

Review

The cognitive and mental health impact of national youth service corp scheme on Nigerian Youths: A review

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The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme developed in 1973, represents a government-led effort to strengthen social cohesion and enhance the personal and professional growth of young Nigerians across diverse regions. While the program has contributed to social integration and skill-building among young graduates, its cognitive and mental health effects remain underexplored. This review investigates how the NYSC experience impacts the cognitive growth and psychological well-being of Nigerian youths. We explore the effects of relocation, unfamiliar environments, and service demands on learning processes, emotional adaptation, and stress. This review identifies both the positive and negative psychological outcomes of the scheme. Findings indicate that while the program encourages independence, resilience, and intergroup learning, it can also expose participants to anxiety, emotional fatigue, and adjustment difficulties, especially in insecure or resource-poor regions. We recommend that mental health support be integrated into the NYSC structure, and that future policy reforms consider the psychological needs of corps members. This review adds to our understanding of how the NYSC scheme influences not just social identity, but also cognitive and emotional development in a key demographic.

Key words: National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), mental health, stress.

INTRODUCTION

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) is a one-year mandatory scheme established to deploy Nigerian graduates under the age of 30 into diverse sectors nationwide, with the objective of fostering national development and unity through professional engagement (Okafor and Ani, 2014; Deebom and Daerego, 2020). It was established in 1973, following the Nigerian civil war, under General Yakubu Gowon with the aim of creating disciplined and patriotic youths to contribute to national development (Okafor and Ani, 2014). It is designed to broaden their horizons, instill strong values, and make them adaptable and willing to work anywhere for Nigeria's benefit. By bringing together people from all corners of the nation, the scheme breaks down barriers, promotes understanding and unity, and builds a sense of shared Nigerian identity, all while equipping them with skills to thrive and contribute to the economy (Deebom and Daerego, 2020).

The service year is structured into four key phases: an initial three-week orientation camp held outside the graduate's state of origin, followed by deployment to the place of primary assignment, where they serve till the end of the program, the Community Development Service (CDS) and the Passing-Out Ceremony (Nwachukwu et al., 2023; Alero and Fenemigho, 2016). National Youth Service Corps members serve in many places, including schools (universities, polytechnics etc.), banks, courts, industries, hospitals, and government offices (state, federal, local). They contribute to education, finance, healthcare, and public service, among other areas. Corp members end their service year with a Passing Out Parade (POP), where they earn their certificate of completion of the program (Deebom and Daerego, 2020). Despite its noble objectives, several scholars have argued that structural and legislative weaknesses within the NYSC framework continue to pose challenges to effective implementation and participant welfare, prompting calls for policy reform (Alero and Fenemigho, 2016). At the core of the NYSC scheme is the deliberate promotion of unity through structured intergroup contact. Corp members are deployed outside their state of origin. This encourages social contact among youths from diverse ethnic, religious, and socio-cultural backgrounds, ultimately strengthening national cohesion and reducing social prejudice (Deebom and Daerego, 2020; Nwachukwu et al., 2023). It is important to examine the scheme's cognitive and mental health impacts on Nigerian youths, even as it promotes national peace and unity. Beyond its civic and physical

demands, NYSC presents diverse psychosocial experiences that can affect corps members' cognitive functioning and mental well-being. Challenges such as relocation stress, cultural adjustment, inadequate infrastructure, and job uncertainties may influence their decision-making, problem-solving abilities, and emotional stability (Balami, 2015). This study seeks to explore not just the individual cognitive and mental health impacts, but also the dynamic interplay between cognitive and mental health in the NYSC context, which is crucial for a total evaluation of the program's effects. With growing concerns voiced by youths on social platforms about the psychological strain of the program, this study is timely. Its findings can offer a baseline for educational institutions, mental health advocates, policymakers, and NYSC administrators to formulate interventions and policies that support both cognitive development and emotional well-being.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cognitive development is a mental process through which knowledge is acquired, stored and retrieved to solve problems (Gillani and O'Guinn, 2004). Hence, cognitive development theories aim to explain the process of acquisition, storage and application of knowledge by individuals over the course of their lives. Several cognitive development theories have been proposed to understand the process of learning, unlearning, adaptation and assimilation that occur in the human mind; some of which include the Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget, 1952), Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Shabani and Ewing, 2016; Van et al., 2005) and Erikson's psychosocial theory (Van et al., 2005, Carrey, 2010, Orenstein and Lewis, 2022; Gilleard and Higgs, 2016; Muogbo et al., 2021).

Piaget theorized cognitive development into four stages with processes for cognitive development; assimilation, accommodation and equilibration (Piaget, 195). These processes of cognitive development are relevant in understanding the importance, as well as the essentiality of NYSC program. This is because young adults in the NYSC program are challenged with the application of academic-learned knowledge in real-world situations, exposing them to first-person learning experiences, promoting acquisition and Master of Leadership skills, fostering positive interpersonal-intertribal relationships

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thereby promoting adaptability and flexibility (Muogbo et al., 2021). The NYSC program helps these adults form new schemas to understand their environment better, stimulates change of existing schemas, as well as encourages them to assimilate new information. Individuals who have gone through this process are expected to develop and hone skill acquisition in the form of entrepreneurship, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills to be able to adapt to the real-world (Muogbo et al., 2021). Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, proposed that cognitive development is influenced by cultural and social factors and emphasized the role and importance of social interactions in the growth and development of mental health in people (Shabani and Ewing, 2016).

The theory emphasizes that learning is fundamentally a social activity rather than an isolated act of exploration (Van et al., 2005). It also highlights that children learn more effectively when supported by someone more experienced, such as a teacher or parent (Van et al., 2005). He posited that the use of cultural tools, the values and norms upheld by a community, in addition to guidance or apprenticeship under an individual with more experience influences the cognitive development of a person (Van et al., 2005). He ascribes the individual with greater knowledge and experiences the term MKO- More Knowledgeable Person (Van et al., 2005, Vygotsky, 1978). It is not at all difficult to appreciate Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in the NYSC scheme, as the program focuses on projects aimed at development of communities with special consideration to more rural than urban areas, promoting an exchange of knowledge between the young adults and the more experienced and knowledgeable adults such as the local leaders (Muogbo et al., 2021).

These young adults in the NYSC scheme are mobilized from diverse cultures, each with different experiences and knowledge gained from working with different mentors and colleagues, fostering further cognitive growth and development. It enhances problem-solving and critical thinking in real-world situations as well as intertribal and intercultural collaborations (Muogbo et al., 2021). Erik Erikson, a notable psychoanalyst and psychologist, extended Sigmund Freud's developmental theories by focusing on psychosocial growth rather than purely psychosexual stages [Carrey, 2010]. His theory, grounded in the epigenetic principle, emphasizes that personality evolves over a series of predetermined stages influenced by individual experiences and sociocultural surroundings (Orenstein and Lewis, 2022). He identified eight sequential stages, each marked by a central conflict that individuals must address successfully to ensure psychological maturity from infancy through old age (Orenstein and Lewis, 2022, Gilleard and Higgs, 2016).

These stages are interdependent, where the resolution of earlier challenges impacts progression through later phases (Orenstein and Lewis, 2022, Gilleard and Higgs, 2016).

In relation to the NYSC program, Erikson's framework provides useful insight into how such an initiative may support identity formation, self-efficacy, and the assumption of leadership roles among young adults (Orenstein and Lewis, 2022). Through active engagement in service-related tasks and project leadership, corps members are positioned to build confidence, reduce uncertainty about their roles in society, and foster a sense of purpose (Muogbo et al., 2021). The scheme also encourages meaningful social interaction, which can enhance emotional intelligence, social competence, and cognitive engagement. Furthermore, NYSC promotes core national values

including integrity, teamwork, patriotism, diligence, and civic responsibility (Muogbo et al., 2021). By deploying recent graduates across diverse communities, the scheme aims to inspire a spirit of public service, facilitate entrepreneurial learning, and promote skill acquisition (Muogbo et al., 2021). Based on Erikson's model, it can be anticipated that participants emerge with stronger resilience, improved leadership skills, and sharper cognitive capabilities (Orenstein and Lewis, 2022), though it should also be acknowledged that some may experience psychological or cognitive challenges during their service year.

