ROLES OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, PERSONALITY TRAITS, AGE AND JAIL LENGTH ON PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG INMATES AT CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CENTRE IN OWERRI

Helen I. Nnamdi-Annorzie[1]* & Nkechi Alice Osugiri[2]

Department of Psychology, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria [12]

*annorzie.ihuoma@gmail.com[1]

ABSTRACT: The study examined the roles of emotional intelligence, personality traits, age and jail length on psychological distress among inmates in Owerri. One hundred and thirty inmates (150), comprising seventy (70) males and sixty (60) females, were selected purposively/conveniently from the Owerri Correctional Service Centre. Their ages ranged from 18 to 54 years, with a mean of 32 and a standard deviation of 9.21. Three instruments were employed: the Psychophysiological Symptom Checklist, the Emotional Intelligence scale, and the Big Five Inventory (BFI). Five hypotheses were postulated and tested. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, and Multiple regression statistics were used for data analysis. The results revealed that emotional intelligence, neuroticism and age are significant predictors of psychological distress, while jail length and agreeableness did not predict psychological distress among inmates. It was recommended, among others, that the correctional system should move beyond punitive models toward psychologically informed rehabilitation strategies

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian Correctional Services (NCS), overseeing approximately 244 prisons nationwide, faces considerable challenges in managing the mental needs of inmates. A growing body of evidence suggests that the neglect of psychological well-being in Nigerian correctional centres poses risks not only to inmates but also to public safety and rehabilitation outcomes (Nwosu & Odesanya, 2022). Psychological distress is seen as a particular relationship between person (s) and the environment that is appraised or perceived by the person(s) as taxing or exceeding his/her resources and endangering his/her well-being, Geren (1990). In other words, psychological distress is a specific relationship or association between individuals and their surroundings, considered by the individual as beyond available resources, and this inability threatens the person's health and well-being.

O'Donovan, Doody and Lyons (2023) found several types of stress, such as acute, episodic and chronic stress, among inmates. These researchers further argued that acute stress has been the most identified from the sources, which include the demands and pressure of the current, past, as well as spending time in incarceration. This type of stress is stirring and exciting in minor doses, but it becomes exhausting when it is excessive or prolonged. However, in the episodic type, victims take on too much and face too many challenges. This situation typically occurs in long prison sentences where individuals affected by stress are unable to consolidate the demands and pressure of stress

and seem perpetually in the clutches of acute stress. On the other hand, chronic stress is crushing stress that drains people and negatively impacts the body, mind and life of the individual. These stressors make the incarcerated population highly vulnerable to mental health challenges. Hence, imprisonment-related difficulties differ across a range of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, self-harm or other aggressive behaviour, obsessions and psychological substance abuse (Oguroyifa, 2019).

Several authors have argued that, beyond the physical and social conditions of correctional centres, psychological factors are important stressors that affect the health and well-being of inmates. Available statistics show that nearly one in nine prison inmates suffer from common mental health challenges such as stress, depression and anxiety (Ajala, Adebayo & Oyekanmi, 2022).

For some inmates, incarceration is emotionally painful to the extent that it creates a form of severe traumatic stress that causes post-traumatic stress reactions even after acquittal (Akinhanmi, Olugbile & Adebowale, 2021). Unfortunately, the occurrence of mental health problems, particularly stress, in correctional centres is great, but the right of entry by health personnel to treat or manage the inmates is very limited.

In recent years, researchers have begun examining individuals' psychological factors that may influence how inmates experience and respond to distress in the prison environment. One such factor is emotional intelligence (EI), which is the ability to identify, manage and utilise emotions effectively both in oneself and in others (Sallover & Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995). It typically involves four main components: self-awareness, which entails the ability to recognise one's emotions and their effects, self-regulation, which indicates the ability to manage or control emotional reactions, social awareness, which suggests the ability to understand others' feelings and perspectives, and relationship management, which entails using emotional understanding to build and maintain relationships. Hence, it is of interest to psychologists, as Perera and Dicilacomo (2015) have previously linked it to resilience, better interpersonal relationships, and lower psychological distress.

