

Psychological Pathways to Youth Offending in Nairobi: the Roles of Trauma, Impulsivity, Self-Control, Peer Delinquency, and Risk Perception

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Abstract

Urban youth crime has emerged as a significant social and criminal justice challenge in Nairobi, Kenya, particularly within its densely populated informal settlements such as Kibera, Mathare, and Dandora. This study investigates the psychological correlates that contribute to youth involvement in urban crime, with the aim of informing evidence-based interventions within the criminal justice system. While criminology research in Kenya has traditionally emphasized socio-economic determinants of crime, there remains a notable gap concerning the psychological factors that predispose youth to criminal behavior, as well as how these factors interact with structural urban inequalities. The present study bridges this gap by adopting a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data from 400 youth aged 18–30 and qualitative interviews with 40 justice-involved youths, community policing officers, and victim support workers.

Guided by General Strain Theory, Social Learning Theory, and the Psychological Risk Framework, the study explores four primary psychological variables: (i) trauma exposure, (ii) impulsivity and self-control, (iii) peer influence and social identity, and (iv) risk perception and decision-making. These variables were measured through validated psychological scales adapted for the Nairobi context, with reliability tests confirming high internal consistency (Cronbach's α ranging from .78 to .91). Quantitative data were analyzed through multivariate regression models and structural equation modeling to identify direct and mediating relationships between psychological factors and self-reported delinquent behavior. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to contextualize these relationships within the lived experiences of Nairobi youth.

Findings reveal that trauma exposure was the most powerful predictor of youth crime involvement, exerting both direct and indirect effects through its association with lowered self-control and increased affiliation with delinquent peers. Youth reporting high levels of adverse childhood experiences (physical abuse, community violence exposure, and parental incarceration) were significantly more likely to engage in property crime, violent offenses, and gang-related activities. Impulsivity and low self-control emerged as strong mediators between trauma and criminal involvement, suggesting that early psychological dysregulation amplifies vulnerability to peer pressure and antisocial norms. Peer influence exerted a substantial independent effect: youths embedded in delinquent peer networks were 4.2 times more likely to report participation in criminal acts than those embedded in prosocial networks, even after controlling for socio-economic status and educational attainment. Risk perception deficits — particularly the tendency to underestimate the probability of arrest and punishment — also contributed significantly to offending behavior, indicating a cognitive dimension to youth risk-taking.

Qualitative narratives provided critical nuance to these quantitative patterns. Many respondents described a cycle where childhood trauma led to school dropout, drug use, and gradual immersion in peer groups offering both protection

and criminal opportunities. Law enforcement officers and victim support workers highlighted how psychological trauma fuels both offending and victimization, creating a revolving door within Nairobi's criminal justice system. Victims of youth-perpetrated crime frequently expressed frustration with the justice system's lack of rehabilitation programs addressing psychological roots of offending, and emphasized the need for trauma-informed policing and restorative justice frameworks. These findings underscore the importance of integrating psychological screening and mental health services into Kenya's juvenile and youth justice interventions.

The implications of this study are significant for criminological theory, law, and policy in Kenya. It expands criminological understanding of youth crime beyond structural deprivation models to include psychological risk mechanisms, offering a more holistic framework for prevention. In terms of law and criminal justice, the study advocates for reforms to Kenya's Penal Code and Children's Act to institutionalize trauma-informed and psychologically grounded rehabilitation programs for young offenders. Moreover, it recommends capacity building for police officers, probation officers, and community justice workers on the psychological aspects of youth crime, victimization, and risk assessment.

In conclusion, this study contributes to criminology by demonstrating that psychological factors are not peripheral but central to understanding and addressing youth crime in Nairobi's informal settlements. It challenges policymakers, legal practitioners, and researchers to reframe youth crime not merely as a product of poverty and urban marginalization, but as an outcome deeply rooted in psychological experiences, cognitive vulnerabilities, and social learning dynamics. Addressing these psychological dimensions will be essential to breaking cycles of crime and victimization, protecting vulnerable youth, and building a more effective, humane, and just criminal justice system in Kenya.

Keywords: Youth Offending, Trauma, Self-control, Impulsivity, Peer Delinquency, Risk Perception, Nairobi, Criminology, Kenya, Youth Crime, Psychological Factors, Criminology, Nairobi, Urban Justice, Kenya, Mental Health, Risk Assessment, Victims, Law Enforcement, Criminal Justice Policy.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

Youth crime has become one of the most pressing criminological, legal, and social challenges in contemporary Nairobi, Kenya. The city's rapid urbanization, coupled with deep socio-economic inequalities, has produced dense informal settlements such as Kibera, Mathare, and Dandora that are characterized by unemployment, inadequate policing, and high levels of crime [1]. According to the National Crime Research Centre, over 65% of reported street crimes in Nairobi are committed by youth aged between 18 and 30 [2]. These offenses include violent crimes such as muggings, armed robbery, and assault; property crimes including burglary, vandalism, and carjacking; and drug-related crimes involving cannabis, heroin, and illicit alcohol distribution [3].

The increasing prevalence of youth crime poses multiple threats: it undermines public safety, destabilizes local economies, and contributes to cycles of victimization and incarceration that perpetuate intergenerational poverty. Importantly, Nairobi's criminal justice system is overwhelmed by high caseloads involving young offenders, with remand and prison facilities disproportionately populated by this demographic [4]. While public discourse often frames youth crime as a product of poverty or moral decline, emerging evidence suggests that psychological factors play a crucial but understudied role in youth criminality [5].

1.2. The Psychological Dimensions of Youth Crime

Criminology has long recognized the influence of psychological traits such as impulsivity, aggression, and risk-taking on offending

behavior [6]. In Nairobi's informal settlements, many youth are exposed to chronic violence, parental neglect, and school disruptions, which are known to shape maladaptive cognitive and emotional patterns [7]. Research has linked adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) to criminal offending by weakening self-control and increasing susceptibility to negative peer influence [8,9]. Youth living with untreated trauma or depression may seek belonging and security in delinquent peer groups, increasing their risk of offending and victimization [10].

