany; the Faculty of Economic Sciences at the University of Warsaw, and the Behavioral and Experimental Public Administration Lab at the Center for Health and Society, at Copenhagen University. The intention of forming this multi-disciplinary University Research Panel was to strengthen the research methodology, to draw upon existing socio-economic research particularly about migrant groups in the Poland and Germany labor markets, to raise awareness about implicit biases that can appear in such research, and to apply behavioral design elements both in the assessment and in the recommendations for the learning platform. Following a series of brainstorming and design sessions, the University Research Panel co-developed with COZZ a methodology for the teen focus groups that aimed for representative sampling, candid responses, active engagement, and open-ended dialogue to reveal unexpected threads for further study.

Location, Timing and Recruitment

Aiming for a representative cross-section of Ukrainian teen refugees, the project team focused on Wiesbaden, Düsseldorf, Bremen, Hamburg and Berlin, because of the very large representation of Ukrainians in these cities and evidence that Ukrainian refugees have primarily re-settled in urban areas (rather than in rural zones). The selection of cities therefore followed from population analysis and migration data.

Timing was another important factor in the planning of the focus groups. Keeping in mind the project goals both to assess the perceptions and knowledge of teens about working, as well as to raise awareness about labor rights and protections, colleagues at BEPAL emphasized the importance of intervening at "teachable moments". That is, a learning opportunity proves most effective when it is pitched to the audience at the very moment when that knowledge should be most pertinent. By reaching out to teenagers during the last days of the secondary school year (the last day of public school in Germany tends to between late June and early July, and focus groups in Germany took place June 23, 24, 25, 26 and July 9) the impact was especially timely for 3rd and 4th-year secondary students entering summer job for the first time. For those not working, jobs were at the top of their minds. Unsurprisingly, when the question was asked at groups, "Are you interested in finding work this year?", sixty-two percent of participants in Germany answered "Yes".

The method of recruitment to focus groups was also an important consideration, not only to ensure adequate participation (the project aimed to gather about 20 youth per group), but also to be sure that participants reflect the real socio-economic variation of Ukrainian refugee teens. In this respect, IZA colleagues warned about selection bias; an over-reliance on recruitment from Ukrainian education and cultural enrichment centers can over-represent youth from privileged families, especially when the centers' focus is fee-based enrichment activities. Although participants may be easily recruited who are more socially outgoing and have more free time, the views of teens at enrichment programs may not reflect those of less advantaged Ukrainians in the same age and migration-year cohort. Taking this into account, the project looked to religious-based charitable support programs (Wiesbaden and Dusseldorf), humanitarian aid support services (Hamburg), a peer-to-peer support group (Berlin), and a free-admission educational support organization

(Bremen) as points of local recruitment. The focus groups generally took place outside of city centers (except in Wiesbaden and Dusseldorf), in less affluent residential neighborhoods. Earlier work done by IZA had pointed to significant correlation of migrant socio-economic status to city neighborhoods,[12] a bias the team sought to avoid.

Figure 4: Anonymity makes teens comfortable with a test of what they know about labor law and rights at the focus group in Hamburg on 26 June 2025.

Nevertheless, the recruitment methods were somewhat rudimentary, owing to limited resources and time. The project having only initiated on 12 May 2025, and the school year quickly approaching its end, the team was eager to confirm local counterparts and get the word out on social media channels (Telegram, WhatsApp, Facebook). Within the time constraint, and in respect for participants' privacy, the team did not try to disaggregate participants by household income or longevity of migration status. Denying participation on this basis would seem hurtful and would likely offend hosting social organizations. The project team instead tried friendly, voluntary ways to incorporate these questions into conversation during focus groups, rather than making them parameters for admittance. The Research Panel noted major differences in economic capability between the 0-6 month arrival cohort and the 12-24 month cohort, even for same-city stay. The Research Panel also highlighted sensitivities surrounding use of words "refugee" or "migrant" or "resident", that can be terms used contextually depending on one's comparator group. The project team was conscientious about avoiding over-simplifications describing "refugees".

Discussion Structure, Facilitation, Anonymization and Gender Aspects

In planning the focus group format, the project team took heed of warnings from colleagues at BEPAL about social favorability bias and performance inflation. The focus groups were going to touch on matters of personal pride (e.g., educational attainment, family income, success in finding work, parental occupation), as well as legal compliance (e.g., formality of work arrangements, school

[12] Krause, A., Rinne, U. and Schüller, S. (2015), *Kick It Like Özil? Decomposing the Native-Migrant Education Gap*†. Int Migr Rev, 49: 757-789. https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12107

attendance, adherence to rules and regulations). In an open-response format, participants would be very likely to distort their responses toward socially favored or legally compliant responses, particularly if they valued the opinions of peers sitting around them.

Another constraint anticipated by behavioral design colleagues was reticence and passivity of teens, especially to serious questions like the future direction of their lives, and to dry content like Labor Law, health and safety standards. With the advice of BEPAL colleagues, the project team adopted an approach to make teens comfortable, and also to make participation social, a bit competitive, and fun. Using their mobile phones would also be an integral part of participation—a feature that is popular with teenagers.

A key to balancing social/competitive with fun/comfortable was designing the focus groups to protect anonymity. Although participants might already know one another, they shouldn't know how each was answering questions (unless that person wished to share her/his view). Although it's more fun to test knowledge in a game-like, timed-quiz format, it's embarrassing to expose one's ignorance and mistakes. (And as BEPAL colleagues explained, there is a gender aspect, too. While competition fires up males to greater levels of group participation, it often does so at the price of female participation). How to strike a balance?

The team found its solution in Mentimeter, an online responding and voting platform that can keep respondents anonymous or represent them as avatars, and which aggregates responses spontaneously in colorful, captivating graphics. (Teenagers also quickly discovered that Mentimeter allows them to anonymously post emojis and comments on the side of the projected screen!) Mentimeter would make it possible to get groups of teens to open up about awkward topics (for example, having unemployed parents, working under the table, avoiding taxes, giving or not giving money to support the Ukraine war effort). Mentimeter would also keep teens' attention through a 20-minute quiz sequence on Labor Law and regulations which would otherwise lose their attention; this content was transformed into an anonymized game where participants selected their avatars. They could watch themselves winning or losing but disguise their identities from others in the room.

Figure 5: Teens use hand gestures to indicate certain responses with the facilitator at the focus group in Berlin on 9 July 2025.

