

Freeing the Communities from Drugs: Experiences of Tagbilaran City Police Station Drug Enforcement Unit (DEU) Personnel in the Implementation of Anti-Illegal Drugs Operations

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of Tagbilaran City Police Station Drug Enforcement Unit personnel in the implementation of anti-illegal drug operations. Anchored on Self-Efficacy Theory and supported by Team Development Theory and Safety Culture Theory, the study examined the informants' experiences, the challenges they encountered, and their aspirations for improving operational implementation. The research employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design using a structured interview guide, voice recorder, and journal. Ten Drug Enforcement Unit personnel served as informants; four participated in individual interviews and six joined a focused group discussion. The gathered data were transcribed, translated, and analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method. Findings revealed three positive experiences: intelligence-driven operations, successful apprehension or arrests, and legal and technical support. The negative experiences were operational constraints, tactical failures and compromised safety, and procedural and legal obstacles. Informants addressed these challenges through adaptability and resourcefulness, use of skills and training, and strengthened legal and case management. Their aspirations focused on stronger agency collaboration, an adaptive risk management system, and strengthened legal support through capacity building. The study concludes that anti-illegal drug operations require coordinated institutional support, adequate resources, legal guidance, training, ethical practice, and community cooperation. The study is aligned with SDG 3, SDG 4, SDG 11, SDG 16, and SDG 17 because it relates to public health, capacity building, community safety, justice, governance, and inter-agency partnership. Its sustainability impact lies in strengthening institutional, social, governance, and community sustainability through more humane, evidence-based, and accountable anti-illegal drug enforcement practices.

Keywords: Adaptive Risk Management, Anti-Illegal Drug Operations, Capacity Building, Drug Enforcement Unit Personnel, Intelligence-Driven Operations, Inter-Agency Collaboration, Legal Support

1. Introduction

This study examines the lived experiences of Tagbilaran City Police Station Drug Enforcement Unit (DEU) personnel in the implementation of anti-illegal drug operations. It situates the drug problem within law enforcement, public health, human rights, organizational safety, and inter-agency governance concerns. Anchored on Self-Efficacy Theory, supported by Team Development Theory and Safety Culture Theory, the study seeks to humanize the realities of frontline DEU personnel by exploring their experiences, challenges, and aspirations in performing anti-illegal drug operations in Tagbilaran City, Bohol.

Anti-illegal drug operations have developed through different approaches and philosophies, including punitive enforcement, public health concerns, and human rights considerations. International frameworks, such as those overseen by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), provide guidance in addressing the world drug problem and countering organized crime through the implementation of the UN convention against transnational organized crimes (Canton, 2021). However, implementation varies across legal and political contexts. In the Philippines, the drug problem has largely been treated as a law enforcement and criminality issue, with the government emphasizing criminalization and punishment. From the beginning of the "war on drugs," the Duterte administration (2016-2022) relied on punitive measures and mobilized the Philippine National Police (PNP) and local government units nationwide. Police personnel conducted massive door-to-door operations pursuant to presidential directives (Simbulan et al., 2019). Under Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., (2022-present), policy reform has been signaled, but punitive drug laws remain unchanged, prompting some academics and human right organizations to state that "the drug war continues" (Lasco, 2024). In Bohol, government efforts have

included stricter inspections at seaports to address possible drug smuggling, as reflected in Executive Order No. 31, series of 2023. Tagbilaran City has also recorded high-value drug seizures, including the March 03, 2025, operation in Brgy, Bool, Tagbilaran City, where 1500grams of suspected methamphetamine hydroxide or “shabu,” valued at 10.2 million pesos, was seized (Press release, TCPS, March 04, 2025). Such incidents indicate the continuing need for effective anti-illegal drug operations to curb drug activity and protect communities. At the same time, anti-illegal drug operations expose law enforcers to serious risks. In 2014, Bohol police pursued Artemio Tare, identified as the lone gunman who killed PO1 Michael June Ejoc and wounded three other police officers during a suspected drug den raid in Poblacion 1, Tagbilaran City; weapons, ammunition, and sachets of shabu were recovered from the suspect (Napallacan, 2014). Officers may also encounter resistance from suspects whose actions threaten the safety of officers and their families (Fuentes et al., 2023). These realities prompted the conduct of this study to understand the experiences of PNP personnel implementing anti-illegal drug operations and to provide a more comprehensive and empathetic account of their role in society.