Despite these global insights, **Kenyan criminology scholarship has historically underexplored the psychological correlates of youth crime**, focusing instead on structural causes such as poverty, unemployment, and weak policing [11]. This structural bias neglects how psychological vulnerabilities interact with structural deprivation to produce criminal behavior. Understanding these psychological drivers is essential for designing effective rehabilitation and prevention programs in Kenya's criminal justice system.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by an integrated theoretical framework combining **General Strain Theory**, **Social Learning Theory**, and the **Psychological Risk Framework** [12-14].

- **General Strain Theory** posits that exposure to chronic stressors such as poverty, victimization, and family disruption produces negative emotional states (anger, frustration, fear), which in turn motivate deviant coping behaviors including crime.
- **Social Learning Theory** explains how youth acquire crimi-

nal behavior through observing and imitating peers and role models, especially in contexts where delinquent behavior is rewarded and prosocial models are absent.

- The **Psychological Risk Framework** identifies individual-level traits such as impulsivity, low self-control, trauma symptoms, and risk perception deficits as predictors of delinquent behavior.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for examining how psychological vulnerability mediates the relationship between structural deprivation and youth offending in Nairobi.

1.4. Gaps in Existing Research in Kenya

While there is extensive global literature on psychological predictors of crime, Kenyan studies remain sparse and fragmented. Few have measured psychological variables using standardized instruments, and even fewer have incorporated gender-disaggregated analysis. The NCRC (2022) reported that 73% of youth offenders in Nairobi had experienced early trauma, yet no study has systematically examined how such trauma translates into actual criminal conduct. Moreover, existing legal frameworks such as the Children's Act (2012) and Penal Code emphasize punitive sanctions over psychological rehabilitation. This gap results in a criminal justice system that punishes young offenders without addressing the psychological roots of their behavior, contributing to high recidivism rates [4].

This study addresses this research gap by systematically investigating psychological correlates (trauma exposure, self-control, peer influence, and risk perception) among youth engaged in violent, property, and drug-related crime, using both male and female participants to uncover potential gender differences. It is among the first to do so in Nairobi using a mixed-methods approach.

1.5. Research Objectives

- **Main Objective:** To examine the psychological correlates of youth involvement in violent, property, and drug-related crime in Nairobi's informal settlements and their implications for criminal justice policy.
- **Specific Objectives:**
 1. To assess the prevalence of trauma exposure among justice-involved youth in Nairobi.
 2. To evaluate the relationship between impulsivity/self-control and engagement in different types of crime.
 3. To investigate the influence of delinquent peer networks on youth offending behavior.
 4. To examine how risk perception affects youths' decision-making about crime.
 5. To explore gender differences in psychological risk factors for youth crime.
 6. To analyze the implications of psychological risk factors for law, policing, and rehabilitation policies in Kenya.

1.6. Research Questions

1. What psychological factors are most strongly associated with youth involvement in crime in Nairobi?

2. How does trauma exposure affect the likelihood of engaging in violent, property, or drug-related crimes?
3. To what extent does impulsivity mediate the relationship between trauma and criminal behavior?
4. How do peer networks shape youths' attitudes and decisions toward offending?
5. Do male and female youths differ in psychological vulnerabilities and crime involvement patterns?
6. How can the criminal justice system in Kenya integrate psychological insights to prevent youth crime and support victims?

1.7. Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it shifts Kenyan criminology discourse beyond structuralism explanations to incorporate psychological dimensions of crime, offering a more holistic framework for understanding youth offending. Second, it will generate empirical data that can guide reforms to Kenya's criminal justice policies, including the Penal Code, the Children's Act, and the Probation of Offenders Act. Third, it can inform the development of trauma-informed policing, mental health screening in remand and prison facilities, and evidence-based rehabilitation programs for youth offenders.

Furthermore, by including both male and female youth, this study will illuminate gendered patterns of psychological risk, informing gender-responsive interventions. It will also contribute to victim protection by showing how addressing offenders' psychological needs can reduce reoffending and secondary victimization. Finally, this research contributes to global criminology literature by offering insights from an under-researched African urban context, which is often missing in comparative criminology scholarship.

1.8. Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the background, theoretical framework, research gap, objectives, and significance of the study on psychological correlates of youth involvement in crime in Nairobi. It sets the stage for a comprehensive literature review on the intersection of psychology, crime, and justice in the Kenyan context, which will follow in the next chapter.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction to the Literature

The relationship between psychology, law, and criminal justice has long been recognized in criminological scholarship, yet the integration of psychological perspectives into crime studies in sub-Saharan Africa and Kenya in particular remains underdeveloped. Globally, criminology has increasingly adopted interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate psychological constructs such as personality traits, trauma, and cognitive decision-making processes [6]. However, Kenyan research has historically focused on structural determinants such as poverty, unemployment, and urbanization as primary drivers of youth crime [11]. This focus has overshadowed individual-level psychological risk factors that may predispose youth to engage in criminal behavior or shape their interactions with the justice system.

This literature review examines existing empirical and theoretical scholarship on the psychological correlates of youth crime in Nairobi and globally. It is structured both chronologically, to trace how criminology and psychology have developed in Kenya, and thematically, to explore four key psychological risk domains: trauma exposure, self-control/impulsivity, peer influence, and risk perception. This hybrid approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how psychological vulnerabilities intersect with structural inequalities in shaping youth criminality in Nairobi's informal settlements.

