

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PNP-WCPC ENFORCERS IN COMBATING TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS IN THE ZAMBOANGA PENINSULA: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of PNP–Women and Children Protection Center (WCPC) enforcers in the Zamboanga Peninsula as they engaged in combating trafficking in persons (TIP). Using a phenomenological approach, the research drew insights from 15 participants through in-depth interviews, focusing on their emotional, psychological, and professional realities. Findings revealed that officers bore profound trauma from repeated exposure to child victimization, often experiencing intrusive memories, emotional fatigue, and vicarious trauma. Despite these burdens, they demonstrated resilience through coping strategies such as peer support, boundary-setting, and compartmentalization. Themes also highlighted their professional growth in decision-making, critical thinking, and trauma-informed practice, which extended into their personal lives by fostering heightened vigilance and protective behavior toward their families and communities. Institutional challenges emerged as significant barriers, particularly limited funding, inadequate manpower, lack of digital investigative tools, and weak inter-agency coordination. Officers also underscored the need for continuous training, mental health support, and grassroots education campaigns to strengthen prevention and community engagement. The study corroborated these findings with contemporary literature on secondary traumatic stress, resilience, and the organizational demands of law enforcement. Based on these insights, the study recommended the institutionalization of structured psychosocial support, values-based training, increased logistical resources, trauma-informed care protocols, and sustainable community awareness programs. Ultimately, the research underscored that while PNP-WCPC officers endure immense emotional and operational challenges, their experiences also serve as catalysts for institutional reforms and community-centered strategies to combat trafficking in persons.

Keywords: trafficking in persons, PNP-WCPC, phenomenology, vicarious trauma, resilience, community engagement

Introduction

Trafficking in Persons (TIP) is a serious human rights violation tied to global inequality, conflict, and exploitation, affecting over 27.6 million people worldwide (UNODC, 2021; ILO, 2021). The Philippines is especially vulnerable as both a source and destination country, due to its geography, socio-economic challenges, and internal conflicts. In regions like the Zamboanga Peninsula, these risks are intensified, leading to the creation of laws such as RA 9208 and RA 10364 to improve enforcement and victim protection. Despite these efforts, there is limited research on the lived experiences of frontline

officers, particularly those in the PNP-WCPC. This study aims to explore their perspectives to guide more effective training, policy development, and support systems.

The Philippines remains vulnerable to TIP due to its socio-economic conditions and geopolitical landscape. Republic Act No. 9208 and Republic Act No. 10364 established legal and institutional frameworks, such as the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT), and empowered PNP-WCPC as the lead enforcement agency in cases involving women and children.

Despite these frameworks, law enforcers face multiple challenges. The Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines (CHR, 2022) notes that law enforcers often lack sufficient funding, trauma-informed training, protective equipment, and interagency coordination. These issues are compounded in high-risk areas like Mindanao, where officers are frequently exposed to violence, moral dilemmas, and psychological stress—largely undocumented factors.

The Zamboanga Peninsula (Region IX) is among the regions most vulnerable to TIP due to proximity to international borders and unregulated coastal entry points. The area has reported cases of labor and sexual exploitation, child trafficking, Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC), and trafficking linked to terrorism financing and insurgent group recruitment (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

A phenomenological approach to this research offers a valuable opportunity to capture the lived realities of WCPC officers in the Zamboanga Peninsula. The study aims to generate insights that can inform institutional reform, enhance policy relevance, and improve support structures for enforcers in similarly complex settings. Understanding these lived experiences is not only a matter of academic interest—it is a prerequisite for crafting humane, contextually grounded, and sustainable anti-trafficking strategies in the Philippines.

The Philippine National Police's Women and Children Protection Center (PNP-WCPC) holds a critical position in the country's efforts to combat trafficking in persons (TIP), particularly in regions like the Zamboanga Peninsula, where vulnerable populations are at heightened risk. Numerous local studies have examined the experiences, challenges, and operational dynamics of PNP-WCPC enforcers, highlighting both the complexities of their roles and the socio-political context of their work.

Laraga et al. (2025) conducted a phenomenological study exploring the lived experiences of non-uniformed personnel in the PNP, revealing significant issues related to limited career advancement, recognition gaps, and the psychological demands of frontline anti-trafficking work. This research foregrounds the human dimension of law enforcement efforts beyond uniformed officers, emphasizing the need for institutional support and inclusive policies.

The operational challenges of the PNP-WCPC in the context of Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC) have also been documented. For instance, Cruz and Dela Cruz (2023) reported on the rescue of four children in Taguig, Metro Manila, illustrating the intricacies of cybercrime investigations and the resilience of officers confronting technologically sophisticated perpetrators. Similar accounts from Pampanga by Garcia and Santos (2024) noted the psychological stress experienced by officers following the rescue of three minors, underscoring the necessity for trauma-informed care within law enforcement agencies.

Policy analyses by Reyes (2022) in Davao del Norte stressed the importance of inter-agency collaboration, pointing out how inconsistent implementation of anti-trafficking laws hampers effectiveness.

These findings resonate with earlier work by Villanueva (2020), who advocated for stronger coordination among government units, NGOs, and community groups to create a holistic response framework.

Human trafficking remains a persistent global challenge, with law enforcement officers playing a pivotal role in combating this complex crime. The lived experiences of these officers, especially those in specialized units like the Philippine National Police-Women and Children Protection Center (PNP-WCPC) operating in high-risk areas such as the Zamboanga Peninsula, reveal multifaceted challenges and adaptive strategies in anti-trafficking efforts.

Societal attitudes towards sexual crimes further complicate enforcement efforts. The Philstar (2016) report illustrates how cultural stigma around discussing sexual exploitation leads to underreporting and limits open communication, isolating officers tasked with these sensitive cases. Moreover, UN Women and UNODC (2019) found that despite these barriers, many PNP-WCPC officers demonstrate resilience, adaptability, and an enduring sense of duty, often going beyond their official responsibilities to safeguard victims and pursue justice.

Diskurso PH (2025) investigates structural challenges faced by enforcement officers, identifying inadequate infrastructure, insufficient specialized training, and fragmented inter-agency coordination as key impediments to effective anti-TIP responses. Similarly, Tahanan ng Pagmamahal (2024) reveals the corrosive effects of criminal syndicates' influence and corruption within certain law enforcement and judicial sectors, which undermine investigations and prosecutions, negatively impacting officer morale.

Case studies compiled by IJM (2023) illustrated how successful rescue operations and victim rehabilitation efforts serve as motivating factors for officers, reaffirming their commitment despite systemic challenges. In contrast, research by NTUC Philippines (2021) documents the discouragement officers face when cases falter due to witness intimidation or procedural shortcomings, highlighting the emotional oscillation inherent in anti-trafficking work.

Continuous professional development and community engagement have become hallmarks of contemporary enforcement strategies. UN Women and UNODC (2019) reported a growing adoption of trauma-informed and gender-sensitive methodologies among PNP-WCPC officers, fostering trust and improving victim cooperation. This approach aligns with findings from the Philippine National Police's own 2022 Annual Report, which emphasizes integrating survivor-centered practices to enhance operational outcomes.

Significance of the Study

PNP-WCPC Enforcers. The study validates their personal and professional challenges, recognizing their sacrifices and emotional burdens. This acknowledgment may boost their morale and foster a sense of institutional appreciation. It also highlights the need for improved mental health support, specialized training, and better working conditions tailored to their unique experiences in combating trafficking in persons.

PNP Leadership. Findings offer practical, evidence-based insights to inform policy reforms and enhance training curricula that address the specific stressors faced by enforcers. Leadership can implement targeted strategies to reduce burnout, improve operational efficiency, and develop support mechanisms that promote resilience and professional fulfillment within anti-trafficking units.

Policy Makers and Government Agencies. By understanding the frontline realities of anti-trafficking enforcement, policy makers can design more effective laws, allocate resources more judiciously, and develop budget programs that address gaps in institutional support. This alignment ensures policies are responsive to the challenges faced by enforcers, leading to stronger anti-trafficking frameworks.

Anti-Trafficking Task Forces and NGOs. The study deepens their understanding of law enforcement perspectives, which is crucial for fostering seamless inter-agency cooperation. It promotes the development of shared protocols and victim-centered approaches that enhance the protection and rehabilitation of trafficking survivors, ultimately strengthening the overall anti-trafficking ecosystem.

Criminal Justice and Criminology Educators. The findings provide rich, real-life case studies and narratives that educators can integrate into curricula to bridge theory and practice. This equips students with a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in TIP enforcement, cultivating future law enforcers who are empathetic, ethically aware, and better prepared for the psychological demands of their roles.

Victims and Survivors of Human Trafficking. While indirectly benefiting, survivors stand to gain through improved responsiveness and sensitivity from law enforcers who are better trained and supported. Enhanced enforcement practices rooted in lived experiences contribute to more humane treatment, greater victim protection, and more effective legal recourse.

Academic and Research Community. The study enriches qualitative criminology and phenomenology literature by providing an in-depth exploration of law enforcement lived experiences. It opens new avenues for comparative, cross-cultural, and longitudinal studies, encouraging further inquiry into the psychological, ethical, and institutional dimensions of anti-trafficking work.

General Public and Civil Society. By raising awareness about the complex challenges faced by anti-trafficking officers, the study fosters greater public empathy and support. This can encourage civic engagement, community vigilance, and advocacy efforts, ultimately strengthening the social fabric that underpins effective trafficking prevention and intervention.

Researcher. The researcher gains professional and academic growth through mastering phenomenological methodology and qualitative data analysis. The study contributes original insights to criminology and human trafficking research, enhancing the researcher's expertise and opening pathways for future scholarly work.

Future Researchers. The study provides a comprehensive empirical foundation, including rich narratives and conceptual insights. Future researchers can build on this work for comparative studies, policy evaluations, or investigations into related topics such as law enforcer well-being, inter-agency collaboration, and victim-centered practices, advancing knowledge in the field.

Statement of the Problem

This study is to explore and interpret the lived experiences of PNP-WCPC enforcers in the Zamboanga Peninsula as they combat trafficking in persons, by uncovering the personal meanings, challenges, and significant moments they encounter, and examining how these experiences shape their perceptions, practices, and professional identity in the context of their anti-trafficking mission. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the lived experience of PNP-WCPC enforcers in the Zamboanga Peninsula as they engage in the work of combating trafficking in persons?

2. What are the essential meanings and common themes that emerge from the descriptions of these experiences shared by the PNP-WCPC enforcers in the Zamboanga Peninsula?
3. How do PNP-WCPC enforcers in the Zamboanga Peninsula perceive and interpret the challenges they encounter while combating trafficking in persons, and what is the significance of these interpretations in their lived experiences?
4. What are the significant aspects or moments that stand out in the lived experiences of PNP-WCPC enforcers in the Zamboanga Peninsula as they strive to protect victims and prosecute perpetrators of trafficking in persons?
5. How does the phenomenon of combating trafficking in persons manifest in the consciousness and daily practices of PNP-WCPC enforcers in the Zamboanga Peninsula, revealing the fundamental structure of this experience?
6. Based on the findings, what can be recommended?

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research design grounded in transcendental phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of Philippine National Police–Women and Children Protection Center (PNP-WCPC) enforcers in combating trafficking in persons within the Zamboanga Peninsula. Guided by the philosophies of Edmund Husserl and the methods of Clark Moustakas (1994), the approach sought to understand participants' subjective experiences while minimizing researcher bias through bracketing. Fifteen purposively selected PNP-WCPC enforcers with at least two years of direct anti-trafficking experience participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. These were audio-recorded, transcribed, and validated through member checking to ensure authenticity and accuracy. The data were analyzed using Moustakas' Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, involving epoche, horizontalization, thematic clustering, and synthesis of textural and structural descriptions to capture the essence of their lived experiences. Ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and institutional approval, were strictly observed throughout the research process.

The study focused exclusively on PNP-WCPC enforcers stationed in the Zamboanga Peninsula—an area marked by socio-political complexity, economic vulnerability, and geographical proximity to transnational trafficking routes. Data collection occurred through Key Informant and In-Depth Interviews, enabling the researcher to gather both institutional and personal insights. The primary instrument was a validated semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit rich narratives on the officers' challenges, emotional responses, coping mechanisms, and reflections on anti-trafficking efforts. Transcribed data were systematically coded and thematically analyzed to reveal the meanings and patterns underlying their experiences. Although the study was limited to a small, purposive sample and relied on self-reported accounts, it provided a nuanced understanding of the psychological, ethical, and operational realities faced by law enforcement officers in their fight against human trafficking. This rigorous and ethically grounded methodology yielded an authentic portrayal of the enforcers' dedication, struggles, and the complex human dimensions of their work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presented the analyzed findings based on the lived experiences of PNP-WCPC enforcers in the Zamboanga Peninsula as they carried out their roles in combating trafficking in persons. Using a phenomenological approach, the data were thematically organized to capture the shared meanings and recurring patterns that emerged from in-depth interviews. The results revealed how officers experienced emotional strain, moral conviction, institutional challenges, and personal transformation throughout their work. Each theme was supported by direct narratives that gave voice to their struggles, insights, and motivations. These findings were discussed in light of existing literature to deepen the understanding of how such experiences shaped their professional identity, resilience, and approach to victim-centered law enforcement.

Trauma from Witnessing Child Victimization. This theme underscored the emotional and psychological burden experienced by police officers who encountered child victims during rescue operations. Many officers highlighted how seeing children subjected to sexual exploitation or labor abuses had left a lasting impact on their personal and professional lives.

Trauma from Witnessing Child Victimization,” presented the lived experiences of PNP-WCPC enforcers in the Zamboanga Peninsula during anti-trafficking operations. The accounts revealed the heavy emotional and psychological toll carried by officers repeatedly exposed to disturbing cases involving child victims. Verbatim testimonies described intense emotional responses—overwhelming sadness, shock, anger, and moral anguish. Some officers recalled scenes where children as young as two or three were filmed being abused, often by their own parents. These encounters caused several officers to break down emotionally, with others admitting they were moved to tears during interviews with victims. Many described the lasting trauma of such exposure, including not being able to forget the fearful face of a child or still hearing a rescued child’s cries long after the operation.