The literature presents illegal drug use as both a law enforcement and public welfare issue. Illegal drugs remain a major problem faced by law enforcement (Fuentes, 2023). Based on the 2023 statistical analysis of the Dangerous Drug Board, Methamphetamine Hydrochloride or “Shabu” remains the leading drug of abuse, followed by Cannabis and Cocaine. Globally, around 284 million people aged 15-64 used drugs worldwide in 2020, representing a 26 percent increase over the previous decade (Nwogu, 2022). Young people use more drugs, with use levels in many countries higher than in the previous generation (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2019). In the Philippines, the Dangerous Drugs Board recorded 1.8 million current drug users, while 4.8 million Filipinos reported having used illegal drugs at least once (Simbulan et al., 2019). Anti-drug operations aim to promote safer and healthier communities through coordinated efforts of the PNP and other law enforcement agencies to prevent use, treat dependency, and reduce the production and distribution of illicit drugs. Such programs also seek to prevent youth involvement in illegal drugs through awareness of harmful social and health effects and community-based interventions (Vearrier, 2019). During the Duterte administration, the “War on Drugs” gained national and international attention (Fatalla, 2017, Revised, Nov. 3, 2022). Oplan “TokHang” and “Double Barrel” were implemented as major campaign strategies. From July 1, 2016 to January 7, 2017, the PNP reportedly conducted 40,982 anti-drug operations, with 2,206 drug personalities killed and 44,070 arrested (Palatino 2017). PNP data also reported 1,309,776 illegal drug personalities who surrendered, 86,030 arrested, and 3,264 deaths in police operations from March 1, 2017 to June 30, 2017 (PNP 2017). The literature also shows that anti-drug campaigns carry operational, legal, emotional, and safety consequences for police personnel. More than 300 police officers were killed during the drug war under President Rodrigo Duterte (Malonzo, 2024). Marbil (2024) reported that from July 2016 to June 2022, 312 police personnel were killed, 974 were injured, and several officers faced criminal cases, dismissal, or detention, while acknowledging the risks they faced in ensuring public safety (Peralta-Malonzo, 2024, Sunstar). Congressional inquiries into alleged extra judicial killings also implicated officers and officials in issues surrounding the drug war and alleged reward systems (Flores, 2024). A punitive drug regime continues in the Philippines under the Marcos administration (Valenzuela, 2024). Anti-drug enforcement is difficult because the drug problem is complex, and police action alone cannot fully resolve it (Bartky, 2020). Drug arrests and prosecutions are difficult because of the lack of complaining victims and witnesses, while drug distribution systems adapt quickly in response to police action (Bartky, 2020). Police officers also face risks of corruption, abuse of authority, cynicism, and anger because informants and undercover operations place them in close contact with offenders (Maynard-Moody, & Musheno, 2022). Young people may use tactics to continue drug use and evade law enforcement, viewing police as “kalaban” or enemies because of perceived hypocrisy and injustice (Lasco, 2018). Prior studies emphasize the difficulties experienced by law enforcers in anti-illegal drug operations. Fuentes, Gengania et al (2023) found that police officers’ personal and family security may be compromised, especially when apprehensions create enemies and family members become concerned for officers’ safety. Arresting drug users may also be difficult because their cognitive reasoning can be distorted (Meloy, & Rahman, 2021). Ceniza, G, (2019) identified police initiative, effective planning, contentment in work performance, compromised personal and family security, and commendation for accomplishments as themes in the experiences of officers. Salindo, et.al (2024) documented the real-life encounters of drug enforcement agents and highlighted the need to strengthen support, provide equitable training, improve enforcement capability, encourage criminologists and researchers to contribute to practice, and build community cooperation. Pila (2021) identified lack of human resources, logistical problems, and mobility issues as challenges in the PNP’s anti-drug campaign, emphasizing local government support in financial sufficiency, resource management, and program implementation. Gacayan (2020) found that the Philippine anti-drug campaign evolved through policy stages shaped by implementation crises, policy rebranding, police reorganization, supplementary guidelines, and a police-centric framework despite interagency and whole-of-government approaches.