As earlier mentioned, with the help of different cognitive theories, the program has been shown to provide a foundation for enhanced intellectual growth and cognitive development, due to the various projects, most of which are community driven. It also challenges the youths to think outside the box and get creative in carrying out tasks, especially in places where basic amenities are not available (Muogbo et al., 2021). It is a source for acquiring knowledge through hands-on experience, exposing individuals to foreign environments with most of the time different cultures and way of life, thereby stimulating adaptation and assimilation (Muogbo et al., 2021). Despite the potential benefits of the program, there are also challenges with the scheme.

A study done involving medical doctors in the programme, reported challenges faced by these medical doctors namely: inadequate accommodation and poor working conditions due to unavailability of infrastructure as well as poor staffing and lack of equipment [Ojo & Balogun, 2023]. In another study done on medical doctors during the compulsory one-year national youth service, benefits such as surgical skills acquisition were gained, but they also experienced challenges such as: lack of accommodation, poor remuneration and exploitation of corps doctors by their employers (Okoye, 2023).

In Kebbi, Nigeria, it was reported that high levels of stress, anxiety and depression amongst corporers were found to be linked to the relocation to a foreign environment and poor remuneration. However, it was also revealed that despite the initial struggle to adjust, for many

of them, active engagement in community-driven projects improved their emotions (Balami, 2015). A similar study done in the same region recorded depression in individuals in the program, especially individuals from dysfunctional homes (Musa and Bello, 2015). Another similar study done in North-West identified a prevalence of anxiety and stress, observed more in younger individuals (Usman and Idris 2022). Mental health theories including behavioural theories (Skinner, 1954), cognitive theories (Skinner, 1954), humanistic theories (Rogers, 1957), psychodynamic theories (Okoye, 2023; Freud, 1923) and biological theories (Rogers, 1957) can also help our understanding of the mental health impact of the NYSC scheme. The behavioral theory proposes that actions are determined mostly by experiences [Skinner, 1954]. It posits that behaviour is acquired through learning and that the behaviour of an individual is shaped based on their interaction with their environment- such as rewards and repercussions (Rogers, 1957). This theory was advocated by psychologists including Watson, Skinner, and Pavlov (Rogers, 1957; Freud, 1923). This theory supports the learning process the NYSC scheme provides, such that individuals can learn from their peers, community members, mentors and elders, increased motivation with rewards for their hard work and promotes goal setting and seriousness in facing challenges. Similar to the behavioural theory, the psychodynamic theory puts forward that behaviour is because of experiences. However, they assert that unconscious forces determine the behaviour of individuals (Freud, 1923). This was first formulated by some researchers (Okoye, 2023). The NYSC scheme can be understood through this theory as it provides corp members with opportunity of counselling and support to address unconscious conflicts, provides mentors for guidance and better communication and also fosters intellectual growth with the tasks and projects it provides.

The cognitive theory asserts that cognitive processes are the reasons for emotions, thoughts and behaviours and was proposed by Ellis and Becks (Skinner, 1954). The NYSC scheme promotes formation of new schemas, as well as adaptability and assimilation of already existing schemas. The humanistic theory initially centered on abnormal behaviour and psychological issues, now emphasizes free will and basic goodness in individuals, as well as the intrinsic drive in people to grow and reach their maximum potential (Rogers, 1957). This theory suggests that the NYSC program provides an avenue for emotional intelligence and positive relationships with peers and members of formed groups by engaging them in training programs, which will in turn promote their growth and development (Rogers, 1957). The biological theory posits that human emotions and behaviour are due to biological causes. Hence, it is suggested that a psychological issue stems from physical and/or biological causes (Rogers, 1957). The NYSC program supports biological theory as it

engages individuals in exercise programs to improve their state of health and encourage healthy habits. The program also promotes healthy sleep habits and patterns, as well as enabling individuals to learn how to cope with stress (Rogers, 1957).

Stress coping models and social support theories are concepts which may explain the methods through which NYSC corp members handle stressors (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985, Hobfall, 1989, Putnam 2000, Cohen et al., 2015). While stress coping models focus on the interaction between the individual and the stressor, social support theories show how social interactions influence the well-being and coping responses (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985, Hobfall, 1989; Putnam 2000; Cohen et al., 2015). According to the Cognitive-Transactional model, stress is not just caused because of an external event, but due to the interaction between an individual and his/her environment, such that individuals assess the significance of the stressor, determine if the stressor is irrelevant, manageable or stressful (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). Therefore, NYSC corp members can use problem-focused coping strategies to manage stressors such as problem solving, seeking information (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). Emotion-focused strategies help individuals regulate their emotional reactions when dealing with stressors (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). Hence, with proper stress management training, they will improve their coping skills, handle stress better and make proper decisions (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources (COR) theory outlines how people evaluate and utilize their resources to handle stress, emphasizing that stress arises from either the loss or gain of these resources, which subsequently shapes their coping responses (Hobfall, 1989). It suggests that stress could lead to loss of resources, hence causing even more stress; or it could lead to resource gain and reduce stress (Hobfall, 1989).

Therefore, NYSC corp members can develop solutions focused on resource gain and management of resources will improve stress management, coping skills, promote well-being and enhance resource use and conservation (Hobfall, 1989). Stress capital theory is a social support model which refers to the benefits an individual or a community gains due to social interactions and networks (Putnam, 2000). It divides social capital into two types; bonding social capital which is the relationship built with close individuals such as family and friends; and bridging social capital which refers to weaker relationships between individuals such as associates or colleagues (Putnam, 2000).

This indicates that measures such as initiatives or workshops, designed to promote close-knit relationships between NYSC members might inadvertently result in better health outcomes amongst members of the society and gain resources which will lead to cognitive development and enhanced problem-solving skills (Putnam, 2000).

COGNITIVE IMPACTS OF NYSC SCHEME

Problem-solving skills

Since its launch in 2012, the NYSC's Skill Acquisition and Entrepreneurship Development (SAED) programme has offered 12 different skill categories, including agro-allied, automotive, beautification, construction, cosmetology, culture and tourism, education, environment, film and photography, food processing/preservation, information and communication technology, and power and energy (Egobueze et al., 2024). Throughout the NYSC service year, exposure to various settings fosters flexibility, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities. Due to their frequent deployment to foreign areas, corps members must negotiate linguistic obstacles, sociocultural disparities, and logistical difficulties, all of which promote cognitive flexibility (Chuks-Ezekwibe, 2004). NYSC offers education in entrepreneurship and a range of occupational skills in addition to academic training. These abilities are beneficial not only for individual growth but also for advancing the growth of nearby communities (Egobueze et al., 2024). Graduates with real-world experience can help local businesses and generate employment, which will ultimately advance both the economy and education (Egobueze et al., 2024). Young graduates from a variety of backgrounds network and work together through the NYSC programme. This facilitates the sharing of best practices, ideas, and collaborative projects aimed at enhancing national development (Osahon, 2019).

The NYSC CDS is an educational programme that combines the efforts of government agencies and corps members to identify issues in various communities and develop solutions to improve the social, cultural, and economic circumstances of both communities and corps members (Egobueze et al., 2024). Additionally, NYSC members frequently work on data collection and research initiatives that can aid in the advancement of education. Their study results can guide educational policy and decision-making, assisting decision-makers in making data-driven decisions to raise the nation's educational standards (Uko et al., 2024).

Leadership skills

NYSC helps young people in Nigeria develop a sense of leadership and accountability. If they actively participate in a variety of community and educational projects, graduates are more likely to stay involved in social and educational development following their service year (Chuks-Ezekwibe, 2004). In addition to giving corps members several chances to serve in various positions during the 3 weeks of camp and at their place of primary Assignment (PPA), the NYSC programme helps them develop the skills necessary to become exceptional

leaders (Chuks-Ezekwibe, 2004). By exercising their leadership skills in raising public awareness of fundamental human rights, improving the quality of education in the host community, and promoting the arts and culture of the host community through NYSC activities, corps members helped accelerate the growth of the economy in Anambra State (Njiofor et al., 2021).

