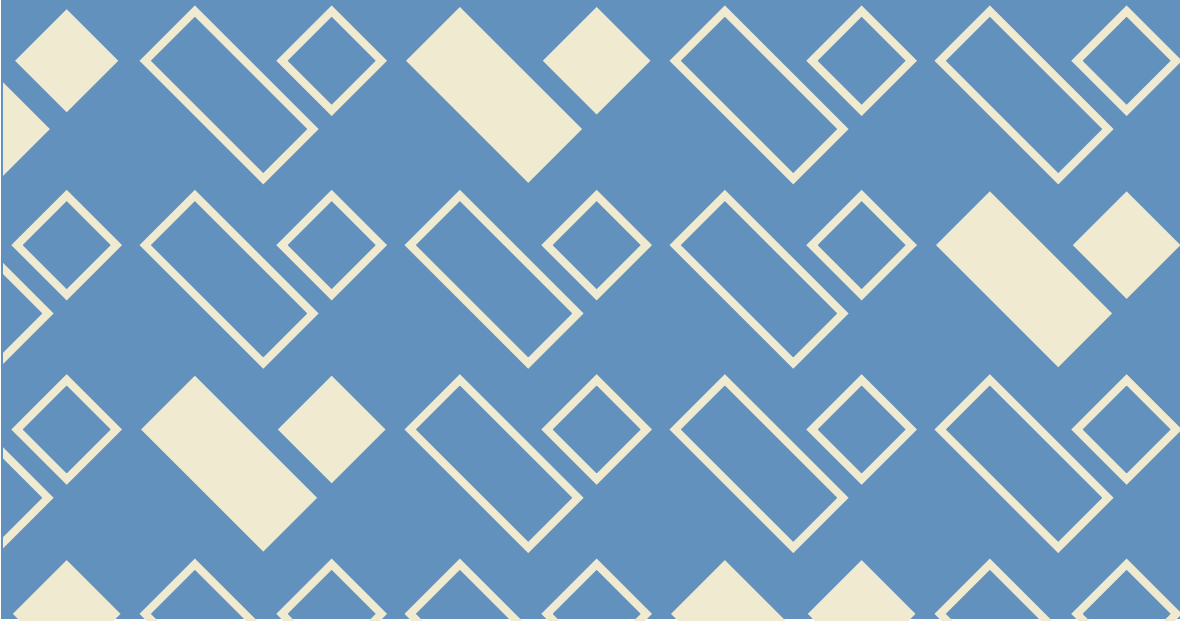




ANALYTICAL REPORT



Needs of Families of Persons Missing
Under Special Circumstances:
Research Findings

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*Missing Does Not Mean Forgotten:
Society Must Do More to Support
Families of Missing Persons*

Prepared by

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This study was conducted as part of the project activities of the charitable organization "CHARITABLE FOUNDATION "ADAPTATION AND REHABILITATION CENTER "YARMIZ".

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Introduction

Full-scale invasion of Ukraine has left thousands¹ of families living in prolonged uncertainty, not knowing the fate of their loved ones. This experience differs fundamentally from bereavement following death or other forms of loss. Instead, it is characterized by the coexistence of hope, fear, emotional exhaustion, and the constant anticipation of answers.

Against this background, there is an urgent need to better understand the everyday challenges faced by families of persons missing under special circumstances, identify their unmet needs, and explore how they envision an effective system of support.

The purpose of this study extends beyond presenting statistical findings. It also seeks to amplify the voices of families whose lived experiences often remain unheard.

For this reason, the survey included open-ended questions that allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words and to inform the development of sustainable, responsive support services.

"The hardest part is not knowing."

"It feels as though our lives have been put on hold."

"We have not stopped living, yet we are unable to truly live."

These reflections vividly illustrate the emotional reality experienced by many participants.

5 ¹According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, more than 90,000 people are officially registered as missing under special circumstances. This figure was reported by Artur Dobroserdov, the Commissioner for Persons Missing Under Special Circumstances, in an interview with Ukrinform.

Terminology

Persons Missing Under Special Circumstances

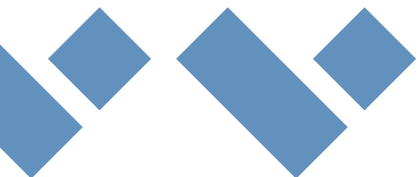
In this report, the term "Persons Missing Under Special Circumstances" refers to the legal status established under Ukrainian legislation for military personnel and civilians whose whereabouts remain unknown as a result of armed conflict, temporary occupation, or other extraordinary circumstances.

