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Assessing the Psychological Impact of Police Stop-and-Search Encounters on Youths in Nigeria: Evidence from Oye Local Government Area, Ekiti State

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Abstract

Background

Arbitrary stop-and-search practices by law enforcement are prevalent in Nigeria, yet their psychological impact on youths remains underexplored. This study investigates how such encounters affect anxiety, stress, depression, and trust in law enforcement among youths in Oye, Ekiti State.

Methods

A cross-sectional mixed-methods study was conducted with 200 youths. Quantitative data were collected via structured questionnaires assessing experiences, psychological outcomes, and trust in the police. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews exploring lived experiences. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Results

Youths reported significant psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, avoidance behaviors, and impaired concentration. The frequency of stop-and-search encounters was positively correlated with psychological distress ($r = 0.462$, $p < 0.001$). Trust in law enforcement was moderate (mean = 3.14), but lower among those with negative encounters (mean = 2.94 vs 3.28, $p = 0.001$). Qualitative themes highlighted perceived arbitrariness, stigmatization, fear, and anticipatory anxiety.

Conclusion

Arbitrary stop-and-search practices negatively affect youth mental health and undermine trust in law enforcement. Interventions promoting procedural fairness, reducing arbitrary stops, and providing mental health support are critical.

1. Introduction

Police stop-and-search practices constitute a central component of proactive policing strategies aimed at preventing crime, detecting illegal possession of items, and maintaining public order. These encounters empower law enforcement officers to stop, question, and, where necessary, search individuals based on reasonable suspicion. While such practices are often justified as essential tools for crime control, a growing body of evidence suggests that their frequent or arbitrary application may produce unintended psychological consequences, particularly among youths who are more visible in public spaces and thus more likely to experience police scrutiny [3, 7].

Adolescence and early adulthood represent critical periods of psychological and social development, during which interactions with authority figures can significantly shape emotional regulation, identity formation, and institutional trust. Negative or coercive encounters with law enforcement during these formative stages may generate fear, anxiety, and a persistent sense of vulnerability. Empirical studies from diverse contexts indicate that repeated or aggressive police stops are associated with elevated levels of psychological distress, including depressive symptoms, trauma-related responses, and disengagement from social and educational activities [3, 7, 14–16]. These findings suggest that policing practices extend beyond their immediate legal function to influence broader dimensions of youth well-being.

The mechanisms underlying these effects can be understood through established criminological and psychological frameworks. General Strain Theory (GST) posits that exposure to stressful or unjust experiences generates emotional strain, which may manifest as anxiety, anger, or psychological distress [4]. In the context of stop-and-search, youths who perceive encounters as humiliating or discriminatory may experience cumulative strain with adverse implications for mental health. Labeling Theory (LT) further explains how repeated targeting by authorities can lead to the internalization of stigmatizing identities, reinforcing perceptions of deviance and social exclusion [5]. Complementing these perspectives, Procedural Justice Theory (PJT) emphasizes that individuals' perceptions of fairness, respect, and neutrality during interactions with authority are critical determinants of trust and cooperation [6]. When police encounters are perceived as arbitrary or disrespectful, they are more likely to elicit negative emotional responses and weaken institutional legitimacy. Taken together, these frameworks provide a multidimensional lens for understanding how stop-and-search practices shape psychological and social outcomes among youths.

Beyond direct interactions, recent scholarship highlights the broader public health implications of policing. Exposure to aggressive or invasive policing—whether experienced personally or observed within one's community has been linked to stress-related disorders and diminished overall well-being [16, 17]. For example, witnessing police stops or hearing accounts of coercive encounters may generate anticipatory anxiety and reduce perceived safety, even among individuals who have not been directly involved [18]. This evidence underscores the cumulative and diffuse nature of policing-related stressors, positioning law enforcement practices as important social determinants of mental health.

Despite the growing international evidence base, research on the psychological consequences of stop-and-search practices in developing countries remains limited. In Nigeria, existing studies have largely focused on issues of corruption, accountability, and police legitimacy, with comparatively little attention to the mental health implications of everyday policing encounters [9, 10, 13]. Yet, anecdotal and emerging empirical evidence suggests that arbitrary stop-and-search practices—often linked to suspicions of cybercrime or other offences may involve intrusive questioning, searches, and informal detention, frequently in the absence of clear legal justification. Such encounters can engender fear, humiliation, and psychological distress, but systematic empirical investigation of these outcomes remains scarce.

