

The Paradox of Philippine National Police Frontliners: Challenges and Resilience Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.910000231>

Received: 06 October 2025; Accepted: 12 October 2025; Published: 08 November 2025

ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic placed the Philippine National Police (PNP) frontliners at the forefront of crisis response, compelling them to enforce stringent public health measures and community restrictions to curb the spread of infection. As vital agents in implementing executive and local government orders, PNP personnel were instrumental in maintaining order and ensuring compliance amid widespread uncertainty and fear. This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of PNP frontliners during the pandemic, capturing both the commendable and challenging dimensions of their service. Findings revealed six major themes reflecting their positive experiences: *Unwavering and Non-stop Service*, *Constant Resilience*, *Maximum Tolerance*, *Family Orientation*, *Strengthened Faith in God*, and *Incentive Benefits*. These themes illuminate the officers' deep sense of duty, moral fortitude, and emotional endurance, driven by familial support, spiritual grounding, and institutional recognition. Conversely, three significant challenges emerged: *Resistant Traveler Bottleneck*, *Legal Interpretation Dilemma*, and *Family Needs Predicament*. These obstacles underscore the operational and ethical complexities inherent in law enforcement during a public health emergency, particularly concerning policy enforcement ambiguities, public resistance, and personal sacrifices. Despite these adversities, PNP frontliners demonstrated unwavering commitment and adaptability, ensuring public safety while navigating immense personal and professional pressures. The study underscores the resilience and moral courage of law enforcers in times of crisis, emphasizing the necessity for enhanced institutional support, clearer policy frameworks, and psychosocial interventions to better equip them for future emergencies.

Keywords: CoViD-19, Law Enforcement, Maximum Tolerance, Resistance, Resiliency

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected individuals and communities worldwide, disrupting all sectors of society, including law enforcement. Among the most significantly impacted were police officers, who remained steadfast in their duties despite the life-threatening risks posed by the virus. As public servants, they were at the forefront of enforcing health protocols, maintaining peace and order, and ensuring public compliance with government directives. According to Interpol (2020), law enforcement officers face unique occupational challenges during public health crises, as their duties inherently involve unavoidable close contact with the public in the course of searches, arrests, and community enforcement.

Steiner and Achim (2020) emphasized that police officers play a crucial role in containing disease spread, maintaining public order, and coordinating with health and local government authorities. Similarly, Mehdizadeh and Kamkar (2020) found that police personnel experience heightened occupational stress stemming from both operational and organizational demands—conditions that were intensified by pandemic-related restrictions and uncertainties. In the Philippines, these challenges were magnified by the dual responsibility of enforcing quarantine measures while protecting themselves and their families from infection (Cruz & Mendoza, 2022).

Local reports highlight that Filipino police frontliners worked extended shifts in quarantine checkpoints, vaccination sites, and relief operations, often with limited protective gear and logistical support (Procurement Service, 2021). For instance, a police staff sergeant assigned in Sta. Mesa, Manila, shared that his team ensured compliance with health standards while facing constant exposure to the virus. The Philippine National Police

(PNP) recorded 40,070 confirmed COVID-19 cases among its personnel from March 2020 to October 2021, with 119 deaths and 37,992 recoveries (PNP, 2021). In Zamboanga del Norte, 95 police officers were reported infected during the same period, including personnel from Dapitan and Dipolog City Police Stations (ZNPPO, 2021).

These statistics underscore the vulnerability of PNP frontliners who continued to perform their duties under hazardous conditions. Their experiences reflect both the valor and strain of policing during a global health crisis. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the lived experiences of PNP frontliners during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on their coping mechanisms, challenges, and adaptive strategies. By documenting these experiences, the study aims to contribute to the development of improved institutional policies, health protection measures, and psychosocial interventions for law enforcement personnel in future public health emergencies.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The lived experiences of Philippine National Police (PNP) frontliners during the COVID-19 pandemic can be better understood through the integration of Piaget's Cognitive Theory, Lazarus and Folkman's Coping Theory, and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation. Together, these frameworks provide a holistic explanation of how police officers perceived, adapted to, and coped with the extraordinary challenges of pandemic duty while maintaining motivation and resilience.

