



RISK EXPERIENCES OF POLICE OFFICERS PERFORMANCE ON THE WAR ON DRUGS

Nonilito O. Carpioⁱ

Faculty of Criminology Program,
Davao Oriental State University,
Philippines

Abstract:

The war on drugs was an important program of President Duterte, even calling on the Philippine National Police or police officers to kill drug users and dealers to mitigate the drug abuse problem. The Police crackdown affected both the Philippine National Police personnel and the families of the victims of the fatal shooting. Because of this, the study documented the risk experiences of Philippine National Police Personnel during a buy-bust operation and coping mechanisms after a drug operation. Also, Expert Insights were gleaned from their experiences using in-depth interviews and a focus group of 15 Philippine National Police personnel. The results revealed five themes: exposure to deadly and critical situations, dealing with court hearings and lawsuits, being subject to negative public perception, and lacking logistics and community support. The community plays a crucial role in the war against drugs. The implications of the study include the vital role of collaboration and cooperation in the community and other sectors of society. The illegal drugs were prevalent in the community because they did not concern them. Thus, it shows the contribution of police officers in maintaining peace and order in the community.

Keywords: Tokhang, War on Drugs, PDEA, PNP, Duterte

1. Introduction

The war on drugs started as a campaign during the administration of President Nixon, who declared that drug abuse was the “*public enemy number one*.” He then devoted all resources to preventing new drug addicts and the rehabilitation of those who are addicted. During this campaign, police were burdened with expectations of how the job should be done. With their actions watched over and the results scrutinised by the public, police officers were put into a quandary on how to perform their jobs. However, the most aggravating part is that as they perform their job, they are putting their lives in danger

ⁱ Correspondence: email nonilitocarpio@gmail.com

and are even easy targets for people who are involved with drugs and the drug trade. Moreover, people doubt their actions and are even accused of planting drugs as proof, or they are the ones involved in the extra-judicial killing just to have good outputs in their drug operations (Baum, 2016; Dufton, 2012; United States Agency for International Development, 2015). Drug-related violence is a major problem in Mexico, with approximately 28,000 drug-related killings in the past 4 years (Morris K: Drug crime and criminalization threaten progress on MDGs. Lancet 2010; 376:1131-1132.). Between January and September of 2009, there were 5,874 drug-related murders in Mexico, an increase of almost 5% over the same period the previous year (Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs: International Narcotics Control Strategy Report. Washington, US Department of State, 2010.)

In the Philippines, a day after his assumption of office, President Duterte explicitly called for police to kill drug users and dealers for a total war against the use of illegal drugs. The coined term “tokhang” has become a common word among police officers and people of the community. Police officers cracked down on illegal drugs and caught pushers. Emboldened by the President’s pronouncements and protection while doing their duty, the Philippine National Police (PNP) aggressively responded (Santos & Ebbighausen, 2018).

However, results of the Dangerous Drugs Board’s (DDB) survey on drug use in the Philippines showed a total of 1.8 million drug users, with 859,150 users of *shabu* or crystal methamphetamine, the most abused illegal drug. The same survey showed that the prevalence of drug use among Filipinos aged 10 to 69 years old is at 2.3% of the total population, or an estimated 1.8 million users (DDB, 2015). Moreover, the data coming from PDEA and PNP showed that 6,201 persons who died during anti-drug operations resulted in bloody confrontations ([PDEA, October 2021](#)) (General Oscar Albayalde). The PNP, since 2019, has killed 50 of these casualties and 144 others who were injured during the bloody operation (Gen Eleazar). The goal is to eradicate the narcotics trade in the country.

Prompted by this scenario, the researcher conducted a study that tackled the experiences of the police officers on the performance of their duty in the war on drugs to shed light on some doubts and to clear ambiguities that tainted the image of the police officers in this all-out war against drugs. At present, there is a dearth of research on the experiences of police officers in their war against drugs. Hence, this study would provide first-hand data on this concern, which would serve as data for other related studies that would be conducted, especially qualitative studies. The general objectives of this study were to document the Risk experiences of PNP personnel. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following questions: a) Risk experiences of PNP personnel during buy-bust operation; b) challenges and coping mechanisms of the PNP personnel after drug operations; c) Expert Insights of lived experiences of PNP personnel. This study used a qualitative method to answer the research objectives.

2. Methodology

This chapter deals with the research steps and procedures employed in this study. It includes the research design, role of the researcher, research participants, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness and credibility, and ethical considerations of this research.

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed in this study because its purpose is to obtain specific information from the participants' own perspective. Qualitative study acknowledges that human experiences are subjective and involve various meanings (Creswell, 2013).

Qualitative phenomenological research is highly recommended for the investigation of complex interactions and processes. These complex processes can best be drawn out and understood using qualitative methods, which include participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and analyses of text, which are better suited for the task group (Pathak and Kalra, 2013). Another reason this design was chosen was because it is best as a design when there has been little previous research to serve as a guide (Sutton, 2014). These studies are best at contributing to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes (Pathak & Kalra, 2013). Sutton (2015) stressed that exploring these complex processes can best be drawn out and understood using qualitative methods, which include participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and analyses of text, which are better suited for task groups.

