

Within the Realm of Plea Bargaining in Drug Cases: An Exploration of Probation Officers' Lived Experiences

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Abstract— *The Philippines initially opposed plea bargaining in drug cases. However, a Supreme Court ruling prompted its adoption, escalating probation officers' caseloads. The goal of this study was to explore the experiences and challenges faced by probation officers and provide insights for improving their well-being. The study utilized qualitative research method, specifically phenomenological research design. The informants of the study were composed of twelve (12) probation officers assigned in Parole and Probation Administration (PPA) Region IV-A Office. The findings of the study revealed that work-related strains from managing drug-related cases under the plea-bargaining framework significantly impact probation officers' well-being, with many experiencing physical, mental, and emotional challenges. In the proposed action plan, the proposal outlined a wellness program focusing on physical, mental, and emotional health, alongside a structured case management system for better oversight. Furthermore, it highlighted the importance of hiring more probation officers to enhance service delivery and alleviate burnout, achieving also a balanced officer-to-probationer ratio.*

Keywords— *Plea bargaining, well-being, probation officers.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Green et al. (2024) stated that work is essential not only for meeting financial needs but also for fulfilling psychological needs like self-esteem and satisfaction. While work ideally provides happiness and contentment, it often requires significant sacrifices and can impact physical and emotional well-being. Preparing psychologically and physically is crucial for meeting these demands. As emphasized, the quality of work life, rather than just having a job, significantly affects overall well-being, with enhanced work experience contributing to greater satisfaction and psychological health.

According to Hines (2023) one of the most demanding yet overlooked jobs is being a probation officer, wherein their role has evolved into largest form of supervision within the criminal justice system (Phelps, 2018). Probation officers play a multifaceted role in supervising and supporting probationers and parolees within the criminal justice system. This includes conducting regular one-on-one visits with their assigned individuals, appearing in court to provide updates and recommendations, and generating comprehensive reports on their progress (Rhineberger-Dunn & Mack, 2019).

The global landscape of probation is recognized as complex, value-driven, and politicized, with efforts at both personal and bureaucratic levels aimed at rehabilitation (Burke et al., 2023; Bosker et al., 2021). While different countries

exhibit distinct approaches to probation, commonalities such as individualized rehabilitation plans, risk assessment systems, and community involvement underscore a shared commitment to offender reformation. The establishment of effective probation services aligns with a worldwide trend, supported by the United Nations' Tokyo Rules advocating for non-custodial sentences and essential standards for implementation.

In the Philippines, the role of probation officers is exceptionally challenging, requiring a nuanced understanding of legal frameworks, strong case management skills, and a commitment to rehabilitation. They manage diverse responsibilities, from conducting post-sentence investigations to supervising probationers, while navigating their own well-being and job satisfaction.

The Parole and Probation Administration was established under Presidential Decree No. 968, "The Probation Law of 1976," to oversee the probation system. As expounded in the law, probation officers will handle cases of qualified individuals who have been convicted of crimes with an imposable penalty of not more than six (6) years of imprisonment. While probation system in the Philippines seems to apply to almost all cases, Section 9 of Republic Act No. 10707 emphasized that among the disqualified offenders are those convicted of any crime against the national security. Probation will not also apply to drug-related cases and violations under Republic Act No. 9165 or Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002 as violations of the said law are punishable with maximum term of imprisonment of more than six (6) years – making the offenders already disqualified.

In recent years, the Philippines initially resisted the use of plea bargaining in drug-related cases. Plea bargaining, as defined by Palmer (2019), involves a defendant agreeing to plead guilty for reduced charges or a lighter sentence. This resistance was evident in the 2017 case of Estipona vs. Lobrigo. However, after the Supreme Court declared part of the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act unconstitutional, the Office of the Court Administrator introduced Circular No. 90-2018, allowing plea bargaining for minor drug offenses with penalties of 6 months to 4 years, making individuals eligible for probation under the 1976 Probation Law.

Unfortunately, the Philippines' "War on Drugs" led to a surge in drug-related arrests, prompting more use of plea bargaining to manage the caseload, which in turn increased the

workload for probation officers (Ciocchini & Lamcheck, 2023).

While studies on plea bargaining, such as those by Tisdale and Votruba (2023) and Dioses et al. (2019), typically focused on the defendant's perspective, there was a need to examine the impact on probation officers managing rising caseloads. Despite their crucial role in the criminal justice system, research on probation officers remained underexplored, and they often lacked the public recognition given to police, judges, and prison officers. Additionally, while some research addressed African American law enforcement, little focused on African American juvenile justice probation officers (Lockett, 2020). This study aimed to explore how plea-bargaining affected probation officers facing increased workloads.

Parenthetically, Magnaan (2020) highlighted challenges faced by the Parole and Probation Administration (PPA) in the Philippines, notably an overwhelming caseload that led to a disproportionate workload. Probation Officers managed an average of 601 cases, with investigation ratios at 1:330.59 and supervision at 1:270.778, negatively impacting their well-being due to insufficient personnel.

Reports from 2017 and 2018 showed a sharp increase in cases, from 21,166 investigations and 43,194 supervised clients in 2017 to 37,478 investigations and 51,286 clients in 2018, linked to the Plea-Bargaining Framework for Drug Cases. By 2023, investigation cases rose to 129,849 and supervision cases to 151,824, with the officer-to-client ratio worsening from 1:82 in 2018 to 1:251 in 2023, indicating a growing burden on officers (PPA, n.d.).

Thus, the goal of this study is to explore the experiences and challenges faced by probation officers in the context of the newly adopted plea bargaining framework in drug cases and to provide insights for improving their well-being.

Evidently, in terms of well-being, probation officers often experience significant stress in their roles, leading to negative outcomes such as health problems, job burnout, and increased divorce rates (Denny et al., 2020; Mendez, 2023). They face physical and mental health challenges, including heart disease and high blood pressure due to stress (Kelly, 2020).