Moreover, personality traits are another important psychological factor of great interest in this study. It connotes an enduring pattern of thoughts, feelings and behaviour that distinguishes one individual from another. They represent consistent tendencies in how a person reacts to situations, interacts with others and views themselves and the world. According to the five-factor model (FFM), there are five traits, often referred to as the Big Five, including neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness. These traits may be very capable of influencing emotional regulation and stress management. Openness involves six facets or dimensions, including imagination (fantasy), aesthetics, sensitivity, attentiveness to inner feelings, a preference for variety, and intellectual curiosity. Conscientiousness is a personality trait characterised by being very careful or diligent. It implies a desire to do tasks well and to fulfil obligations to others seriously. Agreeableness is a personality trait characterised by individuals who are perceived as kind, sympathetic, cooperative, warm, honest, and considerate.

Studies have shown that high neuroticism predicts greater psychological distress, whereas traits like conscientiousness and extraversion serve as protective factors. (Bakker & Demerouti, 2022). These traits may moderate how inmates react to incarceration stress.

Age may also play a significant role. Younger inmates may engage more in impulsive behaviour and are often less equipped with adaptive coping strategies, while older inmates may struggle with chronic health issues, emotional loneliness and existential concerns, all of which can influence distress level.

Significantly, the number of months and years spent in the correctional services centre may contribute to inmate health. Jail term, as used in this study, refers to the period an individual spends in correctional services centres. Convicts are meant to serve short, medium, and long jail terms as per the court's orders. Preliminary evidence suggests that older adults experience unique stressors and traumas and that their reactions to these events may be vastly different from those of younger offenders, particularly short-term and long-term consequences on physical and mental health (Aday *et al*, 2014).

Despite the growing global literature on inmate mental health, there is a research gap in sub-saharan African concerning how emotional intelligence, personality traits, age and jail term interplay to influence psychological distress. Understanding and appraising the methods and major findings is a critical initial step towards synthesising the information that has been accrued.

Statement of Problem

Psychological distress, which encompasses a range of emotional and cognitive symptoms such as anxiety, depression and somatic complaints, is significantly more prevalent among inmates than in the general public (Ogunrotifa, 2019). In Nigeria, correctional institutions have become breeding grounds for mental health deterioration due to system failure and poor infrastructures, overcrowding, lack of access to mental health professionals and social isolation (Amnesty, International 2020). This mental health crisis in Nigerian correctional centres is a human rights and public health concern that requires urgent multi-sectoral attention. The distress is a symptom of structural neglect and social injustice. Hence the need for reform and inmate-focused mental healthcare services, rehabilitation, and social reintegration.

Studies indicate alarming high rate of psychological distress among Nigerian inmates. For instance, (Akinhanmi, et al 2021) found that over 556 of inmates in a Lagos Correctional facility showed symptoms of moderate to severe psychological distress with depression and anxiety being the most reported conditions. Similarly, a study by Ekhomu and Ojo (2020) in Enugu prison revealed that 61% of male inmates exhibited clinical symptoms of psychological distress attributing this to a prolonged pre-trial detention and lack of psychiatric support. The entire prison systems is critically underserved in term of mental health professionals. According to the Nigerian correctional service annual Report, 2022, only 19 psychologists serve over 75,000 inmates nationwide. This shortage of mental health staff limit timely diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric conditions.

The uncertainly regarding legal outcome compounded by indefinite detention, contribute to feelings of hopelessness and learned helplessness (Okeke, 2021). Moreover, most Nigerian prison operate far beyond their capacity, for instance Kirikiri Maximum Security prison designed for 1,056 inmates, reportedly houses more than 3,000 (Federal Ministry of Justice, 2021).

This prevalence of psychological distress in Nigeria correctional facilities remain unacceptably high, often unaddressed due to systemic inefficiencies and limited mental health resources. While much of existing research address structural challenges with prison system, few studies have explored how inmates psychological traits such as emotional intelligence and personality traits contribute to resilience or vulnerability to distress.

Additionally, demographics and contextual variables such as age and jail term are often overlooked in intervention planning, the South-east region precisely Imo State with its unique socio-culturally and judicial dynamics remain under researched in this regards. Within context-specific knowledge, efforts to improve inmate mental health may remain superficial and ineffective.