Another important design component was the facilitator; it was critical that the facilitator should be a relatable voice. In this respect, the project team's selection of a family therapist who is also a Ukrainian refugee in Poland, and who has worked for two years on the workers' support

hotline, was apt. As a facilitator and psychologist, she brought ample experience with listening and reading body language, opening the discussion to welcome all participants, treating all comments and contributions with respect, and appreciating everyone's unique position and views. She would also provide a credible resource to participants as a hotline counsellor. She could reassure teens that no matter how strange or embarrassing their work situation, she has heard many similar stories. The participating labor market researcher from University of Warsaw is a Russian- and English-language speaker, and the development economist from COZZ is a Ukrainian-, Russian- and English-language speaker, enabling a fluid discussion without interpretation.

The project team discussed with the University Research Panel and came away unconvinced about creating gender-specific focus groups, for a few reasons. The labor market researchers did not find strong evidence of a gender-correlation to job-finding, language acquisition, and stable assimilation of Ukrainian refugees in Germany and Poland when the preceding socio-economic status (in Ukraine), and local neighborhoods (the arriving status) are considered. That is, the data suggest that more likely there will be a correlation of income gap and lower assimilation among both males *and* females who come from socially marginalized and lower-income backgrounds in Ukraine, and who move to lower-income places in Germany and Poland (rather than a tendency that these patterns will correlate to gender). With that in mind, the project team put a greater emphasis on socio-economic and neighborhood representation (as noted above) and sought focus group participation less from Ukrainian cultural centers and enrichment programs (that favor upper/middle class people), and more from support services and humanitarian aid organizations geared toward lower-income people.

Figure 6: Ukrainian youth share responses not only as numerical ranking, but also through open call-out and discussion at the focus group in Berlin on 9 July 2025.

Methods for Data Aggregation: Self-Reflection, Multiple Choice, Drawing as Thinking, and Open-Ended Discussion

The project team sought to strike a balance between gathering a large volume of quantitative replies on factual questions (e.g., "Have you ever worked for pay in Germany?") via Mentimeter with keeping teens' interest and gathering open-ended responses for further analysis.

The University Research Panel highlighted the importance to gather a range of responses about psycho-social health, as these factors have demonstrated some interesting correlations with

work-study compromises, longer-term labor market outcomes, and longer-term health. The project team incorporated some of these factors into quantitative responses (e.g., rating on a scale of 1-10) and free response (e.g. demonstrating with hand gestures or by forming small groups in the room). The team included questions about sleep-work-study balance, teens' sense of panic or stability, optimism about career development versus alienation and pessimism. However, this particular project does not foresee individual therapeutic interventions, and the focus group size was fairly large, so treatment of such questions was rather superficial.

The project team also took guidance from the labor market economists that there could be unexpected patterns, correlations in participants' responses during the focus groups, which might not be seen if the responses were pre-defined (e.g., multiple-choice, yes/no responses). The team learned from University of Warsaw colleagues about the rEUsilience project, which uncovered unexpected patterns from open-ended discussions with migrant families.[13] The team was also cautious that they might motivate through social pressure and default-settings toward selected responses that don't really reflect how people are feeling. Colleagues from BEPAL suggested a stronger tilt toward narrative discussion; this would create space for free-form and open-ended responses within a format that is replicated in the same way in every focus group. Thus, the project team created with the University Research Panel a step-by-step guide for the facilitator and a workbook for teenagers. The materials contain structured content, cues for participants' physical responses, questions for smaller group discussions, and prompts for free drawing.

Especially when combined with self-reflection exercises, such exercises as freestyle mapping, drawing, or listing can yield personally authentic responses. With her background in family therapy, the project's facilitator was well-prepared to listen to participants who chose to hide or share their personal drawings. Taking cues from behavioral scientists at BEPAL, the project team asked focus group participants to visualize themselves, draw themselves, reflect about and critique themselves. The aim was to help teens put themselves into their own narratives and to see themselves taking further steps in personal and career development which they would describe in conversation.

The workshops were designed to take 90-120 minutes on weekday evenings (after school). They began with ice-breaking questions and a range of interactive voting, moving, calling out, and drawing exercises, leading up to an anonymized, competitive quiz in which teens participated as avatars. The materials were offered in Ukrainian language, with additional copies in Russian language, and the discussion flowed between the two languages. In the last 20 minutes of the meeting, participants broke into smaller discussion groups and shared personal stories over

[13] Learn more about rEUsilience Research Laboratory. Co-Funded by the EU Horizons Europe Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No Project 101060410 and Innovate UK, the UK's Innovation Agency, http://reusilience.eu. This project is grateful for guidance about the rEUsilience project and research approaches that can uncover unexpected patterns. Colleagues from University of Warsaw Faculty of Economic Sciences guided the team to ask about family interactions, work-study balance, roles and duties (sense of fairness, sinking or swimming, optimism or despair), stability versus panic (nutrition, sleep, loss of assets or having enough), extroversion versus avoidance (comfort with language, readiness to engage socially versus alienation, hostility). As they suggested, these kinds of axes may be as powerful or more powerful than quantitative measures like earning or not earning money, or testing-level of language, or degree- or grade-level status.

sandwiches, snacks and beverages. Below is a table summarizing the participation at the 5 focus groups that took place in Germany.

Focus Group **Date** **Location**	**Total youth participation** (ages 15-19 yrs)					
		Of which male	Of which female	Of which nonbinary	Of which 15-17 years old	Of which 18-19 years old
Wiesbaden 23.06.2025 Ukrainian orthodox church parish Facebook group, Kirchgasse 58.	20					
		6	14	0	6	14
Düsseldorf 24.06.2025 Rivne Slovo WhatsApp group (religious charitable organization) Immermannstraße 41.	17					
		5	12	0	9	8
Bremen 24.06.2025 Ukrainian Unity Center at VHS (vocational) Schule, Faulenstraße 6.	23					
		10	13	0	18	5
Hamburg 25.06.2025 Feine Ukraine (humanitarian support center) Habichstraße 82.	27					
		16	11	0	13	14
Berlin 09.07.2025 Alliance Ukrainischer, Schönfließer 7.	31					
		17	12	2	18	13
TOTAL for GERMANY	118	54	62	2	64	54

Findings from the Focus Groups

With the aid of Mentimeter and team notes from the physical and open-ended responses, the following data aggregates the responses of the 118 participants from the June-July 2025 focus groups in Germany.