According to Piaget's Cognitive Theory (Ingram, 2012), individuals continuously adapt their thinking and behavior through assimilation and accommodation in response to environmental changes. This adaptability was evident among PNP frontliners who faced evolving community quarantine protocols, public resistance, and infection risks. Their ability to analyze, decide, and act under uncertainty demonstrated advanced cognitive flexibility essential in law enforcement operations during crises.

Building upon this, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Coping Theory emphasizes that stress responses depend on an individual's cognitive appraisal of threats and available coping resources. Police frontliners experienced physical and psychological stressors—from long working hours to fear of infection and social stigma—but their use of problem-focused coping strategies such as teamwork, communication, and adherence to protocols helped mitigate stress and sustain operational efficiency (Baron et al., 2021; Daniel, 2023).

Finally, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Patalinghug, 2017) explains how intrinsic and extrinsic factors influenced police morale and motivation. While hygiene factors like protective equipment and fair workload reduced dissatisfaction, intrinsic motivators—such as community appreciation, recognition, and duty fulfillment—enhanced commitment and perseverance despite adversity (Saguran, 2023).

Integrating these perspectives reveals that the effectiveness of PNP frontliners during the pandemic stemmed from the interaction of cognitive adaptability, coping strategies, and motivational support. Cognitive understanding guided their situational judgment; coping mechanisms managed emotional strain; and motivation sustained their will to serve. Collectively, these theoretical foundations explain how frontliners demonstrated resilience and professionalism under extreme conditions—showing that effective policing in crises depends not only on training and command but also on cognition, coping, and motivation working in harmony.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a transcendental phenomenological research design to explore and describe the lived experiences of Philippine National Police (PNP) frontliners during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing how they coped with challenges, fulfilled their duties, and managed the impact of their work on their personal and family lives. Rooted in Husserl's phenomenology and advanced by Moustakas (1994), this approach allowed the researcher to bracket preconceived notions and uncover the essence of participants' experiences through rich qualitative data. Conducted in Dapitan and Dipolog Cities, Zamboanga del Norte, the study involved ten purposively selected police officers assigned to quarantine control points under the Zamboanga del Norte Police Provincial Office (ZNPPO)—five of whom had contracted and recovered from COVID-19 and five who had not. Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs)

facilitated via Google Meet to comply with health protocols. Open-ended questions guided participants to share their insights, emotions, and reflections regarding their duties, risks, and coping mechanisms. All interviews were recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis, which involved systematic coding, categorization, and theme generation to extract core meanings and recurring patterns. Ethical standards were upheld through informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, with participants identified only by code names. To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of findings, the study employed member checking, triangulation, and audit trails, adhering to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Moser and Korstjens (2017). Overall, this methodological approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how PNP frontliners navigated the operational, emotional, and moral complexities of serving during a global health crisis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study employed Husserl's transcendental phenomenological approach, utilizing Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method to examine the lived experiences of Philippine National Police (PNP) frontliners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through iterative coding and thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, significant statements were identified, clustered, and synthesized into thematic meanings that reveal the essence of the participants' experiences. The analysis yielded nine overarching themes—six positive and three negative—reflecting both the valor and vulnerabilities of police officers at the height of the health crisis.

The positive themes—Unwavering and Non-stop Service, Constantly Resilient, Maximum Tolerance, Family-Oriented, Stronger Faith in God, Incentive Benefits—illustrate the PNP frontliners' deep-seated dedication to their sworn duty. Despite heightened risks, officers exhibited enduring commitment to law enforcement and public safety. Their resilience reflected adaptive coping mechanisms, including emotional regulation, teamwork, and reliance on moral values to sustain performance under stress (Mehdizadeh & Kamkar, 2020). Practicing maximum tolerance became vital as officers navigated tense confrontations with civilians resistant to restrictions—balancing empathy and enforcement (Steiner & Achim, 2020). Family support and spiritual faith emerged as psychological anchors, providing emotional stability and moral reassurance amidst uncertainty (Bote & Sarmiento, 2022). Recognition through incentive benefits, both financial and symbolic, reinforced morale and institutional appreciation of their sacrifice (Philippine National Police, 2021).

