

Prosecuting Crime, Pursuing Justice: Work Experiences of Public Prosecutors

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Abstract

Achieving impartial justice is one of the main goals of public prosecutors, who are essential gatekeepers of the legal system, ensuring that the search for the truth is balanced against the defense of fundamental rights. Thus, this study aimed to explore the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and aspirations of the public prosecutors in performing their duties in Bohol, Philippines. This was a transcendental phenomenological qualitative study involving semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 10 informants. All the informants are public prosecutors with 3 years of working experience in handling criminal cases. Informants participated in individual interviews. The qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The study's findings revealed the positive experiences of public prosecutors, including judicial gatekeeping, victim-centric advocacy, and adversarial mastery. In contrast, their negative experience is systemic resource austerity. Moreover, affective compartmentalization, principled impartiality, collaborative modernization, and holistic self-preservation are the informants' coping mechanisms, while the pursuit of ethical justice and pragmatic dispute resolution are their aspirations. Although public prosecutors exhibit high levels of professional expertise and advocacy, systemic resource austerity severely limits their efficacy. Hence, to reduce caseload pressure and achieve the goal of pursuing ethical justice, the Department of Justice and pertinent stakeholders should implement a multi-sectoral support strategy that incorporates digital case management and offers comprehensive mental health programs.

Keywords: Public Prosecutors, Systemic Resource Austerity, Coping Mechanisms, Criminal Justice Administration, Phenomenology

1. Introduction

Public prosecutors serve as essential actors in the criminal justice system because they represent the State, evaluate criminal complaints, initiate prosecution, and help ensure that justice is pursued without disregarding the rights of the accused, victims, and the public. Globally, prosecutorial work is shaped by independence, discretion, ethical responsibilities, technological demands, heavy caseloads, and public expectations. In the Philippines, public prosecution is anchored on Rule 110 of the Rules of Court and the structure of the National Prosecution Service, where prosecutors exercise control over criminal actions in the name of the People of the Philippines. This study focuses on the lived experiences of public prosecutors in Bohol, Philippines, particularly their professional experiences, coping mechanisms, and aspirations in performing their duties amid legal, operational, emotional, and institutional challenges.

Criminal prosecution is a public legal action undertaken to determine the guilt or innocence of an accused person in accordance with law. Prosecutors perform a vital role in criminal investigations and case resolution while protecting the rights of parties involved (Research Society of International Law [RSIL], 2025). Prosecutorial systems vary across countries depending on legal traditions and political structures, and the level of prosecutorial independence affects charging decisions, trial processes, and justice outcomes (The Law Institute, 2023). In the Philippines, Rule 110 of the Rules of Court governs criminal prosecution and establishes the prosecutor's control over criminal proceedings. Since crimes are treated as offenses against the State, criminal actions are prosecuted in the name of the People of the Philippines, giving public prosecutors the authority and responsibility to pursue criminal cases (Respicio & Co. Law Firm, 2025). However, prosecutors now face increasing demands arising from limited resources, digital evidence, forensic developments, cybercrime, statutory deadlines, and heightened ethical scrutiny, especially in the context of wrongful convictions and disclosure obligations (Lawrence et al., 2019). The local context of Bohol presents specific prosecutorial concerns. The province has experienced issues involving jurisdictional clarity and the informal use of terms such as "Attorney General Referral," which may refer to appeals to the Secretary of Justice or the Solicitor General (Respicio & Co. Law Firm, 2025). More importantly, Bohol has faced public concern regarding low conviction rates in illegal drug cases, where dismissals and acquittals have been linked to alleged corruption by some police sources, while legal experts have emphasized police lapses, procedural irregularities, evidence mishandling, and chain-of-custody violations as major reasons for weak cases (Bohol Sunday Post, 2014). These conditions justify the need to explore the lived experiences of public prosecutors in Bohol and how they manage flawed dockets, systemic constraints, and justice-sector coordination issues.

