

Guardians of Silence: Worklife Realities of Witness Protection Agents

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Abstract

This study explored the work-life realities of Witness Protection Program (WPP) agents under the Witness Protection, Security and Benefit Program (WPSBP) of the Department of Justice in Cebu City, Philippines. The study aimed to examine the lived experiences, occupational challenges, coping mechanisms, and aspirations of WPP agents in the performance of their duties. Anchored on Rational Choice Theory, Social Contract Theory, and Organizational Culture Theory, the study utilized a qualitative research design employing transcendental phenomenology and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with ten actively serving WPP agents who had completed mandatory trainings and possessed at least three years of service experience. Audio recordings, field notes, and thematic analysis were used to capture and interpret the participants' narratives and operational experiences. The findings revealed that WPP agents experience high-risk and demanding occupational conditions characterized by exposure to danger, operational pressure, media intrusion, confidentiality concerns, and multifaceted protective responsibilities. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience, adaptability, teamwork, and strong commitment to justice and public service. Emotional fulfillment derived from protecting witnesses and contributing to successful legal outcomes served as a significant source of motivation. The study also identified the importance of institutional support, professional training, healthcare benefits, and inter-agency collaboration in sustaining operational effectiveness, although budgetary limitations and public misconceptions continued to affect the efficiency of witness protection services. The study concluded that WPP agents perform a critical humanitarian and justice-oriented role in maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of witness protection operations in the Philippines. The study supports Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 on Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions through its focus on witness protection and the strengthening of criminal justice systems. It also relates to SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth by addressing workforce welfare, occupational realities, and organizational support mechanisms. The findings contribute to institutional, governance, and community sustainability by providing insights that may improve personnel welfare, operational systems, and public trust in witness protection programs.

Keywords: Adaptability, Department of Justice, Phenomenology, Resilience, Witness Protection Program, Witness Protection Program Agents, Work-Life Realities

1. Introduction

The Witness Protection Program (WPP) is a government mechanism designed to provide protection, security, and benefits to witnesses whose testimonies are essential in the successful prosecution of criminal cases. It safeguards individuals exposed to threats, intimidation, retaliation, or harassment before, during, and after judicial proceedings. Internationally, witness protection is recognized as a crucial component of criminal justice systems, particularly in addressing organized crime, corruption, terrorism, and other high-risk offenses. In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 6981 institutionalized the Witness Protection, Security and Benefit Program to encourage witness participation and ensure justice delivery. Despite extensive discussions on witness safety, legal protection, and prosecutorial outcomes, limited attention has been given to the lived experiences and operational realities of Witness Protection Program agents who function as frontline implementers of witness security. These agents perform high-risk duties such as escort operations, threat assessment, emergency response, and safehouse management while operating under strict confidentiality. This study explores the work-life realities, challenges, coping mechanisms, and aspirations of Witness Protection Program agents in Cebu City to contribute to the limited local literature on the subject and support improvements in organizational effectiveness and workforce sustainability.

1.1 Background of the Study on Witness Protection Program Agents in the Philippines

Witness protection refers to state-sponsored protection provided to individuals whose testimonies are necessary in criminal proceedings and who are exposed to danger because of their cooperation with law enforcement authorities. Karen Kramer defined witness protection as a state program wherein a witness is relocated and provided a new identity to prevent

intimidation resulting from testimony (UNTOC Article 24). Similarly, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime described witness protection programs as formally established covert programs involving relocation and identity change for witnesses threatened by criminal groups because of their cooperation with authorities. The United States Federal Witness Security Program (WITSEC), authorized under the Organized Crime Control Act of 1970, became the foundational model for many witness protection systems globally. Similar programs exist in Canada, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Italy, South Africa, Kenya, and other countries, although implementation structures and effectiveness vary across jurisdictions. These programs emerged primarily in response to organized crime, corruption, and witness intimidation. In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 6981 or “The Witness Protection, Security and Benefit Act” established the formal Witness Protection Program in 1991 to protect witnesses from reprisals and economic dislocation. Prior to its enactment, witness protection mechanisms were informal and limited. The law encourages individuals with knowledge of crimes to testify before courts, quasi-judicial bodies, or investigating authorities. Witness protection agents serve as frontline operators who provide 24/7 security, escort services, emergency response, and safehouse management while ensuring witness safety and courtroom participation. Existing studies primarily focus on witnesses, legal frameworks, and judicial outcomes while overlooking the professionals responsible for implementing witness protection measures. Consequently, the operational realities, occupational stress, motivations, mental health concerns, and workplace experiences of WPP agents remain understudied in the Philippine setting.