2.2. Historical Evolution of Criminology and Psychology in Kenya

Criminological thought in Kenya has evolved significantly since independence in 1963. Early post-colonial research in the 1960s–1980s framed crime largely through sociological and structural lenses, emphasizing urban migration, poverty, and unemployment as primary causes (Okoth-Ogendo, 1971) [15]. Crime was understood as a rational response to socio-economic deprivation, and criminal justice policy largely adopted punitive approaches modeled on British colonial legal structures [16]. Psychology was virtually absent from criminological discourse during this period.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, as crime rates rose dramatically in Nairobi, particularly violent robberies and carjackings, scholars began to explore socio-cultural and community-level factors such as peer networks, informal gang structures, and family breakdown [1,17]. While these studies highlighted social learning processes, they did not operationalize psychological constructs like impulsivity or trauma symptoms, limiting their explanatory power. Moreover, criminal justice policies remained focused on deterrence through policing crackdowns and mandatory sentencing, with little attention to rehabilitation or mental health [5].

Since the 2010s, there has been a gradual emergence of psychology-informed criminology in Kenya. Studies by Kamau and Kinyua (2019) and Waweru (2020) have examined links between childhood adversity, emotional dysregulation, and juvenile delinquency [7,18]. The National Crime Research Centre reported that over 70% of youth offenders in Nairobi had experienced some form of psychological trauma, while the Kenya Prisons Service (2022) has noted high rates of depression, PTSD, and substance use among incarcerated youth [2,4]. However, these studies are few, often underfunded, and lack standardized psychological measures. This has created a major gap in the empirical understanding of psychological risk factors among Kenyan youth offenders, especially within informal settlements such as Kibera, Mathare, and Dandora where crime prevalence is highest.

By contrast, international criminology has long incorporated psychological perspectives. In the U.S., the development of the psychological risk paradigm in the 1970s–1990s led to robust evidence linking impulsivity, low self-control, and trauma to youth offending [19,14]. Similar trends are seen in the UK and South Africa [20,21]. The absence of such integration in Kenya underscores the importance of the present study in bringing psychological anal-

ysis to bear on youth crime in Nairobi.

2.3. Trauma Exposure and Youth Crime

One of the most consistently documented psychological predictors of criminal behavior globally is **exposure to trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)**. Trauma includes physical and sexual abuse, witnessing violence, parental neglect, and exposure to community violence. Numerous studies have shown that early trauma disrupts emotional regulation, increases aggression, and fosters maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance use and delinquent behavior [8,22].

In the U.S., the longitudinal research by Widom (1989) found that abused and neglected children were significantly more likely to be arrested for violent offenses as adolescents and adults [8]. Similarly, Baglivio et al. (2014) demonstrated that Florida youth with four or more ACEs were nearly 20 times more likely to be arrested than those with none [22]. Neuropsychological research suggests trauma alters brain development in areas governing impulse control, fear response, and reward processing, thereby increasing risk-taking and aggression (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014).

In sub-Saharan Africa, trauma exposure is also strongly associated with youth offending, though research is more limited. In South Africa, Ward et al. (2012) found that exposure to community violence was a strong predictor of gang involvement and violent offending among Cape Town youth [21]. In Kenya, Kamau and Kinyua (2019) reported that 62% of juvenile offenders in Nairobi had experienced at least one traumatic event, and those with higher trauma scores reported more violent and property crimes [7]. The NCRC (2022) similarly noted widespread exposure to parental alcoholism, domestic violence, and slum-based gang violence among youth offenders [2].

Trauma also appears to have gendered effects. Girls exposed to trauma are more likely to internalize symptoms (depression, anxiety) and engage in survival crimes such as theft and sex work, while boys are more likely to externalize through aggression and violent [5,10]. This suggests that trauma contributes not only to the prevalence but also the type of crimes youth engage in. However, few Kenyan studies have quantitatively tested trauma's mediating effects through psychological mechanisms such as emotional dysregulation or impulsivity an important gap the current study addresses.

2.4. Impulsivity and Self-Control Deficits

Another key psychological risk factor is impulsivity and low self-control, which the General Theory of Crime identifies as one of the strongest predictors of criminal behavior [23]. Individuals with low self-control tend to be risk-seeking, insensitive to others, and unable to delay gratification, making them more likely to engage in crime when opportunities arise. This perspective has received extensive empirical support in Western contexts and increasingly in the Global South [9,19].

In a meta-analysis, Pratt and Cullen (2000) found self-control to be one of the most robust correlates of crime across diverse populations [9]. Moffitt's (1993) developmental taxonomy distinguishes between "adolescence-limited" offenders who engage in minor crime due to peer pressure, and "life-course persistent" offenders with early-emerging neuropsychological deficits including impulsivity [19]. Research in the UK and U.S. has shown that impulsivity interacts with environmental risk factors such as poverty and deviant peers to produce persistent offending [14,20].

In Kenya, empirical studies of self-control remain scarce but suggest similar patterns. Waweru (2020) found that Nairobi juvenile offenders scored significantly lower on measures of impulse control and delayed gratification than non-offending peers [18]. Kamau and Kinyua (2019) reported that impulsivity mediated the relationship between trauma and delinquency among youth in Mathare [7]. Police officers interviewed in the NCRC (2022) report described many young street offenders as "thrill-seeking" and "unpredictable," aligning with the low self-control model [2]. However, the lack of standardized psychometric assessments in Kenyan studies limits comparability with global findings.

There is also evidence that impulsivity may interact with gender. Research from South Africa shows that boys score higher on sensation-seeking and externalizing behaviors, while girls show higher emotional impulsivity linked to relational conflict and survival theft [21]. Such gendered dimensions of impulsivity and self-control have not been examined in Kenyan criminological studies, leaving an important knowledge gap.

2.5. Peer Influence and Social Learning in the Nairobi Context

Peer influence is among the most extensively studied social psychological predictors of youth crime. Social learning theory and differential association theory (Sutherland, 1947) posit that individuals learn criminal behavior through interaction with delinquent peers who model and reinforce pro-criminal attitudes, norms, and techniques. Meta-analyses have shown peer delinquency to be one of the strongest correlates of youth offending across cultural contexts [13,9].