Hence, this study is necessary to identifying key psychological factors affecting distress among inmates, thus informing targeted mental health intervention.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the roles of emotional intelligence, personality traits, age and jail term in predicting psychological distress among inmates. Specifically, the study aims to examine

1. Role of emotional intelligence on psychological distress among inmates at correctional service centre in Owerri Imo State.
2. Role of neuroticism on psychological distress among inmates in Owerri correctional centre.
3. Role of agreeableness on psychological distress among inmates at Owerri correctional centre
4. Role of age on psychological distress among inmates at Owerri correctional service centre
5. The role of jail term on psychological distress among inmates in Owerri correctional service centre.

Hypotheses

1. Emotional intelligence will not significantly predict psychological distress among inmates at correctional service centre in Owerri Imo State.
2. Neuroticism will not significantly predict psychological distress among inmates in Owerri correctional centre.
3. Agreeableness will not significantly predict psychological distress among inmates at Owerri correctional centre
4. Age will not significantly predict psychological distress among inmates at Owerri correctional service centre

5.   Jail term will not significantly predict psychological distress among inmates in Owerri correctional service centre.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Stress Process Model by Pearlin et al (1981)

Pearlin et al. posit that stressors, mediators and outcomes interact to influence psychological well-being. The theory frames mental health as a product of

(a)   Stressors (life, events, chronic strains)
(b)   Mediators/resources (social support, coping, mastery, personal traits) and
(c)   Outcomes (psychological distress, maladaptive behaviours.   Pearlin et al originally formalised the model (1981) and later expanded it by adding that personal resources and life-course factors shape vulnerabilities and stress proliferation.

Stress process theory (Pearlin et al., 1989) provides a useful framework for understanding psychological distress among Nigerian inmates because it links environmental stressors (chronic strains such as overcrowding and lack of services) with individual resources (emotional intelligence, social support, and mastery) to predict distress outcomes.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies from Nigeria indicate high rates of psychological problems within the prison population, aligning with the predictions of the Stress Pathway Theory (SPT) that increased stress exposure results in greater psychological distress, particularly when mediating resources are limited. Concurrently, research consistently demonstrates that higher emotional intelligence (EI), especially as a stable trait, correlates with better mental health and reduced psychological distress. A meta-analysis involving nearly 8,000 participants by Shutte, Malouff, Thorsteinson, Bhullar, and Rooke (2007) found an average correlation of $r = .29$ between EI and mental health outcomes, with trait EI measures showing stronger associations than ability EI.

In Nigeria, there is emerging empirical support for the protective role of EI outside correctional settings. For instance, Olah and Utibe (2022) found, in a cross-sectional survey of 354 Nigerian civil servants, that emotional intelligence significantly predicted psychological well-being. Also, a study of 485 secondary school adolescents in Anambra State showed that emotional intelligence (together with self-efficacy) significantly predicted better psychological adjustment, suggesting that EI supports adaptive functioning under stress.

While few published studies in Nigeria directly assess EI among prison inmates, the high prevalence of mental health problems in correctional centres is noted. Inmates/populations such as depression, anxiety and general distress have been documented. In a 2020 study of inmates at a medium security prison in Makurdi, 27.8% screened positive for depression, yet few were receiving treatment or counselling. Similarly, newly admitted inmates in Enugu prison show high levels of

distress. Over 8-% scored above clinical cut-offs on the depression and anxiety scale just days after incarceration.

Igwe (2024) conducted a cross-sectional study on the role of personality traits on the psychological adjustment of inmates in Enugu Custodial Centre. Employing 150 inmates, He administered the NEO, five-factor inventory and the Kessler psychological distress scale (K10). Results revealed a strong positive correlation between neuroticism and psychological distress. Neuroticism significantly predicted psychological distress, explaining 38% of the variance after controlling for age and duration of incarceration.

Daramola (2022) examined personality traits and psychopathological symptoms among inmates. Two hundred (200) inmates across two Nigerian prison (Lagos and Ibadan) were assessed using the big five inventory (BFI) and depression anxiety stress scale (DASS-21). Extraversion negatively correlated with distress and conscientiousness similarly showed a protective effect. Regression analysis indicated both traits significantly reduced distress levels with conscientiousness exerting a stronger effect. Thus, the study emphasized that conscientious inmates demonstrated better coping and emotional regulations.

Aondoakaa (2025) surveyed 321 inmates in Benue State correctional facilities, using the NEO-FFI and K10 scale. While neither openness or agreeableness directly predicted distress in regression, model – mediated analysis revealed that their influence operated indirectly through adaptive coping strategies. For instance, inmates higher in openness reported greater cognitive flexibility, which led to reduced distress through a problem–focused coping style.