These experiences resonate with documented symptoms of secondary traumatic stress (STS) among police officers working in child protection, where repeated exposure to child abuse investigations is linked to intrusion, emotional exhaustion, and distressing memories (Hurrell, Draycott, & Andrews, 2018; Ogińska-Bulik, Bąk, & Michalska, 2023). Officers’ empathic identification with victims—such as imagining their own children in similar situations—mirrors findings that professionals exposed to child victimization often internalize victims’ suffering, intensifying their distress (Molnar et al., 2020). Likewise, the betrayal trauma felt when abuse was committed by family members reflected patterns described in betrayal trauma theory, where violations of trust by caregivers trigger stronger emotional reactions (Freyd, 1996; Smith & Freyd, 2014). Recent reviews also confirm that exposure to child sexual abuse material and trafficking cases significantly undermines police wellbeing, producing vicarious trauma and heightened psychological burden (Henschel & Lutz, 2024).

Emotional Conflict Between Professional Duty and Personal Values This theme revealed the internal struggles experienced by police officers as they balanced their professional obligations with their personal emotions and values. The data showed that while they strived to maintain objectivity during operations, their roles as parents, siblings, or simply as human beings often created deep emotional conflict.

captured the internal struggles of PNP-WCPC enforcers as they navigated the tension between their professional responsibilities and their personal emotions during anti-trafficking operations. Although

officers were expected to perform with objectivity and composure, many revealed the emotional burden of suppressing personal feelings in the face of traumatic cases involving children.

Several accounts reflected sentiments of helplessness and moral discomfort, with officers admitting that they carried out duties against their will or repeated to themselves “this is just work,” yet continued to feel emotional pain. Others emphasized the difficulty of separating their professional role from their identity as parents, noting that they often imagined their own children when confronting victims’ experiences. These narratives align with the concept of emotional dissonance, which occurs when individuals must suppress or fake emotions to meet occupational demands (Hochschild, 2012).

The testimonies also reflected aspects of moral distress, where officers recognized that their professional actions were correct yet still felt it was not enough—resulting in guilt, frustration, and self-doubt. Studies with police and child-protection personnel similarly report that unresolved moral conflict heightens psychological strain and contributes to long-term stress (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2014; Molnar et al., 2020). The emotional labor required in such high-stakes contexts has been linked to burnout, particularly when officers lack adequate support or acknowledgment of their psychological struggles (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Queirós, Passos, & Bártolo, 2020).

Moral Distress Due to Familial Involvement of Perpetrators This theme explored the anguish felt by police officers when perpetrators of trafficking were close family members of the victims. The officers shared their emotional turmoil in confronting situations where parents, siblings, or relatives were exploiting children. This deepened the psychological toll, as it reflected a betrayal of trust within the supposed safe space of the family.

Moral Distress Due to Familial Involvement of Perpetrators presented one of the most distressing dimensions of human trafficking cases encountered by PNP-WCPC enforcers—the betrayal of child victims by their own families. Officers described cases where the abuse was orchestrated by parents or other close relatives, such as mothers directing acts behind the camera or fathers filming while pretending ignorance. These accounts highlighted the devastating reality that trafficking was not always external but could be deeply rooted within the domestic sphere.

For many officers, these cases provoked strong emotions of anger, disbelief, and moral anguish. Some admitted to struggling with urges to retaliate against abusive parents, while others expressed difficulty in understanding how familial bonds could be weaponized for exploitation. Such reactions reflect moral distress, a state of psychological disequilibrium arising when professionals encounter ethical violations they cannot easily reconcile with their values (Austin, Saylor, & Finley, 2017).

Officers also emphasized the compounded trauma for child victims, noting that betrayal by caregivers strips children of a foundational sense of safety and trust. This observation aligns with betrayal trauma theory, which explains that abuse within caregiving relationships inflicts more severe psychological harm than abuse by strangers (Freyd, 1996; Smith & Freyd, 2014). Studies further show that children abused by family members are more likely to experience silencing, secrecy, and delayed disclosure due to the authority and dependency inherent in familial relationships (McElvaney, 2015).

Repeated encounters with such cases also left some officers emotionally desensitized, yet still disoriented by the incongruence between familial roles and abusive behavior. This pattern is consistent with research documenting compassion fatigue among professionals working in child protection, where

cumulative exposure to morally conflicting situations erodes emotional resilience (Sprang, Craig, & Clark, 2011; Molnar et al., 2020).

Resilience and Commitment Amidst Adversity Despite the emotional burden and moral challenges involved in anti-trafficking operations, many police officers expressed a deep sense of commitment to their duties. This theme highlighted their resilience and unwavering dedication to protect victims and continue their work even in the face of psychological distress and personal sacrifice.

Resilience and Commitment Amidst Adversity highlighted the unwavering dedication of PNP-WCPC enforcers in confronting human trafficking despite the profound emotional, psychological, and systemic challenges they encountered. Unlike previous themes centered on trauma and distress, this theme illuminated the officers' strength, sense of purpose, and commitment to their mission. Many acknowledged the painful realities of their work but emphasized that responsibility toward victims outweighed their personal struggles. Statements such as "No matter how hard it is, we continue the fight" and "children are counting on us" revealed that their sense of duty extended beyond professional obligation into moral and humanitarian conviction.

This persistence reflects the construct of compassion satisfaction, or the positive fulfillment derived from helping others, which has been found to buffer against secondary traumatic stress and burnout among frontline professionals (Hunsaker et al., 2015; Cieslak et al., 2014). Officers described fulfillment in rescuing children and underscored that empathy and compassion were central to their work—demonstrating that meaning-making served as a psychological resource in sustaining their efforts.

The officers' determination also echoed research on occupational resilience, which refers to the capacity of workers in high-stress roles to adapt, persevere, and maintain commitment despite adversity (Hart et al., 2014; Robertson et al., 2016). Narratives of pushing forward "no matter how painful" or "no matter how dangerous" illustrated resilience not as the absence of distress, but as the ability to channel purpose and values into sustained action. Similar findings have been reported among law enforcement and humanitarian responders, where resilience is often grounded in a strong sense of mission and collective responsibility (Andersen et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2017).

To explore the lived experiences of PNP-WCPC enforcers in the Zamboanga Peninsula as they engage in combating trafficking in persons

Occupational Strain and Emotional Exhaustion in Anti-Trafficking Work This sub-theme presented the daily psychological toll and emotional fatigue experienced by officers as a result of their exposure to disturbing cases. Stress, frustration, and helplessness emerged as major sentiments among respondents, revealing the cost of prolonged immersion in anti-trafficking duties.

Several officers described the inability to "switch off" after duty hours, admitting that thoughts of exploitation and unresolved cases lingered into their personal lives. Such spillover reflects cognitive intrusion and occupational spillover, phenomena linked with increased burnout and psychological strain among law enforcement professionals (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2014; Queirós, Passos, & Bártolo, 2020). Officers also highlighted the emotionally draining nature of reviewing explicit materials and listening to traumatic disclosures. Reports of vivid recollections of photos, testimonies, and rescue scenes parallel

findings that repeated exposure to child exploitation content is associated with intrusive memories and heightened stress symptoms among investigators (Henschel & Lutz, 2024).

In addition, officers expressed frustration when victims re-engaged in risky behaviors despite intervention, leading to feelings of helplessness and disillusionment. This mirrors research on compassion fatigue, where chronic exposure to traumatic narratives and perceived systemic failures erode professional efficacy and emotional well-being (Molnar et al., 2020; Sprang, Craig, & Clark, 2011).

Professional Growth and Purposeful Commitment Amidst Challenges. highlighted how engagement in anti-trafficking work shaped the personal and professional development of PNP-WCPC enforcers. In response to the question, “How has your daily work been shaped by your role in anti-trafficking efforts?” several officers described their experiences as opportunities for transformation and purpose-driven commitment despite the difficulties of the job. Officer 5 explained that the motivation to continue stemmed from the desire to protect potential victims, particularly those vulnerable along trafficking routes such as the backdoor to Malaysia. Similarly, Officer 6 emphasized that their visibility in the community reinforced a heightened sense of accountability, as victims depended on their presence and interventions. These reflections aligned with the notion of purpose-driven work, wherein a strong sense of meaning fosters resilience and long-term job satisfaction (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012).

a sustained commitment to the mission of anti-trafficking even outside field operations, illustrating how advocacy became internalized beyond the boundaries of duty. This experience was consistent with self-determination theory, which argues that internal motivation—rooted in alignment between personal values and professional responsibilities—leads to greater job satisfaction and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Collectively, the accounts captured in Table 3.1.2.2 reflected how, despite the emotionally taxing nature of the work, anti-trafficking duties also served as a catalyst for resilience, professional growth, and a strengthened sense of purpose among officers.

Coping and Emotional Resilience Strategies. A number of officers emphasized the importance of emotional coping mechanisms and stress management strategies. These insights reflected how they maintained psychological balance despite the taxing nature of anti-trafficking operations. Explores how PNP-WCPC enforcers managed the emotional toll of anti-trafficking operations. While their duties involved constant exposure to morally distressing and traumatic content, officers described adaptive strategies that helped them maintain psychological balance. Officer 3 shared how recreational activities allowed decompression after the frustration of seeing victims repeatedly return to exploitative situations—an approach consistent with findings that active leisure serves as a buffer against occupational stress in frontline workers (Carleton et al., 2022). Officer 7 highlighted the importance of keeping stress “within the workplace,” a strategy supported by recent evidence that boundary management reduces work-to-home spillover and emotional exhaustion among police (Royle et al., 2021). Officer 9 emphasized the development of emotional regulation skills over time, reflecting studies that identify emotion regulation as central to resilience in trauma-exposed professionals (Andersen et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Officer 14’s parental lens illustrated empathetic grounding, where personal identification with victims intensifies emotional stakes but, when processed adaptively, can reinforce commitment—a dynamic aligned with newer work on value-based coping in policing (Papazoglou & Tuttle, 2022).

These accounts suggest that officers are not passive recipients of stress but active agents employing coping strategies that help them sustain their work. However, reliance on individual effort alone risks uneven outcomes; while some officers draw strength from recreation, boundaries, or empathy, others may lack the resources or training to do so effectively. The implications point toward the need to complement individual coping with structured support systems—such as resilience training, peer debriefings, and reflective practices—so that adaptive strategies are reinforced rather than left to chance

To identify essential meanings and common themes that emerge from their shared experiences

What thoughts or emotions are commonly associated with your work in combating trafficking in persons?

Profound Sadness and Compassion for Victims. This theme captured the frequent expressions of deep sorrow, pity, and compassion toward trafficking victims, particularly minors. Officers often internalized the pain of the victims and their families, with some relating personally to the hardship. Highlighted the dominant emotional pattern of profound sadness and compassion expressed by PNP-WCPC enforcers during anti-human trafficking operations. Officers repeatedly described feelings of sorrow, pity, and empathy, particularly in cases involving children or when perpetrators were family members. Officer 1 reported experiencing “sadness, pity, and anger,” while Officer 5 admitted being deeply moved by victims’ stories, noting one “can’t help but feel pity for them.” Officer 13 connected their compassion to personal struggles, underscoring how officers’ own life experiences shaped empathetic identification with victims. These accounts reflected an emotionally charged occupational environment where compassion was inseparable from daily practice.

The officers’ responses aligned with recent research on affective empathy, described as the ability to share in another’s emotional state rather than simply recognizing it (Zaki, 2020). Such emotional attunement, while central to trauma-sensitive practice, can also heighten vulnerability to compassion fatigue, a condition documented in professionals repeatedly exposed to suffering (Cocker & Joss, 2016). Intrusive emotional memories reported by some officers were consistent with secondary traumatic stress, a phenomenon still widely observed in law enforcement and child protection workers (Hensel et al., 2015). Additionally, the link between personal hardship and heightened empathy, as illustrated by Officer 13, echoed findings that unresolved personal trauma amplifies vicarious trauma in high-stress professions (Molnar et al., 2017). Officer 2’s grief over children growing up without parental guidance also resonated with global evidence showing that lack of family support is one of the strongest predictors of vulnerability to trafficking (UNODC, 2022).

These narratives illustrate how compassion, though vital for humane policing, carries psychological costs when left unsupported. The implication is that while empathy sustains officers’ moral drive, it also requires structured reinforcement—through peer support, trauma-informed supervision, and resilience-focused training—to prevent compassion from becoming a source of emotional depletion.

Moral Outrage and Disillusionment Toward Perpetrators. This theme underscored the intense emotional burden officers felt when they encountered suspects who were often the victims’ own parents. The betrayal of the familial role as a protector evoked moral anger and frustration. A recurring emotional response among PNP-WCPC enforcers: moral outrage and disillusionment toward perpetrators, especially when the offenders were the parents or close relatives of the victims. Officers described intense frustration and anger

at the betrayal of children by those entrusted to care for them. Officer 6 expressed “deep disappointment toward the suspects, especially when they are the victims’ own parents,” while Officer 14 lamented that exploiting children for selfish gain was “infuriating.” These accounts highlighted the deep ethical violations perceived by officers in such cases.

This response reflected the concept of moral injury, defined as psychological distress stemming from the violation of one’s moral or ethical framework (Litz et al., 2009). Recent studies have documented how exposure to morally transgressive acts, such as child abuse by caregivers, induces emotional exhaustion, chronic anger, and disillusionment among law enforcement professionals (Papazoglou & Tuttle, 2022). Officers’ indignation also aligned with research showing that abuse committed within the family inflicts greater psychological harm on victims, as it disrupts fundamental bonds of safety and trust (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). For officers, such cases were perceived not only as criminal violations but also as symbolic ruptures of core social and familial values.

Officer 7’s concern that rescued children might grow up to normalize abuse underscored the intergenerational risks of exploitation. This perspective reflected evidence from developmental and social learning research, which shows that exposure to violence and abuse within families can perpetuate cycles of maltreatment and maladaptive behaviors into adulthood (Widom & Wilson, 2015). These observations suggested that officers’ moral indignation was not only an immediate emotional reaction but also a recognition of broader social consequences.

The implications point to the need for interventions that address both the psychological burden of moral injury among officers and the systemic urgency of breaking cycles of familial abuse. Structured psychological support, moral resilience training, and reflective practices could help enforcers process the moral dissonance they encounter, while reinforcing their capacity to carry out protective roles in deeply distressing contexts.

