



Co-funded by
the European Union

Social
Innovation 
Initiative



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

A baseline assessment in the context of
the ESF+ SII project¹, “Stepping into the Job”²

Draft for Discussion

Warsaw, Poland
August 2025

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 Poland 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 Poland. With the support of the European Social Fund (ESF+) Social Innovation+ Initiative³, a team of psychologist, development economist and labor market researcher from Centrum Organizowania Związków Zawodowych⁴ and University of Warsaw Faculty of Economic Sciences carried out focus group discussions with 112 Ukrainian refugee youths aged 15-19 years in Gdansk, Katowice, Krakow, Lublin, and Warsaw during June and July, 2025. The purpose of the focus groups was to assess Ukrainian refugee teens in Poland with respect to their attitudes toward work and careers, personal experience with working for pay in Poland, work-study balance, household and personal stress factors, and knowledge of the rights and protections of workers in Poland. The assessment reveals several critical dilemmas facing Ukrainian youth in Poland, including under-investment by many in study and foreign language-learning, heavy time commitment to underpaid, uncontracted labor, and ignorance of basic labor rights and protections.

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 Germany, 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 influx of Ukrainian youth into Poland 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 Poland.

Yet this group, Ukrainian refugee youths aged 15-19 years who fled to Poland since the 2022 Russian invasion, faces a daunting set of challenges, many specific to their age cohort. Firstly, the



Figure 1: Focus Group of teens meet with "Stepping into Job" facilitator at the Caritas Support Center in Gdansk, Poland on 12 July 2025.

arrival into a new country as teenagers (compared to younger siblings) has afforded Ukrainian teen refugees very little time to learn Polish language to a level that would enable academic success in Polish-language secondary schools. Many of them, confronted with the prospect of social alienation and failing grades, have opted to continue studying via distance education to Ukrainian secondary school programs. By the Government of Poland's own estimates, more than half of Ukrainian teens in Poland don't enroll in Poland secondary schools.⁶ Yet this pathway presumes a near-term ceasefire and potential return to

Ukraine, or else it impairs or delays assimilation into the Polish-speaking workforce. A small number of highly ambitious (and under-slept) Ukrainian teens that the project team spoke with indicated that they are double-enrolled, both in Polish local schools and in distance-based Ukrainian schools, struggling to handle a double curriculum of readings and homework, while learning the new language. But these are a minority, and typically a quite privileged group.

A 15-year old boy in Gdansk boasted to his friends about returning from a brief summer job: "I collected harvest for 6 days in a row at 10 hours per day, and I made a clean 600 zloty". The rate is less than one-third of Polish minimum wage.

By contrast, at least one third, and in some cities one half of Ukrainian refugee youth from the focus groups fall into a second dilemma—financial pressure. Feeling a strong financial pressure,

⁶ Based on a comparison of PESEL database and ZUS child benefit data as at January 2025. Forum for Research on Eastern Europe and Emerging Economies. "Three Years On: Ukrainians in Poland after Russia's 2022 Invasion," FREE Policy Briefs. 21 February 2025, Available at: <https://freepolicybriefs.org/2025/02/21/ukrainians-in-poland/>

Ukrainian teens in Poland are far more likely than their Polish peers to be working long hours, without contracts, often at a fraction of minimum wage, and hoping to gain critical language and technical skills on-the-job instead of through vocational or academic programs. Stories emerged in focus group conversations about earning “10 zloty per hour in cash, but I don’t have to pay any tax” (e.g., that is less than one-third of the Polish minimum wage, and young people under age 26 pay zero personal income tax anyway); and “collect[ing] harvest for 6 days in a row at 10 hours per day, and I made a clean 600 zloty” (again, at less than one-third of minimum wage). While evidencing a very strong work ethic, desire to learn, and readiness to try a wide range of informal jobs, the same teens imagine themselves becoming “millionaires”, “businessmen”, “crypto-traders”, “investors”. Yet it’s not clear how their weekly time allocations, heavily invested in severely underpaid, uncontracted manual tasks with little time spent on studies, could advance them toward these ambitious visions in the next 5-10 years. The expectations gap seems particularly high among teens who have not developed language capacity in any foreign language (e.g., Polish, English, German, etc).

The third dilemma may be common to many teens and perhaps a consequence of the COVID lockdowns and the prevalence of mobile phones: most teens aren’t reading or studying. At least two-thirds of Ukrainian refugee teens in the Polish focus groups indicated spending fewer than 20 minutes per day reading or doing homework. Instead, they are scrolling on phones, messaging with friends, sleeping, working or relaxing. The under-investment in reading and studying suggests that school enrollment is not the only missing factor, and boosting enrollments might not significantly increase skills and knowledge outcomes. (E.g., As the research team discovered in the Germany focus groups, an over-emphasis on formal enrollments and language courses without personal investments in studying leads to another set of problems in the form of system dependency and personal stagnation.)



Figure 2: Focus Group teens have drawn out their time allocations and set priority-levels to work and study in Katowice on 28 June 2025.

Ukrainian teenagers in Poland stand at the brink of huge opportunities for personal and professional growth, at the same time that Poland itself stands to realize enormous growth in productivity, investments, and innovation thanks to incoming Ukrainian refugees. Much of what the Government of Poland, voivod administrations, and municipal services have done to ease the integration of Ukrainian people into housing, jobs, schools, and social services has been a remarkable success. This is evidenced by high levels of Ukrainian employment, tax-paying, and consumption spending. Yet confidential, anonymous interviews with Ukrainian teens reveal a “wild East” in the Polish labor market that differs markedly from Labor Law and codes. Long, unpaid “probational periods” of work, widespread avoidance of labor contracts in favor of cash or mandate or task-

contracts, spontaneous dismissals without back-pay, flouting of safety precautions or imposing the cost of health and safety equipment on employees, uncompensated over-time, fines and accusations of “money missing from the register” resulting in heavy subtractions from pay are heard from every group in five cities in Poland. Nor is there confidence in a meritocratic or transparent market for job-finding, with teens expressing disillusionment that jobs could ever be found through diligent application and CV preparation. Rather, those who have worked indicate that family and friends (primarily mothers) put them into their positions. There are also severe gaps in teens’ knowledge of their rights, from minimum wage to safety precautions to overtime. It is not surprising that more than half of the focus group participants indicate that they think they do NOT have the same chance at fair contracts and conditions that their Polish peers have.

How will today’s dish-washers, fruit harvesters, café servers and delivery-riders make any progress toward becoming the “businessmen” and “investors” that they dream to be? Based on the focus group discussions, several key needs and design recommendations will guide this project:

1. Teens need to assess more critically their allocation of time between study, work, relaxing and other activities. With more than two-thirds of focus group participants indicating fewer than 20 minutes per day of study or reading, there is a widespread under-valuation of learning (and an over-expectation of future opportunities);
2. Teens need to ramp up the productivity of study, especially language study, both increasing time and intensity;
3. Teens need both inspiration and specificity about potential career directions; while claims to becoming a “millionaire” or “crypto-trader” are ambitious, such responses indicate limited self-reflection or investigation of industries, specializations and careers;
4. Older teens need to visualize the logical progression of their efforts toward personal and career goals; the most outspoken and self-confident respondents in the focus groups often described their future selves with very specific milestones (e.g., “speaking Polish at B2 level”, “becoming a licensed dentist”);
5. Teens need to become more aware among their friends and with parents of the red flags that indicate high-risk employment, and become familiar with local support resources and Labor Inspection redress mechanisms in the event of harm;
6. Teens need to be drawn back from distractions that dissipate their time (e.g., scrolling, messaging) in the race to achieve language and skills before they are thrown into the job market. One approach can be to adopt some of the same addictive designs or “gamifications” that mobile apps employ. A learning platform may “hook” teens, for example, by visualizing their avatars, achieving mini-milestones, earning badges, excelling against their peers, appearing on leaderboards, and moving along a progress-bar or through levels or worlds.