Moreover, phenomenology seeks to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon by attempting to peer into the researcher's perspective to understand the phenomenon, thereby interpreting the perceived reality of the individuals who experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

2.2 Research Participants

The participants of this study were the police officers who are mandated to perform/conduct the "Tokhang", or in short, part of the operation on the war on drugs. Participants were chosen using a purposive sampling because it is the best method to identify primary participants, especially when the researcher's purpose was to look for those who have had experience relating to the phenomenon to be researched (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Snowball sampling was also used to find other interviewees. The participants chosen in the purposive sampling were asked to recommend other participants. Snowball sampling requires a "gatekeeper" or someone "*whom entry is gained*" while a person who volunteers assistance is called "the key actor or insider (Creswell, 2013).

There were eight informants of the study who had experienced Female/Male, 5 years length of service assigned in the Anti-Illegal Drug Unit with the same phenomenon for in-depth interview to provide for saturation of data (Creswell, 2013) while seven participants for focus group discussion (FGD) (Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest & Name, 2005)

As to inclusion of the participants in the study, an informed consent was given to all the members of the Anti-Illegal Drugs Group of the Philippine National Police of the city since each of them qualify as participant because they are directly assigned on the war on drugs and they have experienced the phenomena that this study would like to uncover. However, only those who signified a desire to participate were considered participants after signing the informed consent. However, even after they understood and signed the informed consent, they were free to withdraw at any moment they desired. This concern was included in the informed consent and was explained to them prior to signing the informed consent.

2.3 Data Collection

This study used different sources of data, which included in-depth interviews and focus groups. Although a study may structure a clear plan to collect data, important adjustments need to be made throughout the study to increase the dependability, trustworthiness, and authenticity of the data collected (Creswell, 2013). Considering the very purpose of this study, which is to explore the experiences of the policemen.

An in-depth interview was one of the major methods in the collection of data. A total of eight participants were interviewed until data saturation. Each participant was interviewed individually in a place where each of them was free to think and answer the questions. Most of the interviews were conducted in a cafeteria or restaurant on Saturdays and Sundays. The interview provided the participants with an avenue for a rich description of experiences.

Another method of data collection utilized in this study was the focus **group discussion (FGD)**. Just like the interview, this was a very rich source of data. One remarkable advantage of the focus group method is that it minimized the *self-other* distance because a researcher could utilize social interaction among participants. There were seven students who consented to be interviewed in the FGD. This was done in a place of their choice. Participants met to inquire about the date, day and time everyone would be available. Before the interview started, the protocol for conducting an FGD was explained to clear things up and to provide background. When participants affirmed to have understood everything, each was given a number in order for the interaction to go smoothly. A letter addressed to the Chief of Police of the City of Mati was given to determine the respondents of the study. Once approved, a cover letter was given to each police officer to determine whether they would participate in the study or not. The cover letter included the researcher's purpose, why respondents are being recruited, as well as the researcher's contact information, where they can contact the researcher in case they have questions or queries relevant to the research.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed following Creswell (2013), which includes organizing and preparing data for analysis, coding the data, reading through all data, interrelating themes/descriptions and interpreting the meaning of themes/descriptions. In the analysis of data, three steps were employed using the following: data reduction, data display and

conclusion drawing and verification. The *data reduction* was facilitated by providing the data analyst with sentences and phrases which have similar thoughts or ideas (van Manen, 2017). On the other hand, *data display* was presented in the form of a table as shown in Tables 2 to 4, elucidating the findings as well as the patterns of the responses. The final step, the conclusion drawing and verification phase, was formulated by having preliminary ideas about the patterns of the responses.

3. Results

This chapter details the result of qualitative data analysis in answer to the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of the policemen?
- How do policemen cope with the challenges of their experiences?, and
- What insights do these policemen share with their colleagues in society?

3.1 Participants of the Study

The participants of this study were the police officers mandated to perform/conduct the “Tokhang”, i.e., all members of the Anti-Illegal Drugs Group of the Philippine National Police. There were eight informants of the study for in-depth interviews and seven participants for focus group discussion (FGD) chosen through purposive sampling based on the criterion that they are members of the Anti-Illegal Drugs Group of the Philippine National Police detailed in the research locale during the duration of the study.

Table 1: Participants of the Study

Interview Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Number of Years in the Anti-Illegal Drugs Group
1. Officer Dido	45	Male	18 years
2. Officer Baste	47	Male	20 years
3. Officer Paulo	37	Male	15 years
4. Officer Inday	34	Female	13 years
5. Officer Bong	38	Male	14 years
6. Officer Ronald	27	Male	3 years
7. Officer Oscar	33	Male	11 years
8. Officer Lina	37	Female	13 years
Total = 8			
FGD Pseudonyms			
1. Officer Lorlie	36	Female	15 years
2. Officer Cesar	31	Male	18 years
3. Officer Raul	28	Male	5 years
4. Officer Umberto	26	Male	5 years
5. Officer Luisa	35	Female	12 years
6. Officer Mario	41	Male	13 years
7. Officer Ping	40	Male	10 years
Total = 7			
Grand Total = 15			

As shown, there are two female police officers and six male police officers for in-depth interview, while there are also two female police officers and five male police officers for FGD. Their age and number of years in the service varied. The shortest number of years in the service was three, while the longest number of years was 20 years. In terms of their age, the oldest was 47 and the youngest was 26.

