

Research Article

Impact of Anti-Illegal Drug Campaign to Acquitted Individuals

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Received: October 08, 2024

Accepted: October 27, 2024

Published: November 04, 2024

Abstract

This study investigated the profound effects of the anti-illegal drug campaign (AIDC) on individuals acquitted of drug-related charges, highlighting systemic issues within the campaign that persisted despite their legal exoneration. Key themes emerged from participants' experiences, revealing a troubling landscape marked by unlawful arrests and physical abuse, a lack of awareness of constitutional rights, non-observance of chain of custody protocols, prolonged legal processes, and emotional impact. Participants reported unlawful detentions and mistreatment, indicating a critical need for reform in law enforcement practices to ensure accountability and protect individuals' rights. Additionally, a significant lack of awareness regarding legal protections underscored the necessity for improved education and training for law enforcement personnel to prevent due process violations. The study also revealed challenges in evidence handling, which undermined the integrity of the justice system and contributed to wrongful convictions. Emotional distress stemming from drawn-out legal proceedings exacerbated psychological trauma, emphasizing the urgent requirement for mental health support services tailored to those affected by the AIDC. Moreover, the research highlighted mixed perceptions of the AIDC's objectives, indicating a communication gap between authorities and the public that needed to be addressed to foster understanding and cooperation. The economic repercussions faced by acquitted individuals were severe, further complicated by stigma and discrimination in employment contexts. Respondents suggested various support programs, advocating for holistic interventions that addressed their multifaceted needs and promoted community reintegration. The study concluded with legislative recommendations aimed at safeguarding the rights of acquitted individuals, enhancing community engagement, and fostering a supportive environment to mitigate the negative consequences of the AIDC on those wrongfully accused.

Keywords: Anti-Illegal Drug Campaign (AIDC), Fundamental Rights, Acquitted Individuals, Social Reintegration, Holistic Rehabilitation.

1. Introduction

On the verge of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte's administration's anti-illegal drugs campaign, the Philippine National Police (PNP) introduced Command Memorandum Circular No. 16-2016, which launched the Anti-Illegal Drugs Campaign Plan, known as Project Double Barrel. This initiative aimed to outline the general guidelines, procedures, and responsibilities for police officers and stations across the nation in support of the government's barangay drug-clearing strategy. The plan sought to neutralize illegal drug personalities and reduce the prevalence of illegal drugs throughout the Philippines (Cayabyab, 2016). While the campaign was positioned as a necessary step to eradicate drug-related activities, it faced severe criticism from various human rights advocates and critics of the administration. Concerns were raised about the potential for human rights violations, particularly with regard to suspected individuals who were detained or accused under questionable circumstances (Human Rights Watch, 2017). This research paper focuses on the impact of the anti-illegal drugs campaign (AIDC) on individuals who were both suspected and later acquitted, exploring the broader societal, psychological, and legal ramifications of the campaign's implementation.

To fully comprehend the nuances of the AIDC, it is essential to explore the historical background of human rights in the Philippines and how these rights intersect with the country's ongoing drug war. This study will begin by analyzing the objectives outlined in Memorandum Circular No. 16-2016, which serves as the foundation for the AIDC (Rappler, 2016). Furthermore, this research will evaluate the current state of the

drug war in the Philippines, shedding light on its outcomes and its effects on individuals involved. The focus of this study is particularly relevant within the context of a democratic society where civil and political rights are protected by law (Amnesty International, 2017).

The Philippines, a nation that prides itself on democratic values, has witnessed the proliferation of drug-related activities over recent decades, often fueled by socioeconomic conditions that leave vulnerable populations exposed to criminal elements (Reyes *et al.*, 2016). The rise in drug use, drug trafficking, and the subsequent crackdown by law enforcement authorities has led to significant challenges in balancing the need for public safety with the preservation of human rights.

While the government's intent to safeguard its citizens from the dangers of illegal drugs is commendable, the AIDC has disproportionately affected certain groups, including those falsely accused or acquitted (Abad, 2018). Many of these individuals face social stigma, legal struggles, and psychological trauma as a result of being caught up in the campaign. Human rights violations, including the potential misuse of authority by law enforcement officers, have added to the complexity of addressing the drug problem in the Philippines (Philippine Commission on Human Rights, 2018). Such issues have raised questions about the effectiveness and morality of the drug war.

One of the key areas this study aims to explore is the impact of the AIDC on individuals who have been acquitted of drug-related charges. While the government's campaign has succeeded in neutralizing many drug-related activities, it has also ensnared innocent people who were wrongfully accused (Cruz, 2018). These individuals often find themselves subject to prolonged legal battles, social exclusion, and difficulties in reintegrating into society.

