

# Criminology Students' Perspectives on Police Involvement in Cockfighting: Ethical, Legal, and Public Perception Dimensions

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## ABSTRACT

Police participation in culturally significant yet legally prohibited activities, such as cockfighting, poses critical ethical and institutional challenges in law enforcement. This study examined the lived experiences and perceptions of criminology students regarding police involvement in cockfighting, a practice that remains culturally embedded yet legally and ethically contested in the Philippine context. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the research explored how students interpreted the relationship between cultural traditions, ethical obligations, and law enforcement conduct. Data were gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with twelve criminology students enrolled in a private higher education institution in Misamis Occidental. The interviews were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method to extract significant statements, formulate meanings, and develop thematic clusters. The analysis revealed four major themes: (1) weakening of public trust and police credibility; (2) violations of ethical standards and conflicts of interest; (3) legal consequences and weak law enforcement implementation; and (4) cultural normalization of cockfighting and its influence on public perceptions. Findings indicated that although cockfighting is often socially accepted as a traditional activity, participants consistently emphasized that police officers are expected to uphold ethical and legal standards regardless of cultural practices. Police participation in such activities was perceived to compromise professional integrity, weaken public confidence, and challenge the legitimacy of law enforcement institutions. The study concludes that police involvement in culturally significant yet legally restricted practices undermines public trust, exposes persistent ethical and legal tensions, and highlights the need for professional integrity in policing. It is recommended that police institutions strengthen ethics-oriented training, enhance accountability mechanisms, and integrate cultural sensitivity instruction within criminology and law enforcement education to prepare future officers to navigate complex socio-cultural contexts without compromising ethical or legal standards.

**Keywords:** cockfighting; police ethics; police legitimacy; cultural traditions and law enforcement; criminology students' perceptions; qualitative phenomenology

## INTRODUCTION

### Rationale of the Study

Cockfighting remains a long-standing cultural practice in many societies; however, it increasingly raises ethical and legal concerns related to animal welfare and law enforcement responsibilities (Cunningham, 2025). Law enforcement officers often face the challenge of balancing respect for cultural traditions with the obligation to enforce animal protection laws. In many jurisdictions, animal fighting is legally categorized as cruelty, leading to intensified public debate regarding the legitimacy of such practices and the appropriate role of police intervention (Yudiani et al, 2026). As global attention to animal welfare continues to grow, policing activities related to cockfighting have become subject to increasing scrutiny from both legal institutions and civil society (Aragunde & Kohl, 2025).

Ethical considerations play a crucial role in shaping how law enforcement responds to cockfighting activities. Police officers frequently encounter dilemmas when enforcing laws that conflict with local customs and long-

standing social practices. While legal frameworks in many countries identify cockfighting as an act of animal cruelty, certain communities continue to perceive it as a socially accepted recreational or economic activity. This tension between cultural acceptance and legal enforcement may influence public trust in policing institutions and affect cooperation between communities and law enforcement agencies (Setiawan et al., 2023).

Across different regions of the world, the regulation and perception of cockfighting vary considerably due to differences in legal systems, social norms, and public attitudes toward animal welfare. In some countries, strict enforcement policies reflect strong public opposition to animal fighting, while in other contexts the practice persists due to its economic and cultural significance. Studies indicate that the normalization of cockfighting within certain communities contributes to weak enforcement of prohibitive laws and ongoing tensions between authorities and local populations (Aragunde & Kohl, 2025).

In the Philippines, cockfighting—locally known as *sabong*—continues to function as a socially embedded activity associated with entertainment, livelihood, and community gatherings. Despite the presence of legal frameworks aimed at regulating animal welfare, enforcement remains complex due to the strong cultural acceptance of the practice and the economic networks connected to it. Understanding how future professionals in the criminal justice system perceive these issues is therefore essential. Examining the perspectives of criminology students can provide insights into how ethical, legal, and public perception factors shape attitudes toward police involvement in culturally sensitive practices such as cockfighting. These insights may contribute to improving police-community relations and developing more ethically informed approaches to law enforcement in contexts where cultural traditions intersect with legal regulation.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study aimed to explore the insights of criminology students regarding police officers' involvement in cockfighting, particularly in relation to its ethical, legal, and societal implications.

Specifically, this research sought to answer the following questions:

1. How does police involvement in cockfighting affect public trust in law enforcement?
2. What ethical and legal implications arise from police officers engaging in cockfighting?
3. How does the cultural acceptance of cockfighting influence society's perception of police officers who participate in it?

