

# **STRUGGLE AND RESILIENCE:** **Challenges Faced by At-Risk Youth in** **Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Ireland (Mini Report)**



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# Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, cross-national comparative methodology to explore the lived experiences and key integration challenges faced by at-risk youth in Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Ireland. The study focuses on five thematic areas: mental health and well-being, language and communication, housing and living conditions, access to education and employment, and discrimination and social inclusion. The aim is to amplify youth voices and inform context-sensitive, youth-centered initiatives across the three countries.

## Research Design and Data Collection

The research combined both primary and secondary data collection methods to ensure triangulation and comprehensive insights:

- **Desk Research:** Each partner organization conducted a literature review of grey literature, academic publications, policy documents, CSO reports, and media sources relevant to at-risk youth in their national contexts. This helped identify structural gaps, emerging needs, and institutional responses.
- **Primary Data Collection** included:
  - Semi-structured interviews with at-risk youth and relevant stakeholders (e.g., youth workers, CSO professionals, and local authorities).
  - Semi-structured focus group discussions with diverse youth participants.
  - A structured survey incorporating Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions, disseminated in multiple languages to maximize accessibility.

The primary data collection took place between April and September 2024. The breakdown per country is as follows:

Country	Survey Respondents	Focus group Participants	Interviewees	Youth Focus
Cyprus	31	14	2 (youth and stakeholders)	Youth with migrant and refugee backgrounds (13–30 years old)
Bulgaria	57	7	4 (Ukrainian youth)	Ukrainian refugee youth (13–29 years old)
Ireland	32	8	3 (youth and professionals)	Irish and Ukrainian at-risk youth (13–30 years old), especially rural youth and those experiencing homelessness or exclusion

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, prioritizing those with lived experiences of vulnerability, displacement, or exclusion. Stakeholders were invited based on their expertise in youth support, education, social services, and civic engagement.

# Methodology

## Analytical Approach

### A mixed-methods analysis was conducted:

- **Thematic Analysis:** This was applied to qualitative data from interviews and focus groups to identify recurring themes, patterns, and divergences within and across national contexts. Transcripts were coded both inductively and deductively using the five thematic areas as a guiding framework.
- **Descriptive Statistical Analysis:** This was used to analyze survey responses, with results disaggregated by age, gender, and country when relevant.

A cross-country comparative framework was utilized to contextualize findings, highlight commonalities and differences, and ensure culturally sensitive interpretations.

## Ethical Considerations

All research activities adhered to ethical standards, ensuring:

- Voluntary and informed participation.
- Anonymity and confidentiality of participants.
- Cultural sensitivity and age-appropriate engagement strategies.

Where necessary, translated materials and multilingual facilitators were employed to overcome language barriers during data collection.

## Limitations

While the research provides valuable qualitative insights, there are limitations, including:

- A relatively small sample size, which may not fully represent the diversity of youth experiences.
- Uneven availability of disaggregated data across national contexts.
- Potential biases linked to self-reporting in surveys and interviews.

Nevertheless, the findings serve as a strong foundation for developing responsive, youth-informed programs, especially in contexts lacking structured youth integration policies.

# Foreword & Acknowledgment

This publication was developed as one of the core outputs of the **BEYOND – Building Bridges: Empowering Youth, Nurturing Determination** project, co-funded by the European Union under the Erasmus+ program.

BEYOND is an 18-month initiative running from April 2024 to October 2025. The project aims to provide holistic and age-appropriate support to vulnerable people aged 14 to 30 living in Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Ireland. Through targeted interventions, it seeks to strengthen young people's inner resilience and empower them to navigate their challenges.

Between April and September 2024, the transnational partnership carried out desk-based and field research with vulnerable youth in the three participating countries. The findings of this research form the foundation of this publication, which will inform the design and delivery of a series of community-based interventions. These actions aim to enhance the social inclusion and integration of marginalized and vulnerable members of society.

The project is a partnership between **G.F.C. Generation for Change CY** (Coordinator, Cyprus), **Blackwater Training & Consulting** (Ireland), and **Foundation "Situational Center Open Doors"** (Bulgaria). The research team from all three organizations extends its deepest gratitude to the young people in Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Ireland who generously participated in the interviews and surveys. Their courage and openness in sharing their lived experiences and challenges lie at the heart of this report.

We also wish to express our sincere appreciation to local stakeholders—non-governmental organizations, professionals working in the field of migration and youth, and local authorities across the three countries—whose contributions provided essential context and insights. Their input has significantly enriched the research and helped shape meaningful, context-sensitive recommendations.

This publication was co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

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# Cyprus Introduction

Generation for Change CY (GFC) evaluated the conditions of 14–30 year old teenagers and youth with refugee and migrant backgrounds residing in Cyprus from April to July 2024 through desk and field research (interviews, focus groups, and surveys).

The study attempts to provide essential insights into their lived experiences by examining their vulnerabilities, mental health challenges, and structural impediments to integration. Despite being hampered by the absence of disaggregated data, this study uses surveys, field interviews, and previous findings to offer a more complex picture of the issue.

Among EU member states, Cyprus had the greatest number of asylum applications (13 per 1,000 residents in 2023) compared to its total population in the last few years, making it stand out for having a disproportionately high number of applications compared to its population (Asylum Information Database, 2024a).

In spite of this, the national asylum system finds it difficult to meet the young applicants for international protection needs. Language challenges, delayed access to the labour market, and limited educational possibilities are just a few of the many struggles faced by young migrants. Particularly at risk are women and unaccompanied adolescents, who frequently face discrimination, limited access, and insufficient safeguards in the areas of employment, housing, and education.

## The study identifies:

Systemic gaps in key sectors such as healthcare and mental health services persist. Language barriers and the absence of interpretation services in state hospitals limit access to care, while reported racist behavior by medical staff exacerbates the issue. Education is also a concern, as migrant youth over 18 are denied free access to public schools, hindering their personal and professional development.

Field research through interviews, focus group and survey further highlights the urgent challenges faced by young migrant and refugees. Respondents cited systemic racism, high living costs, inadequate housing, and financial instability as major barriers. Language and documentation issues also limit access to jobs and services, leaving many feeling isolated from their communities.

## Initiatives implemented by solidarity entities like Civic Society Organisations

provide crucial assistance in spite of these obstacles. Programmes that offer mental health assistance, educational materials, and language instruction have been successful in promoting empowerment and inclusion. These efforts' scope, however, is inadequate to respond to the rising need, including from an intersectional perspective.

To address the vulnerabilities of Cyprus's migrant and refugee youth, systemic adjustments are urgently needed, as this introduction explains. A multimodal strategy is crucial for promoting social inclusion, preventing discrimination, and enhancing access to healthcare and education. Legislators and neighbourhood associations can pave the road for these youths to flourish in their new settings by giving these initiatives top priority.

# Desk research

GFC carried out desk research to evaluate the circumstances of young migrants and refugees between the ages of 14 and 30 in Cyprus. This overview will cover the target group's mental health, vulnerabilities, and difficulties. General data and broader studies were used to better understand the needs and conditions of youth with migrant and refugee backgrounds in Cyprus because specialised data is scarce.

## An overview of the situation in Cyprus regarding migrant and refugee youth

It is essential to consider that Cyprus received a high number of asylum applications until 2023 relative to its population. In 2023, Cyprus received 13 applications per 1,000 inhabitants, the highest number among EU members. The vast majority of them came from Syria, followed by Nigeria, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Cameroon (Eurostat, 2024); (Asylum Information Database, 2024a). In this context, also in 2023, Cyprus amended its Civil Registry Law and the requirements for applying for naturalisation have increased significantly (Ministry of Interior – Gov.cy Portal, 2023). In April 2024, the Cypriot authorities, given an uptick in irregular sea arrivals, declared a migration crisis (Operational Data Portal, 2024); (Stamouli, 2024).

The present rate of arrivals and the declared inability of the authorities to adequately respond have to be collated with the difficulties already present, also resulting from the substandard integration infrastructure (Migration Policy Group, 2020). As indicated by the UNHCR, integration remains the weakest link of the national asylum system in Cyprus, **and not enough efforts have been made to address the situation** (UNHCR Cyprus, 2018). On top of this, a negative perception persists within the general political and public debate. As indicated by Governance and the Local Integration of Migrants and Europe's Refugees (GLIMER) in its 2019 report (Christodoulou & Michael, 2019).

## Sources of vulnerabilities experienced by migrant and refugee youth

According to the Asylum Information Database (2024a), the mental and physical health of young migrants and refugees—particularly those who have experienced significant trauma such as the loss of family, forced displacement, violence, or war—can be a profound source of vulnerability. These experiences deeply affect their psychological well-being, influencing their ability to integrate and succeed in new environments. In Cyprus, youth of migrant and refugee backgrounds face numerous systemic challenges, including language barriers, delayed access to the labour market (with a nine-month waiting period), and confinement to limited job sectors. These factors often result in the undervaluation of their qualifications and are further complicated by a lack of gender and cultural sensitivity in recruitment. Discrimination against young women wearing visible religious symbols, such as the hijab or niqab, and against African candidates makes labour market access even more difficult. Education is another area of concern, as youth over the age of 18 are denied free access to public schools despite their motivation to continue learning. Access to healthcare is equally problematic, with the absence of interpretation services in state hospitals and limited gender-sensitive care—particularly for victims of violence. Reports of racist behaviour by medical staff further exacerbate the struggles these young people face in receiving adequate and dignified care.

In places such as Pournara, Unaccompanied and Separated Children are exposed to various risks, including reports of sexual abuse. Moreover, the transition to adulthood for unaccompanied minors remains inadequately supported, affecting their accommodation, education, and mental health.

### **Priority needs of vulnerable youth in Cyprus**

Vulnerable migrant and refugee youth in Cyprus face several critical needs. Based on data collected from social workers who work with at-risk youths in Cyprus, the priority needs of this group include maintaining their mental and physical health through more accessible access to medical and psychological treatments, protecting minors during their residence in the reception centres / shelters, overcoming language barriers for effective communication, reducing delays in labour market access and vocational skills training, ensuring gender-sensitive healthcare, and addressing discrimination. Additionally, supporting unaccompanied minors during their transition to adulthood is essential.

### **Key Active Non-Profit Organizations Working with Migrants and Refugees in Cyprus**

**Generation for Change CY(GFC)**, GFC is a migrant-led grassroots organization comprised of individuals from diverse backgrounds working to build a more inclusive society in Cyprus and the EU. Alongside humanitarian aid to disadvantaged migrants and refugees, GFC supports the integration and empowerment of marginalized communities through non-formal education, employability, psychosocial support, and sports programs. It also leads advocacy and cultural initiatives that promote intercultural dialogue, social justice, and community-building.

**Cyprus Refugee Council**, a partner of UNHCR, offers free legal and social support to asylum-seekers and refugees in the Republic of Cyprus. CyRC provides guidance on various matters, including the asylum process, access to employment, social and healthcare services, family reunification, and related concerns. Psychological support is also available for individuals who have experienced violence.

**Caritas Cyprus offers humanitarian aid to migrants and refugees.** This includes managing two emergency shelters, distributing clothing and food, providing transportation, and facilitating referrals to health and mental health services. Additionally, Caritas supports migrants through the asylum process by offering administrative assistance, legal advice, and opportunities for integration, such as language classes and social events. These services are available at two drop-in Migrant Centres in Nicosia and Larnaca, along with an educational support hub, The Learning Refuge, situated in Pafos.

**CODECA**, is a non-profit organisation that fosters and promotes social cohesion, development and care. As part of their interventions, they offer support to families & children, accommodation services, social entrepreneurship endeavours, and management services. They have previously worked on TRACeD, a programme to tackle gender-based cyber violence among adolescent girls and young women; and Civilhood which aimed at enhancing unaccompanied minors' transition to early adulthood through civic education and labour market integration. (CODECA, 2024).



**Hope for Children CRC Policy Centre**, is an international humanitarian and independent organisation based in Cyprus. Hope for Children have established the Homes for Hope programme which established and organised private children's shelters for the accommodation and support of unaccompanied children. Additionally, they provide non-formal education workshops to children of all educational levels across Cyprus.

In addition to the organisations mentioned, various NGOs in Cyprus offer programmes for migrants and refugees. However, the highlighted organisations specifically implement initiatives that focus on the mental health and well-being of young migrants, providing a broader range of services that support their overall development and inclusion.

### **Mental health challenges experienced by migrant and refugee youth in Cyprus**

At the time of conducting this research, there was very limited available data on health challenges identified by at-risk migrant youth in the Republic of Cyprus was available. Although the literature is sparse, some insights can be gathered from broader studies on mental health. The EU initiative Cyprus Country Health Profile 2023 sheds light on the high burden of mental health issues on its population. According to the report, these issues, most commonly anxiety and depression, are strongly conditioned by socioeconomic factors and a lack of access to mental health services, which renders migrant and refugee youth especially vulnerable (OECD, 2023).

## **Field Research** Interviews & Focus Groups

**GFC** conducted two focus groups and interviews with young migrants and refugees to understand their experiences and challenges in the country. The findings from the focus groups and interviews reveal a range of impactful life experiences, current struggles, and emotional well-being issues faced by migrants and refugees in Cyprus.

The focus groups and interviews revealed six main themes: (1) experiences of racism and social exclusion in Cyprus; (2) support from Cyprus-based organisations; (3) unfavourable experiences with Cyprus's public services; (4) a wish for additional education and career opportunities; (5) financial strains and housing difficulties; and (6) the emotional well-being and mental health experiences of migrant youth living in Cyprus.

The participants shared experiences of discrimination in different contexts, highlighting the challenges they face due to cultural and language barriers. One participant recalled instances of racism on public transport, mentioning negative encounters with employees, but also noted that experiences on the street were generally more positive. The participants continue sharing their frequent encounters with discrimination in Cyprus, mainly they have characterised the treatment they face from bank employees and public officials as impolite and discriminatory due to their lack of Greek language skills. As a result, they began to view interactions with public authorities as stressful and frustrating, deepening their sense of exclusion.

Some participants indicated a significant desire to participate in further formal education, despite their existing involvement in non-formal education and training with GFC. They did point out that, as asylum seekers or young adult migrants and refugees, they do not yet know how to take advantage of these opportunities. "I came here for protection and to continue my studies, but I have not had the opportunity to do so," one participant emphasised.

One area of vulnerability that was brought up was financial strain and housing, particularly since "too many people are rejected and left without (housing) status." Due to financial constraints experienced by participating migrant and refugee youth, along with a lack of welfare aid, they continue to face insufficient support. One participant expressed that, if given the opportunity, she would focus on improving the community's accommodations for migrants.

