Career Paths in Criminal Justice: Intersection of Passion, Opportunity and Overcoming Challenges of First-Year Criminology

Students in the Philippines

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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:** To explore students' perspectives and experiences, a qualitative research approach using descriptive content analysis was employed. Data were collected through structured surveys.  **Place and Duration of Study:** The study was conducted among freshmen criminology students at 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. The collected responses were analyzed using descriptive content analysis, identifying recurring themes that shape 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 pursue their chosen careers fully. |

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

1. INTRODUCTION

The transition to higher education marks a critical period in which students make foundational career decisions. A common challenge arises when individuals select academic programs that do not align with their personal interests or abilities, potentially leading to academic struggles and career changes after graduation. Understanding the factors shaping these choices is essential for effective career counseling. This study examines how freshmen at the University of the Eastern Philippines (UEP) Laoang College of Criminal Justice Education (CCJE) navigate their decision-making process when selecting a criminology career, shedding light on their motivations, aspirations, and potential obstacles.

According to Parola and Marcionetti (2021), career selection involves choosing an educational path that leads to a profession based on one's interests, passions, and skills, often shaped by external influences such as family and peers. Parental guidance and mentorship from teachers can impact students' satisfaction and persistence in their chosen field (Duru, 2022). Selecting a college major is frequently an intricate and stressful process with long-term implications (Edmonds, 2012), and switching majors is a widespread phenomenon (Silver, 2023). Ensuring compatibility between personal traits and academic pursuits—termed "Person-Environment Fit"—is crucial for achieving successful outcomes (Porter & Umbach, 2006). Cultural and familial dynamics, including the parent-child relationships prevalent in Asian societies, also contribute to students' career decisions (Hou et al., 2023). Additionally, societal and economic factors, such as job market demand and employability rates, significantly influence students' academic and professional aspirations (Fenta et al., 2019; Gekara & Sampson, 2021; Oropeza, 2024). Moreover, individual behavioral patterns play a role in shaping career paths (King et al., 2020).

Parson (1909) proposed that career selection should be based on self-awareness, an understanding of job requirements, and a logical evaluation of both (Duru, 2022; Park & Harris, 2024). Career decisions are influenced by intrinsic factors, such as personality and interests, as well as external elements, including social networks and available resources (Patton & McMahon, 2021; Affuso et al., 2022).

Research on criminology students has identified several primary influences on career choice. These include personal ambition (Green & Karuppannan, 2025; Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2021; Miller et al., 2019; Mahajan, 2024), family expectations (Lee et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2020; Park & Harris, 2024; Afzal et al., 2018), perceived employment opportunities (Trebilcock et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2025; Walters et al., 2022; Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2021), the thrill associated with law enforcement work (Trebilcock et al., 2022; Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2021; Clinkinbeard et al., 2021; Park & Harris, 2024), and financial considerations, particularly for students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Peng et al., 2022; Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2021; Huang et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2024).

This analysis highlights the significance of factors such as personal ambition, family influence, career prospects, the appeal of exciting law enforcement work, and financial limitations in shaping criminology students’ career paths. The relative impact of these elements may vary across cultural contexts. Understanding these determinants is crucial for guiding students and informing initiatives that encourage criminology careers among diverse populations. Future studies should investigate how these influences interact and address barriers faced by underrepresented students.

Let me know if you’d like any refinements or further adjustments!

**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**

This study adopted a qualitative research design, specifically employing 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 facilitated an in-depth exploration of students' motivations and decision-making processes, providing valuable insights into the interplay of personal aspirations, social influences, and economic considerations that shape career choices..

**2.2 Population and Sampling**

The study focused on all 144 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 comprehensive representation, a complete enumeration sampling method was employed, allowing for the inclusion of all students in the analysis. This approach ensured that the findings accurately reflected the perspectives and experiences of the entire population under study.

**2.3 Data Collection Instrument**

A structured survey instrument was designed to collect data on the factors influencing students' course selection. The survey incorporated both open-ended and closed-ended questions, enabling the gathering of qualitative insights. Open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their motivations and provide detailed explanations for their choices, while closed-ended questions facilitated structured analysis. Prior to full-scale implementation, the survey underwent a pilot test with a small group of students to ensure clarity and comprehensiveness.

**2.4 Data Analysis**

Responses from open-ended survey questions were examined using descriptive content analysis, identifying recurring themes and patterns that shaped students' career choices. Additionally, closed-ended responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentage calculations, to provide a numerical representation of students' preferences and facilitate comparative analysis across influencing factors.

**2.5 Ethical Considerations**

The study adhered to ethical research principles to ensure the protection of participants' rights and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, emphasizing voluntary participation. Measures were taken to safeguard privacy by anonymizing responses during data collection and analysis. Throughout the research process, professionalism and integrity were maintained to uphold ethical standards in conducting the study..

3. results and discussion

*3.1 Factors Affecting Career Choice*

Among the 144 first-year criminology students surveyed, 141 indicated that BS Criminology was their first choice. The findings reveal that several key factors influenced their decision, including the desire to serve and protect, personal ambition, family influence, career opportunities, and the excitement associated with law enforcement.

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

The most common motivation for selecting BS Criminology was the aspiration to serve and protect others. This suggests that students are driven by a strong sense of civic duty and a commitment to making a positive societal impact. Their career choice is guided by the belief that law enforcement provides a meaningful avenue to contribute to public safety and community well-being.