Moreover, much of the Nigerian literature is concentrated in major urban centres, with limited attention to smaller towns and semi-urban settings where policing dynamics may differ. Oye Local Government Area (LGA) in Ekiti State provides a relevant context for such inquiry, given its sizeable youth population, driven in part by the presence of higher educational institutions and commercial activities. Youths in this setting frequently interact with law enforcement in public spaces, increasing their exposure to stop-and-search practices and their potential vulnerability to associated psychological effects. Examining these dynamics in a semi-urban context offers important insights into the broader social and mental health implications of policing beyond metropolitan environments.

Research Gap: There is limited empirical understanding of how stop-and-search practices affect youth psychological well-being in Nigeria, especially outside major urban centers. The interplay between procedural fairness, labeling, and strain in shaping mental health outcomes has not been systematically examined in the Nigerian context.

Study Aim and Objectives: The primary aim of this study is to assess the psychological impact of police stop-and-search encounters on youths in Oye Local Government Area, Ekiti State, Nigeria. The study addresses the following objectives:

1. To examine youths' experiences with police, stop-and-search encounters in Oye.
2. To assess the psychological outcomes of these encounters, including anxiety, stress, depression, and avoidance behaviors.
3. To evaluate the effect of stop-and-search practices on youths' trust in law enforcement.
4. To analyze the relationships between the frequency and nature of police encounters and psychological distress, informed by General Strain Theory, Procedural Justice Theory, and Labeling Theory.

1.2 Literature Review

Police Stop-and-Search and Youth Encounters

Police stop-and-search practices remain a central feature of proactive policing, designed to prevent crime, detect the possession of illegal items, and enhance public safety. These encounters permit law enforcement officers to temporarily stop and question individuals in public spaces based on reasonable suspicion. While such practices are often justified on security grounds, a growing body of empirical research indicates that their frequent or arbitrary application may have unintended psychological consequences, particularly for youths who are more likely to occupy public spaces and, consequently, experience police scrutiny [1, 2].

For adolescents and young adults, stop-and-search encounters are typically involuntary and may involve questioning, inspection of personal belongings, or physical searches. As these interactions often represent initial contact with the criminal justice system, they can evoke feelings of embarrassment, fear, and a perceived loss of autonomy—especially when experienced as unjust or discriminatory. Such

encounters function as salient social stressors, with the potential to shape emotional and cognitive development, as well as early perceptions of authority and justice [3]. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that youths exposed to frequent police stops report higher levels of anxiety, trauma-related symptoms, and general psychological distress, particularly where encounters are perceived as intrusive or disrespectful [4, 5]. These findings underscore the cumulative impact of routine policing practices on youth mental health.

Psychological Consequences of Police Stops

The literature increasingly conceptualizes police encounters as environmental stressors with measurable implications for psychological well-being. Stop-and-search practices often involve the temporary restriction of liberty, perceived humiliation, and uncertainty regarding potential escalation, all of which can trigger emotional distress. Scholars have argued that such experiences function similarly to adverse life events, contributing to anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and broader forms of social exclusion [6].

Evidence from population-based and epidemiological studies supports this perspective. Youths who experience police stops report significantly higher levels of emotional distress and trauma-related symptoms compared with those without such encounters [7, 8]. Systematic reviews further indicate that repeated exposure to police contact is associated with increased risks of anxiety, depression, and psychological dysregulation [14, 17]. In this regard, invasive or aggressive policing has been described as a form of “collateral damage,” reflecting unintended yet substantial health consequences arising from routine law enforcement practices [16]. These effects are often intensified when encounters are perceived as coercive or stigmatizing, reinforcing feelings of helplessness, social exclusion, and diminished well-being [1].

Frequency of Police Contact and Psychological Distress

The frequency of police encounters plays a critical role in shaping psychological outcomes. Recurrent stop-and-search experiences may produce sustained feelings of surveillance, vulnerability, and hypervigilance, thereby elevating stress and anxiety levels. Empirical studies demonstrate that adolescents and young adults exposed to multiple police stops exhibit higher levels of depressive symptoms, post-traumatic stress, and overall psychological distress compared with those experiencing limited or no contact [4, 9, 14, 15]. These findings suggest a dose response relationship, whereby increased exposure to policing intensifies psychological harm.

Importantly, the impact of policing extends beyond direct encounters. Indirect or vicarious exposure such as witnessing police stops or hearing about them within peer networks can also contribute to psychological distress. Research indicates that such exposure is associated with heightened fear and reduced perceived safety, particularly in communities with frequent police activity [18]. This broader diffusion of policing-related stress highlights the collective dimension of its psychological impact and reinforces the need to consider both direct and indirect experiences in assessing youth well-being.