On the basis of this assessment, the “Stepping into the Job” project team can begin to develop tailored workshops, call center support, and an adapted career development platform that specifically responds to the challenges that Ukrainian youth face in Poland. The focus groups have also gathered an enthusiastic audience of pilot users for prototype testing of the platform courseware and gamification features, which the team plans to unroll during fall-winter 2025.

Background and Context

Over 130,000 Ukrainian youth aged 15-19 reside in Poland under valid permits or temporary protection status.^{7, 8} This sizable population is concentrated primarily in major urban centers, aligning with the broader settlement patterns of Ukrainians in Poland. The highest concentrations of Ukrainians, including youth, are found in Mazowieckie (22%), Dolnośląskie (12%), Wielkopolskie (11%), Małopolskie (9%), and Śląskie (9%) voivodeships. These regions encompass key metropolitan areas such as Gdansk, Katowice, Krakow, Lublin, and Warsaw which serve as focal points for employment opportunities.⁹

Youth Employment Patterns in Poland

Although there is no direct data on the percentage of Ukrainian teenagers who have worked in Poland, the employment landscape for young workers in general provides useful context. Research shows that 45% of Polish adults report having worked before turning 18, often in temporary or part-time positions.¹⁰ Seasonal work, such as fruit picking, is a common first employment experience, particularly for teenagers from smaller towns. However, formal youth employment remains relatively low, with only 5% of Polish youth aged 15-19 formally employed.¹¹

Despite this low official employment rate, it is likely that many Ukrainian teenagers engage in informal or non-standard work arrangements. The high rate of temporary employment among young workers in Poland—51.7% of workers aged 15-24 are on temporary contracts—suggests a labor market characterized by short-term and flexible work.¹² Given that Ukrainian refugees in Poland generally have higher employment rates than their counterparts in Germany, Ukrainian teenagers may be entering the workforce informally or under less regulated conditions.

Employment Conditions and Contract Types

In Poland, a significant portion of Ukrainian workers—45.8%—are employed under civil contracts, which do not provide the same protections as standard labor contracts. This percentage is

⁷ European Commission. (2024). *Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex – quarterly data (rounded)* [Data set]. Eurostat.

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asytpfq__custom_15655924/default/table?lang=en

⁸ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2023). *Experiences of refugees from Ukraine: Displacement, housing, and employment*. https://doi.org/10.2908/MIGR_RESVAS

⁹ Polish Office for Foreigners. (2024, March 31). *Obywatele Ukrainy w Polsce – aktualne dane migracyjne* [Ukrainian citizens in Poland – current migration data].

<https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc/obywatele-ukrainy-w-polsce-aktualne-dane-migracyjne2>

¹⁰ Filary Biznesu. (2023, July 17). *Blisko połowa z nas pracowała przed osiemnastką* [Almost half of us worked before the age of 18]. <https://filarybiznesu.pl/gospodarka/blisko-polowa-z-nas-pracowala-przed-osiemnastka/a24655>

¹¹ European Commission. (2024). *Employment rates of young people not in education and training by age and sex – quarterly data* [Data set]. Eurostat.

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/yth_empl_010/default/table?lang=en

¹² European Commission. (2024). *Temporary employees as a percentage of the total number of employees, by sex – quarterly data* [Data set]. Eurostat.

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00073/default/table?lang=en>

notably higher than that of Polish workers (13%), indicating that Ukrainians, including teenagers, are more likely to work in precarious employment arrangements.¹³

Poland's high rate of temporary employment among youth further suggests that many Ukrainian teenagers who work do so under conditions of economic insecurity. Informal employment is also likely prevalent, particularly in industries such as hospitality, retail, cleaning, and agriculture—sectors that typically attract both young workers and refugee labor.¹⁴

Factors Influencing Teen Employment in Poland

Several factors contribute to the employment trends among Ukrainian teenagers in Poland. Unlike Germany, Poland offers fewer social benefits for Ukrainian refugees, which may create stronger incentives for young people to seek work. Additionally, Poland has a tax exemption for individuals under 26, meaning many Ukrainian teenagers who work do not have to pay personal income tax on their earnings.¹⁵ However, their participation in the social protection system is less clear, as only a fraction of foreign youth under 19 are officially covered.¹⁶

Overall, while formal employment rates for young people in Poland are low, the combination of high refugee employment rates, reliance on civil contracts, and strong economic incentives suggests that many Ukrainian teenagers are engaging in work—though often in temporary, informal, or insecure positions.

Understanding the employment landscape for Ukrainian teenagers in Poland requires considering both formal data and broader labor market trends. While direct statistics on Ukrainian teen employment are unavailable, evidence suggests that many are likely working in temporary, informal, or civil contract-based roles, influenced by economic necessity and limited social benefits. As this report will explore, these factors shape not only the actual work experiences of Ukrainian teenagers in Poland but also their perceptions of job opportunities, economic stability, and future prospects in the country.

¹³ Kępa, M. (2023, August 25). *Ukrainians are slowly adapting to life in Germany*. Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW). <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-08-25/ukrainians-are-slowly-adapting-to-life-germany>

¹⁴ Balicka-Sawiak, E. (2024, March 12). *65 Percent Ukrainian refugees work, but face many challenges in the Polish labour market*. Polish Economic Institute (PIE). <https://pie.net.pl/en/65-ukrainian-refugees-work-but-face-many-challenges-in-the-polish-labour-market/>

¹⁵ Randstad Poland. (n.d.). *Tax exemption for those under 26 and income limits*. <https://www.randstad.pl/en/career-advice/jobs-poland/clone-interview-questions-how-to-successfully-navigate-recruitment/#:~:text=Tax%20Exemption%20for%20Those%20Under%2026%20and%20Income%20Limits&text=According%20to%20regulations%2C%20young%20workers,limit%20is%20the%20primary%20consideration.>

¹⁶ UNICEF Europe and Central Asia. (2025, January). *Refugee students from Ukraine in Polish schools: What has changed in the 2024/2025 school year?* UNICEF and the Center for Citizenship Education. <https://www.unicef.org/eca/reports/refugee-students-ukraine-polish-schools>

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 Poland, 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 Gdansk, Katowice, Krakow, Lublin and Warsaw, 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 Poland was 27 June 2025, and focus groups in Poland took place June 5, 27, 28, July 12 and July 15) 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?”, the answer was a nearly unanimous “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



Figure 3: Teens (and one mother) gather in Lublin at the UNICEF humanitarian support center. Many teens in Lublin indicated strong financial pressure to work.

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 a religious-based charitable support

program (Caritas in Gdansk), humanitarian aid support services (Lublin and Katowice), a peer-to-peer support group for families with disabilities (Krakow), and a free-admission educational support organization (Warsaw) as points of local recruitment. The focus groups generally took place outside of city centers (except in Warsaw), in less affluent residential neighborhoods. Earlier work done by IZA had pointed to significant correlation of migrant socio-economic status to city neighborhoods,¹⁷ a bias the team sought to avoid.