For these reasons, studying the consequences of plea bargaining in drug cases on probation officers' well-being is crucial due to significant changes in criminal justice practices in the Philippines. Previously, drug cases were excluded from the probation system, leaving officers inexperienced with relevant procedures. This transition increased their workload and raised concerns about the effects of plea bargaining on offender rehabilitation, sentencing outcomes, and the stress of working with drug offenders.

Thus, this study specifically aimed to explore the lived experiences of the probation officers when plea bargaining was adopted in drug related cases which clearly contributed to the vast amount of investigation and supervision caseload. This study explored the well-being of probation officers addressing the six (6) dimensions: emotional, professional, physical, social, mental, and spiritual that build the holistic sense of wellness and fulfillment.

II. METHODS

Research Design

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of probation officers when plea bargaining in drug cases was adopted, specifically its consequence on well-being, job satisfaction and turnover intentions. Hence, the researcher utilized qualitative research method, specifically interpretative phenomenological research design.

Qualitative research methods offer unique advantages for exploring complex issues, allowing researchers to draw on interpersonal skills and subjective insights to deepen their understanding (Alase, 2017). Tenny et al. (2022) emphasized that qualitative research is particularly valuable for investigating real-world problems, providing rich data on participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors, focusing on the "how" and "why" rather than just quantitative measures. This study employed qualitative research with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method described by Creswell and Creswell (2017) as ideal for deeply exploring the meanings individuals assign to social or human issues, collecting data in context, and analyzing it inductively to identify broader themes.

IPA was well-suited for this research, which aimed to explore probation officers' well-being, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. It enabled the researcher to investigate the shared personal experiences of participants, capturing their connections to their personal and social worlds. By focusing on participants' perspectives, IPA facilitated a deeper understanding of their lived experiences, fostering an authentic, bias-free dialogue (Alase, 2017). As noted by Smith and Fieldsend (2021), IPA is a collaborative, theory-neutral approach that seeks to uncover the meanings individuals construct from their personal experiences, making it especially effective for exploring nuanced and subjective aspects of life.

Informants

With the use of purposeful sampling, the informants of the study are composed of twelve (12) probation officers assigned in investigating, handling and supervising convicted individuals who were released on probation through plea bargaining in drug cases. The said probation officers are assigned in Parole and Probation Administration – Region IV-A. Additionally, they were suited in the study considering the voluminous number of their workloads and clients hence could really contribute to either intensifying or weakening the said variables of interest.

While data saturation was initially achieved with ten (10) informants, the inclusion of two (2) additional informants further strengthened the study's ability to capture the depth and breadth of probation officers' experiences related to well-being, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. This approach aligns with the core principles of qualitative research, which values rich, detailed insights that provide a deeper understanding of complex social phenomena. As argued, the ideal or optimal sample size for qualitative research is influenced by several factors, including the research question, target population, and study goals. According to recent findings by Hennink and Kaiser (2022), achieving saturation

might require fewer participants than previously thought. Their analysis of 23 peer-reviewed studies indicates that conducting 9–17 interviews or 4–8 focus group discussions may be adequate to achieve data saturation.

Further, the informants in this study range in age 29–61, with the length of service ranging from 8–38 years and are handling 100–3300 probationers released on probation through plea bargaining in drug cases under their investigation and supervision. Brief descriptions of the informants are as follows:

TABLE I. Profile of the Informants

Probation Officer	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Length of Service	Estimated Number of Investigation Cases Being Handled	Estimated Number of Clients Under Supervision
1	45	Female	Single	20 years	1000	700
2	29	Male	Single	6 years	800	507
3	29	Female	Married	8 years	4000	4000
4	50	Female	Married	26 years	400	300
5	31	Male	Married	9 years	1400	789
6	48	Female	Married	22 years	160	100
7	53	Female	Married	31 years	1893	1000
8	61	Female	Married	38 years	500	500
9	53	Female	Married	29 years	3300	3000
10	42	Female	Married	20 years	1500	1200
11	32	Female	Single	8 years	1000	912
12	51	Male	Married	25 years	500	500

Probation officers in Region IV-A can serve as a representative sample for the entire country's probation experiences due to the uniformity of their tasks and responsibilities across the nation. In the Philippines, probation officers nationwide share similar roles, including supervision of probationers, conducting pre-sentence investigations, and managing rehabilitation programs, ensuring that their experiences are largely comparable. Moreover, Region IV-A has one of the highest rates of probation cases, particularly due to the increased use of plea bargaining in drug-related offenses, which has significantly elevated the number of individuals eligible for probation. This makes Region 4-A an ideal region to study, as it reflects broader national trends in probation practice, especially in relation to the growing caseload tied to drug-related cases.

Instrument

As a phenomenological study, the primary instrument for data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interview questionnaire with participants. Phenomenology seeks to understand the lived experiences of individuals, so interviews allow the researcher to explore participants' perspectives, perceptions, and understandings in-depth.

The interview guide was developed based on the research questions and objectives of the study. It included broad, open-ended questions to allow participants to share their experiences freely, as well as some more specific probes to delve deeper into particular aspects.

The semi-structured interview questionnaire consisted of two parts: (1) Preliminaries – which contained questions relative to the participants' consent to participate in the study and demographic profile such as age, sex, marital status, length of service, number of investigation cases being handled

and number of clients under supervision; (2) Interview proper – which included the set of interview questions.

Interviews were conducted via video conferencing (Google Meet), based on Parole and Probation Region IV-A director's office and participants' preference and logistical considerations. They ranged from 30–45 minutes in length to allow sufficient time for participants to fully describe their lived experiences as to the consequences of plea bargaining in drug cases on probation officers' well-being.

Data Gathering Procedure

This study was conceptualized by the researcher through the help of thesis adviser. Once the topic has been chosen and approved, objectives of the study were formulated. The researcher did a literature review after completing the objectives, which helped not only to support and strengthen the study, but in crafting questions utilized in the interview. The interview guide was created according to the research questions and aims of the study, which was confirmed by specialists in the field.