Police Encounters, Procedural Fairness, and Psychological Outcomes

Procedural fairness has emerged as a critical factor shaping psychological and attitudinal responses to police encounters. Procedural Justice Theory posits that individuals' perceptions of fairness, respect, and transparency during interactions with authorities influence not only their emotional responses but also their trust in institutions and willingness to comply with the law [6]. Within the context of stop-and-search, youths who perceive encounters as fair and respectful are less likely to experience severe psychological distress, even when subjected to police scrutiny.

Conversely, encounters perceived as arbitrary, discriminatory, or disrespectful tend to exacerbate negative emotional responses, including anxiety, anger, and mistrust [5]. Empirical evidence indicates that perceptions of unfair treatment during police stops are strongly associated with heightened trauma symptoms and sustained psychological distress [1, 4]. These findings suggest that the psychological impact of stop-and-search practices is not solely determined by their occurrence but is significantly mediated by the quality of police conduct during interactions.

Police Encounters, Legitimacy, and Social Outcomes

Beyond individual psychological effects, police encounters have broader implications for institutional legitimacy and social integration. Procedural Justice Theory further asserts that perceptions of fairness and respect are central to the legitimacy of law enforcement, which in turn influences public cooperation and compliance [6]. Empirical studies support this assertion, demonstrating that individuals who perceive police as legitimate are more likely to engage in cooperative behaviours, including reporting crimes and providing information [19].

However, negative or stigmatizing encounters may produce enduring developmental consequences. Research in developmental criminology suggests that early and repeated contact with the criminal justice system particularly when perceived as unjust can shape behavioural trajectories, reinforce deviant identities, and weaken social bonds [20]. This aligns with labeling perspectives, which emphasize how repeated police scrutiny may contribute to the internalization of negative social identities and subsequent marginalization.

Evidence from non-Western contexts further underscores the role of structural and institutional factors in shaping these dynamics. Studies in settings such as South Africa and Nigeria demonstrate that perceptions of police legitimacy are closely linked to everyday experiences of fairness, accountability, and respect [21, 22]. In contexts where policing is perceived as arbitrary or coercive, such practices may exacerbate existing social inequalities and deepen mistrust between youths and law enforcement agencies. These patterns underscore the importance of context-sensitive analyses in understanding the psychological and social consequences of stop-and-search practices

Conceptual and Theoretical Integration

The psychological outcomes of stop-and-search encounters namely fear, anxiety, stress, and mistrust can be theoretically understood through the combined lens of General Strain Theory (GST), Procedural Justice Theory (PJT), and Labeling Theory (LT).

General Strain Theory posits that exposure to negative or stressful events generates emotional strain, manifesting as anxiety, frustration, or distress [1]. Stop-and-search encounters, particularly when perceived as unjust or intrusive, constitute a source of strain for youths. Repeated experiences of such encounters can induce chronic stress, leading to long-term psychological consequences such as heightened fear, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation [2].

Procedural Justice Theory emphasizes that the perceived fairness and legitimacy of authority figures influence emotional and cognitive responses to policing [10]. Youths who perceive stop-and-search encounters as fair, respectful, and transparent are less likely to experience severe distress. In contrast, perceptions of arbitrariness, discrimination, or disrespect exacerbate psychological strain and mistrust [5]. Procedural injustice can thus amplify the psychological consequences of negative police encounters.

Labeling Theory explains how repeated police scrutiny can result in internalized social labels. Youths targeted multiple times may begin to view themselves as deviant or suspicious, even in the absence of culpability [6]. This internalization reinforces social exclusion, mistrust, and fear, further contributing to psychological distress. Over time, these processes may influence identity formation, behavior, and broader social engagement.

By integrating GST, PJT, and LT, this study conceptualizes stop-and-search encounters as multidimensional stressors with cognitive, emotional, and social consequences. GST provides the foundation for understanding emotional strain, PJT accounts for the moderating role of perceived fairness, and LT highlights the long-term cognitive and social implications of repeated labeling. This framework guides the selection of key psychological outcomes (fear, anxiety, stress, mistrust) and underscores the importance of local contextual factors, including community policing norms and sociocultural influences, in shaping youth mental health outcomes.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model underpinning this study. It depicts how stop-and-search experiences operationalised through frequency, intrusiveness, and perceived fairness shape a range of psychological outcomes, including fear, anxiety, anger, humiliation, and distrust. These outcomes are theoretically grounded in General Strain Theory (GST), Procedural Justice Theory (PJT), and Labeling Theory (LT), which respectively explain the emotional, normative, and identity-based consequences of police encounters. The framework further demonstrates how these psychological responses translate into attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, such as trust in police, perceived legitimacy, compliance, deviance, withdrawal, and cooperation.