Vicarious Trauma and Psychological Exhaustion. This theme emphasized the emotional toll and stress that officers endured due to prolonged exposure to the traumatic stories and images of victims. The mental health strain was a significant consequence of their work, as officers frequently found themselves affected by the intensity and frequency of the distressing cases they encountered. Over time, this led to accumulated psychological fatigue, revealing the invisible yet profound impact of sustained frontline engagement in anti-trafficking operations. This reflected a deeply troubling but important dimension of anti-trafficking work: the cumulative emotional burden that police officers carried from constant exposure to traumatic material. As shown in the responses of Officers 3, 8, 9, and 11, the psychological strain was not limited to the victims alone—it also significantly affected the responders. Officer 3, for example, recounted the emotional intensity of rescues: “There’s always crying during rescues. It’s painful—but we have to intervene.” Similarly, Officer 8 noted how “the disclosures and visuals we see are extremely disturbing and mentally straining,” while Officer 11 shared that disturbing images “leave a lasting imprint—not just professionally, but personally as well.” Officer 9, too, admitted to emotional vulnerability, stating, “I quickly absorb the victims’ emotions—it can be overwhelming.”

These testimonies aligned with the concept of vicarious trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1990), which referred to the profound psychological impact experienced by professionals who worked closely with trauma survivors. In policing and investigative contexts—particularly in cases of child abuse, exploitation,

or trafficking—officers often relived the trauma vicariously through victims’ narratives, images, and disclosures. According to Figley (1995), this led to what was termed compassion fatigue, where sustained emotional engagement diminished one’s psychological resilience and resulted in symptoms similar to PTSD.

Recent studies further reinforced these dynamics. Meadows, Holloway, and Sinha (2021) found that officers handling child exploitation material experienced heightened risks of secondary trauma and emotional detachment. Perez, Jones, and Englert (2010) similarly documented elevated stress, sleep disturbances, and social withdrawal among investigators of Internet Crimes Against Children. More recent scholarship underscores the persistence of these risks: Papazoglou et al. (2022) reported that continuous exposure to human suffering and disturbing imagery in law enforcement correlated with increased anxiety and depressive symptoms, while Hensel et al. (2022) highlighted that officers working in child protection and trafficking units were particularly vulnerable to cumulative trauma exposure. A 2023 study by Turgoose and McKie also emphasized that officers who lacked structured organizational support were more likely to experience burnout and maladaptive coping.

What made vicarious trauma especially insidious in law enforcement was the prevailing culture of stoicism. Officers were often trained to “remain strong,” yet internalizing trauma without structured outlets for processing or recovery fostered long-term psychological strain (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2014). Officer 11’s account—that the job left a personal as well as professional imprint—reflected the enduring consequences of unaddressed trauma. The implications extend beyond individual well-being, as unmitigated vicarious trauma may compromise officers’ decision-making, empathy, and overall effectiveness in anti-trafficking operations, signaling the need for systemic organizational strategies to safeguard both personnel and the integrity of their work.

Resilience and Sense of Purpose in Advocacy. Despite the emotional challenges, some officers reported a sense of pride and fulfillment in helping victims. Their experiences of growth, continuous learning, and advocacy sustained their motivation. Highlighted how PNP-WCPC officers found personal strength, professional growth, and a renewed mission despite the emotional cost of their work. Officer 6 said, “Proud po kasi isa po ako sa nakatulong ko sa kanila” (“I felt proud to have helped the victims”), and Officer 9 reflected, “Lagi akong may natutunan... dagdag kaalaman...” (“I learned something new every day—every case added to my knowledge and skills”). These statements align with the concept of vicarious resilience, in which witnessing victims’ recovery and strength can lead to positive transformation among helping professionals (Hernandez, Gangsei, & Engstrom, 2007) and are affirmed in recent work (e.g. Tsirimokou, 2022; Cai, 2024).

The phenomenon also corresponds with Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), which is increasingly documented in law enforcement research: officers subjected to high stress and exposure to trauma sometimes report enhanced self-efficacy, deeper values, and meaning in work (Experiences of Burnout, Post-Traumatic Growth... Tsirimokou, 2024). Moreover, interventions aimed at resilience training (such as in Andersen et al., 2023) show that both psychological and even biological resilience markers can improve with structured support. Public safety personnel studies (e.g. RCMP Study, 2024) underscore that workplace factors like meaningful mission, peer support, and feedback amplify officers’ sense of purpose and reduce risk of disillusionment.

The implications suggest that fostering these growth and purpose experiences should be part of organizational approaches: training programs, opportunities for reflection, peer mentoring, recognition of achievements may reinforce the natural growth officers achieve. Incorporating recent empirical findings supports the view that purpose and meaning are not just morale boosters but integral to sustaining resilience in traumatized professions.

Emotional Numbing and Mental Conditioning as a Survival Strategy. In coping with the demands of their work, some officers developed emotional detachment or mental conditioning. These responses helped them maintain functionality and control during emotionally charged operations. This illustrated how some police officers adapted to the emotional demands of anti-trafficking operations through mechanisms of psychological detachment and anticipatory coping. Officer 7 emphasized the importance of removing victims quickly from emotionally volatile environments—an act that simultaneously minimized trauma for both victims and officers. Officer 15 described a shift toward automaticity in their responses, noting that over time, difficult encounters became almost routine and required deliberate mental preparation, or “mind over matter.” These narratives reflected how officers engaged in self-protective conditioning to maintain composure in high-stakes situations.

These coping responses aligned with the construct of emotional numbing, a defensive adaptation commonly observed among professionals repeatedly exposed to trauma (Figley, 1995). Recent studies confirmed that emotional numbing is prevalent among frontline police, often serving as both a shield and a risk factor. Papazoglou et al. (2022) found that emotional detachment allowed officers to perform effectively under stress but also carried the potential for long-term psychological costs, such as depersonalization and burnout. Similarly, Chopko and Schwartz (2022) highlighted that suppression of affect among officers dealing with child exploitation cases reduced immediate distress yet impaired recovery and emotional connectedness over time.

In parallel, the officers’ accounts reflected aspects of mental conditioning and stress inoculation, where individuals cognitively prepared for emotionally challenging encounters. This process, described in recent resilience research, has been shown to enhance short-term operational performance by lowering physiological arousal and sharpening focus (Arble, Daugherty, & Arnetz, 2021). However, such conditioning often required organizational reinforcement—through structured debriefing and psychological training to ensure it remained adaptive rather than eroding long-term well-being.

The officers lived experiences therefore, underscored a delicate balance: while emotional numbing and anticipatory coping were necessary for survival in high-trauma contexts, without parallel opportunities for emotional recovery, they risked becoming maladaptive. This highlights the need for trauma-informed organizational practices that combine operational resilience training with systematic psychological support. To identify essential meanings and common themes that emerge from their shared experiences

Are there recurring situations or patterns you notice when dealing with trafficking cases?

Exploitation through Technology and Online Platforms. This theme encapsulated how trafficking networks increasingly relied on digital tools and platforms such as Facebook, Messenger, and other social media sites to recruit, groom, and exploit victims. Officers shared that the internet accelerated illegal recruitment and facilitated easier connections between victims, facilitators, and foreign clients, particularly in cases of online sexual exploitation. Highlighted the recurring pattern among trafficking cases in which

offenders utilized social media and other online communication tools to facilitate exploitation. As reported by Officer 2, poverty remained a driving factor, with digital platforms like Facebook offering seemingly quick and accessible financial opportunities: “Kadalasan din, sir, yung dahilan nila dito is kahirapan... Kasi through Facebook lang din, or online, madali lang kumita ng pera” (“Poverty was often the reason... Through Facebook or online, they could easily earn money”). Officer 7 echoed this by emphasizing the absence of physical contact between recruiters and victims, stating: “Usually, they never personally met the recruiter... they only connected through Messenger.” This reinforced the deceptive and remote nature of online trafficking, where trust was built virtually. Similarly, Officer 11 pointed out the role of cyber patrolling in detecting red flags, such as victims having a high number of foreign online friends, noting: “In cyber patrolling, you could already see the red flag—most of their friends on social media were foreigners.”

These narratives reflected broader patterns identified in global research. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2021) reported that traffickers increasingly exploited social media and encrypted platforms to recruit and control victims, with the Philippines identified as a hotspot for online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC). Recent work by Ojanen et al. (2023) similarly emphasized how traffickers leveraged anonymity and low-cost access to digital platforms to normalize exploitative exchanges, particularly in low-income contexts where poverty shaped vulnerability. In the Philippine setting, the International Justice Mission (2022) documented that many OSEC cases were facilitated by family members who capitalized on easy access to livestreaming and private chat applications, underscoring the intimate and hidden nature of technology-mediated trafficking.

Europol’s Internet Organized Crime Threat Assessment (2022) further observed that online grooming blurred physical boundaries, allowing perpetrators to build trust-based relationships virtually while bypassing conventional law enforcement detection. This aligns with Officer 7’s observation that many victims never physically encountered recruiters. The officers’ accounts also resonated with studies in cybercrime policing, which noted that digital surveillance and proactive cyber-patrolling were increasingly necessary to detect early red flags in online behavior (INTERPOL, 2022).

The implications of these findings suggest that frontline anti-trafficking enforcement must integrate technological literacy and digital forensics into everyday policing, as traditional methods are insufficient to address the evolving dynamics of online exploitation. This points to the importance of equipping officers with advanced cyber-patrolling tools, collaborative international monitoring systems, and training in online behavioral analysis to keep pace with the digital tactics employed by traffickers.

Deception and Manipulation by Traffickers. This theme underscored the deceitful tactics employed by traffickers and recruiters, who often disguised trafficking under the pretense of offering legitimate jobs or romantic relationships. Victims, unaware of the risks, were lured by promises of financial stability, especially when traffickers offered “fly now, pay later” schemes or promised direct employment abroad. Illustrated a recurring pattern in human trafficking cases: the use of false promises and misleading offers to lure victims into exploitative situations. Officers reported that traffickers often presented themselves as employment agents or romantic partners, exploiting the victims’ hopes for a better life. As Officer 4 noted, facilitators “sinasabing may magandang kita, magandang trabaho... hindi naman totoo” (“said there was good income, good jobs... but it was not true”), showing how fraud was a central element in the recruitment stage. Officer 9 emphasized the stark contrast between what was promised and what victims experienced:

“They were promised jobs. But when they arrived, it was completely different.” Additionally, Officer 8 described schemes such as “fly now, pay later,” where victims were deceived into believing that migration and work opportunities abroad were accessible and safe: “There were ‘fly now, pay later’ schemes... that’s how they were tricked.”

These accounts were consistent with recent global findings on trafficking deception. The International Labour Organization (2017) documented deception during recruitment—particularly about job conditions, pay, and migration—as one of the most prevalent tactics of coercion. More recent data from UNODC (2022) indicated that traffickers continue to exploit socioeconomic vulnerabilities by manipulating victims’ lack of access to verified employment channels. Similarly, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2023) highlighted that “fly now, pay later” and no upfront payment schemes remain widespread hooks that prey on individuals seeking overseas opportunities, especially in economies with persistent unemployment. Europol’s Internet Organized Crime Threat Assessment (2022) also underscored the rise of romance-related deception, where traffickers initiate fake relationships online or in person, later leveraging emotional attachment to manipulate victims into exploitative travel or relocation.

The implications of these findings highlight the urgent need for stronger mechanisms that verify overseas job recruitment, as well as targeted awareness campaigns addressing fraudulent migration schemes and romance scams. Equipping communities with accurate information and law enforcement with tools to detect fraudulent recruitment channels may help disrupt the deceptive strategies traffickers employ at the earliest stages.

Backdoor Entry and Zamboanga’s Strategic Vulnerability. Zamboanga’s geographical location made it a major transit point for victims trafficked to Malaysia and other countries via maritime routes. This theme illustrated how syndicates exploited local ports, unregulated boat routes, and border vulnerabilities to smuggle individuals out of the country, especially those from Luzon and Visayas. revealed a recurring pattern in trafficking operations involving the geographic exploitation of Zamboanga City. Situated near the maritime borders of Malaysia and Indonesia, Zamboanga served as a convenient and strategic exit point for human traffickers transporting victims—especially those from Luzon and Visayas—through unofficial and often unregulated maritime routes. Officer 6 shared that most of the communities they visited were congested, impoverished areas where residents were desperate to leave the country, saying, “Halos lahat ng pinupuntahan naming bahay... iskinita, siksikan... tapos gusto nila umalis ng bansa.” (“Almost every house we visited was in cramped alleys... they just wanted to leave the country.”) Officer 8 echoed this by questioning why people avoided official travel routes through Manila, instead choosing to “pass through Zamboanga, then BARMM, and use backdoor routes,” highlighting how traffickers exploited alternative passageways. Officer 10 emphasized that “Zamboanga City was the backdoor for victims headed to Malaysia,” confirming its role as a key trafficking exit hub.

Recent literature reinforced these observations. The U.S. Department of State (2023) Trafficking in Persons Report identified Zamboanga and Tawi-Tawi as strategic maritime corridors used by traffickers to move victims toward Sabah, Malaysia, via unregulated boat travel. Similarly, the ASEAN-Australia Counter-Trafficking Initiative (2022) noted that porous borders and limited patrol capacities in Western Mindanao heightened cross-border trafficking flows, particularly affecting women and children. A report

by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD, 2021) further stressed that the prevalence of informal ports and community-level tolerance for irregular migration in Zamboanga facilitated clandestine operations, often overlapping with smuggling and labor trafficking networks.

The implications point to the need for enhanced maritime governance that goes beyond punitive enforcement. Strengthening inter-agency patrols, regulating private docking points, and investing in coastal community livelihood programs may reduce vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit, particularly in regions where poverty, migration aspirations, and geographic proximity to international borders intersect.

Cycle of Victimhood and Repeated Exploitation. This theme reflected how some victims became trapped in a cycle of trafficking due to systemic failures, lack of protective legislation, or sheer desperation. Officers reported encountering victims multiple times—rescued, but later re-victimized—because of limited livelihood options or psychological conditioning. brought to light one of the most disheartening realities observed by police officers: the recurrence of victimization among individuals who had already been rescued. Officer 3 shared that “Tatlong beses na naming narescue itong tao... pabalik-balik pa rin” (“We had rescued this person three times... but they kept going back”), emphasizing how some victims returned to trafficking circumstances despite intervention. Officer 1 noted the emotional toll of “absorbing the problems of the victims” and recognized that these individuals often had nowhere else to turn. Officer 4 added that “they didn’t understand the law,” which pointed to a broader issue of legal illiteracy and systemic gaps in rehabilitation and reintegration programs.