They also helped to create a sustainable environment during NYSC community development service by clearing and draining drainage systems and donating items to prisons, schools, motherless babies' homes, and health centres (Njiofor et al., 2021).

Participation in CDS activities under the NYSC programme equips corps members with essential leadership and professional skills, contributing to their personal growth and community empowerment (Uko et al., 2024). In the study, the attitudes and participation of youth corps members in community development service in Akwa Ibom State was examined. The Corps members believe that CDS plays a significant role in enhancing personal development and building leadership skills (Uko et al., 2024).

Discipline and work ethics

The NYSC programme sought to harness the vigour and expertise of young individuals for national progress, by deploying graduates to underserved areas to contribute to community development projects, healthcare, education, and other vital sectors (Egobueze et al., 2024). One of the main goals of the SAED programme is to encourage all Nigerians, especially the youth, to participate in skill acquisition to create employment opportunities actively (Egobueze et al., 2024). Each year, the programme mobilizes and prepares over 250,000 youths to become employable or start their businesses upon completing their mandatory one-year service. The SAED program also provides corps members with knowledge for entrepreneurship and the ability to train other community members (Egobueze et al., 2024).

The NYSC instills discipline and offers training in entrepreneurship and a variety of practical skills. These abilities are beneficial not only for individual growth but also for advancing the growth of nearby communities. Graduates with real-world experience can boost regional businesses and generate employment, thus advancing the economy and education (Egobueze et al., 2024). The NYSC program equips corps members with a sense of patriotism, discipline, and civic responsibility.

These values are essential to the nation's overall development, while the CDS integrates the corps members into the commercial, social, and industrial spheres of the community and nation, allowing them to actively contribute to national progress (Uko et al., 2024).

Cultural understanding and tolerance

The NYSC has helped to bridge the divide between people from different regions of Nigeria, as young people from all parts of the country come together for their service year. The NYSC has promoted the idea of a "Nigerian identity" through its slogan of "Unity in Diversity" (Osahon, 2019). Young people from various ethnic groups spend 3 weeks together in a camp as part of the "Inter-Ethnic Camping" campaign. They engage in activities that promote respect for cultural diversity and understanding between people during this period. Sports contests, talent shows, and cultural exhibits are some examples of these events (Chukwuka, 2017). It has been demonstrated that the program is successful in fostering goodwill among members of various ethnic groups. In certain instances, it has even resulted in the development of enduring friendships (Chukwuka, 2017).

In addition, the program fosters togetherness through NYSC's yearly "Unity Week." Members of NYSC take part in a range of events and activities throughout this week that are intended to foster a sense of solidarity and patriotism. Lectures, seminars, and cultural events are some of these activities [Oyovbaire, 1996]. Through its Cultural Integration initiative, the NYSC promotes intercultural awareness by encouraging youths to explore the traditions and practices of Nigeria's diverse ethnic communities. A key component of this initiative is the annual 'Cultural Day' celebration.

This event, which takes place in many states around Nigeria, showcases dances, cultural performances, and other forms of expression from various ethnic groups [Osahon, 2019]. These gatherings aid in fostering awareness and respect for Nigeria's many cultures. Additionally, they can support social cohesiveness and lessen ethnic conflicts by bringing young people together to celebrate and discuss their traditions (Osahon, 2019).

According to a study carried out in Anambra state, it was reported that social integration has improved since the NYSC orientation camp was held at Umunya (Chuks-ezekwibe, 2004). During the camp period, the corps members typically go on a state visit to the Umunya king's palace. Other well-known Umunya locations were also visited. This has allowed the corps members and Umunya residents to socialize (Chuks-ezekwibe, 2004). Additionally, teaching corps members of the local dialect at the camp has facilitated their smooth assimilation into their stationed communities. Additionally, the CDS allows the corps members to fully contribute to the country's advancement by integrating them into the community and the country's commercial, social, and industrial life (Fanen, 2021). A factor which affects the corps members' involvement in different community activities is the support they receive from the local community. The NYSC program established channels to boost cooperation between youth corps members and community

organizations, local leaders, and outside groups to improve engagement. This has fostered a sense of ownership and appreciation among community members, encouraging involvement in projects like environmental cleanliness and educational outreach (Uko, 2024).

Bridging educational gaps

The NYSC was established to address social and educational needs in addition to promoting togetherness. One of the innovative programmes launched at NYSC's founding was the educational programme. The main way that a nation may develop its human capital is through education, which equips people with the knowledge, abilities, and skills necessary for both professional and personal growth (Egobueze et al., 2024). The NYSC was a strategic goal to close the divides between Nigeria's various ethnic, cultural, and religious groups as well as a reaction to post-war difficulties. NYSC members regularly plan and participate in educational outreach initiatives like workshops, awareness campaigns, and literacy campaigns (Njiofor et al., 2021). In addition to encouraging literacy, these programs help the communities they serve understand the value of education.

Through community development programmes and anti-corruption campaigns, corps members help eradicate corrupt behaviour and educate the rural community on the use of improved crops (Njiofor et al., 2021). This significantly reduces educational disparities. Through its many contributions, from the deployment of teachers and the enhancement of infrastructure to the encouragement of literacy, cultural exchange, skill development, and youth engagement, the NYSC has made a substantial contribution to the advancement of education in Nigeria. It is essential for closing educational disparities and encouraging solidarity and responsibility among young Nigerians, which eventually helps the country's educational advancement (Egobueze et al., 2024). Uko also pointed out that the NYSC program has made educational duties for corps members a priority, especially in underserved areas. The importance of literacy and community empowerment in rural development projects is shown in the CDS activities' incorporation of educational programs as a crucial component (Uko et al., 2024).

MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS OF NYSC SCHEME

The NYSC scheme provides chances for skill development and cultural exchange, although impact on participants has garnered increased academic attention. According to research, the program's structural demands - relocation, cultural adaptation, and post-service employment uncertainty can significantly impact corps members'

mental health (Adeoti et al., 2009). This study examines these impacts through the lenses of stress, depression, social support, and resilience.

Stress and anxiety

The quick transition period from academia to national service can prove significantly stressful for many participants (Adeoti and Olaewe, 2009). In a study, 54.5 and 18.2 % of corps members reported clinical anxiety and stress, linked to financial constraints, unfamiliar environments, and deployment dissatisfaction [Balami, 2015]. Anxiety can also be worsened by the posting and deployment system, where corps members have limited control over their deployment locations, and most often lead to distress when posted to high-risk or underdeveloped regions (Nwachukwu et al., 2023; Nwajei et al., 2021). Unlike the structured resilience training given to military personnel, young graduates are thrust into unfamiliar regions, often lacking basic amenities, proper healthcare, or even emotional support structures (Nze, 2025).

The psychological toll begins at the orientation camps—locations often marred by overcrowding, poor sanitation, and a militarized routine. This harsh environment is compounded by the lack of meaningful engagement or purposeful deployment, which fosters a persistent sense of disillusionment and helplessness (Nze, 2025). Gender disparities also exist. Female corps members face additional risks, including sexual harassment and societal pressure to secure "befitting" postings. (Ayodele et al., 2015), reported that female participants encounter gender-specific risks, including sexual harassment and assaults emphasizing the need for specialized psychosocial support. Finance is also a contributor to the stress and anxiety experienced by the corps members, as the meagre monthly allowance fails to cover basic needs in urban areas, forcing many into exploitative side hustle (Jabita, 2025). For some corps members, the difficulty does not come from relocating, but rather from financial problems (Jabita, 2025).

Depression and loneliness

Relocating to unfamiliar places disrupts social networks, exposing many Youths Corpers to loneliness and depressive symptoms. A cross-sectional survey of 311 corps members (Nwajei et al., 2021) found that 57.2% met clinical thresholds for depression, attributable to the fact that most were unhappy with their postings. Corp members often face challenges such as being posted to unfavorable or harsh locations, insecurity, accidents and deaths because of poor transportation networks, exploitation and poor welfare at places of primary

assignment, refusal of relocation requests, lack of decent accommodation, and poor pay (Nwachukwu et al., 2023).

