

## MENTAL HEALTH AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR AMONG POLICE OFFICERS IN SOUTH-WEST NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL SECURITY

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper investigated mental health and aggressive behaviour of police officers in South-West Nigeria and the implications for national security by adopting the cross-sectional survey research design. A sample of 184 police officers was selected through the cluster sampling technique. Valid and reliable instruments used for data collection were Demographic Data Inventory (DDI), Mental Health Inventory – 5 (MHI-5) and Aggression Questionnaire (AQ). Two hypotheses were formulated and analyzed using the simple linear regression analysis and independent t-test at the .05 significance level. Results revealed a significant influence of mental health on aggressive behaviour among police officers in South-West Nigeria (Beta = -.283,  $t = 9.224$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and a significant difference in aggressive behaviour between male and female police officers ( $t = 12.026$ ,  $df = 182$ ,  $p < .0005$ ), with male officers (mean = 102.7) being more aggressive than female officers (mean = 87.4). It was subsequently recommended, among others, that the Nigerian government should utilize psychological interventions to inhibit aggressive tendencies among at-risk police officers.*

**Key Words:** *Mental health, aggressive behaviour, national security, police officers.*

### INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, the primary responsibility for national security and maintenance of law and order and the protection of lives and property in the society lies heavily on the shoulder of the police. The police job is one of the most dangerous especially as police officers armed gangs, emotional distress arising from victims of crimes and accidents, etc. Members of the public still view the police in a negative light despite concerted efforts being made by the police authorities to project a positive image of the agency (Ajayi, 2017; Ikeji, 2013).

Of recent, there have been widespread and indiscriminate incidents of extra-judicial killings, aggression, brutalization and extortion of innocent Nigerians by police officers. According to Amnesty International, at least, not less than 82 cases of brutal torture and killings were reported between January 17, 2017 and May, 2020. The major reason for the unfavourable perception of the police is this their display of aggressive behaviour mostly against the civilian populace. Aggressive behaviour by police officers has serious implications for national security. In fact, the *Boko Haram* uprising that has caused a lot of destruction to lives and property particularly in North-East Nigeria was partly attributed to police aggression in 2009 when the police extra-judicially killed one Mohammed Yusuf and Alhaji Buji Foi, triggering off a violent uprising and war that is still threatening national security today (Ikeji, 2013). Lives have been lost, property has been destroyed and people have been displaced. Trillions of naira have also been spent by the government on arms needed to fight the *Boko Haram* uprising which erupted as a result of a singular act of aggression by police officers (Mamman, 2020). Again, national security was seriously threatened on Thursday 8th October 2020 when the nationwide #EndSARS protest which was one of the challenges that the police are confronted with. This led to loss of lives, arson, looting and other forms of destruction of public and private property on a large scale (Sahara Reporter, 2020).

Aggressive behaviour refers to the attempt to cause injury or harm to another person. It includes all forms of physical or verbal behaviour intended to cause harm or be damaging to a person or a group of people. According to Hsieh and Chen (2017), aggressive behaviour can be destructive and lead to financial loss, emotional distress, physical injury or even death to its



victims and many other indirect interpersonal and social costs to individuals and social groups associated with the victims. The dimensions of aggressive behaviour include physical, verbal, active, passive, direct and indirect aggression (Haller, 2014). Physical aggression involves physically harming or injuring another person. Verbal aggression includes the use of cruel and hostile words to hurt people (Foster, Bowers & Nijman, 2007; Kisa, 2008). Active aggressive behaviour refers to the attempt to physically or verbally harm another, while passive aggression is failing to engage in helping behaviour. It is an inert form of aggression. Direct aggression targets a specific person and can take the form of physical attack and/or hostile verbal behaviours against the person. Indirect aggression is aimed at a person behind his/her back (DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2012; Haller, 2014).

Two other dimensional frameworks of aggressive behaviour have been recognized, namely, reactive (impulsive, hostile, emotional or affective) aggression and proactive (instrumental) aggression. Reactive or impulsive aggressive behaviour is a defensive or impulsive action or hostile act performed in response to a threat or provocation. It is characterized by strong emotions like anger or fury that is felt upon being irritated or provoked and is unleashed in order to make the target person suffer (Anitei, Birau, Chraif, Burtaverde, & Mihaila, 2014). On the other hand, proactive or instrumental aggressive behaviour is a deliberate aggression instigated by a desire to achieve a particular goal; that is, aggression is used as a means to an end. Unlike reactive aggression which is spontaneous and involves emotionality, proactive aggression is more calculated, planned, controlled, and has less emotionality. It is premeditated and manifested without obvious provocation. Proactive aggression is used in order to obtain some benefits such as obtaining goods, seeking power or gaining peer support.