1.2 Themes and Insights from Related Literature on Witness Protection Operations

Related literature emphasizes that witness protection is essential to preserving the integrity of criminal justice systems and ensuring successful prosecution of offenders. Gaña (2010) stressed that witnesses and their testimonies are crucial in securing convictions. Chugh (2023) further emphasized that the state has a constitutional obligation to protect witnesses so they can testify truthfully without fear of retaliation. Several studies highlight witness intimidation as a major obstacle in criminal prosecution. Cetin (2010) explained that fear of reprisals discourages witnesses from cooperating, particularly in cases involving organized crime. Similarly, Dedel (2006) and the Council of Europe (2004) noted that witness intimidation continues to undermine criminal prosecutions globally. Boisvert (2005) argued that criminal organizations possess significant power to intimidate witnesses, while Roadcap (2004) identified witness tampering as a form of obstruction of justice. International literature also demonstrates operational challenges in witness protection systems. Makokha (2017), Human Rights Watch (2018), Greer (1995) likewise pointed out weak inter-agency coordination within the Italian anti-mafia witness protection system. Psychological and occupational concerns are likewise evident in witness protection operations. Studies in the United States revealed that long-term psychological distress among protected witnesses may contribute to elevated suicide risks, emphasizing the need for psychological support mechanisms. Barrett (2009) highlighted the pressures experienced by courts and security personnel in high-profile cases, Technological developments and media exposure also affect witness protection operations. Humphreys (1996) discussed the growing influence of media systems and electronic communication on legal proceedings, while Marx (1988) explained the expansion of covert surveillance practices in law enforcement. Paulesu (2022) further noted that media trials may psychologically influence judicial impartiality and public perception. At the international level, witness protection remains integral to institutions such as the International Criminal Court, particularly in conflict and post-conflict investigations where witness testimony serves as critical evidence (Kramer, 2014). Effective witness protection therefore strengthens justice systems, supports prosecution efforts, and reinforces the rule of law globally (Schur, 2002).

1.3 Local, National, and Global Context of Witness Protection Program Operations

Globally, witness protection systems operate under varying institutional structures but commonly aim to protect individuals cooperating with criminal investigations. Canada administers witness protection through the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, while the United Kingdom operates the Protected Persons Service through the National Crime Agency. Turkey established its witness protection program in response to organized crime and terrorism concerns, while Italy developed anti-mafia protection systems with distinct prosecutorial mechanisms. In Africa, South Africa and Kenya continue to encounter implementation difficulties because of financial constraints, institutional weaknesses, and security limitations. International organizations such as the International Criminal Court also rely heavily on witness protection measures due to the high-risk nature of international prosecutions and ongoing conflicts. In the Philippine setting, Republic Act No. 6981 institutionalized witness protection to strengthen criminal prosecution and encourage witness participation. The Department of Justice administers the program, while agencies such as the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Philippine National Police, National Bureau of Investigation, and Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking collaborate in witness security efforts. Proposed legislative measures, including Senate Bill No. 1162, further seek to strengthen witness protection mechanisms, especially in legislative inquiries. Within Cebu City, Witness Protection Program agents serve as operational personnel tasked with maintaining witness safety under highly confidential conditions. Their duties involve escort operations, emergency response, threat management, and safehouse administration, exposing them to significant occupational risks and operational pressures.

1.4 Theoretical and Conceptual Basis of Witness Protection Program Agents’ Work-Life Realities

This study is anchored on Rational Choice Theory by Adam Smith (1776), Social Contract Theory by Hobbes (1651), Locke (1689), and Rousseau (1762), and Organizational Culture Theory by Schein (1985). Rational Choice Theory explains decision-making through cost-benefit analysis and expected outcomes. In organizational settings, the theory supports the idea that positive work environments and work-life balance contribute to employee motivation, productivity, and job satisfaction. Social Contract Theory explains the state's obligation to protect citizens and uphold social order. Witness protection agents embody this responsibility through their role in safeguarding witnesses and ensuring justice. The theory also highlights the balance between individual rights and state authority in witness protection operations. Organizational Culture Theory (Schein, 1985) explains how shared assumptions, beliefs, values, artifacts, and organizational practices shape employee behavior and institutional identity. Schein emphasized that leadership significantly influences organizational culture through workplace systems, values, and operational structures. Saad & Kaur (2020) further explained that organizational culture governs employee behavior and organizational practices, influencing performance, motivation, and professional conduct. These theories collectively provide a framework for understanding the work-life realities, motivations, coping mechanisms, and organizational experiences of Witness Protection Program agents.

