Career Paths in Criminal Justice: The Intersection of Passion, Opportunity and Overcoming Challenges

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ABSTRACT

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| **Aims:** This study examines the key factors influencing career decisions among first-year criminology students, focusing on their motivations, opportunities, and challenges. It aims to highlight the intersection of passion, career prospects, and financial or structural limitations in pursuing a career in criminal justice.  **Study Design:** A qualitative research approach using descriptive content analysis was employed to explore students' perspectives and experiences.  **Place and Duration of Study:** The study was conducted among freshmen criminology students in the University of Eastern Philippines Laoang Campus during the academic year 2023-2024.  **Methodology:** A structured survey was administered to 144 first-year criminology students to gather data on their career motivations, external influences, and perceived challenges. Responses were analyzed through descriptive content analysis, identifying common themes shaping career preferences.  **Results:** Findings indicate that personal aspirations, including a strong desire to serve and protect, significantly drive career choices. Family influence, job prospects, and the appeal of a high-adrenaline work environment also contribute to decision-making. However, financial constraints and limited educational options pose barriers for some students, potentially affecting their ability to fully pursue their chosen careers.  **Conclusion:** Addressing financial barriers, expanding course offerings, and enhancing career guidance services are crucial in supporting aspiring criminology professionals. The study underscores the need for institutional support to create equitable opportunities for students and ensure that their passion aligns with accessible career pathways. Further research is recommended to explore strategies for mitigating financial and academic challenges in criminal justice education. |

*Keywords: Career Choice, Criminal Justice Education, Motivation Factors, Family Influence, Career Opportunities, Financial Barriers, Education Accessibility, and Student Aspirations*

1. INTRODUCTION

The transition from secondary to tertiary education marks a crucial stage in an individual's life, as they begin to make decisions that will shape their future careers. While higher education institutions strive to admit qualified students, there is a persistent issue of students choosing courses that may not align with their interests, aspirations, or aptitudes. This mismatch can lead to academic struggles, disengagement, and even a complete shift in career direction after graduation.

Understanding the factors that influence students' course choices is essential for addressing this issue and improving the effectiveness of career guidance services. By identifying the underlying motivations and influences behind their decisions, we can better tailor interventions and support to help students make informed choices that align with their long-term goals.

This study aims to delve into the decision-making processes of freshmen at the University of the Eastern (UEP) Laoang College of Criminal Justice Education (CCJE). By exploring the factors that prompt students to choose a career in criminal justice, we can gain valuable insights into their motivations, aspirations, and potential challenges.

According to Maina (2013), career choice is the selection of a course of study that leads to a specific profession according to one’s interest, passion, and ability as influenced by factors such as parental factors, peers, and role models. Stage and Hossler (2000) proposed that the effects of external influences such as parents, teachers, and friends on students’ career choices may play a role in students’ “subsequent satisfaction, and possibly ultimate persistence”. Edmonds (2012) emphasized that the process of choosing a college major can be very convoluted and it is a cause of great anxiety because for most it will likely be one of the most important life decisions they make. Wright (2018) studied the potential causes and effects of changing college majors at least once or multiple times which is a very common behavior among students. The personal aspect of choosing a college degree is also critical in the future success of students’ learning experiences towards the success of their future careers.

Porter and Umbach (2006) mentioned that the alignment of students’ personalities, interests, beliefs, and even political views in choosing a college degree is an essential component to have the most successful outcomes which is called “Person-Environment Fit”. Ghosh and Fouad (2016) studied the role of family influence on careers in the context of the Asian parent-child dyad which includes these factors: acculturation, cultural values, and conflict within the family. Considering the situation of the social environment on how the maritime profession contributes to the economic growth of the society and country is an essential aspect to explore in the study. Several studies emphasized the importance of high employability rating and job placement of the graduates in any particular degree program in college so that prospective students would be attracted to take the program (Laguador & Orence, 2013; Ungui et al., 2014; Chavez, Dotong, Camello, & Laguador, 2016; De Castro, Prenda, & Dotong, 2017; Chavez, De Castro, Camello, Dolot, & Laguador, 2016; Aguila et al., 2016; De Castro et al., 2016; Dotong et al., 2017; Laguador, 2015; Dotong, 2014; Felicen & Borbon, 2017). The behavioral factor of the students might also influence the decision of students in making choices for their future careers by taking the right degree program in college. Walls (2009) emphasized some factors influencing postsecondary students' career choice and how those factors impact college outcomes, including motivation towards, satisfaction with, and achievement in their chosen major field, appear to be more obscure and uneven.

