

Challenges Faced by Law Enforcers in Combating Illegal Drugs

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100300362>

Received: 08 March 2026; Accepted: 14 March 2026; Published: 08 April 2026

ABSTRACT

Efforts to combat illegal drug activities place law enforcers in demanding operational environments that require sufficient resources, continuous training, and strong community cooperation. This study examined the challenges encountered by law enforcers in the conduct of anti-drug operations, with particular attention to operational constraints, community participation, and officer safety in one of the cities of Misamis Occidental, Philippines. A qualitative research design was employed, using in-depth interviews with law enforcement personnel to document their lived experiences in implementing anti-drug initiatives. The collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and issues affecting operational effectiveness. The findings revealed several interconnected challenges in anti-drug enforcement. Six cluster themes emerged from the analysis: resource and logistical constraints, training and adaptability, limited community support, awareness and preventive education, dangers of armed and hostile suspects, and coping mechanisms and safety protocols. Participants reported that shortages in manpower, limited funding, and inadequate operational equipment restrict the ability of enforcement units to sustain proactive operations and respond effectively to the evolving strategies of drug syndicates. The study also found that community cooperation remains limited due to fear of retaliation, mistrust of authorities, and the tendency of some families or community members to protect individuals involved in illegal drug activities. Additionally, officers frequently encounter high-risk situations, including armed resistance and hostile operational environments, which increase both physical danger and psychological strain. The study concludes that the effectiveness of anti-drug operations is influenced not only by enforcement capacity but also by the level of institutional support and community engagement. Strengthening resource allocation, improving logistical support, and expanding continuous professional training may enhance the operational readiness of law enforcement personnel. Furthermore, reinforcing community-based engagement programs and establishing support mechanisms that protect the safety and well-being of officers may contribute to more sustainable and effective anti-drug enforcement efforts.

Keywords: *anti-drug operations, law enforcement challenges, community cooperation, policing strategies, operational safety.*

INTRODUCTION

Rationale of the Study

The global fight against illegal drugs remains one of the most pressing challenges for law enforcement agencies, as illicit drug use and markets continue to expand and evolve. A recent world drug report highlights that rising drug consumption and trafficking create profound public health, social, and security implications, requiring coordinated responses from law enforcement, governments, and communities to address both supply and demand effectively (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2024). These international trends demonstrate that drug enforcement is not confined to national borders, but is a complex, transnational task that challenges policing systems in diverse contexts.

In the Philippines, law enforcement officers are on the frontline of anti-drug efforts, particularly under the current national strategy that emphasizes both enforcement and human rights considerations. Local settings in a selected

city in Misamis Occidental reflect the operational realities faced by police tasked with implementing anti-drug laws within constraints of limited resources, political pressures, and community expectations. Officers must balance enforcement duties with maintaining public trust and ensuring community safety; however, existing studies largely focus on urban centers or national-level analyses. There remains a limited body of qualitative research that captures the lived experiences of frontline law enforcers operating in smaller provincial cities, where resource constraints, community dynamics, and operational realities may significantly differ.

Contemporary literature identifies several barriers to effective drug enforcement, including resource constraints, operational complexity, and the difficulties of maintaining legitimacy in the community. For example, recent research on drug decriminalization in the United States shows that drug policy reforms can constrain police roles and challenge their ability to maintain public order, even as officers seek to fulfill their duties under evolving legal frameworks (Rouhani, 2025). Moreover, phenomenological studies conducted with Philippine National Police drug enforcers reveal that officers often face difficulties such as inadequate resources, challenges in case build-up and surveillance, and negative feedback from the community, all of which complicate their work in implementing anti-drug laws (Noble, 2024).

This study aims to explore, identify, and analyze the varied challenges faced by law enforcement officers in combating illegal drugs in a selected city in Misamis Occidental, Philippines, with a focus on structural, operational, and socio-political factors that hinder anti-drug initiatives at the local level. By addressing the limited localized research on provincial law enforcement experiences, this study fills an important gap in criminological literature. Findings from this study may inform local and national efforts to strengthen law enforcement effectiveness, optimize resource allocation, and foster community engagement in anti-drug initiatives.

By focusing on a provincial setting, this study contributes to the growing body of criminological literature by highlighting how structural limitations, community relationships, and localized operational risks shape anti-drug enforcement. This localized perspective offers practical implications for policy development and policing strategies tailored to similar contexts.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to explore the key challenges faced by law enforcers in combating illegal drugs, specifically focusing on resource constraints, public cooperation, and the risks involved in drug law enforcement.