Upon obtaining consent from the expert validators, the research tool was subsequently presented to the Research Ethics Review Committee of the Lyceum of the Philippines University - Batangas Graduate School. Once ethics approval was granted, the researcher sent a letter requesting permission to conduct the interviews to the Office of the Administrator of Parole and Probation Central Office. The PPA Administrator issued an indorsement letter directing Region IV-A Office to accommodate the request. The researcher was requested to physically and personally report to the Regional Director for an initial meeting.

Upon receiving approval for the request, the researcher coordinated with probation officers regarding the study. Materials needed such as semi-structured interview questions, recorders, and cameras were prepared. Data was gathered mainly through comprehensive, semi-structured interviews with participants. The interviews were conducted via secure video conferencing software, based on participant preference.

Furthermore, before the start of the research interview, the researcher established rapport with the participants to lighten up the mood and atmosphere and feel relaxed about the procedure thus giving a high chance to get accurate responses. Prior to the interview also, participants reviewed the informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, procedures, risks and benefits, and measures to protect confidentiality. They also completed a brief demographic questionnaire. Probing questions were used to deeper explore particular aspects or experiences as needed.

After finishing the interviews, the researcher encoded the comments given by the participants. The researcher then followed up with the participants to verify their statements and discuss the themes derived from the gathered information. The researcher engaged in an iterative process of data analysis – transcribing the responses word per word, including the fillers and expressions during the interview, moving back and forth between the raw data, emerging themes, and interpretations.

Afterward, the researcher terminated and deleted any video, audio, and/or taped recorded material after it was

transcribed for the data privacy of the participants. The transcribed data were put in a Microsoft Word file and were color-coded and categorized to conveniently analyze the responses. Lastly, the researcher used her laptop for records and file keeping.

Data Analysis

After collecting pertinent and necessary information and data from the semi-structured interviews, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim. Then, alike responses gathered from the participants will be extracted and categorized by themes, code, and category.

A well-known procedure known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will be utilized to extract similar responses per line of the verbatim transcription. IPA was a powerful tool for researching complex, perplexing, and emotionally laden topics. Alase (2017) explains that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative method enabling researchers to deeply understand participants' life experiences. The procedure of data analysis using IPA by Braun and Clarke (2006 as cited in Valderama, 2022) was a recurrent process where the researcher proceeds through several systematic phases: Phase 1: familiarization with collected data; Phase 2: generating initial codes; Phase 3: searching for themes; Phase 4: reviewing themes; Phase 5: defining and naming themes by clusters; and Phase 6: report production.

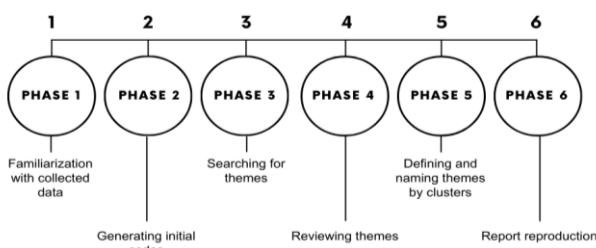


Fig. 1. Summary of Braun and Clarke's Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

In terms of data presentation, the researcher adopted the institutional format. The researcher used the Thematic Charts to extract the participants' similar responses as defined by themes and clusters. With comparable ideas or thoughts, the responses converged on a single topic, which became the title of the Thematic Chart. The responses, which included a variety of ideas and views, were grouped by significant statements, then code was extracted and placed in the third column of the Thematic Chart. The category, as the title of the Thematic Chart suggested, acted as a synthesis of all the code, which was found in the appendices.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained informed consent from participants, ensuring they have a clear understanding of the purpose, procedures, and potential risks involved in the study. Confidentiality and privacy of participants' personal information are upheld, and data are anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

In favor of the researcher and respondents, identity will remain anonymous in the research due to confidentiality in gathering information regarding the desired result. The views and opinions of the respondents are freely expressed in accordance with their opinion but guaranteed that it remain confidential as to their identity. To protect the confidentiality and privacy of the gathered data, the researcher exclusively limited access to the raw data to authorized individuals only. The interview guide was designated with the label "For Research and Educational Purposes Only" to prevent any unauthorized use of their contents for other intents. Additionally, upon manuscript submission, the researcher ensured the proper disposal of completed interview questions.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Plea bargaining in drug cases has led to an increase in the number of drug offenders qualifying for probation, placing a significant burden on probation officers who are already dealing with heavy caseloads. While other pillars of the criminal justice system may be prepared to handle these cases, probation officers bear much of the responsibility, leading to increased stress and workload pressures. This shift in responsibility significantly affects their well-being, contributing to job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, and higher turnover intentions.

As expounded by Lamcheck (2023) despite being promoted as benefiting all parties, including the defendants, plea bargaining ultimately proved to be disadvantageous to the poor, favoring the interests of judges, prosecutors, and lawyers instead. The war on drugs led to a surge in arrests and detentions, creating overwhelming workloads for public defenders, prosecutors, and judges. In fact 2018, drug-related cases alone made up 28% of all criminal cases filed. The sheer volume of these cases forced them to be distributed across nearly every criminal court, even affecting Municipal and Metropolitan Trial Courts. However, the introduction of plea bargaining has expedited the resolution of cases, which benefits prosecutors and judges. Yet, this process leaves not only the drug arrestees at risk, but also the probation officers (Henderson Legal Defense, 2023).

