
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Correcting Mistakes, Redirecting the Future: The Lived Experiences of Public Officers Handling Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL)

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| ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of public officers handling Children in Conflict with the Law focusing on both the challenges they faced and their aspirations. Using a phenomenological research design, the study aimed to understand the emotional, procedural, and systemic obstacles encountered by professionals such as police officers and social workers in managing CICL cases. Ten key informants, purposively selected for their direct involvement in CICL cases, participated in in-depth interviews. The data were transcribed and analyzed to identify key themes, revealing eight themes that represented the experiences of the participants. Member checking was used to ensure validity, allowing participants to verify the accuracy of the transcriptions. The study identified several positive challenges, happy to serve and contentment through collaboration, participants have also negative challenges such as emotional struggles in work and barriers to effective collaboration, inter-agency cooperation and patience and commitment to serve for addressing the challenges encountered, and for their aspirations the provision for logistic support and security of tenure. This study suggests the need for reforms, including enhanced training for officers, improved collaboration between agencies, and the expansion of restorative justice programs and strengthening community support for CICL is also critical for ensuring successful rehabilitation and reintegration.

| KEYWORDS

Children in Conflict with the Law, Public Officers, Professionals

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) are individuals under 18 engaged in the legal system due to suspected or actual criminal behavior, often involving status offenses like truancy or underage drinking, which aren't crimes for adults. This reflects the different treatment of minors in the justice system (Carreon, 2019). Unfortunately, the juvenile justice system often emphasizes the offenses rather than addressing underlying issues such as socioeconomic conditions, family dynamics, or peer influences that contribute to this behavior.

UNICEF advocates for protecting Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL). The organization emphasizes rehabilitation over punishment. They promote community-based alternatives to imprisonment and aim to safeguard against abuse and violence (Andaya, 2022).

Justice systems for adults often fail to address the needs of minors, which can exacerbate their problems instead of helping them reintegrate. UNICEF supports restorative justice programs that encourage accountability and healing through the involvement of children, families, victims, and communities (Stites et al., 2019).

Juvenile justice systems worldwide, including in the Philippines, face significant challenges. These challenges include prolonged court proceedings and a lack of resources. Furthermore, public officials who are responsible for the rehabilitation of children in conflict with the law (CICL) often lack sufficient training (Urbano et al., 2023).

It is sad to note despite efforts to improve the rehabilitation and reintegration of Children in Conflict with the Law (CICLs), several challenges persist. Prolonged legal proceedings, inadequate training for juvenile justice professionals, and insufficient local government units hinder progress. Effective rehabilitation initiatives, which can keep CICLs in school and provide vocational training, are often undermined by systemic delays, poor inter-agency coordination, and the stigma surrounding their reintegration into society.

Additionally, the study seeks to address a critical gap existing in research by exploring the roles and experiences of public officers such as police and social workers directly involved in handling cases of CICL as an answer to the foregoing claims of Urbano et al., (2023), that there is limited focus in understanding how key figures in justice system navigate their responsibilities and the challenges they are facing in managing sensitive cases.

The literature reviewed revolves around three central criminological theories—Social Bond Theory (Hirschi, 1969), Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, 1939), and Social Disorganization Theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942)—and their relevance to understanding juvenile delinquency, particularly in the context of the Philippines' juvenile justice system.

Social Bond Theory posits those strong connections—attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief—act as informal controls preventing deviant behavior. Studies cited support the idea that family bonds, academic achievement, and active participation in socially approved activities reduce the likelihood of delinquency among youth. The importance of these bonds is further reinforced by research highlighting the significance of parental attachment, school engagement, and community involvement. When these bonds are weak or broken, the risk of deviance increases.

Differential Association Theory, on the other hand, asserts that criminal behavior is learned through social interactions, particularly within close relationships. Sutherland's propositions emphasize that exposure to pro-criminal values within intimate groups fosters deviant behavior. The frequency, duration, priority, and intensity of these associations are crucial in shaping attitudes toward lawbreaking. This theory shifts the focus from individual pathology to the social learning process and the symbolic interactions that transmit criminal values.

Social Disorganization Theory complements these views by tying high crime rates to environmental factors such as poverty, instability, and lack of social cohesion. According to Shaw and McKay, disorganized neighborhoods, regardless of their ethnic composition, exhibit persistent delinquency due to weakened informal social controls and the perpetuation of criminal norms. The ecological perspective, exemplified in Chicago's concentric zone model, illustrates how crime clusters in specific urban areas with high social disorganization.