3.2 Risk Experiences of Police Officers' Performance on the War on Drugs

Revealed in Table 2 are the major themes and core ideas on the experiences of the policemen. For this research question, 5 themes emerged: *exposure to deadly and critical situations, dealing with court hearings and lawsuits, subject to negative public perception, lacking logistics and community support and challenged with pre-operation planning and preparation.*

Table 2: Themes Based on In-depth Interview of Risk Experiences of PNP Personnel (N=15)

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Exposure to deadly and critical situations	A perilous undertaking; anything can happen during operations
	Some operations are very challenging and dangerous
	During actual operation, the suspect might fight back with ammunition
	Always considered suspects as fully armed in an operation
	It is a threat to life and limb; don't know who the enemy is
	The companion got shot and perished during the operation
	In the war against drugs, one foot is already in the grave
Dealing with court hearings and lawsuits	During court hearings and the filing of the case, I had to stand as a witness
	Mandated to protect the rights of the suspect
	A common problem is during the change of the custody of evidence
	Have to be careful in sharing confidential info, not even to families
	If a step in the procedure is missed, police officers get charged
	If operatives make a mistake, it could backfire on them
Subject to negative public perception	Getting unsavoury feedback from the public
	Sometimes, police officers are judged unfairly
	The public has the wrong notion about the war against drugs
	The public says only the small fry, not the drug lords, get arrested
	People thought it is the automatic killing of the suspects
Lacking logistics and community support	No protection gear when there is a surprise attack from the enemy
	Sometimes, the ammunition of the criminals is more sophisticated
	PNP lacks advanced ammunition to fight the criminals
	Lack of support from the community
	The community seems unmindful that drugs are all around them
	Civilians' support badly needed on the whereabouts of suspects
Challenged with pre-operation planning and preparation	It is time-demanding; from planning to apprehending to filing a case
	Had to undergo proper surveillance once the tip is received
	Have to study the moves of the drug suspect; penetrate their lair
	Have to use an informer or police asset
	Conducting tokhang, taphang or texthang to call users to surrender

3.3 Exposure to Deadly and Critical Situations

The war on drugs has constantly exposed policemen to deadly and critical situations. From among the policemen who expressed this concern, this statement from a police officer is an epitome of this experience:

"The job of a police officer is too risky and dangerous. I was assigned to the women-children desk... we turned over the children of the suspects who are minors to the Department of Social Works and Development (DSWD). We also apprehended people who violated the curfew hours, as well as conducted "Oplan Kapkap" (physical search) to prevent minors from using marijuana. Another unforgettable moment we experienced was when we arrested a pregnant woman who was a suspect. She begged us not to arrest her. She also had an accomplice who was killed during the operation because he/she resisted."

3.4 Dealing with Court Hearings and Lawsuits

Policemen, as they strive to perform their tasks, cannot avoid being in court or filing cases against people who violated the war on drugs. One of these police officers expressed:

"So far, one of the memorable experiences I had was the court hearing and the filing of the case in the court, as well as standing as a witness. We need to always protect the rights of the suspect, even if he/she is a criminal, just like the rights of the victims." (FGDP2RQ1)

3.5 Subject to Negative Public Perception

Along with the passion to eliminate and eventually eradicate the use of illegal drugs in the country, police officers cannot avoid being subject to negative public perception. As vividly expressed by this statement:

"The war against drugs has many negative responses from the public, especially "tokhang." They thought if a police officer went to them, they would kill them. People have a wrong interpretation of "tokhang"; that the drug suspect will be automatically killed." (III3RQ1)

3.6 Lacking Logistics and Community Support

Another experience that police officers expressed as they fought against drugs was the lack of logistics and community support. This is vividly expressed by this statement:

"What is lacking with us is advanced supplies. Criminals' guns are high-powered compared to some of my colleagues. For the community, I just want to share that hopefully, they will understand us law enforcers. We are just doing our job. We hope that policemen will not be judged. We are trying our best to solve the problem peacefully. There is a program given by the police to give addicts the chance for their safety but they refuse it." (III7RQ1)

3.7 Challenged with Pre-operation Planning and Preparation

Unavoidably, police officers had to make the best preparations in dealing with the war on drugs. Aside from the usual preparations that they normally do during operations, police officers had to devise all schemes to prevent putting their lives in imminent danger. One of them expressed this statement:

“In reality, the work of a policeman is always putting us at risk. Without my expectations, I had a bad experience in drug operations. We should prepare for it, especially those attacks that are beyond our watch. We do not want to involve civilians; that is why we should prepare so that we can apprehend the suspect.” (FGDP1RQ1)

3.8 Coping and Challenges of Police Officers on the War on Drugs

Reflected in Table 3 are the major themes and core ideas on how policemen involved in the war on drugs cope with the challenges of their experiences. With this research question, also five themes emerged: *strict adherence to standard operating procedure, collaboration and coordination with lead agencies, fortitude and prudence, learning from experience and superiors and openness and rapport with the civilian community.*

3.9 Strict Adherence to Standard Operating Procedure

Notably, as people who vowed to serve the country, police officers were able to cope with the challenges of their experiences because of their strict adherence to standard operating procedures, as vividly expressed by one of them during the focus group discussion and agreed by everyone:

Table 3: Themes on Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of PNP Personnel (N=15)