Globally, drug use remains a major challenge, with increasing use among persons aged 15-64 and higher drug use among younger populations in many countries (Nwogu, 2022; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2019). International responses are guided by frameworks such as those associated with UNODC, which address the world drug problem and organized crime (Canton, 2021). Nationally, the Philippine response has been shaped by punitive anti-drug policies, police-led operations, and evolving political leadership. RA 9165, or the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002, remains the country’s principal law against illegal drugs and is considered more stringent than the previous law (Estacio Jr, 2022). The

government is mandated to pursue an intensive campaign against trafficking and use of dangerous drugs through an integrated system of planning, implementation, and enforcement of anti-drug abuse policies, programs, and projects (RA 9165, 2002). The Anti-Illegal Drugs Special Task Force PNP manual on anti-illegal drugs operation and investigation provides standard rules for PNP members and units enforcing RA 9165 in support of PDEA (Supreme Court e-library, 2010). The Revised POP 2021 also provides that only PNP Drug Enforcement Group Special Operation Units and Drug Enforcement Units of local police units are authorized to conduct anti-illegal drug operations and coordinate with PDEA, the implementing arm of the Dangerous Drugs Board (RA 9165, as amended by RA 10640). Locally, Tagbilaran City presents a relevant site for studying DEU personnel because of recorded high-value seizures, continuing enforcement activities, and risks experienced by officers in anti-illegal drug operations. While previous studies have focused on national and provincial impacts of anti-illegal drug campaigns, this study centers on the lived experiences of Tagbilaran City Police Station Drug Enforcement Unit personnel, offering a micro-level analysis of challenges in a smaller urban setting.

This study is anchored on Self-Efficacy Theory (Albert Bandura, 1977) and supported by Team Development Theory (Bruce Tuckman, 1965) and Safety Culture Theory (Wiegmann, Zhang, and von Thaden 2001; Wiegmann et al. 2002). Self-Efficacy theory of Bandura (1977) explains that individuals' belief in their capacity to perform actions necessary to achieve desired outcomes affects their motivation, persistence, and performance. Self-efficacy develops from mastery experiences, vicarious experiences through social role models, social persuasion, and emotional and physiological states (Bandura, 1982). In the context of DEU personnel, self-efficacy helps explain how officers maintain confidence, adaptability, and persistence in high-risk operations. However, the theory has limitations. Tryon (1981) argued that Bandura's data may be explained by social contingencies within structured behavioral situations. Biglan (1987) questioned whether correlations between self-efficacy ratings and behavior establish causality, while Eastman and Marzillier (1984) argued that efficacy expectations are not clearly distinguished from outcome expectations. Team development theory (Bruce Tuckman, 1965) explains how teams develop through forming, storming, norming, performing, and later adjourning stages. In forming, members are introduced to goals and purpose (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). In storming, conflict and differences in ideas, priorities, and work styles appear (Tuckman, 1965). Norming involves cohesion, role clarification, and renewed focus on shared goals. Performing reflects effective teamwork, shared commitment, and satisfaction, while adjourning marks the completion of team tasks. Team development theory (Tuckman, 1965) also faces critique because stage theories may overgeneralize human processes, which are often marked by variability and flux. Safety Culture Theory of Wiegmann et al. (2002) explains the importance of organizational culture in high-risk work. It emerged from analyses of major accidents, including the Chernobyl nuclear accident, where poor safety culture was identified as a contributing factor. Safety theory developed through technical, human error, sociotechnical, and safety culture periods (Wiegmann and Shappell 2001). In this study, Safety Culture Theory is relevant because DEU personnel work in environments involving danger, uncertainty, teamwork, and organizational accountability. Although safety culture and safety climate have been used interchangeably, and no universally accepted definition exists (Wiegmann et al. 2001; Wiegmann et al. 2002), the theory remains useful in understanding safety behavior, risk management, and organizational support. The term safety climate was first highlighted by Zohar (1980).