"14 cases lang yung hinandle namin ahm throughout the year before. Ahhh tapos noong 2018 pumasok si plea bargain duon na naloka ang mundo namin kase hindi proportionate ang dumadating na kaso, naipon yung kaso sa courts so, ah nung dumating samin bulto bulto." Probation Officer/Informant 3 shared. It was reiterated also by the statement of Probation Officer/Informant 4 *"Grabe po talaga kung hindi nag plea bargaining, medyo magaan naman. Pero nung nag plea bargaining parang ang bigat-bigat na ng probation. Iisang grievance namin. Kung pwede nga mawala na ang plea bargaining, yun ang hiling namin."*

One of the probation officers also described how the responsibilities became increasingly burdensome and overwhelming as a result of the widespread use of plea bargaining. She explained that the process significantly intensified her workload, as the influx of cases required more intensive monitoring and supervision of individuals placed on probation. With the expedited resolution of cases through plea

agreements, the number of people under probation surged, and the complexities of managing their rehabilitation and compliance with court orders grew much more challenging. This additional strain not only affected her ability to provide effective oversight but also stretched the resources available for probation services. Verbatim, Probation Officer/Informant 6 said:

"Hanggang may plea bargaining, hindi kami mababawasan. Hindi maalis eh. Supreme Court, ma'am, nag-decide. Gusto ko nga may mag-file sa Supreme Court. Ito, madiscuss ko lang din. Ano yung plea bargaining? Ano ko lang din. Ano na yung pre-work? Kasi parang gumaan ang sentensya ng mga drug addicts. And then inilagay ang probation. Alam mo, ginawa lang nilang scapegoat ang probation. Kasi... Parang naglalaro. Yes, meron kami mga... May war on drugs. May war on drugs, ma'am. Inaresto mo. Tapos ay inallow ang plea bargaining. Ay di wala din. Inaresto mo pa. And then yun nga, balik sila sa dati. Scapegoat lang yung probation. Sana nga may mag-file sa Supreme Court na yung epekto ng plea bargaining hindi siya maganda talaga. May nagbibigay dito sa amin na court, 6 months and 1 day. 6 months and 1 day pushing and using. Kaya hindi nakakapagtaka bakit hindi nari-resolve ang drug cases. Ang sentensya nila, huli sila ng huli ng kung sino-sino lang sa labas. Yun. At din mismo yung magpapayo, aminin mo, aminin mo, napasok sa probation. So actually, nung nagkaroon kami ng study, noong in-implement yung plea bargaining na yan, ano? Ready ang PAO, ready ang prosecutor. Pero kami pala mababagsakan lahat ng kaso, hindi kami nakaready. Kasi ang PAO, Public Attorney's Office and Prosecutor. Kung ma-hiring nila, isang lawyer, isang court, ganun yung ratio. Isang court, isang prosecutor, ganun din. Andaming fiscal. Pero ito yung Parole and Probation Administration sa pagdating ng mga plea bargaining cases."

Well-being

In the Philippines, probation officers are tasked with supervising probationers. This follows after conducting post-sentence investigations to help the court determine if offenders are eligible for probation. This includes investigating the offenders' criminal history, environment, and background, with the results compiled into detailed reports for the court's decision. Unfortunately, the adoption of plea bargaining in drug cases in 2018 created a significant impact. It allowed drug offenders to qualify for probation if their sentences were reduced to less than six years, which previously was not the case. This change caused a dramatic increase in the number of cases, as probation officers went from handling tens of cases to thousands, leading to a tremendous strain on their workload and negatively affecting their overall well-being.

With the theme Work-related strains undermine the holistic well-being, this implies that the challenging and demanding role of probation officers in investigating the applicants for probation have regrettably created profound effects across all aspects of their lives. Strains such as increased caseloads and emotionally taxing responsibilities affect not only their professional lives but also their physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health.

The foregoing theme was conceptualized using the generated codes: stress and health deterioration, testing of physical endurance and spiritual resilience, mentally and physically shocked from workloads, multidimensional exhaustion, work-induced health strain and emotional support, sleep deprivation and risk to oneself, optimistic thoughts and family support, triggers to health problems and cognitive distortions, reduced family time and risk to one's safety, burnout and fatigue yet work-responsibility satisfied, sleep deprivation. Most codes clearly reflect the negative effect of investigating the cases of drug-related offenders who may be released on probation due to plea bargaining to probation officers' well-being. As such, these codes fall into categories such as physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, socially and professionally affected.

While the responses from probation officers reflect a range of impacts on their well-being, including varying combinations of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and professional effects, the majority of the probation officers are affected physically when investigating drug offenders eligible for probation due to plea bargaining. According to Probation Officer 9 probation officers are experiencing health problems due to the overwhelming demands of their work, which act as triggers for various physical ailments. Specifically, *"Actually, ngayon, ang handle namin, 3,300 plus. Ito actually second highest national, buong PPA. Nagpeak talaga kami 2021-22 dahil sa plea bargaining ng 3800 plus. Hanggang ngayon, hindi kami makarecover. Physically, nag show up lang ng sakit. Noong na-covid ako nung 2020. Nagkaroon ako ng diabetes. Basta lumabas lahat ng sakit, highblood, cholesterol, ang nawo-worry talaga ako ngayon yung sa sugar ko, uncontrollable talaga yung sa sugar."* Further, Probation Officer 1 added *"pagmedyo hirap magfield kasi meron pong Asthma so minsan naapektuhan sya kapag mainit sa field."* Probation Officer 5 also affirmed this by sharing *"So syempre sa physical ko, ay syempre lagi na akong may sakit kunwari this year ano nakapangatlong beses na, actually ngayon meron na naman kakagaling ko lang ulit so alinman sa madadali yung mga application at sick leave..."*

On the other hand, Probation Officers 7 and 12 noted that they are experiencing sleeping disturbances. Respectively arguing *"Physically kailangan mag puyat sa dami ng cases"* and *"Ahmm, siguro sa physically de minsan kasi hindi makatulog sa dami."* Similarly, Probation Officer 11 highlighted the long hours of typing and writing investigation reports that led to physical issues such as back pain, frozen shoulders, and a weakened immune system. Mentioned by the officer, *"Physically, due to the excessive number of cases, my physical activity has decreased. I am the type of person who values their job over their physical wellness. I'm suffering some back pain, frozen shoulders from typing and writing jobs, and a weakened immune system, which I wished I could manage soon."* Incidentally, Probation Officer 4 also recognized that their job is too physically exhausting that conducting investigations can leave probation officers feeling constantly tired and overwhelmed, citing *"Physically, syempre nakakapagod yan kase magfield work talaga"*

diba?.....Sobrang ano siya, sobrang tiring talaga nakaka exhaust talaga siya noh ng lakas para sa physical pa yun."