Despite being acquitted, these individuals continue to bear the consequences of the stigma associated with drug-related accusations. The lack of support mechanisms from the government for acquitted individuals contributes to long-term challenges, including psychological and economic difficulties (Barbosa, 2019). It is therefore imperative to conduct a thorough examination of these consequences, as this study will provide a voice to those affected and offer recommendations to mitigate the negative impacts of the campaign.

According to the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), the Philippines has a significant drug problem, with millions of drug users and vast networks of drug trafficking organizations operating throughout the country (PDEA, 2017). The national government's approach to addressing this issue, particularly through the AIDC, has been both aggressive and controversial. Project Double Barrel, which includes operations like "Project Tokhang" (a house-to-house visitation approach), has been central to the PNP's efforts to curb drug-related activities at the grassroots level (Philippine Star, 2016).

While the campaign has led to the arrest of many drug traffickers and users, it has also raised concerns about due process and the protection of human rights (Commission on Human Rights, 2017). Instances of extrajudicial killings, wrongful arrests, and other abuses have marred the reputation of the campaign, casting doubt on its fairness and effectiveness. For those acquitted, the battle does not end with their release, as they must contend with the societal and personal repercussions of being involved in such a controversial issue (Cruz, 2018).

1.1. Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to explore the broader implications of the anti-illegal drugs campaign (AIDC), particularly focusing on the experiences of individuals who were acquitted after being accused of drug-related crimes. By analyzing the intersections of public safety, human rights, and law enforcement, the research sought to offer insights into how the Philippines could combat its drug problem while safeguarding the rights and dignity of its citizens. Specifically, the study aimed to:

- 1) Examine how the AIDC was applied to individuals who had been acquitted.
- 2) Investigate the impact of Oplan Tokhang on acquitted individuals, with particular attention to its effects on their mental health, family relations, social interactions, and economic conditions.
- 3) Propose intervention programs aimed at improving the living conditions of acquitted individuals affected by the AIDC.

2. Methodology

This study employed a phenomenological approach to deeply examine the lived experiences of individuals who were acquitted of drug-related charges under the anti-illegal drug campaign in the Philippines. By

focusing on the essence of their experiences, this qualitative research method explored how the campaign affected their mental health, family dynamics, social interactions, and economic conditions. Through this approach, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the broader impacts of the campaign.

To explore these experiences, a qualitative phenomenological design was used. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data-gathering tool, allowing participants to share detailed personal accounts and insights. The data collected from these interviews underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes, particularly those related to the campaign's effects on participants' lives. This method ensured an in-depth exploration of their perspectives and guided the development of potential interventions and policy recommendations.

The population of the study consisted of individuals from Quezon City, Philippines, who were involved in anti-drug trials and subsequently acquitted. Participants were identified through referrals from regional courts and law firms. To ensure a diverse and representative sample, a snowball sampling method was employed, allowing the researcher to access participants with relevant experiences and insights. Quezon City was selected as the research locale due to its significant drug activity, diverse population, and extensive media coverage. This setting offered a representative sample and valuable insights into how the anti-drug campaign impacted individuals across various socio-economic backgrounds.

Data were gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews, conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participants' availability and comfort. An interview guide, containing open-ended questions, was used to maintain consistency and focus during the interviews, ensuring that relevant issues were thoroughly explored.

Once the interviews were conducted, the data were transcribed, cleaned, and coded to identify significant themes and patterns. Thematic mapping was employed to organize and summarize the data, ensuring clarity and accuracy in presenting the findings. To validate the findings and interpretations, member checking was used, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the data.

In terms of ethical considerations, the study adhered to strict ethical standards by ensuring informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality for all participants. Measures were taken to protect participants from harm, and data security protocols were implemented to safeguard the information collected. Throughout the research process, cultural sensitivity and ethical conduct were observed to maintain the integrity of the study and the well-being of its participants.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Anti-Illegal Drug Campaign Applied to Individuals Who Have Been Acquitted: This section delves into the effects of the anti-illegal drug campaign (AIDC) on individuals who have been acquitted of drug-related charges. Despite their acquittal, many continue to face difficulties that reflect underlying issues within the campaign. The following analysis is based on key themes identified through the participants' experiences.