The literature shows that anti-illegal drug operations have been studied in relation to national campaigns, policy design, operational outcomes, and police challenges. However, fewer studies focus on the lived experiences of Drug Enforcement Unit personnel in smaller urban settings such as Tagbilaran City. Existing studies emphasize policy implementation, operational risks, resource limitations, family and personal security, legal challenges, and the need for training and inter-agency cooperation, but the local experiences of Tagbilaran City DEU personnel remain underexplored. This study addresses that gap by examining the experiences of Tagbilaran City Police Station Drug Enforcement Unit personnel in implementing anti-illegal drug operations. Specifically, it explores their experiences, how they address challenges, and their aspirations for improving implementation. The study's rationale is grounded in the need for a holistic and human-centered understanding of drug enforcement that may support improved policies, practices, training programs, resource allocation, legal coordination, and community protection.

This study aligns with SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being because anti-drug operations are connected to the prevention of drug use, treatment of dependency, and reduction of illicit drug production and distribution, which affect public health and community well-being (Vearrier, 2019). It also relates to SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities because the study addresses community safety, local drug activity, and the protection of Tagbilaran City residents from the harms associated with illegal drugs. The study supports SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions because it examines the rule of law, enforcement of RA 9165, accountability, human rights considerations, proper handling of evidence, operational procedures, and legal safeguards in anti-illegal drug operations (RA 9165, 2002; Supreme Court e-library, 2010). It also connects with SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals because anti-illegal drug operations require coordination among the PNP, PDEA, DDB, DOJ, LGUs, prosecutors, and communities. Where the study discusses training, capacity building, and professional development of DEU personnel, it also has limited relevance to SDG 4 – Quality Education, particularly in relation to continuing training and capability enhancement for law enforcement personnel.

The study contributes to public health sustainability by addressing illegal drug use as a social and health concern that affects youth, families, and communities. It contributes to community sustainability by examining how anti-illegal drug operations may strengthen safety, reduce drug-related harm, and improve community trust when implemented with accountability and cooperation. It also supports institutional sustainability by generating insights for the PNP, PDEA, DDB, ICAD, NAPOLCOM, DOJ, NPS, LGUs, and related agencies. The study may help these institutions review operational procedures, legal coordination, training needs, resource allocation, and officer support systems. In addition, it contributes to policy and governance sustainability by emphasizing lawful, ethical, evidence-based, and human rights-conscious anti-illegal drug operations. Its focus on DEU personnel also advances occupational and organizational sustainability by recognizing the emotional, psychological, physical, legal, and safety-related burdens faced by officers in high-risk enforcement work. Overall, the study is multidisciplinary because it links criminology, public administration, law, public health, psychology, organizational safety, community development, and governance. By documenting the lived experiences of Tagbilaran City DEU personnel, the study may contribute to more humane, effective, and sustainable anti-illegal drug policies and practices for both law enforcers and the communities they serve.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

This study used Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological research methodology to examine the lived experiences of DEU personnel in the implementation of anti-illegal drug operations in Tagbilaran City, Bohol, Philippines. Moustakas's (1994) transcendental or psychological phenomenology focuses on describing participants' lived experiences rather than relying on the researcher's interpretations. The approach requires the researcher to identify the phenomenon, set aside personal biases through bracketing, gather data from participants who experienced the phenomenon, extract significant statements, organize these into themes, and develop a comprehensive description of the essence of the experience. In this study, phenomenology was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to explore how DEU personnel directed their consciousness toward their work, drug operations, and the people involved, while allowing both positive and negative experiences to emerge.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Tagbilaran City, Bohol, Philippines. Tagbilaran City is the capital and a component city of Bohol and became a chartered city on July 1, 1966 through Republic Act No. 4660. It is located 630 kilometers southeast of Manila and 72 kilometers south of Cebu City, occupying the southwestern part of the province with a total land area of 3,270 hectares and about thirteen kilometers of coastline. The city has 15 barangays and, based on the 2020 Census of Population and Housing (2020 CPH), had a total population of 104,976 as of 01 May 2020. This population accounted for about 7.53 percent of Bohol's population in 2020, with 41% of residents living in four urban barangays where trade and commerce are concentrated (Release Date: 04 October 2022, Reference Number: 2022- SR12-049). The study specifically focused on the Tagbilaran City Police Station, which had 105 Police Non-Commissioned Officers and 3 Police Commissioned Officers (Bohol Provincial Police Office Records, 2025). Over the last three years, the station recorded 229 RA 9165-related cases filed, 229 anti-illegal drug operations conducted, and 396 arrested persons (Generated from PNP Crime Information, Reporting and Analysis System, 2022-2024, Generated: March 21, 2025).