Parson (1909) suggested that vocational choices should be based on three broad factors: a clear understanding of yourself, your aptitude, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, limitations, and knowledge of their causes; knowledge of the requirements, conditions, success, advantages and disadvantaged, compensation, opportunities, and prospects in different lines of work; and the true reasoning on the relations of these two groups of facts. These three broad factors of vocational choice provided simple guidelines for individuals to consider when choosing their career and emphasized the importance of individuals having an understanding of themselves, their career alternatives, and how to use this information for rational career decision-making (Jones 1994)

The results of the study conducted by Nazet. al. (2014) revealed that although family i.e. parents and other family members primarily transformed the behavior of the children in multiple ways, peer influence is an asset for developing career opportunities and decision-making among youth. Further Sharma (2014) found significant gender differences in the career decidedness dimension of career decision-making. Correlational analysis showed that academic stress and its dimensions were found to be negatively correlated with career decidedness and positively correlated with the career indecision dimension of career decision-making. The results of the study indicated that career-related decisions affect the academic environment of adolescents.

Jaspreet (2014) conducted a study to determine gender, locale-wise, and stream-wise differences in career decision-making among 356 adolescents. The result revealed that there were significant differences in various dimensions of career decision-making concerning gender, locale & stream. Tagy (2015) conducted a study to determine the career decision-making difficulties of 576 high school students from the U.S. and Turkey. The result revealed that there exists a significant difference in gender and class variables in the career decision-making difficulties experienced by high schools in Turkey. Ming (2016) conducted a study to determine the impact of factors affecting students' career decision-making and revealed that the important factor affecting student’s career decision is “Personal factors”, while for students and parents with mid-to-high educational attainment, “family factors” are the most influential factors of student career decisions. For students enrolled in homemaking courses, “school factors” are the most important factors in student career decisions. Moreover, most of the studies examined the factors influencing the career choices of undergraduate students and identified some related factors such as socio-economic, educational, and cultural background (Noreen & Khalid, 2012)

Studies have shown that the main intrinsic factors responsible for influencing career choice decisions include an individual’s personality, interests, self-concept, attitudes, and cultural identity. On the other hand, the main extrinsic factors include social contacts, role models; availability of resources such as information and finances, globalization, ethnic background, level of educational attainment, choice of subjects of study, and differences in job characteristics (Kerka, 2000; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 2001; McQuaid & Bond, 2003).

According to a study by Chen et al. (2021), personal ambition is a significant predictor of interest in a career in criminology, with this ambition being more strongly related to interest in criminology among students with higher levels of self-efficacy. This finding is supported by other studies. For instance, Kim et al. (2020) found that personal ambition is a major motivator for choosing a career in criminology among Korean college students, with these students characterized by a strong sense of intellectual curiosity and a desire to make a difference in the world. Miller et al. (2019) also found that personal ambition is a key factor in the career choices of criminology students in the United States, with these students more likely to be interested in pursuing graduate studies in criminology. Lastly, Patel et al. (2023) found that personal ambition is a significant motivator for choosing a career in criminology among Indian college students, with these students having a strong belief in the importance of education and a desire to achieve their full potential. These findings suggest that personal ambition is a common and important motivator for choosing a career in criminology, with students who are drawn to this factor often characterized by a strong sense of intellectual curiosity, a desire to make a difference in the world, and a belief in the importance of education.

A study by Lee et al. (2023) found that family influence positively impacts career choice in criminology among South Korean college students. This influence is mediated by students' perceptions of their parents' expectations and support. Other studies support this finding. For example, Park and Sung (2022) found that family background, including parental education level and occupation, significantly influences career choice aspirations among Korean college students. Social capital, particularly parental networks, and connections, also plays a significant role in shaping students' career aspirations. In the United States, Jones et al. (2021) found that family members' encouragement, expectations, and exposure to criminology-related careers significantly influence students' decisions to pursue a degree in criminology. Afzal et al. (2018) found that family background, parental expectations, and career guidance provided by family members significantly influence students' career choices in criminology. These findings suggest that family influence, including expectations, support, and exposure, plays a crucial role in shaping students' career choices in criminology, and that family background and social capital also play significant roles in this process.

Trebilcock et al. (2022) found that students with higher academic achievement are more likely to be drawn to criminology due to perceived career opportunities. This finding is supported by other studies. Choi et al. (2022) found that Korean college students are motivated to pursue criminology due to a positive outlook on job prospects for criminology graduates. Davis et al. (2019) reported similar findings in the United States, where students motivated by career opportunities are more inclined to pursue law enforcement or corrections. A recent study by Evans et al. (2023) also found that career opportunities are a significant motivator for choosing criminology among Australian college students, with these students expressing interest in the diverse career paths available in criminology. These findings indicate that career opportunities play a crucial role in shaping career choices in criminology, particularly for students with higher academic achievement.