Specifically, the study endeavored to ask the following questions:

1. What are the most significant challenges faced by law enforcers in combating illegal drug activities, particularly in terms of resources, training, and support from the government and local authorities?
2. How do the public's perceptions and levels of cooperation with law enforcement affect the efficiency of drug control operations in areas like one of the cities in Misamis Occidental?
3. What are the primary safety and security risks that law enforcers encounter during anti-drug operations, and how do these risks impact their ability to effectively carry out their duties?

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of law enforcement officers in combating illegal drugs in one of the cities of Misamis Occidental. Qualitative research enables an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, capturing the richness and complexity of social phenomena within their natural context (Creswell, 2021). Phenomenology was deemed appropriate as it focuses on uncovering the essence of participants' perceptions and the challenges encountered in daily operational activities.

The study was conducted in one of the cities of Misamis Occidental, a provincial setting where drug-related offenses, though less widespread than in major urban centers, present unique operational challenges. Participants were twelve law enforcement officers directly engaged in anti-drug operations, with at least one year of relevant experience. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure diverse perspectives across ranks and units, while officers not directly involved in drug enforcement were excluded.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews guided by a pretested protocol consisting of one opening question, six core questions, and one closing question, covering operational constraints, resource limitations, public cooperation, safety concerns, and overall effectiveness of anti-drug activities. Interviews were conducted with sensitivity and respect to ensure participant comfort and openness. Ethical protocols included obtaining informed consent, assuring voluntary participation, and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality throughout data handling.

Data analysis followed Colaizzi's (1978) method, systematically extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, and identifying emergent themes. To ensure phenomenological rigor, credibility was enhanced through member checking, dependability through audit trails, and confirmability by maintaining reflective journals and transparent documentation of analytical decisions. This approach ensured that findings accurately represent participants' experiences while minimizing researcher bias.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Resource and Logistical Constraints

Sub-theme: Insufficient Manpower and Operational Capacity

Participants highlighted a recurring challenge: limited personnel and operational reach hinder proactive anti-drug initiatives, often forcing units into a reactive stance. As one participant explained, "we're forced to cover wide areas with very few personnel, using outdated equipment and relying on limited intel support" (P6). This finding aligns with studies documenting insufficient staffing as a persistent barrier to effective law enforcement operations (Lum et al., 2020). As drug markets become increasingly complex and adaptive, the strain on frontline officers intensifies, requiring more strategic allocation of personnel and resources to sustain effective interventions (Wilson, 2024). These insights suggest that without adequate staffing and operational support, law enforcement agencies face difficulties maintaining consistent surveillance and timely responses to illegal drug activities.

Sub-theme: Inadequate Funding and Budget Support

Participants further emphasized that limited financial resources compromise operational capabilities. One officer shared, "many times, we even use our own resources and mobility to ensure operations push through" (P1), illustrating how funding gaps directly affect efficiency and officer well-being. Existing literature supports these observations, noting that inadequate funding can restrict access to operational equipment, training opportunities, and technological support necessary for effective policing (del Pozo et al., 2021). Strengthening financial support and resource allocation is therefore essential to improving operational efficiency.

Theme 2: Training and Adaptability

Sub-theme: Evolving Methods of Drug Trade

Participants described how drug syndicates continuously modify their strategies. As noted by one officer, "some suspects no longer meet in person—they use encrypted messaging apps and digital payments" (P6), highlighting the growing complexity of drug operations.

Research confirms that the dynamic nature of contemporary drug markets necessitates flexible and intelligence-driven policing strategies capable of responding to rapidly changing criminal networks (Spicer, 2021).

Consequently, law enforcement agencies must develop adaptive operational frameworks that allow officers to respond effectively to emerging criminal patterns.

Sub-theme: Importance of Continuous Training

Officers emphasized the need for continuous training. One participant stated, “we need more training in modern investigative techniques such as cybercrime and financial tracking” (P8), reinforcing the importance of professional development in adapting to evolving threats. Empirical studies support this perspective, demonstrating that structured training programs improve law enforcement adaptability and performance when operating in complex and unpredictable environments (Andersen & Gustafsberg, 2023). Ongoing training also equips officers with updated tactical knowledge and critical thinking skills necessary to respond effectively to evolving threats and investigative challenges.