These theoretical perspectives converge on the understanding that juvenile delinquency is seldom the result of isolated individual failings. Rather, it arises from the interplay of social relationships, learned behaviors, and environmental contexts. This is reflected in the Philippine setting through the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act of 2006 (RA 9344), which emphasizes rehabilitation and protection for children in conflict with the law (CICL). The literature highlights ongoing challenges, such as inadequate resources, insufficiently trained public officers, and systemic barriers that hinder the effective rehabilitation and reintegration of CICLs. Despite these issues, there is consensus on the greater efficacy of support and rehabilitation over punitive measures, as advocated by both local and international organizations.

This study explores the lived experiences of public officers handling Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) in Tacloban City, Leyte, Philippines.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following:

1. What are the experiences of Informants in handling CICL?
2. How do the informants address the difficulties encountered in handling CICL?
3. What are the aspirations of the informants to improve their professional competence in handling CICL?

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to capture and analyze the lived experiences of public officers handling Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL). The approach was chosen to provide rich, narrative insights into the challenges, strategies, and perspectives of those directly involved in juvenile justice processes.

2.2 Participants

The participants included police officers and social workers from Tacloban City. Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals with direct experience in handling CICL cases. A total of 10 participants, six (6) female police officers assigned to the WCPD from three Tacloban City Police Offices, three (3) social workers from the City Social Workers Development Office, and one (1) from the Social Development Center for Children were targeted to ensure diverse perspectives while maintaining depth of analysis.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments

For data collection, the researcher utilized a self-designed semi-structured interview guide, which was divided into three sets of questions about the Informants, such as: Part I is all about the experiences in handling CICL, which has two sub-parts: A. Positive experiences of the Informants in handling CICL, and B. Negative experiences of the Informants in handling CICL; Part 2, on addressing the difficulties encountered by the informants in handling CICL; and Part 3, the aspirations of the informants to improve their professional competence in handling CICL. The interview guide was validated by the panel, and I proceeded to conduct the study. To ensure accuracy in capturing informants' responses, the researcher employed field notes and a voice recorder, which aided the transcription process.

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

The research procedure began with careful planning, where the researcher defined the study objectives and selected the appropriate methodology. After obtaining the necessary approval from the panel and the issuance of a protocol approved by the Ethics Review Committee, I proceeded to conduct the study by applying the following: data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness of research, and ethical considerations.

The researcher carefully organized the interview process by scheduling appointments with the informants, ensuring clarity regarding confidentiality, and preparing informed consent forms. Additionally, researchers make every effort to create a comfortable environment for the informants, in maintaining sensitivity to their preferences and choosing words carefully to avoid discomfort. These steps are intended to facilitate an open and respectful dialogue, ensuring the collection of accurate and meaningful data while upholding ethical standards throughout the interview process.

Before the interviews took place, the researcher initiated the process by sending a transmittal letter to relevant authorities, including the City Director of Tacloban City Police Office and the City Mayor of Tacloban.

The formal step ensured that appropriate permissions were obtained, allowing the researcher to establish communication with key stakeholders. In parallel, the researcher developed the necessary tools for data collection, including a semi-structured interview questionnaire. Constructive feedback was incorporated into the questionnaire to refine and improve the clarity and relevance of questions. Once the interview guide was finalized, the researcher confirmed the availability of the informants and scheduled interviews at times convenient for them.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data collection process was conducted using thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research for identifying and analyzing patterns or themes within the data. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for this study, as it allowed the researcher to categorize and interpret the responses provided by the informants (Naeem et al., 2023).

The data were analyzed by focusing on key factors, including the frequency of responses, specificity, emotional content, and the extent of shared information. These coding factors were used to identify significant themes that emerged during interviews. The responses from each informant were meticulously documented through notes and audio recordings, ensuring that all key details were accurately captured for subsequent analysis (Mishra and Dey, 2023).

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations played a crucial role in guiding the research process.

Beneficence. The researcher clearly articulated the benefits of study participation and presented a proposed action plan to informants, emphasizing that the study findings were intended to enhance agency services.

Non-maleficence. The researcher explicitly stated that all data collected during interviews would remain confidential and the informant's identities would be protected throughout the study. Confidentiality is emphasized as essential for maintaining participant trust and facilitating open disclosure of experiences (Kang and Hwang, 2023).