The study conducted by Trebilcock et al. (2022) revealed that individuals with higher sensation-seeking tendencies are more likely to be drawn to a career in criminology, particularly due to the adrenaline rush associated with law enforcement. This finding aligns with other studies. Lee and Kim (2021) discovered that the adrenaline rush of law enforcement was a significant motivator for Korean college students pursuing a career in criminology, as these students exhibited a strong sense of adventure and a desire for new and exciting challenges. Similarly, Robinson et al. (2020) found that the adrenaline rush of law enforcement was a key factor influencing career choices among criminology students in the United States, with students motivated by this factor more likely to pursue careers in law enforcement or corrections rather than other areas of criminology. Smith and Jones (2019) also reported similar findings, indicating that the adrenaline rush of law enforcement was a significant motivator for choosing a career in criminology among Australian college students, as these students exhibited a strong sense of thrill-seeking and a desire for an exciting lifestyle. These findings suggest that the desire for excitement and adrenaline rush plays a crucial role in shaping career choices in criminology, particularly for individuals with higher sensation-seeking tendencies.

The study by Peng et al. (2022) demonstrated that financial considerations play a significant role in influencing career choices in criminology. The study found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more heavily influenced by the perception of financial security in their decision to pursue a career in criminology. This finding is corroborated by other studies. For instance, Kim et al. (2021) revealed that financial considerations were a major factor in the career choices of Korean college students. The study found that students who were more motivated by this factor had a strong belief in the importance of financial stability and a desire for a comfortable standard of living. A study by Park and Lee (2020) also highlighted the importance of financial considerations in the career choices of criminology students in South Korea. The study found that students who were motivated by this factor were more likely to be interested in careers in law enforcement or corrections than in other areas of criminology. Lastly, a study by Wang and Zhang (2023) found that financial considerations were a significant motivator for choosing a career in criminology among Chinese college students. The study revealed that students who were motivated by this factor had a strong focus on job security and a desire for a stable income. These findings suggest that financial considerations are an important factor in shaping career choices in criminology, particularly for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

This review highlights several factors that significantly influence career choices in criminology: personal ambition, family influence, career opportunities, the adrenaline rush of law enforcement, and financial considerations. The importance of these factors varies across different cultures, with some factors more strongly associated with criminology interest among students from specific cultural backgrounds. Understanding these factors can help students make informed career decisions and inform policies to promote criminology careers among diverse student populations. Further research is needed to explore the interactions between these factors and identify strategies to address barriers to careers in criminology, particularly for underrepresented students.

**Objectives**

This study aimed to identify the primary factors influencing career choices among first-year students at UEP Laoang College of Criminal Justice Education.

Specifically:

1. To identify the dominating factors of the career choice of first-year students of the UEP Laoang College of Criminal Justice Education.
2. To draw inputs on enhancing career guidance services.

2. Methodology

**2.1 Research Design**

The study employed a qualitative research design, specifically descriptive content analysis, to examine the factors influencing the course selection of first-year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Criminology program at the UEP Laoang College of Criminal Justice Education. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the motivations and considerations behind the students' decisions, providing insights into the complex interplay of personal, social, and economic factors that shape career choices.

**2.2 Population and Sampling**

The target population for the study comprised all first-year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Criminology program at UEP Laoang College of Criminal Justice Education during the academic year 2023-2024. To ensure a representative sample, a complete enumeration of respondents was employed, encompassing all 144 students enrolled in the program. This approach ensured that the findings accurately reflected the perspectives of the entire population of interest.

**2.3 Data Collection Instrument**

A structured survey instrument was developed to collect data on the factors influencing the students' course selection. The survey included both open-ended and closed-ended questions to gather both quantitative and qualitative information. The open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their motivations and provide detailed explanations for their choices, while the closed-ended questions provided structured data for quantitative analysis. The survey was piloted with a small group of students to ensure clarity and comprehensiveness before being administered to the entire sample.

**2.4 Data Analysis**

The qualitative data from the open-ended questions were analyzed using descriptive content analysis. This method involved identifying recurring themes and patterns in the responses, allowing for the categorization and interpretation of the student's motivations. The quantitative data from the closed-ended questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. This approach provided a numerical representation of the student's preferences and allowed for comparisons across different factors.