Ambiguous Loss

Ambiguous loss is a concept describing a situation in which physical and psychological presence do not coincide. It occurs when a loved one is physically absent but psychologically present, as in cases where their fate remains unknown, or when a person is physically present but psychologically absent.

Unlike bereavement following a confirmed death, ambiguous loss provides no clear boundary that allows the grieving process to begin or reach resolution. As a result, families may simultaneously experience hope, fear, guilt, helplessness, and ongoing anticipation over extended periods of time.

The concept of Ambiguous Loss was developed by the American family therapist and researcher **Pauline Boss** and is now widely recognised as one of the leading theoretical frameworks for understanding the psychological experiences of families of missing persons.



About the Study

The survey was developed to gain a deeper understanding of the current needs and challenges experienced by families of persons missing under special circumstances and to contribute to the development of more responsive, accessible, and effective support services.

The study was conducted on a voluntary basis.

The questionnaire, data collection, and initial analysis were made possible through the collaborative efforts of professionals united by a shared commitment to strengthening the support system available to families of persons missing under special circumstances.

A total of 254 family members of persons missing under special circumstances participated in the study.

Research Methodology

The study employed an anonymous online survey. The questionnaire consisted of **23 questions**, combining both closed-ended and open-ended response formats.

Closed-ended questions were used to assess the prevalence of specific needs, challenges, and experiences among respondents, while open-ended questions enabled participants to describe their personal experiences, emotional responses, and perspectives on the support they consider most necessary.

The analysis integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches, including:

- descriptive statistical analysis of survey responses;
- thematic analysis of open-ended responses;
- analysis of selected statistical relationships between key variables.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The questionnaire included a socio-demographic section designed to describe the characteristics of the study sample.

Information was collected on respondents' age, region of residence, relationship to the missing person, marital status, whether they had children, and the length of time their loved one had been missing under special circumstances.

The study included family members from across different regions of Ukraine.

The majority of respondents were spouses of missings (59.8%). The sample also included parents (17.7%), siblings (13.8%), children, and other close relatives.

More than **74%** of participants had been living with this uncertainty for over one year.

These findings are consistent with the theory of **Ambiguous Loss**, which describes the prolonged psychological uncertainty experienced when the fate of a loved one remains unknown.

Ethical Considerations



Participation in the study was entirely voluntary.

Before completing the questionnaire, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and that the findings would be reported exclusively in aggregated form.

The survey was anonymous. No personally identifiable information was collected.

All quotations included in this report have been anonymised and are presented solely to illustrate common experiences and recurring themes identified through the analysis of participants' open-ended responses.

Throughout the study and the preparation of this report, the research team adhered to the ethical principles of respect for participants' dignity, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the responsible and ethical reporting of research findings.

Study Limitations

The findings presented in this report reflect the experiences of individuals who voluntarily participated in the survey and should not be considered representative of the entire population of families of persons missing under special circumstances in Ukraine.

Nevertheless, the results provide valuable insights into the common needs, challenges, and priorities reported by participating families. They also identify areas for strengthening existing support systems and may serve as a foundation for future research and the development of evidence-informed psychosocial support programmes.



Psychological Well-being

Overall, **58.3%** of respondents rated their psychological well-being as **poor or very poor**.

The findings also revealed another important pattern. Despite the high levels of emotional distress reported by participants, only **40.9%** had ever sought psychological support (31.5% had done so on several occasions, while 9.4% reported receiving support on a regular basis).