Uhenku et al. (2025) studied 613 inmates in Benue State using the Schwarzer and Jerusalem General Self-Efficacy Scale, the Brief Resilience Scale and the K10. The results revealed that conscientiousness and extraversion were positively associated with self-efficacy and resilience, which, in turn, predicted lower distress. Mediation analysis revealed that those personality traits mediated the impact on psychological distress.

Okafor, Onwudiwe, and Musa (2025) conducted a 12-month follow-up of 120 inmates at the Abuja medium security prison, measuring psychological distress every 3 months using the General Health Questionnaire-28 (GHQ-28). The study found that distress levels increased progressively with incarceration length, especially after 6 months. Mixed-effects regression models showed that length of stay was a significant predictor of the distress trajectory.

However, Eze, Onah, and Nwankwo (2024) found that problem–focused coping partially mediated the relationship between jail length and distress, reducing its impact. Inmates relying on avoidant coping showed a stronger positive association between incarceration duration and psychological symptoms.

Ojo, Bello, and Yusuf (2023) examined age–related differences in psychological distress among inmates in Ogun State. Using the Kessler (K10) scale to measure distress, they reported a positive correlation between age and psychological distress, indicating that, in a linear regression model controlling for level, age was a significant predictor of distress.

Ibekwe and Musa (2022) sampled 180 inmates at Jos maximum security prison using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21). They reported that younger inmates (18-30year) had significantly higher depression and anxiety scores compared to older inmates. Post hoc analysis showed younger inmates scored on average 1.5 SDs higher on anxiety than those aged 45+. The authors suggested that younger inmates experience more distress due to adjustment difficulties and uncertainty about the future.

Taken together, these findings support a compelling, yet under-researched case of applying EI frameworks in correctional psychology in Nigeria. Given (a) the strong international evidence linking trait EI to reduced distress, and (b) the documented mental health burden among Nigerian inmates. Therefore, including EI in empirical studies of inmates' mental health in Nigeria is theoretically justified, methodologically feasible and practically important – especially if the goal is to identify protective factors or design interventions to reduce psychological distress in correctional facilities.

METHOD

Population of Study/Participants

The study involved 130 inmates, comprising 65 males and 65 females. They were drawn from the correctional services centre in Owerri through a purposive/convenience sampling technique. Their ages ranged from 18 to 54 years, with a mean of 32 and a standard deviation of 9.21.

Instruments

Three instruments were employed in the study: the Psychological Symptoms Checklist (PSC), the Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS), and the Big Five Inventory (BFI). The Psychological Symptoms Checklist (PSC), developed by Omoluabi (1988), was used to measure the stress or distress reaction level of the inmates. It is a (50) item inventory scored on a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (Slight effect) to 5 (very severe effect). The inventory has reliability coefficients of .78 and .88 and a concurrent validity coefficient of .47, as reported in a pilot study by Ebiai (1986). The norm for the scale is 48.89 for males and 49.78 for females. Scores above the norm indicate a high stress level, while scores below the norm indicate a low stress level. The BFI-5 inventory (developed by John, 1990) is a 40-item inventory that assesses an individual on the five-factor (dimensions) of personality. These dimensions include (a) agreeableness, (b) extroversion, (c) openness, (d) neuroticism and (e) conscientiousness. It contains both direct and reverse-scored items. The psychometric properties reported by Goldbery (1992) indicated validity coefficients of .80 and .85 for decision validity in both males and females.

Procedure

Ethical approval for this study was granted after obtaining permission from the comptroller of Owerri Correctional Services Centre to use their facilities. Participants were recruited during the first visit to the centre, where they were informed about the study's purpose. Each scale featured a brief introduction and a consent request. No personal data was collected.

A total of 130 inmates who consented participated in the study. Participants were purposefully recruited. The inclusion criteria were inmates aged 18 and older with at least 6 months of incarceration. Exclusion criteria included inmates with severe medical conditions that could affect their participation or those unable to provide informed consent due to language barriers or other issues.

Design and Statistics

A cross-sectional survey was used to collect data. This allowed for the simultaneous collection of data on variables of interest at a specific period in time. The collected data were analysed using the statistical package for the social sciences, SPSS version 27.