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Strict adherence to standard operating procedure	Stick to the proper operational procedure to avoid charges
	Following standard operating procedure during police operations
	Just follow the mandate of the law
	Always doing the standard operating procedure
	Ensure that the rights of individuals or suspects are respected
	Observe the safety of personnel as well as the community
	Do things in accordance with the law
Collaboration and coordination with lead agencies	Seeking assistance from other agencies, PDEA, the community LGO
	Tap lead agency PDEA, CIDG, Provincial intelligence, etc.
	If the target is high-value, seeking the assistance of friendly forces
	Coordination with regional intelligence, another participating agency
	Tap other stakeholders' support, i.e. media, LGU, religious sector
	Giving feedback to a higher office
	Tapping/coordinating with DSWD for minor suspects
Fortitude and prudence	Being strong and firm, not giving in to pressures
	Being stronger, more courageous and daring
	Staying alert and ready at all times
	Being vigilant during anti-drug operations
	Attentiveness/alertness in ensuring one's own safety and that of civilians.
Learning	Making experiences as a guide, learning from the lapses

from experience and from superiors	Learning from previous operations, esp. life-threatening cases
	Sharing experiences that may serve as a reference in future ops
	Learning from the feedback of the community regarding operations
	Getting advice or instruction from superiors on what to do
	Get a briefing and coordination with PDEA
Openness and rapport with civilian community	Taking note of the negative comments and opinions
	Accepting the good and bad experiences
	Not blaming civilians for giving a negative comment
	Establishing a good relationship with the community
	Working hard in hand with civilians on the anti-drug campaign
	Tapping the stakeholders, i.e., the community, the business sector, and the LGU

“Our job is difficult, but we just keep in mind to follow the mandate of the law. We follow the mandate of the PNP to avoid charges as a law enforcer.” (FGDP1RQ2)

3.10 Collaboration and Coordination with Lead Agencies

Appreciatively, police officers were able to cope with the challenges of their experiences because of the strong collaboration with lead agencies, which believe that the war on drugs is not a war waged by police officers alone but by all agencies who are directly involved in this worthwhile cause. One of the informants during the in-depth interview uttered gratitude to some of these agencies:

“We are grateful that in every operation that we are in, we are coordinating with PDEA, CIDG, and higher offices, regional intelligence and other participating agencies. Our coordination and collaboration make our job easy.” (III5RQ2)

3.11 Fortitude and Prudence

Undeniably, police officers were able to carry out their job in the war against drugs because of their positive attitude towards their work and their vow. Most of them possess fortitude and prudence to be able to overcome the challenges of their experiences in the war on drugs. One of them candidly described how he was able to survive the challenge of his job:

“It is important not to be afraid and not to give in to pressures, especially the bad comments of the media, like the extra-judicial killing. We should be alert and vigilant during operations.” (III2RQ2)

3.12 Learning from Experience and Superiors

Apparently, what police went through in their past experiences on the war on drugs and the experiences of their superiors became an inspiration to cope with the challenges in the present, strengthening the war on drugs. One of them has to say:

"Those not-so-good experiences can help me to cope with the lapses of the past operations. They have a good impact on the next operation because you can plan/mindset the next operation because you are already prepared." (III8RQ2)

3.13 Openness and Rapport with Civilian Community

Essentially, police officers were able to cope with the challenges beset by their battle cry, for the war on drugs was the openness and rapport with the civilian community. They acknowledged that establishing a good relationship with the community and developing their confidence in them remained a significant tool to combat this pressing problem. As explained clearly by one of them during the FGD:

"We are grateful for the support of the community. We coordinate with the barangay officials because they know the targets and they know better. We are grateful that we have a good relationship with the community because if not, we would have difficulty." (FGDP2RQ2)

3.14 Expert Insights on War on Drugs

Displayed in Table 4 are the major themes and core ideas on insights that policemen involved in the war on drugs can share with their colleagues and society.

As shown, five themes emerged:

"The community plays a crucial role in the war against drugs. Police officers should uphold the integrity of the profession. our call is to serve the country through the war against drugs, the PNP needs."

3.15 The Community Plays a Crucial Role in the War against Drugs

Evidently, police officers acknowledge the fact that the war against illegal drugs is not their sole responsibility. It entails support from the different institutions in the society, one of which is the community. They recognized the vital role of the community as the central unit in our society. One of them said:

"As members of the drug operatives, we really need the support of the community. We will have difficulty without their support because we cannot do anything without them, because they really know who the drug addicts or those who are selling illegal drugs in their place." (III6RQ3)

Table 4: Themes on Expert Insights Police Personnel (N=15)

Major Themes	Core Ideas
The community plays a crucial role in the war against drugs	Engagement with the community is a necessary first step.
	Join forces with the community in resolving the issue of drugs.
	Police do not conduct an operation without a report from the community.
	Conduct dialogue with homeowners on illegal drug issues.
	Conduct barangay visitation, coordinate with Punong Barangay.
	Police need the help of the local government in the fight against illegal drugs.
Police officers should uphold the integrity of the profession	Be aware of orders from high command to avoid illegal arrest.
	Always follow the orders of senior officers to control casualties.
	Follow orders to exercise tolerance in operation.
	Strengthen commitment to the campaign against drugs.
	Be responsible in the job; secure the evidence at the scene.
	Always comply with the SOP during drug operations.
	Strengthen moral and spiritual fiber to resist temptation.
Our call is to serve the country through the war against drugs.	The mandate is to eliminate the use of drugs in the country.
	The mission is to control the proliferation of illegal drugs.
	The job is to maintain peace and order in the community.
	The mission is to put the last pusher in jail.
	Had to enforce an order of the President of a drug-free country.
	The war against illegal drugs is the primary focus.
	Willing to go through the risks because that's the main job.
The PNP needs support in its war against drugs.	Encouraging the public and the media to trust the police force.
	Hoping that the community will know more about the police side of the story.
	Just doing my job to help the President in his war on drugs
	Life is on the line, but do not get any understanding/appreciation.
	Hoping for the understanding and appreciation of civilians
	Can't blame the public, but wish the police were not judged unfairly.
	Tokhang tries to solve the problem peacefully, but they refuse
Measures are instituted to improve drug operations	The media are allowed to participate in drug operations.
	Media serve as witnesses during search and seizure operations.
	During the conduct of the search, barangay officials are invited.
	To erase doubt, personnel wear body cameras during the operation.
	There is intelligence validation before conducting an operation.
	Drug operatives attend a media conference to erase doubts.
	Suspects are apprised of their rights and the proper procedure.