The persistence of aggressive behaviour against members of the public among Nigerian police officers is currently a matter of great concern for the citizens, government, and police authorities and other stakeholders who are all making efforts to rectify the situation. Therefore, an investigation aimed at understanding the predictors of aggressive behaviour would be timely as it would help to nip it in the bud and thereby forestall security breaches. It has persistently been suggested that all police officers should be subjected to thorough psychological and mental evaluations. This suggestion indicates that mental health issues could be predisposing police officers to aggressive behaviour.

Mental health has been defined as a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make meaningful contribution to his or her community (World Health Organization, 2001). It has also been defined as a state of mind in which an individual can effectively utilize his or her capacities by displaying psychological resilience in making personal and social adjustments to fit the dynamic environment within which he or she co-exists with other persons (Mental Health Foundation, 2015). Mental health is concerned with enhancing competencies of individual employees and aiding them in the performance of their tasks. Bello, Onunkun, and Uwanna (2018) view mental health as a concept that is related to the social and emotional well-being of individuals and communities and to the enjoyment of life, ability to cope with stresses and sadness, the fulfillment of goals and potential, and a sense of connection to others. Mental health problem is a complex construct whose symptoms include depression, anxiety, despair, and life satisfaction (including dissatisfaction). These symptoms can lead to the display of aggressive behaviour.

Mental health concerns our feelings, cognitions and behaviours. According to Onunkun (2017), a person with good mental health has the ability to deal with day-to-day events and obstacles, work towards important goals and function effectively in the society. The implication of this is. It is universally believed that aggressive behaviour can be instigated by a poor state of mental health which does not allow the aggressor to consider that a person with poor mental health is susceptible to negative outcomes such as antisocial behaviour including aggression the possible consequences of his or her actions. For example, the stress and trauma, high job



demands, and burnout associated with police work have the potential to adversely affect the mental health of the officers.

The fact that mental health could have considerable impact on aggressive behaviour among police officers calls for serious efforts to foster good mental health and attempt, through psychotherapeutic and other techniques to reduce or mitigate incidence of mental health problems that may emerge among police officers (Adekunle, 2019). Many of the acts of police aggression against the citizens could be partly attributed to both organizational and individual variables that could be harmful to mental health. For example, personality traits as well as the stress, trauma and high job demands which characterize police work can impair the mental health of the officers. Velden, Kleber, Grievink, and Yzermans (2010) recognized the influence of mental health of police officers on their aggressive behaviour and emphasize the importance of being proactive by promptly addressing issues that can trigger mental health problems. Cherry (2018) argued that aggression can be caused by mental health disorders. It is generally believed that mental illness is associated with violence.

Gender differences in aggressive behaviour among police officers have been a subject of research, with studies indicating that male officers are more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviours compared to their female counterparts. For instance, a study on gender dynamics and role performance among female police officers in Kwara State, Nigeria, found that male officers were more prone to using force in their duties (Ojedokun, 2024). Additionally, female officers often report higher levels of organizational stress and mental health challenges, which can influence their behaviour in the field. Research indicates that women in policing experience greater organizational stressors, such as discrimination and sexual harassment, compared to men (Ojedokun, 2024; Scent, Chukwu, Obuzor, & Nwagba, 2020). These findings suggest that gender may play a role in shaping the behaviors and experiences of police officers, potentially impacting their interactions with the public and their approach to law enforcement.

## Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses are formulated for this study:

Ho1: There is no significant influence of mental health on aggressive behaviour among police officers in South-West Nigeria.

Ho2: There is no significant difference between male and female aggressive behavior of police officers in South-West Nigeria.