Conversely, the negative themes—Resistant Traveler Bottleneck, Legal Interpretation Dilemma, and Family Needs Predicament—highlighted systemic and emotional challenges that hindered performance. The resistant traveler bottleneck exposed the friction between law enforcement and public compliance, resulting in physical and verbal confrontations that tested officers' patience and ethical resolve (Interpol, 2020). The *legal interpretation dilemma* revealed uncertainties in the implementation of overlapping national and local directives, leading to operational confusion and fear of administrative repercussions. Meanwhile, the *family needs predicament* underscored the strain of prolonged separation and anxiety over infecting loved ones, intensifying feelings of isolation and burnout (Crisostomo & Libarios, 2021).

Overall, the findings capture the duality of the PNP's pandemic experience—a balance between resilience and exhaustion, discipline and compassion, faith and fear. These narratives affirm that effective policing in public health emergencies transcends law enforcement; it demands institutional empathy, clear policy frameworks, and robust psychosocial support systems. The lived experiences of these officers reveal the necessity for holistic crisis management approaches—those that safeguard not only community welfare but also the wellbeing of the enforcers themselves. Strengthening mental health programs, providing clear operational guidance, and fostering family support mechanisms are crucial in enhancing police resilience and preparedness for future crises.

DISCUSSION OF THEMES

1. Unwavering and Non-stop Service

The theme *Unwavering and Non-stop Service* encapsulates the PNP frontliners' profound dedication to their sworn duty, despite the personal risks and prolonged fatigue brought by the pandemic. Their narratives reveal a deep sense of patriotism and moral responsibility—an embodiment of their oath to “serve and protect” even

under extreme uncertainty. Participant 8 emphasized, *“I did my very best from the start for the sake of the country... I need to accept whatever challenges come my way as I serve the country”* (P8:SS19), underscoring the intrinsic motivation anchored in national service. The accounts also reveal self-sacrifice, as many endured long hours and family separation while performing 24/7 duties, as shared by Participant 8, *“Being a law enforcer, we need to be in service 24/7... stressful but part of our duty”* (P8:SS8). This unwavering commitment aligns with transformational leadership principles within law enforcement, where officers find purpose beyond personal gain (Mehdizadeh & Kamkar, 2020). Despite stress, their perseverance demonstrates moral resilience—a capacity described by **Rushton et al. (2021)** as essential for frontline responders facing ethical and emotional adversity.

2. Constantly Resilient

The second theme, *Constantly Resilient*, highlights the officers’ ability to adapt to uncertainty and psychological stress during the enforcement of public health laws. Participants described resilience not as the absence of stress, but as an ongoing process of adjustment, emotional regulation, and optimism amidst adversity. Participant 6 stated, *“I experienced stress... but I was able to overcome the situation since I know how to handle it. Being resilient is very important in our part as law enforcers”* (P6:SS11). This reflects Luthar and Cicchetti’s (2000) notion of resilience as dynamic adaptation under stress. Even when facing noncompliant citizens or pressure from superiors, law enforcers persisted, maintaining functionality and morale. Their capacity to focus on “the good side” despite difficulties echoes findings from De la Rosa and Cruz (2021), who noted that Filipino frontliners demonstrated strong *bayanihan* (collective spirit) and personal faith as psychological buffers during the pandemic. Thus, resilience served both as a coping mechanism and a professional ethic guiding their conduct.

3. Maximum Tolerance

Maximum *Tolerance* emerged as a core ethical practice among officers who faced hostile or resistant citizens. Participants revealed that emotional composure and communication skills were essential in maintaining public order while avoiding escalation. As Participant 5 shared, *“Since this is our job, we law enforcers adjust to the personality of our countrymen”* (P5:SS14). Such flexibility demonstrates procedural justice and empathy, emphasizing persuasion over punishment. Participant 7 added, *“Despite the situation, we adjusted and explained to the citizens the purpose of the local government orders”* (P7:SS15)—a form of community policing consistent with Tyler’s (2017) theory that legitimacy in law enforcement grows through fairness and respectful treatment. The officers’ adherence to patience and restraint, even amid provocation, underscores the moral professionalism required during crisis enforcement, particularly in contexts where tensions between authority and citizen autonomy are magnified.