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents, referred to as research informants, were PNP personnel assigned to the Drug Enforcement Unit of Tagbilaran City Police Station, Tagbilaran City, Bohol. They were selected because of their direct experience in anti-illegal drug operations. The study included 10 informants, four of whom participated in individual interviews, while six participated in a Focused Group Discussion.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study required a minimum of 10 research informants. The selection was based on specific inclusion criteria: the informants had to be PNP personnel assigned to the Drug Enforcement Unit of Tagbilaran City Police Station, have at least three years of experience, have undergone specialized training, and have conducted at least 10 anti-illegal drug operations. These criteria ensured that the informants could provide deeper, richer, and more relevant information about the phenomenon being studied.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was a structured interview guide prepared to obtain detailed responses from the informants. The guide contained three parts: the first focused on the experiences of the informants in anti-illegal drug operations, the second focused on how they addressed the challenges encountered, and the third focused on their aspirations for improving anti-illegal drug operations. To accurately record the interviews, the researcher used a voice recorder and journal to document the informants' responses. Observational data were not used because of the nature of the informants' work. The research instrument was also subjected to ethics committee screening.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

After the interview guide was approved, the researcher sought permission from the Provincial Director of the Bohol Police Provincial Office through the Chief of Police of Tagbilaran City Police Station to allow the participation of the informants. The researcher then conducted interviews and a Focused Group Discussion with the selected informants. The informants were encouraged to narrate their experiences in Cebuano to allow them to clearly express their thoughts and feelings and to capture the full meaning of the phenomenon. Their responses were recorded using a voice recorder and documented through a journal. The interviews were later transcribed and translated for readability.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The data gathered from the interviews and Focused Group Discussion were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven steps of data analysis. The responses were transcribed and translated individually. Significant statements were extracted from the interview transcriptions, and core meanings were formulated from these statements. The formulated meanings with common ideas were grouped into clustered themes, which were then further organized to develop emergent themes. This process allowed the researcher to identify the essential meanings and patterns in the informants' lived experiences.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical principles because of the sensitive nature of anti-illegal drug operations and the possible risks to the informants and their families. The ethical considerations were guided by autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. Beneficence was addressed by ensuring that the study could benefit the participants and society through a better understanding of the challenges encountered by DEU personnel and through findings that may contribute to moral considerations in implementation. Non-maleficence was observed by minimizing potential harm, protecting confidentiality and privacy, avoiding risks to participants' families, and reducing possible emotional distress, harassment, or stigmatization. Autonomy was ensured by informing participants about the nature and purpose of the study, obtaining voluntary informed consent, allowing them to ask questions, and respecting their right to withdraw at any stage. The researcher also avoided deception or exaggeration of the aims and objectives of the research. Justice was upheld through fair and unbiased participant selection based on rank, years of service, and roles within the unit, while avoiding selection bias and ensuring that eligible personnel had equal opportunity to participate.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Experiences of the Informants in the Implementation of Anti-Illegal Drug Operations

3.1.1 Intelligence-Driven Operations

The data showed that intelligence-driven operations were central to the informants' positive experiences. Informants described intelligence as the foundation of surveillance, case build-up, and operational planning. They emphasized that confidential informants, concerned citizens, and complete intelligence packets helped them validate information and identify targets before field action. These experiences showed that intelligence enabled more strategic, evidence-based, and coordinated operations (IDI2), (FGD1), (FGD2). This finding indicates that DEU personnel viewed intelligence not merely as information but as the core of operational readiness, decision-making, and risk reduction. Their confidence in using validated information reflects Self-Efficacy theory by Bandura (1977), which explains that belief in one's capacity influences motivation, behavior, and performance. In this context, repeated success in gathering and using intelligence strengthened the informants' confidence and commitment to their duties (Bandura, 1994). The finding also supports Tuckman's Team Development Theory (1965), as effective intelligence work depended on coordination, trust, shared roles, and teamwork.