3.16 Police Officers Should Uphold the Integrity of the Profession

One of the insights that police officers want to share not only with their colleagues but also with society is that they should uphold the integrity of the profession. It was very evident during the interview and FGD that police officers are proud of their chosen profession, and most of them adhered to the rules set by the PNP. In fact, one of them pleads to their colleagues to:

“As police officers, we should show to them that we are true to our oath. We should help to clean the community and the PNP organization. Let us help each other resolve the problem of drugs. To make all this happen, policemen should be strong in moral and spiritual aspects so that they can resist temptations and corruption.” (III3RQ3)

3.17 Our Call Is to Serve the Country through the War against Drugs

Concomitantly, aside from the vow to protect and to serve, the love for the country also serves as an inspiration to police officers in their war against illegal drugs. The thought that some of their fellow Filipinos were drifting away from the right path and were on a bleak, unclear direction because of drug use and addiction, prompted them to commit themselves to this life-threatening job and wage war against pushers and drug syndicates. This is vividly described by one of the participants during the FGD:

“As a police officer, we have a big responsibility to the country, which is why we give our lives to this war on drugs. A lot of people have been insane because of drugs, and we are scared that the time will come when the criminality in our country will worsen because of too many drug syndicates and pushers.” (FGDP4RQ3)

3.18 The PNP Needs Support in its War against Drugs

Imbued with passion and love for country and humanity, these police officers appeal to the public and the community for support in their war on drugs. They acknowledge that without the support of the different sectors, the war on drugs will not prosper. Hence, they plead:

“The local government should coordinate and help the police, especially in the dissemination of information regarding drugs, for a positive result.” (III1RQ3)

“Hopefully, the civilian must know or consider the operation we are conducting in every operation. We follow the standard operating procedure, such as during the conduct of a search. There must be a barangay official and media personalities who may serve as witnesses during the search and seizure of the subject.” (FGDP7RQ3)

3.19 Measures Are Instituted to Improve Drug Operations

Police officers in their war on drugs are beset with so many challenges and are bombarded with negative criticisms from different organizations and the media. Nonetheless, they would like to assure the people that they are doing something to eliminate doubts about their operations, like:

“For my colleagues, there should be no exemptions even if they are law enforcers. If they have violated the law, they should be given the same penalty given to the civilians because the government wants a clean society.” (III1RQ3)

4. Discussion

In his assumption of office on June 30, 2016, President Duterte carried out the nationwide campaign against illegal drugs, led by the Philippine National Police (PNP). The campaign was well-coordinated with the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), the barangay leaders were tapped, and each one provided different interventions

to those who surrendered. A great number of those who surrendered after they were "Tokhang" were recorded every day. However, while many Filipinos supported President Duterte's war on drugs, it received different reactions and even criticism from different sectors both in the country and abroad. Police have been accused of resorting to extrajudicial killings to come up with good results (Bueza, 2016).

Nevertheless, in January 2017, less than a year after the all-out campaign waged by President Duterte, "Oplan Tokhang" was temporarily suspended. The President instructed the PNP to first get rid of its corrupt personnel after an alleged involvement of some policemen in the kidnapping and murder of a South Korean businessman, Jee Ick Joo, who was murdered in a fake buy-bust operation. Hence, the President declared that "*something has to be corrected severely*" (Cupin, 2017).

This study is purposely conducted to provide an in-depth understanding of the risk experiences of the policemen in the performance of their duty as Police officers in their war on drugs. This undertaking covered the risk experiences of this particular group in our society. Nevertheless, in the course of performing their job, policemen were accused of extra-judicial killings and of planting drugs on the victims. Drug-related killings soared between January 1, 2016 and June 15, 2016. Police justified that this surge in killings was because the victims "fought back." Despite the evidence presented by the Philippine National Police, public opinion varied. Policemen's image inadvertently changed from a hero to a culprit (Kine, 2017).

From the findings, it could be gleaned that of the 13 participants of the study are members of the Anti-Illegal Drugs Group of the Philippine National Police, eight comprised the in-depth interview group until data saturation (Creswell, 2013) and seven from the FGD until data saturation (Mack, Woodson, Macqueen, Guest & Name, 2005). Of the 15, there were 11 males and 4 females. For a number of years in the Anti-Illegal Drugs Group, only 3 served below ten years, while the rest served more than ten years.

4.1 Experiences of Policemen Involved in the War on Drugs

The Result of the study disclosed that the experiences of the policemen involved in the war on drugs were divided into: *exposure to deadly and critical situations, dealing with court hearings and lawsuits, subject to negative public perception, lacking logistics and community support and challenged with pre-operation planning and preparation.*

For *exposure to deadly and critical situations*, policemen attested that being involved in the war on drugs is quite life-threatening and is beset with perilous moments. From this experience, the participants and informants conveyed that drug-related operations were typically dangerous, but the war on drugs was extremely exhilarating. They described it as a perilous undertaking, during which anything can happen during operations due to the fact that suspects might fight back with ammunition. In fact, they lost some of their colleagues in the operations.