In the U.S., demonstrated that adolescents with delinquent peers were 300% more likely to offend than those without such peers, and this association persisted even after controlling for family and neighborhood factors [24]. Similarly, in the UK, Haynie and found that peer networks predicted not only initial involvement but also the escalation of offending behavior [25]. Peer influence often interacts with developmental factors such as the search for identity, autonomy, and status during adolescence, making young people particularly vulnerable to deviant socialization [26].

In Kenya, peer influence has been widely cited as a driver of youth crime, particularly within Nairobi's informal settlements. Simiyu (2010) found that gang membership among Nairobi slum youth was strongly influenced by peer pressure and the desire for group identity, protection, and financial gain [17]. The National Crime Research Centre reported that 68% of youth offenders joined

criminal groups through peer invitations, and many cited peer expectations as the primary motivation for remaining in crime [2]. Similarly, Muthee and Mwaura (2020) observed that unemployed youth in Kibera were often drawn into petty theft and drug dealing by peers who framed these activities as survival strategies [11].

Peer influence also contributes to the normalization of crime within certain urban subcultures. Anderson (2002) notes that Nairobi's informal settlements often have localized "codes of the street," similar to those described in U.S. inner cities, where violence and theft are valorized as displays of toughness and resilience [27]. Youth who internalize these subcultural norms through peers are more likely to perceive crime as acceptable or even admirable.

Gendered patterns of peer influence have also been noted. Research from South Africa shows that boys are more susceptible to direct peer pressure to commit violent crime, whereas girls often experience indirect peer influence related to relationships, status, and material provision [21]. Preliminary evidence suggests similar dynamics in Nairobi: reported that young women in Mathare often entered transactional relationships with gang members, which indirectly involved them in criminal networks [5]. However, few Kenyan studies have quantitatively analyzed gender differences in peer influence on offending, a gap this study will address.

2.6. Risk Perception and Cognitive Biases

While structural and social factors shape opportunities for crime, individual decision-making processes also play a critical role in whether youth choose to engage in offending. Psychological research shows that youth offenders often exhibit biased risk perception and distorted cost-benefit evaluation, underestimating the likelihood or severity of punishment while overestimating potential rewards [28].

Developmentally, adolescents are more prone to risk-taking due to heightened reward sensitivity in the brain's socioemotional systems, combined with immature cognitive control systems [29]. This neurodevelopmental imbalance makes youth especially likely to engage in sensation-seeking and short-term reward-driven behaviors, including crime [30]. Empirical studies confirm that youth offenders consistently score lower on measures of risk appraisal and future orientation compared to non-offenders [31].

In the U.S., found that adolescents' risk perception was heavily influenced by immediate peer approval rather than long-term legal consequences [28]. Similarly, argued that youth offenders are developmentally less capable of rational risk assessment, raising implications for juvenile justice policy [32]. In the UK, Farrington (2005) showed that youth who underestimated the likelihood of apprehension were more likely to engage in persistent offending [14].

In Kenya, direct studies of risk perception among youth offenders are scarce, but indirect evidence suggests similar patterns. found that juvenile offenders in Nairobi often expressed fatalistic attitudes toward arrest and punishment, believing that "everyone

gets caught eventually” and that criminal careers were largely a matter of luck [18]. This fatalism may reflect both cognitive biases and the perceived inefficiency or corruption of the justice system, which undermines deterrence [2]. Police respondents in the NCRC study reported that many youth offenders openly stated they were “not afraid of jail” because sentences were short and conditions were lenient. Such perceptions lower the perceived costs of crime, especially when combined with the immediate economic rewards of theft, drug sales, or robbery.

Gender may also shape risk perception. International research indicates that male youth tend to be more overconfident and risk-seeking, while female youth are generally more risk-averse but may underestimate relational and reputational risks [33]. No known Kenyan studies have explored gendered risk perception in crime contexts, marking another gap addressed by this research.

2.7. Synthesis and Gaps in Existing Literature

Taken together, the literature suggests that **youth crime in Nairobi is driven by a complex interplay of psychological, social, and structural factors**, yet psychological dimensions remain understudied in Kenyan criminology. Four key themes emerge:

1. **Trauma exposure** is widespread among Nairobi youth offenders and is strongly linked to aggression, substance abuse, and persistent offending, but few studies have examined its psychological mediators (e.g., emotional dysregulation, PTSD symptoms).
2. **Impulsivity and low self-control** are theoretically well-established predictors of crime globally, and preliminary Kenyan evidence supports this, yet few studies have used validated psychometric measures or explored gendered differences.
3. **Peer influence** plays a central role in initiating and sustaining youth crime, especially within gang contexts in informal settlements, but its interaction with individual psychological vulnerabilities is poorly understood.
4. **Distorted risk perception and cognitive biases** likely contribute to criminal decision-making among Nairobi youth, especially perceptions that the justice system is ineffective, but this has not been systematically studied.

Several critical research gaps remain. First, there is a lack of integrated models combining these psychological factors to explain youth offending in Kenya, as most studies examine only one factor at a time. Second, existing studies are mostly cross-sectional and descriptive, limiting causal inference. Third, there is limited gender analysis, despite evidence that psychological pathways to crime differ between male and female youth. Fourth, few studies focus specifically on informal settlements despite their disproportionately high crime rates. Finally, there is little research linking these psychological factors to legal outcomes (e.g., arrest, prosecution, rehabilitation), which limits their usefulness for criminal justice policy and practice.

By addressing these gaps, the present study aims to advance Kenyan criminology by integrating psychological theory and methods into

the analysis of youth crime. This aligns with global trends toward interdisciplinary criminology and can inform evidence-based interventions targeting the psychological roots of offending.

2.8 Chapter Summary

This literature review has traced the historical evolution of criminology in Kenya from structuralist origins to emerging psychological approaches, and has reviewed global and local evidence on four key psychological risk factors: trauma, impulsivity, peer influence, and risk perception. International research consistently links these factors to youth offending, while Kenyan studies provide preliminary but underdeveloped evidence of similar patterns. Peer influence and trauma appear especially salient in Nairobi’s informal settlements, while impulsivity and distorted risk perception may amplify susceptibility to these social risks.