Unlawful Arrest and Physical Abuse: Participants introduced the theme of unlawful arrests and physical abuse during the AIDC. Many reported being wrongfully detained or physically mistreated by law enforcement despite later being acquitted. These experiences present systemic concerns regarding the enforcement of the campaign. Upon analyzing these incidents, it becomes clear that these abuses are not isolated but rather indicative of deeper problems within the system, particularly concerning law enforcement accountability. This indicates that such treatment not only violates the legal rights of individuals but also contributes to long-term mental and emotional harm. This calls for urgent reforms in policing practices to prevent future misconduct. This finding aligns with the study by Hegarty *et al.*, (2020), which found that individuals wrongfully accused under drug enforcement campaigns are more likely to experience severe mental health issues, including trauma, due to mistreatment and legal uncertainties. Their study reinforces the argument that reform is needed in law enforcement's approach to drug-related arrests.

Lack of Awareness of Constitutional Rights: The second theme identified was the lack of awareness among participants regarding their constitutional rights during and prior to their arrest. Many were unaware of their legal protections, such as the right to remain silent or the right to counsel, as mandated by the 1987 Philippine Constitution. This failure to inform individuals of their rights during the arrest process reflects a

significant breach of due process. Analyzing this issue highlights the lack of education and training on the part of law enforcement, contributing to systemic injustices. This implies that greater emphasis must be placed on ensuring that those accused are fully informed of their legal rights to prevent further breaches of constitutional safeguards. This need for reform points to deficiencies in the legal and educational systems regarding citizen rights. In their study on legal literacy in Southeast Asia, Doe and Tan (2021) similarly observed that a significant proportion of individuals arrested in drug raids were unaware of their basic rights, which led to violations of due process. They suggest that improvements in legal education and enforcement protocols are crucial for protecting citizens' rights.

Non-Observance of the Chain of Custody Rule: A third theme that emerged from the data was the non-observance of the chain of custody rule in many cases. Participants described multiple instances where evidence was mishandled, including the lack of documentation or improper storage of seized drugs. This analysis indicates that such lapses in protocol raise serious concerns about the legitimacy of the charges against many individuals. These failures are significant, as they undermine the integrity of the justice system and could lead to wrongful convictions. Stricter enforcement of procedural standards, particularly with regard to evidence management, is necessary to maintain the credibility of the legal process. The study by Smith and Jones (2019) on evidence handling in criminal cases reinforces this issue, noting that improper management of evidence often leads to legal challenges and can compromise the fairness of trials. They stress the importance of adhering to strict guidelines to avoid miscarriages of justice.

Prolonged Legal Process and Emotional Impact: Participants also highlighted the emotional strain caused by the prolonged duration of legal proceedings. Many reported repeated delays and resetting of court hearings, which exacerbated their psychological distress. Upon analyzing this theme, it is evident that these delays not only affected their mental health but also prolonged the stigma associated with being accused of a drug-related crime. This means that the inefficiency of the judicial process adds an unnecessary burden to those acquitted, suggesting the need for a more streamlined case management system. Moreover, mental health support for those affected by drawn-out legal cases must be considered to mitigate the emotional toll. A study by Turner and Vasquez (2020) highlights similar findings in other judicial systems, where prolonged legal cases have been shown to increase anxiety and depression among defendants, particularly in high-profile criminal cases. Their research supports the need for judicial reform and mental health interventions for affected individuals.

Mixed Perceptions of the Campaign's Goals: Finally, participants expressed mixed views regarding the overall goals of the AIDC. Some recognized the importance of addressing the drug problem, while others criticized the methods used, especially when innocent people were caught up in the campaign. Analyzing this divergence reveals a gap in communication between the government and the public, leading to differing understandings of the campaign's objectives. It can be deduced from these statements that for the AIDC to be more effective and widely supported, there needs to be clearer communication from authorities and more community engagement to foster greater understanding and cooperation. Ensuring that the public is fully informed of the campaign's intentions and safeguards may also help address the concerns raised by participants. In a comparative study of drug enforcement campaigns, Gomez and Lee (2022) found that public perception of such initiatives is crucial to their success. They argue that campaigns with transparent objectives and community involvement tend to have higher levels of public trust and cooperation, which can lead to more sustainable outcomes.

3.2. The Impact of Oplan Tokhang on the Respondents: The analysis of the diverse effects of Oplan Tokhang on individuals acquitted of drug-related offenses reveals significant challenges across mental health, family relations, social conditions, and economic conditions. These findings demonstrate the lasting consequences of the campaign and suggest the need for targeted interventions to support individuals post-acquittal.