The participants expressed feelings of loneliness and cultural disconnection. One of them observed "back home, we have so many traditions and social interactions, but here, it's easy to feel disconnected." This feeling of disconnection increases mental health issues such as isolation and depression. Another participant shared a deep sense of unhappiness, partly due to being away from family but also as a result of traumatic experiences in their home country, such as female genital mutilation (FGM). Many also expressed stress about the future, particularly concerning their lack of documentation. Without proper residency documents, participants felt insecure about their existence in Cyprus, leading to anxiety and fear about having to leave the country or face further displacement. Some participants try to manage these feelings through faith, social connections, or finding meaning in their roles as parents. These cultural differences and the emotional toll of being far from home and uncertain about their future in the host country contributed to a growing sense of loneliness, hopelessness, and a profound sense of insecurity. In addition, participants expressed specific wishes for improvements in their lives, including the provision of proper documentation, family reunification, and reduced rents. They also called for increased salaries, enhanced support for sports facilities, and access to free formal education opportunities for adults. These aspirations reflect a strong desire for stability, greater opportunities, and improved quality of life.

## Field Research Survey

GFC conducted a trilingual survey between June and July 2024. The survey was made available in English, Arabic, and Greek and disseminated through GFC social media platforms and website. Targeted emails were sent directly to GFC beneficiaries and to Civic Society Organisations working with the research target group.

The Cypriot survey's first component looked at the participants' demographics. The study included 31 participants, 12 men and 19 women, aged 14 to 30 from countries including Afghanistan, Cameroon, Guinea, India, Iraq, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Syria, Somalia, and Ukraine. Of the participants, only 22.5% were currently enrolled in assistance programmes, even though 80% currently resided in urban areas. 35.5% of respondents said they had encountered discrimination, and 19% said they had gone through some kind of cultural shock.

Furthermore, 57.7% indicated they resided in privately rented housing, 26.9% in government-provided housing, 11.5% lived with family, and 3.8% lived in coupon-rented communal housing at the time of this survey. The likelihood of living in government-provided housing was three times higher for women participants in this study than for men participants. Living with relatives was more common among men. Gender differences in the likelihood of renting housing were equal; 57% of those who rented their own housing in Cyprus were employed, while the majority of people living in government-provided housing were either unemployed or enrolled in high school.

# Employment & Education Status Distribution



Among the participants, 33.3% were unemployed and actively seeking employment, while 25.9% were employed full-time. Additionally, 14.8% were in high school, 7.4% were unemployed but not looking for work, 7.4% were enrolled in trade or vocational schools, 7.4% were pursuing higher education, and 3.7% were working part-time. The study found that men were twice as likely as women to hold full-time jobs. Some female participants reported that their responsibilities related to dependents were a major reason preventing them from working at present. Another contributing factor was that some participants did not possess a valid work permit to seek employment in Cyprus.

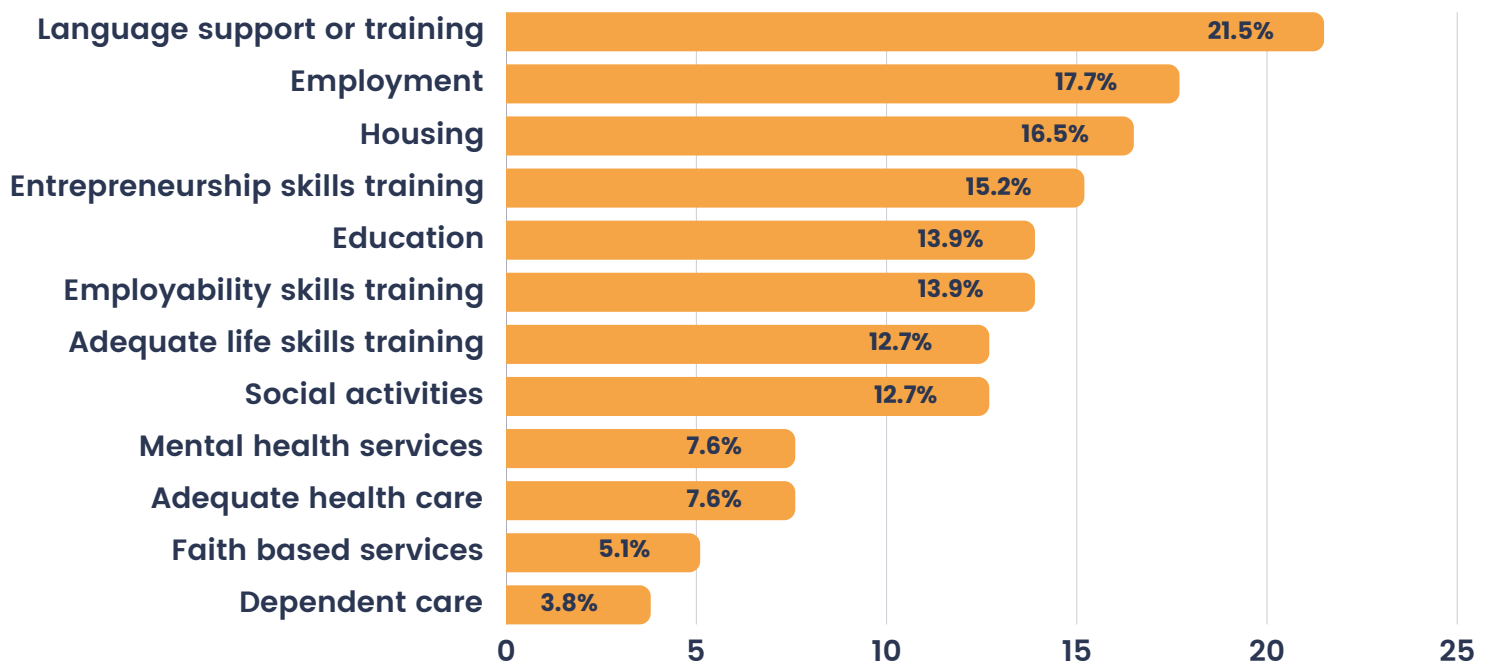
One respondent in this research provided an insight into the cost of living in Cyprus at present, indicating “Where I live it is a small village and far from the city and here there are no job opportunities. In all, Cyprus most of available job opportunities for asylum seekers are seasonal jobs and if find a seasonal job around 700 or 750€ only for 5 months and I can’t afford monthly expenses of a family of five while only the rent of two bedrooms for a family of five at least costs more than 700€.”

## Needs Questions

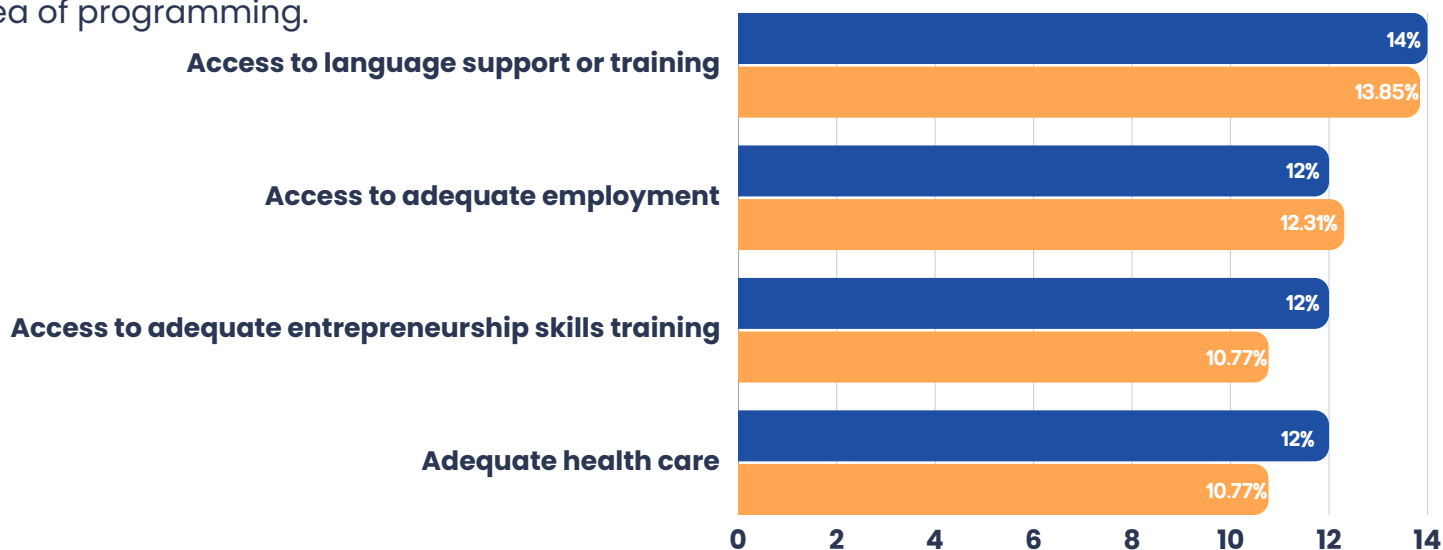
The study examined the primary needs of young migrants and refugees in Cyprus, highlighting the challenges they faced while adjusting to their new environment and establishing stable lifestyles.



### Main Integration Barriers and Priorities



Among the participants, the most pressing need identified was language support or training, with 21.5% highlighting its importance. This underscores how crucial language skills are for accessing opportunities and services. Additionally, due to the financial and housing challenges faced by many young people in Cyprus, employment (17.7%) and housing (16.5%) were also recognized as significant needs. Training in entrepreneurship skills (15.2%), education (13.9%), and employability skills (13.9%) also received considerable attention. This suggests that there should be a strong focus on both professional and personal development in the interventions developed in this area of programming.



A gender breakdown of the needs indicated that both men and women have similar demands, with both sexes identifying a need for language training or help (14% for men and 13.85% for women). Males (12%) and females (10.77%) expressed similar levels of interest in entrepreneurship skills training, indicating that both genders see business-related skills as relevant to their financial goals.

Respondents were invited to share additional needs that had not been covered in the research. The following responses were provided:

1. **Not having access to Translators:** "Translators cannot be found in schools and hospitals for people who don't understand the language."
2. **The need for more language courses:** "Greek and English language courses."
3. **Documentation Issues:** "Documentations."
4. **Gratitude Despite Uncertainty:** "Not knowing my left from my right but just being grateful for life."
5. **Citizenship Rights:** "The right to get a citizenship, as I've been here for 14 years, graduated and working in Cyprus."

The youth participants in this survey were asked to describe the **activities they are currently involved in that support their integration**. In the research conducted in Cyprus, participants identified four key activities that aid their integration. They were asked to rate the effectiveness of these activities on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates a low degree of effectiveness and 5 indicates a high level of effectiveness.

Activities such as GFC's football and skills development sessions received a rating of 5/5, while ICT training classes and language courses were rated 4/5. Three (3) individuals explained why they are **not currently participating in any programmes to support their integration**, as follows: (1) "I've already finished my education, and owing to my full-time job, I don't have time to engage in any skill development programmes"; (2) "I had no idea where to look"; and (3) "I tried to find out".

## Challenges of Integration

Migrant and refugee youth were invited to answer open-ended questions to share their thoughts on the challenges that they face regarding their integration. 55% of the respondents in this research **reported encountering difficulties, most frequently relating to financial insecurity, low salaries, high living costs, transportation issues, lack of documents, racism, police harassment, and intolerance.**

Teenagers and youth migrants in Cyprus described specific challenges regarding their integration. These challenges can be structured into twelve categories, as follows:

1. **Lack of Documentation:** Difficulty in accessing necessary legal and identification documents.
2. **Language Barriers:** Struggles with understanding and communicating in the local language.
3. **Employment Difficulties:** Challenges in securing permanent jobs and coping with physically demanding work under pressure.
4. **Housing Issues:** Difficulty in finding proper and affordable housing.
5. **Racial Discrimination:** Experiencing racism and the resulting lack of financial stability.
6. **Transportation Challenges:** Limited access to reliable transportation.
7. **Lack of Educational Opportunities:** There are few options for free education for individuals over 18, particularly refugees.
8. **Social Isolation:** Being far from family and friends during a challenging period in life.
9. **Physical and Mental Strain:** Balancing physically demanding work and the mental toll of life stressors, often needing to hide the pain to avoid job loss.
10. **Lack of Social Activities:** Limited access to activities that promote social integration.
11. **Survivor Trauma:** Coming from war-torn areas, experiencing homelessness, hunger, and inhumane conditions, and feeling unsupported in the new environment.
12. **High Living Costs:** Struggles with unstable jobs and expensive rent.

## Mental Health & Well-being

Regarding mental health and well-being, the study participants noted experiencing major mental health concerns as a result of government resistance, societal rejection, difficulties connecting with neighbours, lack of accessible mental health resources, and profound exhaustion that made even daily tasks difficult.

This highlights the crucial need for more caring mental health and social support systems in Cyprus. Some of the participants in the research described mental health and well-being challenges that they face whilst living in Cyprus, including:

## Mental Health & Well-being

1. **Lack of Practical Solutions:** Feeling unsupported due to the absence of actionable solutions from professionals.
2. **Social Well-being with Neighbours:** Struggles in building or maintaining positive relationships with neighbours.
3. **Mental Struggles from Uncertainty:** Feeling stuck and abandoned by the government, resulting in significant mental health challenges despite gratitude for life.
4. **Accessing Mental Health Services:** Difficulty finding mental health services, especially as a migrant in a new country.
5. **Fear of Rejection:** Experiencing anxiety about being excluded or dismissed.
6. **Lack of Motivation:** Feeling overwhelmed and struggling to get out of bed due to exhaustion.
7. **Depression:** Experiencing depression and lacking support to cope with it.
8. **Lack of Support and Awareness:** No help from welfare services and limited awareness of health services or how to access them.

## Accessing Services

**Accessing essential services** is a critical aspect of ensuring well-being and fostering integration, yet participants in this research reported numerous obstacles in this regard. Many shared experiences of feeling unsupported and overwhelmed due to challenges such as bureaucratic hurdles, documentation delays, language difficulties, and limited knowledge of available services. For migrants and refugees in Cyprus, these barriers often result in feelings of prolonged stress, uncertainty, and frustration. The following research participants' accounts highlight the key difficulties encountered when trying to access crucial services like healthcare:

1. **Health Services Challenges:** "Well, mostly health services. I can't really apply for a medical card due to the state in which I have been left documents-wise, so I have to go through private doctors if I am sick. With no health insurance, it's not easy financially, so I really pray not to get sick. It's really draining."
2. **Documentation Issues:** Difficulty obtaining necessary documentation for family members, such as a child.
3. **Excessive Bureaucracy:** "Too much procedure."
4. **Difficulty Accessing Healthcare:** "There's no easy access to health care in Cyprus. Just seeing one doctor takes months. At this point, you feel, why bother? Live on painkillers as much as you can."
5. **Lack of Support and Awareness:** "No help from the welfare, not aware about the health services and how to access them."
6. **Communication and Hospital Issues:** "Communicating with other people and difficulties when going to the hospital."
7. **Hospital Experiences:** "I had a hard time dealing with the hospital."

## Employment Challenges



Participants in this research identified several significant challenges related to **employment**. These challenges included managing current jobs while dealing with physical health issues, navigating restrictive employment policies that affect asylum seekers and Third Country National students, struggling to secure well-paying positions without a university degree, relying on unstable seasonal work instead of permanent employment, and facing obstacles due to the lack of residence permits or legal documentation necessary for work. Additionally, language barriers further complicated these issues, limiting participants' ability to communicate effectively and access better job opportunities. The following accounts illustrate the key struggles faced by participants in accessing the Cypriot labor market.