2. Methods

2.1 Study design

A cross-sectional, mixed-methods design was used to examine the psychological impact of police stop-and-search encounters on youths in Oye Local Government Area, Ekiti State, Nigeria [1]. Quantitative surveys assessed encounter frequency, perceived procedural fairness, and psychological outcomes, including anxiety (GAD-7), stress (PSS-10), and trust in law enforcement [2–6]. Qualitative semi-structured interviews explored emotional responses, stigmatization, and conditional trust [7].

2.2 Study setting and participants

Oye Local Government Area is a semi-urban locality with diverse educational, commercial, and residential environments [2]. Participants were youths aged 15–29 years who had resided in the area for at least one year and had prior exposure to or awareness of stop-and-search encounters. The quantitative sample included 200 participants (98% response rate), while 20 participants were purposively selected for interviews to ensure variation in age, gender, and encounter frequency [3].

2.3 Sampling and data collection

A multistage sampling approach was used to select wards, communities, and participants systematically [8]. Surveys captured demographics, police encounters, and psychological outcomes, while interviews explored personal experiences. Data collection occurred face-to-face in private settings to ensure comprehension, confidentiality, and voluntary participation [4–7].

2.4 Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0; descriptive statistics summarized outcomes, and inferential analyses (t-tests, ANOVA, multiple regression) examined associations between encounter frequency, procedural fairness, and psychological distress ($p < 0.05$) [9]. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's six-step method and integrated with survey findings for contextual interpretation [10].

2.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval

was obtained from the Federal University Oye-Ekiti (FUOYE) Ethics Committee, with local authority permission. Written informed consent was obtained, with parental consent for minors. Confidentiality was maintained via coded identifiers, withdrawal was allowed at any stage, and psychological support resources were provided [10].

2.6 Limitations

Limitations include a reliance on self-reported data subject to recall bias and the cross-sectional design limiting causal inference. The inclusion of qualitative interviews mitigates these limitations by providing depth and context.

3. Results

A total of 200 questionnaires were administered, with 196 returned (98% response rate). Respondents' sociodemographic characteristics were documented, followed by analyses of youth experiences with stop-and-search encounters, associated psychological outcomes, and trust in law enforcement. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression models, while qualitative interview findings were integrated to contextualize youths' experiences and psychological responses.

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic profile of respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n = 200)	Percentage
Gender	Male	120	60%
	Female	80	40%
Age	18–22	60	30%
	23–27	80	40%
	28–32	60	30%
Religion	Christianity	80	40%
	Islam	115	57.5%
	Traditional/Other	5	2.5%
Ethnic Group	Yoruba	95	47.5%
	Igbo	60	30%
	Hausa	45	22.5%
Educational Level	Secondary	35	17.5%
	OND/NCE	50	25%
	HND/Bachelor's	80	40%
	Postgraduate	35	17.5%
Residence	Sub-Urban	65	32.5%
	Rural	95	47.5%
	No Idea	40	20%
Average Monthly Income	Below ₦10,000	12	6%
	₦10,000–₦49,999	25	12.5%
	₦50,000–₦99,999	40	20%
	₦100,000 and above	123	61.5%
Field work,2026			

The sample consisted predominantly of young adults, with individuals aged 23–27 years accounting for 40% of respondents, and males representing 60%. The sample was religiously and ethnically diverse, with Yoruba respondents constituting the largest ethnic group (47.5%). More than half of the participants (57.5%) had attained tertiary education, suggesting a relatively informed cohort capable of reflective responses. In terms of residence, 47.5% were from rural areas, while 32.5% resided in suburban settings,

indicating contextual diversity in exposure to policing practices. A majority (61.5%) reported monthly incomes above ₦100,000, reflecting a relatively economically active population. Overall, the sample provides a relevant basis for examining youth experiences of stop-and-search practices and their psychological implications

3.2 Experiences of Youths with Stop-and-Search Practices

Findings on youths' experiences during stop-and-search encounters are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

S/N	Item	SA	A	SD	D	Mean	Decision
1	The officers exhibited respect towards me during the stop	54	61	42	43	3.10	Accepted
2	I was afforded an opportunity to articulate my perspective.	49	58	50	43	3.08	Accepted
3	The officers were attentive to my statements.	63	55	46	36	3.12	Accepted
4	The officers conducted themselves in a professional and composed manner	67	53	46	34	3.14	Accepted
	Overall cluster average	—	—	—	—	3.11	Accepted

Keys: $\bar{X}$ *= Mean of responses, SD = Standard Deviation*

Field work, 2026

The results indicate that respondents generally perceived police conduct as moderately respectful and professional, with a cluster mean of 3.11. A substantial proportion of participants reported that officers listened to their perspectives and maintained composure during interactions. However, the presence of dissenting responses points to inconsistencies in procedural conduct. These mixed experiences suggest that while elements of procedural justice are evident, arbitrary or uneven application of stop-and-search practices may still generate uncertainty and tension among youths, consistent with procedural justice scholarship [1].