Another experience of the police officers in their war on drugs is *dealing with court hearings and lawsuits*. Here, the participants and informants expressed that in their war on drugs, they had experienced standing as witnesses because they are mandated to protect the rights of the suspect. However, they had to be very careful in following the

procedures. If a step were missed, they would be charged for negligence or incompetence or, worse, accused of having planted the evidence.

Unavoidably, in the war on drugs, police officers were also *subject to negative public perception*. Police officers in their war on drugs received “not welcoming” feedback from the public. They expressed that they were judged unfairly, accusing them of extra-judicial killings and that no due process was afforded to the suspects. Moreover, some families claimed to have planted evidence, which aggravated the negative perceptions of the community.

Sadly, with a campaign so intense and life-threatening, police officers experienced *lack of logistics and community support*. From their experience, police officers declared that despite the threatening nature of their operations, they were haunted by the thought that at any moment, one of them or even all of them would perish, considering that they had no protection gear when there would be a surprise attack from the enemy due to shortage in guns and ammunitions. Aggravating, the criminals’ guns and ammunition were more sophisticated.

In terms of a *lack of community support*, police officers were disheartened because the community lacked support in this endeavor. They did not seem to care that drugs and their menace were hovering in their community and might cause havoc to their life and property. The findings of Human Rights Watch (2017) attest to this fact as it found that regardless of its noble mission, the war on drugs received very low support from among the members of the community because of fear of being involved, or they misconstrued police actions.

Lastly, police officers also experienced *that they are challenged with pre-operation planning and preparation*. Police officers articulated that the war on drugs followed a very tedious process. It is time-demanding from planning to apprehending to filing a case. They had to undergo proper surveillance once the tip was received. They had to study the moves of the drug suspect, penetrate their lair, use an informer or police asset and conduct tokhang, taphang or texthang to call users to surrender. This finding is supported by the Revised PNP Manual on Anti-Illegal Drugs Operations and Investigation (2014), which stipulates the standard rules and procedures to provide guidance for the efficient and effective performance of PNP’s duties and responsibilities.

4.2 Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

Confronted with so many experiences, which are mostly unpleasant, police officers involved in the war on drugs tried to cope with these challenges. True to their mission to protect and to serve, they *observe strict adherence to standard operating procedure, collaborate and coordinate with lead agencies, fortitude and prudence, learning from experience and from superiors and openness and rapport with the civilian community*.

One of the strategies employed by the police officers to cope with the challenges in their involvement in the war on drugs is to *observe strict adherence to standard operating procedure*. In the course of their mission, they followed standard operating procedure conscientiously during police operations to ensure that the rights of

individuals or suspects were respected. They also observed the safety of personnel as well as the community.

Acknowledging the fact that the war on drugs is not just the concern of the PNP, the participants in the study affirmed that they *collaborated and coordinated with lead agencies*. Police officers clearly articulated that for the war on drugs to succeed, they needed to seek assistance from top lead agencies like the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), Criminal Investigation and Detection Group (CIDG), and Local Government Units (LGUs). It was also a must to coordinate with the media, religious sector, community and other sectors which they deemed significant in this plight. For minor suspects, they tapped/coordinated with the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) for minor suspects.

Fortitude and prudence is another way of coping with the challenges of the experiences of the police officers involved in the war on drugs. Bombarded by negative criticisms with mounting evidence such as Tokhang watchlist is in fact a kill list, that police officers were planting evidence and a lot more which dragged their reputation and their integrity, police officers conveyed that in order to champion the war on drugs, they had to be strong and firm without giving in to pressures. They had to be vigilant, alert, and attentive at all times and in all places to protect and preserve themselves and their colleagues from the unexpected enemies.

Further, to cope with the challenges of their experiences, police officers involved in the war on drugs, *learn from experience and from superiors to these police officers*, their experiences in their previous operations became their guide to perform better and to learn from their lapses. The advice that they got from their superiors also played a vital part in their development as individuals and as a group.

As expected, one way to cope with the challenges of their experiences is to be *open and to establish rapport with the civilian community*. Police officers were grateful that with the intense war on drugs, they had established rapport with the people in the community. They articulated that the best way to survive this life-threatening experience was to accept good and bad experiences as avenues to improve. They attested that establishing a good relationship with the community, working hard in hand with them, tapping the stakeholders and not blaming civilians were very helpful in their war on drugs. This finding conforms with Human Rights Watch (2017), which found that Filipinos respond positively to the call of the President to support his all-out war against drugs. Some may have hesitations, but most Filipinos would like to take part in the eradication of this society's menace in order to live in a safe and drug-free environment.

4.3 Expert Insights of a Police Officer

From their experiences, police officers who are involved in the war on drugs want to share some insights with their colleagues and the society that they believe is beneficial to them. These include: *the community plays a crucial role in the war against drugs, police officers should uphold the integrity of the profession, our call is to serve the country through the war against drugs, the PNP needs support in its war against drugs and measures are instituted to improve drug operations*.

Repeatedly, the police officers involved in the war on drugs emphasized the *crucial role played by the community*. It is because from their experience they have witnessed how the success or failure of their operation is affected to a great extent by the community's participation and involvement. They affirmed that engagement with the community is a necessary first step and that joining forces with the community is a great deal in resolving the issue of drugs. They learned that police officers should not conduct operations without a report from the community, conduct dialogue with homeowners and conduct barangay visitation in proper coordination with the Punong barangay.