1. **Work Policies and Restrictions:** "Third country work policy's, student different policy, less possibility to get employed."
2. **Seasonal Employment Challenges:** "To secure permanent job is hard. You can mostly find seasonal work for just 6 months."
3. **Employment as a Means of Survival:** "Well, I am employed. That at least keeps me going."
4. **Physical Health:** Health issues impacting the ability to work.
5. **Limited Opportunities Without Education:** "Finding a high-paid job without a university education."
6. **Residency and Protection Issues:** "The biggest employment challenge for me is that I can't get a job because I don't have residency or protection. I've been here for a year, and they haven't given me anything. I'm still an asylum seeker."
7. **Lack of Documentation or no documentation:** "No documents, so no good opportunities for jobs." Challenges due to missing legal documentation.
8. **Language Barriers, Challenges:** Struggles with language proficiency; "The language; Limited ability to communicate effectively in the required languages; General language-related difficulties in securing employment."

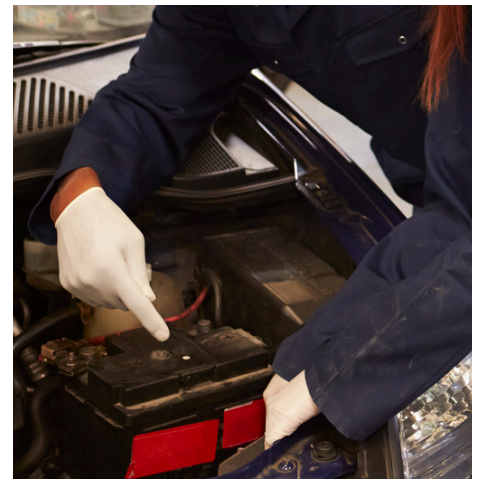
## Language & Communication

**Language and communication** are essential for successful integration, yet participants in this research reported facing significant challenges in these areas. Many expressed difficulties in expressing themselves, understanding others, and adapting to the language requirements of daily life in Cyprus. These challenges were further complicated by obstacles in accessing opportunities, building social connections, and managing essential tasks, such as hospital visits or job searches. The following accounts illustrate the key obstacles participants faced as they navigated the complexities of language and communication in their efforts to integrate and connect.

1. **Language Communication Issues:** "I found it difficult to communicate with people because 70 percent of the people speak Greek"; "Difficulty understanding and using spoken Greek"; "Well, I have been picked up a lot on the language, especially comprehension, but I am putting more effort into speaking, so from time to time I get stuck, especially in my line of work"; "Being able to express myself correctly."
2. **Transportation:** "Well, in my situation, I don't have much challenges with language. Just the transportation when I've work and classes at the same time."
3. **Communication and Hospital Challenges:** "Communicating with other people and difficulties when going to the hospital."
4. **Limited Job Opportunities:** "Limited job opportunities without speaking English or Greek, difficulties with doing anything without the help of others."
5. **Hospital Experiences:** "I had a hard time dealing with the hospital."
6. **Social Connection Challenges:** "Connecting with others."

## Education, Training & Vocational Skills

Participants encountered challenges related to **education, training, and vocational skills**, such as lack of accessible skill acquisition centers, limited availability of affordable training programs, and the absence of free educational opportunities for adults over 18 years old. Additionally, most vocational skills training programs are offered in Greek, which excludes young adults with migrant and refugee backgrounds. Furthermore, difficulties in enrolling in local educational institutions arose due to issues with recognition of previous education, and few schooling options were available for adults who had not completed high school.



1. **Documentation Challenges:** "Challenges in accessing necessary legal and identification documents."
2. **Language Barriers:** "Struggles with communication due to limited language proficiency" / "Limited ability to communicate effectively in the local language" / "General difficulties with language proficiency" / "The language."
3. **Limited Access to Opportunities:** "Not many opportunities for adults" / "No free access to skill development programmes, not aware about the free existing programmes."
4. **Social Hostility:** "Everyone hates each other."



## Culture Shock & Discrimination



Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of culture shock and discrimination following their relocation to Cyprus. The results revealed that 23% of respondents reported not experiencing any form of culture shock or discrimination, indicating a relatively smooth transition for this group. Meanwhile, 23% acknowledged encountering varying degrees of culture shock or discrimination, suggesting that while some adapted with minimal adjustment difficulties, others faced challenges that may have impacted their integration and overall experience in their new environment.

In the study, 55% of respondents reported experiencing significant **discrimination** in Cyprus based on their race, religion, or appearance. Common experiences include being unjustly avoided or treated with suspicion in public spaces, facing disrespect in professional settings like banks and government offices, and enduring racial prejudice in everyday situations, such as public transportation, where people choose to stand rather than sit next to a Black person. Discrimination also appears due to religious practices, with individuals stating, "I faced discrimination because of my hijab." Other accounts of discrimination shared were:

1. **Discrimination at School:** "By some teachers at school."
2. **Racial Discrimination:** "Many times, especially due to my skin colour and my race."
3. **On Public Transport:** "In public buses, if the seat next to you is empty, they will not sit there (I think) just because I am Black. They will prefer standing until a seat is empty next to a white person."
4. **Employment and Social Discrimination:** "Not getting a job because of who you are, being distanced in a public gathering, or someone saying ill of you or being suspicious of you for no cause while you're just doing your job."
5. **Cultural and Religious Discrimination:** "Can't wear hijab, can't work in front-of-house jobs because you're Black, can't pray."

Among those who experienced **culture shock**, the following factors were cited as contributing causes:

1. **Language Barriers:** "Failure to communicate with others due to language."
2. **Cultural Differences:** "Such as religion, culture, language, and treatment."
3. **Language and Country Rules:** "Language, the country rules."
4. **Miscommunication:** "Lack of understanding due to language."
5. **Cultural and Religious Differences:** "Such as religion, culture, language, and treatment."
6. **Language and Legal Systems:** "Language, the country rules."
7. **Adapting to Social Norms and Language:** "New social norms, new language."
8. **Cultural Dress Codes:** "Dress code and food."
9. **Dress Code Differences:** "Their dress code."

# Roadmaps

One of the main outputs of the project is the design of roadmaps that outline interventions to address the issues affecting the mental health of young migrants and refugees. In the final phase of the study, participants were asked about the specific interventions and roadmaps they would like to see implemented to improve their circumstances. They proposed ideas such as creating better supportive structures to provide resources for vulnerable groups, including single mothers with disabled children; increasing the availability of affordable housing; enhancing job opportunities; improving documentation processes for migrants and their descendants; and developing public transportation options. Additionally, they emphasized the need for educational and social initiatives to combat racism and promote greater social inclusion.

## Some of the other responses they shared included:

1. **Optimization Courses:** "I want " optimization courses such as computer and makeup."
2. **Translators in Hospitals:** "Provide translators in the hospitals."
3. **Control Rental Prices:** "Rental prices don't go up."
4. **Access to Translators or Specialists:** "Having a translator or specialist."
5. **Free Education:** "Free access to education."
6. **Translators in Healthcare:** "Provide translators in the hospitals."
7. **Support for Refugees:** "Pay more attention to refugees... because they are weak for this life... and they came from their countries exhausted and afflicted... and they come here and become more exhausted than before?? This is unfortunate."
8. **Welcoming Neighbourhoods:** "Make it more welcoming neighbourhood for immigrants."
9. **Documentation for Second-Generation Migrants:** "Ensuring proper documentation for second-generation immigrants."
10. **Improve Transportation:** "Tackle the transportation, especially the distance."
11. **Employment Equity:** "Employment differences for migrants."
12. **Community Awareness:** "Raise awareness of other communities."
13. **Addressing Housing Costs:** "Bills and house bills."
14. **Affordable Housing:** "Low-cost houses."
15. **Fighting Judgement and Prejudice:** "Educate people on not judging the book by its cover, and may the government see our bleeding hearts."
16. **Advocating Against Racism:** "Promoting anti-racism measures".
17. **Social Gatherings:** "Social get-together."
18. **Education for Future Preparation:** "To be educated and do something with our lives and prepare ourselves for the future."
19. **Support for Single Mothers of Disabled Children:** "Sensitising single moms with special need kids (e.g., Autism)."
20. **Proper Documentation:** "Documentations for people who meet the criteria."

# Conclusion

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Overall, the research findings highlight the deep-rooted systemic and structural barriers confronting migrant and refugee youth in Cyprus. Participants reported challenges across multiple sectors, including limited access to quality healthcare, restrictive employment and education systems, language and documentation barriers, and prevalent discrimination based on race, religion, and appearance. Emotional distress, financial instability, and lack of housing security further compound their vulnerabilities. Particularly concerning is the inadequate support for unaccompanied minors transitioning to adulthood and the exclusion of youth over 18 from free public education. While civil society organisations provide crucial support through language courses, mental health services, and empowerment programmes, the scale of need far surpasses the existing offerings, leaving many young migrants without sufficient aid.

Despite these adversities, youth participants showed resilience and a strong desire for better opportunities and inclusion. Their calls for accessible documentation, affordable housing, language support, and improved mental health care are clear indicators of the pressing need for targeted interventions. Additionally, participants advocated for anti-racism initiatives, free adult education, and community-building efforts to foster integration and restore dignity. As Cyprus continues to receive a high number of asylum seekers, the findings of this study stress the urgency for comprehensive and inclusive policymaking. A rights-based, intersectional, and youth-centred approach is essential to ensure that migrant and refugee youth are not only protected but also empowered to thrive within Cypriot society.

# Bulgaria

## Introduction

In the wake of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Bulgaria has been a major host nation for displaced Ukrainians, including Ukrainian youth. Currently, 77,360 displaced Ukrainian persons live in the country (UNHCR Operational Data Portal, 2025). The UNHCR estimates around 68,000 children aged 3-17 in Bulgaria at the start of the 2023-2024 school year. At the same time, UNICEF (2023) estimated that there will be around 55,880 children and adolescents in 2023.

Bulgaria has gone a full decade without a functioning national refugee integration programme (European Commission, 2024). Over these ten years, successive governments have failed to establish a sustainable mechanism to support newcomers, despite consistent advocacy from international organisations, non-governmental actors, and academic institutions. Currently, refugee integration support in Bulgaria relies mainly on international organisations and the NGO sector, mostly via EU funding.

Only 18% of Ukrainian pupils attend formal Bulgarian schools, as many have difficulty integrating into the local educational system (UNHCR, 2023). These challenges are made worse by language obstacles and a dearth of resources to treat psychological discomfort and trauma, which restricts access to quality education. Furthermore, according to UNICEF (2023), economic uncertainty is a major barrier with approximately 70% of displaced Ukrainian youths unable to find work, a fact that makes them socially and financially isolated.

This demographic also has a high prevalence of mental health issues. The trauma of war, displacement, and the uncertainty of their future are the main causes of anxiety, sadness, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These problems are made worse by a lack of access to psychosocial care, which leaves many people without healthy coping strategies. Furthermore, precarious living circumstances, such as dependence on short-term or government-funded housing, exacerbate feelings of insecurity and impede attempts to build stable lifestyles.

**The urgent needs, vulnerabilities,** and long-term goals of at-risk Ukrainian youth residing in Bulgaria are looked at in this research. It identifies gaps in current solutions while highlighting important areas including housing, mental health, work, and education through desk research, in-person interviews and a focus group. By offering this comparative analysis, this research aims to provide suggestion on interventions to enhancing the quality of life for these underprivileged groups and promoting their effective integration into Bulgarian society from a bottom-up perspective.

# Desk research

From the first days of the war in Ukraine, which resulted in over 6 million displaced people, Bulgaria serves as a major destination for Ukrainian refugees. Since the beginning of the war, over 200,000 people from Ukraine have registered for temporary protection in Bulgaria. Overall, youth are a significant proportion of refugees fleeing from Ukraine, particularly women youth (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2023).

Although temporary protection enables them access to protection, health care, employment, and other public services, the situation for young Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria presents a range of challenges, especially in areas of education, employment, mental health, and living conditions. Notable among these challenges is the fact that there is no certainty for how long the Temporary Protection Directive will be active, and what will happen to the rights of displaced Ukrainian people residing in the EU once it expires. Young people face unique barriers due to this uncertainty, which makes it difficult for them to plan for their future.

Bulgaria adopted its National Strategy on Migration of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2025 in 2021 (National Council on Migration, Borders, Asylum and Integration, 2021). Currently, Bulgaria does not have a national integration program for refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, and integration is not part of the strategy. No action plan has been adopted, and no funding has been allocated to support integration efforts. Furthermore, although municipalities are nominally responsible for promoting refugee integration, they have not been provided with a dedicated budget to implement these initiatives, which makes implementation of this mandate virtually non-existent (World Health Organization, 2023). This situation is one of the key factors that influence public attitudes towards refugees and migrants. CSOs working in the field consistently observe and report that negative perceptions of refugees and migrants are widespread among host communities

## **An overview of the situation in Bulgaria regarding at-risk Ukrainian Youth**

One of the key challenges young Ukrainian refugees face in Bulgaria is access to education. Only about 18% of Ukrainian children of school-going age receive any education in the local schools, which demonstrates the great accessibility problems which the young refugees encounter in seeking education opportunities. Language barriers as well as the ability of the teachers to assist with the psychological and emotional distress suffered by many of the children makes integration into the educational system difficult (UNICEF, 2023). Further, the overall education system is unable to accommodate the higher number of school seats requirements, as the number of children needing placement outstrips the resources that are available. 18% of school-aged children are completely out of learning (not attending school, not attending on-line or remote education)(UNHCR, 2024)

In addition to educational challenges, many forcibly displaced Ukrainian youth in Bulgaria face [high levels of economic instability](#). About 70% of them are unable to find a job which makes it impossible for them to be self-sufficient, and to attain the necessary economic self-sufficiency to focus on their education, or for their own growth and development (UNICEF, 2023). This lack of economic opportunity can importantly affect their overall well-being and integration into Bulgarian society.

A significant percentage of displaced Ukrainian Youth in Bulgaria (17%) are currently [Not in Education, Employment or Training \(NEET\)](#). This group is at particular risk of socioeconomic exclusion, worsening physical and mental health, use of harmful coping mechanisms and substance abuse (UNHCR 2023).

Moreover, the psychological consequences of such a displacement are also highly problematic. Young refugees are struggling with anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder triggered by the events of the war and their displacement. The anxiety about their life prospects and the instability in terms of accommodation, medical services, education, and employment opportunities only aggravate their mental health (UNHCR, 2023). The absence of visible perspectives intensifies these factors, leading a considerable part of the youth to feel lost and helpless regarding their future.