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 0-6month 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 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.

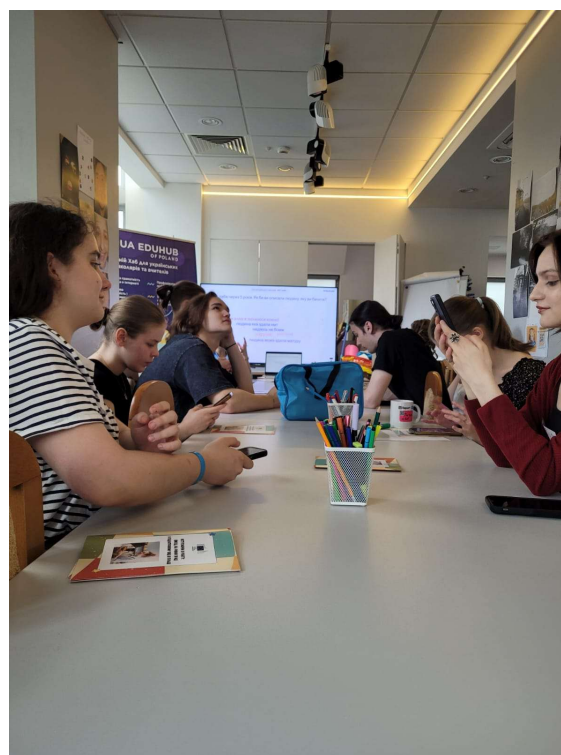


Figure 4: At the Warsaw focus group on 5 June 2025, teens used a combination of open call-out, drawing-out priorities and ideas in their booklets, and anonymous voting on their phones through the Mentimeter app.

¹⁷ 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>

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.

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



Figure 5: In Krakow on 15 July, project psychologist/facilitator and parents supported teens with intellectual and physical disabilities to participate in a specially-designed focus group, addressing some of the specific challenges of stepping into jobs.

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.

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 Poland?”) 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.¹⁸ The team was also

¹⁸ 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

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, either on weekday evenings (after school) or on Saturday afternoons. 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 sandwiches, snacks and beverages. Below is a table summarizing the participation at the 5 focus groups that took place in Poland.

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.

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
Warsaw 05.06.2025 EduHub (free educational support center) Marszałkowska 77/79	23					
		14	9	0	19	4
Lublin 27.06.2025 UNICEF (humanitarian support center) Kazimierza Wielkiego 8	21					
		12	9	0	14	7
Katowice 28.06.2025 UNICEF (humanitarian support center) Gustawa Morcinska 5/9	18					
		11	7	0	11	7
Gdansk 12.07.2025 Caritas Volunteer Center (religious charitable organization) Jesionowa 6A	38					
		24	14	0	30	8
Krakow 15.07.2025 Members of Self-Help Organization 'Patchwork' at Multicultural Center of Krakow, Zabłocie 20	12					
		5	5	2	6	6
TOTAL for POLAND	112	66	44	2	80	32

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 112 participants from the June-July 2025 focus groups in Poland.

Interested to Work, But Mixed Experiences and Skepticism

Teenagers in Poland displayed an overwhelming curiosity about working, with 90 percent responding that they know a friend or classmate who has worked, and half indicating personal experience with work. Many were eager to share personal stories about finding jobs through friends

at school, through mothers’ recommendations, on OLX and Facebook Marketplace, and by asking if help is needed at local cafes and vendors. Typically, the reported job experiences were short—a few days or weeks in the summer—but a few (almost always boys) had committed more than 30 hours per week to money-making, including in platform delivery-service and at cafes.

Boys were also more openly talkative about avoiding contracts and taxes, earning cash, and lying about their age. This smaller group working 30+ hours tended to downplay injury, exposure, and legal risks of work in conversations, emphasizing instead feelings of independence, pride about personal income and the ability to purchase things. Girls who had work experience tended to have episodic jobs, such as distributing pamphlets, babysitting a neighbor’s child, or walking a neighbor’s dog, usually closer to home and relayed through friends, mothers and neighbors. When the topic of risks and problem-employers came up, many girls recalled cautionary tales of café employers withholding tips and salary, of OLX solicitations to strange and faraway locations, and of workplace exposure to drunk and aggressive men. Conversations tended to reaffirm among girls the risks and uncertainties of work, and the value of connecting to jobs through people whom they trust.

A 16 year-old girl in Warsaw said she had worked last summer as an ice cream seller for a Ukrainian employer. “My boss insisted that I should take the cart every day to a construction site, but **I was completely alone, and I was afraid, because the men working there came all around my cart and harassed me.** I asked my boss to assign me to a different location, but he refused. When I left the job, he underpaid me by 100 zloty.”

Figure 6: "Have you ever worked for pay in Poland?"

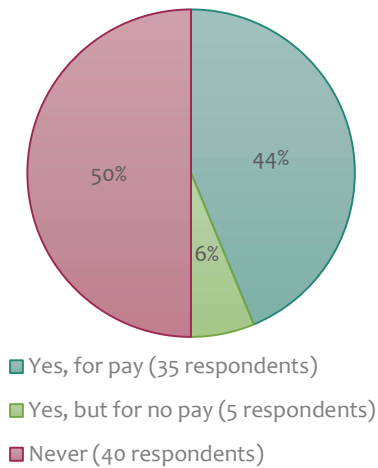
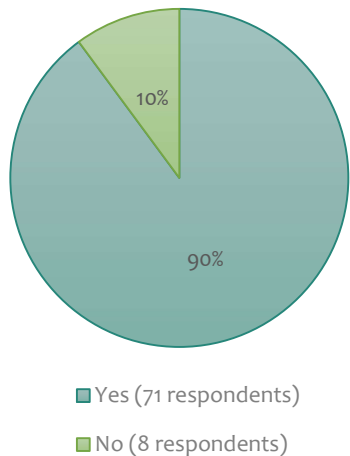


Figure 7: "Do you have classmates or friends who worked for pay in Poland?"



The participants’ stated enthusiasm for finding work should be understood in this context. Fully 91 percent of respondents said that they are interested in finding work *this year*, and this is remarkable both compared to their Polish peers and compared to same-age Ukrainian refugees in Germany, who showed much lower interest in finding work (and were generally older). Among all the focus groups, the average age when teens said “My family expects me to start working” was

17.32 years, nearly the average age of the participants at the time of the focus groups. Yet participants' views of what constitutes reasonable work differed markedly. For at least three-quarters of the groups, ad hoc tasks, especially related to friends, neighbors and local vendors, are considered ideal work during the 10th, 11th and 12th classes of secondary school (the level of most of these youth). Many were only referring to the summer months ahead, hoping to find a few weeks of intensive work (e.g., more than 30 hours per week) only until the academic year resumes. This was clear when teens were asked how they expect to balance work and study. About one-third don't expect to do both at the same time (the average level of agreement with the statement "I believe I am able to continue studies and work at the same time was 3.62 on a scale from 0= complete disagreement to 5= complete agreement).

The smaller group of mostly male, time-intensive workers were actively seeking opportunities that include travel (e.g., for agricultural harvesting), heavy work (e.g., in warehouses), late hours (e.g., in restaurants and cafes) and cash payments. This group's definition of work seemed to stand apart, and merits further investigation, because it raises questions about time tradeoffs, language-learning, exploitation in the near-term, and a gap in potential earnings over the long-term.