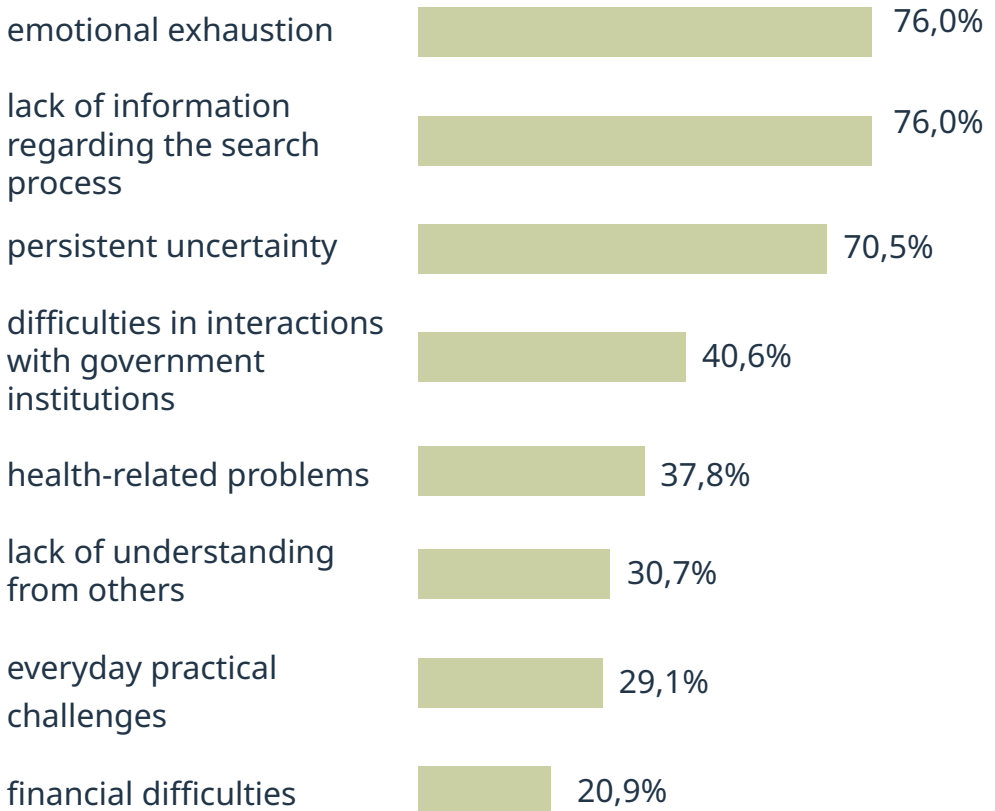
Nearly one-third of respondents (**28.0%**) indicated that they had wanted to consult a psychologist but, for various reasons, had not done so.

A further **31.1%** reported that they had not sought psychological support because they did not perceive a need for it or did not believe it would be helpful.

These findings suggest the presence of barriers to accessing psychological support. Possible barriers may include limited awareness of available mental health services, doubts about their effectiveness, limited access to qualified professionals, and the belief that psychological support cannot alter the objective reality of prolonged uncertainty. However, the present study does not allow conclusions regarding the relative importance of these barriers or any causal relationships between them.

Key Challenges

The challenges most frequently reported by respondents were:



Notably, emotional exhaustion and the lack of reliable information were reported with almost identical frequency.

These findings suggest that timely access to accurate and reliable information serves not only an administrative function but also plays a significant psychological role for families of missing.

Ambiguous Loss

The findings are consistent with the theory of **Ambiguous Loss**.

Unlike bereavement following a confirmed death, there is no defining event that enables the grieving process to begin or progress toward resolution. A loved one may still be alive, yet may also have died. The coexistence of these mutually exclusive possibilities creates a prolonged state of psychological uncertainty.

For this reason, conventional models describing the "**stages of grief**" may not be fully applicable in work with families of missing persons or should be applied with considerable caution.

It is also noteworthy that the statistical analysis found **no significant association** between the length of time a person had been missing and the psychological well-being of their family members.

This finding suggests that the passage of time alone does not necessarily reduce psychological distress. At the same time, the present study did not evaluate the effectiveness of specific psychological interventions.

In light of these findings, a promising direction for strengthening the support system may be the development and implementation of programmes aimed at enhancing family resilience and strengthening adaptive coping resources.



Secondary Traumatization

One of the recurring themes identified in participants' open-ended responses was the experience of being retraumatized through interactions with other people or with institutions.

Participants wrote:

"Please don't tell me that he is gone when no one knows that for certain."

"The most painful thing is when people try to convince me to accept it."

"Some conversations leave me feeling even more hurt."

These qualitative findings underscore the importance of increasing awareness of **Ambiguous Loss** among communities as well as among frontline professionals who are often the first point of contact for families.

A better understanding of the unique experiences of families of persons missing under special circumstances could not only reduce the risk of secondary traumatization but also help prevent burnout among professionals working in helping and support services.

Family Needs

The needs most frequently identified by respondents included:

receiving regular and reliable updates on the search process 60,2%

having clear guidance on available procedures and assistance with administrative documentation 42,5%

access to psychological support 40,9%

having a single designated professional to coordinate communication and cooperation between relevant services 44,1%

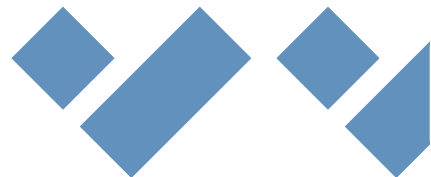
receiving support for children and other family members 29,5%

experiencing understanding and support from the wider community. This need emerged through the qualitative analysis of participants' open-ended responses rather than from a specific multiple-choice survey item.