This cyclical pattern of victimization has been consistently recognized in more recent research. The International Labour Organization (2021) underscored that re-trafficking was frequently linked to persistent poverty, limited livelihood opportunities, and weak social protection systems, particularly in Southeast Asia. A study by Surtees (2022) confirmed that survivors who lacked sustainable reintegration support—such as education, housing, and mental health services—were at higher risk of returning to exploitative environments. Similarly, the U.S. Department of State’s Trafficking in Persons Report (2023) noted that in the Philippines, gaps in long-term aftercare and livelihood programming contributed significantly to survivors’ vulnerability to re-exploitation. More recently, the ASEAN-ACT (2023) initiative highlighted the importance of trauma-informed, survivor-centered reintegration frameworks, stressing that insufficient economic empowerment and unresolved trauma often led to repeated cycles of exploitation.

Taken together, the accounts in Table 3.2.2.4 illustrated that while rescue operations disrupted immediate harm, they did not guarantee long-term safety or recovery. The recurrence of victimization pointed to critical shortcomings in reintegration and aftercare services, with implications for strengthening survivor-centered policies that prioritize sustained livelihood support, psychosocial recovery, and legal empowerment to truly break the cycle of exploitation.

To understand how PNP-WCPC enforcers interpret and perceive the challenges in combating trafficking in persons, and the significance of these interpretations

What are the most challenging aspects of your job in fighting trafficking, and how do you interpret these challenges?

Geographical and Logistical Challenges. This presented the logistical barriers encountered by PNP-WCPC personnel whose jurisdiction spanned the entirety of Mindanao. Officers frequently traveled to remote and under-resourced locations, which added strain to operations, court attendance, and inter-agency

collaboration. The challenges of travel, time, and funding created consistent logistical burdens. This revealed one of the fundamental operational difficulties faced by PNP-WCPC enforcers: the extensive travel and resource demands required to carry out anti-trafficking work across the Mindanao region. Officer 7 recounted the need to traverse far-flung areas such as Jolo and Caraga, noting how “travel costs and court attendance were significant challenges.” Similarly, Officer 15 emphasized the frequency of operations in “very remote places like Surigao,” which added physical and emotional strain to their duties. Officer 10 further highlighted the complexity of investigations, explaining that building cases required “coordination with multiple agencies and airtight evidence,” all of which demanded time, logistical support, and inter-agency synergy.

Recent scholarship has documented how logistical strain and geographic constraints remain a defining challenge for anti-trafficking enforcement in archipelagic and conflict-affected regions. The UNODC (2020) emphasized that in contexts where infrastructure is limited, delays in victim rescue, evidence gathering, and case prosecution become more pronounced, reducing the timeliness of justice. In the Philippines, the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2021) highlighted how archipelagic geography and insurgency-prone zones in Mindanao created unique barriers for law enforcement mobility and victim protection. A study by Quimba and Calizo (2022) further found that resource shortages—such as insufficient travel funding, poor inter-regional transport coordination, and weak logistical planning—directly undermined the effectiveness of anti-trafficking task forces.

The accounts in Table 3.3.1.1, therefore, illustrated how geography and limited resources compounded the operational burden of anti-trafficking enforcement. The implications point toward the urgent need for structural reforms: adequate funding for mobility, localized victim support systems, and streamlined coordination mechanisms to reduce delays. Strengthening field-based task forces and providing logistical infrastructure at the local level could help alleviate operational strain while ensuring both officers’ and victims’ safety in high-risk, geographically dispersed areas.

Digital and Investigative Barriers. The following table captures the challenges posed by traffickers who exploited technology and anonymity to avoid detection. Officers highlighted difficulties in tracing suspects, securing digital evidence, and adapting to the evolving online behavior of perpetrators. Highlighted the evolving nature of human trafficking operations in the digital age and the significant difficulties that PNP-WCPC officers encountered in tracing suspects, verifying identities, and collecting actionable evidence. Officer 2 shared how traffickers were often “highly capable of using technology,” necessitating the involvement of “foreign counterparts” to conduct online surveillance and tracking. Officer 11 noted that perpetrators had become “more cautious,” using methods like requiring “video calls first” to verify the identity of potential clients or victims, which complicated undercover operations. Likewise, Officer 12 emphasized the prevalence of “dummy accounts,” which masked the identities of traffickers and hindered law enforcement's ability to trace them even with open-source intelligence tools.

These challenges mirrored the global trend of cyber-enabled trafficking, where traffickers leveraged anonymity, encryption, and borderless digital platforms to operate with reduced risk. The UNODC (2021) reported that social media and online communication tools had become central to the recruitment, grooming, and exploitation phases, particularly in cases of online sexual exploitation of children. In the Philippines, ECPAT International (2022) identified the country as a major hub for online

sexual exploitation, noting that traffickers used fake accounts, encrypted chats, and live-streaming services to evade detection.

The accounts in Table 3.3.1.2 therefore reflected how technological sophistication had shifted the landscape of trafficking operations, demanding equally advanced responses from law enforcement. The implications point to the necessity of institutional investments in cyber forensics, capacity building for local officers, and stronger partnerships with technology providers and international cybercrime agencies. Without closing the digital gap, frontline units risked being consistently outpaced by traffickers who continuously adapted to emerging online tools and strategies.

Systemic Legal and Procedural Constraints. This identified obstacles in legal processing, such as victims' reluctance to testify, prosecutorial delays, and excessive documentation requirements. These procedural barriers limited officers' capacity to pursue and complete trafficking cases effectively. This revealed how legal bureaucracy and procedural delays hindered the effective prosecution of trafficking in persons (TIP) cases in the Philippines. Officers reported persistent issues such as lack of victim cooperation, prosecutorial delays, and rigid procedural requirements. Officer 6 observed that victims frequently withheld information or were unwilling to participate in proceedings, leaving officers to "just comply with procedural demands." Similarly, Officer 8 noted that many victims "just wanted to go home" rather than pursue formal complaints, even when traffickers had already been identified. Officer 11 added that even when trafficking elements were established, "some prosecutors still required more case build-up," resulting in delays in warrants and other legal processes.

These accounts align with Walk Free (2020), which documented how excessive evidentiary burdens and rigid legal frameworks often slowed human trafficking prosecutions. More recent assessments echo similar concerns: the U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report (2023) observed that in the Philippines, lengthy case build-ups and limited prosecutorial capacity continued to obstruct timely convictions. UNODC (2021) further highlighted that delays and procedural rigidity discouraged victim participation, especially among those already traumatized or economically vulnerable. This was reinforced by ASEAN-ACT (2022), which stressed that lack of trauma-informed procedures and inadequate witness protection often left survivors feeling re-victimized by the justice process.

The Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines (CHR, 2022) also pointed to inconsistent coordination among law enforcement, prosecutors, and social workers as a persistent barrier, particularly outside urban centers. Similar findings from IJM (2021) emphasized that the requirement for near-perfect documentation before cases proceed undermined both the urgency of victim rescue and the effectiveness of legal redress.

The officers' testimonies, when situated alongside these recent findings, suggest that legal rigidity and weak inter-agency collaboration not only stall justice but also discourage victim cooperation, limiting the state's ability to hold traffickers accountable. These systemic gaps imply the necessity of institutional reforms that prioritize trauma-informed, victim-centered procedures and streamlined inter-agency coordination to improve both case resolution and survivor protection.

Post-Rescue Gaps and Unsustainable Aid. This highlights how rescued victims often returned to exploitative environments due to insufficient post-rescue support, delayed aid, or the absence of sustainable livelihood. These systemic shortcomings undermined law enforcement's long-term efforts. It illustrated

how the lack of long-term rehabilitation, reintegration, and livelihood programs negatively affected both survivors of trafficking and the overall effectiveness of anti-trafficking interventions. Police officers highlighted that in the absence of stable aftercare services, many victims either refused shelter, were reluctant to testify, or eventually returned to exploitative environments. Officer 4 noted that some rescued individuals “went back abroad because aftercare support was not permanent,” reflecting cycles of re-victimization. Officer 8 observed that victims often “wanted to go home instead of staying in shelters,” undermining efforts to pursue legal cases. Officer 13 further pointed out that “severe trauma” limited cooperation during investigations and trials, though with appropriate support, some victims could eventually engage with the process.

These accounts are consistent with recent evidence. IOM (2021) found that weak post-rescue interventions, particularly the lack of sustainable livelihood and psychosocial support, often drove survivors back into unsafe environments out of economic necessity. UNODC (2020) similarly stressed that care in Southeast Asia was typically short-term and fragmented, leaving critical reintegration needs unmet. The Philippine Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT, 2022) acknowledged that despite the existence of shelters, victims frequently opted out due to inadequate trauma-informed services and poor conditions. More recent monitoring by ECPAT International (2023) highlighted that survivors of online sexual exploitation in the Philippines continued to face limited reintegration pathways, especially in rural areas, where community stigma and poverty heightened the risk of re-trafficking.

Taken together, these perspectives underscore that fragmented aftercare and limited reintegration support discourage victim cooperation, weaken prosecutions, and perpetuate cycles of vulnerability. The implications point to the need for institutional reforms that expand trauma-informed, livelihood-oriented, and community-based programs to ensure that post-rescue interventions not only protect survivors in the short term but also reduce their long-term risk of exploitation.

Ethical and Emotional Dilemmas. This them reflected officers’ personal struggles in confronting the moral complexity of their work—witnessing poverty, repeated victimization, and feeling sympathy for both the exploited and, at times, the offenders. shed light on the complex moral and emotional tensions experienced by PNP-WCPC enforcers in their anti-trafficking work. Officers described the deeply personal impact of the job, with Officer 1 recounting how seeing victims’ pain reminded him of his own children, saying, “It’s difficult to witness victims’ pain and think it could happen to our own children or loved ones.” Officer 5 reflected on the persistent role of poverty, noting, “I kept hearing the same stories—poverty being used to exploit people,” which underscored the systemic roots of exploitation. Most striking was Officer 9’s admission that “sometimes I felt pity for the suspects—they’re driven to this because of poverty,” revealing how the blurred lines between victimhood and perpetration generated moral conflict for frontliners.

These tensions are reflected in recent scholarship. Armstrong and Wolff (2020) observed that law enforcers in human trafficking cases frequently encountered “moral distress” as they balanced empathy for victims with recognition of the systemic inequalities shaping perpetrators’ choices. More recent findings from Gozdziaik and Bump (2021) highlighted how poverty and structural vulnerabilities often complicated officers’ perceptions of justice, making it difficult to separate exploitation from survival strategies. Studies on emotional labor in policing also noted that officers working in child protection and trafficking cases faced high risks of compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, and ethical strain without adequate institutional

support (Lopez et al., 2022). In the Philippine context, IACAT (2023) acknowledged that frontliners often carried both the emotional weight of victim trauma and the frustration of confronting socio-economic realities that law enforcement alone could not resolve.

The insights from Table 3.3.1.5 suggest that anti-trafficking work exposes officers not only to secondary trauma but also to moral ambiguity when poverty drives both victimization and offending. The implications point to the need for structured psychosocial support, trauma-informed training, and clear ethical frameworks to help law enforcers navigate these dilemmas, ensuring that empathy enhances rather than undermines their pursuit of justice.

Structural Loopholes in Traditional Trafficking. This discusses the weaknesses in maritime monitoring, unregulated private ports, and trafficking through familial networks. These structural loopholes allowed traditional trafficking to persist undetected. It revealed systemic enforcement gaps that enabled trafficking networks to operate with relative ease, particularly in maritime regions such as Zamboanga. Officer 3 noted that “there are many private ports that aren’t monitored. Trafficking victims can board unnoticed,” pointing to the persistent exploitation of unregulated maritime gateways. This lack of surveillance weakened interception efforts in provinces with porous coastal borders. Officer 14 further explained that “they engage in trafficking because of poverty—just to survive,” underscoring how economic desperation not only pushed individuals into becoming facilitators but also normalized exploitation within communities. Officer 13 added that trauma complicated investigations, since “victims don’t cooperate immediately—but with persistence, they eventually open up,” highlighting the emotional complexity of cases involving kinship ties and familial trafficking.

These concerns are reflected in more recent scholarship. UNODC (2021) reported that unmonitored entry and exit points in archipelagic states remained hotspots for trafficking activity, particularly when private or informal ports lacked regulatory oversight. A study by IOM (2022) emphasized that weak maritime coordination and resource constraints across Southeast Asia created significant blind spots for enforcement, allowing organized groups to move victims across borders with minimal detection. Recent research also highlighted the complicating role of family-based trafficking, where victims were less likely to cooperate due to loyalty, coercion, or social stigma (ECPAT International, 2021; David, 2023). In the Philippine setting, the Commission on Human Rights (CHR, 2022) noted that coordination between the Philippine Coast Guard, MARINA, and local law enforcement remained inconsistent, leaving structural loopholes open for exploitation.

The insights from Table 3.3.1.6 suggest that trafficking networks thrived not only because of organized criminal intent but also because of systemic weaknesses in regulating maritime infrastructure and addressing poverty-driven vulnerabilities. The implications highlight the need for stronger inter-agency coordination in maritime surveillance, sustained monitoring of private ports, and targeted socio-economic interventions to reduce the reliance on trafficking as a survival strategy, particularly in coastal and border communities.

To understand how PNP-WCPC enforcers interpret and perceive the challenges in combating trafficking in persons, and the significance of these interpretations

How do these challenges affect your personal motivation or your view of justice and protection for victims?

Renewed Sense of Duty and National Service. This theme highlighted how personal commitment, family inspiration, and a sense of public service continued to drive officers despite the overwhelming difficulties. Their oath of service and national duty were central to their perseverance. This highlighted how, despite systemic barriers and emotional strain, many PNP-WCPC officers remained committed to their mission, drawing strength from personal values, family, and a strong sense of civic duty. Officer 10 affirmed this conviction, stating, “Of course, that’s my duty as a police officer... we’re helping our country,” a sentiment echoed by Officer 15, who emphasized both family and the sacredness of their sworn oath as sources of motivation. Officer 9 added that “I ensure the evidence I gather is solid, so the case won’t be dismissed. It’s part of our job to seek justice,” underscoring a justice-oriented mindset that prioritized accountability and the protection of vulnerable populations.