## **THEORETICAL AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study is anchored on key criminological and sociological theories that explain the relationship between police behavior, public trust, and culturally embedded practices. These theoretical perspectives provide a framework for understanding how police involvement in cockfighting is interpreted by future law enforcement professionals.

### **Police Legitimacy Theory**

Police Legitimacy Theory posits that public trust and willingness to cooperate with law enforcement are largely influenced by perceptions of fairness, integrity, and adherence to the law (Tankebe et al., 2021; Yesberg & Bradford, 2021). When police officers are perceived to engage in unethical or illegal activities, public confidence in their authority diminishes. In the context of cockfighting, police participation in a legally restricted activity may undermine institutional legitimacy by creating a contradiction between enforcement duties and personal behavior. This theoretical lens is relevant in explaining why participants in the study associated such involvement with declining trust and credibility.

### **Procedural Justice Theory**

Closely related is Procedural Justice Theory, which emphasizes that individuals are more likely to view authorities as legitimate when they act fairly, transparently, and consistently (Kochel et al., 2021; Nix & Wolfe, 2020). Perceived inconsistencies—such as selective enforcement or tolerance of illegal practices—can weaken

public cooperation and compliance with the law. In this study, perceptions of unequal enforcement linked to police involvement in cockfighting reflect concerns central to procedural justice, particularly the expectation that law enforcement should model lawful behavior.

### **Conflict Theory**

Conflict Theory provides another relevant perspective by highlighting how power, social inequality, and competing interests influence the enforcement of laws. From this viewpoint, laws may be applied unevenly depending on social, economic, or cultural dynamics. The persistence of cockfighting despite legal restrictions can be understood as a reflection of underlying socio-cultural and economic interests that shape enforcement practices. Participants' observations of selective enforcement and weak accountability align with this theoretical perspective, suggesting that policing practices may be influenced by broader structural and cultural forces.

### **Related Literature**

Existing studies highlight the critical role of ethical conduct in maintaining police legitimacy and public trust. Research indicates that misconduct among law enforcement officers significantly reduces public confidence and weakens institutional credibility (Jones et al., 2023; Hoffman & Richey, 2021; Kutnjak Ivković & Haberfeld, 2022).

Scholars have also examined the complexities of policing culturally embedded practices. Dela Cruz and Ramos (2022) noted that traditional activities, while socially accepted, can create enforcement challenges when they conflict with modern legal frameworks. Similarly, Setiawan et al. (2023) argued that the persistence of culturally normalized practices such as cockfighting contributes to inconsistent law enforcement and regulatory difficulties.

In addition, studies on police legitimacy consistently show that public perceptions are shaped not only by direct interactions but also by observed behavior and media representation (Intravia et al., 2021; Nix & Wolfe, 2020). Negative portrayals of police involvement in controversial activities can amplify distrust and reinforce perceptions of institutional failure. This is particularly relevant in the digital age, where information spreads rapidly and influences public opinion.

Despite the growing body of research on police ethics and cultural practices, limited studies have explored how criminology students—future members of the criminal justice system—perceive these issues. This study addresses this gap by examining how students interpret the ethical, legal, and cultural dimensions of police involvement in cockfighting. By doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions on police professionalism, cultural sensitivity, and the maintenance of public trust in law enforcement institutions.

## **METHODS**

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences and perceptions of criminology students regarding police involvement in cockfighting. Phenomenology was employed to capture the meanings participants attributed to ethical, legal, and cultural dimensions of the issue, allowing for an in-depth understanding of how these experiences shaped their views on police–community relations. The approach was appropriate for exploring subjective interpretations within a culturally sensitive context and for generating insights relevant to ethical policing practices.

The research was conducted at a private higher education institution in one of the cities of Misamis Occidental, offering a criminology program. Twelve criminology students were purposively selected based on their academic exposure to law enforcement ethics, legal age to provide consent, and demonstrated interest in issues related to community policing or animal welfare. This sampling strategy ensured information-rich cases and enhanced credibility by engaging participants with relevant theoretical and contextual knowledge.

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews using an interview guide consisting of introductory, core, and reflective questions. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-

recorded with permission, and lasted approximately 40–60 minutes. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant identity. Transcription and translation were completed prior to analysis to ensure accuracy and consistency. Prolonged engagement during interviews and careful documentation of procedures supported dependability, while reflexive bracketing was practiced to minimize researcher bias and strengthen confirmability.