Lastly, the living conditions of many forcibly displaced Ukrainian youth remain unstable. Many young refugees are housed in temporary accommodations, which can have a significant impact on their mental health and overall stability. As of December 2023, around 7,692 individuals were living in state-funded housing, while others resided in private accommodation (UNICEF, 2023). The majority of state-funded housing are located in remote areas, with **little to no access to basic services** such as healthcare or education. This increases the social isolation of young people, creates conditions for accentuated educational poverty, and impedes their ability to interact with and integrate into their host communities. The uncertainty of temporary housing arrangements contributes to the overall instability that these youths face, further complicating their ability to adjust and thrive in their new surroundings.

## **Mental Health & Well Being**

Young Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria, particularly children and adolescents, face significant vulnerabilities that hinder their integration and overall well-being. A major barrier is the difficulty many encounter in enrolling in local schools—over half of school-aged Ukrainian children are not attending school (UNICEF, 2023). This exclusion leaves them susceptible to academic setbacks, social isolation, and the loss of routine and structure crucial for development. Without access to education, they also struggle to learn the local language, connect with peers, and build skills for future opportunities. This marginalization not only limits their integration but increases their risk of exploitation, including labor trafficking, and deepens long-term dependency on aid.

Mental health challenges are widespread among this group, shaped by the trauma of displacement and the ongoing war. Many report symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation—especially among adolescents exposed to violence and loss (Hornfeck et al., 2023; Afkhami, 2023). Social isolation, language barriers, and the stress of adjusting to a new environment further aggravate these conditions (UNICEF, 2023). While some mental health services exist, access remains limited due to stigma, lack of awareness, and the absence of cultural mediation in health and reception services (WHO, 2023). Without adequate Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), refugee youth risk long-term emotional dysregulation, isolation, and limited personal development, all of which severely affect their ability to adapt and thrive.

Additionally, access to other essential services—such as healthcare and employment—is often constrained by gaps in state capacity and legal or structural barriers (UNICEF, 2023). Economic hardship weighs heavily on many families, and young people face particular challenges in securing work and achieving financial independence. Coupled with limited community connections, these factors fuel loneliness and prevent young refugees from building the supportive networks needed for successful integration. Altogether, these intersecting vulnerabilities underscore the urgent need for comprehensive, youth-centered interventions to support Ukrainian refugees in rebuilding their lives in Bulgaria.

# Field Research Interviews

FSCOD conducted four interviews with youth refugees living in Sofia, providing profound insights into the challenges faced by Ukrainian youngsters in Bulgaria. These young individuals have been uprooted from their homes due to the war and are navigating life in a foreign country while dealing with emotional, social, and academic difficulties associated with their relocation. Common themes in their stories include loneliness, language barriers, bullying, and the resilience required to adapt to new circumstances.

All interviewees reported experiencing significant emotional distress resulting from their displacement. One participant expressed concern for a family member still serving in Ukraine's defense forces, describing the separation as a source of worry and emotional strain for both him and his parent. He conveyed feelings of being overwhelmed and isolated, with no outlet for his emotions. Another interviewee discussed the anxiety and stress regarding their family's future, which was aggravated by financial difficulties as they worked to rebuild their lives in Bulgaria. Two participants shared their experiences of bullying at school, which have left them feeling alienated and insecure. One described how comments about their accent and country of origin contributed to feelings of scrutiny and discomfort. Throughout the interviews, the need for mental health support emerged as a recurring concern, with several interviewees emphasizing the importance of access to counseling or someone to talk to in order to process their emotions and cope with their challenges.

Language barriers were a significant obstacle to social and academic integration for all participants. Some reported frustration with their slow progress in learning Bulgarian, leaving them feeling isolated despite their efforts to adapt. Others recounted experiences of bullying at school due to their limited proficiency in the language, with classmates mocking them and deepening their sense of alienation. A lack of accessible and well-organized language programs was highlighted as a key issue, despite their determination to learn. Additionally, the participants emphasized the need for greater tolerance and understanding within their schools and communities during this transitional period.

The Ukrainian youths interviewed by FSCOD frequently reported difficulties in adapting to a new educational system. One participant described how the unpredictability of their circumstances disrupted their studies and led to disengagement. Another expressed a strong desire to continue their education but struggled to keep up with subjects like science and math due to language barriers and insufficient support at school, fearing they might fall behind academically.

One participant described their parent's struggle to support the family in Bulgaria while coping with the emotional strain of being separated from a spouse, acknowledging both the toll it has taken and their parent's resilience. Another shared similar concerns, noting their dependence on humanitarian aid from organisations such as the Red Cross and irregular part-time work to meet basic needs.

Based on the interviews, several suggestions emerged to address the challenges faced by Ukrainian refugee youth in Bulgaria. These include expanding access to mental health support to help young people cope with emotional stress; providing language classes to support integration; implementing anti-bullying programmes in schools to tackle anti-migrant sentiment; creating safe spaces for youth to connect and express themselves; and offering both financial assistance and emotional support to young people and their families.



The testimonies reflect the resilience of Ukrainian youth as they navigate life in new communities, but also expose systemic gaps in responding to their complex financial, social, and emotional needs. A holistic approach—centred on social inclusion, mental health, education, and language acquisition—is essential to reducing the inequalities these young people face and supporting their long-term well-being.

## Field Research **Focus Group**

FSCOD conducted a focus group with seven Ukrainian refugee youth living in Bulgaria aged between 14 - 17 years. The discussion revealed significant emotional strain, social exclusion, and educational challenges faced by these young people since arriving in Bulgaria.

The findings from the session highlight six interrelated themes: (1) experiences of social isolation and bullying in schools; (2) emotional stress caused by family separation; (3) the absence of targeted support within educational settings; (4) the importance of peer solidarity within the Ukrainian community; (5) academic struggles due to language barriers; and (6) the need for emotional and educational support tailored to their circumstances.

Participants described a widespread sense of social exclusion and verbal harassment in their Bulgarian schools. Several teenagers recounted instances of bullying linked to their Ukrainian identity and their limited ability to communicate in Bulgarian. Some shared that classmates mocked their accents and backgrounds, which intensified feelings of alienation. Others noted that jokes about the war were particularly distressing. The cumulative effect of these encounters has led to an emotionally hostile school environment, making it difficult for the young people to feel safe or included.

A prominent emotional burden among the group was family separation. Most participants live in Bulgaria with their mothers, while their fathers remain in Ukraine due to the war. Several spoke candidly about their ongoing fears for their fathers' safety and the emotional toll this has taken on them. Others described the difficulty of trying to support their mothers emotionally while managing their own anxiety. Some noted that the uncertainty surrounding their family members' well-being affects their concentration and motivation, particularly in school and social settings.

The teenagers expressed that their emotional distress often goes unnoticed and unsupported by their schools. Some highlighted that teachers rarely intervene in bullying situations or offer tailored assistance to help students cope with trauma or displacement. This lack of recognition and support has exacerbated their sense of isolation.

Despite these challenges, participants described finding comfort and strength in the company of fellow Ukrainian peers. The solidarity and shared understanding within the Ukrainian refugee community provide a rare emotional anchor. One participant remarked that being surrounded by others who "understand without explanation" is a key source of emotional support. Another noted that connecting with other Ukrainians helps create a temporary sense of belonging and stability.

Educational challenges were a recurring theme. Many participants reported falling behind in core subjects due to the language barrier and lack of academic support. Some mentioned that they once excelled in subjects like mathematics and science in Ukraine but now struggle to keep up. Others described the exhaustion of mentally translating lessons during class, which slows their learning and deepens their frustration.

When asked about the support they need, participants consistently pointed to gaps in both emotional and academic assistance. Suggestions included more focused Bulgarian language classes, academic tutoring, and access to trauma-informed counselling within the school system to help them process their emotions and cope with the realities of displacement.

The absence of their fathers emerged repeatedly as a source of deep emotional pain. Participants described the ongoing fear and helplessness associated with their loved ones' involvement in the war. Many expressed the daily worry they carry, often feeling unable to share these fears with their already-stressed mothers. This emotional weight further compounds their sense of vulnerability and instability.

In conclusion, the insights from this focus group highlight the multifaceted challenges faced by Ukrainian refugee young people in Bulgaria. Their experiences of bullying, social exclusion, family separation, and educational disadvantage underscore the urgent need for comprehensive support systems. This includes language assistance, anti-bullying initiatives, and access to culturally sensitive mental health services. Without targeted interventions, the capacity of these young people to adapt, succeed, and find emotional stability in their new environment remains severely limited.

# Field Research **Survey**

A total of 57 participants from Ukraine, aged between 13 and 29, took part in the study. The group comprised 28 males, 28 females, and one non-binary participant. The majority (98%) lived in urban areas, with 61.1% residing in privately rented accommodations—either alone or with family (25.9%). This trend is primarily due to the fact that most participants were based in the capital, where government-provided housing is generally unavailable. A small number of respondents reported alternative living arrangements: 3.7% lived in government-provided housing outside the capital, 3.7% in NGO-provided accommodations, and 1.9% in dormitories, hostels, or university housing.

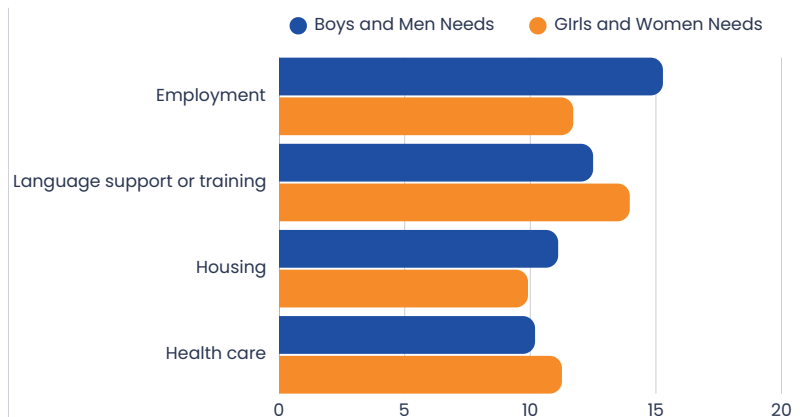
In terms of education and employment, 62.3% of participants were enrolled in college, 28.3% were attending high school, and 5.7% were in trade or vocational schools. A small percentage (1.9%) were self-employed, while another 1.9% were unemployed and actively seeking work. No participants were classified as NEETs. However, one participant who was unemployed and not seeking work clarified that they were still engaged in education and therefore unavailable for the labor market.

Only 12% of respondents reported experiencing discrimination, and 16% mentioned having encountered culture shock. Additionally, 44% indicated that they were currently participating in support programs. When asked about their most pressing needs, 15.28% identified access to employment opportunities as essential for overcoming integration challenges and financial burdens. A further 12.5% expressed a strong need for language training to assist in their integration into Bulgarian society.

## Main Integration Barriers and Priorities



## Gender-Disaggregated Insights



## Programmes Supporting the Integration of Ukrainian Youth in Bulgaria

Moreover, respondents were invited to share any additional needs and barriers they faced that were not directly addressed in the initial research questions. When asked to identify these challenges, 28.6% of Ukrainian youth refugees reported experiencing economic barriers, which aligns with the broader needs analysis. Cultural barriers were reported by 22.9% of participants, while 14.3% identified health-related issues. Social barriers were mentioned by 11.4% of respondents, reflecting concerns raised in the short-term needs of male participants. Additionally, 11.4% of participants reported living with a disability, 8.6% cited educational difficulties, and 2.9% indicated struggles with mental health.

Regarding mental health, one participant shared that "some of the traumas are now manifesting as difficulties in making friends, obsessive thoughts, and problems with understanding intimate topics." Another respondent described experiencing low self-esteem, specifically emerging as "self-doubt." These accounts highlight the psychological toll of displacement and the urgent need for tailored mental health support for refugee youth.

1. **Lack of Awareness:** "I don't know anything about it."
2. **Time Constraints due to Work/Family:** "I have never come across such events! I'm working! Or with the kids!"
3. **Balancing Work and Language Learning:** "Busy learning the language and working."
4. **Irrelevance of Program:** "Doesn't meet my needs."
5. **Lack of Suitable Programs:** "I can't find a suitable program at the moment."
6. **Difficulty Finding Information:** "I don't know where to look for such events. There are no events with participation of peers."
7. **Lack of Help from Services:** "Because they don't help, we've been asking them again and again."
8. **Adaptation Period:** "I have recently lived in this city and am going through a period of adaptation."
9. **Employment Commitments:** "Because I work."
10. **Disinterest in Integration:** "(I am) Not interested in integrating."
11. **No Information Provided:** "We have no information."
12. **Lack of Awareness & Being Uninformed:** "I don't know" and "Did not know about them."

# Integration Challenges

Over half (55%) of the participants reported facing challenges integrating into their new communities in Bulgaria. The responses reveal a complex web of barriers that go beyond basic needs—ranging from financial instability, limited employment opportunities, and unaffordable housing to deep-seated issues such as language barriers, cultural disconnection, and emotional distress. Many respondents highlighted feelings of isolation, being undervalued, and struggling to adapt due to unfamiliar social norms, religious differences, or a lack of peer connection. These challenges are further compounded by limited access to education, career development, and support systems for young refugees.

## The specific accounts shared by participants include:

- **Age-Related Bias in Employment:** "People don't believe that a person can know so much at the age of 24, so they don't hire for promising jobs."
- **Language Barrier:** "Language barrier, difficult to accept." – "I don't know the language."
- **Cultural and Mentality Differences:** "Different mentality, a country that does not seek to develop, slow, not particularly interested in the lifestyle of those around them."
- **Lack of Understanding of Cultural Values:** "Language barrier, lack of understanding of cultural values and traditions."
- **Limited Social Integration & Social Disconnect:** "I still do not have good friends here. All my relationships here are only studying or acquaintances, nothing more."
- **Social Discomfort and Withdrawal:** "Often people are a little different from me, and I have no desire to talk to them."
- **Religious Differences:** "Attitude to the Church of the Moscow Patriarchate."
- **Lack of Knowledge About Social Protection:** "Language barriers, lack of knowledge about social protection in the country, prospects for development (work)."
- **Lack of Access to Education:** "Does not have access to a favourable educational environment."
- **Lack of Communication with Peers:** "Difficulty building connections and relationships with others."
- **Feeling 'Second-Rate' or Undervalued:** "Experiencing a sense of inferiority or being undervalued."
- **High Rental Prices:** "Struggles with rising housing costs."
- **Affordable Housing Needs:** "Housing for reasonable money."
- **Limited Professional Job Options:** "The most important problem is the small number of professional jobs and the lack of choice. Because of this, I have to look for alternative positions such as remote work abroad."
- **Lack of Career Development for Russian-Speaking Employees:** "Lack of development of Russian-speaking employees."

## Mental Health and Well-Being

Regarding the mental health and well-being of Ukrainian youth refugees living in Bulgaria, many participants reported facing significant psychological and emotional challenges. These included difficulties adjusting to new social norms, coping with trauma, and the absence of a strong support network. Some shared feelings of isolation due to limited peer interaction, while others described lingering fear triggered by sounds like airplanes, linked to past traumatic experiences. The lack of open communication about local violence and insecurity also contributed to ongoing stress. In addition, several participants noted that financial insecurity further exacerbates their mental health struggles and emphasized the need for targeted support to improve their overall well-being.