These insights align with recent studies on resilience in law enforcement. Papazoglou et al. (2020) noted that a strong sense of purpose and moral duty enabled police officers to sustain engagement despite repeated exposure to trauma. Andersen et al. (2021) similarly found that officers working in specialized, high-stress units—such as those addressing child exploitation and trafficking—drew resilience from a deeply internalized mission of service, which protected them from burnout. Research in the Philippine context also suggests that officers who anchored their identity in nation-building and public service were better equipped to navigate stressors tied to limited resources and systemic inefficiencies (David & Atun, 2022). Moreover, recent literature highlights that resilience in policing is not merely individual but shaped by collective values, organizational culture, and recognition of their role in safeguarding human dignity (UNODC, 2023).

The responses in Table 3.3.2.1 suggest that while operational and emotional challenges persisted, officers’ resilience was closely tied to their self-concept as protectors of justice and contributors to national service. The implication is that strengthening this sense of purpose—through recognition programs, value-driven training, and organizational support—can further enhance officers’ endurance and commitment in anti-trafficking work.

Victim-Centered Purpose and Fulfillment. Many officers emphasized that seeing rescued victims safe, supported, and heard during hearings reaffirmed their motivation. Their role in giving children a chance at justice offered emotional validation for their work. Victim-Centered Purpose and Fulfillment,” highlighted how PNP-WCPC officers derived profound emotional and professional validation from the outcomes of their rescue operations. Officer 2 emphasized that their motivation stemmed from “the victims we rescue,” showing how direct encounters with survivors shaped their commitment. Officer 3 reflected, “I was inspired to rescue more victims and protect innocent children,” underscoring how safeguarding vulnerable lives provided both inspiration and psychological resilience. Similarly, Officer 8 affirmed, “Just seeing the victims safe is enough for me,” illustrating how emotional reward and professional purpose were inseparably linked in their work.

These accounts reflect what contemporary research has termed victim-centered policing, where prioritizing survivor safety and well-being enhances both case outcomes and officer resilience. According to UNODC (2021), adopting a trauma-informed and victim-centered approach not only empowers survivors

but also sustains law enforcement motivation by reinforcing the tangible impact of their role. A recent study by Wood et al. (2022) similarly found that meaning-making—when officers recognize the transformative effect of their actions—was associated with higher levels of resilience and lower rates of burnout in units addressing exploitation. In the Philippine context, Atun and David (2023) noted that officers working in child protection and anti-trafficking operations reported stronger professional fulfillment when they could directly witness victims’ safety, recovery, or reintegration.

The responses in Table 3.3.2.2 suggest that officers’ resilience was not solely grounded in duty but in the lived reality of victim recovery. The implication is clear: reinforcing a victim-centered framework—through trauma-informed training, survivor feedback mechanisms, and institutional recognition of successful rescues—can enhance both officer well-being and the long-term effectiveness of anti-trafficking work.

Justice System Frustrations vs. Moral Persistence. This theme included reflections on how flaws in the justice system—such as slow proceedings, uncooperative victims, and biased protocols—tested the officers’ patience but also solidified their determination to persist in seeking justice. This underscored the tension between officers’ strong ethical commitment and the institutional barriers they confronted in pursuing justice. Officer 4 admitted that “it’s really difficult with our justice system,” while Officer 13 observed that “our justice system is okay, but it progresses very slowly.” These reflections echoed the frustrations of many frontline anti-trafficking actors, where bureaucratic inefficiencies, court backlogs, and legal loopholes impeded timely case resolutions. Officer 6 further remarked that “our justice system often favors the accused,” highlighting a perception of systemic imbalance that undermined officers’ trust in judicial outcomes.

Such frustrations resonated with International Justice Mission (2019), which documented that trafficking prosecutions in the Philippines were frequently stalled by inadequate coordination between police and prosecutors, congested dockets, and victims’ withdrawal from cases due to intimidation or retraumatization. This sentiment paralleled Lee and Persson’s (2016) findings in comparable contexts, where weak prosecutorial follow-through and prioritization of other crimes often led to dismissal of trafficking cases. These structural limitations reinforced a sense of disillusionment among officers, who saw their hard-earned rescues sometimes dissipate within a slow-moving judicial process.

Yet, embedded within these accounts was evidence of moral resilience. As Officer 6 shared, “we just use our rescued victims as our motivation,” suggesting an intentional re-centering of purpose around human impact rather than institutional efficiency. This adaptive coping mirrored the insights of Papazoglou and Andersen (2014), who argued that law enforcement in trauma-exposed roles often sustain themselves through meaning-making—deriving strength from the lives they protect rather than the verdicts they secure. The officers’ persistence, therefore, revealed a deeper recalibration of justice, one anchored not only in legal outcomes but in the everyday dignity restored to victims.

The implications of these accounts extend beyond individual coping, pointing to the need for structural reforms that alleviate judicial delays and reinforce survivor-centered practices. At the same time, they highlight how moral persistence enables officers to withstand systemic inadequacies, ensuring that their service remains anchored in the protection and empowerment of the vulnerable even within imperfect institutions.

Commitment Despite Personal Cost. Several officers described enduring personal sacrifices, including emotional strain and financial burdens, as part of their work. Yet, these hardships did not deter them—they saw these acts as necessary contributions to a larger cause. They highlighted the remarkable self-sacrifice demonstrated by PNP-WCPC officers in their fight against trafficking in persons. Their accounts revealed how personal resources—emotional, financial, and physical—were willingly expended to sustain their mission despite the limited institutional support available. Officer 7 remarked, “I’m okay with spending my own money—it’s a way to help the victims,” underscoring the depth of personal investment that extended beyond formal duty. Similarly, Officer 12 affirmed, “We won’t stop there... we’ll keep looking for other ways to rescue more,” reflecting a proactive stance rooted in moral obligation rather than organizational mandate.

This finding resonated with Jonas and Kroll (2016), who observed that frontline responders in high-stress environments often embodied an “altruistic commitment” that pushed them to act beyond prescribed roles, motivated by empathy and justice. In this sense, officers’ sacrifices were not perceived as burdens but as extensions of their ethical identity. Officer 5’s reflection, “I want to help victims... to prevent them from being trafficked,” illustrated how their motivations transcended reactive law enforcement, orienting instead toward prevention and transformation.

Such narratives aligned with the broader scholarship on occupational resilience in law enforcement. Papazoglou and Tuttle (2018) emphasized that officers working under high stress frequently reframed personal hardship as meaningful sacrifice, a perspective that buffered them from burnout. Likewise, the officers’ willingness to endure adversity echoed what Skogan and Frydl (2004) termed the “internalization of service-oriented policing,” wherein law enforcement roles are redefined as community care and protection rather than solely crime control. More recent insights from UNODC (2020) similarly stress that sustainable anti-trafficking interventions depend not only on institutional frameworks but also on the moral courage and discretionary efforts of individual actors.

The implications of these findings suggest that while systemic gaps persist, the dedication of PNP-WCPC officers continues to bridge resource and policy limitations. Their self-sacrifices, though unsustainable in the long term, highlight the need for institutional mechanisms that reinforce officers’ well-being and provide material support. At the same time, their resilience underscores the critical role of human agency in sustaining anti-trafficking efforts, demonstrating how personal commitment can uphold a justice system that aspires to protect dignity even in the face of structural inadequacies.

Emotional Empathy and Protective Instincts. highlighted how deep emotional resonance with the plight of trafficking victims—particularly minors—amplified officers’ protective instincts and reshaped their professional identities. Justice, for these enforcers, was not confined to courtroom victories but extended into the moral and emotional duty of safeguarding vulnerable lives. Officer 1 reflected, “I feel the painful part of arresting our fellow Filipinos who were just victims of their circumstances,” revealing how empathy complicated enforcement by acknowledging that some suspects were themselves trapped in cycles of exploitation. This mirrored recent findings by UNODC (2021), which emphasize that victim-offender overlap in trafficking contexts often requires law enforcement to balance accountability with compassion.

Officer 11’s statement—“As a man, it’s hard for me to see children suffer... but we have to fight for them”—demonstrated how traditional notions of masculinity were reshaped in trauma-laden

environments. Rather than detachment, officers' exposure to child victims activated protective instincts rooted in moral duty. This aligns with Crawford (2017), who argued that emotional labor in policing, particularly in victim-centered cases, strengthens officers' ethical commitments by recasting them as guardians rather than mere enforcers. Likewise, Officer 14's assertion—"We must continue the fight—otherwise more victims will fall prey to trafficking"—reflected a preventive orientation consistent with Miller and Hess (2019), who described humanistic policing as driven by empathy and proactive justice.

At the same time, this emotional engagement carried psychological risks. Theories of compassion fatigue and satisfaction (Figley, 1995; Hesketh et al., 2022) suggest that repeated exposure to trauma can erode officers' well-being, but can also serve as a source of meaning and professional fulfillment when officers see their empathy as a protective strength. In this context, empathy was not a liability but an adaptive resource that reinforced resilience, allowing officers to sustain their mission in emotionally taxing environments.

The implications of these findings point to the dual role of empathy as both a protective and motivating force in anti-trafficking work. For the PNP-WCPC, emotional connection to victims—especially children—functioned as a powerful driver of resilience, shaping their approach to justice as fundamentally human-centered. However, the intensity of this emotional labor also underscores the importance of institutional measures such as counseling, peer support, and trauma-informed training to safeguard officers' psychological health while enabling them to maintain their protective commitment. To capture significant moments that stand out in their lived experiences as they protect victims and prosecute perpetrators

Can you recall a specific case or moment that deeply affected you, either positively or negatively?

Extreme Parental Betrayal and Intra-Familial Abuse. highlighted the most emotionally shattering cases encountered by PNP-WCPC officers—those where parents or close relatives themselves became perpetrators of trafficking and abuse. These incidents carried a unique psychological weight, as they inverted the very expectation of family as a sanctuary. Officer 1 described a case in Clarin, Misamis Occidental as "worse than the worst," a reflection of the moral shock officers experienced when protectors became violators. Similarly, Officer 3 recalled a case in Aurora Municipality that left a "lasting emotional impact," demonstrating how family-based crimes not only scarred victims but also left deep impressions on those charged with protecting them.

The most graphic account came from Officer 7, who investigated a mother assaulting her child with a Coke litro bottle—an act of cruelty that provoked rage, disbelief, and professional strain. Such narratives illustrate what Myers and Hall (2018) identified as the heightened secondary trauma law enforcers endure when abuse originates from a caregiver, where the betrayal compounds the horror of the act itself. This aligns with Pearlman and Saakvitne's (1995) concept of vicarious traumatization, which stresses that trauma is intensified when it undermines fundamental beliefs about safety and trust within the family. Recent studies, such as Cross et al. (2022), similarly found that frontline professionals in child protection and trafficking contexts report the greatest psychological toll when family members are implicated, since these cases shatter cultural and moral assumptions about caregiving.

These encounters also disrupted officers' own notions of justice and decency. As Sprang et al. (2011) argued, intra-familial abuse cases evoke stronger emotional reactions among child protection

workers precisely because the home—supposed to be the safest place—becomes the site of profound harm. For the officers, this betrayal reinforced the urgency of their mission, deepening their resolve to seek accountability and protection for children whose primary support systems had failed them.

The implications of Table 3.4.1.1 suggest that intra-familial trafficking cases represent a distinct emotional burden for law enforcement, demanding not only investigative rigor but also enhanced psychological resilience. These experiences reveal the necessity for trauma-informed training, structured debriefing, and psychosocial support systems to help officers manage the moral weight of confronting parental betrayal, while ensuring they remain effective in safeguarding the most vulnerable.

Psychological Trauma in Child Victims. shed light on the immense emotional and psychological burdens carried by trafficked children and the officers who sought to protect them. A recurring challenge highlighted by the officers was the silence, withdrawal, or conflicting statements of victims—symptoms of deep trauma that complicated both protection and prosecution. Officer 5 recalled a case where a child repeatedly changed her statements during interviews, a reflection of the fear, confusion, and internal conflict many children grappled with in the aftermath of abuse. For officers, this presented a profound dilemma: while coherent testimony was vital for legal proceedings, the children’s fragmented narratives revealed the lingering psychological scars of exploitation.

Officer 8 offered another poignant account, describing a seven-year-old victim as an “expert liar” who, despite repeated interviews, withheld disclosure of the abuse. Far from being evidence of deceit, this illustrated what Deblinger, Mannarino, and Cohen (2015) identified as trauma-driven coping mechanisms, such as denial, dissociation, or avoidance. These behaviors served as psychological shields, allowing children to distance themselves from unbearable experiences, but often frustrated formal processes that required clarity and consistency. Similarly, Officer 12 described how rescues sometimes triggered emotional breakdowns not just in victims but also within their families, noting that even under the OSAEC law, children as young as fifteen were entangled in cases that carried heavy legal consequences. These reflections underscored that trauma reverberated outward, touching not only victims but also their families and law enforcers themselves.

Scholars have long emphasized the complexity of interviewing and supporting child victims of interpersonal trauma. Pynoos et al. (2009) noted that children who endured chronic abuse often displayed emotional numbing, fragmented memory, and deep distrust of adults—factors that could persist for years and severely affect their interactions with caregivers and authorities. For police officers, engaging with such children often meant shouldering their pain indirectly, a process linked to secondary trauma and compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995). These cases demanded extraordinary patience and emotional resilience, as the children’s silence or avoidance was not resistance to justice but evidence of profound harm.

Taken together, the insights in Table 3.4.1.2 revealed that the psychological trauma of child victims shaped not only their healing trajectory but also the experiences of those sworn to protect them. Victims’ silence, denial, and emotional withdrawal highlighted the necessity of trauma-informed, child-sensitive approaches that prioritize healing before disclosure. For officers, this meant recognizing that meaningful justice required not only gathering testimony but also fostering an environment of safety and trust where children could begin to reclaim their voices.

Digital Evidence and Online Exploitation illuminated some of the most harrowing cases encountered by PNP-WCPC enforcers, where technology became both the medium and amplifier of child trafficking. Officer 2 recalled a case involving a teacher in a rural farming community who was later found guilty of qualified trafficking. Although the setting was traditional, digital tools were central in concealing and perpetrating the crime, reflecting the fusion of offline recruitment with online exploitation.