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method, which involved familiarization, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of themes, and validation against the original transcripts. Credibility was reinforced through careful alignment of themes with verbatim accounts, while an audit trail of analytical decisions enhanced dependability. Confirmability was ensured by grounding interpretations strictly in participant narratives and maintaining transparency throughout the analytic process. Ethical principles of voluntariness, confidentiality, and respect were observed throughout the study.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Theme 1: Weakening of Public Trust and Police Credibility

Findings revealed that police involvement in cockfighting was perceived by criminology students as a factor contributing to the erosion of public trust and institutional credibility. Participants expressed disappointment and declining confidence in police integrity when officers were observed participating in activities associated with gambling and animal cruelty. Such behavior was viewed as inconsistent with the ethical expectations placed upon law enforcement officers, thereby weakening their moral authority within the community. These perceptions align with prior research indicating that public trust in policing is strongly influenced by officers' adherence to ethical conduct, transparency, and professional accountability (Jones et al., 2023).

From the perspective of Police Legitimacy Theory, these findings suggest that perceived misconduct directly undermines the moral authority of law enforcement institutions, thereby reducing citizens' willingness to cooperate and comply with the law (Yesberg & Bradford, 2021). The observed decline in trust reflects a legitimacy deficit, where the inconsistency between expected and actual police behavior weakens institutional credibility.

Participants also emphasized that when law enforcement personnel are perceived to violate ethical standards, community confidence in policing institutions tends to decline significantly. Studies on police legitimacy suggest that public cooperation with law enforcement is strongly influenced by perceptions of fairness, professionalism, and moral integrity among officers (Tankebe et al., 2021). These findings reinforce the idea that maintaining ethical behavior is essential for sustaining public confidence in the criminal justice system.

This is further supported by Procedural Justice Theory, which posits that legitimacy is strengthened when authorities act in fair and consistent ways; conversely, visible misconduct—such as participation in illegal or ethically questionable activities—signals procedural unfairness and erodes public trust (Kochel et al., 2021).

Media exposure further intensified these perceptions of distrust. Participants noted that viral videos, social media discussions, and online news coverage often amplify negative portrayals of police behavior. Media narratives were perceived to rapidly shape public opinion, sometimes framing police involvement in controversial activities as indicative of broader institutional problems. This observation is consistent with the findings of Intravia et al. (2021), who highlighted that digital media coverage significantly influences public attitudes toward policing and may accelerate the decline of perceived police legitimacy when misconduct is widely publicized.

These findings demonstrate how mediated visibility of police behavior amplifies legitimacy challenges, reinforcing theoretical claims that legitimacy is not only built through direct interaction but also through public narratives and symbolic representations of authority.

### Theme 2: Violations of Ethical Standards and Conflicts of Interest

The study also identified ethical misconduct as a central concern among participants. Criminology students emphasized that police officers are expected to demonstrate professionalism, discipline, and moral leadership.

Engagement in cockfighting was interpreted as a failure to uphold these ethical expectations, particularly because the activity is often associated with gambling and animal harm. Participants perceived such involvement as contradicting the ethical standards emphasized in criminology education, thereby creating a gap between the professional ideals taught in academic institutions and the practices observed in reality. These findings support Hoffman and Richey (2021), who argued that ethical lapses among law enforcement personnel weaken their legitimacy as representatives of state authority.

From a theoretical standpoint, this disconnect reflects a breakdown in normative expectations embedded in Police Legitimacy Theory, where officers are expected to embody the law rather than contradict it. When such expectations are violated, the symbolic role of the police as moral agents of the state is compromised.

Scholarly discussions on police integrity further highlight that ethical violations within law enforcement institutions can damage public confidence and institutional credibility. Kutnjak Ivković and Haberfeld (2022) emphasized that maintaining integrity within policing organizations is essential for ensuring professional accountability and sustaining public trust.

Conflicts of interest were also evident when officers were perceived to participate in activities they are responsible for regulating or enforcing. Students suggested that personal involvement in cockfighting could result in selective tolerance or inconsistent enforcement of gambling and animal welfare laws. Such perceptions contribute to the belief that law enforcement practices may be influenced by personal interests rather than impartial legal standards. Similar observations were reported by Aguirre and Santos (2021), who noted that conflicts of interest within policing institutions can weaken accountability systems and distort public perceptions of fairness.

This finding can be interpreted through Conflict Theory, which suggests that the enforcement of laws is often shaped by power relations, personal interests, and social dynamics rather than strict legal rationality. The perceived selective enforcement reflects structural inequalities and competing interests that may influence policing practices.

Empirically, this aligns with broader criminological research indicating that conflicts of interest and discretionary enforcement practices weaken institutional accountability and contribute to perceptions of injustice and bias in law enforcement.