1.5 Research Gaps and Rationale on the Work-Life Realities of Witness Protection Program Agents

Existing literature predominantly focuses on witness rights, legal frameworks, courtroom procedures, prosecution effectiveness, and witness security mechanisms. Studies extensively discuss witness intimidation, organized crime, court security, international protection frameworks, and procedural safeguards. However, limited research examines the operational realities and lived experiences of witness protection agents themselves, particularly in the Philippine context. There remains insufficient literature regarding the occupational challenges, emotional burdens, mental health concerns, coping mechanisms, workplace culture, and aspirations of Witness Protection Program agents. This gap is particularly evident in local studies involving agents assigned in Cebu City and within the Department of Justice. The study is therefore necessary to document the realities faced by WPP agents, identify operational challenges, and explore strategies that may strengthen organizational systems, personnel welfare, and witness protection effectiveness. The findings may also contribute to policy development, workforce sustainability, and future criminal justice research.

1.6 Alignment with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The study aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. Witness protection programs strengthen the rule of law by ensuring witness participation in criminal proceedings and supporting effective prosecution of crimes. The protection of witnesses and the operational effectiveness of WPP agents contribute to safer judicial processes and stronger justice institutions. The study also relates to SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth by examining the working conditions, occupational realities, and workforce sustainability of Witness Protection Program agents. Understanding their challenges and aspirations may support organizational improvements, employee welfare, and safer work environments. Additionally, the research supports SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being because the study indirectly addresses occupational stress, mental health concerns, and psychological pressures experienced by WPP agents operating in high-risk environments.

1.7 Importance of the Study to Multidisciplinary Sustainability

This study contributes to socio-economic, institutional, organizational, and community sustainability by strengthening knowledge regarding the operational realities of witness protection personnel. Effective witness protection systems reinforce public trust in the criminal justice system and support long-term institutional sustainability. The research also contributes to policy and governance sustainability by providing evidence that may guide improvements in recruitment, training, operational procedures, and workforce management within the Department of Justice and partner agencies. Findings may help enhance inter-agency coordination among the DOJ, AFP, PNP, NBI, IACAT, and other institutions involved in witness protection. From a public safety and criminal justice perspective, the study supports community sustainability by strengthening witness protection mechanisms that contribute to safer communities and improved law enforcement effectiveness. Furthermore, the study contributes to educational sustainability by providing future researchers, criminology educators, and students with localized knowledge regarding witness protection operations and workforce realities within the Philippine criminal justice system.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design using transcendental phenomenology by Moustaka (1994). This approach emphasized epoche or bracketing, allowing the researcher to set aside personal biases and focus on the authentic descriptions of participants' lived experiences. Horizontalization was likewise utilized, wherein all statements were initially treated with equal value before being clustered into meaningful themes. Phenomenology focused on understanding the essence of human experiences by examining participants' perceptions, interpretations, and subjective realities. The research also incorporated Interpretive Phenomenology associated with Heidegger and Gadamer and operationalized through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This perspective recognized that meanings are co-constructed through