Theme 3: Limited Community Support

Sub-theme: Fear and Hesitation to Report

Participants reported that many community members hesitate to report drug-related activities. One officer explained, “people are afraid to report because they fear retaliation... others don’t trust law enforcement” (P5), demonstrating how fear and mistrust weaken intelligence gathering. Such reluctance limits the availability of community-based intelligence necessary for effective drug enforcement operations. Studies indicate that fear of crime and institutional distrust can significantly reduce citizens’ willingness to cooperate with police authorities (Greer et al., 2022). These findings suggest that strengthening trust between law enforcement and communities is essential for improving information sharing and collaborative crime prevention efforts.

Sub-theme: Protection of Drug Personalities by Families and Communities

Additionally, “fear or distrust holds people back, especially when suspects are relatives or well-known in the barangay” (P6), indicating the influence of social relationships on law enforcement challenges. Previous research highlights how social and familial relationships within communities can influence responses to criminal behavior, sometimes resulting in reluctance to cooperate with authorities (Nhan et al., 2020). Such dynamics can reduce witness participation and hinder enforcement operations. Establishing confidential reporting mechanisms and strengthening community engagement programs may help mitigate these barriers and improve cooperation.

Theme 4: Awareness and Preventive Education

Sub-theme: Barangay-Level Campaigns and Dialogues

Participants stressed the importance of grassroots engagement. As one officer stated, “regular dialogues and awareness seminars can help build trust” (P6), emphasizing the role of community-based strategies. These initiatives aim to foster public trust and encourage community participation in drug prevention efforts. Research suggests that collaborative community-based policing strategies can improve public confidence in law enforcement while also strengthening preventive interventions against drug-related crimes (Zgierska et al., 2021). Such collaborative approaches help build stronger partnerships between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve.

Sub-theme: School and Youth-Focused Programs

Another participant highlighted prevention, stating, “if fewer people turn to drugs in the first place, the problem becomes much easier to manage” (P7), underscoring the long-term value of education. Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of school-based drug prevention programs that incorporate life-skills training, parental involvement, and interactive learning approaches (Stapinski et al., 2022). These initiatives provide a proactive framework for addressing drug-related issues before they escalate into criminal behavior.

Theme 5: Dangers of Armed and Hostile Suspects

Sub-theme: Violent Resistance and Armed Suspects

Participants reported frequent exposure to violent situations. One officer recalled, “the suspect suddenly reached for his firearm during the operation” (P6), illustrating the unpredictability and danger of fieldwork. Research indicates that law enforcement personnel often encounter dangerous situations when dealing with individuals involved in drug trafficking or organized criminal activities (Nix & Wolfe, 2021). The presence of firearms and aggressive resistance increases the risk of injury or fatality for both officers and civilians, highlighting the importance of strategic operational planning and tactical preparedness.

Sub-theme: Risks from Group Operations and Hostile Environments

Another shared, “we were caught in an ambush while serving a warrant” (P8), highlighting the risks associated with hostile environments. Studies highlight the importance of scenario-based training, structured command systems, and rehearsed operational protocols in reducing casualties and improving mission outcomes in high-risk law enforcement activities (Espevik et al., 2021). These measures strengthen officers’ ability to respond effectively to complex and dangerous operational contexts.

Theme 6: Coping Mechanisms and Safety Protocols

Sub-theme: Teamwork and Discipline

Participants emphasized that strong teamwork, discipline, and strict adherence to operational protocols are essential for ensuring safety during anti-drug operations. Literature supports the importance of team-based coordination in high-risk professions, demonstrating that shared mental models and structured teamwork significantly improve operational performance and reduce errors during critical incidents (Olma et al., 2024). Effective collaboration also strengthens communication and situational awareness among officers during enforcement activities.

Sub-theme: Careful Preparation and Briefings

Participants highlighted the importance of thorough pre-operation briefings, intelligence gathering, and risk assessments prior to conducting operations. Such preparation allows officers to anticipate potential threats and develop appropriate response strategies. Research suggests that systematic planning and structured leadership processes significantly enhance coordination and resilience in dynamic operational environments (Manzi, 2024). Careful preparation ultimately contributes to safer and more effective law enforcement operations.