Teenagers in Germany expressed notably less engagement with paid work compared to their peers in Poland. When asked about their own work experience, only about a third of respondents reported having worked for pay, while a similar number had only participated in unpaid work, such as volunteering, internships, or helping family. The majority, 60 out of 118, reported never having worked at all. Despite this, more than half of respondents said they knew a classmate or friend who had worked for pay in Germany, suggesting that while paid work was not entirely absent from their circles, it was not a shared or normalized experience. Across workshops, many Ukrainian youth emphasized a desire to focus on their education and improve their German, expressing that work could be a distraction or even a risk to their academic progress and future career paths.

Unlike in Poland, where work was often described as an exciting opportunity or necessity, German-based youth were more cautious or disinterested. Conversations tended to reflect a greater awareness of legal and bureaucratic barriers to youth employment, especially for recent arrivals still learning the language or without stable housing. Some respondents expressed anxiety about doing something "illegal" or "getting in trouble" with authorities. Few had strong opinions about working conditions or contracts, and even those who had worked for pay often described it as something they did only briefly or reluctantly. Overall, for many teenagers in Germany, education appeared to be a stronger priority than early entry into the labor market.

Figure 7: Have you ever worked for pay in Germany?

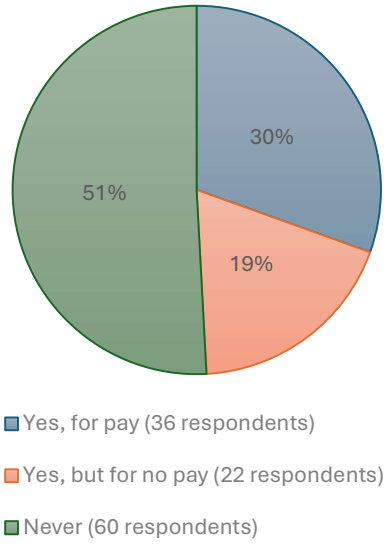
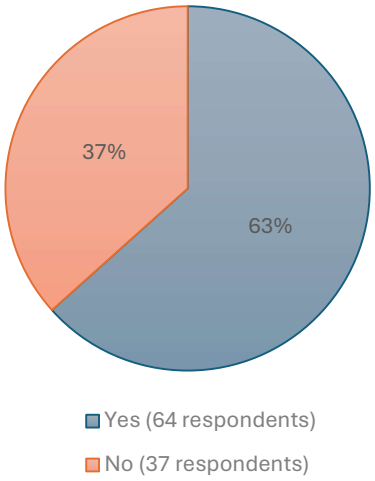
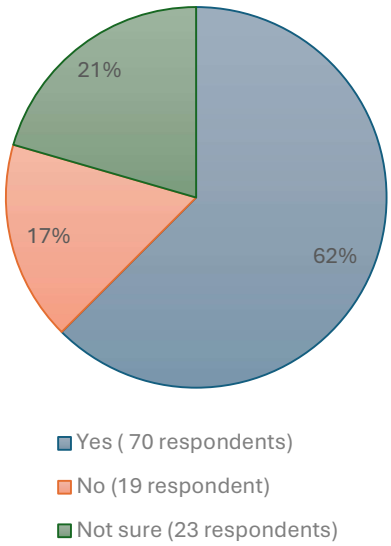


Figure 8: "Do you have classmates or friends who worked for pay in Germany?"



Teenagers in Germany showed significantly less enthusiasm for informal or ad hoc work compared to their peers in Poland. While 62% of respondents across the focus groups in Germany expressed interest in finding a job this year, many added strong caveats during discussions. If they were to work, they asserted, it would need to be formal, legal, and well-regulated. There was little mention of the casual job-seeking commonly discussed among the Ukrainian youth based in Poland, such as waiting tables at local cafes or accepting informal payments for tasks through social media. Instead, Germany-based Ukrainian teens often pointed to legal compliance, such as the requirement to obtain permission to work for minors, to notify their local job center, to sign official contracts, as reasons why they had not yet sought work. The average expected age to begin working was 17.9, slightly older than in Poland, and this expectation was often framed as something tied to completing school or achieving language proficiency first.

Figure 9: "Are you interested in getting a job this year?"



Across conversations, participants repeatedly stated that their priority was education, and they were cautious about anything that might interfere with it. When asked if they believed they could balance work and study, the average agreement score was 3.55 out of 5, slightly lower than in Poland, and many voiced concerns about stress or time limitations. Informal or cash-based work was viewed not only as undesirable, but potentially risky or even "illegal," and was rarely discussed as a real option. Even those who had friends working tended to speak about these experiences with distance, rather than as a model they hoped to follow. For most teens in Germany, the idea of youth labor was acceptable only within a clear legal framework and, even then, secondary to academic goals.

Figure 11: "I believe I am able to continue my studies and work at the same time."

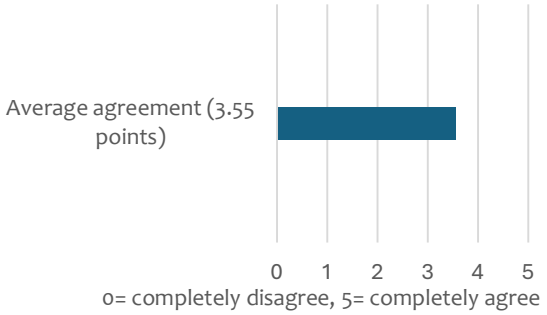


Figure 10: At what age does your family (or yourself) expect you to start working?

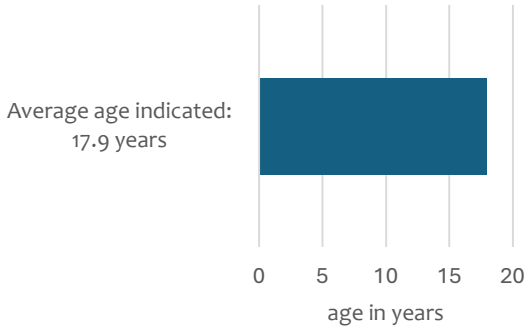


Figure 12: Do you think that Ukrainian teenagers in Germany have the same chance of getting fair working conditions as German teenagers?