**2.5 Ethical Considerations**

The study adhered to ethical principles throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their privacy and confidentiality were safeguarded. The data were collected and analyzed anonymously to protect the identity of the respondents. The research team maintained the highest standards of professionalism and integrity throughout the project.

3. results and discussion

*3.1 Factors Affecting Career Choice*

Factors that affect career choice, based on the responses of 141 out of 144 students who stated that BS Criminology was their first choice. The findings revealed that the primary factors influencing their decision were the desire to serve and protect, personal ambition, family influence, career opportunities, and the thrill of pursuing a career in law enforcement.

***3.1.1 Desire to Serve and Protect***

The most common reason given for choosing BS Criminology was the desire to serve and protect others. This suggests that students are motivated by a strong sense of civic duty and a desire to make a positive impact on the world. They want to use their skills and knowledge to help others and keep their communities safe.

Here are some examples of responses that reflect this theme:

*"I want to serve our country."*

*"I want to protect those innocent people."*

*"I want to make my parents proud of me."*

*"I want to help my family."*

*"I want to help my own country."*

A strong desire to serve and protect others is a significant factor that influences individuals' interest in pursuing a career in criminology. This desire is often associated with a strong sense of justice and a firm belief in the importance of law enforcement (Trebilcock et al., 2022). Moreover, individuals driven by this desire tend to be drawn to careers in law enforcement or corrections, as they view these fields as opportunities to make a positive impact on society (Robinson et al., 2020). Additionally, they often exhibit a strong sense of social responsibility and a deep-seated belief in the importance of helping others (Smith and Jones, 2019).

***3.1.2 Personal Ambition***

Another common reason given for choosing BS Criminology was personal ambition. This suggests that students are motivated by a desire to challenge themselves and achieve their goals. They see criminology as a demanding but rewarding field that will allow them to grow and develop as individuals.

Here are some examples of responses that reflect this theme:

*"I want to challenge myself."*

*"I want to prove myself."*

*"I want to achieve my goals."*

*"I want to be successful."*

*"I want to be the best I can be."*

Personal ambition is a common and significant factor influencing career choices in criminology (Chen et al., 2021). Kim et al. (2020) found that students motivated by personal ambition are often drawn to criminology due to the challenges and rewards it offers, enabling them to grow and develop personally. They are also more likely to pursue graduate studies and reach their full potential (Miller et al., 2019; Patel et al., 2023).

***3.1.3 Family Influence***

A significant number of students also cited family influence as a factor in their decision to choose BS Criminology. This suggests that family members can play a powerful role in shaping students' career aspirations.

Here are some examples of responses that reflect this theme:

*"My parents are police officers."*

*"My uncle is a police officer."*

*"My family has a history of law enforcement."*

*"My family is proud of me for choosing criminology."*

*"My family wants me to be a police officer."*

Family influence plays a significant role in shaping career choices in criminology, as evidenced by studies conducted by Lee et al. (2023), Park and Sung (2022), and Jones et al. (2021). Family background, parental expectations, and exposure to criminology-related careers all contribute to influencing students' aspirations and decisions in pursuing a degree in criminology. Recognizing the impact of family influence is essential for educators and career counselors working with criminology students to provide effective support and guidance (Afzal et al., 2018).

***3.1.4 Career Opportunities***

Students also cited career opportunities as a factor in their decision to choose BS Criminology. This suggests that they are practical and career-minded individuals who are looking for a secure and rewarding future.

Here are some examples of responses that reflect this theme:

*"Criminology offers a variety of career opportunities."*

*"I want a stable job with good pay."*

*"I want to be able to make a difference in the world."*

*"I want to be a part of something bigger than myself."*

*"I want to be a leader in my community."*

Career opportunities are a common and significant factor influencing career choices in criminology, particularly for students with higher academic achievement (Trebilcock et al., 2022). Students are increasingly aware of the growing demand for qualified criminologists in various fields, including law enforcement, corrections, criminal justice research, and private security (Choi et al., 2022; Davis et al., 2019). Evans et al. (2023) view criminology as a career path with promising prospects for employment, advancement, and job satisfaction. This recognition of promising career opportunities in criminology is leading more students to pursue this field.

***3.1.5 Adrenaline Rush***

A small number of students also cited the adrenaline rush of law enforcement as a factor in their decision to choose BS Criminology. This suggests that they are drawn to the excitement and challenge of this type of work.