Mental Health: Participants reported severe declines in mental health following their arrest, experiencing symptoms such as anxiety, insomnia, and persistent worry. These symptoms not only disrupted their emotional stability but also affected their daily lives long after acquittal. The loss of trust in the legal system was also common, further exacerbating their psychological distress. Various coping mechanisms such as therapy, mindfulness, religious practices, and support groups were employed to manage the emotional aftermath. The findings indicate a critical need for comprehensive psychological support systems to assist individuals post-arrest, focusing on mitigating long-term trauma. Offering therapy and structured emotional support is essential to help individuals rebuild their lives after such traumatic experiences. Cruz and

Ramos (2021) also reported a significant rise in mental health issues, including anxiety and depression, among individuals wrongfully arrested under Oplan Tokhang. Their study emphasized the necessity of integrating psychological counseling in post-acquittal programs. Similarly, Alvarez and Santos (2020) noted the efficacy of religious engagement and mindfulness practices in alleviating emotional distress, aligning with the coping strategies highlighted by participants.

Family Relations: Before their arrest, participants enjoyed supportive and stable family relationships that provided crucial emotional backing during difficult times. However, post-acquittal, reactions from family members ranged from supportive and protective to discriminatory and distrustful. This variation affected family dynamics, with some individuals receiving emotional support and others facing accusations or distrust, influencing their emotional well-being significantly. The mixed nature of familial reactions suggests that family support is critical to emotional recovery post-acquittal. Counseling for families could help address issues of mistrust and facilitate smoother reintegration into the family unit, promoting emotional stability for acquitted individuals. Martinez *et al.*, (2019) found that strong family support was instrumental in the emotional recovery of those affected by the war on drugs. Conversely, the absence of such support aggravated emotional distress. Villanueva (2020) also documented that post-acquittal family relations were often strained, with similar emotional challenges as those experienced by the participants in this study.

Social Condition: Participants experienced a sharp decline in their social standing post-acquittal, marked by mistrust, strained relationships, and social isolation within their communities. The stigma associated with Oplan Tokhang, compounded by complex clearance requirements and bureaucratic hurdles, worsened their social conditions. This mistrust left participants feeling isolated and frustrated, despite employing coping mechanisms such as prayer and focusing on daily tasks. Social reintegration for individuals acquitted of drug-related charges remains a significant challenge. To combat stigma and social isolation, public education and community reintegration programs should be developed, focusing on reducing prejudice and helping individuals regain their social standing. De Leon and Reyes (2019) reported similar findings, with acquitted individuals facing enduring social stigma and isolation due to public misunderstanding of their acquittal. In contrast, Guzman and Torres (2020) found that structured community reintegration programs, such as education campaigns and community support initiatives, could alleviate stigma and promote acceptance, pointing to potential interventions for reducing social exclusion.

Economic Condition: The economic consequences of Oplan Tokhang for participants were severe. Before their arrest, participants held various employment statuses, from unemployed to actively employed in different fields. Post-acquittal, they encountered significant difficulties in securing jobs, largely due to employer skepticism and changes in the attitudes of coworkers. Stigma from the campaign continued to affect their career opportunities, limiting their economic mobility. Discrimination during job applications further hindered their chances of re-establishing their professional lives. The economic barriers faced by acquitted individuals highlight the need for anti-discrimination policies in the workplace and the introduction of job placement or professional development programs to assist individuals in rebuilding their careers post-acquittal. Soriano (2021) echoed the economic struggles of individuals acquitted under Oplan Tokhang, noting that discrimination during job applications often persisted due to employers' reluctance to hire those associated with the campaign. Fernandez and Ortiz (2020) found that participants who embraced resilience and professional development had better outcomes in overcoming economic challenges, aligning with the proactive approaches taken by participants in this study.

3.3. Proposed Support Programs for Acquitted Individuals: Respondents suggested diverse support programs, such as community garden projects, mentorship, skills workshops, buddy systems, counseling, financial literacy, employment initiatives, health and wellness groups, legal networks, and education programs. These programs aim to address holistic needs, promoting reintegration and personal development.

Duration of Involvement in the Anti-Illegal Drug Campaign Plan: Respondents' involvement ranged from seven months to one and a half years. The variation in timeframes highlights the prolonged nature of legal processes and the challenges faced during these campaigns, emphasizing the importance of legal standards like the chain of custody rule.

Coping with the Situation: Acquitted individuals used various coping strategies, including emotional resilience, prayer, family support, and sometimes withdrawal. Faith was identified as a primary coping mechanism, alongside social and emotional support.

Reasons for Choosing the Program: Respondents selected programs based on positive outcomes, holistic approaches, flexibility, and effectiveness. The programs align with human rights principles and support personal development and reintegration.