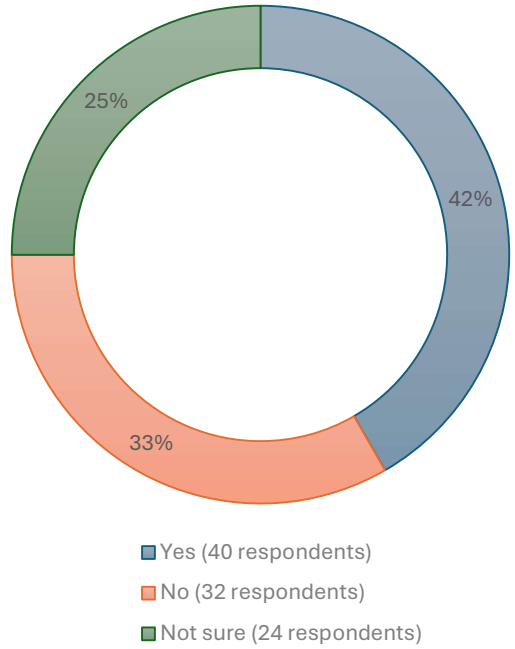
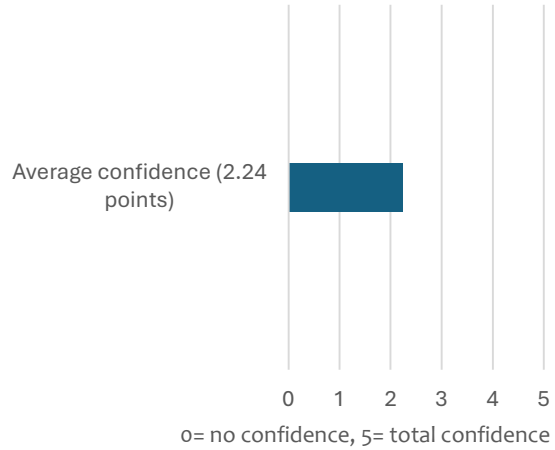


Figure 13: How sure are you that you know the rules and norms of work in Germany?

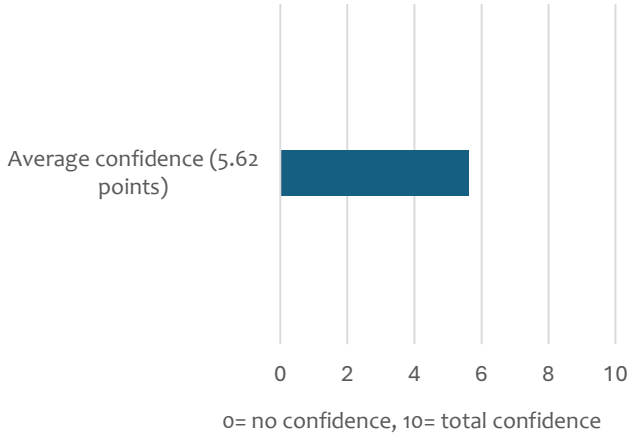


Compared to their peers in Poland, Ukrainian teenagers in Germany indicated very low confidence about understanding the rules and norms of the workplace. Across all workshops, the average self-reported confidence score was just 2.24 out of 5. Unlike in Poland, where teens often overestimated their legal knowledge, German-based youth were more aware of their gaps in understanding, and many framed this lack of knowledge as a primary barrier to even considering work. Their sense of fairness, while still low, was slightly better than that in Poland. When asked whether they believed they had the same chances of receiving fair working conditions as German peers, only 40 out of 96 respondents said "Yes," with nearly as many saying "No," and a sizable group remaining unsure. This skepticism appears closely tied to their limited confidence in understanding German labor rules and norms.

Focus group conversations suggested that, for many, this uncertainty was amplified by the perceived complexity of German bureaucracy and the lack of accessible, youth-oriented information in Ukrainian. Rather than relying on peer networks or informal stories to explain the system, many teens in Germany simply felt left out of it. Few described hearing direct cautionary tales, but several referenced a general sense that "it's hard for Ukrainians," or that employers might prefer German teens who are more fluent and better integrated. Unlike Ukrainian teens in Poland, who felt that knowledge could empower them to seek work and cope with risks, many youth in Germany felt that the uncertainties justified inaction. In this sense, rather than cynicism, the prevailing tone in the German workshops was one of disengagement and uncertainty.

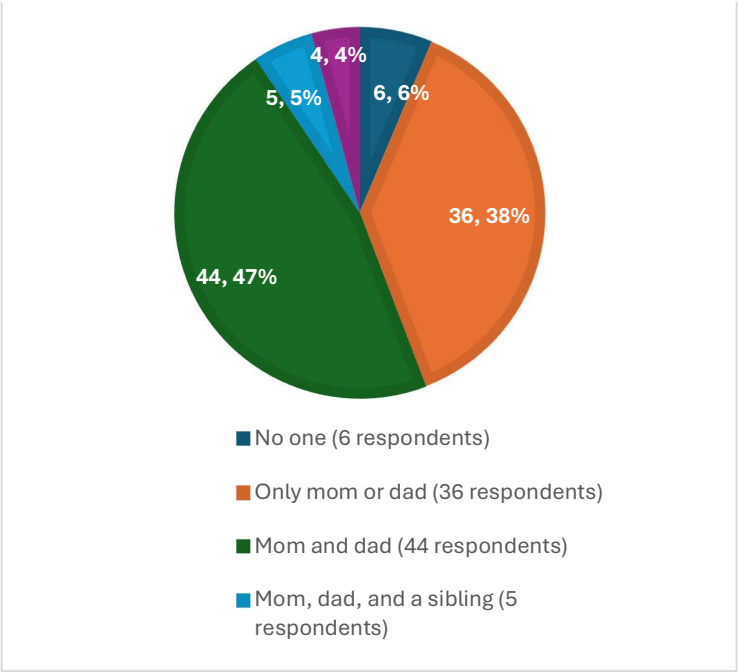
In Germany, many Ukrainian teens expressed only moderate confidence in their ability to find a job, with the average self-rating at 5.62 out of 10—slightly higher than their peers in Poland, but still suggestive of uncertainty. This uncertainty stands in contrast to the fact that most came from working households: just 6 out of 95 participants reported that no one in their family was employed. The majority had at least one working parent, and several had both. Still, personal connections to employment did not seem to translate into a clear understanding of how they themselves could access work, especially within the formal German labor market. Conversations revealed that even when teens were interested in work, the path to finding a job was unclear and often seen as too complex or out of reach.