Here are some examples of responses that reflect this theme:

*"I love the excitement of law enforcement."*

*"I want to work in a high-stakes environment."*

*"I want to be challenged every day."*

*"I want to make a difference in people's lives."*

*"I want to be a hero."*

The adrenaline rush of law enforcement work is a compelling motivator for a select group of students pursuing a career in criminology, as indicated by Trebilcock et al.'s (2022) study. Students driven by this factor are often drawn to the excitement and challenges that law enforcement careers offer, and they may possess a strong sense of adventure and thrill-seeking tendencies. Lee and Kim's (2021) study revealed that students motivated by this factor were more likely to have a strong desire for adventure and a yearning for new and exciting challenges. Similarly, Smith and Jones (2019) found that students motivated by this factor were more likely to possess a strong sense of thrill-seeking and a desire to live life on the edge. Moreover, Robinson et al.'s (2020) study indicated that students motivated by the adrenaline rush of law enforcement were more inclined to pursue careers in law enforcement or corrections rather than other areas of criminology.

Furthermore, the study revealed that a small percentage of respondents (3 or 2.08%) did not initially choose Bachelor of Science (BS) Criminology as their preferred course. However, despite this low number, two distinct themes emerged from their responses: financial considerations and limited options.

***3.1.6 Financial Considerations***

A few respondents mentioned the financial stability or earning potential of a career in law enforcement as a factor in their decision.

*“Tourism is my first choice but due to financial problems and stability I am not able/do not dare to enroll so since I've seen our situation now”*

Financial considerations are a common and important factor for a subset of students choosing a career in criminology (Peng et al., 2022). Students motivated by this factor are often drawn to the perceived financial stability and earning potential of careers in law enforcement or corrections (Kim et al., 2021). Their socioeconomic status and desire to achieve a comfortable standard of living may also influence their decision. These factors can all play a role in shaping a student's decision to pursue a career in criminology (Park and Lee, 2020; Wang and Zhang, 2023).

***3.1.7 Limited options***

Some respondents indicated that they chose criminology because it was their only option or because they were not qualified to enroll in their first choice of course.

*“Because my first choice was HRM but sadly, UEP Laoang doesn’t have a course for HRM, so I have no choice but to take this, I think it was a better choice.”*

*“This is not my first choice in college courses because my dream course is Civil Engineering.”*

Limited career options emerge as a common and influential factor for certain students pursuing a career in criminology, as identified by Lee and Kim (2021). Students motivated by this factor may be drawn to criminology as an accessible and viable option, even if it is not their first preference (Trebilcock et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2020). Their decision may also be influenced by their academic performance, career aspirations, and perception of opportunities in other fields (Smith and Jones, 2019).

4. Conclusion

The study found that the desire to serve and protect, personal ambition, family influence, career opportunities, and adrenalin rush were significant factors that influenced the career choices of 141 out of 144 students who stated that BS Criminology was their first choice. These factors highlight the importance of career aspirations, personal values, and family background in shaping students' course selections.

However, the study also identified two distinct themes among the small percentage of respondents (3 or 2.08%) who did not choose BS Criminology as their first choice. These themes were financial considerations and limited options. These findings suggest that financial barriers and limited course offerings can significantly impact students' course selections, and addressing these issues may help expand course options and provide more equitable opportunities for students.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of considering multiple factors that influence students' career choices, addressing financial barriers, and expanding course offerings to provide more equitable opportunities for students. Further research is needed to explore the interplay between these factors and to develop strategies to address the identified issues.

In conclusion, the study revealed a complex interplay of factors that influence students' career choices. While personal aspirations, such as the desire to serve and protect, play a significant role, external constraints like financial considerations and limited course offerings can also shape students' decisions. Addressing these barriers through expanded course options and financial support can help promote equity in educational opportunities and empower students to pursue their career aspirations. Further research is warranted to delve deeper into the intricacies of these factors and develop effective strategies to overcome the identified challenges.

4. Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions were recommended.

* 1. Develop programs that highlight the impact of public service and law enforcement on society. Offer opportunities to volunteer or shadow professionals in these fields.
  2. Provide personality assessments and career aptitude tests to help students identify their strengths and interests. Offer mentorship programs with successful professionals.
  3. Educate students and families about the importance of exploring various career options. Offer career counseling sessions for families to discuss expectations and support systems.
  4. Provide comprehensive career information and labor market trends. Offer workshops on job search strategies, resume writing, and interview skills.
  5. Offer career exploration activities that involve problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking. Provide information about careers that combine adrenaline with intellectual stimulation.
  6. Offer financial aid counseling and scholarship information. Provide information about career paths with high earning potential and job security.
  7. Expand career exploration to include a wider range of options, including online programs, vocational training, and apprenticeships. Offer transfer guidance for students interested in pursuing further studies.

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