Family Needs

Furthermore, only **16.1%** of respondents believed that the needs of families of persons missing receive sufficient public attention within their local communities. This finding may indicate a broader lack of public awareness regarding the realities and needs of these families.

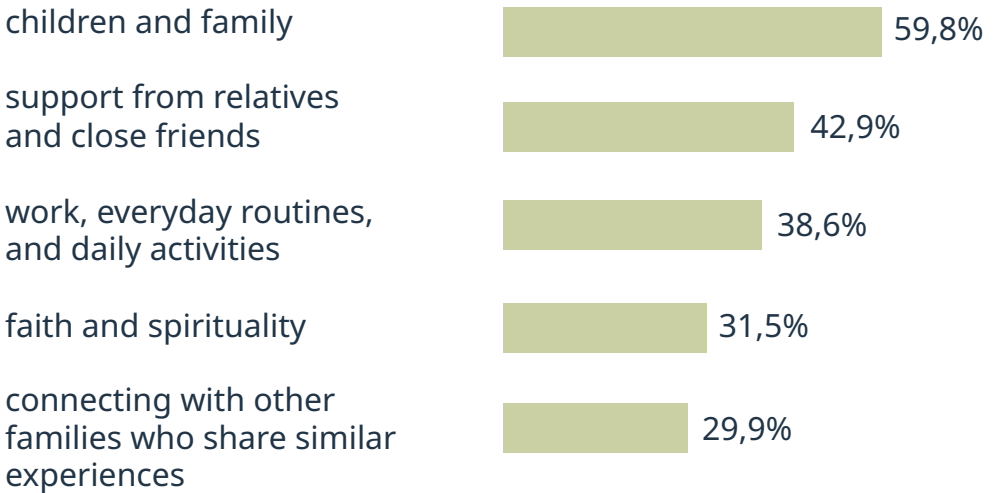
Nearly **79%** of respondents supported the introduction of family **case management**. This finding suggests a clear demand for a more coordinated and integrated support system. One promising approach would be the implementation of a **case management model** to ensure continuity of support and coordination across services.



Sources of Strength and Support

Despite experiencing high levels of emotional distress, most respondents identified personal sources of strength that helped them cope with ongoing uncertainty.

The most frequently reported sources of support were:



One participant wrote:

"What helps are the people who do not try to take my pain away, but simply stay beside me."

Recommendations



The recommendations presented below are based on the findings of this study and are consistent with contemporary approaches to the organisation of psychosocial support for families of persons missing under special circumstances.

For National and Local Government Authorities

- support the development and implementation of case management systems for families;
- ensure regular, transparent, and sustainable communication with families, including timely access to reliable information;
- consider measures to improve interagency coordination and simplify administrative procedures;
- strengthen the availability and accessibility of qualified psychosocial support services.

Recommendations

For Psychologists and Other Helping Professionals

- incorporate an understanding of Ambiguous Loss into assessment, intervention, and ongoing support;
- refrain from making assumptions or drawing conclusions about the fate of the missing person;
- avoid encouraging families to "move on" or prematurely accept an outcome that remains uncertain;
- pay particular attention to the psychosocial needs of children and adolescents affected by the disappearance of a family member.

For Communities

- refrain from making assumptions about the fate of the missing person;
- avoid using phrases such as "time heals," "you need to let go," or "you need to move on";
- be willing to listen without judgment;
- remember that support often begins with the simple willingness to be present.



Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that families of persons missing under special circumstances experience a wide range of psychological, informational, and social needs.

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to everyone working to strengthen the support system for families of persons missing. Even in the face of profound uncertainty and adversity, one of the most meaningful forms of support is the experience of having one's reality acknowledged rather than denied, one's suffering validated rather than minimised, and one's experience accepted without attempts to oversimplify it.

The author extends her sincere gratitude to the charitable organization "CHARITABLE FOUNDATION "ADAPTATION AND REHABILITATION CENTER "YARMIZ" for supporting the implementation of this study, to Hanna Mokrousova for her expert review, and to every participant who generously shared their personal experiences.

Their voices form the foundation of this analytical report.

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