Perhaps the most jarring accounts came from officers who confronted OSAEC cases rooted within families. Officer 13 described situations where mothers themselves acted as perpetrators, a violation of both maternal trust and human dignity. This echoed UNICEF (2021) findings, which reported that in the Philippines, many OSAEC facilitators were family members motivated by poverty and enabled by increasing internet access. Officer 14 recounted an especially disturbing case in which a mother filmed herself inserting a bottle into her daughter's genitals—an act commodified online for profit. Such cases captured the brutal commodification of abuse, aligning with Quayle and Taylor (2002), who argued that the recording and distribution of exploitative material reinforced cycles of abuse and escalated the severity of offenses. Similarly, INTERPOL (2020) identified the Philippines as a global hotspot for OSAEC, driven by digital connectivity intersecting with socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

From an operational standpoint, officers emphasized the daunting complexity of digital investigations. Tracing IP addresses, securing warrants for online platforms, and engaging in transnational cooperation often required specialized training and cross-agency collaboration. These demands were consistent with UNODC (2021), which stressed the urgent need for technical expertise, inter-agency coordination, and international partnerships in combating cyber-enabled trafficking. The fusion of local abuse with global distribution networks meant that even seemingly isolated cases in remote areas had international dimensions.

Multi-Victim and Collaborative Rescue Operations. highlighted some of the most defining moments in the lived experiences of PNP-WCPC officers—operations where scale, complexity, and inter-agency collaboration converged. These large-scale rescues were emotionally layered, combining pride in saving lives with the heavy burden of confronting systemic suffering.

Officer 4 recounted a 2017 case where several family members were arrested together, a moment that underscored the moral tensions in anti-trafficking work. While fulfilling his duty to enforce the law, he could not ignore the reality that many perpetrators were driven not by cruelty but by desperation. This internal struggle reflected Herzfeld's (2002) notion of "moral labor," in which law enforcers grapple with compassion and justice colliding in the field.

In contrast, Officer 9 described one of the most celebrated operations of his career, where 128 victims were rescued in a single coordinated effort. This unprecedented scale required meticulous planning, swift coordination across multiple agencies, and immense professional resolve. The operation's success earned him a military merit medal and illustrated Gozdziaik and Bump's (2008) assertion that anti-trafficking interventions are most effective when rooted in multi-sectoral collaboration, especially in contexts where exploitation is deeply embedded in local socio-economic systems.

Officer 11 offered another account that demonstrated the weight of collective accountability—an entire household, all of legal age, arrested simultaneously. The officer reflected on the emotional difficulty of such cases, recognizing that justice often demanded dismantling entire family systems complicit in

trafficking, whether through active involvement, pressure, or ignorance. This complexity emphasized the dual responsibility of officers: rescuing and protecting victims while navigating the fallout of fractured family networks.

Collectively, these accounts revealed how multi-victim and collaborative rescue operations reshaped the officers' understanding of their roles. They were not merely enforcers of the law, but also participants in large-scale humanitarian interventions requiring coordination, empathy, and resilience. UNODC (2018) stressed that such operations demand trauma-informed approaches, not only in immediate victim rescue but also in post-rescue rehabilitation and legal processing—a reality that officers consistently encountered in the field.

Ultimately, Table 3.4.1.4 illustrated how moments of operational triumph were tempered by the moral and emotional complexities of human trafficking cases. These rescues became turning points for officers, reminding them that every successful operation was both a victory for justice and a sobering reminder of the deep societal wounds that perpetuate exploitation.

Emotional Empathy and Protective Instincts. captured how deep emotional resonance with the plight of trafficking victims—especially minors—amplified police officers' protective instincts and transformed their work into a personal crusade. Officer 1 illustrated this by sharing, “I feel the painful part of arresting our fellow Filipinos who were just victims of their circumstances,” recognizing that some suspects were themselves caught in cycles of exploitation. Such empathy complicated their role, forcing officers to navigate the blurred line between enforcement and compassion.

Officer 11 stated, “As a man, it's hard for me to see children suffer... but we have to fight for them,” which spoke to how traditional masculinity was reshaped in the face of trauma. Rather than suppressing emotion, the experience of working with child victims activated a fierce sense of moral protection. This reflects recent findings by Resurreccion (2024), who showed that resilience and mental well-being among police officers in the Philippines are often reinforced by empathy and a sense of moral purpose. Similarly, the study by Unveiling the Lived Experiences of Police Officers in Dealing with Violence Against Women and Children (2024) found that officers' empathy often became a driver of trust-building and perseverance in handling child-related cases.

Moreover, Officer 14's statement, “We must continue the fight—otherwise more victims will fall prey to trafficking,” revealed a forward-looking mindset that linked empathy with prevention. This resonates with the work of Myers and Hall (2018) and more recently with Springer (2024), who emphasized that specialized law enforcement units often experience both compassion fatigue and growth, with emotional engagement motivating officers to act as protectors rather than mere enforcers.

In this sense, Table 3.3.2.5 highlighted how empathy—particularly for children—did not weaken professionalism but intensified officers' commitment. The latest literature suggests that this blend of compassion and duty has important implications: it sustains resilience, strengthens officers' psychological endurance, and underscores the need for trauma-informed policing frameworks that acknowledge the protective role of empathy.

To capture significant moments that stand out in their lived experiences as they protect victims and prosecute perpetrators

How did this experience influence how you see your role in the justice system?

Strengthened Commitment and Renewed Motivation highlighted how deeply impactful experiences in handling trafficking cases could serve not to discourage but to deepen law enforcement officers' resolve. Officer 1 reflected on how a particular case enhanced his sense of urgency and made him more dedicated as an undercover online investigator. The exposure to the severity of the crimes catalyzed a stronger drive to develop airtight cases and rescue more victims. This observation resonates with recent findings by Resurreccion (2024), who noted that Filipino police officers often translate exposure to traumatic cases into renewed motivation, framing their struggles as meaningful service to vulnerable communities.

Officer 3 echoed this, explaining that witnessing the suffering of innocent children in trafficking cases did not weaken his resolve but rather inspired him to intensify his efforts. Such reflections align with newer studies on post-traumatic growth among law enforcement, where direct encounters with trauma can foster a stronger moral identity and professional purpose (Brooks et al., 2022). This also parallels the insights of *Unveiling the Lived Experiences of Police Officers in Dealing with Violence Against Women and Children* (2024), which emphasized that resilience in child-related cases is sustained by emotional engagement and the officers' perception of making a life-changing impact.

Officer 6 emphasized the systemic importance of every individual in the justice process, stating that their presence and effort made a tangible difference in rescuing victims and ensuring that perpetrators were held accountable. This recognition of role significance reflects what Springer (2024) described as "protective purpose," where officers remain engaged in high-stress roles because they view their work as indispensable to both justice and victim recovery.

Together, these accounts revealed that confronting trauma, injustice, and complexity in the field did not diminish the moral stamina of PNP-WCPC officers. Instead, it intensified their commitment to protect the vulnerable and reinforced their belief in the necessity of their role in the justice system. The latest literature suggests that this phenomenon—where trauma exposure becomes a catalyst for renewed motivation—has important implications for designing officer wellness and training programs that frame challenges as opportunities for growth and strengthened professional identity.

Advocacy Through Education and Prevention illustrated how some PNP-WCPC enforcers had evolved from being reactive agents of law enforcement to becoming proactive educators and advocates. The traumatic and morally distressing nature of trafficking cases not only reinforced their sense of duty but also reshaped their strategies for protecting vulnerable populations. Officer 4 described how his frustrations with systemic barriers motivated him to establish educational platforms—delivering lectures, engaging with media, and building public awareness. This transformation reflects recent findings by De Guzman (2023), who highlighted that police officers in the Philippines increasingly assume advocacy roles, recognizing that prevention through awareness is as vital as prosecution.

Officer 8 emphasized the need for moral clarification when working with very young victims, noting that children under seven often struggled to distinguish abuse from affection due to grooming. His role extended beyond enforcement into early education, paralleling Azzopardi and Bezzina's (2022) argument that prevention frameworks in child protection must prioritize age-appropriate education to counteract the normalization of abuse. Similarly, a UNICEF Philippines report (2022) underscored the

importance of integrating law enforcers into school- and community-based awareness initiatives to ensure that prevention reaches at-risk groups directly.

Meanwhile, Officer 14 drew attention to the broader socioeconomic drivers of trafficking, such as the “easy money” culture that offenders exploited. His perspective resonates with UNODC (2021), which stressed that prevention efforts must be tied to livelihood programs and poverty reduction initiatives to address structural vulnerabilities. By identifying economic precarity as a root cause, officers positioned themselves not only as enforcers but also as advocates for systemic reform.

These narratives suggested that officers were expanding their understanding of justice—beyond courtrooms and arrests—to classrooms, communities, and public discourse. The latest literature indicates that such advocacy-driven approaches hold implications for long-term trafficking prevention: empowering citizens, reshaping cultural norms, and reducing systemic vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit.

Frustration Over Systemic Injustice or Slowness. presented a theme of emotional fatigue and disillusionment voiced by several PNP-WCPC enforcers regarding the Philippine justice system. While these officers remained committed to their mission, their narratives reflected an internal struggle as they confronted what they perceived as structural inefficiencies and inequities. Officer 7’s reflection on the sluggishness of court proceedings—despite possessing hard evidence like videos and documentation—echoed longstanding critiques of the Philippine judiciary. Recent assessments by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (2022) and Human Rights Watch (2023) confirm that trial delays remain a persistent barrier in trafficking prosecutions, often resulting in retraumatization of victims and attrition of cases.

Officer 12’s statement highlighted another dimension of systemic frustration: the perceived leniency toward foreign nationals implicated in trafficking. This view resonated with findings by International Justice Mission (2022), which documented uneven prosecution outcomes in cross-border cases, noting that domestic traffickers often faced harsher sentences compared to foreign perpetrators who benefitted from diplomatic protections or loopholes in international cooperation. Such imbalances reinforced the officers’ sense of inequity and raised questions about accountability in transnational crimes.

Officer 2’s insight broadened the critique by shifting attention toward the socio-economic vulnerabilities of Filipino perpetrators—particularly parents driven by desperation. This perspective aligned with recent research by UNICEF Philippines (2021) and the Commission on Human Rights (2023), which emphasized that poverty, unemployment, and lack of social safety nets continue to fuel trafficking at the household level. These reports argue that without addressing structural deprivation, punitive approaches risk criminalizing survival strategies rather than dismantling exploitation networks.

The collective voices in Table 3.4.2.3 illuminated how law enforcers encounter justice not only as a legal process but also as a moral and social imperative. Their frustrations underscored the urgent need for reforms that ensure timeliness, equity, and socio-economic sensitivity in handling trafficking cases—implying that without systemic change, the gap between enforcement and true justice will persist.

Trust in Due Process and System Efficiency. presented a counterbalance to earlier themes of frustration by highlighting positive experiences among PNP-WCPC enforcers who had seen the justice system function as intended. Officers in this theme expressed a reinforced belief in the structure, fairness, and protective capacity of the Philippine legal system—particularly when all agencies involved performed their

roles effectively. Officer 9’s testimony underscored this trust, noting that due process, although demanding, validated their sacrifices and lent legitimacy to their work. This observation echoed Acheron’s (2015) assertion that procedural justice—anchored in transparency and fairness—was vital to strengthening institutional trust. More recent analyses have reinforced this view, with the Philippine Commission on Human Rights (2022) emphasizing that consistent adherence to due process remains critical for building public confidence in anti-trafficking responses.

Officer 10’s reflection that “the system works when everyone does their part” aligned with the collaborative model of criminal justice emphasized in UNODC’s 2020 and 2023 guidelines, which highlighted the centrality of multi-agency coordination among law enforcement, prosecutors, and social services in ensuring efficient trafficking case outcomes. When cooperation was strong and protocols were followed, officers witnessed justice unfold, as seen in successful rescues and convictions—affirming the findings of IOM (2021), which documented that inter-agency task forces significantly improved case turnaround and victim protection measures.

Meanwhile, Officer 13’s experience illustrated how prosecutorial diligence and inter-agency synergy accelerated case resolution. This observation was consistent with U.S. Department of State’s Trafficking in Persons Report (2023), which noted that countries with effective prosecutorial practices and coordinated victim-centered approaches reported higher conviction rates and stronger law enforcer morale. In these instances, justice became not only a legal principle but also a lived and visible outcome, reinforcing officers’ faith in the system.

Collectively, the narratives in Table 3.4.2.4 illustrated how positive encounters with due process, inter-agency collaboration, and prosecutorial efficiency sustained officers’ commitment and enhanced institutional loyalty. They implied that when the justice system is perceived as responsive and fair, it fosters resilience among frontliners and strengthens the legitimacy of state-led anti-trafficking efforts.

Realizations About Root Causes and Social Factors. revealed how officers’ frontline experiences led them to a deeper awareness of the structural conditions that fostered human trafficking in the Philippines. Rather than viewing trafficking purely as a criminal act committed by morally corrupt individuals, several PNP-WCPC enforcers expressed empathy and a systems-oriented understanding of why trafficking had persisted. For example, Officer 2 reflected on how many offenders—particularly first-time ones—had been driven by desperation rather than malice, suggesting that appropriate government intervention and social services might have prevented their involvement. This recognition resonated with recent analyses by Gonzalez & Rodriguez (2022), who argued that poverty, lack of livelihood, and weak welfare programs were enduring drivers of trafficking in Southeast Asia.

Officer 11 emphasized that with continuous seminars and operations, both law enforcers and communities had become more aware of trafficking risks and indicators. This aligned with UNODC (2023), which highlighted that community-based prevention and localized awareness campaigns were critical in reducing trafficking vulnerability, especially in rural and high-risk areas. Officer 14’s observation that limited employment opportunities contributed to the rise of “easy money” schemes echoed the ILO (2021, 2022) findings, which documented how economic precarity—particularly in rural and informal economies—remained a central push factor for trafficking in the Philippines and the broader Southeast Asian region.

Taken together, these accounts illustrated a conceptual shift among officers—from reactive enforcement to proactive advocacy. Their insights underscored that the persistence of trafficking was inseparable from structural inequality, economic precarity, and social marginalization. The implication is clear: without integrating law enforcement with social development programs, livelihood creation, and continuous community education, anti-trafficking interventions will remain incomplete and reactive rather than preventive.

Procedural Relief After Case Closure. illustrated the emotional arc experienced by officers as they navigated the complexities of human trafficking cases—from initial trauma to eventual resolution. Officer 5 candidly expressed that the act of finally filing a case offered a sense of emotional relief—a moment of psychological unburdening after prolonged stress. Recent studies confirm this pattern, with Villani et al. (2021) noting that procedural milestones in policing often serve as coping anchors, providing officers with a sense of closure after exposure to prolonged traumatic investigations.