interactions between individuals and their environments. The approach allowed the researcher to interpret the experiences of WPP agents within the context of their professional roles and operational realities. Phenomenology was selected because it provides authentic accounts of complex human experiences and values participants' individuality and narratives. Although criticisms of phenomenology include concerns regarding subjectivity and limited generalizability (Liamputtong, 2023), interpretive phenomenology and the concept of intersubjectivity support the co-constructed nature of shared experiences (Demmin, 2025). Structured interviews, field notes, and audio recordings were utilized to capture rich and detailed accounts of the work-life realities of WPP agents.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at the Witness Protection, Security and Benefit Program (WPSBP) office under the Department of Justice Region VII located in Guadalupe, Cebu City. The WPSBP operates under Republic Act No. 6981 or the "Witness Protection, Security and Benefit Act," which was established to encourage witnesses to testify in criminal proceedings by ensuring their protection against threats, reprisals, and economic displacement. The office in Region VII was headed by a Regional Implementor and supported by 25 personnel. Cebu City, known as the "Queen City of the South," served as the study setting due to its significance as a highly urbanized center for commerce, trade, education, tourism, and governance in the Visayas region. As one of the country's oldest cities and a major gateway in the Philippines, Cebu City provided a relevant operational context for examining the realities faced by WPP agents assigned within an urban and strategically important location.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The study involved 10 informants who were actively serving as Witness Protection Program agents under the Witness Protection, Security and Benefit Program of the Department of Justice. Informants were required to have a minimum of three years of service and must have completed all mandatory trainings related to their duties as WPP agents. The study utilized In-Depth Interviews (IDI) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) to gather detailed insights regarding the agents' work-life experiences, operational challenges, coping strategies, and professional aspirations. To ensure contextual relevance, participants were required to be officially assigned at the WPSBP office in Cebu City or regularly perform duties within Cebu City and nearby areas. These criteria ensured that the participants possessed substantial operational experience and familiarity with the local realities of witness protection operations in Region VII. Light refreshments were provided to participants as a gesture of appreciation for their participation and cooperation.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study employed purposive sampling in selecting informants who met the established inclusion criteria. Participants were deliberately chosen based on their professional experience, training background, and active involvement in witness protection operations. Only agents with at least three years of service and complete mandatory trainings were included to ensure that the data gathered reflected informed and substantial operational experiences. The purposive selection of informants enabled the researcher to obtain rich and meaningful narratives directly relevant to the objectives of the study. The focus on agents assigned within Cebu City and surrounding areas ensured that the findings reflected the localized realities, challenges, and operational conditions of WPP personnel in Region VII.

2.5 Research Instrument

Data were primarily collected using a validated and panel-approved interview guide designed to elicit comprehensive narratives from actively serving Witness Protection Program agents. The interview guide consisted of several sections that explored demographic information, years of service, designation, perceptions regarding their work environment, operational experiences, coping mechanisms, and recommendations for improving the Witness Protection Program. The initial portion of the interview guide established rapport and gathered contextual information about the informants. Subsequent sections focused on the functions and daily experiences of WPP agents, including operational successes, workplace realities, challenges, and stressful situations encountered in the performance of their duties. Informants were also asked about their coping strategies, support systems, and team dynamics that assisted them in managing occupational pressures. The final section gathered forward-looking insights and recommendations from informants regarding programs, training, and policy improvements that could enhance their competence, well-being, and quality of service delivery. All interviews were conducted personally by the primary researcher to ensure consistency and encourage detailed responses. Audio recordings and field notes were likewise utilized to document verbal responses, non-verbal cues, contextual observations, and immediate reflections that enriched the qualitative data gathered from the participants.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering process began with the submission of a transmittal letter to the Regional Prosecutor's Office to seek formal approval for the conduct of the study. Upon approval, the researcher presented the authorization documents to prospective informants to verify the legitimacy of the research. Before conducting interviews and focus group discussions, informed consent forms were thoroughly explained to the participants to ensure voluntary participation and full understanding of the study's objectives, procedures, benefits, risks, confidentiality measures, and withdrawal rights.

Individual in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions served as the primary methods of qualitative data collection. The interviews allowed informants to share reflective accounts of their work experiences, challenges, beliefs, perceptions, and coping strategies within the Witness Protection Program. The use of FGDs further facilitated collective discussion and deeper exploration of shared experiences among WPP agents. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, while field notes were simultaneously documented to capture observations and contextual details relevant to the study.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

All interview data were initially collected using the local dialect to ensure authenticity and participant comfort during the discussions. The recorded responses were subsequently transcribed and translated into English while maintaining the contextual meaning and fidelity of the original statements. The translated narratives were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and meanings related to the work-life realities of Witness Protection Program agents. The process involved careful examination of participants' responses to capture authentic perspectives regarding their experiences, operational challenges, coping mechanisms, and aspirations within the program.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

Strict ethical procedures were observed throughout the conduct of the study to ensure the protection, dignity, and voluntary participation of all informants. Formal invitations were extended to significant individuals within the Witness Protection Program explaining the purpose of the study and the importance of their participation. Each participant was provided with a comprehensive informed consent form detailing the study objectives, procedures, confidentiality measures, risks, benefits, and rights of withdrawal without penalty. The researcher carefully explained the content of the consent form and allowed participants to ask questions to ensure complete understanding before obtaining their voluntary written consent. Explicit permission for audio recording was likewise obtained, with assurances regarding the secure handling and protection of recorded materials. No identifying information was included in computer files, and all identifying data were destroyed as soon as possible to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. The study adhered to the ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy throughout the research process.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Work-Life Realities of Witness Protection Program Agents