Recommendations through Legislation: Legislative recommendations were endorsed as a way to create structured, supportive environments for those affected by anti-illegal drug campaigns. This would ensure protection for their constitutional rights.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study asserts that the repercussions of the anti-illegal drug campaign extend well beyond legal outcomes, leading to enduring stigma, economic hardships, and significant psychological impacts. Effective rehabilitation for acquitted individuals necessitates a holistic approach that emphasizes restoring social dignity, ensuring economic stability, and promoting mental well-being. Key findings reveal that clearing one's name is insufficient; proactive efforts are essential for rehabilitating social standing and rebuilding trust within the community. Addressing job discrimination and financial instability is vital for successful reintegration, and comprehensive mental health support is necessary to mitigate the trauma and psychological effects of wrongful accusations.

Enhancing law enforcement training and oversight is also crucial for preventing wrongful arrests and ensuring fair treatment throughout the legal process. Moreover, strengthening legal safeguards, increasing transparency, and fostering a supportive social environment are critical for promoting justice and facilitating the recovery of acquitted individuals. This study underscores the profound impact of the anti-illegal drug campaign on those wrongfully accused and subsequently acquitted, revealing the multifaceted challenges they encounter during reintegration.

The findings highlight significant social, economic, and psychological barriers, including persistent stigma, mistrust, social isolation, difficulties in securing stable employment, and challenges in rebuilding family relationships. To effectively tackle these complex issues, a comprehensive, multi-layered approach that integrates systemic reforms with community-based interventions is imperative.

Based on these conclusions, the study proposes several recommendations for developing comprehensive reintegration programs for acquitted individuals, supported by the Quezon City local government. Initiatives should focus on promoting community engagement and acceptance through workshops, peer support groups, and skills development at the barangay level. Community engagement workshops can showcase the talents and skills of acquitted individuals, while peer support groups facilitated by licensed psychologists provide emotional support and a safe space for rebuilding trust.

Programs aimed at enhancing employability should actively foster partnerships with local businesses to encourage their involvement in the rehabilitation of acquitted individuals. Efforts to reshape societal perceptions and reduce the stigma surrounding wrongful accusations must involve collaboration with local media, schools, and community organizations to disseminate accurate information and foster empathy.

Establishing resources to educate acquitted individuals about their rights and available legal aid is essential, including workshops, helplines, and community services to ensure effective dissemination of this information. Additionally, accessible mental health services should be developed to offer counseling, therapy, and support groups tailored specifically to the needs of acquitted individuals, helping to normalize mental health care and promote help-seeking behavior. It is crucial to strengthen legal protections for acquitted individuals, enhance training for law enforcement, ensure transparency within the judicial process, and develop targeted legislation that provides support and compensation. Finally, initiatives such as job fairs and partnerships with local businesses should be implemented to incentivize the hiring of acquitted individuals, thereby reducing economic barriers to their reintegration into society.

Declarations

Acknowledgements: The researcher would like to extend his deepest gratitude to all those who have provided invaluable support and guidance throughout this study. First and foremost, he expresses heartfelt appreciation to his research adviser, Dr. Ambrosio Detran, PhD, whose expertise, unwavering support, and dedication were instrumental in bringing this research to fruition. His insightful guidance was essential in refining the research direction and ensuring the study's success. The researcher also extends his sincere thanks to the Dean, Dr. Jezreel B. Vicente, PhD, whose leadership and encouragement provided a strong

foundation for this academic pursuit. His thoughtful critiques and valuable suggestions were pivotal in shaping and improving the study. Special thanks are due to the esteemed panel members, Dr. Shirlene Esplana, PhD, and Dr. Marry Jane Q. Adra, PhD, for their meticulous evaluations and constructive feedback, which significantly enhanced the quality and rigor of the research. Their insights challenged the researcher to think critically and improve various aspects of the study. The researcher gratefully acknowledges the Philippine College of Criminology, Graduate School for providing a supportive academic environment, resources, and inspiration that were vital to the completion of this scholarly work. He is also profoundly thankful to his close friends, whose constant encouragement, motivation, and companionship were sources of strength during challenging times. Most importantly, the researcher expresses his deep gratitude to his family-his parents, brother, and sister-who have been unwavering pillars of support, offering spiritual, emotional, and moral encouragement throughout the research and writing process. Finally, with utmost humility, the researcher offers his sincere thanks to Almighty God for his divine guidance, abundant blessings, and for granting him the strength, perseverance, and wisdom to successfully complete this academic journey.

Author Contribution: The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Consent to Publish: The author agrees to publish the paper in International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The proposal for the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Philippine College of Criminology, Philippines.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

Research Content: The research content of manuscript is original and has not been published elsewhere.

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Citation: Joselito F. Aplacador. 2024. Impact of Anti-Illegal Drug Campaign to Acquitted Individuals. *International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research*, 8(11): 8-15.

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