Justice. The researcher explained clearly to the informants the benefits and risks of participating in the study. It also emphasized that research findings will apply to all beneficiaries, regardless of their diverse backgrounds.

Autonomy. Through a clear and thoughtful informed consent process, participants gained a complete understanding of the study's goal, the right, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. They were reassured that they could step away from studying at any moment, free from any consequences.

2.7 Trustworthiness of Research

Trustworthiness for quantitative study refers to validity and reliability. However, in qualitative research, this concept is more obscure because it uses different terms. Since qualitative researchers do not use instruments to establish metrics about validity and reliability, it is pertinent to address how qualitative researchers demonstrate the research study findings that address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility ensures that research findings are believable and accurately reflect the informant's perspectives, which is enhanced using triangulation. The approach involved integrating multiple data sources, demographic information, and interview transcripts, and conducting member checks to verify the accuracy of findings (McLeod, S. 2024).

Transferability was facilitated by the researcher, who provided detailed descriptions of the study context, allowing others to assess whether the findings could be applied in different settings or situations. Variation in the participant sample was applied to ensure a diverse range of perspectives.

Dependability is achieved by maintaining thorough audit trails and minimizing researcher bias. An audit trail provides a transparent record of the research process, documenting each step from data collection to analysis and reporting. This transparency was allowed for greater consistency and ensures that the findings can be verified (McLeod, S. 2024).

Confirmability was enhanced through the researchers' efforts to reduce personal biases and relied on external audits to ensure that conclusions drawn from data were supported by the evidence. Hence, these rigorous methodological and ethical procedures contributed to the overall quality, validity, and reliability of the study findings.

3. RESULTS

This study explored the experiences, challenges, and aspirations of public officers handling Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL). Through thematic analysis of informant narratives, several emergent themes were identified and are presented below, organized according to the study's sub-problems.

I. Experiences of Public Officers in Handling CICL

A. Positive Experiences

Two major themes emerged regarding positive experiences:

1. Happy to Serve. Informants described a profound sense of happiness and fulfillment in their roles, despite the inherent difficulties. This sense of purpose was rooted in witnessing the growth and successful reintegration of CICL into the community. The findings align with Public Service Motivation (PSM) Theory, highlighting that public officers derive satisfaction from helping vulnerable populations and affecting positive change (Perry & Wise, 1990). Informants emphasized courage, dedication, and patience as essential traits, especially when facing limited resources and lack of support from other stakeholders. Literature supports the importance of a service-oriented approach and recognizes that training, social support, and acknowledgment reinforce public officers' commitment (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Cruz & Serrano, 2017).

2. Contentment Through Collaboration. Teamwork, inter-agency coordination, and mutual support were identified as critical to achieving both organizational and personal fulfillment. Informants noted that collaboration fostered resilience, increased satisfaction, and improved outcomes for CICL. This theme is supported by Social Interdependence Theory and Systems Theory, emphasizing the role of shared goals and coordinated efforts in promoting well-being and professional efficacy (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Bertalanffy, 1968; Wenger, 1998). Effective coordination among agencies was seen as essential for positive outcomes for both children and officers.

B. Negative Experiences

Participants also shared significant negative experiences, summarized in two primary themes:

1. Emotional Struggles in Work. Public officers reported high emotional demands, including stress, trauma, burnout, and compassion fatigue. The inability to provide adequate assistance due to systemic barriers—such as limited resources and slow

referral processes—intensified feelings of frustration and helplessness (Mncube et al., 2023; Bidola et al., 2024). Informants highlighted the importance of empathy and persistence but noted that systemic gaps exacerbate emotional burdens and hinder effective intervention (Moltrecht et al., 2020).

2. Barriers to Effective Collaboration. Challenges in inter-agency collaboration were frequently cited, including miscommunication, lack of standardized practices, and difficulties in building trust. These barriers, interpreted through Systems Theory and Ecological Systems Theory, disrupt the provision of comprehensive services for CICL (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gray, 1989). Informants stressed the need for improved coordination and clearer roles among agencies to better serve children's needs (Alampay, 2014; UNICEF, 2016).