3.1.1 Occupational Danger and Risk Management

The findings revealed that Witness Protection Program agents constantly encounter high-risk and life-threatening situations during escort operations, witness security assignments, and emergency responses. Informants described exposure to surveillance, armed threats, unpredictable encounters, and operations in conflict-prone areas such as Mindanao. Participants emphasized the need for continuous professional development, particularly through advanced international trainings that expose agents to updated techniques and operational strategies not yet commonly practiced in the Philippines. Although local trainings from the Special Action Force (SAF), National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), and Camp Crame were considered valuable, participants expressed disappointment over the temporary suspension of foreign training opportunities. Informants also highlighted that the program provides operational support, necessary equipment, and coordinated assistance from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), which often serves as backup and frontline combat support during high-risk missions. Participants further acknowledged that employment benefits and operational assistance significantly contributed to their preparedness and motivation. These findings demonstrate the dangerous and operationally demanding nature of witness protection work, which requires extensive tactical preparedness, institutional coordination, and continuous capability enhancement. The results support Chugh (2023), who emphasized the state's responsibility to ensure the safety of witnesses and protection personnel involved in judicial processes. The findings also align with Barrett (2009), who stressed the importance of professional preparation, operational readiness, and coordinated security measures in high-risk legal environments. Furthermore, the experiences shared by the participants reflect the operational and institutional challenges discussed by Makokha (2017) and Human Rights Watch (2018), particularly regarding training, resource allocation, and inter-agency cooperation in witness protection systems.

3.1.2 Emotional and Moral Reward

Despite the occupational dangers, participants expressed strong emotional fulfillment and moral satisfaction in serving as WPP agents. Informants shared that helping victims, protecting witnesses, facilitating court participation, and witnessing successful case outcomes gave them a deep sense of purpose and pride. Many participants described emotional moments when witnesses expressed gratitude after winning cases or receiving assistance such as transportation, allowances, and protection services. The findings indicate that the agents' motivation extends beyond financial compensation and is deeply connected to service, justice, and humanitarian fulfillment. This supports Rational Choice Theory by Smith (1776), which explains that individuals evaluate rewards and benefits in decision-making processes. The emotional satisfaction experienced by the agents also reflects the principles of Social Contract Theory by Hobbes (1651), Locke (1689), and

Rousseau (1762), emphasizing the state's responsibility to protect citizens and uphold justice. The results further support Nagar (2021), who emphasized that witnesses and those assisting justice systems perform an important public duty in ensuring truth and accountability.

3.1.3 Institutional Support and Operational Limitations

Informants acknowledged that institutional support such as salary improvements, healthcare benefits, professional trainings, and insurance programs contributed positively to their motivation and job satisfaction. Participants specifically noted that WPP agents currently receive salary grades comparable to police officers and have access to GSIS, PhilHealth, and Kaiser healthcare benefits. However, they also identified operational limitations, particularly budget constraints during emergency deployments and sudden operations, which negatively affected efficiency and personnel welfare. The findings suggest that while institutional support strengthens morale and motivation, operational limitations continue to affect the effectiveness of witness protection services. These realities align with Organizational Culture Theory (Schein, 1985), which highlights how organizational structures, values, and support systems influence employee behavior and performance. The findings also support Saad & Kaur (2020), who explained that organizational culture affects employee practices, motivation, and institutional effectiveness. Budgetary and operational concerns identified by the participants further reflect the implementation challenges observed in witness protection programs in Kenya and South Africa (Makokha, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2018).

3.1.4 Role Complexity and Professional Identity

The findings showed that Witness Protection Program agents perform multiple responsibilities beyond conventional security functions. Participants described acting as protectors, escorts, negotiators, intelligence personnel, and emergency responders depending on operational demands. Informants also shared that most members of the public mistakenly identify them as police officers because of the nature of their duties and limited public awareness regarding the Witness Protection Program. Since agents do not wear official uniforms during operations, they commonly identify themselves as personnel from the Department of Justice while carrying official identification badges for verification and security purposes. Participants further explained that confidentiality requirements often limit public recognition of their actual roles and responsibilities.