3.3 Psychological effects of arbitrary stop-and-search practices on youths

The psychological consequences of stop-and-search encounters are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

S/N	Item	SA	A	SD	D	Mean	Decision
1	I experienced feelings of anxiety or nervousness subsequent to the encounter.	61	56	42	41	3.18	Accepted
2	I encountered difficulties in sleeping due to persistent thoughts about the event.	68	47	45	40	3.12	Accepted
3	I felt a sense of sadness or depression following the stop.	59	55	42	44	3.11	Accepted
4	I consciously avoided locations where I perceived I might be subjected to another stop.	51	63	46	40	3.08	Accepted
5	I harbored feelings of anger or resentment towards the officers.	103	55	25	17	3.20	Accepted
6	I felt a sense of helplessness or hopelessness as a consequence of the stop-and-search. Law enforcement officers in my vicinity demonstrate fairness towards youth.	68	49	55	28	3.10	Accepted
7	I faced challenges in concentrating on my academic or professional responsibilities thereafter.	51	63	20	16	3.06	Accepted
	Overall cluster average		—	—	—	3.12	Accepted

$\bar{}$

Keys: $\varvec{X}$ *= Mean of responses, SD = Standard Deviation, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree*

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

The findings reveal that such encounters are associated with notable psychological distress, with a cluster mean of 3.12. Respondents reported experiencing anxiety, sleep disturbances, depressive symptoms, and difficulty concentrating following police interactions. High levels of anger and resentment further suggest that repeated encounters may foster adversarial perceptions of law enforcement. Additionally, behavioural adaptations such as avoidance of certain locations—indicate broader implications for mobility and perceived safety. These outcomes align with General Strain Theory, which posits that adverse experiences generate negative emotional states that may influence behaviour [2].

3.4 Trust in Law Enforcement

Levels of trust in law enforcement are reported in Table 4.

Table 4

S/N	Item	SA	A	SD	D	Mean	Decision
1	Law enforcement officers in my area act fairly toward youths	66	54	49	31	3.14	Accepted
2	I would feel comfortable reporting a crime to the police	58	55	55	32	3.10	Accepted
3	I believe police officers treat people from all backgrounds with respect	62	56	55	27	3.13	Accepted
4	I trust law enforcement to use their authority responsibly	59	50	49	42	3.11	Accepted
5	I would cooperate with police if asked for information or help	90	45	6	4	3.20	Accepted
	Overall cluster average	—	—	—	—	3.14	Accepted

$\bar{}$

Keys: $\varvec{X}$ *= Mean of responses, SD = Standard Deviation*

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

Despite the reported psychological distress, respondents exhibited moderate levels of trust in law enforcement (cluster mean = 3.14). Many indicated willingness to cooperate with police and report crimes. However, trust appeared conditional and was lower among those with negative stop-and-search experiences. This finding underscores the importance of perceived fairness in shaping institutional legitimacy, as emphasised in Procedural Justice Theory [1].

3.5 Correlation Analysis

The relationship between stop-and-search frequency and psychological distress is presented in **Table 5**.

Variables	R	Sig.	Interpretation
Frequency of stop-and-search	0.462	0.000	Positive, significant
Psychological distress	—	—	—

The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = 0.462$, $p < 0.05$) indicates a moderate and statistically significant positive relationship. This suggests that increased exposure to stop-and-search encounters is associated with heightened psychological distress among youths.

3.6 Regression Analysis

The regression model predicting psychological distress is summarised in **Table 6**.

Model	R	R^2	Adj. R^2	Std. Error
1	0.671	0.450	0.445	0.324

The model explains approximately 45% of the variance in psychological distress (R^2 = 0.450), indicating substantial explanatory power. Key predictors include frequency of encounters, perceived respect, opportunity for expression, and procedural fairness. These findings highlight the cumulative influence of policing experiences on mental health outcomes and reinforce the multidimensional nature of police–citizen interactions.

3.7 Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis One

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between stop-and-search encounters and psychological distress.
Table 7

Variables	N	Mean	SD	r_{cal}	Sig
Frequency of Stop-and-Search Encounters |	200	3.21	0.74	.462	0.000
Psychological Distress	200	3.07	.92		

Results presented in **Table 7** indicate a statistically significant relationship (r = 0.462, p = 0.000). The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. This finding confirms that frequent stop-and-search encounters are associated with increased psychological distress among youths.