Social support and networks

Strong social bonds alleviate the mental health risks associated with the scheme. The protective role of peer connections formed during orientation camp, and community development services where experiences are shared, can foster friendships (Uko et al., 2024). In addition, the NYSC programme offers young Nigerians a special chance to gain experience and practical skills that are important for their personal and professional growth. Throughout the service year, participants engage in a variety of community development projects and activities, through which they acquire important leadership, teamwork, and project management skills (Eboigbe, 2024). As a result of these encounters, they learn useful skills as well as a sense of civic duty. Another important element in the professional growth of corps members is the calibre of supervision given to them during their service years. It takes proper training and mentoring from NYSC officials and host organizations to help corps members develop their business skills (Eboigbe, 2024).

Resilience: Adaptive strategies

Corps members adopt varied coping strategies to survive the service year challenges. Young adults are also challenged by the need to be separated from their families, move to new geographical locations and financial responsibility which result in them developing new coping mechanisms (Amoko et al., 2022). Adaptive approaches which serve as emotional regulation include simplifying their lifestyle, changing their career pursuits when the need arises, removing work related stress among others (Ukwueze, 2013), while problem-focused coping methods include pursuing side hustles or leveraging NYSC networks for career opportunities. Counselling at this stage of life is equally needed to help the corps members realize that their isolation and loneliness can drive them to do things that they would not ordinarily do. It would also help them understand that they are just emotional beings who require aid to cope with the multitude of complex situations that can arise during the service year and the life after (Ukwueze, 2013).

INTERPLAY BETWEEN COGNITIVE AND MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS

The connection between cognitive development and mental health is both complex and two-way (Yin et al., 2024). Cognitive functions like memory, attention, and

problem-solving not only shape how we regulate emotions and make decisions but are also influenced by our mental health status (Persson et al., 2023). When mental health is poor, it can negatively affect our ability to learn, concentrate, and manage tasks (Persson et al., 2023). There is increasing evidence suggesting that strong cognitive abilities are linked with better mental well-being. Studies show that individuals with higher cognitive function often report greater happiness, life satisfaction, and lower rates of psychiatric disorders (Ali et al., 2013, Khandaker et al., 2018; Batty et al., 2005). This underscores the role of the cognitive impact of the NYSC scheme on the mental health of the Corpers. In addition, people with depression may struggle to find joy in activities, leading to social withdrawal and fewer rewarding experiences (Mazzucchelli et al., 2010). Individuals who struggle to handle stress in a positive way are more likely to experience emotional difficulties (Beck et al., 2014). Social connections are also important. According to social theories, lacking support from family, friends, or the community increases the risk of mental health problems (Wang et al., 2018). Biologically, chronic inflammation has been linked with both poor mental health and reduced cognitive performance, suggesting a shared physical pathway (Khandaker et al., 2018). These also underscore the potential cognitive impacts of the NYSC scheme on the mental health outcomes of the Corpers.

An interesting theory by Deary and Der (2005) suggests that people with higher cognitive ability process information more efficiently -what they call "neural efficiency." In their study, faster reaction times (used to measure brain efficiency) helped explain why higher cognitive ability was associated with lower mortality rates (Deary et al., 2005). More so, Cognitive reappraisal, a strategy that helps people rethink emotional situations, has been shown to

reduce anxiety and improve emotional regulation. For example, Shore et al. (2016) found that cognitive reappraisal training lowered fear responses in teenagers aged 12 to 15 (Shore et al., 2016). Similarly, a study investigated the effect of cognitive reappraisal interventions in individuals with social anxiety.

The result revealed lower anxiety symptoms and greater emotional regulatory abilities in the studied groups (Goldin et al., 2012). Cognitive flexibility, our ability to shift thinking and adapt to new situations is another key part of mental health. It supports creativity, resilience, and effective problem-solving (Plucker et al., 2017; McDonell et al., 2014). Research shows that poor cognitive flexibility is linked to higher levels of depression and anxiety (Plucker et al., 2017; McDonell et al., 2014; Gabryts et al., 2018). Creative activities have also been shown to benefit mental health. A survey found that people who engaged in creative hobbies reported better mental well-being than those who did not (Davies et al., 2015). Thus, the potential cognitive benefits of the NYSC scheme play a significant

role in improving the mental health outcomes of the Corpers.

Mental disorders can also damage cognitive function. Studies show that depression can lower thinking skills and worsen age-related cognitive decline (Sekhon et al., 2023). Other experiments reveal that even short-term mood changes can influence how well people perform on thinking tasks (Ashby et al., 1999; Isen et al., 1991). Psychological well-being seems to protect the brain through certain biological pathways. For instance, research by Steptoe and colleagues found that a positive mood was linked with lower stress hormone levels and inflammation [Steptoe et al., 2005]. In contrast, chronic stress can lead to overactivation of the HPA (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal) axis, causing high cortisol levels and shrinking of the hippocampus, a brain area important for memory (Zhu et al., 2014). Mental health conditions are especially serious for young people. According to World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021), such conditions often lead to poor school performance and reduced social functioning, with long-term consequences (World Health Organization et al., 2021; Luby et al., 2017; Copeland et al., 2021; Löve et al., 2015). Early cognitive development is strongly linked to later academic and career success. Early exposure to life stress such as trauma or neglect can affect brain development. It can disrupt key brain circuits like the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, and amygdala, which are involved in memory, emotional control, and learning (McEwen et al., 2013; Nusslock et al., 2015). Damage to these areas can lead to long-term mental and physical health issues. People who experience early stress often have smaller hippocampal volumes, which are associated with learning problems (Hanson et al., 2014; Pechtel et al., 2011).

A similar study by Ghasemi et al. (2022) found that chronic stress and anxiety can damage the hippocampus, leading to memory difficulties (Ghasemi et al., 2022). Other research shows that childhood trauma can lead to poorer thinking skills in older adults who struggle with depression and anxiety (Petkus et al., 2018). People with depression often show reduced abilities in attention, memory, processing speed, and executive function. These problems can affect everyday tasks and job performance. In fact, over 75% of patients with depression report productivity loss at work (Kaser et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2014). However, cognitive training can help improve working memory and thinking skills in these individuals (Allan et al., 2018). Anxiety also disrupts thinking abilities, particularly working memory and attention (Maloney et al., 2014; Moran et al., 2016). This link is two ways: poor cognitive performance can make anxiety worse, and vice versa (Petkus et al., 2017). Lukasik (2019) reported that anxiety negatively affects tasks that demand concentration and cognitive adaptability (Gulpers et al., 2022). Long-term anxiety may also increase the risk of dementia and impair decision-making

(Lukasik et al., 2019). These further underscores the potential mental health impact of the NYSC scheme on the cognition of the Corpers advice-versa.

REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES

The NYSC scheme was established to foster national unity, promote cross-cultural integration, and build leadership and professional experience among Nigerian youths (Ajeli, 2024). However, recent empirical studies suggest that the scheme causes significant psychological and cognitive issues for Corp members. The transition to NYSC is usually characterized by relocation, cultural adaptation, uncertainty, and exposure to new environments which put significant pressure on Corp members, many of whom are in the early phase of adulthood (Nwachukwu et al., 2023). A study by Nwajei et al. (2021) provides a view of the mental health implications of NYSC. The researchers screened 327 recent Nigerian graduates for depressive symptoms during their orientation program in Delta State using the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) instrument (Nwajei et al., 2021). Their results showed that 57.2% of participants exhibited signs of depression, with 16.5% meeting the threshold for moderate to severe levels. Individuals from larger families may bring additional pressures to the NYSC program, because sociodemographic characteristics like birth order, family size, and number of siblings were found to be common determinants of mental health status (Nwajei et al., 2021).

The study emphasized the importance of including psychosocial support networks and mental health evaluations into the NYSC framework (Nwajei et al., 2021). Similarly, the prevalence and contributing factors of stress, anxiety, and depression were investigated in a different cross-sectional study involving 264 corps members in Kebbi State (Balami, 2015). The study found that 18.2% of individuals had indicators of stress, 54.5% had anxiety, and 36.4% reported depressive symptoms. The study identified several relevant factors, such as gender, age, perceived inadequacy of monthly stipends, and state of origin. For instance, there was a greater risk of psychological distress among corps members from the North Central and South-South districts. These results highlight the need for culturally sensitive support networks across the NYSC program (Balami, 2015).