Figure 8: "Are you interested in getting a job this year?"

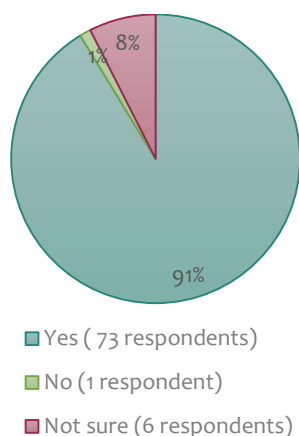


Figure 9: Expectations about starting work

To what extent do you agree with the statement
"I am able to continue my studies and work at the
same time" (from 0=completely disagree to
5=completely agree),

average response: 3.62

17.32 years

The average age at which teens say their
parents expect them to start working

It is also remarkable that while nearly all teens expressed an interest to work, about half of them don't expect to be treated fairly in terms of contracts, wages and working conditions compared to Polish peers. This doesn't seem to be related to their sense of limited understanding of Polish laws and labor regulations, however. The groups expressed moderate confidence in their understanding of laws and regulations about work (although this confidence was mostly unfounded, as discussed further below. Teens' actual knowledge of key rules including minimum wage, overtime and safety precautions was severely lacking).

Why should teens who feel rather confident that they know their rights at the same time exhibit such cynicism about their likelihood of being treated fairly? A possible explanation is that

A 15-year old girl in Warsaw shared that her friend worked at a convenience store for four days under a signed contract but was **fired without explanation**. The **employer later refused to pay her and denied she had ever worked there**. The friend decided against pursuing legal action. Similarly, a 16-year old girl in Katowice reported applying to distribute leaflets but was **pressured instead to solicit money on the street**—a significant bait-and-switch that she rejected.

cautionary stories circulate among peers, families and on social media that raise doubts among Ukrainian youth that they will face discriminatory and unfair treatment. The project team heard many such stories relayed through youth in the focus groups. Another possibility is that Ukrainian youth see from their parents or through non-work experiences the routine flouting of laws and regulations with respect to the rights of Ukrainians. Guarantees of equal

rights and social protections, such as access to housing, lease terms, access to education, after-school language programs, academic support and counselling, might exist on paper but be seen to be routinely disregarded. Teens would then perceive a disconnect between learning the ‘rules of the game’ with regard to their rights and protections, and actually ‘playing the game’ in terms of studying, working and living in Poland.

Figure 10: “Do you think that Ukrainian teenagers in Poland have the same chance of getting fair working conditions as Polish teenagers?”

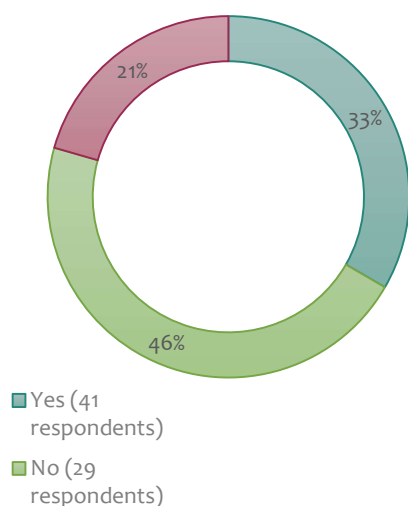
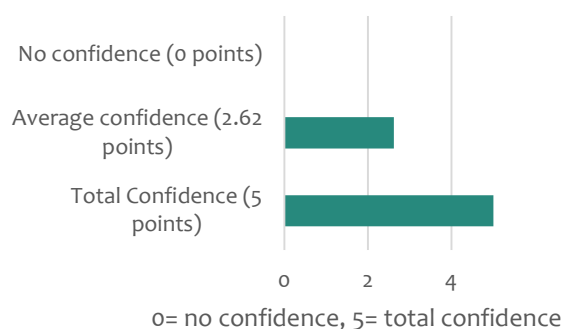
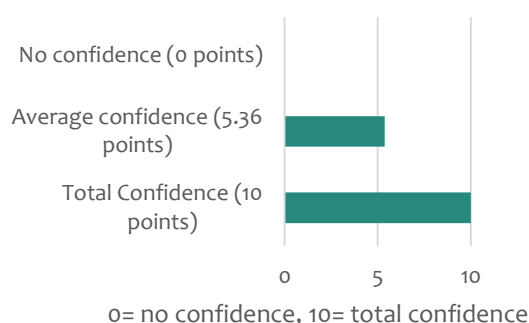


Figure 11: “How sure are you that you know the rules and norms of work in Poland?”



Another curious observation among the teens was an uncertainty about how work is found, even as nearly everyone came from families with working parents (and often siblings) and knew friends and classmates that work. Yet on average, about half of respondents indicated low confidence that they could personally find a job (the average response to the question “Are you confident that you know how to find a job if you want work?” was 5.36 on a scale from 0= no confidence to 10= total confidence).

Figure 12: “Are you confident that you know how to find a job if you want to work?”



In open-ended conversations, teens expressed a combination of ignorance and disillusionment about tools for finding work online.

Most were familiar with popular job-finding platforms like LinkedIn, Indeed, and Pracuj.pl and delivery platform-work like UberEats and Pyszne.pl. Fewer were familiar with Glassdoor and online gig-work sites like UpWork. Very few were familiar with online gig-work sites specific to certain services, like Preply, Fiverr, TaskRabbit, or Hackster. Among the few teens who had made attempts to post jobs through LinkedIn and Pracuj.pl, none had been employed that way, and they were disillusioned by the time invested. Some were suspicious that the sites mine personal data, that companies collect CVs to pretend that internal hires are competitive, or that jobs don't exist at all. Among those who had some prior work experience, the most reliable path to employment had been mothers and friends, followed by walking into local cafes and vendors volunteering themselves.

The disillusionment about formal, transparent, and competitive job-finding was mitigated by participants' youth in Poland. Nearly all the participants still expected to invest several additional years in their education, and at least one-third of them would stop seeking work in September when the academic year resumes. The emphasis was still tilted toward learning, and teens indicated that they expected job-finding would become more straightforward with the completion of degrees. It would be worth studying further the experiences of mid-twenties degree-holders with job-finding to test whether these expectations hold up.

Not Too Stressed Out, Most Are Ready to Work, But Not Too Hard

Taking account of psycho-social indicators, the project team asked participants through a combination of anonymous voting, oral and physical feedback, to indicate their feelings about stress, family obligations, and time pressures. Generally, the responses indicate that Ukrainian refugee teens in Poland experience moderate stress from their work and study responsibilities; about half of respondents indicated little-to-moderate stress from their daily responsibilities. About 15 percent of the respondents (and mostly girls) accounted for most of the stress. These high-performer and double-curriculum teens described balancing two school-days (Polish public school and Ukrainian distance-learning), self-study and private tutorials in Polish and English, plus long transport commuting times. Although few in numbers, these teens reported exhaustion, inability to take time away from school and responsibilities even in sickness, and very high stress.

Figure 13: Who Works in Your Family?