3.1.5 Public Misperception and Visibility Issues

The findings revealed that strict confidentiality protocols significantly affect the operational visibility and public interaction of Witness Protection Program agents. Informants explained that any form of media exposure is prohibited to protect the identity and safety of both agents and witnesses. Participants shared that agents are required to wear face masks during operations to avoid recognition and are not allowed to participate in ambush interviews or unauthorized media interactions. Informants further emphasized that agents are trained to treat any individual approaching a protected witness as a potential threat. Participants also disclosed that agents are prohibited from handling cellular phones during operations to maintain confidentiality, operational focus, and security control. These findings demonstrate the highly confidential and security-sensitive nature of witness protection operations. The results support Humphreys (1996), who emphasized the influence of media systems and communication technologies on legal and security processes. The findings also align with Paulesu (2022), who discussed the impact of media environments on judicial proceedings and public perception. Furthermore, the operational restrictions and surveillance-oriented practices described by the participants reflect the covert and controlled security measures discussed by Marx (1988) in modern law enforcement and protective operations.

3.1.6 Resilience, Adaptability, and Collective Coping

The findings revealed that WPP agents rely heavily on resilience, teamwork, adaptability, and faith in coping with occupational stress and operational dangers. Informants emphasized the importance of maintaining presence of mind during emergencies and adjusting to varying operational demands. Participants also highlighted that teamwork plays a critical role during operations, although there are situations where agents are forced to function independently. Training experiences, opportunities to travel across the Philippines, even abroad and interactions with high-profile individuals and businessmen were also viewed as valuable aspects of their work. These findings demonstrate that coping mechanisms among WPP agents are strongly anchored on professional preparedness, social support, and psychological resilience. The results support Tummers & Bakker (2021), who emphasized the relationship between workplace demands, leadership, and coping resources. The findings also align with Liamputtong (2023), who highlighted the importance of understanding lived experiences in high-pressure professions. The participants' resilience further reflects the adaptive demands discussed by Barrett (2009) in high-risk security environments.

3.1.7 Humanitarian and Social Impact of the Witness Protection Program

Participants emphasized that the Witness Protection Program extends beyond physical protection and contributes significantly to restoring lives and supporting social justice. Informants shared that the program provides educational assistance, relocation services, financial aid, and family support to protected witnesses. Some participants explained that

children of witnesses were allowed to continue their education through modular and online arrangements until tertiary completion. The findings indicate that the Witness Protection Program functions not only as a security mechanism but also as a humanitarian and social support system. These results support Schur (2002), who emphasized that effective witness protection strengthens the rule of law and promotes justice for victims. The findings also align with Kramer (2014), who highlighted the importance of witness protection in maintaining institutional integrity and safeguarding vulnerable individuals. The humanitarian role described by the participants further reflects the state's social responsibility emphasized in Social Contract Theory by Hobbes (1651), Locke (1689), and Rousseau (1762).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study revealed that Witness Protection Program agents experience demanding and high-risk occupational realities characterized by exposure to danger, operational pressure, media intrusion, confidentiality challenges, and complex protective responsibilities. Despite these challenges, the agents demonstrated strong resilience, adaptability, dedication, and commitment to justice, finding emotional fulfillment in serving victims, protecting witnesses, and contributing to successful legal outcomes. The findings further showed that institutional support, professional training, teamwork, and personal coping mechanisms helped sustain their performance, although operational limitations and public misunderstanding continued to affect their work. Overall, the study highlighted the critical humanitarian, protective, and justice-oriented role of WPP agents in maintaining the effectiveness and integrity of the Witness Protection Program.

The study recommends strengthening institutional support for Witness Protection Program agents through continuous professional training, improved operational resources, enhanced welfare benefits, and organizational programs that support their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. Greater public awareness regarding the functions and confidentiality requirements of WPP agents is also recommended to reduce misconceptions and operational difficulties. Furthermore, inter-agency collaboration among the Department of Justice, Armed Forces of the Philippines, Philippine National Police, National Bureau of Investigation, and other related institutions should be sustained to improve witness protection operations and service delivery. The study likewise recommends that future researchers conduct related studies to further explore areas not covered in the present research and contribute to the development of witness protection programs in the Philippines.

The study was limited to ten actively serving Witness Protection Program agents assigned under the Witness Protection, Security and Benefit Program of the Department of Justice Region VII in Cebu City. The findings were based solely on qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions within a specific geographic and operational context. The study focused only on the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and aspirations of WPP agents with at least three years of service and mandatory training completion, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions, agencies, or witness protection personnel with different operational conditions and experiences.

Compliance with ethical standards

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This study received no external funding and was conducted with the cooperation of the Witness Protection, Security and Benefit Program under the Department of Justice Region VII and the voluntary participation of actively serving Witness Protection Program agents in Cebu City. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and non-invasive qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, were utilized. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly observed throughout the study, and no identifying information of the participants was disclosed.

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