Figure 14: "Are you confident that you know how to find a job if you want to work?"



In group discussions, many teens described the German job-search landscape as overly bureaucratic, intimidating, or geared toward adults. While some had heard of platforms like Indeed or StepStone, few had attempted to use them, and even fewer trusted them. Unlike their Polish-based peers, German-based teens showed less awareness of informal strategies such as asking at local shops or relying on friends. For those who had tried to find work online or through school programs, many reported being confused by the paperwork, discouraged by language barriers, or unsure whether Ukrainian teens were even allowed to apply. The idea of finding a job seemed closely tied to formal systems—registered employment, contracts, and tax IDs, which felt inaccessible to many. While this detachment was sometimes paired with frustration, it was more often accompanied by resignation, especially from those who viewed education as their primary focus and hoped that, with time and fluency, the path to work would become clearer.

Figure 15: Who works in your family?

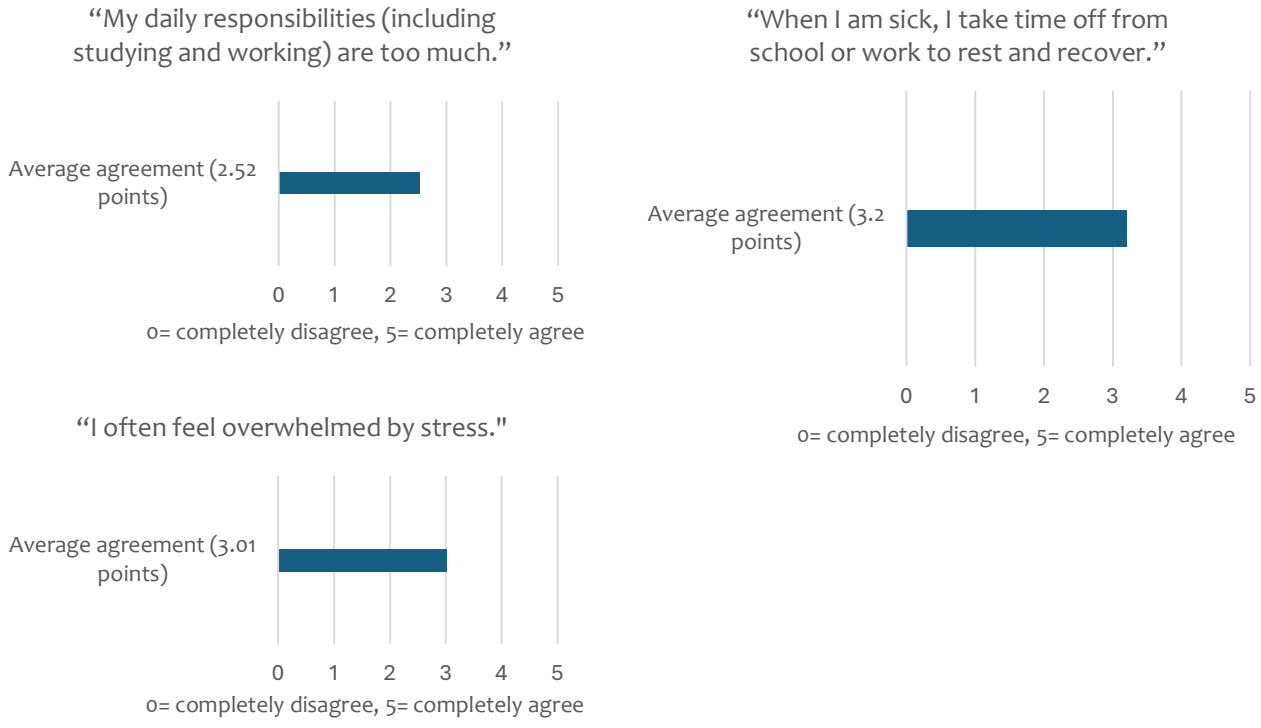


Generally Managing, But with Limits on Energy and Engagement

Psycho-social indicators collected across German workshops suggest that most Ukrainian refugee teens are coping moderately well with their daily responsibilities, with only a small portion reporting high levels of stress. When asked how often they feel overwhelmed by stress, the average score was 3.01 out of 5, squarely in the middle. Responses to whether their daily responsibilities (including school and possible work) were "too much" averaged even lower, at 2.52. While this suggests that most teens don't feel heavily burdened, workshop discussions revealed that stress was often described as background noise rather than acute or debilitating. In contrast to the small group of overextended "double-school" teens in Poland juggling multiple school systems, few in Germany reported such intense schedules. A few referenced long commutes or heavy private tutoring, but most said they had time to rest when sick (average score: 3.2), even if some admitted feeling guilty about it.

The overall picture is of a teen population that is psychologically stable and moderately busy—but not overloaded—and whose appetite for work reflects those limits. Several participants indicated interest in jobs, but often under conditions that didn't compete with study or relaxation time. The desire for work seemed less driven by pressure or need, and more by curiosity, social comparison, or the appeal of pocket money. Some admitted they weren't sure they had the energy or structure in their week to take on a job, particularly if it involved commuting or fixed hours. In this context, their guarded interest in work fits with a broader theme observed across the German workshops: most teens were not uninterested in working, but were only open to it if it aligned comfortably with their routines and did not risk tipping the balance toward stress or exhaustion.

Figure 16: Work-life balance and psychosocial indicators



Knowledge of Workers' Rights and Obligations: High Accuracy, Low Connection to Real-Life Experience

A central element of the German workshops was a 20-minute interactive quiz that tested teens' knowledge of basic labor rights and obligations in Germany. The gamified format, featuring anonymous avatars, instant voting, and group discussion, was especially effective to reveal both what teens know and how they perceive the rules of the German labor market. The quiz revealed relatively strong factual knowledge among the participants.

For instance, 86 percent correctly answered that if they fall ill, they are expected to inform their employer and obtain a medical certificate within a few days of absence. Similarly, 90 percent of teens accurately responded that a workplace injury should be reported immediately and that an employer is responsible for responding to such situations. These high rates of correct responses suggest that teens are absorbing general messages from the German education and healthcare systems, where documentation, formal reporting, and accountability are emphasized in both schools and daily life.