According to Denny et al. (2020), probation officers frequently experience considerable stress, leading to poor health. It was highlighted by Kelly (2020) that in corrections it is the stress that leads to negative outcomes for both individuals and organizations. Employees may experience health issues such as heart disease and high blood pressure because of stress. Mendez (2023) added that stress can negatively affect their physical health, leading to symptoms such as anger, depression, exhaustion, and agitation. These symptoms led to restless nights, agitation, and other health problems. Over time, these health issues can result in severe consequences, such as or even death.

Aside from the physical toll, the mental and emotional well-being of probation officers is also significantly impacted by the challenging nature of investigating drug offenders, particularly those who may be released on probation through plea bargaining. Some probation officers argued that the pressure of handling complex cases, especially when dealing with offenders in the context of drug-related crimes, can lead to mental exhaustion, decision fatigue, and stress certainly affecting mental well-being.

In fact, probation officers specifically highlighted that they experienced significant stress due to the pressure of managing a large number of cases, particularly when clients and their families are following up on long-pending cases. For an instance, Probation Officer 1 particularly said "*Stress, very stressful, lalo na pag medyo ang dami ng nag follow up for their cases, kasi nung initial po ako na nandito, ang natatangap kong cases ay way back 2019 pa na mga case, so yung mga family members ng mga naka detained nagpa-follow up sila for their family members.*" Probation Officer 3 even affirmed this by stating "*sa mentally talagang ano nashock kami nun kase 2018 ahh from 2017 na 14 lang yung ipinrocess naming P.I ...so throughout the year parang tig 6 lang kami na ahh or 7 na cases nung 2017, then pagdating ni 2018 dun na kami nashock kase dumadating yung mga papel sa ahh hundreds talaga yung dumadating araw-araw.....sobrang naapektuhan yung syempre ahh mentally tsaka uuwi kami iisipin namin kung maaubos...matatapos"*

Monnye (2022) described the work environment of probation officers as being shaped by heavy caseloads, limited resources, and the challenge of managing violent probationers. Additional stressors include the time-consuming task of preparing pre-sentence reports and meeting tight deadlines. It was identified also that several key stressors for probation officers, including workload overload, the pressure to meet deadlines, handling office visits and interruptions, and dealing with unpredictable or aggressive clients.

Correspondingly, mental strain on probation officers has become a significant issue. Officers report feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of cases. They are complaining to have experience intense pressure which led some officers to experience emotional distress, feelings of worthlessness, and even thoughts of resignation. Probation Officer 9 narrated, "*mentally, dun talaga ko medyo namorolema, mentally talaga, naapektuhan ako, may time na*

iiyak ka na lang. Sobrang feel like worthless. Parang, parang nararamdaman mo pinabayaan ka ng agency. ...Sa bigat ng trabaho po. Ang problema namin dito din, hindi na kami makatulong sa investigation sa dami nga. Alam mo, Germaine, ang ginagawa namin as late as 2020 pa. Yes, may 2020 pa kami. Nung walang plea bargaining in a month, siguro makareceive kami ng 15. Nung nag-plea bargaining, nakaka-receive kami in a month, nag-peak kami ng 180 in a month. Oh, grabe. ..Scapegoat lang yung probation. Sana nga may mag-file sa Supreme Court na yung epekto ng plea bargaining hindi siya maganda talaga..Actually, may mga colleagues kami na nag-resign na lang. Hindi na kaya. Sa dami. Nag-resign sila, lipat ng ibang trabaho, iba nag-abroad na, iba nag-early retirement para takasan ito. So, ganun yung epekto sa amin. Yung iba naman, sabi nila, ay nag-stay na daw po sila kasi mag-re-retire na. Ano na, yung nagaantay na lang."

As expounded, probation officers play a crucial role in the criminal justice system, overseeing offenders directly, compiling investigative reports for defendants, and providing crucial information to courts for sentencing decisions. These responsibilities often involve navigating multiple and sometimes conflicting roles. The demanding nature of their work, compounded by increasing caseloads, extensive paperwork, and tight deadlines, contributes significantly to POs' stress levels (Erdem et al., 2019).

Kivalu (n.d) also highlighted that the limited staffing of the Probation and Youth Justice Division in Tonga, with only four officers stationed on the main island, poses significant challenges. These include inadequate probation services on outer islands and a growing demand for these services. Officers face heavy workloads, processing an average of 160 pre-sentencing reports annually, in addition to other responsibilities. The overwhelming scope of tasks often exceeds capacity, leading to stress and difficulty in meeting deadlines effectively.

It was also stressed that probation officers' workloads are increasingly demanding, with officer time becoming a critical factor due to the growing pressure to accomplish more tasks with fewer resources. This situation may also compel officers to work beyond their regular hours, including evenings and weekends, without compensation, further contributing to their workload and stress (Martin & Zettler, 2020; Kivalu, n.d.).

In terms of emotional well-being, it is evident that investigation of drug offenders who may be released on probation due to plea bargaining impacts their personal lives and interactions. Some officers shared how their once calm demeanor has changed, causing outbursts and difficulty controlling emotions, even affecting their relationships at home. In affirmation, Probation Officer 4 shared, "*Sa emotional naman para sakin, ayun talagang nakakaano siya, nakaka affect dahil dati mahinahon ako ngayon ang sungit ko na hahaha...Gusto mong emphatizer ka dati, pero ngayon as in hindi mo macontrol tataas na ang boses mo, then unti-unti tsaka mo lang babawiin kase kawawa naman natotrauma din naman yung mga kliyente. Yung emotional ano, minsan nga dala pa sa bahay yan ih mga anak ko sa totoo lang nagrereklamo, mama bat ganyan ka hindi naman kami client..."*" Probation Officer 5 added, "*yung sa emotional*

minsan yung hindi magandang naririnig sa clients mo minsan nadadala ko sa bahay."