Summary of Themes, Sub-themes, and Evidence

Theme	Sub-theme	Evidence
Theme 1 Resource and Logistical Constraints	Insufficient manpower and operational capacity	“The lack of manpower, equipment, and funding seriously affects our ability to fight drug-related crimes. In many cases, we’re forced to cover wide areas with very few personnel, using outdated equipment and relying on limited intel support.” (P6)
	Inadequate funding and budget support	“The budget we receive is frequently inadequate to cover surveillance, operations, food, transportation, and payments to confidential informants. Many times, we even use our own resources and mobility to ensure operations push through.” (P1)

Theme 2 Training and Adaptability	Evolving methods of drug trade	“One major challenge we now face is the use of technology in drug transactions. Some suspects in the province no longer meet in person—they use encrypted messaging apps and digital payments, making it difficult to track and confirm their activities.” (P6)
	Importance of continuous training	“First, we need more resources—not just in terms of equipment and personnel but also in training, especially in modern investigative techniques such as cybercrime and financial tracking.” (P8)
Theme 3 Limited Community Support	Fear and hesitation to report	“I believe public cooperation is very limited here in some parts of the city. In neighborhoods with heavy drug activities, people are afraid to report because they fear retaliation. Others simply don’t trust law enforcement, thinking their reports won’t bring real change or might even backfire on them.” (P5)
	Protection of drug personalities by families and communities	“...fear or distrust holds people back, especially when drug suspects are relatives or well-known in the barangay.” (P6)
Theme 4 Awareness and Preventive Education	Barangay-level campaigns and dialogues	“To improve this, we need stronger community engagement. Regular dialogues, drug awareness seminars, and showing visible results from operations can help build trust.” (P6)
	School and youth-focused programs	“On top of that, I strongly believe in prevention and education programs. If fewer people turn to drugs in the first place, the problem becomes much easier to manage.” (P7)
Theme 5 Dangers of Armed and Hostile Suspects	Violent resistance and armed suspects	“I remember one case where the suspect showed up armed during the transaction. He became suspicious and suddenly reached for his firearm tucked in his waist.” (P6)
	Risks from group operations and hostile environments	“I recall one operation where we were caught in an ambush while serving a warrant. What saved us was teamwork, clear communication, and sticking to protocol.” (P8)
Theme 6 Coping Mechanisms and Safety Protocols	Teamwork and discipline	“These encounters test our readiness, discipline, and coordination. When dealing with armed suspects, we always approach with proper planning, clear communication, and strict adherence to rules of engagement.” (P6)
	Careful preparation and briefings	“Before any mission, we conduct detailed briefings to study the area, possible hazards, and entry and exit points. We prepare by assigning clear roles, following the instructions of our team leader, and most importantly, praying for guidance and protection.” (P3)

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that law enforcers involved in anti-drug operations face persistent operational challenges, including limited manpower, insufficient funding, and inadequate logistical resources. These constraints reduce the ability of enforcement units to conduct sustained and proactive operations, particularly as drug networks

continue to adopt more adaptive and complex methods. Although some institutional support and training opportunities exist, they remain uneven and insufficient to fully address operational demands.

The findings also indicate limited community cooperation in anti-drug initiatives. Fear of retaliation, mistrust toward authorities, and the protection of suspected drug personalities by family or community members often discourage individuals from reporting illegal activities. This lack of cooperation weakens intelligence gathering and undermines preventive efforts.

Additionally, law enforcers regularly encounter high-risk situations such as armed resistance and hostile environments during operations. These conditions increase operational difficulty and place both physical and psychological strain on officers. Overall, the findings highlight the need for strengthened institutional support, improved community engagement, and enhanced safety measures to sustain effective anti-drug enforcement.

These findings underscore the importance of integrating theory-informed and context-sensitive approaches in strengthening anti-drug enforcement strategies, particularly in resource-limited provincial settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening the capacity of law enforcement agencies remains essential for improving anti-drug operations. Increased support in terms of manpower, modern equipment, and continuous training can enhance operational readiness and enable officers to respond more effectively to evolving drug-related activities.

Improving public cooperation is equally important. Expanding community-based initiatives, including awareness campaigns, barangay-level dialogues, and partnerships with local organizations, may help build trust and encourage citizens to share information that supports preventive and enforcement efforts.

Ensuring the safety and well-being of law enforcers should also remain a priority. Enhancing operational protocols, providing adequate protective equipment, and implementing regular risk-based training can improve officer preparedness. Post-operation debriefings and access to psychological support may further help officers manage the demands of high-risk enforcement duties while maintaining operational effectiveness.

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