### Here are some of their statements:

- 1.Coping with Psychological Problems:** "Coping with personal psychological problems is not all the money in the world."
- 2.Socialization and Adaptation:** "Challenges in adapting to new social norms and integrating into society"
- 4.Lack of Social Circle:** "No social circle is available."
- 5. Fear of Airplanes:** "It is scary to hear an airplane in the sky."
- 6.Limited Peer Interaction:** "Little peer interaction."
- 7.Communication with Locals:** "Very little communication with locals."
- 8.Need for Financial Support:** "To provide financial support."

## Accessing Services

Ukrainian youth refugees in Bulgaria reported facing several obstacles when trying to access essential services. Language barriers were frequently mentioned as a major limitation, affecting their ability to communicate effectively and navigate public systems. Participants also described difficulties in identifying the appropriate authorities to resolve issues, as well as challenges related to bureaucratic processes. These included problems obtaining Bulgarian bank cards, accessing personal medical identification numbers, and addressing documentation needs. Barriers within the healthcare system were also highlighted—such as limited access to speech therapists and a pressing need for quality psychological and psychiatric care to support their well-being.

### Here are some of their statements:

- 1.Language Barrier:** "Difficulty communicating due to limited language proficiency."
- 2.Navigating Authorities:** "It's hard to find the right authority when dealing with any issues."
- 3.Inaccessible Bulgarian Bank Cards:** "It is impossible to get a Bulgarian bank card."
- 4.Medic Number Access:** "Medic Number."
- 5.Documentation Issues:** "Documents."
- 6.Healthcare Services:** "Medic number services and speech therapist."
- 7.Psychological and Psychiatric Care:** "Quality psychological and psychiatric care."

Ukrainian youth in Bulgaria reported numerous challenges that significantly impacted their social integration and employment opportunities. Key issues included a lack of proficiency in the Bulgarian language, which led to difficulties in understanding, speaking, and maintaining conversations on various topics. Many participants expressed frustration with learning a language they might only need temporarily, citing the time and effort required in a context where working hard to make a living takes precedence. Additional challenges included learning difficulties exacerbated by disabilities and the struggles of academic integration, as some began their studies with limited Bulgarian knowledge, making the initial months of adaptation particularly challenging.

### Participants Responses Broken Into Thematic Issues

- 1. Lack of Language Knowledge:** "Lack of knowledge of the language."; "Repeated difficulty with understanding and speaking the language."; "To learn a language that I may only need for a short period of time."; "The language is difficult to learn."; "It was a problem for me to even go to the shop."; "Maintain conversations on various topics, lack of vocabulary."; "Limited communication due to insufficient knowledge of the language."; "Lack of knowledge of the Bulgarian language."; "Learning a language requires a lot of free time in a country where you have to work hard to live."
- 2. Learning Challenges with a Disability:** "It is difficult to learn a new language - I have a disability."
- 3. Initial Academic Integration Difficulties:** "I started my studies at the Bulgarian university with little knowledge of Bulgarian, and although this is rather my fault, it is impossible not to note the difficulty of interaction in English. The first months of integration were quite difficult, but then everything got better."

### Employment Challenges

Ukrainian youth refugees in Bulgaria face a range of obstacles in securing and sustaining employment. Participants highlighted issues such as low salaries, language barriers, and difficulty navigating unfamiliar job-seeking processes. Limited language proficiency was a recurring concern, making workplace communication and interviews particularly challenging. Some participants faced limited job opportunities due to their student or legal status, while others reported discrimination, including being underpaid or underestimated because of their refugee background or age.

### Here are some of their statements:

- 1. Low Salaries and Language Skills:** "Low salaries and lack of language skills."
- 2. Passing Interviews:** Challenges in successfully navigating job interviews. "Have an interview."
- 3. Slow and Unfamiliar Processes:** "Everything here is slow, unusual, and this applies to many things."
- 4. Language Difficulties:** "Language."; "Struggles with communication due to limited language proficiency"; "Language."; and "Lack of knowledge of the language."
- 5. Discriminatory Attitudes Towards Foreign Workers:** "Attitude towards 'foreigners' who are not particularly willing to work, and if they do, they take advantage of their difficult refugee situation and deliberately pay less than locals."
- 6. Age-Related Bias:** "People do not believe that young people can know a lot and have a lot of experience."
- 7. Limited Job Options for Students:** "A small number of options suitable for my profile and capabilities (Yes, as a student, I do not have the opportunity to work full-time)."

## Social and Community Inclusion Challenges

Ukrainian youth face significant challenges that contribute to feelings of isolation and hinder their ability to access and build support networks. Language barriers have made it difficult for them to interact and communicate with their peers, leading to misunderstandings and reluctance from locals to accept newly arrived residents. These communication obstacles have resulted in a reported lack of social networks and economic restrictions. The challenges faced by these young people are reflected in the accounts shared by the participants:

Language and Communication Barriers: "Not knowing the language and sometimes not being understood by peers."

"Language integration. Some people, especially the older generation, were very adamant and had little understanding of my own communication difficulties."

Different Perspectives: "Challenges arising from differing viewpoints and cultural norms."

Language and Socialization: "Language, and socialization."

Lack of Social Support: "No friends and relatives living in Bulgaria."

## Education, Training & Vocational Skills

Access to education and skills training plays a vital role in the integration and well-being of refugee youth. However, Ukrainian youth in Bulgaria face several challenges in this area, particularly due to language barriers and limited availability of suitable educational pathways. Many participants reported difficulties studying in Bulgarian, expressing frustration over the lack of opportunities to learn in their native language or access support tailored to Ukrainian learners. This linguistic barrier not only hinders academic achievement but can also contribute to feelings of demotivation, isolation, and low self-worth—further impacting their mental health and overall sense of belonging.

Participants also noted confusion around educational systems, difficulties understanding subject matter, and the lack of affordable school options. These challenges create additional pressure on young people who are already navigating displacement and transition. Without meaningful access to quality education, vocational training, and language support, young refugees risk falling behind, missing opportunities for future employment, and experiencing long-term exclusion from society.

### Some of the challenges shared include:

- 1. Organisation and Subject Understanding:** "Organisation, understanding of subjects."
- 2. Language Barriers and Motivation:** "Language, I don't see the point in learning Bulgarian.; "Not knowing the language."; "Language."; "For me, the hardest part for all is learning the language."
- 3. Finding Affordable Schools:** "Find an affordable, suitable school."



## On a Positive Note

While many participants shared challenges, a number of Ukrainian youth refugees reported facing minimal barriers in their daily lives in Bulgaria. These individuals described a smoother process of adaptation, often crediting their positive experiences to personal resilience, independence, or a sense of having adjusted over time. Some expressed ease in integrating into their new communities, while others noted that they manage difficulties on their own—sometimes successfully, sometimes with difficulty.

Notably, several participants shared that they had shifted their mindset out of necessity, adopting self-reliance because they felt they could not depend on the State or external support. This sense of having to navigate life alone shaped how they approached challenges and their expectations of available services. While this resilience is commendable, it also highlights the emotional impact of perceived abandonment and the urgent need for reliable, accessible support structures.

### Their responses include:

1. **Self-Reliance Attitudes:** "I don't care, I'm on my own."
2. **No Difficulties:** "I have no difficulties."
3. **Ease of Integration:** "I have no difficulties in the new community."
4. **Adapting Through Education:** "Through the syllabus."
5. **Displaying Perseverance:** "Perseverance."
6. **Minimal Challenges:** "There are almost no difficulties, I have adapted."
7. **Self-Sufficiency with Challenges:** "I try to handle things on my own, but it doesn't always work out."
8. **Ease of Integration into Society:** "I have no difficulties in the new society."
9. **Lack of Support:** "Because there is no support!"

## Roadmaps in Bulgaria

As part of the project's final phase, participants in Bulgaria shared suggestions for interventions and roadmaps to improve their well-being and support integration. They highlighted the need for tailored integration programmes, youth centres, and interest-based clubs to foster social connections and reduce isolation. Many called for expanded education and skills-building opportunities to support future employment. Additional proposals included improving access to affordable housing, healthcare, and transportation, as well as simplifying pathways to business and job opportunities—especially with European and international companies. Environmental improvements, recreational spaces, and community clean-up efforts were also suggested to help create more inclusive, youth-friendly communities.

### Some of the other responses they shared included:

1. **Creation of Hobby Clubs:** "Hobby club." / "Create a club to meet and socialise with peers or a hobby club." / "Some kind of organisation to meet people with similar interests."
2. **Targeted Support for Refugees:** "Support programme for forced refugees."
3. **Youth Community Spaces:** "Creating a community for young people from Ukraine!"
4. **Affordable Housing Measures:** "Decline in housing prices." / "House."
5. **Enhanced Medical Services:** "Improving the quality of life in the medical field." / "Better medicine."
6. **Support for Business and Economic Opportunities:** "Expanding the economic zone of influence, making it easier to do business (or to develop the skills and knowledge to do so) and opening up more opportunities to work for European and foreign companies."
7. **Improved Public Transportation:** "Improvement of transportation services."
8. **Youth Education Projects:** "Education projects for young people."
9. **Civic Responsibility and Cleanliness Awareness:** "To let people know that they need to watch their behavior and the cleanliness of the world around them, that they need to behave appropriately."

# Conclusion

The research findings from Bulgaria reveal a range of systemic and structural challenges facing Ukrainian refugee youth. Despite access to public services through temporary protection, participants described barriers in education, employment, housing, and healthcare. Many face exclusion from formal education beyond school age, struggle with language barriers, and lack access to vocational or integration programmes suited to their needs. Limited job opportunities, low wages, and discriminatory attitudes—particularly toward foreign and young workers—further restrict economic independence. Uncertainty around legal status and under-resourced municipal responses add to their precarity. Mental health concerns, including trauma, anxiety, and depression, were commonly reported but remain insufficiently addressed due to a lack of culturally sensitive and youth-appropriate support services.

Despite these intersecting challenges, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience and a strong desire for inclusion. They called for expanded access to education, employment, housing, mental health services, and youth-focused spaces for connection and empowerment. Their insights underline the urgent need for comprehensive, rights-based, and youth-centred interventions. A national integration strategy that prioritises young refugees—by promoting language acquisition, psychosocial well-being, anti-discrimination efforts, and meaningful community participation—is essential. If adequately resourced and implemented, such measures can support Ukrainian youth in rebuilding their lives and contributing to Bulgarian society with dignity, agency, and hope.



# Ireland

## Introduction

Both local and immigrant young people in Ireland deal with a wide range of difficulties that are indicative of larger social, economic, and structural problems. In Ireland, where more than 23% of the population is under 18, young people are negotiating a more complicated environment highlighted by a lack of accommodation, restricted access to mental health facilities, and obstacles to possibilities for school and employment. This is especially true in rural locations, where problems are made worse by lack of recreational infrastructure, transportation difficulties, and geographic isolation.

Both Irish young people and Ukrainian teenagers who have been displaced by the current crisis in Ukraine are the subject of the study. Additional obstacles to Ukrainian youth's integration into Irish culture include language hurdles, cultural adjustment, and trouble finding housing and work. Notwithstanding these challenges, both groups share the demand for more recreational and social opportunities, reasonably priced housing, and easily accessible public services like healthcare and transportation.

**According to emerging research trends** social interaction and community integration are essential for promoting young people's opportunity and resilience. For young people looking to form social bonds or get access to educational and career prospects, the absence of non-sport-based activities, the scarcity of public transport, and the hazardous infrastructure for bikers pose major obstacles. Additionally, housing availability and affordability continue to be major issues, especially for young individuals making the move to independent life.

The issues are thoroughly examined in this research, which also offers insights into the short- and long-term needs of Ireland's youth. The purpose of this study is to provide practical strategies for improving youth well-being, integration, and community participation throughout Ireland by investigating the viewpoints of young people, local stakeholders, and program facilitators.

# Desk research

In 2023, there were an estimated 1.2m children living in Ireland according to the State of the Nation's Children Report issued by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Government of Ireland, 2023). An estimated 23.2% of the Irish Population were under the age of 18 in 2023.

## The report also identified the following statistics:

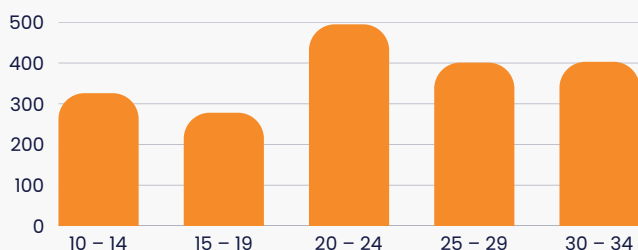
- In 2022, 131,764 (10.8%) of the child population in Ireland had a disability in Ireland.
- In 2022, 14,142 children were members of the Traveller community, an indigenous minority group in Ireland.
- In 2018, 31.1% of children aged between 10 and 17 had been bullied.
- In 2022, 15.2% of children were considered to be at risk of poverty.

## An overview of the situation in regarding at-risk Youth in Ireland

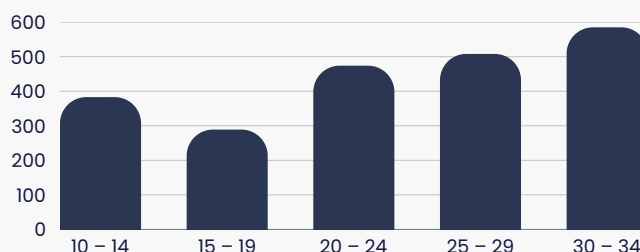
Young people in Ireland face a plethora of challenges and vulnerabilities in Ireland, including access to mental health services, access to homes and affordable accommodation, and access to affordable education.

**Homelessness:** In 2023, the Dublin Simon Community reported that Ireland's youngest are being disproportionately disadvantaged by homelessness because of economic challenges, family conflict, ageing out of the care system or addiction (Dublin Simon Community, 2023). Focus Ireland, the national charity working to end homelessness in Ireland, defines youth homelessness as people aged 13 – 26 without stable accommodation and staying in hostels, temporary accommodation, couch surfing or rough sleeping (Focus Ireland, 2022). On the night of the 2022 Census in Ireland, 03 April 2022, 10,321 people were homeless (Central Statistics Office, 2024).

Furthermore, a total of 1,996 families with 4,206 child dependents were accessing emergency accommodation in Ireland during the week of 22 – 28 April 2024 (Government of Ireland, 2024a).



Boys and Men in State Accommodation



Girls and Women in State Accommodation

## **Mental Health & Well Being**

There is a strong emphasis on improving mental health services for young people. The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) highlights the need for increased funding and resources to support youth mental health initiatives, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

## **Education and Employment**

Addressing educational disadvantages and enhancing employment opportunities are critical for supporting marginalised young people living in Ireland. Barnados (2018) identified that the cost of education in Ireland for young people and the back-to-school costs place a significant financial burden on families, especially those already disadvantaged. According to Zurich (2024), the actual cost of primary education for one child per annum equals €1,871.00, and the actual cost of secondary education for one child per annum equals €3,581.