Figure 17: Sick leave

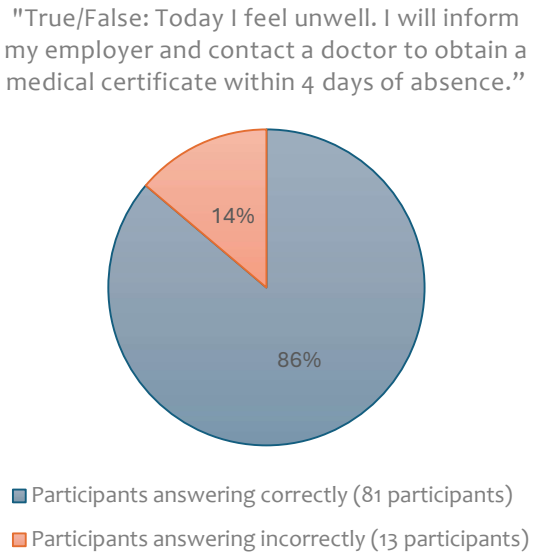
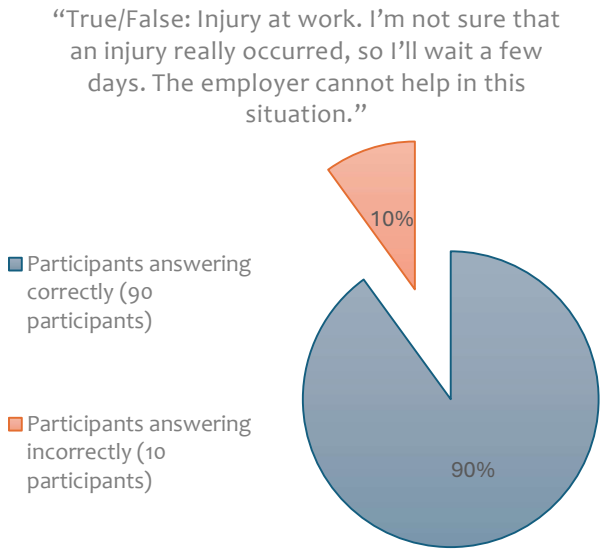


Figure 18: Injury at work



However, workshop discussions showed that while participants could correctly identify legal requirements, many lacked a concrete sense of how these rights function in practice, or whether they would truly be applied to them as Ukrainian refugees. For example, 77 of 95 teens correctly answered that a signed employment contract should be in place before starting work, but follow-up conversations revealed that very few had ever seen a contract or knew how one is created. Several participants responded to this question with skepticism, asking aloud, "Is this what's supposed to happen or what *really* happens?" Others admitted that they were confused by the question itself, since their only exposure to work, through family members, short-term internships, or volunteering, had not involved formal agreements. There was also limited recognition of how

contracts connect to social insurance, taxes, or protections in case of injury, areas that the Polish-based teens, despite lower quiz accuracy, spoke about more directly in terms of their experiences with informal work.

Figure 19: "True/False: I must have a signed employment contract before starting work in Germany."

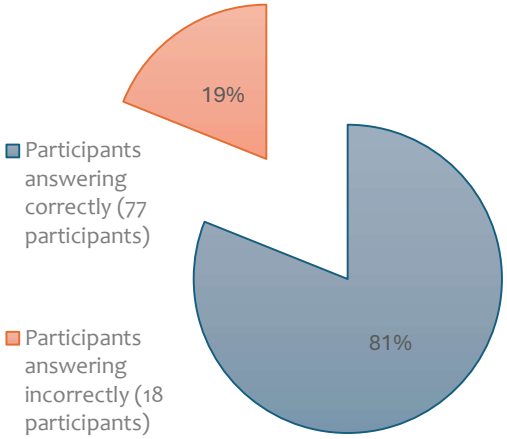
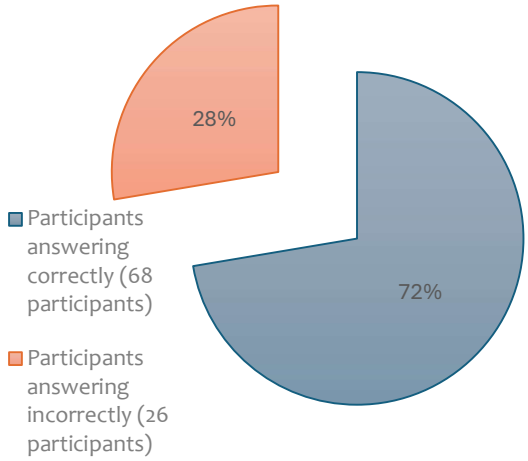


Figure 20: "At what age can you independently drive a car in Germany?"



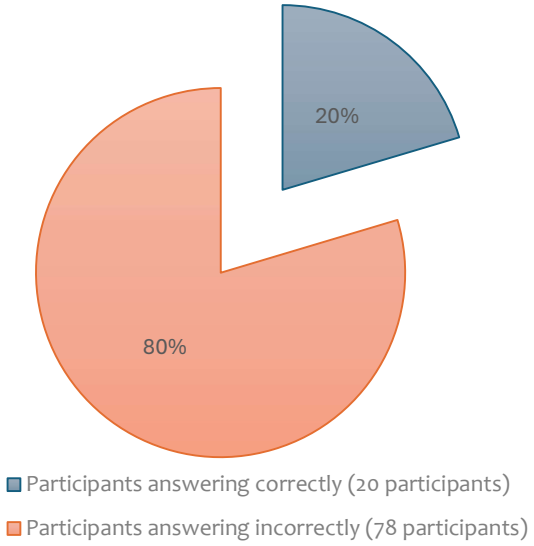
Unlike in Poland, where a small but vocal group of working teens challenged the official line, claiming that reporting injuries could lead to job loss in cash-based arrangements, German-based youth seemed more compliant, but also more distanced from the material. Even among teens who scored well, the quiz was often treated as a classroom-style task rather than something that would impact their lives anytime soon. The legal driving age question was another example: while 72 percent of participants correctly identified age 18 as the legal minimum to drive independently in Germany, this was lower than expected in a country where rules are generally well-publicized and enforced. For many of the teens, however, driving was not an immediate concern. Some explained that they live in urban areas with strong public transport and do not expect to own or need a car soon; others mentioned that their families do not own vehicles, and therefore have little practical motivation to learn the driving laws. These responses hint at a broader disconnect: although teens are learning the formal rules of German society, they do not always see themselves as full participants in that system--at least not yet. Their legal knowledge is surprisingly strong, but often abstract, underscoring the gap between awareness and empowerment.