Hypothesis Two

H_{02}: There is no difference in trust in law enforcement between youths who experienced stop-and-search and those who did not.

The results are presented in **Table 8**.

Variables	N	Mean	SD	r_{cal}	Sig
Youths who experienced stop-and-search	92	2.94	.61	.281	.001
Youths who did not experience stop-and-search	58	3.28	.55		

Respondents who had experienced stop-and-search reported lower trust in law enforcement (Mean = 2.94) compared to those without such experiences (Mean = 3.28). The difference is statistically significant (p = 0.001), leading to rejection of the null hypothesis. This suggests that direct exposure to stop-and-search practices may undermine trust in policing institutions, consistent with labeling perspectives that emphasise the impact of stigmatizing encounters on attitudes and identity [3].

3.9 Qualitative Findings (Interview Themes)

Qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into youths' experiences and psychological responses to police encounters. Three major themes emerged:

Theme 1: Fear and Anxiety during Police Encounters

Participants associated these emotions with the armed officers' presence and perceived aggressiveness. One participant explained:

"The aggressive posture of the officers armed with guns is no child's play. You know a lot of incidents involving the police and some of our students who have been shot accidentally… None of the officers concerned has been held accountable; the army officers are even worse because they believe they are above the law." (participant)

This suggests fear arises not only from the immediate interaction but also from perceptions of institutional impunity, with repeated incidents of "accidental discharge" reinforcing collective anxiety. General Strain Theory posits that such encounters constitute stressors that generate negative emotions when authority is perceived as unjust [1]. Another participant highlighted the unpredictability of police power:

"In Nigeria, the fear of a police officer calling you for anything… is enough to cause anxiety because they can do and undo… They can plant exhibits like drugs… That alone is enough to send shivers down anyone's spine." (Youth participant)

Procedural Justice Theory suggests that perceived arbitrariness undermines legitimacy and heightens psychological distress [2]. Empirical studies confirm that coercive or procedurally unfair policing is linked to increased fear and anxiety among youth [3, 4]. Fear thus reflects a rational response shaped by past experiences and collective narratives, not merely spontaneous emotion.

Theme 2: Perceived Stigmatization and Harassment

Participants reported stop-and-search encounters as stigmatizing, often based on appearance or behavior, reinforcing social labeling. One participant noted:

"In Ekiti State, it is almost an offense to be a young man… You will be singled out for a thorough search… often to extort money, calling you a 'Yahoo boy' or internet fraudster." (Participant)

Labeling Theory posits that repeated authority encounters can impose stigmatizing identities that extend beyond the interaction [1]. Another participant described broader social consequences:

"…people called me a criminal in my environment because of constant harassment at checkpoints." (Participant)

Frequent stops can generate marginalization and social exclusion [2, 3]. Police justified stop-and-search as crime control, but procedural fairness is central to public acceptance; humiliating encounters reinforce distrust and social alienation [4].

Theme 3: Conditional Trust in Law Enforcement

Youths' trust in law enforcement was conditional, dependent on respect, fairness, and non-intimidating conduct. A community leader noted:

"Are the police friends of the people? … Unless the police remove that colonial mentality of being the boss and always right, nothing will change." (Community participant)

Procedural Justice Theory emphasizes that legitimacy derives from perceived fairness and respect rather than enforcement outcomes [1]. Respectful engagement can enhance cooperation, information-sharing, and effective crime control:

"Law enforcement agencies need to see citizens as people they must respect and value… Criminals live within the community, and many people know them, but trust must exist before such information can be shared." (Youth participant)

Empirical evidence shows that procedurally fair interactions increase citizen cooperation and compliance, whereas disrespectful encounters reduce engagement [2, 3]. These narratives indicate that trust is contingent, highlighting the importance of respectful, transparent, and accountable everyday policing practices for strengthening institutional legitimacy.

4. Discussion

This study examined the psychological effects of arbitrary stop-and-search practices on youths in Oye Local Government Area, Ekiti State, employing a mixed-methods design that integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence. The findings are interpreted through the complementary lenses of General Strain Theory (GST), Procedural Justice Theory (PJT), and Labeling Theory (LT), enabling a multidimensional understanding of how policing practices shape emotional responses, social perceptions, and behavioural outcomes.

The results indicate that, although a majority of respondents perceived police interactions as moderately respectful (mean = 3.11), a notable minority reported experiences characterised by inattentiveness, disrespect, or exclusion from decision-making processes. These mixed perceptions are consistent with prior research demonstrating that variability in police conduct significantly shapes individuals' psychological responses and perceptions of legitimacy [1, 2]. In the Nigerian context, the disproportionate exposure of young males to stop-and-search practices reflects broader patterns of visibility and suspicion in public spaces, which may heighten vulnerability to repeated encounters [3, 4]. Such disparities underscore the uneven distribution of policing experiences and their implications for youth well-being.