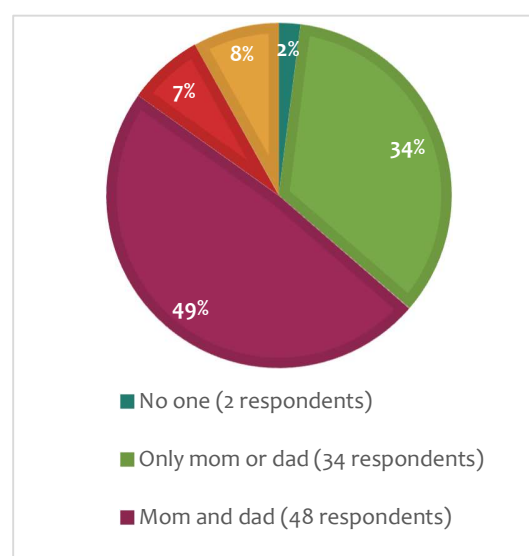
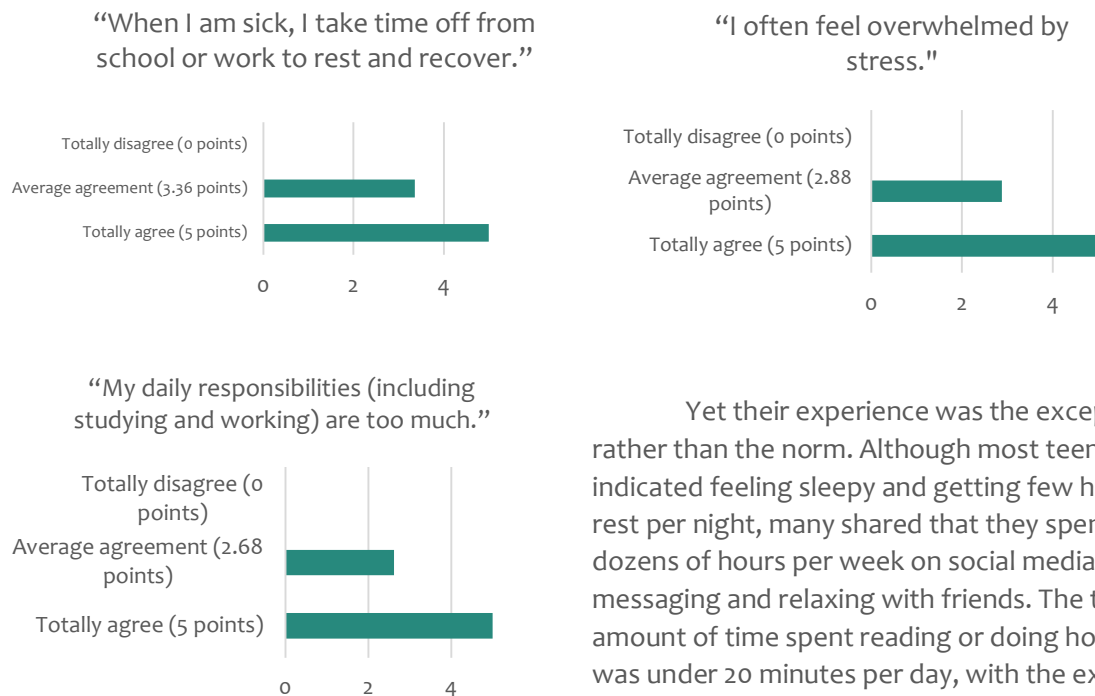


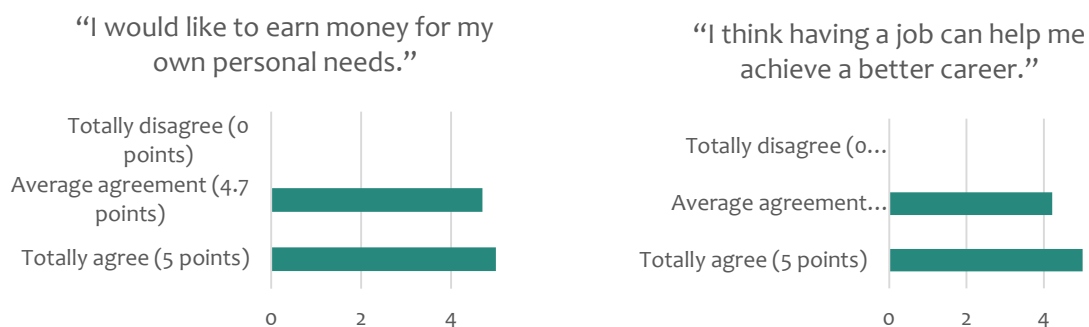
Figure 14: Work-life balance and psychosocial indicators

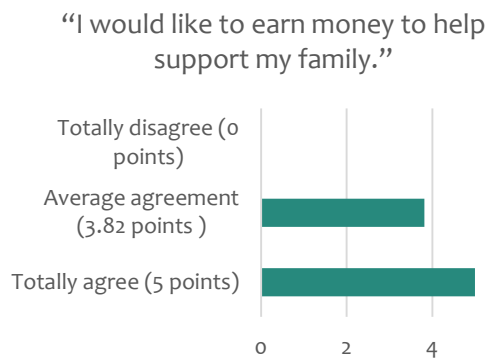


Yet their experience was the exception, rather than the norm. Although most teens indicated feeling sleepy and getting few hours of rest per night, many shared that they spend dozens of hours per week on social media, messaging and relaxing with friends. The typical amount of time spent reading or doing homework was under 20 minutes per day, with the exception of the small, high-performance group (that indicated 3+ hours per day of homework and study). Time allocations to family and performing chores for the family were also very low. In general, the teens described low-productivity time allocations and moderate, episodic stress.

In this context, the teens' enthusiasm for finding work seems to be mostly in the context of low-commitment, short-term tasks primarily to generate personal spending money. In fact, of all the statements on which teens were asked to score agreement or disagreement, the most enthusiastic agreement (scoring an average of 4.7 on a scale from 0= totally disagree to 5= totally agree) was that: "I would like to earn money for my own personal needs". The next-strongest agreement was also related to personal objectives; teens scored an average of 4.22 in agreement with the statement that "I think having a job can help me achieve a better career." Desire to support one's family and the needs of Ukraine showed significantly lower levels of priority.

Figure 15: Teens' motivations for work





Knowledge of Workers’ Rights and Obligations, Strong on Certain Basic Info

A critical component of the focus groups was a 20-minute, gamified quiz, in which the teen participants, disguised as avatars, voted their answers, viewed aggregated results, and then learned the correct information. This format provided a safe and comfortable environment in which to make mistakes and reveal ignorance, and it focused the teens’ attention to learn important rules and obligations about working in Poland.

The teenagers’ knowledge was generally very weak, but most of them answered correctly when they were familiar with concepts from high school. For example, most teenagers understand the concept of sick leave, because they have seen that a student must get a medical certificate in the health system, ZUS, in order to validate a longer absence from school. Ninety-one percent of respondents in the focus groups correctly answered the true/false statement that a worker, likewise, should get a medical certificate in the ZUS platform within three days of claiming a sick leave from work. They also had a strong understanding about the reporting of injuries or accidents, with 89 percent of respondents correctly responding that such things should be reported right away. This would be consistent with teens’ life experiences in other areas, including at school, in public spaces, and in car accidents; it is typical in Ukraine for motorists to stop their cars in the precise location of accidents to wait for police to arrive and record the details of the accident.