Specific Knowledge of Work Arrangements and Workers' Rights: Shallow Understanding, Formal Assumptions

When German-based Ukrainian teens were tested on more specific labor rights and contractual knowledge, their performance suggested a narrow and often overly optimistic understanding of the rules that govern work in Germany. While teens showed relatively strong familiarity with basic concepts such as sick leave and reporting injuries, their grasp of contractual arrangements, wage rights, and overtime regulations was far weaker. Only about one in five participants correctly answered a question about the different types of legal contracts used in Germany (including labor contracts, contracts of mandate, task-based agreements, and business-to-business arrangements). This limited awareness is significant in the German context, where non-

standard contracts are widely used in sectors like cleaning, delivery, hospitality, and part-time services. Teens were largely unaware of how contract type can influence entitlements such as social insurance, paid leave, and dismissal rights. In post-quiz discussions, many participants seemed to assume that formal work is always governed by a single, universal contract type—with fixed conditions and protections. Very few understood how employment arrangements could vary depending on the contract's legal basis.

Figure 21: "What types of contracts can one use to work or provide services?" Possible answers: a) Labor contract b) Contract of mandate c) Contract for specific tasks d) B2B contract e) All of the above. Correct answer: e) All of the above.



An equally concerning gap was revealed in questions about wages and overtime. Although the legal minimum wage in Germany as of 2025 is €12.82 per hour, just 30 of 99 participants were able to identify this correctly. Many teens seemed surprised that there was even a fixed hourly wage, with a few guessing well below the legal minimum. Unlike in the Polish focus groups, where teens frequently discussed exact pay figures and their own experiences being paid in cash "under the table," most German-based teens had little or no firsthand experience to draw on. Their confusion about the minimum wage may reflect a detachment from the labor market altogether, especially among those focused on completing school first. A similar pattern emerged with the overtime pay question: only 26 of 95 teens knew that overtime pay is not automatically granted in Germany. Those who answered incorrectly often did so with the confident (but mistaken) belief that any work beyond 40

Figure 23: "What is the minimum hourly wage in Germany for the year 2025?" (12.82 EUR)

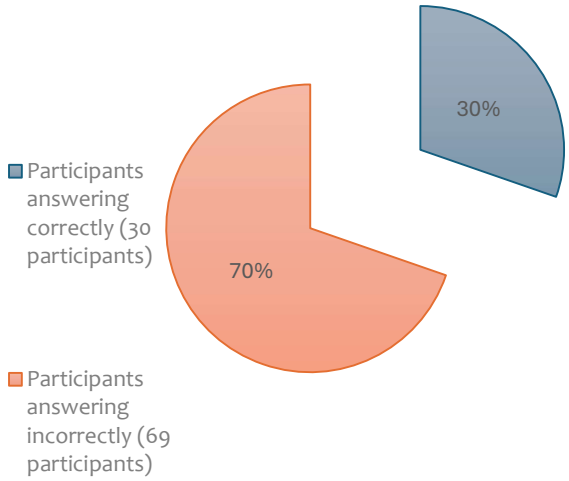
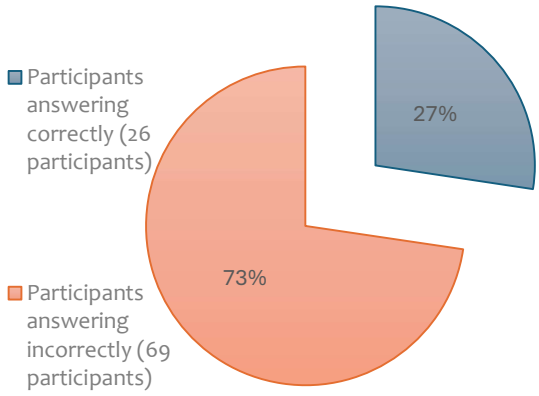


Figure 22: "True/False: I will automatically receive overtime pay if I work over 40 hours a week."



hours should result in extra compensation, again suggesting a default assumption of fairness and formality, rather than a grounded understanding of how work often operates in practice.

Figure 25: "True/False: Other workers at my workplace wear safety glasses, this means I must by them for myself."

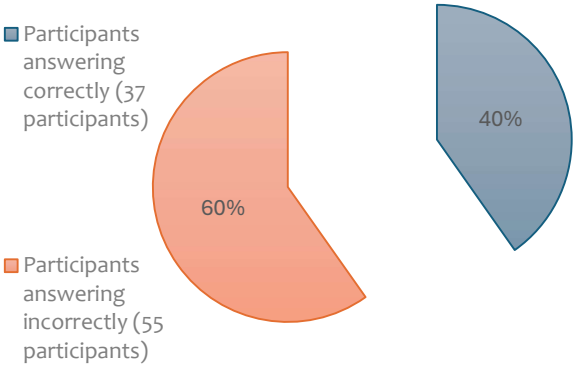
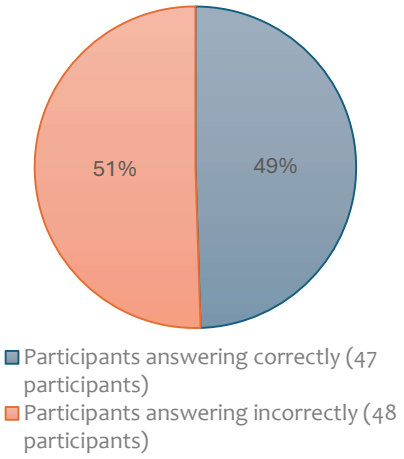


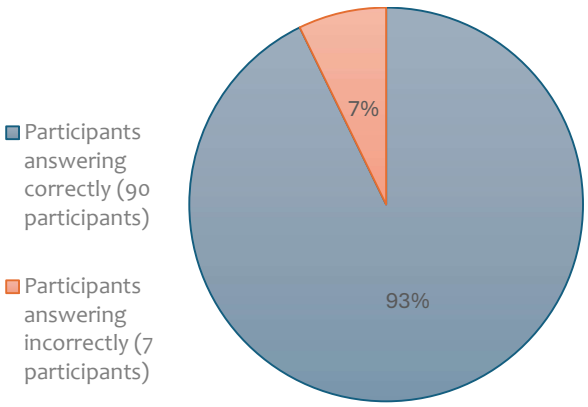
Figure 24: "What is the minimum notice period an employee must give an employer in Germany when he intends to resign?"