RESULT

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations of psychological distress, emotional intelligence, agreeableness, neuroticism, age and jail term.

S/No	Variables	Mean	SD	Psy.D	EI	AG.	NEUR.	J.T	Age
1	Psy. D	76.19	31.03	1					
2	EI	76.94	28.58	.267**	1				
3	Agreeable	24.65	10.05	-.043	-.180**	1			
4	Neuroticism	22.93	8.76	-.190**	.239**	-.217*	1		
5	Jail Term	19.58	7.34	.043	.016	-.113	-.063	1	
6	Age	32.29	9.21	.452**	.279**	.097	-.121	-.036	1

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level*

The table above reveals that on average, the inmates experience high psychological distress because the mean score of 76.19.27 is higher than the norm for the psychological distress scale, which is 49.34 (for males and females). Also, the mean score of 76.94, which is higher than the norm for the Emotional Intelligence scale (70.2), implies that, on average, the inmates have low emotional intelligence. Similarly, they are low on agreeableness [23.65<29.24 (scale norm)] and also low on neuroticism [22.93<23.72 (scale norm). The average jail term of the participants is 19.58 years, and their mean age is 32.29.

The correlation of all the variables is also presented. From the table, there is a significant positive correlation between psychological distress and emotional intelligence (r=.267, p<01); psychological distress and age (r=.425, p<01); and a negative correlation between psychological distress and neuroticism (r=-.190, p<01). Psychological distress did not significantly correlate with agreeableness (r =- .043, p > .05) or jail term (r =- .043, p > .05). Emotional intelligence positively correlated with neuroticism (r=.239, p<01) and age (r= .279, p<01) but negatively correlated with agreeableness (r=-.180, p<01). A significant negative correlation was also found between neuroticism and agreeableness (r = - .217, p < .01). Other variables did not correlate with each other.

Table 2: Summary table of Multiple Regression of emotional intelligence, agreeableness, neuroticism, age and jail term on psychological distress among inmates at the correctional service centre in Imo State

Model		B	t value	p-value
Emotional intelligence		.204	3.195	.002
Agreeableness		-.083	-1.363	.174
Neuroticism		-.212	-3.422	.001
Jail term		0.30	.507	.613
Age		.351	5.653	.000
R^2	.249			
F	14.824			
df	5,224			

Dependent variable: Psychological Distress

The overall model yields an R-square value of .249, indicating that 24% of the variation in psychological distress is explained by the predictor variables (emotional intelligence, personality, age, and jail term). Similarly, the overall model is significant [F(df = 5,224) = 14.82, p<.01].

Table 2 also presents the results of testing the five hypotheses of the study, all of which were accepted. First, emotional intelligence positively predicted psychological distress among inmates at the correctional service centre in Owerri, Imo State (β .204, p = .002, t = 3.195). Thus, the higher the score on emotional intelligence (low emotional intelligence), the higher the psychological distress score. This means that inmates with low emotional intelligence experience more psychological distress. The first hypothesis is upheld, therefore.

However, agreeableness did not significantly predict psychological distress among inmates (β =-.083, p = .174, t = -1.363). The second hypothesis is rejected.

The third hypothesis is upheld, as neuroticism negatively predicted psychological distress among inmates (β =- .212, p = .001, t = -3.422), indicating that as neuroticism increases, psychological distress decreases.

Jail term did not significantly predict psychological distress among inmates (β = .030, p = .507, t = .613); thus, the fourth hypothesis is rejected.

Finally, age positively predicted psychological distress among inmates (β = .351, p < .01, t = 5.653). Older inmates experienced more psychological distress than younger inmates. The fifth hypothesis is thus accepted.

DISCUSSION

The study examined the role of emotional intelligence, personality trait, age and jail term on psychological distress among correctional service inmates in Owerri.

The first finding emphasised that emotional intelligence is a significant predictor of psychological distress among inmates. This aligns with prior research by Olah and Utibe (2022), which highlighted that among 354 civil servants found in Abuja, emotional intelligence significantly predicted psychological well-being. Also, a study of 48 secondary school adolescents in Anambra State by Oparaugo et al (2023) showed that emotional intelligence (together with self-efficacy significantly predicted better psychological adjustment, suggesting that EI supports adaptive functioning under stress.