Figure 16: Injury at work

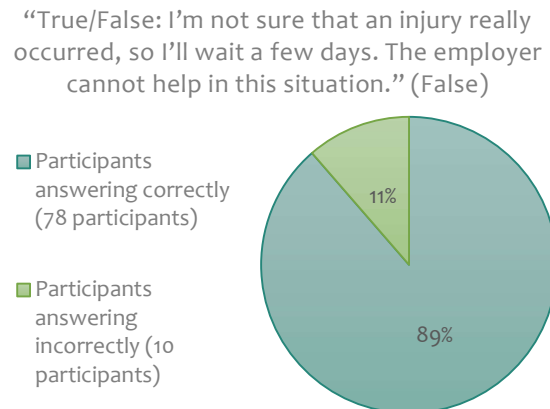
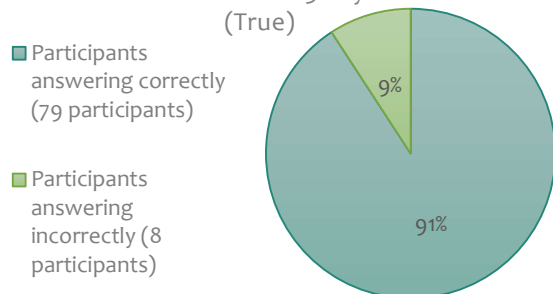


Figure 17: Sick leave

“True/False: Today I feel unwell. I will inform my employer and contact a doctor to obtain a medical certificate from ZUS within 3 days of absence.”



reported to authorities. Their anxiety would naturally result in job terminations, the boys felt. It would be better for the worker to deny any accident and get over his own injuries, than to make others aware, they asserted. Even when the facilitator shared stories from the COZZ hotline of

A 15-year old boy in Katowice described doing odd jobs he found on OLX without contracts. While he acknowledged the legal ambiguity, he preferred **“making extra money rather than wasting time on papers”**.

It is important to note, however, that knowing the correct answer does not mean that teens believe this is the common course of action, or that they would report injuries and accidents themselves. Here again, the most actively-employed (typically male) teens spoke out about their personal views. Among the most busily working boys, there was a strong attitude that accidents or injuries could threaten an employment relationship: employers who had hired the boys without contracts and were paying in cash would be anxious not to have accidents

seriously injured workers, and emphasized the personal risks involved in working without contract or social protection contributions, nearly all of the actively-employed boys held to their views that cash earnings are very important, and that the worker should be more careful to avoid accidents and injuries.

In a similar way, most of the teens understood that a work contract should be in place before the commencement of work. Eighty-two percent of respondents answered this true/false question correctly, slightly below the level of correct response about reporting illness. The incorrect answers in some groups seemed to be accounted by the actively-employed teen boys, some of whom called out during the quiz, “Are you asking what *should be* or what is the case?” Girls may have also misunderstood the question, but were less vocal during the quiz. Many girls shared later in the group discussions that they had watched neighbors’ children and walked dogs for neighbors on vacation, tasks which they almost certainly performed without contracts. When asked about contracts in the open-ended part of the focus group, it seemed that almost none of the teens had ever worked under a contract.

It was a bit surprising that only 80 percent of teens correctly identified the age at which a young person can legally drive a car independently in Poland. The majority of respondents answered correctly, but this should have been a commonly-known fact, if high schools are providing any guidance about it. The wrong answers might suggest that some teens expect flexibility in compliance with the law. For example, are parents putting younger teens behind the wheel when it is expedient, or to have fun? Another possible explanation is that lower-income families don’t have vehicles, and teens don’t expect to rent or buy vehicles any time soon. In this case, a driver’s license is not at the forefront of their minds.

Figure 18: “True/False: I must have a signed employment contract before starting work in Poland.”

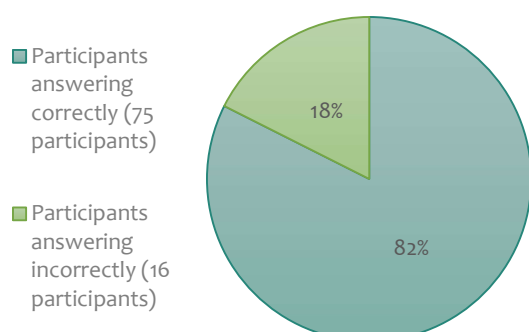
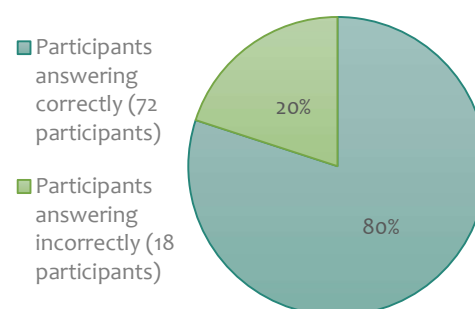


Figure 19: “At what age can you independently drive a car in Poland?” (18 years)

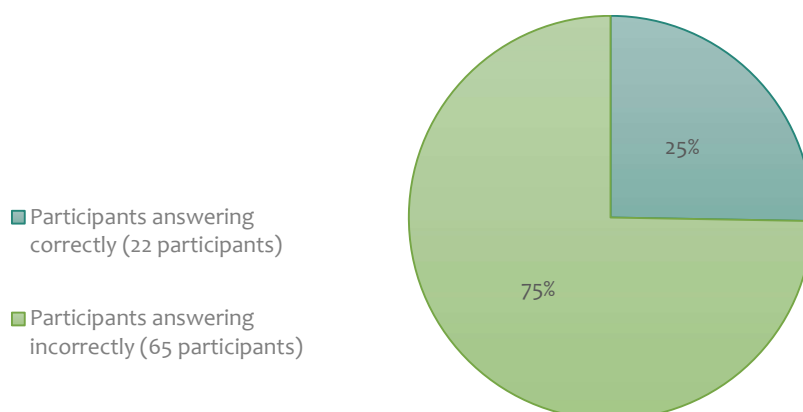


Specific Knowledge of Work Arrangements and Workers’ Rights: Extremely Weak

Beyond the scope of knowledge that a teen might gain from public school and everyday experiences, Ukrainian teens showed very weak knowledge of contractual arrangements, minimum wage, limits on youth working hours, and safety protections.

Three-quarters of teens didn’t know that there are more types of contracts than Labor Law contracts. This is a significant knowledge gap in Poland, because employers frequently avoid Labor Law contracts in favor of Civil Code contracts (e.g., contracts of mandate, task contracts, and business-to-business contracts), which reduce employers’ burden toward employees in the event of sickness, vacation and notification of dismissal. It is a common practice in Poland (and one which the European Council has frequently criticized) that a very large portion of the workforce engaged in full-time work for single employers are treated as entrepreneurs or occasional workers. The fact that so few Ukrainian teenagers realize this reality represents a vulnerability. Half of them had expressed doubts earlier in the discussions that they would be treated fairly in the labor market, and this is one of the first widespread injustices. In several groups, the teenage boys with job experience called out the correct answer during the quiz.

Figure 20: “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.