3.1.2 Successful Apprehension and Arrests

The results revealed that successful apprehension and arrests gave the informants a strong sense of fulfillment, purpose, and accomplishment. They considered arrests of known drug personalities and suspects caught in the act as evidence that their efforts contributed directly to justice, public safety, and the broader mission of the Philippine National Police. Even in unplanned operations, informants reported pride when they were able to arrest suspects violating Republic Act 9165 (IDI1), (FGD1), (FGD3). This result suggests that successful arrests reinforced the informants' professional identity and belief in their operational competence. This is consistent with the Self-Efficacy Theory (1977), which emphasizes that mastery experiences strengthen confidence, motivation, and persistence. In high-risk drug enforcement work, each successful arrest became a form of validation that encouraged personnel to continue performing despite danger and pressure. Safety Culture Theory (2002) also supports this finding because effective arrests require strict safety protocols, coordinated teamwork, and organizational preparedness.

3.1.3 Legal and Technical Support

The findings showed that legal and technical support strengthened the informants' positive experiences by improving case preparation, prosecution coordination, and judicial admissibility. Informants reported that cases arising from RA 9165

operations were filed before the prosecution and later reached court. They also emphasized that guidance from prosecutors, the Department of Justice, and the National Prosecution Service helped reduce dismissals and improved the handling of drug cases (FGD1), (IDI3), (IDI4). This finding shows that DEU personnel recognized legal support as essential in bridging field operations and successful prosecution. It reflects the Self-Efficacy Theory (1977), as access to legal guidance strengthened officers' confidence in performing investigative and documentation tasks. It is also supported by the Team Development Theory (1965), because coordination between investigators, prosecutors, and experienced personnel helped clarify roles, reduce errors, and promote teamwork in case management.

3.1.4 Operational Constraints

The results showed that operational constraints negatively affected the informants' performance. Informants described problems such as exposure during casing and surveillance, uncooperative civilian informants, selective or incomplete information, high-risk field conditions, lack of budget, inadequate mobility, and limited logistical support. These problems caused delays, weakened validation efforts, and sometimes compromised operations (IDI4), (FGD3), (FGD4). This finding indicates that anti-illegal drug operations depend not only on officer competence but also on reliable resources, informant cooperation, and organizational support. According to the Self-Efficacy Theory (1977), personnel with strong belief in their abilities can still adapt and persevere despite constraints. However, inadequate support can weaken confidence, increase stress, and heighten risk. This is further explained by Wiegmann's Safety Culture Theory (2002), which emphasizes that strong organizational systems, training, resources, and safety protocols are necessary in high-risk work environments (Wiegmann, 2002; Bandura, 1977).

3.1.5 Tactical Failures and Compromised Safety

The data revealed that the informants experienced tactical failures and compromised safety during anti-illegal drug operations. These included compromised surveillance due to exposure, suspects' counter-surveillance, failed operations, resistance to arrest, use of reasonable force, possible countercharges, and administrative investigations following dangerous encounters. Informants also described the emotional strain of facing allegations and complaints while performing their duties (IDI1), (FGD1), (FGD3). This finding shows that DEU personnel perform their duties under conditions of physical, legal, and psychological vulnerability. The Self-Efficacy theory (1977) explains that officers with confidence in their skills are better able to respond to operational limitations, resistance, and uncertainty. Bandura (1997) also explains that mastery experiences and social support strengthen self-efficacy. At the same time, safety risks require a strong safety culture in which officers follow procedures, conduct briefings and debriefings, assess risks, and receive institutional support (Wiegmann et al., 2002).