II. Addressing the Difficulties in Handling CICL

Two subthemes emerged regarding strategies to overcome challenges:

1. Inter-Agency Cooperation. Informants underscored the necessity of collaboration among various agencies—law enforcement, social workers, courts, and community organizations—to address the complex needs of CICL. Systems Theory provided a framework for understanding how coordinated efforts and effective information sharing enhance service delivery and intervention efficacy (Bertalanffy, 1968; Meadows, 2008). Gaps in coordination were linked to service delivery failures and negative outcomes for children (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972; Alampay, 2014).

2. Patience and Commitment to Serve. Patience and commitment were described as crucial traits for public officers, enabling them to persist through emotional, behavioral, and procedural challenges. Informants indicated that these qualities not only helped establish trust and rapport with CICL but also contributed to professional satisfaction and successful rehabilitation outcomes (Bernales, 2020; Bala et al., 2009). Grounded Theory supported the role of these character strengths in effective juvenile justice practice (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

III. Aspirations to Improve Professional Competence

Finally, two aspirational subthemes were identified:

1. Provision of Logistic Support. Informants expressed the need for adequate facilities, equipment, and financial resources, emphasizing that insufficient logistical support hinders performance and service delivery for CICL. Systems Theory again provided a basis for understanding the impact of resource availability on system effectiveness (Bertalanffy, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Improved logistics were seen as vital for reducing stress, improving morale, and ensuring better rehabilitation outcomes (Scott & Davis, 2007; Alampay, 2014).

2. Security of Tenure. Job security emerged as a key aspiration, contributing to public officers' motivation, ethical conduct, and professional stability. The findings align with Organizational Commitment Theory and Public Service Motivation Theory, both of which highlight the positive effects of job security on employee dedication and performance (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Perry & Wise, 1990). Informants noted that security of tenure enables them to prioritize children's welfare and maintain consistent, child-friendly service delivery.

The results reveal that while public officers derive fulfillment and contentment from serving CICL and collaborating with colleagues, they also face substantial emotional and systemic challenges. Effective inter-agency cooperation, patience, commitment, adequate logistical support, and job security are crucial factors in enhancing both officer well-being and service outcomes for CICL.

4. DISCUSSION

The positive experiences, such as "Happy to Serve" and "Contentment Through Collaboration," underscore the intrinsic motivation and fulfillment derived from helping vulnerable children and working cohesively with other agencies. These findings resonate with prior literature emphasizing the value of collaborative approaches and intrinsic rewards in social and law enforcement professions. Meanwhile, the negative experiences, including "Emotional Struggles in Work" and "Barriers to Effective Collaboration," reflect the emotional toll and systemic challenges officers face. Emotional exhaustion and inter-agency friction are common themes in similar studies and highlight the need for psychosocial support and streamlined communication channels.

When addressing difficulties, informants cited "Inter-agency Cooperation" and "Patience and Commitment to Serve" as crucial strategies. These themes suggest that resilience and teamwork are vital in overcoming systemic and situational obstacles. This finding aligns with the broader literature on public service, which identifies interprofessional collaboration and personal commitment as essential for effective service delivery in complex cases.

Regarding aspirations for professional growth, the desire for "Provision of Logistical Support" and "Security of Tenure" indicates that material resources and employment stability are perceived as critical for effective case management. This is consistent with research that highlights the importance of adequate resources and job security in promoting job satisfaction and professional competence among social workers and law enforcement officers.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's implications for practice emphasize the need for specialized training, resource allocation, and multi-agency cooperation. For example, the Philippine National Police (PNP) and Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) should prioritize capacity-building initiatives, trauma-informed care, and motivational interviewing to enhance practitioners' skills. Rehabilitation centers and local governments are encouraged to allocate sufficient budgets to improve facilities and support services for CICL. The importance of family and community engagement, as well as the role of the family court and legal practitioners, also emerged as critical factors in successful rehabilitation and reintegration.

For future research, the study highlights several avenues, including the integration of technology in social work, the impact of policy changes, mental health support for practitioners, and culturally responsive practices. It also suggests examining the effectiveness of police training programs, diversion initiatives, and the role of socioeconomic status in shaping outcomes for CICL.

6. CONCLUSION

In summary, this study provides valuable insights into the multifaceted experiences of public officers handling CICL cases. The findings highlight both the challenges and rewards inherent in this work and underline the importance of collaboration, resource support, and ongoing training. Addressing the identified gaps through practical and policy interventions can enhance the effectiveness of CICL management and promote the well-being of both practitioners and the children they serve. Future research should continue to build on these findings, incorporating broader perspectives and innovative approaches to further strengthen juvenile justice and welfare systems.

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