Another key weakness was knowledge of the minimum wage. Only about one-quarter of teens could answer this question correctly, despite half of them having prior work experience, and 90 percent indicating that friends or classmates are working. This suggests that receiving payments

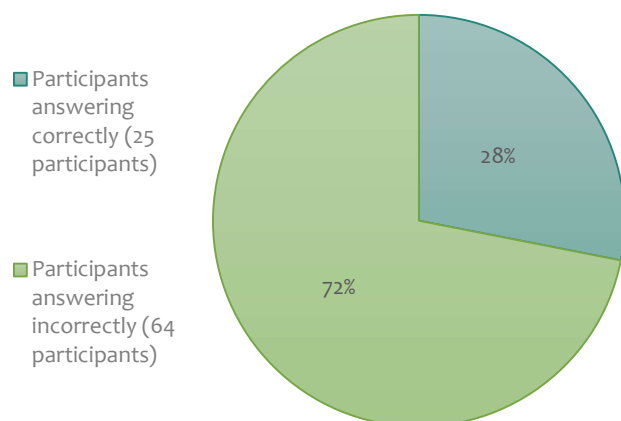
below minimum wage is commonplace. Indeed, the most actively-employed teens shared wage information that revealed earning less than one third of minimum wage during the past year. One fifteen-year-old boy in Gdansk indicated that he lied about his age in order to work at a café and receive 10 zloty per hour. When asked how he felt about working without a contract, he indicated that this enables him to avoid

An 18-year-old girl in Warsaw described applying for work at an adult club where she felt sexually harassed by male staff. ***“They came up close to my body and didn’t think anything of touching me. I felt powerless to get my space back, and they told me my Polish language sounds stupid. It was so embarrassing, I couldn’t stand it and left the job within the first week.”***

paying taxes. (Clearly, he was unaware that youth under 26 years of age in Poland pay zero personal income tax on the first PLN85,528 per year). His experience was not unique, although boys were more vocal than girls about their wages. Ten zloty per hour was a wage indicated by teens in Lublin, Katowice and Gdansk, where many teens likewise expressed happiness about earning cash in an envelope without paying taxes.

Two other areas of weakness were safety equipment and overtime. Three-quarters of teenagers didn’t understand that purchasing safety equipment (for example, safety goggles, safety helmet for construction, latex gloves for healthcare or cleaning, flame-retardant pants and shirt for restaurant kitchens) is the responsibility of the employer and not the employee. Several participants, including a female nursing student in Gdansk and males in Lublin and Katowice, argued with the project team that the information was incorrect, and that such purchases are *always* the responsibility of the employee. The question of overtime was not only answered incorrectly by more than three-quarters of respondents, but often brought laughter from the group. In each focus group, the facilitator was careful to clarify that the question refers to workers under the age of 18, and that in Poland, hours spent at school are considered together with hours of employment. The fact that overtime work is prohibited to youth in Poland came as a complete surprise to nearly everyone.

Figure 21: “What is the minimum hourly wage in Poland for the year 2025?” (30.5 PLN)



When the facilitator explained further prohibitions against youth working late at night, and the necessity for two days of rest per week, groups responded with laughter and disbelief. No one had ever worked in a situation where total weekly hours, time of day, or weekend work had been a constraint.

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

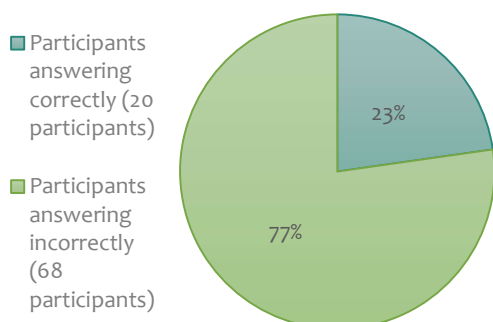
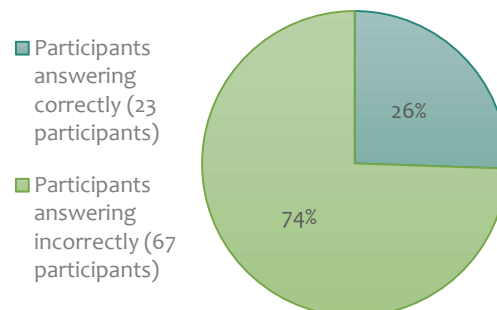


Figure 23: “True/False: Other workers at my workplace wear safety glasses, this means I must by them for myself.”



Respondents were relatively more knowledgeable about probationary periods and notice periods at work. Eighty-nine percent of respondents recognized that a one-year probationary period is too long. During informal discussions, both girls and boys shared stories about employers who had demanded probationary periods without contracts or pay. Several girls had worked in cafes on such terms. Many recalled café owners who use probationary periods to cycle through teen workers without paying anyone. Two-thirds of respondents identified correctly the notice period for dismissal of an employee on a Labor Law contract. Based on the open-ended discussions, it didn't seem that anyone had been dismissed on these terms, however. By comparison, several shared experiences about being dismissed during probationary periods. Given the very limited understanding among teens of Civil Code contracts, it seems that dismissal from work is a blind-spot in their knowledge. They might understand what is provided by Labor Law, but they don't realize how few employers will hire in Poland on the basis of Labor Law.

Figure 24: “My new employers says that I will begin work with a one-year probationary period. This is legal, right?” (correct answer: Not legal)

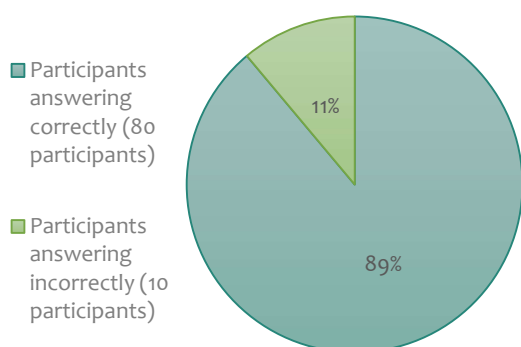
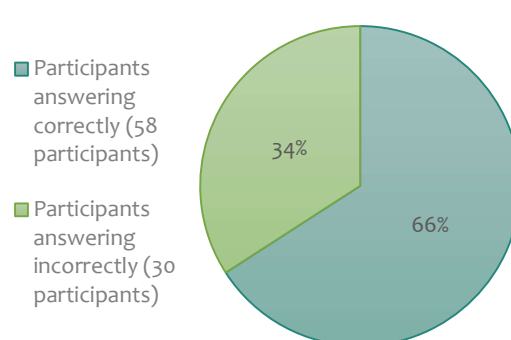


Figure 25: “What is the minimum notice period an employee must give an employer in Poland when a worker is terminated after one year?”



Conclusion

This report provides a critical look at the intersection of youth, displacement, and labor through the lens of Ukrainian teenagers in Poland. The study draws on five focus groups conducted across the largest population centers of Ukrainian refugees in Poland in 2025. The assessment reveals a complex picture of high employment interest but varying expectations about the intensity of work, ignorance and disillusionment about how work is found, ignorance of the dominant work contract types used in Poland, low overall time commitment and intensity of study, readiness by a smaller group (mostly male) to make huge tradeoffs of education in favor of very-low wage work, extremely limited knowledge of workers' rights and protections, and cynicism about the degree to which they will be treated fairly on the labor market.

This focus group assessment gathered a combination of quantitative measures, verbal and gestured-responses and open-ended discussion notes, which together form a quite representative picture of Ukrainian teens in Poland today. Interjections, off-hand comments and personal stories added to a fuller picture of what teens *know on paper* and what they *know in practice*.

This research has pointed to three serious dilemmas that Ukrainian teenage refugees face since arriving in Poland. First, they arrive too old to learn Polish language effortlessly, as their younger siblings might. Instead, their time is limited, and they must consider strategically (and without the ability to predict future global events) whether to double-down on Polish-learning, remain as distance students, or try to juggle two curricula.