### **Theme 3: Legal Consequences and Weak Law Enforcement Implementation**

Participants acknowledged the existence of laws regulating gambling, animal welfare, and police conduct; however, many expressed concern regarding the perceived weakness of law enforcement implementation. The presence of legal loopholes and inconsistent sanctions was believed to allow certain individuals to evade accountability, thereby reducing the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks. Participants also noted that selective enforcement—sometimes influenced by social status, political connections, or community pressure—can undermine the principle of equality before the law. These findings are consistent with Aragunde and Kohl (2025), who observed that ineffective enforcement of regulations related to animal fighting contributes to declining institutional credibility and weaker public compliance with legal standards.

These findings reinforce Conflict Theory by illustrating how structural and socio-political factors influence the uneven application of laws. The perception that enforcement is contingent on social position or influence suggests that legal systems may not operate in a fully impartial manner, thereby undermining the rule of law.

Moreover, students emphasized that inconsistent disciplinary measures may normalize misconduct within law enforcement organizations. The absence of visible sanctions for violations was viewed as reinforcing a culture of impunity, which can further weaken public confidence in justice institutions. This observation aligns with the findings of Pósch et al. (2023), who emphasized that transparent accountability mechanisms are essential for maintaining legitimacy and ensuring sustained public confidence in policing agencies.

From a Procedural Justice perspective, the absence of consistent and transparent sanctions signals unfairness in institutional processes, which in turn reduces compliance and trust among the public. This highlights the importance of accountability as a key mechanism for sustaining legitimacy.

#### **Theme 4: Cultural Normalization of Cockfighting and Its Influence on Perceptions**

Cultural context was found to play a significant role in shaping perceptions of police involvement in cockfighting. Participants observed a noticeable distinction between urban and rural settings, noting that cockfighting is often normalized in rural communities where it forms part of long-standing social and economic traditions. In contrast, individuals in urban areas were perceived to be more critical of police participation in such activities, often interpreting it as inconsistent with contemporary ethical and legal standards. This urban–rural variation reflects findings by Dela Cruz and Ramos (2022), who highlighted how cultural embeddedness can influence public tolerance of practices that are legally restricted.

This finding is best explained through the Cultural Deviance and Social Norms perspective, which posits that behavior considered illegal in formal legal systems may still be socially accepted within specific cultural contexts. The normalization of cockfighting demonstrates how informal social norms can compete with formal legal standards.

Scholars have also noted that traditional practices embedded within communities may create enforcement challenges for authorities implementing modern legal regulations. Setiawan et al. (2023) explained that the persistence of culturally accepted gambling-related activities can complicate regulatory enforcement, particularly when such practices remain socially normalized.

Despite acknowledging the cultural significance of cockfighting in certain communities, participants emphasized that cultural acceptance should not justify ethical or legal violations by law enforcement personnel. Students consistently expressed the view that police officers must prioritize professional integrity and legal responsibility over cultural accommodation. The findings suggest that while cultural traditions may influence public perceptions of cockfighting, they do not diminish the expectation that police officers consistently uphold legal and ethical standards in the performance of their duties.

This reinforces the central argument of Police Legitimacy Theory, which emphasizes that legitimacy is sustained when law enforcement consistently adheres to legal and ethical standards, regardless of contextual pressures.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that police involvement in cockfighting has a detrimental effect on public trust and the perceived legitimacy of law enforcement. Participants viewed such involvement as incompatible with the moral and professional standards expected of police officers, resulting in diminished credibility and weakened community confidence. The findings further indicate that participation in cockfighting exposes persistent ethical and legal tensions, as officers' actions conflict with their duty to model lawful conduct while gaps in enforcement and accountability mechanisms limit the effectiveness of existing regulations.

The study also highlights the influence of cultural normalization on public perceptions of police behavior, particularly in rural contexts where cockfighting is socially embedded. However, cultural acceptance was not regarded as a sufficient justification for ethical or legal violations. Participants consistently emphasized that law enforcement officers remain bound by professional integrity and legal responsibility, regardless of prevailing cultural norms. Collectively, these conclusions underscore the need for consistent ethical standards and stronger institutional accountability in culturally sensitive policing environments.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Based on the findings, it is recommended that police institutions strengthen ethics-oriented training and community engagement initiatives to reinforce professional conduct and rebuild public trust. Law enforcement oversight bodies and local governance institutions are encouraged to enhance monitoring mechanisms and

impose clear, consistent sanctions for officers involved in illegal gambling activities to ensure accountability and compliance with legal standards.

Furthermore, criminology and police education programs should integrate focused instruction on managing cultural practices within the bounds of ethical and legal responsibility. Emphasizing this balance in training may better prepare future law enforcement professionals to navigate culturally sensitive contexts without compromising institutional integrity.

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