In support, according to Hines (2023) probation officers experience strain-based conflict which arises when officers carry the stress, problems, or emotions from work into their personal lives, impacting how they control their emotions and interactions with others. For example, if an officer has a confrontation at work, whether with an offender or a superior, the resulting feelings of irritability, apathy, and disconnection can persist at home, leading to conflict.

Emotionally as well, Probation Officer 10 highlighted the inherent danger and emotional toll of the work, particularly for female probation officers. Many are exposed to risky and sometimes inappropriate situations, especially when conducting fieldwork, which can involve direct contact with individuals who may pose a threat. As expounded, *"Noong during pandemic nagkaroon ng raid dun parang may ilan silang napatay kasi tumakbo yung mga para sa mga ilan na nagsikulasan tapos yun, binarily. Mahirap para sa babae na yung trabaho kasi nag-field kami. Minsan, prone ka na minsan mabastos..., medyo boyish kasi ako, kaya hindi rin naman ako bastusin....Pero, nakakatakot siya. Kung halimbawa, may pamangkin ako or kapatid na babae, hindi ko endorse yung work. Lalo yung pag mga malamya-lamya."*

Correspondingly, according to Norman et al. (2024), safety concerns for probation officers are heightened during field visits, especially when visiting probationers in high-crime areas or multi-unit buildings. Officers are at risk of harm if confrontations occur, and navigating poorly lit hallways or climbing multiple flights of stairs adds to the potential dangers. These conditions expose probation officers to an increased risk of victimization while performing essential duties, such as home visits. The study also conducted by Rhineberger and Mack (2022) examined community corrections staff members' – probation officers and parole officers' perceptions of job-related danger and experiences causing safety concerns. While distinct from a prison setting, working with probationers and parolees in community corrections entails inherent risks. The research explored how perceived danger and fear influenced negative workplace outcomes, including burnout, secondary trauma, job stress, and job satisfaction. Results revealed that the experienced fear correlated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion and secondary trauma.

Probation officers also acknowledged that they are also socially affected. Their responses reflect lack of work-life balance due to demanding and challenging responsibility of investigating the cases of the offenders. This apparently reduced the opportunities for social interactions and personal time. This was confirmed by Probation Officer 4 who stated that *"Then sa social naman, edi walang magagawa overtime din, so bawas naman yung social ano mo, social life mo... Kase nga nag ooffice kahit wala sabihin mong wala siyang pay, walang overtime pay ang government. And ayun, talagang yung buong buhay mo parang dun na diba nakakalungkot..nakakalungkot kase although ito yung bread and butter mo kaya lang, ano parang hindi na rin naman talaga siya healthy noh."* Additionally, Probation Officer 10

said *"Wala na kong bebe time sa asawa ko. Dahil sa dami ng work...Nagagalit ang mister ko kasi every weekend kasi na-uwi kami dun sa parents ko sa packing. Bitbit kasi folders. Tapos sasabihin ni mister, o ayan, magbibiyah na naman yung mga folders mo. Nahilo na yung mga folders mo. Hindi mo naman ginagawa. Yung tipong alam mo, hindi mo naman ginagawa. Yung tipong alam mo, iuwi mo, tapos isipin mo. Hindi mo rin naman ginagawa sa bahay kasi may iba't pang ginagawa sa bahay. Bininitbit pa uwi, bininitbit ulit pabalik. Oo, ayan."*

In terms of social well-being, as explained by Hines (2023) probation officers' often experience time-based conflicts. Time-based conflicts arise when an officer's work duties or workload disrupt personal life commitments. This type of strain is especially common in professions that require mandatory overtime or involve being on-call. As discussed by Hines (2023) and Chavez (2022), it was suggested that one reason work negatively impacts an officer's personal life is due to the unique demands of working in corrections. These demands may lead some staff members to adopt work roles that conflict with their roles at home as they have to work on weekends, thus missing important events for their children due to assigned duties.

On the other hand, few of the probation officers have shared that their spiritual well-being has been impacted by the complexities of investigating drug offenders, particularly those who may be released on probation due to plea bargaining. The emotional weight of these cases, combined with the moral and ethical challenges involved, often drives them to pray more fervently, seeking strength to cope with the difficulties and to find peace amid the overwhelming workload and stress. In fact, Probation Officer 2 articulated, *"And then spiritually of course, talagang idinadaing din po natin kay Lord ah struggle sa work, kasi ito pong trabaho na ito given na talaga na kasi, investigative, supervise, rehabilitate, so talagang kailangan din po ng help kay Lord."* Further, Probation Officer 4 shared *"Spiritually, tsakaa...mas kakapit ka Panginoon ngayon kase papanalangin mo; "Lord kailan po ba kokonti ang kaso hehehe at mawawala itong plea bargaining?"...pero ito talaga yung delubyo hahaha delubyo siya. Sabi ko nga miserable buhay namin dito noh. So ayun siya sa ano investigation, talagang lahat."*

Similarly, Woolley (2024) reported that Loren Stanbridge, a senior probation officer, shared that he prays Psalm 23 before interacting with prisoners. Although he sees himself as a civil servant within a larger organization, he believes his role offers unique opportunities to work closely with offenders. Stanbridge strives to model the principles of the gospel through his actions and the way he conducts himself. He acknowledged that if it weren't for his Christian faith, he likely would have left the profession years ago, as it is this faith that helps keep him grounded in his challenging work.

Finally, probation officers felt a sense of detachment from the deeper aspects of their work due to overwhelming workloads. One officer expressed that their role has shifted from being a proactive social worker to merely processing reports, thus professionally affected. As shared by Probation Officer 4, *"So professionally, sa profession naman para bang*

ano lang siya, ah pasa todo na yung alam mo yun hindi ko na maramdaman yung in depth ng mga analysis, assessment na gagawin mo sa sa bawat client... Kaya yung sa profession hindi ko na makita yung pagiging social worker ko, parang ako'y ano na lang taga gawa na lang ng report."