In the midst of all the controversies police officers found themselves in their war against drugs, they gave insights to their colleagues to *uphold the integrity of the profession*. They pleaded that their integrity should not be thwarted by the compelling challenges and criticisms everywhere, which have blotted the good name of their organization. In order to do this, they also exhorted their colleagues to be aware and follow orders from high command or senior officers, be responsible, always comply with the standard operating procedures (SOP) during drug operations and to strengthen moral and spiritual fiber to resist temptation.

Moreover, police officers remind their fellow police officers that *our call is to serve the country through the war against drugs*. Police officers involved in the war on drugs entreated their fellow policemen to remind themselves of their mandate despite the odds brought about by the government's flagship project. They advocated that to win the war on drugs, their colleagues and society must bear in mind that their mandate is to control the proliferation and eventually eliminate the use and sale of illegal drugs in the country, and that they needed to abide by the mission to put the last pusher in jail.

Hence, instead of finding fault or pointing fingers at them, the police officers involved in the war on shared their insights with all sectors of society that *the PNP needs support in its war against drugs*. Participants and informants of the study entreated the public and the media to trust the police force and to know more about the police side of the story. Despite putting their lives on the line, they were misunderstood; hence, they appealed for more understanding and appreciation, and not to be judged unfairly because they were just doing their job to help the President in his war on drugs.

Finally, the insights police officers gain from their involvement in the war on drugs are used to inform their colleagues, and *measures are instituted to improve drug operations*. Frustrated by the diverse and adverse reactions of the Filipino people, participants and informants of the study, shared some insights on how to ensure that indeed measures were on set which included: media would be allowed to participate during drug operations to serve as witness during search and seizure operations, during conduct of search, barangay officials would be invited, to erase doubt. Personnel should wear body cameras during the operation, there should be intelligence validation before conducting the operation, and suspects should be apprised of their rights and of the proper procedure. This finding is attested by PNP Chief Oscar Albayalde's (2019) in his official statement, which promised the nation the continuance of the war on drugs as promised, but it would be less bloody and more humane. He appealed for public support

and assured that the PNP is taking all measures to improve drug operations for a safe and drug-free country.

4.4 Implications for Criminological Practice

Full support from the different sectors in the community is hereby sought to succeed in this flagship program, in the light of the findings: on the experiences of the policemen, 5 themes emerged: exposure to deadly and critical situations, dealing with court hearings and lawsuits, subject to negative public perception, lacking logistics and community support and challenged with pre-operation planning and preparation. It is hereby recommended that police officers be given the right to prove themselves worthy to perform the task mandated to them, free from prejudice or unfair judgment, but rather rely heavily on facts and not just hearsay. On how police officers cope with the challenges of their experiences, 5 themes also emerged: strict adherence to standard operating procedure, collaboration and coordination with lead agencies, fortitude and prudence, learning from experience and from superiors and openness and rapport with the civilian community. Hence, it is suggested that the community and other institutions might work hand in hand in synergy to bring about the dream of the President for a drug-free environment, safe for everyone and for our family. People in the community might act at their own level, reporting people whom they think are suspicious and not just remain silent. Barangay officials, including the barangay captain, might also do some campaigns and other programs that might reinforce the mandate of the police officers. On the insights policemen police officers can share with their colleagues and the society, 5 themes emerged: the community plays a crucial role in the war against drugs, police officers should uphold the integrity of the profession, their call is to serve the country through the war against drugs, the PNP needs support in its war against drugs and measures are instituted to improve drug operations. Police officers are bombarded with so many expectations. It is suggested that the insights learned by the participants and informants might be given attention and recommended to higher-ups for appropriate actions. The media has very big role in informing the masses of the actual facts and the real story, while religious organisations can enlighten the members of their groups on doubts or misconceptions.

4.5 Implications for Future Research

Future research can consider the optimum role of the PNP and other government agencies in providing programs to different sectors of society that may divert the attention of these people in the community to other worthwhile activities that may generate income. Moreover, they can conduct forums that tackle not only the effects of drugs but also the impact of drug use on the peace and order situation of the community. Another valuable finding of the study is the role of the community in the implementation of the war on drugs. Future studies may be conducted to explore the association between the qualities of relationships in the community, most especially the school and the home. Future research may be conducted to ascertain the impact of nurture and intervention on the part of these institutions on the war on drugs. Future research may also be conducted

to ascertain this finding of the study. The study is very limited because few or no qualitative studies in the Philippines were conducted on the war on drugs. Future qualitative research can be conducted on a different group. Mixed method studies (quantitative-qualitative) can also be conducted to prove or disprove the findings of this qualitative study.

5. Conclusion

The PNP is mandated to curb and eventually champion the war on drugs. For years, its actions may have been thwarted by some scalawags in the PNP, its intentions may have been doubted and fingers may have been pointed on them as “killers” rather than law enforcers. Amidst the tumultuous and chaotic situations, the police officers are in. There remain in the folds those who are true and loyal to their vows. Police officers who are participants in the study emphasized the vital role of collaboration and cooperation coming from the community and other sectors of society. Though this is evident, there is a great need to improve the community’s lack of knowledge of drug use and the “I don’t care” attitude. It is clear that illegal drugs are prevalent in their community, but because it does not concern them, they just keep silent. They are so scared to lose their lives in their intervention, but they do not realize the impact of it on the security, safety, peace and order of their community, which they live, mingle and work with. Furthermore, this study could be a great contribution to the dearth of research on police performance in the war on drugs and the life-threatening experiences they went through.