## METHODS

### *Design and Participants*

This study used a cross-sectional survey research design to examine the influence of mental health on aggressive behaviour among police officers. The population included officers from all six State Police Commands in South-West Nigeria (Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo State Police Commands). A total of 210 police officers were selected through cluster sampling. Each State Police Command was treated as a cluster, and participants were drawn proportionally based on the number of Area Commands within each state. The selection covered officers from the headquarters of each State Command as well as various Area Commands. The number of Area Commands in each state varied, and efforts were made to ensure fair representation across the six states. This approach helped in obtaining responses from officers working in different units and locations within each command.

**Instruments**

Instruments used to collect data in this study were Demographic Data Inventory (DDI), Mental Health Inventory – 5 (MHI-5) and Aggression Questionnaire (AQ). These instruments are described below.

**Demographic Data Inventory (DDI)**

The Demographic Data Inventory (DDI) is a five-item instrument developed by this researcher to measure the demographic characteristics of the respondents such as gender, age, marital status and work experience.

**Mental Health Inventory – 5 (MHI-5)**

The Mental Health Inventory – 5 (MHI-5) is a brief 5-item Likert-type scale developed by Berwick, Murphy, Goldman, Ware, and Weinstein (1991) to screen for depressive symptoms in individuals. It is a 6-point Likert-type scale containing both positively- and negatively-worded items and having the following alternative responses: 1 = None of the time; 2 = A bit of the time; 3 = A little of the time; 4 = Most of the time; 5 = Some of the time; 6 = All of the time. Sample items on the scale are: 1. *How much of the time during the past month have you felt calm and peaceful?* and 2. *How much of the time during the past month have you been a very nervous person?*

The MHI-5 is well-known and has been field-tested in extensive populations. The developer reported a test-retest reliability coefficient of .81 with a one-month inter-test interval in a sample of 30 adolescents randomly chosen from educational institution in the United States. The validity of the scale was established by the developer who found that scores on the MHI-5 showed significant and positive relationship with scores on the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) and significant and negative relationships with measures of depression: Multidimensional Poverty Index Questionnaire (MPIQ). The MHI-5 was also found to show high correlation ratings with Multiple Sclerosis Quality of Life Inventory (MSQLI).

**Aggression Questionnaire (AQ)**

The Aggression Questionnaire (AQ) is a self-report measure of aggressive behavior developed by Buss and Perry (1992). It consists of 29 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (Not at all like me) to 5 (Completely like me). The questionnaire is divided into four sub-scales: Physical Aggression (9 items), Verbal Aggression (5 items), Anger (7 items), and Hostility (8 items). Sample items include “I often find myself disagreeing with people” and “At times I can’t control the urge to hit someone.” The AQ has demonstrated strong reliability, with test-retest correlations ranging from .72 to .80 across sub-scales and an overall stability coefficient of .80 (Buss & Perry, 1992). Its validity has been supported through correlations with other aggression and personality measures (Hornsveld, Muris, Kraaimaat, & Meesters, 2009).

**Data Collection Procedure**

Two hundred and ten copies of the instruments were personally administered by the researchers on the officers. One hundred and eighty-four copies were retrieved, giving an attrition rate of 12.4%. Prior to administration, the nature and purpose of the study were explained to the participants with the assurance that information volunteered would be treated as confidential.

**Method of Data Analysis**

Hypothesis one was tested by means of simple linear regression analysis, while hypothesis two was analyzed using independent t-test. Both tests utilized the .05 alpha level for significance.

## RESULTS

### *Hypothesis One*

There is no significant influence of mental health on aggressive behaviour among police officers in South-West Nigeria.

*Table 1: Regression Coefficients for the Influence of Mental Health on Aggressive Behaviour*

	B	Std Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	12.036	5.279		13.058	.000
Mental Health	-.117	.025	-.283	-9.224	.000

Dependent Variable: Aggressive Behaviour

Table 1 revealed significant results ( $Beta = -.283$ ,  $t = 9.224$ ,  $p < .05$ ) this implies that there is a significant influence of mental health on aggressive behaviour among police officers in South-West Nigeria. result further showed that aggressive behaviour can be predicted from mental health by means of the regression equation: Aggressive Behaviour =  $12.036 - 0.117 \times$  Mental Health.