As mentioned by Ausby (2021) citing Annison et al. (2008), it was discovered that many probation officers initially chose the profession because they were motivated by a desire to assist probation clients and had an interest in working with people. However, despite this initial drive, many officers experience job dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction tends to stem not from their interactions with clients, but rather from factors such as agency politics, heavy caseloads, and the limited opportunity for personal, one-on-one engagement with clients.

Under Presidential Decree No. 968, probationer and his probation program are subjected to the actual supervision and visitation of a probation officer. It is the responsibility of the officer to see to it that the conditions of probation as imposed by the court are observed. In fact, house visits, and follow-up may be conducted if needed. While investigating offenders eligible for probation due to the plea-bargaining framework for drug cases significantly affects probation officers' overall well-being, it was observed that their well-being is less affected during the supervision phase of probationers. Unlike the investigative stage, which involves high stress, tight deadlines, and overwhelming caseloads, the supervision of probationers tends to be more routine and manageable, causing minimal strain on officers' holistic well-being. Thus, the theme Trivial Impact on Holistic Well-Being was conceptualized.

From the codes stressful tasks, manageable workloads, complex job role, compromised work quality due to time constraints, compromised work quality owing to high client volume, minimal impact, subtle yet meticulous, appreciating job purpose, neglected job role, unfulfilled job role, burnout and fatigue yet work-responsibility satisfied, and stubborn and disobedient clients, it was evident that the minimal impact of supervision is rooted in professional aspect, while some acknowledged that they are physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and spiritually affected.

Seemingly, probation officers handling supervision over probationers feel overwhelmed by workload pressures and systemic inefficiencies, significantly affecting their professional well-being. Supervision, ideally aimed at designing individualized rehabilitation programs and ensuring successful reintegration, often becomes rushed and compromised due to tight deadlines and performance metrics. As expounded by Probation Officer 4, *"Sa supervision so ganun din ah, sa physical na ang aspect ng supervision... So kami rin yun, yung inimestigahan ko ako rin naman ang gagawa ng program ng rehab sa kanya. So hindi na, na effective wala ng mga rehab rehab ah... Syempre ang objective ko noon bago ako mag recommend na matapos siya sa probation, syempre dapat maganda rin yung aking report na macoconvince ang court na siya fully rehabilitated. Eh sa totoo lang, hindi naman talaga fully rehabilitated eh... hahaha hindi na ganun kase wala pasa todo lang magsa submit kase*

overdue yun, kasi hahanapan din kami sa performance, "bat andami mong overdue cases, dapat tapos na yan, dapat tapos na yan bat hindi mo pa tinatapos?" So ganun, yun yon noh. So sa profession, sa professional naman ah ganun din siya talagang yung kanyang program... hindi ko na talaga siya maintindihn individuality nila noh. So ganun na, emotional ganun din so yun ang sinasabiko.. dala pa rin siya noh? Yun ang treatment sa kanila, yun lang naman."

The shift in priorities within probation work, especially due to the increased demands of investigations, has led to a significant change in the way officers interact with their supervisees. In fact, Probation Officer 5 said *"Sa supervision, sa ngayon kasi yung mga tao talaga dati kinakausap ko isa-isa nakakapagsulat pa ako ng case notes masasabi nila sa akin yung current ng buhay nila, trabaho, health lahat, ngayon hindi ko na sila makausap dahil ako ay naka-priority ko ang investigation basta ang mahalaga sa akin nasusunod nila yung kanilang condition... So, basta masunod lang nila yung conditions ng probation naging monitoring nalang, lahat ng dati kong client kilala ko ang mukha, buhay, pamilya pero ngayon sino ka, sinasabi ko na lang pasensya kasi ang dami nila hindi ko masyadong matandaan kung anong meron sayo."*

Alarmingly also, the Parole and Probation Administration's intense focus on producing investigation reports has inadvertently led to the neglect of probation supervision, undermining its intended rehabilitative purpose. Officers report an inability to monitor clients effectively, resulting in an increase in relapses among probationers who return to substance use or drug-related activities. Specifically, Probation Officer 9 shared *"So, kasi lang, ang agency, talagang tinutukan kami sa investigation na makaproduce. So, parang napapabaya namin ang supervision na hindi naman dapat sana. Diba sabi ko may 2020 pa kami na cases. So ang resulta niyan, ang daming clients na nag-relapse, nagbebenta ulit, gumagamit ulit. Sa, drug test namin, positive na naman. So, nag-file kami ng file ng violation reports. Nara-revoke yung probation nila. Kasi hindi rin naman namin sila matutukan. Unlike before, walang plea bargaining."*

In view of the foregoing, Ausby (2021) argued that many probation officers enter the field with the genuine intention of helping clients and engaging in meaningful work with people. However, over time, many officers experience job dissatisfaction, not due to their interactions with clients, but because of external factors such as overwhelming caseloads, and a lack of opportunities for personal, one-on-one engagement with those they supervise.

On the other hand, as to the physical aspect of the probation officers, unlike other legal professions, such as public attorneys who conclude their involvement once a case is processed, probation officers continue to monitor and guide individuals' post-approval which seems to be challenging and tiring. As mentioned by Probation Officer 3, they experienced complex job role, *"ang problema naman namin is yung naging supervision kase nasubmit na namin sila ng mga report yun yung problema namin ngayon haha pagsusupervise naman kase unlike sa trabaho ng PAO kapag na ahh process na nila yung kaso ng tao tapos na wala ng supervision pero sa*

atin sa probation office pag naimbestigahan mo, naaprubahan ng court yun ay babantayan mo kase ang pinaka ah trabaho talaga ng probation officer is yung rehabilitation ng tao.”