Conflict of Interest Statement

Conflict of interest was addressed by looking at the data alone free from prejudices or biases. There was no issue on conflict of interest in the study because the participants are not directly under my care and supervision.

About the Author(s)

Nonilito O. Carpio, Assistant Professor IV, Davao Oriental State University, Philippines. PhD in Criminal Justice (Major in Criminology).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4726-6941>

References

- Albayalde, O. (2019). 2019 New Year’s call message. Retrieved from <http://www.pnp.gov.ph/>.
- Baum, D. (2016). Legalize it all: How to win the war on drugs. *Harper’s Magazine*, 24-34. Retrieved from <https://harpers.org/archive/2016/04/legalize-it-all/>
- Bueza, M. (2016). *In numbers: The Philippines’ war on drugs*. Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/145814-numbers-statistics-philippines-war-drugs>.

- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. Retrieved from <https://revistapsicologia.org/public/formato/cuali2.pdf>
- Cupin, B. (2017). *Jee Ick Joo case: Tangled webs, inconsistent stories*. Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/159777-senate-hearing-jee-ick-joo-police-crime-drug-war>.
- Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB, 2018). Philippine Anti-Illegal Drugs Strategy. Retrieved from https://www.ddb.gov.ph/images/downloads/Revised_PADS_as_of_Nov_9_2018.pdf.
- Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB, 2015). *Nationwide survey on the nature and extent of drug abuse in the Philippines*. Retrieved from <http://pcij.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/DDB-2015-Nationwide-Survey-Final-Reportc.pdf>.
- Human Rights Watch (2017). *License to kill: Philippine police killings in Duterte's war on drugs*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017>.
- International Narcotics Control Board (2018). *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2018*. Retrieved from https://www.drogenbeauftragte.de/fileadmin/dateien-dba/Drogenbeauftragte/3_Internationales/1_Vereinte_Nationen/Downloads/INCB_Report_2018.pdf.
- Kine, P. (2017). *Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's 'war on drugs'*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/07/philippine-president-rodrigo-dutertes-war-drugs>.
- Krueger, R.A., & Casey, M.A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Sage Publications Inc., Thousand Oaks. Retrieved from <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/book/focus-groups-6>
- Lasco, G. (2016). *Just how big is the drug problem in the Philippines anyway?* Retrieved from <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/dateline/article/2016/10/20/just-how-big-drug-problem-philippines-anyway>.
- Mack, N., Woodsong, C., Macqueen, KM., Guest, G., & Namey, E., (2005). *Qualitative research methods: A data collector's field guide*. Research Triangle Park, NC: Family Health International. Retrieved from <https://www.fhi360.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Qualitative-Research-Methods-A-Data-Collectors-Field-Guide.pdf>
- Pathak V, J.B., & Kalra S. (2013). Qualitative research. *Perspectives in clinical research*, 4(3), 192-205. Retrieved from https://journals.lww.com/picp/fulltext/2013/04030/qualitative_research.10.aspx
- Philippine National Police (2017). *Philippine National Police Annual Report*. Retrieved from https://www.coa.gov.ph/wpfd_file/philippine-national-police-consolidated-annual-audit-report-2017/?_cf_chl_tk=ACRdFmSG5B_JuFmdqREpEUxyNoXGG5chXR3ZJzH0cE-1744987323-1.0.1.1-o9R8ZfPJ5Qs6l8vNHpAy8XqehvA811DFdChUZSQPOsl

- Revised PNP Manual on Anti-Illegal Drugs Operations and Investigation (2014). Retrieved from <https://pro9.pnp.gov.ph/index.php/downloads/finish/6-pnp-manuals/278-revised-pnp-manual-on-anti-illegal-drugs-operations-and-investigation/0>.
- Santos, A., & Ebbighausen, R. (2018). *Investigating Duterte's drug war in the Philippines — facts and fiction*. Retrieved August 22, 2018, from <https://www.dw.com/en/investigating-dutertes-drug-war-in-philippines-facts-and-fiction/a-43695383>.
- Sutton J., & Austin Z. (2015). Qualitative research: data collection, analysis, and management. *Canadian Journal of Hospital Pharmacy*, 68(3), 226–231. Retrieved from <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4485510/>
- van Manen, M. (2017b). Phenomenology in its original sense. *Qualitative Health Research*, 27, 810-825. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732317699381>
- Werb, D., Rowell, G., Guyatt, G., Kerr, T., Montaner, J., & Wood, E. (2011). Effect of drug law enforcement on drug market violence: A systematic review. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 22, 87–94. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2011.02.002>
- Morris, K. (2010). Drug crime and criminalization threaten progress on MDGs. *Lancet* 367:1131-11132. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(10\)61521-8](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(10)61521-8)
- Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, International Narcotics Control Strategy, Washington, U.S. Department of State, 2010. Retrieved from <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2010/index.htm>
- Simbulan, N., Estacio, L., Dioquino-Maligaso, C., Herbosa, T., & Withers, M. (2019). The Manila Declaration on the Drug Problem in the Philippines. *Annals of global health*, 85(1), 26. <https://doi.org/10.5334/aogh.28>

Creative Commons licensing terms

Author(s) will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of Social Sciences Studies shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflicts of interest, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated into the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).