In May 2024, the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, announced the second year of the Primary Schoolbooks Scheme and the first year of the Junior Cycle Schoolbooks Scheme, which will provide free school books, workbooks, and copybooks for all pupils in primary and special schools in the 2024 / 2025 school year (Department of Education, 2024). This measure aims to reduce the impact of the rising cost of living and the financial burden on parents.

## **Priority Needs for Young People In Ireland**

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) invited young people and professionals working with young people to identify “what is not going well for children and young people in Ireland”. A recurring trend in the research was the poor provision of mental health services and long waiting lists for young people in Ireland (Government of Ireland, 2024b).

Many young people have poor access to CAMHS, the Children’s and Adolescent Mental Health Services in Ireland. Professionals working with young people have indicated an urgent need for reform within the system especially in terms of how mental health and wellbeing is supported in school settings in Ireland.

## Targeted interventions that support at-risk Youth In Ireland

There is a wide range of targeted interventions are currently in place for at-risk youths living in Ireland. These interventions include:

- (1) Youth Diversion Programs.
- (2) Mental Health Supports.
- (3) Educational and Vocational Training Programs.

**Youth Diversion Programs:** Under the Children's Act 2001, 105 Youth Diversion Programmes are currently in place. These programmes aim to prevent children under 18 from being involved in antisocial behaviour and young offenders from committing further offenses and entering the adult criminal justice system (Citizens Information, 2024).

**Mental Health Support Providers:** A range of mental health support providers in Ireland offer targeted interventions for young people.

Some of the leading providers include:

1. Jigsaw is the National Centre for Youth Mental Health in Ireland. Working with young people aged 12 – 25, Jigsaw provides free, confidential mental health advice and support in community-based settings and online.
2. CAMHS is the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, which offers specialist services for people under the age of 18. Through referrals from a General Practitioner (GP), young people with moderate to severe mental health difficulties are supported in their difficulties.
3. SOSAD, Save Our Sons and Daughters, was established in 2007 to raise awareness and help prevent suicide in Ireland. Using a person-centred approach, SOSAD works with individuals to support them through their challenges.
4. Pieta House is a national charity which provides a range of services to support those experiencing thoughts of suicide, those who engage in self-harm and those bereaved by suicide.

**Educational and Vocational Programs:** A range of entities and institutions provide young people with educational and vocational skills programs and opportunities in Ireland, including:

1. Youthreach is an alternative pathway to education that offers early school leavers aged between 15 and 20 the opportunity to access education and training support. Youthreach works with learners at their pace to support them in developing their social, personal, and professional skills and promote opportunities for independent living.
2. FETCH Courses is Ireland's National Further Education and Training Course Hub. Their website enables potential learners to search for and apply for a wide range of training courses specific to their needs and interests.
3. SUSI (The Student Universal Support Ireland) is the national awarding authority for further and higher education grants for students. Individuals planning to or studying in further and higher education in Ireland must apply to the scheme annually and, if successful, can be financially supported in their education in Ireland through the payment of maintenance grants or fee grants.
4. Blackwater Training & Consulting is a non-formal training provider based in Cavan. It supports rural community members in accessing training, including skills development, English language classes, and social support.

# Field Research Interviews

In June–September 2024, Blackwater Training interviewed community leaders and civil society representatives in rural County Cavan to better understand the challenges young people face, including refugees, care leavers, and local youth. These interviews revealed recurring themes regarding social isolation, limited access to services, mental health concerns, and the lack of inclusive spaces and opportunities for youth engagement.

Interviewees consistently highlighted the disconnection experienced by young people as they transition into adolescence or adulthood. For instance, some noted a decline in youth participation in community or parish life after primary school, primarily due to the scarcity of structured activities that encourage continued engagement—especially in areas without youth clubs or inclusive programs. Others emphasized the gap in support for care leavers aged 18 to 25, who often face barriers to accessing education, housing, mental health care, and social services once they age out of the state care system. These young adults are particularly vulnerable, with some resorting to couch surfing or living in shelters to qualify for aftercare support. Although a weekly stipend of €300 is provided, many struggle to meet basic living and educational expenses within this limited amount.

Rural areas' lack of public transportation and recreational options was also cited as a significant barrier to inclusion, especially for youth who do not participate in sports. Interviewees expressed concern over the absence of welcoming social spaces for non-sporting youth, which makes it harder for them to build connections and feel part of the community. Issues related to drug and alcohol use among youth were identified as ongoing problems, exacerbated by peer pressure and a lack of safe, alternative spaces. Additionally, mental health challenges, including suicide among young men, were raised as critical concerns that require immediate attention.

Furthermore, proposed solutions included the development of dedicated youth programs that foster emotional resilience, self-expression, and social connectedness to address the issues revealed. This could involve structured community-based activities, utilizing existing sports or community centers for non-sport-related gatherings, and creating recreational events or clubs that cater to diverse interests. Interviewees emphasized the importance of building inclusive environments that offer young people positive alternatives to isolation, substance misuse, and disengagement while also supporting their transition into adulthood with the necessary resources and networks to thrive.



# Field Research **Focus Group**

As part of the BEYOND project, Blackwater Training conducted its focus group session in at Killinkere Leisure Centre, Co. Cavan. The session lasted one hour and involved nine Ukrainian participants—eight female and one male—aged between 18 and 30, who are currently residing in state-provided accommodation in the area.

At the outset, participants were introduced to the aims of the BEYOND project and informed that the focus group was being held to better understand their experiences and needs, with the goal of providing targeted support interventions in the near future. The focus group was conducted bilingually in English and Ukrainian to ensure full participation and understanding.

## **Methodology**

A semi-structured format was used, guided by a set of open-ended questions. This allowed for flexible discussion and the opportunity to explore individual and shared experiences in depth. The group discussion was designed to uncover information in three key thematic areas:

1. Personal journeys and settlement in Ireland
2. Aspirations and goals while living in Ireland
3. Existing supports and gaps in service provision

## **Key Findings**

### **1. Personal Background and Arrival in Ireland**

All participants reported living in state-provided accommodation in Killinkere, Co. Cavan. Five individuals currently reside approximately four kilometres from the focus group location and travelled on foot to attend. The remaining four live in the Rectory, an old parochial house located on the grounds of the Leisure Centre. None of the participants drive, and all rely on walking for local mobility.

Participants identified themselves as part of an extended family unit that began arriving in Killinkere two and a half years ago. The group includes individuals ranging in age from infants to senior citizens, with additional family members expected to join them soon.

All participants were originally from the Kharkiv and Poltava regions of Ukraine. Some shared that they had stable lives before the war, working in roles such as kindergarten staff and cleaners. One participant noted that she arrived in Ireland with her newborn twins and two other children when the twins were just 25 days old.

## **2. Goals and Aspirations**

When asked about their goals while living in Ireland, participants universally identified learning English as their top priority. This was seen as essential not only for everyday communication but also for future access to employment. One participant expressed this clearly, stating: “No speak, no good work.”

Participants indicated that language proficiency is a gateway to social interaction, employment, independence, and confidence. Their responses reflected a strong desire to improve their language skills as a foundation for integration.

## **3. Existing Supports and Identified Gaps**

Participants reported receiving English language support once a week, every Thursday from 13:00 to 16:00, provided by Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB) (which have since been discontinued). The sessions covered reading, writing, listening, and speaking. While the classes were appreciated, participants expressed a strong desire for additional English language instruction to support their integration and improve their chances of employment.

An important observation was that participants’ language levels ranged from A0 to A1 on the CEFR scale. Two participants acted as informal translators during the session and highlighted the need for classes better tailored to individual proficiency levels. They expressed a preference for differentiated instruction that would allow faster learners to progress while supporting those with less experience. The participants also had low literacy skills and expressed a desire to gain additional literacy support.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this focus group indicate that additional and more targeted English language support is essential for the continued integration of young Ukrainian refugees in Killinkere, Co. Cavan. Participants’ clear motivation to improve their English suggests a strong foundation on which to build more tailored interventions. Enhancing access to language education is likely to improve not only their communication skills, but also their confidence, employment prospects, and ability to engage more fully with Irish society.

# Field Research **Survey**

A total of 32 respondents, aged between 14 and 32 years, completed the Irish survey. Among them, 62% identified as female and 38% as male, with 90% residing in rural areas. The survey included both young people raised in Ireland and newly arrived Ukrainian refugees.

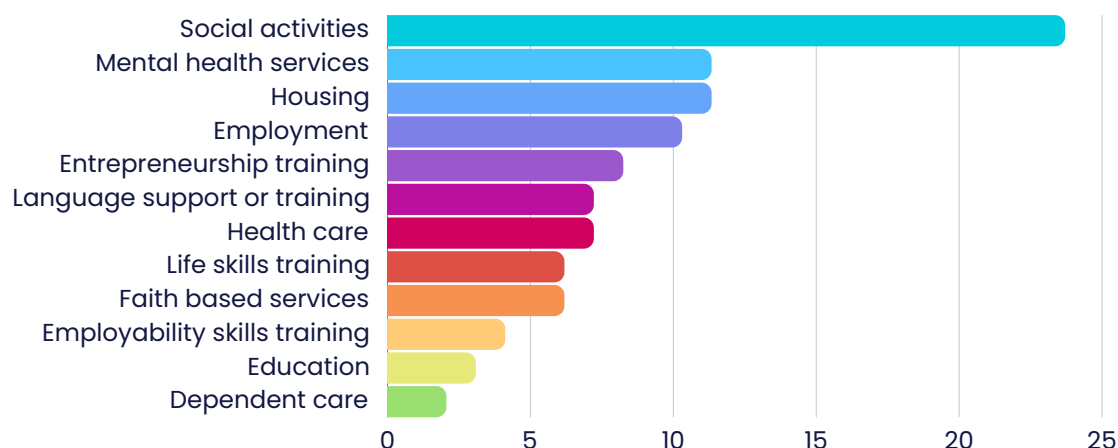
Regarding participation in support services, 67% reported being engaged in assistance programs. However, 34% indicated that they had experienced difficulties integrating into their communities. A small percentage (6%) reported experiencing culture shock, which may be attributed to the mixed-nationality composition of the respondents, while 9% indicated that they had faced discrimination.

Accommodation data showed notable differences between the two groups. Among Irish youth, 76.2% lived with their families, 15.4% were in privately owned housing, and 7.7% were in private rentals. Young men were more likely than women to live with relatives (75% compared to 57%). In contrast, 60% of Ukrainian refugee youth lived in government-supplied housing (Accommodation for Protection Applicants – APA), while 40% were in private rental accommodations.

Regarding education and employment, 46.7% of respondents were enrolled in secondary school, 16.7% were in full-time employment, and 10% were unemployed and actively seeking work. Additionally, 6.7% attended college, 6.7% worked part-time, 3.3% were enrolled in vocational school, and 4% were unemployed and not seeking employment. Among those not seeking work, the main reasons cited were caregiving responsibilities and health-related limitations, which affected their ability to pursue job opportunities.

Participants in the research expressed various priorities related to their everyday challenges. Among the Irish respondents, the most urgent need identified was for increased social activities within their communities, which was selected by 23.7% of participants. Following this, mental health support and housing assistance were ranked equally as the second most pressing needs, each identified by 11.3% of respondents. The least frequently cited need was dependent care, likely because most respondents were teenagers without caregiving responsibilities.

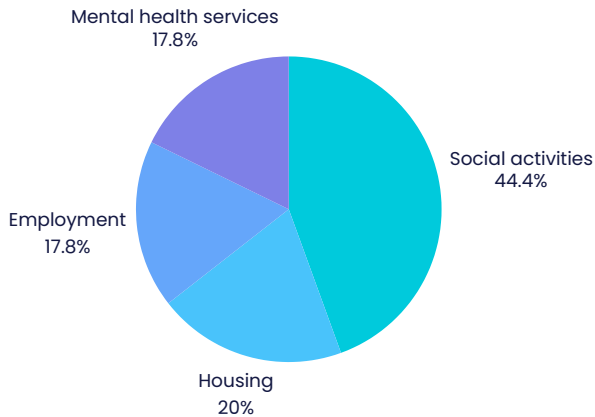
**Identified Needs of Youth Participants**



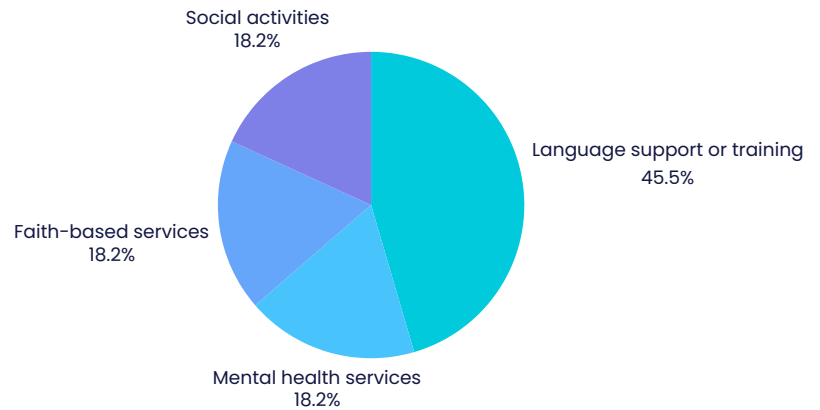
## Differing Priorities Among Irish and Ukrainian Youth

Given that the Irish survey included both local and Ukrainian youth, a breakdown of needs by nationality revealed distinct priorities for each group. Irish youth placed the highest importance on social activities (27.8%) and housing support (12.5%), reflecting a desire for greater community engagement and stability. In contrast, Ukrainian youth identified language support as their most urgent need (29.4%), followed by mental health services (11.8%), highlighting the integration and emotional challenges faced by newly arrived refugees.

**Irish Youth: Reported Needs**



**Ukrainian Youth: Reported Needs**



As a final question, participants were asked to describe any additional barriers they face in their journey of integration in Ireland. Geographic isolation was identified by 15.2% of respondents, who noted that they live in remote or hard-to-reach areas. The most commonly cited barrier was economic hardship, which affected 39.4% of participants. Other challenges included disability (12.1%), health concerns (9.1%), educational difficulties (9.1%), social barriers (9.1%), and cultural differences (6.1%). These responses highlight the complex and intersecting nature of the integration challenges experienced by both local and refugee youth.

## Programmes Supporting the Empowerment and Integration of Youth in Ireland

Participants in the Irish research identified several activities that have supported their integration and overall well-being. They were asked to rate the effectiveness of these activities on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating a low level of effectiveness and 5 indicating a high level. Several activities received the highest rating of 5 out of 5, reflecting their significant impact on participants' lives. These included the National Learning Network, counseling sessions with local general practitioners—especially those involving Cognitive Behavioral Therapy—and participation in sports such as GAA, soccer, and the Blackwater Gaels U14 football team.