This positive correlation between emotional intelligence and psychological distress among inmates may be explained by heightened emotional awareness and empathy within a highly stressful and restrictive correctional environment. Inmates with higher emotional intelligence may be more attuned to their own negative emotions and to others' emotions, thereby increasing their perception and reporting of distress. Within prisons, where exposure to interpersonal conflict, loss of autonomy, and emotional suppression is common, greater emotional sensitivity may lead to emotional overload and rumination, particularly when opportunities for healthy emotional expression and regulation are limited. Moreover, emotional intelligence in this context may reflect emotional awareness rather than effective emotional regulation, thereby increasing psychological strain. Measurement overlap in self-report instruments may also contribute to the observed association. Overall, these findings suggest that in correctional settings, emotional intelligence may function as a vulnerability factor when not accompanied by adequate coping resources and institutional support.

The second and the third findings of the study also emphasised that personality traits (neuroticism) significantly predicted psychological distress, while agreeableness did not, among inmates, respectively. In line with this result is the study by Igwe (2024), in which the results revealed a strong positive correlation between neuroticism and distress score, while on the other hand, contradicts the findings of the study by Aondoakaa (2025) that revealed that neither openness nor agreeableness directly predicted psychological distress among inmates. A negative correlation between neuroticism and psychological distress among inmates may occur when highly neurotic individuals develop adaptive coping strategies or seek social support, allowing them to manage emotional sensitivity better than less neurotic inmates. Prison culture, which discourages emotional expression, may also lead them to suppress or underreport distress, while measurement limitations can exaggerate this effect. Additionally, a survivor effect may leave a population of highly neurotic inmates who have learned to handle stress effectively, resulting in lower observed distress. These factors suggest that, in correctional settings, environmental and behavioural adaptations can sometimes invert the expected relationship between neuroticism and psychological distress.

The findings indicate that jail length did not significantly predict psychological distress among inmates. This aligns with Audu and Okeke's (2023) and Nwosu et al.'s (.2024) findings, which reported that inmates incarcerated for longer than 2 years reported significantly higher psychological distress and a significant positive correlation between jail length and all three distress subscales, respectively. The absence of a significant correlation between jail term and psychological distress among inmates may also be explained by psychological adaptation and contextual factors within the correctional environment. Over time, many inmates develop coping mechanisms such as emotional regulation, routine adherence, and cognitive adjustment that reduce the impact of

sentence length on experienced distress. Additionally, psychological distress among inmates may be more strongly influenced by immediate conditions—such as prison climate, interpersonal relationships, health status, and perceived uncertainty—rather than the objective length of incarceration. Individual differences in resilience, prior incarceration experience, and access to social or institutional support may further buffer the effects of jail term duration. Consequently, sentence length alone may be an insufficient predictor of psychological distress in correctional settings.

Lastly, age was also found to be a significant predictor of psychological distress among inmates. This supports Ojo et al. (2025), whose findings confirmed a positive correlation between age and psychological distress, indicating that older inmates exhibited higher distress levels than younger inmates. The positive correlation between age and psychological distress may be attributed to the cumulative impact of life stressors and increasing vulnerability associated with ageing. As individuals grow older, they are more likely to experience prolonged exposure to chronic stress, health problems, loss of social roles, and separation from family, all of which can contribute to elevated psychological distress. In institutional or correctional settings, older individuals may face additional challenges such as declining physical health, reduced coping resources, longer periods of incarceration, and concerns about reintegration, which can intensify feelings of hopelessness and emotional strain. Furthermore, age-related reductions in psychological flexibility and social support networks may limit effective coping, thereby increasing distress levels. These findings suggest that advancing age may function as a risk factor for psychological distress, particularly in high-stress environments.

Implications

Understanding the psychological factors that predict distress among inmates is crucial for effective assessment, intervention, and rehabilitation. Emotional intelligence, personality traits, and age have emerged as important predictors of psychological distress within correctional settings, with significant theoretical and practical implications.

Emotional intelligence can serve as a resilience factor in incarceration, suggesting that EI-based interventions, such as emotion regulation training and coping-skills program could significantly reduce psychological distress among inmates.