### *Hypothesis Two*

There is no significant difference between male and female aggressive behavior of police officers in South-West Nigeria

*Table 2: Independent t-Test of Difference in Aggressive Behaviour between Male and Female Police Officers*

Variable	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Male Officers	126	102.7	4.9602	182	12.026	.000
Female Officers	58	87.4	2.6249			

Table 2 revealed significant results ( $t = 12.026$ ,  $df = 182$ ,  $p < .0005$ ). It was therefore concluded that there is a significant difference in aggressive behaviour between male and female police officers in South-West Nigeria. Table 2 further showed that, on average, male police officers (mean = 102.7, SD = 4.96) exhibited greater aggressive behaviour than female police officers (mean = 87.4, SD = 2.62).

## DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to investigate mental health and aggressive behaviour among police officers in South-West Nigeria: Implications for national security with the aim of minimizing police aggressive behaviour. This investigation was prompted by the need for more research into the role of mental health in aggressive behaviour among police officers. Two null hypotheses were formulated and subjected to statistical test of significance at the 0.05 alpha level.

The first null hypothesis stated that there is no significant influence of mental health on aggressive behaviour among police officers in South-West Nigeria. This hypothesis was tested and found to be untenable. It was therefore rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. The findings of this study revealed significant relationships between mental health and aggressive behaviour among police officers in South-West Nigeria, with results showing that mental health had a significant influence on aggressive behaviour, with a negative correlation between the two variables. This finding implies that the mental health condition of police officers has a role to play in their display or non-display of aggressive behaviour by the police. This suggests that police officers with better mental health tend to exhibit less aggressive behaviour than those in poor mental health conditions, this is because according to Onunkun (2017) a person with poor mental



health may likely engage in antisocial behavior which include aggression. This finding is also consistent with previous studies that have established a link between mental health and aggression (Adekunle, 2019; Cherry, 2018; Velden et al., 2010).

The second null hypothesis stated that there is no significant difference in aggressive behaviour between male and female police officers in South-West Nigeria. The test of this hypothesis revealed a significant difference in aggressive behaviour between male and female police officers, with male officers being significantly more prone to aggressive behaviour than female officers. This finding is in line with the finding of Ojedokun (2024) that showed that male police officers are more likely to engage in aggressive behaviour compared to their female counterparts. However, it is worth noting that female officers often report higher levels of organizational stress and mental health challenges, which can influence their behaviour in the field, including aggressive behaviour.

The implications of these findings are significant for policing in Nigeria. Firstly, the study highlights the need for police authorities to prioritize the mental health of their officers. This can be achieved through regular mental health check-ups, counselling services and training programmes that promote stress management and emotional intelligence. By promoting good mental health, police authorities can reduce the likelihood of aggressive behaviour among officers. Secondly, the study suggests that. By addressing these challenges, police authorities can promote a more inclusive and supportive work environment that fosters positive behaviour among all officers.

### **Recommendations**

Based on these findings the following recommendations were made:

- (i) The Nigerian government should utilize psychological interventions to inhibit aggressive tendencies among at-risk police officers. This can include initiatives such as mental health screening, counselling services, emotional intelligence training, self-regulation, rational emotive behaviour therapies and stress management training.
- (ii) Government and police authorities should organize training, workshops and seminars aimed at reducing or eliminating mental health problems and aggressive behaviour among police officers. Police authorities should consider gender differences when designing training programmes and policies. Female officers may require additional support to address the unique challenges they face in the workplace, such as discrimination and sexual harassment.
- (iii) Officers should not be overstressed with excessive workload and other unsatisfactory work conditions since these can trigger or exacerbate mental health problems.

### **Implications for National Security**

The findings suggest that mental health problems could aggravate aggressive behaviour among police officers. In Nigeria, excessive use or misuse of force by police officers has resulted into public anger that often culminated into demonstrations, protests and destruction of lives and property. All these are threats to national security. The implication of this is that serious attention should be paid to mental health problems among police officers in order to minimize police aggression and thereby forestall national security breaches that may emanate from it.

Efforts should also be made by the police authorities to prevent officers with mental health issues from handling arms or getting involved in potentially explosive situations especially with members of the public. Since most of the incidents of police aggressive behaviour resulted from conflicts with citizens, national security can further be strengthened through community policing which is participatory in nature and increases a sense of belongingness to the society in the people since everyone plays a role in the safety and security of their community. Thus,



effective police-public partnership can strengthen security network, minimize or eliminate police aggression and thereby increase national security.

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