3.1.6 Procedural and Legal Obstacles

The findings showed that procedural and legal obstacles created frustration and pressure among the informants. They reported difficulties caused by case dismissals, denied search warrant applications, documentation lapses, affidavit errors, chain of custody requirements, and the burden of case reviews. These experiences showed that even minor procedural mistakes could endanger the success of anti-illegal drug cases and expose officers to legal accountability (FGD3), (IDI2), (IDI4). This result suggests that legal precision is a major concern in drug enforcement. Officers must not only conduct operations but also ensure that evidence, documentation, and testimonies meet legal standards. Self-Efficacy Theory explains that personnel who believe in their ability to handle legal challenges are more likely to improve their documentation, evidence-gathering, and courtroom preparation (Bandura, 1977). The Team Development Theory by Bruce Tuckman (1965) also applies because teams facing legal obstacles must communicate, learn from errors, and move toward stronger coordination and performance (Tuckman, 1965).

3.2 Addressing the Challenges Encountered by the Informants

3.2.1 Adaptability and Resourcefulness

The results showed that informants addressed operational challenges through adaptability and resourcefulness. They developed public rapport, gained the trust of informants, protected informants' identities, offered available assistance, used personal and unit resources, validated information carefully, and coordinated available logistics to continue operations despite limited support. These practices helped them sustain case build-up and reduce operational risks (IDI3), (FGD5), (FGD2). This finding shows that adaptability and resourcefulness were essential survival strategies for DEU personnel. The Self-Efficacy theory (1977) explains that individuals who believe they can manage difficult tasks are more likely to remain calm, persistent, and flexible. This confidence helped informants find alternative solutions despite limited resources. The Team Development Theory by Bruce Tuckman (1965) also supports the finding because teamwork allowed personnel to share ideas, adjust to challenges, and collaborate more effectively.

3.2.2 Utilizing Skills and Training

The data showed that informants relied on skills and training to address difficulties in anti-illegal drug operations. They emphasized the importance of seminars, tactical preparation, legal training, coordination with prosecutors, and techniques for handling resisting suspects. Training helped them avoid technical errors, improve readiness, and respond with

composure during both planned and unplanned operations (IDI3), (FGD2), (FGD6). This result indicates that training functioned as both preparation and empowerment. The Self-Efficacy theory (1977) states that individuals who believe in their ability to apply knowledge and skills perform better under stress. Continuous training and field exposure strengthen confidence, discipline, and adaptability. Team Development Theory by Bruce Tuckman (1965) also supports this result because trained teams are better able to coordinate roles, rely on each other's strengths, and perform efficiently. A study also found that individuals with high self-efficacy use their training and skills more effectively in complex decision-making environments (Bandura & Wood, 1989).e to law enforcement standards (Bandura, 1977).

3.2.3 Strengthening Legal and Case Management

The findings showed that informants addressed legal and procedural challenges by strengthening case preparation, documentation, legal coordination, and peer support. They emphasized the need to prepare documents carefully, avoid skipped details, attend DOJ seminars and case reviews, learn from previous mistakes, and brainstorm with colleagues, especially in critical buy-bust operations and cases involving substantial evidence (FGD5), (IDI3), (IDI4). This finding shows that legal and case management practices were viewed as safeguards against case dismissal and countercharges. This theme is anchored on the Self-Efficacy theory (1977), as confidence in legal competence encouraged officers to study procedures and perform documentation properly. It is also supported by Wiegmann's Safety Culture theory, which emphasizes that compliance with operational and legal procedures protects both personnel and the organization from risks. Accurate documentation, transparency, and adherence to legal standards therefore strengthened operational credibility and officer protection (Wiegmann et al., 2002).

3.3 Aspirations of the Informants to Improve Anti-Illegal Drug Operations

3.3.1 Strengthening Agency Collaborations

The results showed that informants aspired for stronger collaboration among law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, courts, communities, and government offices. They wanted prosecutors to participate in case build-up, higher offices to provide regular trainings, and the government to provide modern technology for casing, surveillance, and tracking drug personalities. They believed that inter-agency cooperation, education, and technology would improve both individual and organizational performance (FGD2), (FGD1), (IDI3:147). This finding shows that informants viewed anti-illegal drug operations as a shared institutional responsibility rather than a task of the DEU alone. The Self-Efficacy theory (1977) explains that personnel who believe in their capacity to perform effectively are more likely to initiate coordination and sustain partnership efforts. Tuckman's Team Development theory (1965) also supports this aspiration, as multi-agency collaboration requires groups to pass through early confusion or conflict before reaching effective performance through trust, communication, and shared work.