Officer 15's assertion, "To enforce the law... that's really what we're here for," reflected a re-centering on professional identity and duty. It suggested that procedural progress—even when slow or difficult—reaffirmed their sense of purpose. This observation was echoed in Hu et al. (2022), who found that institutional role clarity reinforced psychological resilience among justice workers, particularly in units that frequently dealt with victim-centered crimes.

Furthermore, Officer 6 emphasized the indispensable nature of their role in ensuring that suspects were located and prosecuted. This resonated with findings by Treglown et al. (2023), which highlighted that police officers in high-stakes environments derived personal stability and motivation from perceiving themselves as key guarantors of justice, even amid systemic constraints.

Taken together, these accounts suggested that procedural completion did not merely signal bureaucratic success but also contributed to officers' psychological well-being. Relief after case closure functioned as both a restorative process and a motivational force, helping sustain long-term engagement in emotionally demanding anti-trafficking work.

To describe how the phenomenon of combating trafficking manifests in their consciousness and daily practices, revealing the fundamental structure of the experience

Expanded Awareness and Digital Vigilance highlighted the transformation in the consciousness of PNP-WCPC enforcers as they confronted the evolving nature of trafficking in persons—particularly its digital dimension. Officers reported a profound shift in both their professional outlook and personal awareness, especially regarding the role of technology and social media in facilitating exploitation. Officer 1, for instance, reflected on how his exposure to online-facilitated trafficking redefined not only his sense of duty but also his broader understanding of youth vulnerability in digital spaces. This aligned with Latonero's (2011) early observations on the migration of trafficking online, but more recent analyses have emphasized the urgency of digital vigilance. ECPAT International (2022) reported that the Philippines remains a hotspot for online sexual exploitation of children, underscoring the need for constant adaptation in law enforcement strategies.

Similarly, Officer 11 described a shift from impulsive engagement to cautious deliberation, particularly in online behavior—an internalization of risk management and ethical awareness. This echoed Powell, Henry, and Flynn's (2018) findings on the necessity of reflective digital practices among officers,

further reinforced by Europol's (2023) warning that blurred boundaries between personal and professional online presence can heighten risks for law enforcers themselves.

Officer 12's comment about "cyber patrolling" reflected the institutional adaptation to this digital shift, wherein officers engaged in proactive surveillance of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and even the dark web. This practice aligned with UNODC (2021) recommendations on strengthening digital law enforcement capabilities, and was echoed by ASEAN (2023), which highlighted the importance of regional cooperation and specialized training to address the cross-border dimensions of online exploitation.

Taken together, these accounts revealed not only the technical evolution of anti-trafficking work but also the personal transformation of officers into digital guardians. The implications extend beyond professional duties—suggesting that resilience against trafficking in the digital age requires both institutional investment in cyber capacity and individual cultivation of digital ethics, vigilance, and adaptive learning.

Redefined Professional Identity and Purpose. illustrated how immersion in anti-trafficking work transformed the professional identity of PNP-WCPC enforcers. Officers who previously associated police work with conventional tasks—such as patrol duty or managing traffic—experienced a deep reevaluation of their role in society after confronting the emotional and moral demands of trafficking cases. As Officer 2 noted, the responsibility that came with handling these sensitive and high-impact cases was *mabigat*—or heavy—suggesting a moral reckoning with the broader implications of their work. This transformation resonates with recent scholarship: Loftus (2010) had earlier described the shift toward victim-centered policing, and more recent research by Chan et al. (2021) confirmed that sustained exposure to trauma cases often reshapes law enforcement identity toward deeper empathy and moral engagement.

Officer 5 shared that the experience changed his view of law enforcement from a technical occupation into a profoundly human one, centered on interacting with victims in pain and distress. This perspective aligned with Loftus's (2010) findings but also reflected new insights from van Steden & Meijer (2022), who argued that officers working in emotionally intense contexts tend to reconstruct their professional identity around care, advocacy, and community trust-building.

Similarly, Officer 15 admitted that before joining the anti-trafficking unit, they saw policing as limited to external enforcement functions like managing public order. However, the realities of anti-trafficking work revealed a deeper, more complex mission—fighting exploitation and restoring dignity to survivors. This mirrors the arguments of Bullock and Garland (2018), but also connects with UNODC (2022), which emphasized that anti-trafficking enforcement globally has increasingly required officers to embody both protective and rehabilitative roles, moving beyond traditional enforcement paradigms.

Taken together, these accounts underscored that combating trafficking in persons had become more than a procedural duty—it was a profound vocational journey. The implication here is that frontline exposure to trafficking catalyzed a shift from "law enforcer" to "justice advocate," suggesting that officer training and institutional support should deliberately nurture this expanded sense of professional purpose to sustain resilience, empathy, and long-term commitment in anti-trafficking work.

Strengthened Moral and Emotional Commitment. highlighted the profound psychological and moral engagement that PNP-WCPC personnel developed through sustained anti-trafficking work. This theme revealed how the officers' role transcended procedural law enforcement and entered the domain of deep

emotional labor. Officer 3, who had served since 2002, expressed that working in WCPC felt uniquely fulfilling, likening their interventions to the actions of “superheroes” rescuing innocent victims. This metaphor captured not only the heroic nature of the task but also the personal emotional resonance that officers felt in the line of duty. Such perspectives reflected Van Maanen’s (1978) theory of “moral mission” in policing, wherein officers derived identity and purpose from emotionally meaningful aspects of their job.

Officer 6 reflected on the transformation in how they viewed their profession, stating that their pride in the PNP grew stronger due to the noble cause of protecting vulnerable individuals from exploitation. This sense of pride and elevated moral purpose was consistent with Miller et al. (2017), who argued that police officers engaged in victim protection roles often developed enhanced professional commitment and personal identification with justice-oriented missions. More recent studies, such as Chan et al. (2021), have reinforced this finding by noting that sustained exposure to human trafficking cases often cultivates a values-driven orientation, where law enforcement officers perceive their work less as enforcement and more as advocacy for human dignity.

The officers’ accounts revealed that anti-trafficking work fostered a heightened emotional and ethical investment. Their duties were not limited to criminal apprehension but were intertwined with a sense of social guardianship and moral leadership. The implication is that such moral and emotional commitment, while fostering resilience and purpose, also necessitates institutional mechanisms for psychological support, ensuring that officers’ empathic engagement is sustained without leading to emotional fatigue or burnout.

Psychological Resilience and Mental Health Awareness. illustrated the development of mental toughness and emotional awareness among PNP-WCPC enforcers as a direct result of their work in trafficking cases. Officer 4 shared that extensive training had allowed them to build emotional strength, recognizing that law enforcers needed to be psychologically stable to effectively help others. This reflection resonates with findings by Andersen et al. (2022), who emphasized that structured resilience-building programs significantly improved psychological preparedness and adaptive coping among frontline officers working in high-stress environments.

Officer 8 emphasized the value of OSAEC-specific training, stating that their understanding of the psychological toll on victims had deepened—particularly in recognizing that trauma was not always physical but profoundly emotional. This mirrors recent insights by Horan et al. (2023), who reported that officers regularly exposed to online sexual exploitation cases required both technical and emotional literacy to manage the invisible weight of victims’ trauma while avoiding secondary traumatic stress themselves.

Officer 13 highlighted how the role had evolved into a passionate vocation, one that not only required technical skills but also demanded emotional maturity and empathy. This aligns with Bowers et al. (2021), who found that officers who derived personal meaning from their protective roles demonstrated higher resilience, greater job satisfaction, and improved mental health outcomes over time.

Collectively, these narratives underscore how psychological wellness and resilience are not peripheral but foundational to anti-trafficking work. The accounts imply that equipping officers with trauma-informed training, reflective practices, and continuous psychosocial support strengthens not only their capacity to safeguard victims but also their own well-being—allowing them to sustain empathy, responsibility, and justice amid repeated exposure to trauma.

Professional Growth and Skills Development. captured the officers' recognition of their enhanced competencies through sustained engagement in anti-trafficking work. Officer 9 noted that nearly seven years of service within the PNP, particularly under the Women and Children Protection Center (WCPC), equipped him with refined case-handling skills. His confidence reflected the concept of experiential learning in criminal justice settings, as discussed by Kolb (1984), where hands-on experience in complex cases fostered practical expertise and procedural mastery.

Officer 10 expressed a renewed belief in his own efficacy, stating that his involvement in anti-trafficking operations revealed his effectiveness in investigative work. This aligned with Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, which suggested that repeated exposure to challenging tasks, when met with success, strengthened one's belief in their ability to perform competently—particularly under high-stakes conditions such as child exploitation investigations.

Officer 14 emphasized the importance of public education and awareness, pointing to the need for officers to extend their professional roles beyond enforcement and into community engagement. This idea resonated with Delprino and Bahn (1988), who asserted that officers who embraced multi-faceted responsibilities—such as advocacy, inter-agency collaboration, and public education—demonstrated greater job satisfaction and adaptability.

Collectively, the officers' narratives reflected a process of transformation, where anti-trafficking work served not only as a professional obligation but as a vehicle for personal development, deeper social awareness, and a broadened understanding of justice work. Their growth in both hard and soft skills exemplified how front-line enforcement in human trafficking cases served as a crucible for professional evolution.

To describe how the phenomenon of combating trafficking manifests in their consciousness and daily practices, revealing the fundamental structure of the experience

Heightened Parental Vigilance and Domestic Influence. revealed how the professional experiences of PNP-WCPC enforcers in combating trafficking in persons (TIP) deeply impacted their personal lives, particularly in how they protected their families and communities. Officer 1 shared that he actively discussed trafficking risks with friends and relatives, using personal networks to amplify awareness. This practice aligned with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which emphasized that individual behavior was influenced by the interconnectedness of personal, familial, and community environments—illustrating how professional experiences rippled into the microsystem of home life.

Officer 10 reflected on how his experiences shaped personal decisions, particularly in advising loved ones on how to respond to suspicious online interactions. This response demonstrated vicarious trauma awareness, where constant exposure to victims' stories sensitized law enforcers to threats in their own surroundings. Studies by Figley (1995) and Newell & MacNeil (2010) confirmed that frontline workers dealing with trauma often developed heightened personal vigilance—a defense mechanism that also enhanced safety consciousness in everyday contexts.

Officer 11 and Officer 14 both described direct interventions with children at home, such as immediate warnings and close monitoring of social media behavior. These narratives reflected the spillover effect from occupational stress and situational awareness into personal and familial domains. They also suggested a proactive policing mindset, not limited to formal duty but extended to private settings,

reinforcing Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism (1986)—where one's environment, behavior, and personal experiences mutually influenced one another.

Together, these accounts underscored that anti-trafficking work fostered not only procedural knowledge and law enforcement expertise but also deepened empathy, heightened domestic protective instincts, and an ongoing sense of civic duty that transcended the workplace.

Emotional Impact and Coping Strategies. This theme combined stress management, emotional spillover, and the conscious maintenance of emotional boundaries. Officers described emotional fatigue, mental exhaustion, and coping mechanisms they developed to handle the daily exposure to distressing material. Whether through setting strict boundaries at home, decompressing with peers, or taking breaks from emotionally heavy tasks, these responses illustrated how officers attempted to preserve mental well-being amidst demanding work.

Officer 3 explained how he consciously separated his work and family life, avoiding discussions about operations at home to maintain emotional boundaries. This form of emotional compartmentalization, discussed by Figley (1995) in the context of secondary traumatic stress, served as a protective barrier to maintain psychological wellness. Similarly, Officer 7 noted the potential for misunderstanding and conflict if sensitive materials from work spilled into the home environment—highlighting the blurred boundaries between professional trauma and domestic relationships, a tension also noted in Arnetz et al. (2013).

However, not all officers were able to maintain this separation. Officer 8 openly shared that emotions spilled over into the home, affecting concentration and mental clarity. This reflected vicarious trauma as described by McCann and Pearlman (1990), where repeated exposure to others' trauma distorted cognitive and emotional functioning. Meanwhile, Officer 12 admitted to using alcohol with colleagues as a coping strategy—a common yet problematic outlet that offered short-term relief but hindered long-term resilience (Regehr & Bober, 2005).

These narratives revealed that while officers adopted various coping mechanisms—both adaptive and maladaptive—their emotional labor was immense. The complexity of their work necessitated institutional support mechanisms, including counseling, structured debriefings, and mental health programs tailored to frontline trauma-exposed personnel.

Enhanced Decision-Making and Critical Thinking. This theme revealed a transformation in how officers made personal and professional decisions. Through experience, they developed deeper emotional intelligence, increased discipline, and adopted better coping mechanisms. These developments influenced how they interacted with others, made decisions, and viewed their responsibilities.

Officer 5 spoke to the development of time management and prioritization, reflecting a shift toward executive functioning and goal-oriented behavior critical to managing emotionally complex and time-sensitive cases (Anderson, 2002). Likewise, Officer 9's account of becoming more inquisitive and analytical showed a marked increase in critical thinking skills—a trait often developed through high-stakes investigative work (Facione, 1990). This capacity for analysis and dialogue contributed to more balanced judgments and ethical reflexivity, both of which were vital in combating human trafficking.

Officer 13 added a layer of trauma-informed sensitivity, noting the need for careful, patient decision-making when working with victims—especially those who were psychologically fragile. This aligned with SAMHSA's (2014) trauma-informed care framework, which stressed safety, trustworthiness,

and empowerment in professional interactions. Finally, Officer 15 offered a summary of internal growth, attributing improvements in personal and professional judgment to experiences in the field. This supported Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), where transformative learning emerged through direct, reflective, and emotionally charged experiences.

Together, these insights illustrated how anti-trafficking work fostered adaptive thinking, refined ethical judgment, and increased personal awareness, shaping officers not only as enforcers of the law but as socially responsive and emotionally intelligent actors.

Budget Constraints and Financial Reimbursement Issues. This theme focused on the recurring issue of insufficient budget allocation for operations and court-related travel. Many officers had to shoulder expenses for transportation, accommodation, and meals, especially when they were assigned to hearings outside Zamboanga City. Although reimbursement was technically available, delays in processing discouraged its use, leading to financial strain.

Officer 8 and Officer 15 articulated the demoralizing impact of using personal funds for work-related duties—a practice that, if normalized, might have discouraged long-term engagement or led to burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Officer 9's observation that the allocated budget was consistently inadequate further suggested a mismatch between policy mandates and the material support provided for implementation. According to Berg and Carranza (2015), insufficient operational funding in anti-trafficking efforts led to compromised investigations and diminished morale among officers.