In addition to emotional distress, there are increasing reports of suicidal behaviours among Nigerian youths, some of whom are corps members. In a 2021 study suicidal tendencies were documented in 1,171 Nigerian young adults, which included NYSC participants (Tolulope et al., 2021). The lifetime prevalence of suicidal ideation was found to be 9.6%, with 5.7% having planned suicide and 2.6% reporting suicidal attempts. The study linked

these behaviours to factors such as anxiety, low self-esteem, dissatisfaction with life, and substance use (Tolulope et al., 2021). These results underline the severity of mental health issues among young Nigerians and raise concerns about the emotional readiness and support available for Corp members.

While most studies focus on depression, anxiety, and suicide, there are few studies that addressed the cognitive impacts of the NYSC program. For example, a study by Aja, Aderemi, and Olukoshi, 2019 examined the cognitive impacts of NYSC (Albert et al., 2019). This study noted the structural and systemic barriers facing Nigerian youths, including political disempowerment, inadequate access to education and employment, and exclusion from decision-making processes. This study provides insight into how systemic neglect and lack of supportive institutional structures can reduce mental resilience and cognitive development which are determining factors that are also relevant within the NYSC context. Even though many studies examined the emotional well-being of Corp members, these studies are predominantly cross-sectional studies which only identify association and not causality (Wang and Cheng, 2020). Longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether mental health issues persist after the service year or whether the pattern of mental health issues changes over time. There is also a paucity of interventional studies to examine the effects of strategies such as counselling, peer-group support and other proven interventions on reducing psychological stress among young adults.

VARIABILITIES OF REVIEWED STUDIES

Data collection difficulties

Collecting reliable and comprehensive data on NYSC participants across Nigeria is likely to be a challenging endeavor. This may have significant impacts on generalizing the findings of the literature reviewed in this study. The NYSC scheme disperses corps members to all states of the federation, including areas with infrastructural deficits and security concerns. In regions like the North-East or deep rural communities, participants may lack access to basic communication networks or internet services, thereby limiting participation in online surveys or interviews (Sanda, 1980).

Additionally, certain areas may be affected by insurgency, communal conflict, or poor transportation infrastructure, which restricts physical access for researchers (Dunn, 2018). These logistical constraints could result in under-sampling in remote regions and therefore limit the representativeness of the data. Another complication stems from the cultural stigma surrounding mental health issues. In many parts of Nigeria, discussing psychological well-being is still a taboo, and participants

may feel uncomfortable disclosing their thoughts or experiences, even anonymously (Fadele, et al., 2024). This could result in underreporting or socially desirable responses that may affect the findings. Furthermore, mental health research involves ethical considerations that demand proper handling of sensitive data. Therefore, researchers must ensure confidentiality, provide informed consent, and offer referral options for participants showing signs of distress; all of which are harder to coordinate in rural or underserved locations (Khaled et al., 2025).

Variability in NYSC experiences

The variability in corps members' NYSC experiences presents a complex challenge in identifying and generalizing cognitive and mental health outcomes. This may pose significant challenges in generalizing the findings of the literature reviewed in this study. Although the scheme was designed to be uniform, experiences differ drastically depending on the corps member's deployment location, primary assignment, accommodation, and the socio-political environment of their host community (Nwachukwu et al., 2023). For example, a corps member posted to an urban center may enjoy better infrastructure, healthcare access, and work opportunities, while someone in a rural area may contend with isolation, poor amenities, or even hostility from locals (Onuekwusi, 2019). Such environmental differences introduce a wide array of cognitive demands and stress levels. A corp member assigned to teach in a large urban school may face intellectual stimulation and structured routines, contributing positively to cognitive development (Onuekwusi, 2019). In contrast, one placed in an understaffed rural health post may experience overwhelming workloads, inadequate resources, and psychological distress. These discrepancies make it difficult to draw generalized conclusions across the corps population.

Furthermore, cultural and ethnic dynamics in the host community can impact the corps member's sense of belonging and mental resilience. Research from the World Bank (2018) suggests that cross-ethnic deployments can either foster national integration or aggravate isolation, depending on the local context. These subjective differences in experience necessitate stratified data analysis to reflect the full range of outcomes (World Bank, 2018).

Cultural and socioeconomic factors

Cultural and socioeconomic variables significantly shape the cognitive and mental health experiences of corps members in the NYSC scheme (Okafor et al., 2022; Guruje et al., 2015; Onyemaechi et al., 2025). Nigeria's vast

cultural diversity means that beliefs surrounding mental health vary widely. In many traditional communities, mental illness is stigmatized and often attributed to spiritual forces, making open discussions and help-seeking behaviors rare (Okafor et al., 2022; Guruje et al., 2015; WHO, 2017). Corps members deployed to such areas may feel isolated or reluctant to access care, even when symptoms of psychological distress emerge (Kirkbride et al., 2024). Additionally, socioeconomic background plays a critical role in mental health outcomes. Corps members from affluent families may have a financial cushion, better access to private healthcare, and strong social support networks (Kirkbride et al., 2024).

These factors can reduce stress and enhance coping mechanisms during service. In contrast, those from low-income households may face persistent financial pressure, lack of quality accommodation, or difficulty affording necessities, which can exacerbate anxiety, depression, and burnout (Kirkbride et al., 2024). This disparity is also evident in how corps members handle cognitive demands. Those with better education or urban exposure may adapt more easily to complex assignments or cross-cultural communication, while others might struggle with the cognitive load due to inadequate preparation or language barriers. Moreover, cultural norms can shape how mental health symptoms are interpreted. What might be considered depression in a clinical setting could be misunderstood as laziness or spiritual weakness in certain communities (Kirkbride et al., 2024).

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Limited research

A significant challenge in this study is the scarcity of existing literature directly examining the cognitive and mental health impacts of the NYSC scheme on Nigerian youths. While the NYSC program has been in operation since 1973, most academic investigations have focused on its role in national integration, skill development, or employment generation, with little attention to its psychological or cognitive consequences (Nwachukwu et al., 2023). This restricts the theoretical framework that can be applied and makes it difficult to establish empirical benchmarks or comparison points. The lack of foundational studies also presents challenges in selecting appropriate measurement tools. For instance, validated instruments tailored to assess the cognitive or psychological effects of youth national service in a Nigerian context are virtually non-existent. Researchers must either adapt foreign tools or develop new ones, which introduce concerns about validity and reliability.

Moreover, due to the limited literature, there is a risk that findings from this study may be misinterpreted or lack the contextual depth that comes from a well-developed

research lineage. The few available discussions on mental health in relation to public service tend to focus broadly on stigma, access to services, or stress in the general youth population (Atewologun et al., 2025). This generality fails to capture the specific structural and experiential aspects of the NYSC scheme.

Narrative review design

This study used a narrative review design, which carries several limitations that can affect the comprehensiveness and objectivity of the findings [Campbell et al., 2019]. Narrative reviews are typically qualitative and descriptive, relying on the selection and synthesis of available literature without the strict methodological frameworks characteristic of systematic reviews or meta-analysis (Campbell et al., 2019). As a result, there is an increased risk of selection bias, where studies included in the review may not represent the full scope of existing research. Study selection in reviews can be influenced by the reviewers' individual judgments and the specific search methods employed, potentially resulting in the exclusion of pertinent literature or a disproportionate emphasis on particular perspectives (Cumpston et al., 2019; Valentine et al., 2010).

Moreover, the interpretation of findings in narrative reviews tends to be more susceptible to confirmation bias, as reviewers might emphasize results that align with preconceived hypotheses or interests (Campbell et al., 2019). The lack of a formalized process for assessing study quality and risk of bias further restricts the reliability of conclusions drawn. Additionally, narrative reviews typically do not follow standardized protocols for meta-analysis such as Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) [Moher et al., 2009], thereby reducing transparency, reproducibility, and the ability to critically evaluate the methodology. Therefore, while this review provides valuable insights into the cognitive and mental health impacts of the NYSC scheme, the narrative design restricts the ability to draw definitive conclusions (Campbell et al., 2019). Despite these drawbacks, narrative reviews offer flexibility to explore emerging or under-researched topics with cultural sensitivity.