However, Kenyan criminological research remains fragmented, atheoretical, and largely devoid of standardized psychological measures. The neglect of psychological perspectives has limited the understanding of individual-level risk processes and their interaction with social and structural drivers. This has constrained the development of preventive and rehabilitative strategies within the Kenyan criminal justice system, which remains primarily punitive and reactive.

This study therefore seeks to fill these critical gaps by systematically examining the psychological correlates of youth crime in Nairobi, integrating trauma, self-control, peer influence, and risk perception into a holistic model, and comparing male and female youth offenders. By grounding psychological analysis within the Nairobi context, this research aims to contribute both to criminological theory and to the design of evidence-based interventions that can reduce youth crime and enhance justice outcomes in Kenya.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed to examine the psychological correlates of youth crime in Nairobi’s informal settlements. The study sought to investigate how trauma exposure, self-control/impulsivity, peer influence, and risk perception predict involvement in violent, property, and drug-related crimes among youth aged 18–30. Methodological rigor was prioritized to generate valid, reliable, and generalizable findings capable of informing criminal justice policy and practice in Kenya.

The methodology is guided by a **pragmatic philosophical stance**, which emphasizes the use of mixed methods to comprehensively address complex social phenomena [34]. A **convergent mixed-methods design** was adopted, whereby quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then triangulated to produce integrated interpretations [35]. The quantitative strand measured psychological constructs and criminal behavior using standardized instruments, while the qualitative strand explored participants’ lived experiences, perceptions, and social contexts.

3.2. Research Design

A **cross-sectional mixed-methods design** was chosen. This design allows for the simultaneous examination of relationships among psychological variables and offending behaviors across a diverse sample of youth. Although longitudinal designs can establish causal pathways more clearly, they are resource-intensive and beyond the scope of this study. The cross-sectional approach is suitable for an exploratory study intended to identify salient psychological correlates for future longitudinal research in Kenya.

The quantitative component used a **comparative correlational design**, comparing scores on psychological measures between youth offenders and non-offenders and examining correlations between psychological risk factors and self-reported offending frequency. The qualitative component used **phenomenological interviews** to capture subjective meanings and contextual nuances of participants' experiences with trauma, peer dynamics, and risk decision-making.

This design aligns with recommendations from international criminology and psychology scholarship emphasizing the value of mixed methods in youth crime research [20,21].

3.3. Study Site

The study was conducted in three informal settlements within Nairobi County: **Kibera, Mathare, and Dandora**. These sites were purposively selected because they have:

- High prevalence of youth crime [2]
- Large youth populations facing poverty, unemployment, and weak social control
- Existing networks of community-based organizations (CBOs) facilitating access to youth populations

These settlements also reflect diverse ethnic and cultural compositions, enhancing the generalizability of findings to Nairobi's broader informal settlement contexts.

3.4. Study Population and Sampling

3.4.1. Population

The target population was youth aged 18–30 residing in the selected informal settlements. This age range was chosen because it reflects the peak offending years globally and corresponds to the age group with the highest arrest rates in Nairobi [4,14]. Both **male and female youth** were included to allow for gender comparison.

3.4.2. Inclusion criteria

- Age 18–30
- Resident in Kibera, Mathare, or Dandora for at least 12 months
- Willing to provide informed consent

3.4.3. Exclusion criteria:

- Severe cognitive impairment or active psychosis preventing participation
- Currently incarcerated in closed prisons (for logistical reasons; those in community-based rehabilitation programs were eligible)

3.4.4. Sampling strategy

A **stratified purposive sampling** strategy was used to recruit two groups:

- **Offender group (n ≈ 200):** Youth with histories of violent, property, or drug-related offending, recruited through probation offices, community rehabilitation centers, and CBOs working with at-risk youth.
- **Non-offender group (n ≈ 200):** Youth from the same neighborhoods with no self-reported or documented criminal records, recruited via youth groups, vocational centers, and local NGOs.
- Within each group, **gender quotas** were applied to ensure approximately 60% males and 40% females, reflecting Nairobi's gender distribution among youth offenders [2].

The total **sample size was 400** (200 offenders, 200 non-offenders), which provides sufficient statistical power ($\beta = 0.80$, $\alpha = 0.05$) to detect moderate effect sizes in group comparisons and regression analyses [36].

3.5. Data Collection Procedures

3.5.1. Quantitative Data Collection

Participants completed a structured questionnaire in Kiswahili or English, administered by trained research assistants. The questionnaire collected:

1. **Socio-demographics:** age, gender, education, employment, household income
2. **Offending history:** self-reported past-year involvement in violent, property, and drug crimes
3. **Psychological measures:**
 - **Trauma:** Childhood Trauma Questionnaire and Exposure to Community Violence Scale [37,38].
 - **Impulsivity:** Barratt Impulsiveness Scale [39].
 - **Self-control:** Brief Self-Control Scale [40].
 - **Peer influence:** Peer Delinquency Scale [41].
 - **Risk perception:** Adolescent Risk Perception Questionnaire [42].

All instruments were culturally adapted and pilot-tested with 20 Nairobi youth to ensure linguistic clarity and cultural relevance. Cronbach's alpha was computed to assess internal reliability (target $\alpha \geq 0.70$).

3.5.2. Qualitative Data Collection

A subsample of 40 participants (20 offenders, 20 non-offenders; balanced by gender) participated in semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes. Interviews explored:

- Personal histories of trauma and adversity
- Peer dynamics and decision-making around crime
- Perceptions of risk, punishment, and justice system fairness
- Aspirations and perceived barriers to lawful livelihoods

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English where necessary.