3.3.2 Adaptive Risk Management System

The findings revealed that informants aspired for an adaptive risk management system that would improve operational quality, readiness, safety, and innovation. They sought full support in mobility assets, communication equipment, additional personnel, protective equipment, firearms, drones, concealed cameras, food, gasoline, and proper planning before actual operations. They also emphasized brainstorming, equipment checking, security consciousness, and protection during possible armed confrontation (IDI3), (FGD1), (FGD5). This finding shows that the informants recognized risk management as essential in protecting DEU personnel and improving operational outcomes. The Self-Efficacy theory (1977) explains that officers who believe in their ability to adapt under pressure are more likely to respond effectively to uncertain field conditions. Safety Culture Theory (2002) further explains that safety in high-risk professions requires protocols, protective equipment, coordinated teamwork, and organizational commitment to personnel welfare. Thus, effective risk management depends on both individual competence and a culture of preparedness and shared responsibility.

3.3.3 Strengthened Legal Support through Capacity Building

The results showed that informants aspired for strengthened legal support through capacity building. They called for a comprehensive, evidence-based, and human rights based approach that includes amendments to existing laws, inter-agency collaboration, legal training, prosecutor participation, updated jurisprudence, seminars on RA 9165 and its amendments, criminal investigation training, and coordinated learning between police investigators, prosecutors, and the Department of Justice (IDI3), (FGD2), (FGD6). This finding indicates that DEU personnel viewed legal capacity building as necessary to improve investigations, reduce case-filing problems, and ensure proper handling of evidence. Team Development Theory by Bruce Tuckman (1965) supports this aspiration because legal and investigative work requires coordination, shared expertise, and teamwork. As teams develop toward the performing stage, members become more capable of using training and legal support to handle investigations, case preparation, and court processes effectively.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study explored the experiences of Tagbilaran City Police Station Drug Enforcement Unit (DEU) personnel in implementing anti-illegal drug operations using a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach. Based on the responses of ten informants, twelve emergent themes were generated. The positive experiences were intelligence-driven operations, successful apprehension or arrest, and legal and technical support, while the negative experiences were operational constraints, tactical failures and compromised safety, and procedural and legal obstacles. The informants addressed these challenges through adaptability and resourcefulness, utilization of skills and training, and strengthened legal and case management. Their aspirations focused on strengthening agency collaborations, developing an adaptive risk management system, and strengthening legal support through capacity building.

The findings recommend that the Tagbilaran City Police Station DEU, Philippine National Police, NaPolCom, PDEA, DDB, ICAD, PDEG-SOU, DOJ, DILG, local government units, and community stakeholders strengthen support systems for DEU personnel through improved training, legal guidance, stress management, ethical decision-making, operational planning, inter-agency coordination, resource allocation, intelligence protocols, community engagement, informant protection, and updated case documentation practices. Future studies should further examine the operational experiences of PNP-DEU personnel, the impact of training programs on performance and self-efficacy, the role of inter-agency collaboration in anti-illegal drug operations, and the perceptions of community engagement and informant cooperation among PNP-DEU officers.

The study does not explicitly state a separate limitations section. However, based on the scope described in the text, the study was limited to the lived experiences of ten Tagbilaran City Police Station DEU personnel, consisting of six informants in a focused group discussion and four informants in individual interviews. Its findings were drawn from qualitative interview data analyzed through Colaizzi's method and were intended to provide a foundational reference for future research on anti-illegal drug operations, institutional support, community cooperation, training, and inter-agency collaboration.

Compliance with ethical standards

This study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards and relevant research protocols for studies involving human participants. Participation of Tagbilaran City Police Station Drug Enforcement Unit personnel was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before the conduct of interviews and focused group discussion. The confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and safety of the informants and their shared information were protected throughout the research process. Ethical approval and proper permissions were secured from the concerned institution and authorities before data gathering. The researcher declares no conflict of interest in the conduct of the study. All individuals and offices that contributed to the completion of the research were properly acknowledged, and copyright ownership of the work remains with the author, subject to applicable institutional policies.

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