Other highly rated activities included kickboxing, playing the piano, farming, practicing Gaelic skills, and attending English classes provided by Blackwater Training. Additionally, several activities were viewed as valuable, receiving a score of 4 out of 5. These included volunteering opportunities, participation in youth cafés, and various recreational and creative pursuits such as football, swimming, tennis, reading, drawing, and athletics.

Involvement in Macra and continued engagement with the National Learning Network also contributed to positive experiences. Overall, these programs and activities highlight the critical role that accessible, youth-focused services and community initiatives play in promoting the integration, empowerment, and mental well-being of young people in Ireland.

## Challenges of Rural Life for Young People in Ireland

Participants in the study who live in Cavan and Meath, rural areas of Ireland, shared specific challenges they face. A significant issue raised was the limited availability of social activities, particularly those outside of sports, which many felt led to feelings of isolation. Access to housing without stable employment was also a common concern, especially for individuals seeking independence or returning from abroad in search of work.

Transportation was identified as one of the biggest barriers. Several respondents described the difficulties they encountered in reaching essential services and opportunities due to long distances and unreliable public transport. One participant emphasized the struggle of walking 10 kilometers to reach the nearest bus stop for school, pointing out that without a car or access to affordable driving lessons, their mobility remained severely limited. The inability to access local spaces and participate in community life due to transportation constraints was a recurring theme, highlighting the broader impact of geographic isolation on youth integration and well-being.

### Here are some of the accounts shared by the participants:

1. **A Lack of Social Activities:** "Lack of social activities outside sport."

2. **Housing Challenges Without Employment:** "You can't get a house without a job."

3. **Transportation Issues for Students:** "I'm still in school and I'll be doing my Leaving Cert in September. We have a big problem with transport. It's a 10km walk for me to the local bus and if I don't walk it, I don't have a lift to school. I need a car but my family can't afford one, and the lessons are not affordable either."

4. **Difficulty Accessing Places:** "Getting places coz I live in the country."

5. **Transitioning Back from Abroad:** "I've just moved back from Australia and looking for work."

6. **Living in a Rural Area Without Transportation:** "Live in the middle of nowhere and don't have a car. I can't get to football without a licence and don't have the €40 for the theory."

7. **Employment and Transportation Challenges:** "I went to Youthreach and can't find a full-time job. I don't drive and need a car and a licence."



Participants were invited to share the reasons behind their lack of involvement in integration programmes. Six individuals provided the following responses:

1. **No Activities in the Area:** "None in my area."

2. **Returning from Abroad:** "I came back last week after living in Australia for a year. I came back until I figure out my next steps."

3. **No Need for Activities:** "I don't need them."

4. **No Activities Available:** "None available."

5. **Participation in Football Group:** "I'm in a football group."

6. **Lack of Awareness:** "Don't know any."

## Roadmaps in Ireland

As part of the project's final phase, participants in Ireland shared a variety of suggestions aimed at improving their well-being and supporting integration. Both Irish and Ukrainian youth expressed a strong desire for more social and recreational activities, such as youth groups, sports clubs, and local events, to foster connections and reduce feelings of isolation.

Improved transportation emerged as a key priority, with calls for safer roads, better public transport links in rural areas, and support for accessing driving lessons and licenses. Participants also emphasized the need for more English language classes, especially for newly arrived refugees, along with the demand for affordable housing and increased access to mental health and healthcare services.

### Some of the other responses they shared included:

1. **Youth Organisations:** "More Macra's for younger people."
2. **Access to Sports Facilities:** "We live outside and the football pitch is 15 minutes away. I can't go there to practice. Maybe a pitch that is a bit closer." / "Add more things for young people. Courts like a basketball court would be great." / "Basketball team would be great." / "Basketball court—we have a half one, not a full size. A hurling club would be great."
3. **Increased Social Events:** "More social events." / "Social events." / "More social events in the club."
4. **Cycling and Sports Infrastructure:** "Cycle lanes in the town lane. There's none at all."
5. **Traffic and Road Safety:** "The traffic is mental. It's an hour going through the town from Dublin to Virginia." / "If they made the roads safer, they are really dangerous. You can't cycle, you have to drive everywhere."
6. **Transportation Access:** "Slow down the traffic that we have in the area and get a local link bus service." / "I need a car and can't get anywhere without it."
7. **Driving Support:** "Help young people start driving." / "Help me get my licence."
8. **English Language Support:** "More English." / "More English classes." / "English classes to help me improve."
9. **Integration Opportunities:** "More opportunities to integrate."

# Conclusion

The findings from Ireland highlight the complex challenges faced by both Irish and Ukrainian youth, particularly in rural areas. Obstacles include issues with housing, transportation, education, and healthcare, compounded for Ukrainian youth by language barriers and cultural differences. Geographic isolation makes it difficult for young people to access essential services and engage with their communities.

While there are national initiatives to improve youth well-being, many services remain inaccessible, especially for those outside urban centers. Young people in state care, returnees, and those with caregiving responsibilities are at higher risk of marginalization.

Despite these challenges, youth express resilience and a desire for change, calling for more inclusive environments, social spaces, recreational activities, safer roads, improved transport, language classes, and mental health support. Their insights stress the need for comprehensive strategies to address inequalities and barriers to inclusion. By investing in accessible services and fostering meaningful participation, Ireland can build supportive communities for all young people.

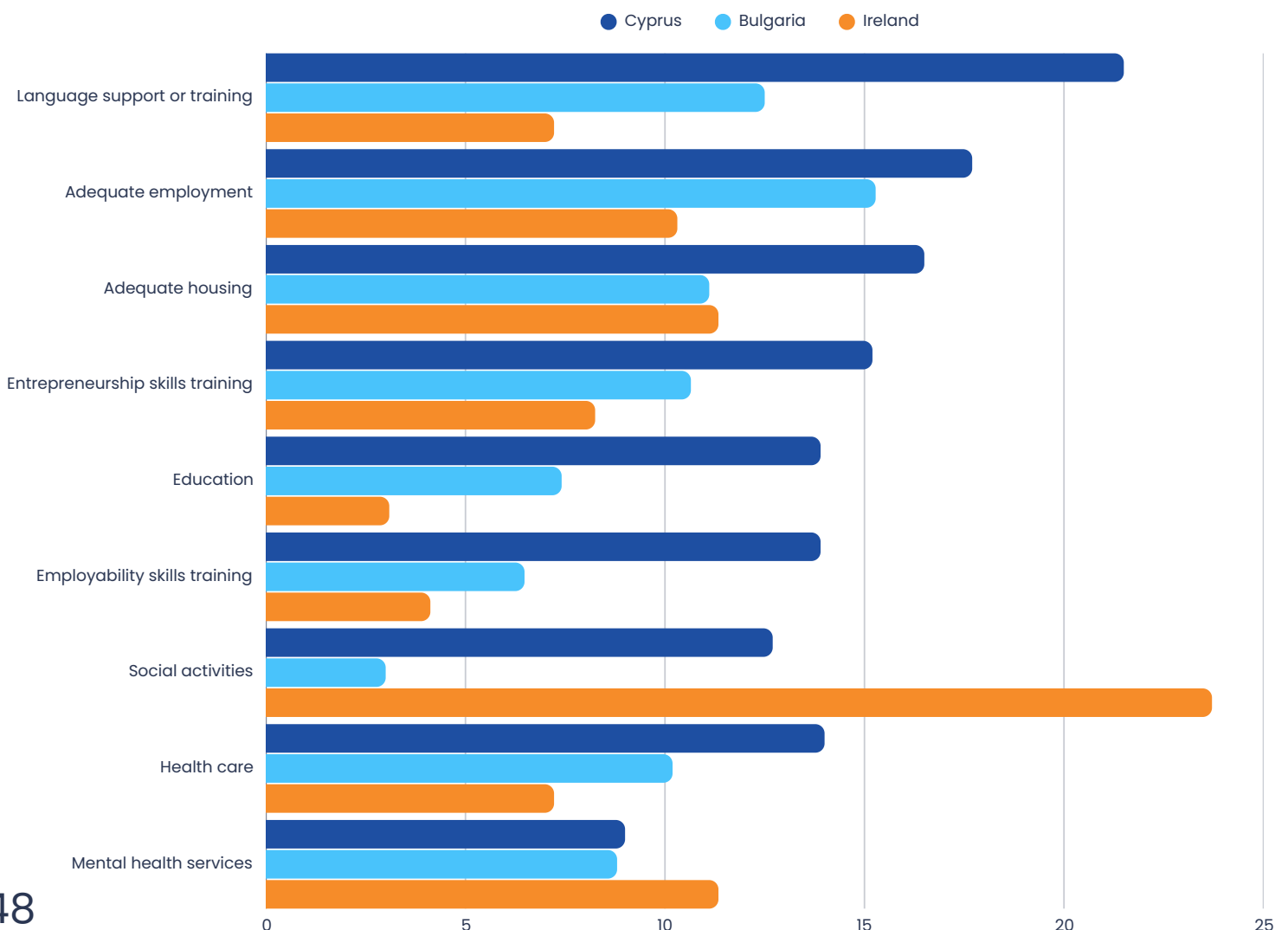
# Comparative Analysis Between the Countries

Youth populations in Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Ireland face a variety of complex challenges influenced by social, cultural, and systemic factors. While the specific needs of young people differ significantly based on geographic location, migratory background, and access to resources, several common priorities emerge, particularly regarding secure employment, affordable housing, and opportunities for meaningful social inclusion.

This section draws on data collected through desk research and fieldwork in all three countries to examine the short- and long-term needs of at-risk youth. By identifying both commonalities and country-specific differences, the comparative analysis provides a nuanced perspective on the daily barriers these young individuals encounter. It also offers guidance for developing tailored interventions that address both overarching issues and local challenges.

The table below provides a comparative overview of the general needs reported by youth in Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Ireland. It illustrates the percentage of participants in each country who identified specific needs—such as language support, employment, housing, mental health services, and access to training—offering insights into their differing priorities and lived experiences.

Comparative Overview of Youth-Reported Needs in Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Ireland





# Comparative Analysis *Between the Countries*

## Employment Opportunities and Economic Independence

Employment remains a top priority for youth in Cyprus (17.7%) and Bulgaria (15.3%), while the percentage is notably lower in Ireland (10.3%). One possible explanation for this difference is the age profile of Irish respondents, with 56.7% currently enrolled in formal education, which reduces the immediate pressure to enter the workforce. Despite these differences, research indicates that young people across all three countries face challenges in securing jobs that match their qualifications and skills. Many expressed concerns about a lack of career advancement opportunities and the difficulty of finding stable employment, particularly for migrants and young people living in rural or disadvantaged areas.

## Access to Safe and Adequate Housing

Housing was identified as a key concern by 16.5% of youth in Cyprus, 11.3% in Ireland, and 11.1% in Bulgaria. While the underlying reasons differ, the shared need for safe and stable accommodation is evident. In Ireland, youth often expressed a desire for greater independence, including the ability to move out of their family homes. In contrast, migrant youth in Cyprus and Bulgaria primarily seek secure and dignified housing to replace temporary or overcrowded living conditions. These differences reflect broader housing system dynamics in each country but highlight a common demand for more affordable, accessible, and youth-appropriate accommodation.

## Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

Access to mental health services is an increasing priority, particularly among Irish youth (11.3%), who frequently mention concerns about mental health, emotional well-being, and suicide rates. In Bulgaria (8.8%) and Cyprus (7.6%), participants also emphasized the importance of mental health support, but often focused on trauma-informed care, especially for migrant youth who have experienced displacement, conflict, or family separation. Across all three contexts, young people called for more accessible, culturally sensitive, and age-appropriate mental health services that address their realities.

## Opportunities for Social Inclusion and Community Participation

Social activities emerged as the top priority for youth in Ireland (23.7%) and a significant need among migrant youth in Cyprus (12.7%). Although reported by fewer respondents in Bulgaria (3.7%), young people across all three countries expressed a strong desire to establish meaningful connections within their communities. These activities are viewed not only as recreational opportunities but also as vital tools for overcoming social isolation, building local networks, and combating discrimination. Additionally, they are linked to increased access to other opportunities, including employment, language learning, and integration into broader civic life.

# Identifying Immediate and Long-Term Needs

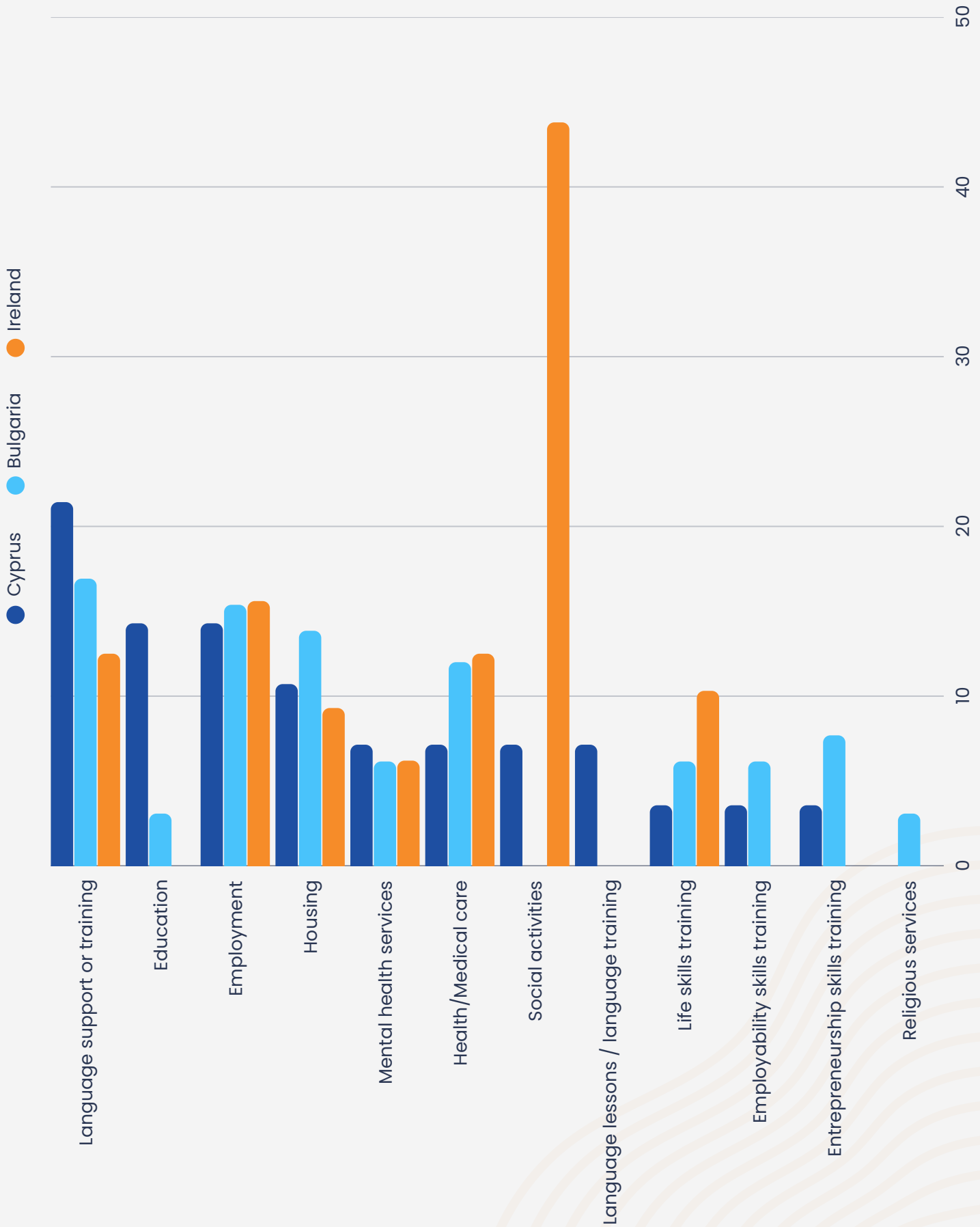
## Immediate Needs

Researchers from Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Ireland set out to understand not only the general needs of young people participating in the study but also to differentiate between their pressing short-term challenges and long-term developmental aspirations. Through fieldwork and survey data, young individuals were asked to reflect on the areas where they currently require urgent support, as well as the services and opportunities they believe will be critical for their future integration and well-being.