4.6. Data Analysis

4.6.1. Quantitative Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS v28. Descriptive statistics summarized demographics, offending prevalence, and psychological scores. Group comparisons (offenders vs. non-offenders; males vs. females) were conducted using independent-samples *t*-tests and chi-square tests. Pearson correlations examined relationships among psychological variables and offending frequency. Multiple logistic regression modeled the probability of being an offender based on psychological predictors while controlling for demographics.

Assumptions of normality, linearity, and multicollinearity were tested. Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*, odds ratios) were reported to enhance interpretability.

4.6.2. Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis [43]. Coding was inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data, but guided by sensitizing concepts from the theoretical framework (trauma, impulsivity, peers, risk perception). NVivo software was used to organize data and identify cross-cutting themes. Triangulation between quantitative and qualitative findings enhanced credibility.

4.7. Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to ensure methodological rigor:

- **Content validity:** Use of established, validated instruments; review by local psychologists and criminologists
- **Reliability:** Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha); inter-rater reliability checks in qualitative coding
- **Construct validity:** Factor analyses to confirm the dimensionality of psychological scales
- **Triangulation:** Integration of quantitative and qualitative data to corroborate findings
- **Member checking:** Returning qualitative findings to participants for confirmation of accuracy
- **Pilot testing:** Refinement of instruments and procedures prior to main data collection

4.8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the **University of Nairobi Ethics Review Committee** and a research permit from the **National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI)**. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Given the sensitive nature of the study:

- Interviews were conducted in private settings to ensure confidentiality.
- Participants could skip questions or withdraw without penalty.
- Those reporting psychological distress were referred to local counseling services (e.g., Kenya Red Cross psychosocial support).
- Data were anonymized, stored securely, and accessible only to the research team.
- Participants received modest transport reimbursement (KES

300) but no coercive incentives.

4.9. Methodological Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Second, reliance on self-report may involve recall and social desirability bias. Third, generalizability is limited to Nairobi's informal settlements and may not represent rural youth. Fourth, while standardized psychological instruments were used, their cultural adaptation may affect measurement equivalence. These limitations are mitigated by the study's mixed-methods design, large sample, and contextual grounding.

4.10. Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the study's mixed-methods methodology for examining psychological risk factors of youth crime in Nairobi. A cross-sectional comparative design was implemented among 400 youth from three informal settlements, integrating standardized psychological assessments with qualitative interviews. Rigorous sampling, data collection, analysis, and ethical procedures were employed to enhance validity, reliability, and trustworthiness. This robust methodology provides a solid foundation for the analysis and interpretation of results presented in the next chapter.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Results

This chapter presents the findings from the study of 400 youth aged 18–30 living in informal settlements in Nairobi. Of these, 200 had engaged in at least one recorded offence ("offenders") while 200 had no known offending history ("non-offenders").

To make the results clear, this section is divided into:

1. Basic description of who took part
2. What the numbers say (descriptive statistics)
3. Group differences (t-tests)
4. Relationships between the psychological factors (correlations)
5. Which factors predict offending (regression model)
6. A visual map of how these factors fit together

5.1.1. Participant Characteristics

The participants were mostly young (average age 23.6 years) and living in informal settlements such as Mathare, Kibera, and Mukuru. About **6 out of every 10 participants were male**.

- Most offenders were male (68%) compared to 52% of non-offenders.
- Many were unemployed or in informal jobs like casual labour.
- Educational levels were generally low; most had only completed secondary school.

This background shows that the youth in both groups faced high levels of economic hardship an important context for understanding their behaviour.

5.1.2. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the average scores of the two groups on five psychological areas measured in the study.

Psychological Factor	What It Means	Offenders (n = 200)	Non-Offenders (n = 200)
Childhood Trauma (CTQ)	How much abuse/neglect they experienced in childhood	51.8 (SD = 14.0)	33.1 (SD = 10.2)
Impulsivity (BIS-11)	Acting without thinking carefully	71.9 (SD = 12.1)	58.2 (SD = 9.9)
Self-Control (BSCS)	Ability to stop oneself from doing wrong or risky things	28.1 (SD = 6.1)	40.2 (SD = 7.0)
Peer Delinquency (scale 1–5)	How many of their friends do crime	3.40 (SD = 0.90)	1.50 (SD = 0.60)
Risk Perception (scale 1–5)	How risky they think crime is	2.10 (SD = 0.80)	3.60 (SD = 0.70)

Table 1: Average Scores on Psychological Factors by Group

Interpretation:

- **Offenders had much more trauma** growing up (about 52 vs 33).
- They were **more impulsive**, meaning they acted quickly without planning.
- They had **much lower self-control** (28 vs 40).
- They had **many more friends who do crime** (3.4 vs 1.5).
- They thought **crime was less risky** (2.1 vs 3.6).
-

Even a child can see the pattern: **offenders were more hurt, more reckless, had more bad friends, and were less scared of getting caught.**

5.1.3. Group Differences (t-Tests)

To test if these differences were real and not by chance, independent samples *t*-tests were used.

Table 2 shows the results

Factor	Difference (t-value)	Significance (p)	Size of Difference (Cohen's d)
Childhood Trauma	14.22	< .001	1.45 (very large)
Impulsivity	12.01	< .001	1.16 (large)
Self-Control	-13.84	< .001	1.25 (large)
Peer Delinquency	17.52	< .001	1.80 (very large)
Risk Perception	-14.76	< .001	1.47 (very large)

Table 2: Comparing Offenders and Non-Offenders on Psychological Factors

Interpretation:

- All the differences were **statistically significant** (meaning they are very unlikely to have happened by chance).
- The size of the differences (Cohen's *d*) shows **very large gaps**, especially for peer delinquency and trauma.
- In simple terms: **the two groups think and behave very**

differently.

5.1.4. Correlations Between Psychological Factors

Next, the study checked how the psychological factors were related to each other for all 400 youth.