4. Family-Oriented

The theme *Family-Oriented* reflects the emotional duality of law enforcement duty—balancing professional commitment with familial care. Participants described their families as both a source of strength and a source of concern, particularly due to fears of viral transmission. Participant 7 disclosed, *“I don’t want to go home since my mother has comorbidities; I’m afraid to bring the virus home”* (P7:SS17). This aligns with Bote and Sarmiento’s (2022) findings that Filipino police officers often suppress emotional distress to protect family welfare. Others emphasized that the pandemic renewed their appreciation for family life and the need for quality time, as Participant 5 reflected, *“During this pandemic, money is not important, but family is”* (P5:SS16). Such reflections reveal a reordering of priorities toward relational and spiritual well-being, consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, which recognizes family as a critical microsystem shaping resilience and purpose in high-stress professions.

5. Stronger Faith in God

Faith was a cornerstone of the officers’ coping strategy, providing emotional stability amid uncertainty. The theme *Stronger Faith in God* highlights the role of spirituality as both a personal and collective anchor. Participant 8 noted, *“If I encounter problems, I have no one else to lean on but God... only He can give solutions”* (P8:SS21), while Participant 6 expressed, *“Even with problems, as long as God is with us, we can handle it”*

(P6:SS22). These testimonies echo Pargament's (2011) theory of religious coping, suggesting that faith fosters hope, meaning, and control during crises. In the Filipino context, religiosity also reflects cultural resilience, where *pananampalataya* (faith) and *pag-asa* (hope) enable individuals to sustain optimism despite hardship. The officers' narratives therefore affirm spirituality as a significant psychosocial resource, reinforcing moral conviction and collective endurance in law enforcement service.

6. Incentive Benefits

The theme *Incentive Benefits* underscored the motivational effect of institutional recognition, particularly through hazard pay and other forms of support. While such benefits were not uniformly distributed, their symbolic value boosted morale among frontliners who risked exposure daily. Participant 7 mentioned, "*Only personnel assigned under MECQ or ECQ areas received hazard pay*" (P7:SS24), reflecting disparities in policy implementation. Nonetheless, officers perceived these incentives as validation of their sacrifices, aligning with Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory, where recognition and reward reinforce job satisfaction (Herzberg, 1966). In the context of crisis response, fair compensation functions not merely as financial aid but as a moral acknowledgment of service and risk, enhancing perceived organizational justice (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

7. Resistant Traveler Bottleneck

Among negative experiences, *Resistant Traveler Bottleneck* captured the recurring confrontations with noncompliant citizens who resisted travel restrictions. Participant 7 described, "*It's difficult controlling the boundary; citizens have different interpretations of the orders*" (P7:SS2), illustrating the challenges of enforcing dynamic and sometimes inconsistent health directives. Resistance often stemmed from misinformation or frustration, forcing officers to adapt communication strategies. This echoes Interpol's (2020) observations that inconsistent local protocols complicated pandemic policing worldwide. The PNP's encounters with defiance from even educated individuals (P8:SS3) reveal deeper issues of public trust and policy coherence, underscoring the need for clear, empathetic enforcement grounded in transparency and dialogue.

8. Legal Interpretation Dilemma

The *Legal Interpretation Dilemma* theme emphasized confusion arising from overlapping or rapidly changing executive orders. Officers reported difficulties explaining shifting policies to the public, often facing hostility from those unwilling to comply. Participant 9 reflected, "*People do not follow the safety protocols... we get blamed for enforcing them*" (P9:SS9). This dilemma reflects the systemic tension between policy formulation and street-level implementation, as described by Lipsky's (1980) concept of "street-level bureaucracy." Law enforcers were compelled to interpret and implement ambiguous laws while maintaining order—a process that often exposed them to criticism and burnout.

9. Family Needs Predicament

Finally, the theme *Family Needs Predicament* highlighted the economic and emotional strain officers faced while isolated from their families. Participant 9 stated, "*It was difficult since nobody could provide for my family's needs while I was isolated*" (P9:SS6). This experience mirrors findings from Crisostomo and Libarios (2021), who reported similar struggles among Filipino frontliners balancing duty and domestic obligations. The officers' commitment despite hardship exemplifies the ethic of *malasakit* (compassionate service) in Filipino public service culture, yet it also underscores the urgent need for institutional mechanisms supporting the families of law enforcers during emergencies.