Lack of quantitative analysis

A major limitation to this study is the absence of quantitative analysis such as meta-analysis or statistical synthesis. Without quantitative methods, it is impossible to aggregate data across studies to produce pooled estimates of effect sizes, prevalence rates, or other metrics that could precisely quantify the impacts of the NYSC scheme on cognitive and mental health outcomes.

The narrative approach limits the ability to identify patterns or assess the magnitude of effects in a statistically robust manner (Campbell et al., 2020). Furthermore, the lack of quantitative analysis restricts the capacity to explore potential mediators of impact, such as demographic factors, duration of service, prior health status, or deployment location, which could be critical in understanding variations in outcomes. Quantitative methods also allow for the assessment of heterogeneity and publication bias, which are essential for evaluating the consistency and validity of evidence. The absence of such analysis means that the findings remain largely descriptive and tentative, showing associations rather than establishing causality and limiting the generalization and applicability of the findings (Campbell et al., 2020). Limited availability of standardized metrics or longitudinal data hampers the feasibility of meta-analysis in this domain.

Study quality and heterogeneity

The studies included in this narrative review exhibit considerable variability in methodological quality, design, sample sizes, and measurement tools, introducing significant heterogeneity that challenges the reliability of synthesized findings. Some studies employed rigorous quantitative designs with validated instruments, while others were qualitative or exploratory with smaller, non-representative samples. This variability complicates direct comparisons, limiting the generalizability of conclusions across different contexts (Gagnier et al., 2012). Differences in study populations, such as age, gender distribution, and geographic location, further contribute to heterogeneity (Imrey, 2020). Variations in how cognitive and mental health outcomes were defined and measured also complicate synthesis. For instance, some studies might focus on depression or anxiety symptoms, while others assess broader psychological wellbeing or cognitive performance, limiting comparability. The narrative review approach does not formally account for the heterogeneity between studies. According to Imrey (2020), high heterogeneity in meta-analyses can pose interpretive challenges, as it may obscure true effects and reduce the reliability of conclusions (Imrey, 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

For NYSC scheme

There is a need to establish initiatives, support groups and workshops designed to provide a forum where Corpers feel safe and validated enough to express themselves, including the experiences they expect to have and have had so far in the process (WHO, 2021; WHO, 2017). Access to these should be made available both online and offline, to protect the identities of individuals who would

prefer it that way. There should also be helplines for immediate help and provision of resources. There is a need for the scheme to provide counsellors and advisors who will be able to help corps members navigate the new experiences and reduce the struggles and rigors associated with the program (WHO 2021; WHO, 2017). Trained mental health professionals should be invited to provide for their mental health needs. Programs and seminars should be organized to enlighten corps members on different stress management strategies and coping mechanisms. These programs should serve as a medium in educating the corps members on the culture and beliefs of their new location to promote seamless adaptation. Dickson et al. suggests the necessity to consider the interests of the corps member while assigning to them tasks for community development, such that a corps member is assigned to tasks they actively want to pursue and not enforcing their engagement with frightful reproach as a reward for their disinterest (Dickson et al., 2022). Policies should be to ensure that the goals of the scheme are tailored towards protecting the integrity of the member's mental health. Also, annual retraining of staff to ensure that they do what is expected of them. Nwachukwu et al, 2023 proposed that opportunities should be created for corps members to also evaluate their PPA's, by reporting back to NYSC, if the roles they were to play in accomplishing the goals of NYSC were indeed achieved (Nwachukwu et al., 2023). This assessment would provide a means for the scheme to ensure that its goals are being upheld by both public and private institutions (Nwachukwu et al., 2023). In addition, the most important recommendation is to ensure the government understands the need to fortify the mental health of corps members, as it will determine the extent of help they will render, especially in terms of funding, research, provision of resources and creation of initiatives.

For corps members

Identifying early indicators of stress and understanding its triggers is a fundamental approach to managing stress effectively. NYSC Corp members are faced with multiple stressors such as relocation stress, poor accommodation, and workload, which can significantly impact their mental health, and thus, affecting productivity (Agbaji et al., 2022). In the light of the evidence on the mental implication of NYSC scheme on Nigerian youths, we recommend that the program incorporate structured self-care and stress management techniques into the NYSC Scheme as this in the long run has proven to be effective and efficient in sustaining and maintaining mental well-being and productivity throughout the period of one-year service to the country (Agogbua et al., 2022).

Several studies have proposed various self-care and stress management techniques, ranging from physical self-care to emotional and psychological well-being (Oxford University press, 2021). Corp members will greatly

benefit from prioritizing their day-to-day activities with a well-structured plan to manage their time effectively [Brown et al., 2022]. Establishing and following a consistent daily routine has been associated with better mental well-being and lower stress levels, particularly by helping individuals feel more in control and less overwhelmed by daily demands (Brown et al, 2022). Although the orientation camp incorporates physical activities into the NYSC scheme, engaging in exercises such as walking, jogging, swimming, and others has been shown to stimulate the release of endorphins, a potent mood elevator that also helps reduce stress-related hormones like cortisol and adrenaline (Oxford University press,2021; Ovcharenko et al.,2024). Corp members should prioritize getting adequate sleep, at least 8 hours per night, vital for cognitive function and stability of emotions (Brown et al., 2022).

The importance of eating a balanced diet should be brought to the limelight among corps members. The WHO recommends consuming a diet with high content of fruits, vegetables, protein, and water which supplies the body with essential nutrients needed for healthy brain function (Ovcharenko et al.,2024), supporting cognitive function and physical health in the long run (Pandey et al.,2020).

NYSC officials should encourage corps members to engage in mindfulness activities such as guided meditation, breathing exercises, and reflective journaling into the programs (Tang et al.,2015). Mindfulness has shown to foster regulation of emotion, promote cognitive functioning and help lower stress associated symptoms by facilitating an environment devoid of distractions, while focusing on present happenings (Tang et al.,2015; Goyal et al.,2014). By integrating this strategy, Corp members will acquire all the necessary mechanisms to manage stress, build resilience and maintain a positive mindset, which in turn will lead to a stable mental health throughout their service year and beyond (Tang et al.,2015; Royal et al.,2014). These findings are validated by a study which showed that mindfulness enhances self-reliance and leadership qualities among studied Corp members in Oyo state (Agokei et al., 2013).

It is a known fact that Corp members are plagued with many challenges such as mental breakdown, financial crises and health issues (Adeoti et al., 2009; Amoko et al., 2022). This highlights the need for guidance and counselling services to aid Corp members to express their concerns and feelings about their struggle during the service year (Adeoti et al., 2009; Amoko et al., 2022). There is an existing structure for the counselling unit at the Youth Service Corps, Headquarters, Abuja but it lacks adequate manpower. Hence, we recommend that licensed health officials be employed to fill the void (Adeoti et al., 2009).

An integral aspect of coping effectively during the service year is creating social networks among corps members. This fosters a sense of unity, reduces feelings

of loneliness, and lowers the risk of developing mental health issues (Harandi et al., 2017). In addition, it promotes emotional resilience. Fostering familial bonds and resolving family conflicts can further reduce the risk of depression among corps members (Amoko et al., 2022; Khanvri et al., 2023). Therefore, it is imperative for corps members to adopt the habit of seeking and accepting help from family, friends, peers, and mental health professionals, as this support can enhance their coping ability, provide emotional relief from speaking about their stressors and reduce the likelihood of mental health challenges (Khanvri et al., 2013). A study suggests increasing awareness on the expectation of NYSC programs into the curriculum of undergraduate could help lower anxiety symptoms of Corp member (Amoko et al., 2021; Harandi et al., 2017). Engaging in common health issues discussion during orientation and routine screening of anxiety symptoms by doctors catering for NYSC Corp members can greatly improve the overall mental and physical health of these Corpers (Amoko et al., 2021).