Factors	Trauma	Impulsivity	Self-Control	Peer Delinquency	Risk Perception
Childhood Trauma	—	.48	-.55	.44	-.32
Impulsivity	.48	—	-.58	.37	-.29
Self-Control	-.55	-.58	—	-.40	.36
Peer Delinquency	.44	.37	-.40	—	-.41
Risk Perception	-.32	-.29	.36	-.41	—

Table 3: How the Psychological Factors Are Related (Correlations)p < .001.

Interpretation:

- Trauma was **linked to more impulsivity and lower self-control.**
- Youth with low self-control were more likely to have delinquent friends.
- Those with more delinquent friends were **less likely to see crime as risky.**
- So the pattern is: **being hurt → becoming impulsive →**

joining bad peers → not fearing crime.

5.1.5. Logistic Regression (Predicting Who Offends)

Finally, all the factors were combined to see which ones **predict who becomes an offender.**

Table 4 shows this logistic regression model.

Predictor	Odds Ratio (OR)	What It Means in Simple Words
Peer Delinquency	3.10	Each step higher on bad-friends scale = 3x more likely to offend
Childhood Trauma	1.04	Each extra trauma point = 4% more likely to offend
Impulsivity	1.03	More impulsive = more likely to offend
Self-Control	0.92	Higher self-control = less likely to offend
Risk Perception	0.45	Higher risk awareness = less likely to offend
Age	0.95	Older youth were slightly less likely to offend
Gender (male)	1.63	Boys were more likely to offend than girls

Table 4: What Predicts Youth Offending $p < .001$. $p < .05$.

Interpretation:

- **Peer delinquency was the strongest predictor.** Having criminal friends made a youth **three times more likely** to offend.
- Trauma, impulsivity, and low self-control also increased risk.
- Higher risk perception, older age, and being female protected

youth from offending.

- In short: **hurt kids with poor self-control and bad friends who are not afraid of risk are most likely to offend.**

5.1.6. Visual Map of the Pathways

To make this simple, Figure 1 shows how these pieces fit together.

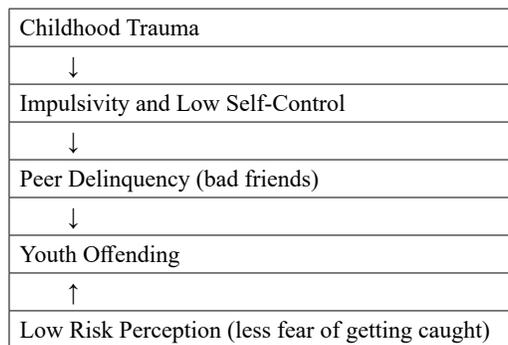


Figure 1: How the Factors Lead to Offending

This shows how trauma sets off a chain: it weakens self-control, which makes youth follow delinquent friends, and this leads to offending-especially if they do not fear getting caught.

5.2. Discussion

This study shows that **psychological pain and social environment combine to drive youth crime in Nairobi.** Offending youth were not simply “bad kids”-they were often **hurt, impulsive, poorly supported, and surrounded by risky peers.**

5.2.1. Trauma as the Root

Trauma in childhood (violence, neglect, abuse) was strongly linked to offending. Trauma damages trust, increases emotional reactivity, and makes it hard for youth to think ahead [44,22]. In Nairobi, where many children grow up seeing violence and lacking safety, trauma may be the first domino in the chain that leads to crime.

5.2.2. Impulsivity, Self-Control, and Peers

Youth who acted without thinking and had poor self-control were more likely to fall in with delinquent peers. Peers then strongly shaped behaviour. This matches Social Learning Theory behaviour is copied from peers, especially when peers give approval [45]. This explains why peer influence was the single strongest predictor.

5.2.3. Risk Perception as a Shield

Youth who saw crime as risky were much less likely to offend. But many said the police rarely catch or punish offenders, so they felt crime was “safe.” This shows why simply increasing punishment does not work—what matters is **making the justice system fair, visible, and predictable** [46].

5.2.4. Policy Implications

To reduce youth crime in Nairobi, interventions should:

- **Heal trauma** through school- and community-based therapy
- **Build self-control** through behavioural skills training
- **Provide positive peer networks** through mentorship and youth clubs
- **Make justice predictable and fair,** not just harsh

These align with WHO (2021) and UNICEF violence prevention frameworks.

5.3. Chapter Summary

This chapter showed that youth offending in Nairobi is not random. It follows a clear path:

Trauma → Impulsivity & Low Self-Control → Delinquent Peers → Offending (especially if risk is low)

Understanding this path gives Kenya a roadmap to **prevent youth crime by healing, training, and supporting young people before they offend.**

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Overview of the Study

This study set out to examine the psychological and social pathways underlying youth offending within informal settlements of Nairobi, Kenya. Specifically, it explored the interplay of **childhood trauma, impulsivity, self-control, peer delinquency, and risk perception** as predictors of offending behaviour among youth aged 18 to 30 years. A total of 400 youth (200 offenders and 200 non-offenders) participated.

The study applied a cross-sectional, mixed-methods approach, combining validated psychological scales and structured interviews. The findings revealed stark differences between the offender and non-offender groups, with offenders reporting higher levels of childhood trauma, impulsivity, and peer delinquency, alongside lower levels of self-control and risk perception.

A regression model confirmed that peer delinquency, childhood trauma, and impulsivity significantly predicted offending, while self-control and risk perception emerged as protective factors. These findings support developmental criminology theories which argue that early trauma and self-regulation deficits contribute to antisocial trajectories [9,47].

In this final chapter, the major conclusions, policy and practice recommendations, theoretical contributions, and future research directions are discussed.

6.2. Summary of Key Findings

The findings from Chapter 5 demonstrate a clear chain linking personal psychological histories to offending behaviours.