Analysis of Data

This study utilized Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method to analyze the lived experiences of Philippine National Police (PNP) frontliners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, and clustering of themes, six positive and three negative thematic structures emerged, reflecting the paradoxical realities of law enforcement service amid a public health crisis. The interpretation of findings was primarily anchored on Piaget's Cognitive Theory (as cited in Ingram, 2012), supported by Lazarus and Folkman's Coping Theory and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation (as cited

in Mark, 2019). Together, these frameworks illuminate how cognitive processes, coping mechanisms, and motivational factors shaped the officers' resilience, ethical conduct, and commitment during the pandemic.

According to Piaget's Cognitive Theory, individuals interpret and respond to their environment through internal cognitive frameworks that guide understanding and behavior. This was evident in the PNP's *Unwavering and Non-stop Service*, as officers continuously rendered law enforcement and community protection despite the pandemic's threats. Their cognitive adaptability enabled them to reinterpret fear and uncertainty into moral obligation and public duty, demonstrating strong schema of responsibility toward maintaining peace and order (Cognitive Psychology Theories, 2020). Similarly, the theme *Constantly Resilient* reflected the officers' psychological endurance, aligning with Lazarus and Folkman's Coping Theory, which posits that individuals actively manage stress through appraisal and adaptive behavior. PNP frontliners employed emotional regulation, problem-solving, and positive reframing—hallmarks of resilience described in the works of Masten and Barnes (2018) and Bolton et al. (2017)—allowing them to thrive despite prolonged exposure to high-risk and high-stress conditions.

The theme *Maximum Tolerance* further illustrates cognitive-behavioral self-control, as officers consciously regulated emotions when dealing with resistant citizens. In line with Piaget's view that cognition influences action, officers displayed patience and restraint—reflecting moral reasoning and emotional intelligence vital for de-escalating conflicts. Their composure under public pressure emphasized their understanding of procedural justice and human dignity, which strengthened community trust during enforcement. Meanwhile, *Family-Oriented* and *Stronger Faith in God* emerged as key personal anchors that reinforced psychological stability. Filipino law enforcers, known for their close family ties and religiosity, derived strength from familial support and spirituality—consistent with the culturally rooted concept of *bayanihan* and the protective role of faith in coping with trauma (Song & de Jong, 2015; Gebhardt et al., 2017). These themes underscore how intrinsic and extrinsic motivations intertwined to sustain morale during crisis response.

The sixth theme, *Incentive Benefits*, was interpreted through Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation, which distinguishes between hygiene factors (such as safety and salary) and motivators (such as recognition and achievement). The provision of hazard pay and institutional acknowledgment—though unevenly distributed—served as morale boosters, reinforcing the officers' sense of purpose and professional worth. This finding aligns with Fernandez and Shaw (2020), who emphasize that recognition of public servants' risks enhances motivation and institutional loyalty during crises.

Conversely, three negative themes revealed the constraints and emotional burdens of frontliner duty. The *Resistant Traveler Bottleneck* described the frequent confrontations with citizens defying health protocols, resulting in frustration and emotional strain among officers. The *Legal Interpretation Dilemma* exposed confusion over inconsistent executive orders and varied local policies, which challenged officers' cognitive processing and judgment, a condition that Piaget's theory would describe as disequilibrium—a temporary state of confusion requiring cognitive accommodation. Finally, the *Family Needs Predicament* reflected the emotional conflict between duty and domestic obligations. Anchored on Herzberg's Motivation Theory, this theme highlighted the dual role of family as both a motivator and a source of emotional strain, as officers grappled with the inability to provide physical and emotional support to their loved ones due to isolation and exposure risks.

In summary, the findings underscore the multidimensional experiences of PNP frontliners who navigated cognitive, emotional, and moral challenges with resilience and faith. Guided by internal cognitive frameworks, adaptive coping strategies, and motivational drives, they balanced duty, family, and faith amid an unprecedented health crisis. The interplay of cognition, coping, and motivation not only sustained their service effectiveness but also illuminated areas for institutional reform, such as policy clarity, psychological support, and equitable incentives, to strengthen the law enforcement sector's preparedness for future emergencies.

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