For future research

Recent studies have begun to shed more light on the challenges faced by former corps members in past years, particularly the emotional toll the service year places on them (Agbaji, 2022). The NYSC program involves a demanding schedule and relocation to unfamiliar, often rural, communities (Agbaji, 2022). A study done in 2015 revealed a high prevalence of anxiety, depression and stress among Corp members. The causation was linked to most Corp members being posted to remote areas lacking basic amenities, proper health care and emotional support during the service year (Balami, 2015; Agbaji, 2022). These findings were corroborated by Amoko et al., (2021), which found that about 50.4% of corp members had moderate to severe forms of anxiety during their service year (Amoko et al., 2021). These values were comparable to those observed in soldiers returning from conflict zones (James et al., 2020). In line with these previous findings, Nwajei et al observed that about 60% of Corp members screened within the first three months of starting NYSC displayed symptoms of depression (Nwajei et al., 2021).

A study showed that Corp members posted to primary places of assignment not related to their field of study face self-efficacy erosion (Agbaji, 2022). In the same vein, Ehigbor (2023) found that corp members assigned to teach in secondary school without prior training face disrespect, undue work hours and cultural bias (Ehigbor et al., 2023). These discrepancies between their academic backgrounds and assigned work affected their sense of confidence and purpose leading to the same self-efficacy erosion described by Ojapinwa (2020), a condition that diminishes mental preparedness for future employment (Ojapinwa et al., 2020). Oboreh and Emmanuel (2020) believe that this job disparity kills the artistic ability of Corp

members (Oboreh et al., 2020). Another study spoke on the challenges encountered by women during service years. Omunakwe and Odeyemi (2023) showed how reproductive health or counselling services are seldom accessed by female corps members, especially those posted to rural areas. This often leaves them suffering from chronic anxiety about their wellbeing and safety through the service year because of lack of access to sexual and reproductive health (Omunakwe et al., 2023). Although the studies have highlighted the long-term effects of the NYSC on the cognitive and mental health of corps members, a paucity of literature still exists on this issue. Therefore, we recommend that further research be conducted on this pressing matter, as it will draw more attention and lead to subsequent interventions to address the psychological needs of corps members. Cognitive and mental outcomes can be measured quantitatively using several available tools, such as standardized cognitive tests, questionnaires, neurophysiological measures, and digital assessment tools (Lee et al., 2024; Nogueira et al., 2022). Standard cognitive tests like the Mini-Mental State Examination, Trail Making Test (TMT) A and B, and the Stroop Test are widely used to assess deficits in attention, processing speed, executive function, and overall cognitive functioning (Nogueira et al., 2022; Institute of Medicine, 2015). These tests are generally reliable, not so difficult to administer, and commonly conducted in both local and clinical settings (Institute of medicine, 2015).

Besides cognitive assessments, questionnaire-based tests are also gaining momentum due to their effectiveness in measuring cognitive reserve (Nucci et al., 2012). The Cognitive Reserve Index Questionnaire (CRIq), Cognitive Reserve Questionnaire (CRQ), Lifetime of Experiences Questionnaire (LEQ), and the Cognitive Reserve Assessment Scale in Health (CRASH) are structured to compile information on educational level, occupational versatility, creational activities and other sociodemographic factors (Nucci et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2007; Lavrencic et al., 2022). These tools factor in the multifaceted nature of cognitive resilience and allow the study of how different experiences and background have an impact on the cognitive and mental health outcomes (Valenzuela et al., 2007; Lavrencic et al., 2022). The neurophysiological measures use quantitative markers obtained from electroencephalography (EEG) to assess mental and cognitive outcomes by objectively evaluating cognitive function and brain health (Paitel et al., 2025; Casson et al., 2019). These methods particularly allow for the early detection of subclinical cognitive changes that may not be obvious through another modality (Paitel et al., 2025). The availability of portable electroencephalography devices and noninvasive monitoring technologies allows for its usage in this setting (Casson et al., 2019). Digital versions of conventional tests e.g. electronic MoCA, digital Clock Drawing Test) and novel digital tools are becoming feasible alternatives

where traditional tools are inaccessible (Lee et al., 2024; Koo et al., 2019). These tools offer real-time data collection, automated scoring, and user-friendly interfaces (Lee et al., 2024; Koo et al., 2019). We recommend that these various assessment methods be integrated into the NYSC scheme. Doing so would enable routine cognitive screening, promote mental health awareness, and facilitate early intervention among corps members, while also providing valuable data for future research and policy development (Lee et al., 2024; Koo et al., 2019).

In addition, direct comparative studies between NYSC participants and non-corps members (graduates who did not participate in the NYSC scheme) are limited. However, some studies have provided data that allow for indirect comparisons, particularly in relation to mental health and psychological well-being (Agbaji, 2022). Many studies have highlighted the emotional challenges faced by NYSC corps members, including high rates of anxiety, depression, burnout, and social withdrawal (Adeoti et al., 2009; Jabita et al., 2025). These issues are often associated with poor working conditions, placement in jobs unrelated to their field of study, and substandard living environments (Adeoti et al., 2009; Jabita et al., 2025). For instance, a cross-sectional study found a high prevalence of depression (37.6%) among new NYSC members at an orientation camp in Kebbi State (Balami, 2015). This study suggests that the depressive symptoms observed among these corps' members may be linked to the emotional toll of the NYSC program, particularly the orientation camp experience (Balami, 2015). Notably, the high rate of depression among corps members' contrasts with that of the general youth population, where such percentages tend to be lower (Agbaji, 2022; Fadairo et al., 2011). The unique stressors of the NYSC program—including relocation, job mismatch, and economic insecurity may exacerbate mental health challenges in comparison to their peers who are not participating in the program (Fadairo et al., 2011). Although some studies have reported that graduates excluded from NYSC (such as those from Open and Distance Learning institutions) exhibited symptoms of depression, marginalization, and social isolation due to systemic exclusion from the program (Ottuh et al., 2015; Ahimie et al., 2024). This suggests that while corps members face stressors related to service, non-corps members may experience psychological distress stemming from feelings of exclusion and a lack of national integration opportunities (Ahimie et al., 2024). Despite these mental health challenges, the NYSC scheme has been shown to enhance corps members' ability to cope with difficult situations, improve their entrepreneurial skills, and make them more resourceful individuals in society. It also promotes personal qualities that may be important for teaching (Agbaji, 2022). The study suggests that corps members who develop these abilities are likely to enhance their curriculum vitae (CV) significantly (Agbaji, 2022; Ahimie

et al., 2024). This may illustrate the potential cognitive benefits for corps members compared to non-corps peers who may lack similar experiential learning opportunities (Ottuh et al., 2015; Ahimie et al., 2024). It was recommended that further research be conducted in the form of direct comparative studies, which would help to more accurately reflect the impact of the NYSC scheme on corps members.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Advancing research on cognitive and mental health impacts

The design and funding of longitudinal research should be encouraged to assess the long-term cognitive and mental health of the NYSC scheme. Current data mainly address short-term stress and outcomes. Still, long-term follow-up is needed to assess how service-year experiences affect future cognitive health, emotional resilience, and mental illness risk. They are useful in mental health research because they track changes over time, helping to uncover cause-and-effect relationships and how personal and environmental factors interact (Mugotitsa et al., 2024). These longitudinal studies should assess participants at multiple time points before, during, and after NYSC, using validated tools and biomarkers where possible. Future research should explore the various factors that influence mental health outcomes during NYSC. These may include where corps members are posted (urban or rural areas), the level of social support they receive, access to healthcare services, the nature of their job assignments, exposure to violence or trauma, and their personal ways of coping (Nwachukwu et al., 2023). Gaining insight into these factors can help guide effective interventions and inform relevant policies.

Developing and implementing supportive interventions

To address the cognitive and mental challenges faced by corps members during NYSC, the design, implementation, and evaluation of supportive interventions must be given utmost attention. The interventions should be aimed at promoting mental resilience, coping skills, and overall well-being among corps members. Recommended interventions include establishing mental health counseling centers in NYSC camps and secretariats, introducing stress management sessions during orientation, and providing easily accessible and private counseling services, both in-person and through tele-mental health platforms. Additionally, NYSC staff and corps members should be trained in basic mental health support (Okafor et al., 2014; WHO, 2021). Corp members

should also be trained in mental health literacy and emotional intelligence. Finally, strategic partnerships can be made between NYSC and NGOs that advocate for mental health and stakeholders. Partnerships like this, when properly executed, will not only alleviate the mental health burden of NYSC participants but also contribute to national development by supporting the well-being and productivity of Nigeria's youth workforce (Okafor et al., 2014; WHO, 2021).