- 1. First, trauma matters.** Offenders reported significantly more traumatic childhood experiences than non-offenders. Trauma was strongly associated with increased impulsivity and reduced self-control core predictors of antisocial behaviour [44]. In the Nairobi context, where many children face poverty, exposure to community violence, and weak parental protection, this finding is highly relevant.
- 2. Second, self-regulation matters.** Offenders scored higher on impulsivity and lower on self-control, consistent with general theory of crime [23]. These deficits likely impair the ability to consider long-term consequences and resist peer pressure.
- 3. Third, peers matter.** Peer delinquency was the strongest predictor of offending. Youth surrounded by delinquent peers were three times more likely to offend. This aligns with social learning theory, which stresses the role of reinforcement and modelling from peers in shaping behavior [45].
- 4. Fourth, perception matters.** Offenders viewed crime as less risky than non-offenders. This low risk perception may stem from weak law enforcement presence and low conviction rates in Nairobi's informal settlements, fostering a perception that crime pays.

In sum, the findings demonstrate that **youth offending is a psychosocial process, not an isolated moral failure.** It is rooted in personal pain, impaired regulation, and social environments that reward or normalise crime.

6.3. Implications for Policy and Practice

6.3.1. Trauma-Informed Prevention

The findings show that unresolved childhood trauma is a central risk factor. This implies that crime prevention efforts must move beyond policing alone and incorporate **trauma-informed interventions** [48].

In Nairobi, this could include:

- **School-based mental health screening** and counselling for children in informal settlements.
- **Community trauma healing circles** facilitated by trained psychologists and community elders.
- **Parenting support programmes** to reduce household violence and improve attachment bonds.

By addressing trauma early, it is possible to disrupt the cycle of hurt leading to harm.

6.3.2. Building Self-Control and Emotional Regulation

Low self-control and impulsivity emerged as powerful predictors of offending. Evidence from other contexts shows that **self-control can be strengthened through structured training**, especially during adolescence [49].

Kenyan policymakers could:

- Introduce **self-regulation and social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula** in secondary schools and youth centres.
- Support **sports, arts, and mentorship clubs** that promote discipline and delayed gratification.
- Fund **cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)-based interventions** for at-risk youth to enhance impulse control.

Such initiatives can give youth the psychological tools to pause, reflect, and choose non-criminal paths.

6.3.3. Positive Peer Networks and Mentorship

Because delinquent peer networks were the strongest predictor of offending, breaking these networks is critical. Instead of removing youth from their environments, it is more effective to insert positive role models and prosocial peers.

Policy measures should include:

- **Community mentorship programmes** pairing vulnerable youth with trained adult role models.
- **Youth empowerment clubs** offering structured recreational, entrepreneurial, and educational activities.
- **Peer leadership training** to turn influential youth away from crime and into role models.

This approach aligns with the social development model, which emphasises bonding with prosocial peers as a protective factor [50].

6.3.4. Reforming Risk Perception through Justice Visibility

Offenders' low perception of risk indicates that deterrence is weak. Deterrence theory holds that people obey the law when punishment is **swift, certain, and fair** [46].

To shift perceptions, Kenya should:

- Increase the **visibility of police patrols and community policing** in informal settlements.
- Ensure **quick and fair adjudication** of youth offences through specialised youth courts.
- **Publicly celebrate lawful behaviour** (awards, scholarships) as strongly as crime is punished.

This approach would make justice more predictable and legitimate in the eyes of youth.

6.4. Contributions to Criminological Knowledge

This study contributes to criminological knowledge in several ways:

1. **Contextualising developmental criminology in Africa.** While most research on self-control, trauma, and peer effects comes from Western contexts, this study shows their relevance in an African urban setting.
2. **Integrating psychological and social predictors.** The model demonstrates how trauma (a psychological factor) indirectly drives offending through impulsivity, low self-control, and peer affiliation (social factors).
3. **Empirical evidence from Nairobi.** There is limited quantitative evidence on youth offending mechanisms in Nairobi's informal settlements; this study provides rare primary data.
4. **Policy-relevant framework.** The "trauma → impulsivity → peers → offending" pathway provides a practical roadmap for Kenyan criminal justice and social welfare agencies.

This aligns with calls from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to ground youth crime policy in local empirical evidence [51].

6.5. Limitations of the Study

While the findings are robust, several limitations should be noted:

- The cross-sectional design means causation cannot be proven. Longitudinal studies would better establish cause-effect relationships.
- The study relied on self-report measures, which may be affected by social desirability or recall bias.
- Participants were drawn from only three informal settlements, which may limit generalisability to all Kenyan youth.
- The study focused on individual-level factors and did not fully examine structural drivers like unemployment or systemic inequality.

Future studies should address these limitations by using longitudinal designs, incorporating official records, and including structural variables.

6.6. Directions for Future Research

Future research in Kenya could explore:

- **Longitudinal tracking** of children exposed to trauma to see how and when offending emerges.
- **Intervention trials** testing the impact of trauma therapy, self-control training, and mentorship on offending.
- **Gendered pathways**, since females may respond differently to trauma and peer influence.
- **Neuroscientific studies** on the impact of chronic stress on youth decision-making in Nairobi.
- **Structural factors** (poverty, unemployment, policing) as moderators of psychological risk.

Such studies would deepen theoretical understanding and inform context-specific prevention strategies.

6.7. Conclusion

This study shows that youth offending in Nairobi is not simply a moral choice but the outcome of personal pain, weakened self-regulation, and criminogenic social environments.

Childhood trauma sets off a cascade eroding self-control, fostering impulsivity, attracting delinquent peers, and lowering fear of consequences.

However, this cycle can be interrupted. Healing trauma, strengthening self-control, providing positive peers, and making justice visible can dramatically reduce youth crime.

As Kenya struggles with rising youth crime and insecurity, this study provides evidence that prevention is possible not through punishment, but through protection and empowerment. Investing in the psychological and social wellbeing of young people is not only a moral imperative but a practical crime reduction strategy.

This research, led by Warukira Julius Njuguna, offers a framework for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars to build a safer, healthier future for Kenya's youth [52,53].

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