A central finding of this study is the statistically significant relationship between the frequency of stop-and-search encounters and psychological distress ($r = 0.462$, $p < 0.05$). Respondents reported a range of adverse outcomes, including anxiety, sleep disturbances, anger, and avoidance behaviours. Qualitative accounts further revealed patterns of anticipatory anxiety and persistent rumination, suggesting that the psychological effects of police encounters extend beyond the immediate interaction. These findings align with GST, which posits that exposure to perceived injustice or stress-inducing events generates cumulative emotional strain [5–7]. The observed association also supports broader empirical evidence indicating that repeated police contact functions as a chronic stressor with measurable mental health consequences [14–16].

Trust in law enforcement emerged as conditional rather than absolute. While overall trust levels were moderate (mean = 3.14), respondents who reported negative stop-and-search experiences exhibited significantly lower trust (mean = 2.94, $p = 0.001$). This pattern reinforces the central tenet of Procedural Justice Theory that perceptions of fairness, respect, and voice during interactions are critical determinants of institutional legitimacy [8, 9]. In contexts where policing practices are perceived as arbitrary or inconsistent, trust may be progressively eroded, reducing willingness to cooperate and engage with law enforcement. This dynamic is particularly salient in Nigeria, where concerns about accountability and fairness continue to shape public perceptions of policing institutions [3, 10].

The qualitative findings provide further insight into the social and psychological processes underpinning these outcomes. Participants frequently described stop-and-search encounters as stigmatizing, particularly when based on appearance or perceived social identity. Such experiences can function as informal labeling events, reinforcing perceptions of deviance and contributing to social withdrawal and avoidance of monitored spaces. These patterns are consistent with Labeling Theory, which emphasizes the role of repeated social reactions in shaping identity and behaviour [11–13]. Over time, such processes may weaken social integration and diminish youths' sense of belonging within their communities.

More broadly, the findings support an emerging body of literature that conceptualizes policing practices as significant determinants of mental health. The observed relationship between repeated police contact and psychological distress aligns with studies demonstrating that exposure to invasive or coercive policing contributes to cumulative emotional strain and adverse well-being outcomes [14–16]. Qualitative evidence of fear, anticipatory anxiety, and perceived stigmatization further reflects patterns identified in research on the wider health effects of aggressive policing [16, 17]. These converging lines of evidence suggest that the impact of policing extends beyond immediate encounters, shaping longer-term perceptions of safety, identity, and institutional trust.

Importantly, the study reinforces the pivotal role of procedural fairness in moderating these effects. Consistent with prior research, respondents who perceived police conduct as respectful and transparent expressed greater willingness to cooperate, whereas those reporting negative experiences demonstrated reduced trust and engagement [19]. This finding highlights the importance of everyday police citizen

interactions in sustaining legitimacy, particularly in contexts where institutional trust is fragile. Evidence from comparable settings further indicates that perceptions of fairness and accountability are central to improving police–community relations and fostering cooperation [21, 22].

Overall, the findings underscore the need to reconceptualize stop-and-search practices not only as instruments of crime control but also as social interactions with significant psychological and institutional implications. Addressing issues of procedural fairness, consistency, and accountability in everyday policing may therefore be essential for mitigating psychological harm and strengthening trust between youths and law enforcement.

Strengths: Mixed-methods design, high response rate (98%), and a theoretically robust framework.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study demonstrates that arbitrary stop-and-search encounters among youths are significantly associated with psychological distress and conditional trust in law enforcement in Oye Local Government Area, Ekiti State. Quantitative analyses revealed a positive relationship between encounter frequency and psychological strain ($r = 0.462$, $p < 0.05$), with policing experiences explaining a substantial proportion of variation in well-being ($R^2 = 0.45$). Qualitative data illustrated that encounters are often intimidating or stigmatizing, particularly when public and arbitrary, aligning with evidence that coercive policing increases anxiety and erodes trust [1, 2]. Despite these negative effects, many youths expressed a conditional willingness to cooperate when interactions were respectful and procedurally fair, consistent with Procedural Justice Theory [3]. These findings underscore that improving the procedural quality of police–citizen encounters is essential for sustaining legitimacy, cooperation, and psychological well-being in democratic policing contexts.