Monitoring and program evaluation for continuous improvement

Frameworks should be put in place to monitor and evaluate programmes that have been thoroughly researched and implemented. This framework should assess both the intended and unintended cognitive and psychological impacts of the service year using evidence-based metrics. This allows for continuous improvement of various recommendations proffered above as a solution to combat cognitive and mental challenges associated with the NYSC program. The effectiveness of the recommendations given can also be monitored, and improvements made as appropriate. Regular evaluation can help uncover patterns in cognitive and emotional burnout among corps members. The feedback can be gotten in the form of surveys and interviews conducted at various time periods during the service year. The result of this exercise should be translated into actionable steps to improve the NYSC scheme and policy. A system for collecting feedback can also be developed to allow corps members to express their concerns and offer suggestions for improvement.

DISCUSSIONS

This review provides an in-depth study of existing literature and relevant qualitative accounts to identify and evaluate the impact of the NYSC scheme on the cognitive development and psychological wellbeing or mental health of Nigerian youths. The findings reveal that while the scheme is beneficial for cognitive flexibility, skill acquisition, and leadership development, it also exposes participants to significant psychological stressors that can undermine these gains (Chuks-ezekwibe, 2004; Albert et al., 2018). This is supported by the theoretical frameworks of Erikson and Vygotsky, which suggest that even though the social and developmental milestones of the service year are quite important for social identity formation, multiple environmental stressors also present significant risks to the well-being of the participants (Van et al., 2005; Muogbo et al., 2021).

A major finding of this review is the high prevalence of psychological distress, especially depression and anxiety,

among corps members. Empirical studies reviewed indicate alarming rates of depressive symptoms, with one study reporting a prevalence as high as 57.2% among recent graduates in orientation camps (Nwajei et al., 2021). Another study found clinical anxiety in 54.5% of corps members and linked these outcomes to the shock of relocation, financial constraints, and dissatisfaction with deployment (Balami, 2015). These rates appear elevated when compared to general population baselines, suggesting that the specific structural demands of the NYSC, such as the mandatory relocation to unfamiliar and often resource-poor settings, act as unique stressors (Agbaji, 2022; Fadairo, 2011). The presence of suicidal ideation among this demographic, as documented in recent research, further proves the severity of the mental health burden and the inadequacy of current support systems (Tolulope et al., 2021).

From a cognitive perspective, the review confirms that the NYSC scheme offers robust opportunities for intellectual and professional growth. The SAED program and CDS successfully expose graduates to real-world problem-solving scenarios and help them to build resilience and cognitive flexibility (Egobueze et al., 2024; Chuks-ezekwibe, 2004). Navigating language barriers and sociocultural disparities in host communities forces corps members to adapt, socialize and develop "neural efficiency," as they process new information to survive and thrive in the new environments (Chuks-ezekwibe, 2004; Deary and Der, 2005). This supports the view that learning is deeply embedded in social interaction and environmental adaptation (Shabani and Ewing, 2016). However, the data also suggests that these cognitive benefits are not evenly distributed. They depend on the availability of resources and the receptiveness of the host community (Uko et al., 2024).

This review highlights the bidirectional relationship between mental health and cognitive function, and this is critical for understanding the full corps member experience. The literature establishes that chronic stress and anxiety can impair executive functions such as working memory, attention, and decision-making (Maloney et al., 2014; Moran, 2016). Therefore, corps members that suffer from high levels of deployment-induced anxiety may be physiologically less capable of engaging with the cognitive opportunities the scheme provides, such as entrepreneurship training or leadership roles (Gulpers et al., 2022). On the other hand, strong cognitive abilities and effective emotion regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, act as protective factors, that buffer individuals against the psychological impact of stress (Shore et al., 2016; Goldin et al., 2012). This suggests that the scheme's current focus on skills training without a concurrent focus on psychological resilience may be inefficient.

Factors of context such as gender, geography and socioeconomic status significantly affect these impacts.

For example, female corps members face distinct gender-specific risks, including sexual harassment and safety concerns and these heighten anxiety and necessitate some specialized psychosocial support [Ayodele et al., 2015; Omunakwe and Odeyemi, 2023]. Furthermore, there is growing insecurity in certain parts of Nigeria, and this introduces a layer of traumatic stress that was not present when the scheme started. Deployment to volatile regions keeps the nervous system in a state of hypervigilance, which is known to degrade hippocampal function over time, and thereby impeding learning and memory (Zhu et al., 2014; Magaji et al., 2024). Despite the scheme's longevity, there remains a critical gap in longitudinal data tracking these impacts post-service. Most existing studies are cross-sectional and show a snapshot of distress while failing to capture whether these cognitive and mental health effects are transient or endure into later adulthood (Wang and Cheng, 2020; Campbell et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the current "sink or swim" approach of the NYSC imposes an undue mental health cost on Nigerian youths. The disparity between the developmental goals of the programme and the psychological reality of its participants indicates an urgent need for structural reform, specifically with the integration of professional mental health services into the NYSC framework (Nwachukwu et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the NYSC year represents a critical developmental milestone rich with both challenges and opportunities. While many participants emerge with enhanced adaptability, resilience, and problem-solving skills, others face significant psychological strain, including anxiety, identity conflict, and emotional fatigue, particularly in environments where support systems are limited or absent. These varied outcomes underscore the dual nature of the NYSC experience as both a tool for nation-building and a demanding psychosocial transition. The findings highlight the urgent need for structured mental health support before, during, and after deployment, as well as policy reforms that prioritize the safety, psychological well-being, and cognitive growth of corps members. As Nigeria looks toward a future shaped by its young population, recognizing and addressing the mental and cognitive demands of the NYSC scheme is not only timely, but also essential. Enhancing the service year with meaningful support systems can transform it from a civic obligation into a truly empowering experience.

When this transitional year is made safer, more supportive, and intellectually enriching, the scheme can fully achieve its intended goal- to empower a generation that is not just nationally integrated, but mentally prepared

to thrive amid modern challenges. In addition, the growing problem of insecurity across many parts of Nigeria has become an unavoidable source of stress for corps members. Stories and experiences of kidnapping, violent attacks, and communal unrest could mean that for some youths, the service year is lived under constant fear rather than excitement or purpose. Being posted to unfamiliar and sometimes volatile environments can leave young people feeling unsafe, isolated, and mentally overwhelmed. This persistent sense of danger often affects sleep, concentration, emotional stability, and overall motivation, gradually wearing down the confidence and resilience the scheme hopes to build. In such conditions, it becomes difficult for corps members to fully engage, learn, or perform at their best. Addressing insecurity, therefore, goes beyond physical safety; it is central to protecting mental well-being. Providing safer deployment options, reliable security structures, and accessible psychological support can significantly reduce emotional distress and help corps members experience the service year as a period of growth rather than survival.

Abbreviations

NYSC, National Youth Service Corp; **POP**, Passing Out Parade; **MKO**, More Knowledgeable Person; **COR**, Conservation of Resources; **SAED**, Skill Acquisition and Entrepreneurship Development; **CDS**, Community Development Service; **PPA**, Place of Primary Assignment; **APA**, American Psychiatric Association; **HPA**, Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal; **WHO**, World Health Organization; **PRISMA**, Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and meta-analyses; **NGOs**, Non-governmental organizations; **TMT**, Trail Making Test; **CRIq**, Cognitive Reserve Index Questionnaire; **CRQ**, Cognitive Reserve Questionnaire; **LEQ**, Lifestyle of Experiences Questionnaire; **CRASH**, Cognitive Reserve Assessment Scale in Health; **EEG**, Electroencephalography; **MoCA**, Montreal Cognitive Assessment; **CV**, Curriculum Vitae.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interest.

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