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."*

This intrinsic motivation aligns with research emphasizing the role of justice and law enforcement in shaping career preferences (Trebilcock et al., 2022). Individuals with a strong sense of duty often pursue careers in law enforcement or corrections, viewing these professions as opportunities to uphold justice and positively impact society (Clinkinbeard et al., 2021; Park & Harris, 2024).

***3.1.2 Personal Ambition***

Many students cited personal ambition as a key factor in their decision, reflecting their desire to challenge themselves and achieve personal and professional growth. Criminology is perceived as a demanding yet rewarding field, offering opportunities for self-improvement and career development..

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."*

Studies suggest that ambition significantly influences career choices, with students attracted to criminology due to the challenges and opportunities for personal development (Wang et al., 2024; Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2021; Miller et al., 2019; Mahajan, 2024).

***3.1.3 Family Influence***

Family expectations and backgrounds also play a substantial role in shaping students’ career aspirations. Many respondents indicated that their decision was influenced by family members with careers in law enforcement.

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."*

Existing literature supports the significance of family influence in career selection, highlighting how parental expectations and exposure to criminology-related careers shape students’ aspirations (Lee et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2020; Park & Harris, 2024; Afzal et al., 2018). This underscores the need for career counselors and educators to acknowledge familial impact when guiding students (Caparroso & Nobis, 2024).

***3.1.4 Career Opportunities***

Practical considerations, such as job stability and future employment prospects, also influenced students' decisions. Many viewed criminology as a field with promising career opportunities in law enforcement, corrections, private security, and criminal justice research.

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."*

Research indicates that career prospects significantly affect students' choices, particularly those with high academic achievement (Trebilcock et al., 2022). The growing demand for criminology professionals contributes to its appeal (Lee et al., 2025; Walters et al., 2022; Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2021).

***3.1.5 Adrenaline Rush***

A smaller subset of students cited the excitement and challenges of law enforcement as a motivating factor. These individuals are drawn to the fast-paced and high-stakes nature of the profession.

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."*

This thrill-seeking aspect has been documented in criminology research, with students attracted to the adrenaline-driven aspects of law enforcement careers (Trebilcock et al., 2022; Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2021; Clinkinbeard et al., 2021; Park & Harris, 2024).

***3.1.6 Financial Considerations***

A small percentage of respondents (2.08%) did not originally select BS Criminology as their first choice but chose it due to financial constraints and stability concerns.

Here are some examples of responses that reflect this theme:

*“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”*

Research highlights financial stability as a critical factor influencing career decisions, especially for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Peng et al., 2022; Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2021; Huang et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2024). Law enforcement careers often offer stable incomes, making them appealing for financially constrained students.

***3.1.7 Limited options***

Some respondents stated that they pursued criminology due to limited alternatives or being unable to enroll in their preferred program.

Here are some examples of responses that reflect this theme:

*“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.”*

Students who selected criminology as a secondary option often cited accessibility and practicality as determining factors. Research indicates that some individuals may choose criminology due to limited alternatives rather than genuine interest (Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2021; Trebilcock et al., 2022; Clinkinbeard et al., 2021; Park & Harris, 2024).

1. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to understand the factors influencing the career choices of freshmen at the University of the Eastern Philippines (UEP) Laoang College of Criminal Justice Education (CCJE). The findings indicate that for the vast majority of students who identified BS Criminology as their first choice (141 out of 144), the desire to serve and protect, personal ambition, family influence, perceived career opportunities, and the allure of the adrenaline rush were significant motivating factors. These results directly support the understanding that students' career aspirations, personal values, and family background play a crucial role in their decision to pursue criminal justice.

However, the study also revealed important insights from the small segment of students (3 or 2.08%) who did not initially choose BS Criminology. The emergent themes of financial considerations and limited course options highlight critical external constraints that can override students' preferred career paths. This demonstrates that while intrinsic motivations are strong for those who choose their desired field, socioeconomic realities and institutional limitations can significantly impact the choices of others.

Therefore, the research objective was achieved by identifying key factors influencing career choices among freshmen in the BS Criminology program. The study not only confirms the importance of intrinsic motivators for those pursuing their preferred field but also sheds light on the significant impact of extrinsic factors, specifically financial limitations and the availability of course offerings, on students who do not choose their initial preference.

In conclusion, this research underscores the multifaceted nature of career decision-making. While personal aspirations are paramount for many, institutional and socioeconomic factors can create barriers for others. Addressing financial constraints and expanding course options are crucial steps toward promoting more equitable educational opportunities and enabling a greater number of students to pursue their desired career paths. Future research should further investigate the interplay between these intrinsic and extrinsic factors to develop targeted interventions and support systems for students navigating their career choices.

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.

**Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)**

This research utilized ChatGPT, Gemini, and Copilot—advanced AI language models—for paraphrasing paragraphs and checking grammatical errors. The Free ChatGPT App, along with Gemini and Copilot, was employed as a tool to enhance the clarity and readability of the text, ensuring that ideas were effectively communicated while maintaining the original meaning. The use of these AI models contributed to refining the language and structure of the manuscript.

Details of the AI usage are given below:

* + 1. Used ChatGPT, Gemini, and Copilot for paraphrasing paragraphs to improve the clarity and readability of the text.
    2. Used ChatGPT, Gemini, and Copilot for checking language and grammar to enhance overall accuracy and fluency.

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