Recommendations:

1. Law enforcement should receive training emphasizing respect, impartiality, and giving youths a voice.
2. Reduce arbitrary stops; enforce clear legal standards.
3. Establish youth counseling and community support programs.
4. Engage youths in participatory policing to reduce fear and mistrust.
5. Future research should adopt longitudinal and multisite designs to examine long-term psychological effects and institutional trust dynamics.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Federal University Oye-Ekiti Ethics Committee. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. The study was conducted in

accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, including respect for participants' autonomy, confidentiality, and the protection of their rights and welfare throughout the research process.

Consent for Publication: Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials: Available upon reasonable request.

Competing Interests: None declared.

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Authors' Contributions:

Author 1: Conceptualization, study design, manuscript drafting, qualitative analysis.

Author 2: Data analysis, manuscript review.

Author 3: Data collection, literature review.

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Figures

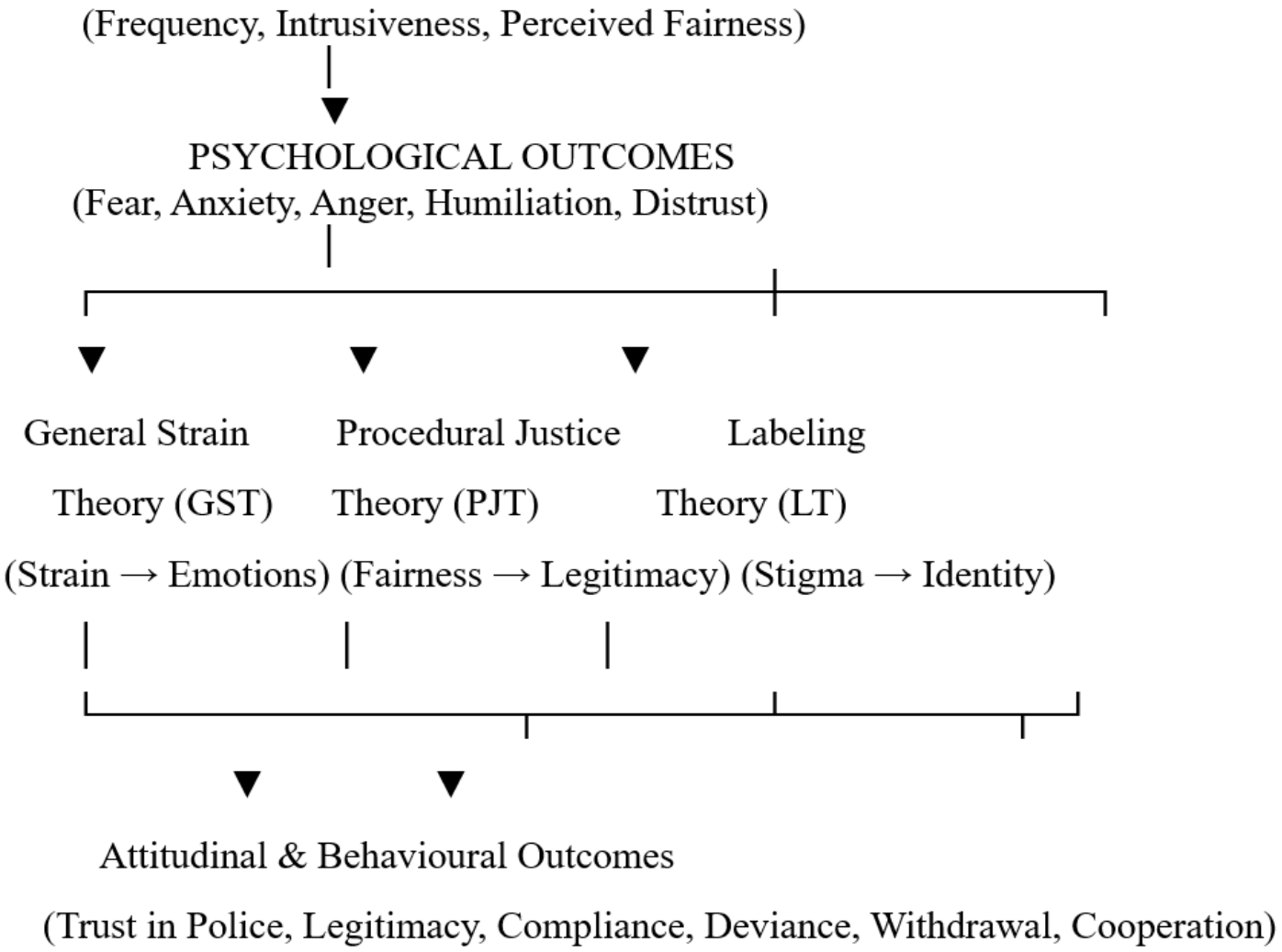


Figure 1

Conceptual framework linking stop-and-search experiences to psychological and behavioural outcomes