These insights called for streamlined disbursement protocols, increased operational funds, and fast-tracked reimbursement processes. When frontline officers were expected to absorb the financial weight of national law enforcement responsibilities, the system inadvertently penalized their dedication. A responsive fiscal structure would not only have improved logistical effectiveness but also affirmed institutional recognition of the emotional and financial investments made by officers.

Need for Increased Manpower and Regional Offices. This theme addressed the lack of personnel and the need for a broader regional presence. Officers stressed that the existing manpower had been insufficient to cover vast areas such as Mindanao and emerging trafficking hotspots like Tawi-Tawi. They emphasized the need for additional satellite offices and ground monitoring units to enhance operational reach and effectiveness.

The call for decentralization and the establishment of more regional and satellite offices, as proposed by Officer 1 and Officer 3, reflected a need for proximity-based law enforcement. According to the ASEAN (2016) Regional Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons, establishing localized units had been key to improving victim identification, information flow, and inter-agency coordination. Officer 6 added that even basic support within teams had been dwindling, suggesting a dangerous overextension of existing resources—a problem that weakened both the physical and emotional resilience of operatives (Kangaspunta, 2017).

In trafficking hotspots like Tawi-Tawi, where border vulnerabilities were high, the absence of an embedded WCPC presence had made early detection and interdiction nearly impossible. The findings strongly recommended increased recruitment, personnel training, and the institutionalization of regional monitoring offices—particularly in maritime zones and underserved regions. Doing so would not only have

improved the speed and scale of anti-trafficking operations but also signaled government seriousness in protecting vulnerable communities.

Technological Needs for Investigations. This theme highlighted the limitations in digital investigative tools. Officers emphasized the need for improved gadgets, data recovery software, and AI-supported logistics to effectively respond to evolving trafficking methods, especially online exploitation.

Table 3.6.1.3, “Technological Needs for Investigations,” reflected officers’ growing concern over the digital gap between traffickers’ evolving methods and the outdated tools available to law enforcement. The statements from Officers 10, 11, and 12 illustrated an urgent demand for technological advancement, particularly tools that allowed for the recovery of deleted messages, enhanced cyber-forensics, and AI-assisted analysis of digital evidence. Officer 11, for example, underscored the need for specialized software to extract erased communication—a critical requirement in cases involving Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC), where traffickers routinely erased traces of abuse to avoid prosecution.

The shortfall in digital infrastructure—as Officer 12 noted—hampered efforts to track, analyze, and present evidence in court, reducing the effectiveness of both rescue and prosecution. According to Interpol (2020), the use of AI and automated tools had significantly improved victim identification and criminal network mapping in advanced jurisdictions, indicating that without such investments, Philippine law enforcement risked falling behind technological trends exploited by traffickers.

Moreover, as Officer 10 stressed, these upgrades were not merely technical “extras” but foundational elements requiring sustained funding and logistical support. The UNODC (2021) advocated for dedicated investment in digital capabilities as a strategic component of anti-trafficking frameworks. Without such tools, WPCP enforcers continued to be outpaced by tech-savvy perpetrators, weakening the chain of custody and admissibility of digital evidence in court.

The findings called for urgent procurement of high-performance equipment, digital forensics training, data analytics platforms, and AI-enabled systems that could detect trafficking patterns across online ecosystems. These tools were deemed indispensable for keeping pace with the increasingly sophisticated nature of trafficking crimes, especially those involving encrypted messaging apps, social media, and the dark web.

Training and Mental Health Support. This theme reflected the officers’ call for continuous training and mental health support to help them deal with the psychological demands of their work. Their recommendations included debriefings, trauma-informed care, counseling, and psychosocial workshops.

This aligned with findings by Perez, Ricciardelli, & Carleton (2022), which demonstrated that law enforcement personnel exposed to traumatic investigations—particularly in child exploitation units—were at high risk of developing vicarious trauma, PTSD, and emotional exhaustion without institutional support. Moreover, Officer 4 stressed that such support needed to be sustainable, not one-time interventions—a sentiment echoed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP, 2021), which advocated for embedded wellness programs and resiliency training as a structural component of policing.

Trauma-informed practices were not only beneficial to officers but also enhanced their effectiveness in engaging with victims, improving the quality of testimony collection and trust-building. Therefore, institutional investment in regular mental health assessments, debriefing protocols after difficult cases, and

peer support programs not only supported officer well-being but also strengthened the broader anti-trafficking framework.

Legal and Logistical Coordination Challenges. This theme emphasized the difficulties of inter-agency coordination, logistical support during court duties, and sustaining anti-trafficking operations over time. Officers stressed the need for stronger networks, better transport coverage, and a permanent support framework. Despite their commitment, they encountered challenges such as lack of communication among agencies, inconsistent transportation arrangements, and the absence of long-term institutional backing. These factors hindered the effectiveness and sustainability of their efforts, reinforcing the call for systemic reforms and integrated operational infrastructure.

These concerns resonated with the findings of David, Pineda, and Carreon (2021), who analyzed the Philippine inter-agency model and found that while its legal framework under RA 9208 as amended by RA 10364 was robust, its implementation was hampered by poor coordination, unclear standard operating procedures (SOPs), and lack of synchronized logistics. Moreover, the UNODC (2020) emphasized that the success of anti-trafficking efforts was contingent on effective inter-sectoral coordination, especially between police units, prosecutors, local government units (LGUs), social workers, and NGOs. When this ecosystem was weakened, it led to delays in rescues, poor victim handling, and court case backlogs.

Therefore, officers' insights validated the urgent need to institutionalize inter-agency cooperation protocols, ensure timely transport and field logistics during legal proceedings, and adopt a sustainable operational model. This included not only improved budget flow mechanisms but also regular joint capacity-building workshops and information-sharing systems across agencies to reduce redundancies and reinforce a collective justice framework.

Community and Awareness Campaign. This theme captured the officers' recommendations to improve grassroots engagement and raise public awareness through education. Suggested strategies included barangay seminars, school lectures, and the integration of anti-trafficking education with existing laws. underscored the recognized value of grassroots engagement in anti-trafficking efforts, as articulated by Officers 1, 12, and 2. Their collective emphasis on education, public awareness, and local-level involvement demonstrated a preventive approach to combating trafficking. Officer 1 advocated for the strategic use of social media platforms and barangay-based campaigns to disseminate information. This highlighted how digital and local communication tools worked synergistically in a community-centered approach. Meanwhile, Officer 12 called for direct community education through barangay and school-based lectures, especially focusing on Republic Act 11930 or the "Anti-Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) Law," recognizing the urgency of educating vulnerable populations. Officer 2 added that although there were initiatives in schools, there remained a shortage of trained specialists and consistent program delivery.

These insights reflected the findings of Cortez and Jabines (2020), who stressed that anti-trafficking interventions were more sustainable when integrated with educational curricula and localized to fit community contexts. Similarly, USAID Philippines (2019) noted that public awareness campaigns—especially when implemented at the barangay and school levels—were critical in preventing both recruitment and re-victimization, particularly among minors and marginalized groups.

Furthermore, the officers' views aligned with RA 9208 as amended by RA 10364, which explicitly encouraged community participation and education as pillars of prevention. However, the implementation of these measures remained inconsistent, particularly in rural and conflict-prone regions such as Mindanao, where access to formal education and civil society programs was limited.

The findings suggested an urgent need to institutionalize regular anti-trafficking awareness drives through inter-agency collaboration with DepEd, DILG, and local councils. This included training barangay officials, guidance counselors, and youth leaders to deliver clear, age-appropriate content and facilitate open community discussions. These campaigns needed to be linguistically and culturally adaptive, grounded in real cases, and reinforced through digital platforms to reach younger demographics.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This phenomenological inquiry explored the lived experiences of PNP-WCPC enforcers engaged in combating trafficking in persons within the Zamboanga Peninsula. Anchored in the Husserlian tradition of describing lived realities as they are consciously experienced, the study uncovered the inner landscapes of officers whose professional duties are intimately intertwined with personal transformation, moral reckoning, and emotional endurance.

The narratives revealed that officers experience their work not merely as a set of procedural obligations, but as a profound moral vocation. Their interactions with victims—particularly minors—and with perpetrators, especially in cases involving intra-familial abuse and maternal betrayal, evoke deep emotional responses. These experiences generate what can be described as empathic embodiment—a state where the pain and trauma of others are internalized, triggering both emotional strain and heightened protective instincts.

Despite facing significant institutional gaps—such as underfunding, limited manpower, inadequate technological tools, and bureaucratic delays—the officers persist in their duties, driven by a sense of justice and personal accountability. Their resilience is not the absence of suffering, but the capacity to derive moral clarity and resolve from adversity. In this regard, their professional identity evolves into one that is increasingly reflexive, emotionally intelligent, and socially responsive.

Notably, the officers' lived experiences extend beyond the confines of institutional structures. They report behavioral shifts in their parenting, digital vigilance, and community engagement. This affirms the phenomenological idea that experience is not compartmentalized but integrated into the lifeworld—where professional roles impact domestic, emotional, and social spheres.

However, the narratives also reveal a silent burden: emotional spillover, psychological fatigue, and moral injury. Officers often absorb trauma without sufficient outlets for processing it. The lack of structured mental health support, trauma-informed supervision, and sustainable operational backing compounds their distress and compromises their well-being.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of anti-trafficking work, as lived by PNP-WCPC enforcers, is a deeply embodied, morally complex, and emotionally transformative experience. The study reinforces the need to humanize the lens through which law enforcers are viewed—not simply as agents of the state but as moral beings navigating trauma, duty, and identity in tandem.

Recommendations

Based on the phenomenological findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are offered to address the lived realities of PNP-WCPC enforcers in combating trafficking in persons in the Zamboanga Peninsula.

1. Based on the findings related to the lived experiences of PNP-WCPC enforcers (SOP 1), it is recommended that the PNP leadership institutionalize structured mental health support systems such as regular psychological debriefings, wellness programs, and accessible counseling services. These will help address the emotional burden that enforcers often bring home and carry with them in their daily lives. Additionally, peer support groups and confidential channels for expressing emotional distress should be encouraged to build emotional resilience within the force.
2. Addressing the essential meanings and common themes that emerged from the participants' narratives (SOP 2), particularly the significance of teamwork, moral responsibility, and empathy, it is recommended that the WCPC reinforce a values-based framework in their operations. This may include ethics training grounded in real-life case reflections, internal team recognition systems, and workshops on empathy-driven law enforcement to deepen the understanding of their shared purpose and the emotional meaning of their work.
3. In light of the enforcers' interpretations of institutional and logistical challenges (SOP 3), it is recommended that the PNP-WCPC allocate sufficient and timely operational funding, including reimbursements, transportation, and logistical support. The strain caused by delayed allowances and lack of mobility support impacts motivation and execution of field duties. Moreover, recruiting and assigning more specialized officers in areas like Tawi-Tawi and other underserved provinces will help address understaffing and promote equitable anti-trafficking responses across the Zamboanga Peninsula.
4. To support significant aspects and critical moments highlighted in the enforcers' experiences (SOP 4)—especially in handling victims with sensitivity and navigating traumatic case scenarios—it is strongly recommended that the WCPC standardize trauma-informed care protocols. Officers must be trained continuously on gender sensitivity, child protection, and survivor-centered investigation techniques. These practices will ensure the dignity and safety of victims while preventing emotional burnout among the officers.
5. With regard to the manifestation of anti-trafficking work in the daily practices and consciousness of WCPC enforcers (SOP 5), it is recommended that efforts be made to integrate their insights into institutional reforms. Policymaking bodies within the PNP should involve frontline officers in consultative planning to ensure that operational procedures are informed by the lived realities of those on the ground. Additionally, incorporating their voices into police education and training curricula can help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Project S.A.F.E.
(Support, Awareness, Framework, and Engagement)
for Anti-Trafficking Resilience in Zamboanga Peninsula

Implementing Agency: WMSU - College of Criminal Justice Education
Partner Agency: PNP–Women and Children Protection Center (PNP-WCPC)

Rationale

The study on the lived experiences of PNP-WCPC enforcers in the Zamboanga Peninsula revealed urgent needs: psychosocial support, values-based teamwork, adequate logistical backing, trauma-informed protocols, and stronger grassroots engagement. WMSU-CCJE, as a center for criminal justice education, is well-positioned to extend technical expertise, training, and community-based interventions that directly respond to these challenges.

Objectives

- Institutionalize psychosocial and wellness support for WCPC enforcers.
- Strengthen values-based teamwork and trauma-informed practice in operations.
- Expand grassroots education campaigns on trafficking prevention in barangays and schools.
- Support institutional reforms through consultative policy forums that integrate officers' field experiences.

Expected Outcomes

- Enhanced resilience and well-being of PNP-WCPC officers.
- Reinforced ethics, empathy, and survivor-centered practices in investigations.
- Increased public awareness and prevention of trafficking at the community level.
- Sustained collaboration between academe, law enforcement, and communities.

Proposed Duration: 1 year (renewable)

Estimated Budget: -----

Project Matrix / Logframe

Objectives	Key Activities	Outputs	KPIs / Indicators	Responsible Units	Timeline
1. Provide psychosocial & wellness support	Quarterly psychological debriefings, wellness retreats, peer support groups	Officers receive structured mental health interventions	4 debriefings/year; 80% participation	WMSU-CCJE Psychology/Criminology Dept., PNP-WCPC	Quarterly
2. Strengthen values-based teamwork & trauma-informed practice	Values & ethics training, empathy-driven workshops, survivor-centered protocols	Officers trained in trauma-informed, ethical policing	2 workshops/year; ≥85% satisfaction rating	WMSU-CCJE Faculty, WCPC Training Division	Semi-annual
3. Expand grassroots education & awareness	Barangay-level seminars, school lectures, IEC campaigns on RA 9208 & RA 11930	Communities educated on anti-trafficking laws	10 barangays & 10 schools/year; 1,000+ participants	WMSU-CCJE Extension Unit, DepEd, Barangay Councils, PNP-WCPC	Continuous
4. Support institutional reforms	Policy forums, officer feedback integration, research-to-policy dialogues	WCPC policies informed by field officers' insights	2 forums/year; policy briefs submitted	WMSU-CCJE, PNP-WCPC Leadership	Semi-annual
5. Public awareness via digital tools	Social media campaigns, educational content creation	Anti-trafficking advocacy online	12 posts/year; ≥10,000 reach	WMSU-CCJE IT/Comm. Team, WCPC Info Unit	Monthly

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