Finally, supervision tasks in probation work, particularly during group activities, can be mentally and socially draining for officers. Managing large groups, especially when some individuals are uncooperative or display challenging behavior, adds significant stress to an already demanding role. Probation Officer 12 affirmed “*hmm supervision lalo na pag may mga activity syempre nahirapan ako ah yung pag, pag may mga, tao na sa dame, merong matitigas ang ulo dun, hehe ang hihirap suwayin yung mga, parang mga bata ba na...*”

Throughout their careers also, some officers may encounter issues like persistent exhaustion, skepticism, inadequate nutrition, indifference, substance dependency, accumulated stress and anxiety, strained relationships or marital breakdowns, frustration, physical discomfort, professional burnout, sleep disturbances, suicidal ideation, illness, PTSD, depression, fear, or feelings of seclusion (California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training [CCPOST], 2020, p. 97). Further, Juvenile Probation Officers (JPOs), a subset of the corrections environment, encounter stress from the inherent tasks of their roles, such as supervising violent or sexual delinquents, facing the risk of physical assault, and managing large caseloads. The conflicting demands of client rehabilitation, punishment, and public safety further contribute to the stress experienced by individuals in this position (Kelly, 2020).

Thus, the theme Trivial Impact on Holistic Well-Being recognizes that while probation officers in the Philippines are primarily focused on addressing investigation backlogs due to the increased case volume from plea bargaining, the responsibility for supervision and rehabilitation of

probationers remains a critical, albeit secondary task. This dual burden, though less emphasized than investigation efforts, still affects their holistic well-being.

Proposed Action Plan

The proposed action plan aimed to enhance the well-being of probation officers affected by plea bargaining in drug cases. It includes developing a comprehensive wellness program that addresses physical, mental, and emotional health and implementing a structured case management framework to improve supervision. Additionally, it emphasizes the need for hiring more probation officers to improve service delivery and reduce burnout.

However, addressing the root cause of all the challenges faced by probation officers should be given paramount consideration. The Department of Justice and the Supreme Court of the Philippines may reconsider and revisit their plea bargaining framework and guidelines, particularly in the context of drug-related offenses. This is necessary because the with the advent of plea bargaining, probation officers now face an influx of cases involving individuals who are granted probation after sentences was shortened. While this may seem beneficial from a judicial perspective, it has had unintended consequences on probation officers. The surge in eligible probationers has further strained the resources of probation administration, leading to difficulties in providing adequate supervision, rehabilitation, and support services. As a result, probation officers are at risk of burnout and job dissatisfaction, which in turn can impact retention rates. The well-being of these officers is critical, not only for the effectiveness of the probation system but also for the broader goal of achieving meaningful rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders.

Key Result Area/ Objectives	Proposed Action/ Activities	Key Performance Indicators/ Success Indicators
Proactively monitor the probation officers' physical well-being and detect potential health issues at an early stage.	Conduct routine health screenings to monitor physical well-being and identify potential health issues early by partnering with local health institutions or clinics to provide screenings.	85% participation annually
Help the probation officers' develop coping strategies, manage stress effectively, and maintain their mental well-being, ultimately reducing the risk of burnout and improving job satisfaction and performance.	Provide access to mental health resources, including counseling and stress management workshops.	70% utilization within the first year
	Employment of an in-house or on-call psychologist.	75% of officers utilizing the service within the first year
Create a safe environment for sharing experiences and coping strategies, fostering mutual support and resilience among probation officers.	Establish peer-led support groups where officers can share experiences and coping mechanisms in a safe environment.	50% attendance at least once a quarter
Enhance probation officers' coping skills and emotional well-being.	Conduct training on emotional regulation and resilience building.	90% completion rate within 6 months
Enhance the effectiveness of supervision and reducing officers' workload.	Implement a structured case management framework which prioritizes individualized rehabilitation among clients.	80% compliance within 1 year
Allow officers to dedicate more time to meaningful interactions with clients.	Simplify administrative procedures that reduce bureaucratic burdens such as revising the investigation reports' format and reducing the post investigation requirements; utilizing digital documentation (e.g. digital forms and e-filing systems)	70% of all documentation within 1 year
	Increase the number of officers by hiring additional probation officers and achieve a more balanced officer-to-client ratio.	Achieve a ratio of 1 officer to 25 clients within 1 year

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed that probation officers faced significant challenges that undermined their holistic well-being, particularly when managing drug-related offenders under plea

bargaining. Officers reported physical, mental, and emotional strains due to overwhelming workloads, leading to health issues and difficulties in emotional regulation. While supervision aimed to support rehabilitation, it often increased

stress and dissatisfaction due to systemic inefficiencies and tight deadlines.

Thus, in relation to the foregoing, the findings suggested the need for policy changes to address workload management and resources. The findings highlighted positive and negative implications. Agencies may improve probation officers' well-being by revising policies for manageable caseloads and establishing wellness programs. However, offices might face challenges in reallocating resources, leading to resistance or slow implementation. If systemic inefficiencies aren't addressed, efforts to improve conditions may have limited effectiveness.

For probation officers, addressing workload pressures and enhancing support systems can increase job satisfaction and emotional well-being.

Proactively addressing these challenges could improve retention rates and workforce stability, enhancing offender supervision and rehabilitation outcomes. However, sustainability is crucial; without ongoing commitment, improvements may not last, and inconsistent implementation could create disparities in job satisfaction and service delivery. A balanced approach is essential for supporting probation officers and enhancing services.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Parole and Probation Administration may implement targeted training programs and wellness initiatives focused on stress management, emotional regulation, and effective supervision techniques to enhance the overall well-being of probation officers supervising and investigating drug-related cases affected by plea bargaining.
2. The National Government through the initiative of the Department of Justice may recommend the adjustment of the annual budget allocation to meet the needs of probation offices.
3. The Parole and Probation Administration may consider hiring additional probation officers to achieve a more balanced officer-to-client ratio.
4. The Department of Justice and the Supreme Court of the Philippines may reconsider and revisit the plea bargaining framework and guidelines as to the qualifications and eligibilities of the convicted offenders applying for probation.
5. Future researchers may conduct similar studies addressing the gaps of this study.

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