Second, many feel strong financial pressure and intense desire to work, and about one-third of them (particularly males) are ready to compromise study, sleep, even health and safety to earn cash. While this enthusiasm for work can be a positive force in their personal pathways as well as for Poland's economy, their ignorance of workers' rights and protections is a serious vulnerability. Without proper measures to protect these high-intensity workers, Poland's less-ethical employers may systematically draw young men away from high school and lock them into longer-term poverty traps, especially if they will forego language-learning and sustain uninsured injuries.

The third dilemma may be common among many teens and perhaps a by-product of COVID lockdowns; teens show very little focus on reading or sustained studying. At least two-thirds of Ukrainian refugee teens in the Polish focus groups indicated spending fewer than 20 minutes per day reading or doing homework. Instead, they are scrolling on phones, messaging with friends, sleeping, working or relaxing. The under-investment in reading and studying is likely more damaging to immigrant groups than local teens. Immigrant teens will doubly suffer a wage-gap, not only from less-developed technical skills, but also from under-developed local language skills compared to their Polish peers. If they cannot compete in reading, writing and verbal aptitude in Polish language, their income prospects may not significantly improve beyond their parents'.

The comfortable and anonymous environment of the focus groups provided an opportunity to highlight key lessons about workers' rights at a "teachable moment" right before summer vacation. For most of the teens participating in the focus groups, this was information they were hearing for the first time, and more than eighty percent of teens indicated that they thought the content was "very timely" and "very useful".

Yet the disconnect between what teens *know on paper* and what they *know from experience* was clear in their voting responses, as well as in the comments, interjections and open-ended discussions. For this reason, it won't be enough to *teach* teens their rights and protections. Policymakers, educators, and employment counsellors also have roles to play to support Ukrainian teens on this journey.

Recommendations for Educators and Policymakers

Much of what the Government of Poland, voivod administrations, and municipal services have done to ease the integration of Ukrainian people into housing, jobs, schools, and social services, has been a remarkable success. Yet confidential, anonymous interviews with Ukrainian teens reveal a “wild East” in the Polish labor market that differs markedly from what is written in laws and regulation.

In order for high schools, vocational schools, employment service-providers, Labor Inspectorate, voivod-level governments, and the Government of Poland to make the most of the infusion of energetic, motivated Ukrainian youth in Poland, the following recommendations are offered.

Stakeholders	Recommendation
Educators at high schools and vocational schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase available resources for small-group Polish language study • Expand opportunities for classroom support to non-native speakers • Engage Ukrainians and other immigrant teens in the mainstream career development courses, including with Ukrainian mentors • Introduce visual tools, self-assessments, and time-management plans into career development classes
Employment services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share the “Stepping into the Job” courseware with youth job-seekers • Present youth with quick reference guides, reminders about fundamental rights at the time when they are job-seeking • Post QR codes and notices on websites and at offices with Labor Inspection point of contact, support services for workers facing mistreatment, accidents and injuries, withheld wages • Carry out confidential, anonymous assessment interviews with repeat job-seekers about workplace experiences in order to identify problem employers. (Sites like Glassdoor offer employees’ assessments of workplaces for the benefit of future employees.)
Labor inspectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase public awareness about key labor rights, <i>especially the legal minimum wage</i>, with QR codes, points of contact for workers facing abuses • Disseminate findings about the most serious workplace abuses relevant to teenagers through high school counsellors and career development teachers, include guidance about where to turn in the event of suspected abuse • Carry out more visible enforcement actions against employers that systemically hire under-aged workers and violate minimum wage, health and safety codes

Voivod-level governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track district-level performance of Polish-as-second-language programs, including student retention and proficiency over time • Study the design, funding and incentive systems of the districts showing best performance in Polish language-learning and school graduation rates • Assess career development courses in secondary curricula for relevance, participation, and student feedback about usefulness of the experience. Compare with similar programs in other countries and at private schools to optimize youth learning opportunities
Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track youth employment, including by industry or economic sector • Track contract-types in employment, aiming for the phasing-out of Civil Code contracts where workers are performing full-time, single-employer jobs • Invest in awareness-raising efforts about enforcement actions against abusive employers and about workers' rights, particularly targeting youth

Ukrainian teenagers in Poland stand at the brink of huge opportunities and for personal and professional growth, at the same time that Poland itself stands to realize enormous growth in productivity, investments, and innovation thanks to incoming Ukrainian refugees. The “Stepping into the Job” project brings new insights and an innovative, scalable courseware that can help Ukrainian teens as well as their educators and employment counsellors. With the additional support of Labor Inspectorate and other government authorities, these teens may steer away from the risks of exploitation and poverty traps and set their sights on more ambitious career goals.

References

- Balicka-Sawiak, E. (2024, March 12). 65 Percent Ukrainian refugees work, but face many challenges in the Polish labour market. Polish Economic Institute (PIE). <https://pie.net.pl/en/65-ukrainian-refugees-work-but-face-many-challenges-in-the-polish-labour-market/>
- European Commission. (2024). Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex – quarterly data (rounded) [Data set]. Eurostat. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asytpfq__custom_15655924/default/table?lang=en
- European Commission. (2024). Employment rates of young people not in education and training by age and sex – quarterly data [Data set]. Eurostat. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/yth_empl_010/default/table?lang=en
- European Commission. (2024). Temporary employees as a percentage of the total number of employees, by sex – quarterly data [Data set]. Eurostat. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00073/default/table?lang=en>
- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2023). Experiences of refugees from Ukraine: Displacement, housing, and employment. https://doi.org/10.2908/MIGR_RESVAS
- Filary Biznesu. (2023, July 17). Blisko połowa z nas pracowała przed osiemnastką [Almost half of us worked before the age of 18]. <https://filarybiznesu.pl/gospodarka/blisko-polowa-z-nas-pracowala-przed-osiemnastka/a24655>
- Forum for Research on Eastern Europe and Emerging Economies. “Three Years On: Ukrainians in Poland after Russia’s 2022 Invasion,” FREE Policy Briefs. 21 February 2025, Available at: <https://freepolicybriefs.org/2025/02/21/ukrainians-in-poland/>. See the comparative analysis of PESEL registrations and ZUS childcare benefits payouts for 2021-2025, indicating an estimated 56% of Ukrainian refugee youth not enrolled in Polish public schools as at January 2025.
- Kępa, M. (2023, August 25). Ukrainians are slowly adapting to life in Germany. Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW). <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-08-25/ukrainians-are-slowly-adapting-to-life-germany>
- 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>
- Polish Office for Foreigners. (2024, March 31). Obywatele Ukrainy w Polsce – aktualne dane migracyjne [Ukrainian citizens in Poland – current migration data]. <https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc/obywatele-ukrainy-w-polsce--aktualne-dane-migracyjne2>
- Randstad Poland. (n.d.). Tax exemption for those under 26 and income limits. <https://www.randstad.pl/en/career-advice/jobs-poland/clone-interview-questions-how-to-successfully-navigate-recruitment/#:~:text=Tax%20Exemption%20for%20Those%20Under%2026%20and%20Incom>

[e%20Limits&text=According%20to%20regulations%2C%20young%20workers,limit%20is%20t
he%20primary%20consideration.](#)

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.

UNICEF Europe and Central Asia. (2025, January). *Refugee students from Ukraine in Polish schools: What has changed in the 2024/2025 school year?* UNICEF and the Center for Citizenship Education. <https://www.unicef.org/eca/reports/refugee-students-ukraine-polish-schools>