Personality traits also have important implications for psychological distress in correctional populations. Traits such as high neuroticism are consistently associated with increased emotional instability, negative affect, and heightened stress sensitivity, making inmates with this trait more susceptible to psychological distress. In contrast, traits like conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability tend to buffer against distress by promoting adaptive coping, self-control, and positive interpersonal relationships. Understanding inmates' personality profiles allows correctional psychologists to identify high-risk individuals and tailor interventions accordingly. This highlights the importance of personality assessment during inmate intake to support early detection and targeted mental health care.

Age is another significant predictor with meaningful implications. Younger inmates often experience higher levels of psychological distress due to poor coping skills, emotional immaturity, identity crises, and difficulty adjusting to prison life. Older inmates, although facing challenges such as health decline and long-term incarceration stress, may show lower distress levels due to greater emotional maturity and life experience. These age-related differences imply that psychological interventions should be age-sensitive. Younger inmates may benefit more from emotional skills training and mentorship programs, while older inmates may require support focused on health-related stress, loneliness, and long-term adjustment.

Limitation

The study was limited to inmates in the Owerri Correctional Centre, thus limiting the extent to which the findings may be generalized to inmates in other regions of the country or in sub-Saharan Africa.

Suggestion for future studies

Future studies should include more correctional centres across the nation to enable possible generalisation

Conclusion

Collectively, the implications of emotional intelligence, personality traits, and age as predictors of psychological distress underscore the need for a multidimensional approach to inmate mental health. Correctional systems should move beyond punitive models toward psychologically informed rehabilitation strategies. Screening for emotional intelligence, personality traits, and age-related vulnerabilities can improve risk assessment, guide individualised treatment plans, and reduce the burden of psychological distress within prisons. Ultimately, addressing these predictors not only enhances inmates' mental health but also contributes to better institutional adjustment, reduced misconduct, and successful reintegration into society after release.

The positive correlation between emotional intelligence and psychological distress among inmates may be explained by heightened emotional awareness and empathy within a highly stressful and restrictive correctional environment. Inmates with higher emotional intelligence may be more attuned to their own negative emotions and to others' emotions, thereby increasing their perception and reporting of distress. Within prisons, where exposure to interpersonal conflict, loss of autonomy, and emotional suppression is common, greater emotional sensitivity may lead to emotional overload and rumination, particularly when opportunities for healthy emotional expression and regulation are limited. Moreover, emotional intelligence in this context may reflect emotional awareness rather than effective emotional regulation, resulting in increased psychological strain. Measurement overlap in self-report instruments may also contribute to the observed association. Overall, these findings suggest that in correctional settings, emotional intelligence may function as a vulnerability factor when not accompanied by adequate coping resources and institutional support.

Recommendations

The Nigerian Correctional Service should institutionalise routine mental-health screening at intake and periodically thereafter, using brief validated tools to stratify risk by age and salient traits (e.g., neuroticism) and to trigger stepped-care referrals. Rehabilitation programmes should embed structured emotion-regulation and coping-skills training (e.g., CBT-informed groups, mindfulness, problem-solving therapy) tailored to inmates with lower emotional competencies and to older adults who showed higher distress. Dedicated psychological services (on-site or tele-mental health), staff training in trauma-informed practice, and clear referral pathways to specialist care are required. Future work should replicate these findings across centres with probability sampling and longitudinal designs to clarify causal pathways and intervention effects.

REFERENCES

Aday, O., Hyer, V., Sohnlr, B., Krause, S. E., & Cairney, P. (2022). *Socioeconomic status and health: The challenge of the gradient. American Psychologist, 49*(1), 15–24.

Ajala, E. M., Adebayo, A. M., & Oyekanmi, A. A. (2022). The impact of congestion on inmate mental health in Nigeria. *International Journal of Forensic Psychology, 9*(1), 56–64.

Akinhanmi, A. O., Olugbile, O. O., & Adebowale, I. O. (2021). Prevalence of mental disorders among inmates in a Nigerian prison. *African Journal of Psychiatry, 24*(2), 117–124.

Amnesty International. (2022). *Nigerian prisoners treated worse than animals.* https://www.amnestry.orglen/documents/age44/7880/2020/enl/

Nwafor, E., Aguocha, C. M., & Ryan, G. (2020). Depression and experience of incarceration in North Central Nigeria: A situation analysis at Makurdi Medium Security Prison. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems, 14*, 76.