Teens showed weak understanding of safety standards and notice periods, reflecting the very limited experiences with formalized work. In Germany, it is the employer's responsibility to supply the employee with the necessary health and safety equipment to perform his function without hazard. Yes 60 percent of teens believed that if safety goggles were required, for example, that the worker should purchase them himself. Several participants displayed disbelief when the correct answers were discussed; they had never seen this policy put into practice. There was likewise very weak understanding of the workers' obligatory notice period, with about half of the teen participants unable to identify the correct timeframe on which he or she is obligated to notify an employer of the intention to leave the job. Clearly, this had not been a commonly-shared experience among the teens.

One area where teens did display strong knowledge was on the legality of probationary periods. An overwhelming 93 percent correctly answered that a one-year probationary period is not legal under German labor law, and some participants appeared to have encountered this issue in family discussions or social media threads.

Figure 26: "My new employers says that I will begin work with a one-year probationary period. This is legal, right?"



Interestingly, there was less direct skepticism or personal storytelling in the German groups compared to those in Poland, where teens frequently shared examples of unpaid trial periods or exploitative arrangements. Instead, in

Germany, the quiz was often treated as a kind of theoretical exercise, something that might be relevant in the future, but not yet meaningful to their own lives. This difference may stem from their stronger identification with formal institutions, or simply from fewer real-life interactions with employers. While this detachment may protect them from exploitative informal jobs in the short term, it also leaves them less prepared for the nuanced, and sometimes precarious, reality of entry-level work in Germany, particularly for young migrants navigating unfamiliar systems.

Conclusion

This report offers a detailed examination of the experiences and perceptions of Ukrainian teenagers living in Germany as they navigate questions of education, work, and rights in a new environment. Based on focus groups conducted in 2025 across several German cities with significant Ukrainian populations, the findings portray a youth cohort whose engagement with the labor market is limited, cautious, and highly conditional, shaped as much by bureaucratic barriers and uncertainty as by personal priorities. While a majority expressed interest in eventually working, fewer than one-third had ever held paid employment in Germany, and many viewed early entry into the workforce as a potential distraction from their main goal: completing school and mastering the German language.

Discussions revealed a distinctive pattern compared to Ukrainian youth in Poland. Rather than embracing informal or ad hoc work, participants in Germany strongly favor legal, regulated employment, often ready to delay any job search until completing education or achieving German language fluency. This hesitancy is compounded by a limited sense of how to navigate German hiring systems and a low confidence in teens' knowledge of workplace rights (with the exception of certain legal basics such as sick leave and accident reporting). For many Ukrainian teens, these rules seem abstract, disconnected from lived experience, and unlikely to be applied in the near term.

Three core challenges emerge from this assessment. First, bureaucratic and legal complexity, real or perceived, discourages early labor market participation. Many teens associate work with formal contracts, tax IDs, and official permissions, but few know how to obtain these or feel ready to try. Second, there is a significant gap between factual knowledge of rights and practical understanding of how these rights are enforced in real workplaces. Teens are often assuming fairness and formality, but they don't recognize that conditions can vary greatly depending on contract type or sector. This leaves them ill-prepared for the nuanced realities of entry-level work. Third, while psycho-social indicators suggest that most teens are coping well and not overloaded, their guarded interest in work reflects a desire to preserve balance, avoid stress, and protect time for rest, conditions which may limit their willingness to engage with the labor market even when opportunities arise.

Recommendations for Educators and Policymakers

The focus-group environment provided a timely opportunity to address these knowledge gaps, and most participants indicated that the information about workers' rights was relevant and useful. Yet, as the discussions revealed, information alone will not be enough. For many Ukrainian

teens in Germany, the path to work remains abstract, distant, and highly conditional on formal milestones such as language mastery or school completion.

Policymakers, educators, and employment counselors will need to go beyond classroom instruction. They need to cooperate to provide clear, accessible pathways into regulated youth employment. They need to provide practical guidance about contracts, wages, and labor protections, if these young people are to move from theoretical knowledge to active roles in the German labor market.

Stakeholders	Recommendation
Educators at high schools and vocational schools	• **Increase** available resources for small-group German language study, particularly for students arriving after age 15. • **Expand** opportunities for in-class learning support to non-native speakers, including targeted modules on navigating German bureaucracy and job search systems. • **Engage** Ukrainian and other immigrant teens in mainstream career development courses, including mentorship from Ukrainian-speaking professionals already working in Germany. • **Introduce** visual tools, self-assessments, and realistic time-management plans into career development classes to help students consider how work could fit with school commitments.
Employment services	• **Share** tailored "Stepping into the Job" courseware with youth job-seekers, including clear step-by-step guides to obtaining required documents (e.g., diplomas, academic and professional credentials). • **Present** youth with quick reference guides about fundamental rights at the time when they are job-seeking, emphasizing contract types, minimum wage, and overtime rules. • **Post** QR codes and notices on websites and at job centers with information about youth-friendly labor advisory points, trade unions, and workers' hotlines for reporting abuses. • **Offer** confidential, anonymous assessment interviews with young job-seekers about their experiences, even if limited, to identify early patterns of exclusion or discrimination.
Labor inspectors	• **Increase** public awareness of key labor rights for youth, especially the legal minimum wage, overtime regulations, and the right to a written contract before starting work. • **Disseminate** clear, youth-friendly materials about the most serious workplace abuses relevant to under-18 workers through school career advisers, in German and Ukrainian.

	• **Carry** out more visible enforcement actions against employers that violate youth employment laws, particularly in hospitality, cleaning, and delivery sectors.
State-level and municipal governments	• **Track** district-level performance of German-as-second-language programs for late-arrival students, including retention and proficiency over time. • **Study** and share best practices from schools and districts with the highest language-learning outcomes and integration rates for Ukrainian teens. • **Assess** the relevance and effectiveness of career orientation courses in secondary curricula, including student feedback on usefulness for navigating the German labor market. Compare with models in other EU countries to improve youth access to employment pathways.
Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs	• **Track** youth employment trends by sector and contract type, paying special attention to under-18 participation rates and legal compliance. • **Invest** in awareness campaigns about the difference between contract types, rights linked to each, and enforcement actions against non-compliant employers, targeting schools and youth centers. • **Promote** and fund programs that connect Ukrainian teens to safe, legal part-time work opportunities as a bridge to fuller integration into the German labor market.

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