When focusing on immediate priorities, several overlapping themes emerged across all three countries. These themes include employment opportunities, housing stability, access to healthcare, language support, and social participation. While the nature of these needs varies by context—for instance, social engagement was the top priority among Irish youth, whereas language support was more prominent among migrant youth in Cyprus—the findings indicate a shared need for responsive, youth-centered programming. Service providers and policymakers must adapt their strategies to address these urgent areas, ensuring that young people receive timely, localized, and culturally appropriate interventions.

The table below presents the **immediate needs** identified by participants in Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Ireland, displaying the percentage of youth who expressed urgent requirements for specific services such as language training, employment assistance, housing, and mental health care. This cross-country comparison highlights the areas where intervention is critically needed to support youth in their current contexts.

# Identifying Immediate Needs



# Identifying Immediate and Long-Term Needs

## Long-Term Needs

In contrast, the long-term needs expressed by youth across the three countries reflect both shared aspirations—such as stable employment and secure housing—and differences shaped by local socioeconomic and cultural realities. Common themes include the need for continued education, social connection, and access to healthcare; however, variations across settings underscore the importance of designing tailored, context-specific responses that acknowledge the diverse lived experiences of young people.

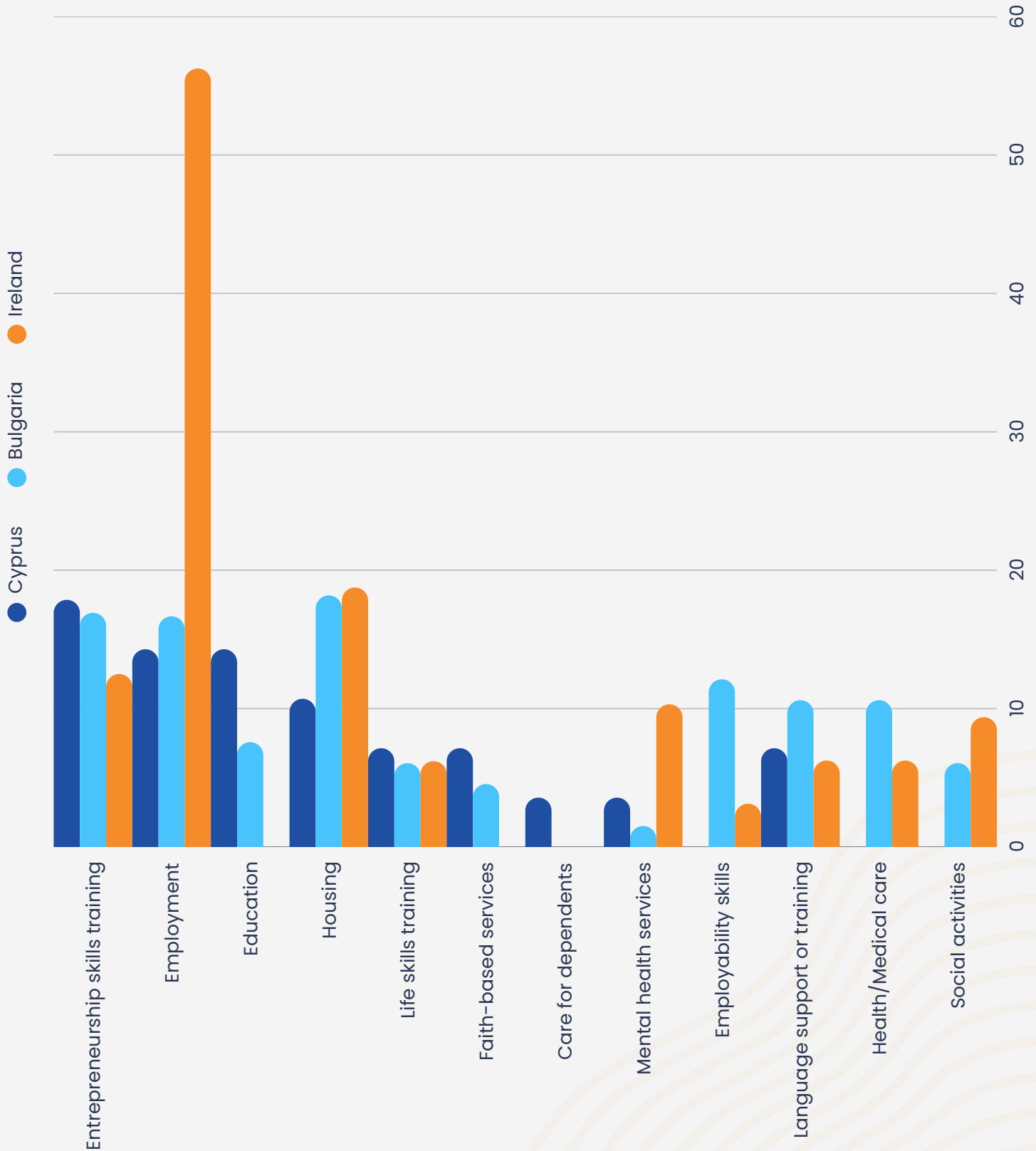
The following table outlines the long-term priorities reported by youth in Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Ireland, showing the proportion of participants in each country who highlighted enduring needs such as employability skills, educational pathways, access to social spaces, and healthcare services. These findings point to the structural supports necessary for young people to successfully transition into adulthood and fully participate in their societies.

A noteworthy finding from the long-term data is the high demand for employment-related support among Irish youth (56.25%) compared to their counterparts in Bulgaria (16.67%) and Cyprus (14.29%). This likely reflects the larger number of Irish respondents currently in secondary education, who are already thinking about their career development. In contrast, many migrant and refugee youth in Cyprus and Bulgaria continue to face immediate barriers to entering the labor market, such as legal restrictions, non-recognition of qualifications, and discrimination.

Housing remains a significant long-term concern, particularly in Ireland (18.75%) and Bulgaria (18.18%), where access to affordable housing is becoming increasingly challenging. Although fewer respondents in Cyprus (10.71%) identified housing as a long-term priority, it is nonetheless a core component of stability and successful integration, especially for displaced youth living in temporary accommodation.

# Identifying Long-Term Needs

Long-Term Needs Of Youth By Country



# Five Key Thematic Issues

## Cross-border

Moreover, research conducted in Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Ireland has identified five interrelated thematic areas that highlight the core challenges faced by at-risk youth and migrant communities. These areas are:

1. Mental health and emotional well-being
2. Language barriers and communication
3. Housing and living conditions
4. Education and skills development
5. Discrimination and social integration

These themes emerged consistently across all three countries, reflecting shared experiences and country-specific nuances. They should guide the development of community-driven initiatives, youth-led projects, and responsive programs that effectively address the realities faced by young people in inclusive, practical, and sustainable ways.

### **1. Mental Health and Emotional Well-being**

Mental health emerged as one of the most pressing challenges for young people across all three countries. Experiences of trauma, displacement, discrimination, social isolation, and uncertainty about the future were common issues affecting both local and migrant youth.

In Cyprus and Bulgaria, young refugees and migrants reported carrying trauma related to war, family separation, and forced migration. These psychological burdens are often exacerbated by hostile or unfamiliar environments, where access to emotional support may be limited or unavailable. In Bulgaria, for instance, Ukrainian youth described distress triggered by everyday reminders of their past, such as the sound of planes. Moreover, language barriers, unfamiliar healthcare systems, and a lack of culturally responsive care further complicate access to support.

In Ireland, rural isolation and limited youth infrastructure were often cited by local youth as factors contributing to depression, anxiety, and rising suicide rates. Long waiting lists and the scarcity of accessible mental health services were common concerns. Participants expressed a need for spaces where they could safely share their experiences, even outside clinical settings.

Across all three countries, the research indicates the importance of expanding mental health initiatives embedded in community life—initiatives informed by youth, trauma-aware, and culturally relevant.

### **2. Language Barriers and Communication**

The inability to communicate fluently in the host country's language was recognized as a significant challenge, particularly for migrant and refugee youth. This barrier impacts all areas of life—from accessing essential services and healthcare to forming social relationships and securing employment.

# Five Key Thematic Issues

## Cross-border

Participants from Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Ireland reported feeling excluded and frustrated due to language difficulties, which hindered their ability to express themselves or advocate for their needs. In Cyprus, one participant expressed helplessness when others spoke too quickly. In Bulgaria, many refugees struggled with school engagement due to language gaps. Although some supports, like interpreters, exist in Ireland, the demand for English language classes—especially in rural areas—far exceeds the current availability.

Language barriers isolate young people from their surroundings and limit their ability to engage meaningfully in society. Many described being barred from job opportunities or education programs due to insufficient language skills while lacking the resources to improve them. This cycle deepens marginalization.

The findings suggest a need for a broader expansion of accessible, localized language learning opportunities. These should be flexible, low-barrier, and integrated into community spaces where young people feel connected and welcome.

### 3. Housing and Living Conditions

Access to safe, affordable, and stable housing was a recurring theme across all research sites, significantly affecting young people's physical and emotional security. Many describe their housing situations as precarious, inadequate, or entirely inaccessible.

In Cyprus, young people spoke about overcrowded shelters and temporary government accommodations, which contributed to stress and declining mental health. Discrimination in the private rental market and inflated costs posed additional barriers. In Bulgaria, Ukrainian youth faced challenges securing housing in the capital due to cost and availability, often forced into unstable arrangements with limited protections.

In Ireland, youth homelessness—particularly among care leavers, low-income households, and marginalized groups—was identified as a growing crisis. Participants pointed to "hidden homelessness," such as staying in hotels or couch-surfing while trying to maintain access to education or employment. Rural areas' lack of housing infrastructure further complicated the situation for those living outside urban centers.

Youth across the three countries emphasized that stable housing is foundational for their ability to plan for the future. Programs that promote transitional housing, youth-led co-housing, or community-supported accommodation models are essential to address these challenges.

### 4. Education and Skills Development

Young people consistently emphasized the importance of education as a pathway to opportunity; however, many encountered both structural and personal barriers that hindered their ability to continue learning or develop relevant skills.

# Five Key Thematic Issues

## Cross-border

In Cyprus, access to free formal public education becomes extremely limited once youth turn 18, particularly for migrants. Participants expressed frustration about not knowing how to re-enter educational systems or access vocational training. In Bulgaria, youth faced challenges with school integration, cultural differences, and a lack of extra learning support. The disconnect between school curricula and students' experiences led many to disengage, and vocational pathways remained limited after secondary school.

In Ireland, affordability was a significant concern. Even with subsidies, the costs of tuition, transport, and housing made education feel out of reach for many. Participants from rural areas described having to commute long distances or delay their studies due to poor infrastructure. Those not pursuing traditional academic routes felt that skill-based training options were underdeveloped or inaccessible.

Across various contexts, young people expressed a need for more practical, affordable, and inclusive education pathways. This includes expanding vocational and alternative education options, integrating language and skills support, and ensuring access regardless of geography or background.

### **5. Discrimination and Social Integration**

In Cyprus, migrant youth reported facing discrimination in everyday settings—ranging from being avoided on public transport to being overlooked in the job market. Those wearing visible religious symbols were particularly vulnerable. In Bulgaria, refugees noted the stigma attached to their status, with some locals blaming them for economic challenges. Language barriers made it difficult for them to challenge this treatment or explain their realities.

In Ireland, both migrant and Traveller youth shared experiences of being stereotyped or dismissed before even speaking a word. Discrimination was observed in schools, housing, and workplaces, with one participant stating, “You can see it in their faces—they’ve already decided who you are.”

While efforts to foster community dialogue and intercultural awareness are emerging, participants stressed the need for deeper, more consistent engagement. Initiatives that promote intercultural exchange, youth-led community building, and solidarity across groups can help foster connections and reduce stigma.



# Final Reflections & Next Steps

This mini-report highlights the initial insights into the lived experiences of migrant and refugee youth in Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Ireland, focusing on five key thematic areas: mental health and well-being, language and communication, housing and living conditions, access to education and employment, and discrimination and social inclusion. It is important to note that these interconnected issues are not standalone; they are structural realities that impact the daily lives and futures of young people in various national contexts.

While the research involved a relatively small and non-representative sample, its findings are significant. The voices of young people and key stakeholders, combined with existing grey and academic literature, provide a foundational understanding of the urgent needs and barriers that hinder integration, empowerment, and well-being. Despite the limited scope, the methodology revealed underrepresented perspectives that are often overlooked in larger datasets or policy discussions. These early findings highlight the critical need for further investigation through expanded, youth-centered, and intersectional research to inform impactful, evidence-based responses across Europe.

## Looking Ahead: Toward Locally Anchored Youth Interventions

The next phase of the project will concentrate on designing nine country-specific Roadmaps (three for each country) that propose practical, community-driven interventions based on the research outcomes. These Roadmaps will be developed in collaboration with local partners, young people, and stakeholders. They will not only reflect the challenges but also the opportunities identified through the research, emphasizing agency, resilience, and community potential.

Following the design phase, the Roadmaps will be tested in their respective national contexts. These pilot interventions will explore effective models for supporting migrant and refugee youth in areas such as mental health, education, housing, and civic inclusion. The outcomes will be shared through public events and presented to local authorities, community initiatives, CSOs, and policymakers. Through these collaborative and public-facing engagements, the project aims to stimulate broader dialogue, inspire replication, and generate support for sustainable, youth-informed action across Europe.

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## **STRUGGLE and RESILIENCE: Challenges Faced by At-Risk Youth in Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Ireland (Mini Report)**

### **About the Project**

This report was produced as part of the BEYOND project, a cross-national initiative aiming to enhance the inclusion, well-being, and civic participation of migrant and refugee youth across Europe. The project is coordinated by Generation for Change CY, a migrant-led grassroots organization based in Cyprus, and is implemented in partnership with Blackwater Training & Consulting in Ireland and the Foundation for Sustainable Community Development (FSCOD) in Bulgaria.



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