Aodoakaa, M. T. (2025). Optimism and personality traits as predictors of psychological distress among inmates in Benue State. *Research Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies, 4*(1), 112–125.

Audu, I., & Okeke, F. (2023). The impact of incarceration duration on psychological distress among inmates in Kano Central Prison. *Nigeria Journal of Correctional Psychology, 5*(1), 34–45.

Daramola, D. S. (2022). Personality traits and psychopathological symptoms among inmates in selected Nigerian prisons. *Journal of Psychological and Behavioural Studies, 10*(2), 45–59.

Extremera, N., & Fernández-Berrocal, P. (2006). Emotional intelligence as predictor of mental, social, and physical health in university students. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology, 9*(1), 45–51.

Eze, C. N., Onah, O., & Nwankwo, U. (2024). Coping strategies as mediators between length of incarceration and psychological distress among inmates in Port-Harcourt. *Journal of Nigerian Correctional Studies, 7*(2), 89–102.

Gohm, C. L., Corser, G. C., & Dalsky, D. J. (2005). Emotional intelligence under stress: Useful, unnecessary, or irrelevant? *Personality and Individual Differences, 39*(6), 1017–1028.

Goteman, O. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ.* Batman Books.

Ibekwe, C. C., & Musa, L. (2025). Psychological distress among younger and older inmates in Jos maximum security prison. *Journal of Nigerian Correctional Health, 6*(2), 102–115.

Igwe, M. N. (2024). Personality traits and psychological adjustment of inmates in Nigerian correctional facilities. *African Journal of Health and Social Sciences.*

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping.* Springer.

Mikolajczak, M., Luminet, O., & Menil, C. (2007). Predicting resistance to stress: Incremental validity of trait emotional intelligence over alexithymia and optimism. *Psicothema, 19*(1), 143–150.

Nwosu, C., & Odesanya, K. (2022). Inmate rehabilitation and psychological services gaps in Nigeria correctional centres. *West African Journal of Psychology, 13*(1), 77–91.

Nwosu, P. E., Okoro, A., & Obi, F. (2024). Psychological distress and prolonged pretrial detention among awaiting correctional centre detainees. *International Journal of Forensic Mental Health, 13*(1), 21–33.

Ogunrotife, A. B. (2019). Mental health and prison reform in Nigeria: A review. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 63*(8), 1412–1430.

Ojo, K. T., Bello, S. A., & Yusuf, T. A. (2023). Age-related differences in psychological distress among inmates in Ogun State correctional center. *African Journal of Psychology, 11*(3), 87–98.

Okafor, J. C., Onwudiwe, P., & Musa, I. (2025). Trajectory of psychological distress among inmates: A 12-month longitudinal study in Abuja medium security prison. *Journal of Correctional Health, 11*(1), 55–70.

Okeke, T. C., Onwudiwe, P., & Musa, I. (2025). Trajectories of psychological distress by age-group among inmates in Abuja medium security prison: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Correctional Health, 11*(2), 105–121.

Okoro, J. N., Ezeonwuka, C. N., & Onu, J. U. (2018). Socio-demographic characteristic correlates of psychological distress among new prison entrants in Nigeria. *International Journal of Prison Health, 19*(5), 40–52.

Olah, D. O., & Utibe, U. J. (2022). Emotional intelligence and psychological wellbeing of civil servants in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria. *Journal of Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology in Practice, 1*(3), 55–67.

Oparaugo, E., et al. (2023). Emotional intelligence and self-efficacy as predictors of psychological adjustment among secondary school adolescents in Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. *European Journal of Educational Studies, 8*(6). https://doi.org/10.446827/eges.v8i6

Salovey, R., & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality, 9*(3), 185–211.

Schutle, N. S., Malouff, J. M., Thorsteinsson, E. B., Bhullar, N., & Rooke, S. E. (2007). A meta-analytic investigation of the relationship between emotional intelligence and health. *Personality and Individual Differences, 42*(6), 921–933.

Uhenku, D. B., Ihaji, E. O., & Atsehe, P. A. (2025). Self-efficacy, resilience, and psychological distress: A mediation study among inmates in Benue State correctional centres. *Journal of Humanities and Social Policy, 7*(2), 55–70.

Widiger, T. A., & Costa, P. T. (2013). *Personality disorders and the five-factor model of personality*. American Psychological Association.