The literature shows that prosecutorial work is influenced by discretion, public accountability, political pressure, workload, professional identity, ethical responsibility, and institutional support. Prosecutors are viewed as public servants whose role evolves according to community expectations and justice priorities (Ingram, 2024). In some jurisdictions, prosecutorial identity is affected by electoral pressure, public criticism, and conviction-rate expectations (Munir, 2024). Progressive prosecution has emerged as a reform movement that seeks less punitive approaches and racial fairness, although it continues to face political resistance (Mitchell & Petersen, 2025). At the same time, prosecutorial discretion may also be used to support police power or protect institutional interests, showing the complexity of prosecutorial authority (Johnson, 2024; Ingram, 2024). Several studies emphasize the operational burden experienced by prosecutors. Staffing shortages, high attrition, and heavy caseloads have created severe pressure in many prosecutors' offices (Gershowitz, 2024). These demands, combined with high-risk decision-making and emotional stress, place prosecutors at risk of moral injury (Rostad & Langvik, 2025). Similar concerns are reported among public prosecutors in Pakistan, where excessive workload, negligence, and lack of skills affect performance (Baig et al., 2024). Heavy workload, deadlines, and weak institutional support may also cause psychological distress, fear of error, loss of control, and even workplace suicide risks (Lancman et al., 2025). Quality of life among prosecutors is also associated with sleep quality and social support, showing the need for occupational health support (Oliveira et al., 2025). The literature further highlights competence-related challenges. Prosecutors must adapt to expanding digital and forensic evidence, requiring specialized training and technical capacity (Goudswaard et al., 2025). Knowledge gaps also remain in areas such as eyewitness testimony and false confessions, where legal professionals may still need targeted training to avoid wrongful convictions (Kabzińska & Dukąła, 2025; Schneider et al., 2025). Decision-making is also shaped not only by law and evidence but by emotions, moral judgment, plea bargaining dynamics, trust, criminal history, and assessments of defendant character (Nordquist, 2025; Bowman et al., 2024; Tisdale & Votruba, 2024; McGinnis, 2025). Psychological strain is another important theme. Prosecutors may experience vicarious trauma or secondary trauma because of repeated exposure to traumatic materials (Forlong, 2024). Such trauma affects personal and professional functioning, especially where workplace support is inadequate (Kim et al., 2023).

Related literature also reports gendered differences in stress and coping among criminal justice professionals, including workload, injustice, discrimination, family responsibilities, and psychological detachment (Smith, 2025). Burnout among prosecutors may also be shaped by structural and emotional stressors (Park et al., 2022), while Crown Prosecutors handling sexual trauma may face greater risks of vicarious trauma when organizational support is weak (Te Miha, 2023). Experienced prosecutors may develop emotional management strategies to handle confidence, uncertainty, and complex relationships (Wettergren & Blix, 2022). The literature also shows that prosecutorial independence and institutional design vary across countries. Norway emphasizes a mission-driven ethos grounded in rule of law, independence, and transparency (Glomseth & Boe, 2025), while Poland faces concerns because of the political union between the Prosecutor General and Minister of Justice (Kremens & Jasiński, 2024). European systems also differ, with some prosecutor's offices operating under ministries of justice and others functioning more independently (Leheza et al., 2025). Regardless of structure, rule of law requires protection of prosecutors and judges from unlawful influence (Amelin et al., 2024). Reform-oriented literature positions local prosecutors as central actors in criminal justice change. Reform-minded prosecutors seek to address overincarceration and rethink low-level offenses (Hessick & Su, 2023; Krinsky et al., 2022), but critics argue that progressive prosecution may only reinforce the existing system if it does not reduce prosecutorial power and resource dependence (Godsoe, 2022). Prosecutorial discretion is also affected by managerialism, standardization, and institutional legitimacy concerns (Soubise, 2023). Prosecutors may use self-legitimation strategies to preserve professional authority while displacing responsibility for systemic problems (Cox & Gripp, 2022). Mandatory prosecution, rooted in legality and equality, also faces political and victim-discretion influences (Le, 2025).

Globally, prosecutors work within varied systems shaped by law, politics, institutional independence, public accountability, and reform movements. Prosecutorial models differ across jurisdictions, but they commonly involve discretion, ethical judgment, procedural responsibility, and pressure to balance public safety with fairness (The Law Institute, 2023; Leheza et al., 2025; Amelin et al., 2024). Global literature also shows that prosecutors experience workload pressure, psychological strain, technological demands, and reform conflicts (Gershowitz, 2024; Rostad & Langvik, 2025; Goudswaard et al., 2025; Forlong, 2024). Nationally, the Philippine prosecution system is organized under the National Prosecution Service, which was strengthened by the Prosecution Service Act of 2010. The NAPROSS is under the Secretary of Justice and includes prosecution staff, regional prosecutors, provincial prosecutors, and city prosecutors. Its mandate includes preliminary investigation and prosecution of violations of penal laws (The LawPhil Project, 2025). Under Rule 110, prosecutors control the initiation and direction of criminal actions, file Informations, determine probable cause, manage amendments or substitutions of charges, and prosecute cases in the name of the People of the Philippines (Respicio & Co. Law Firm, 2025). Locally, Bohol provides a relevant setting because prosecutors there operate amid challenges involving case quality, police-prosecution coordination, drug-case dismissals, and procedural lapses. The low conviction rate in illegal drug cases has raised concerns about the integrity and effectiveness of the local justice process, particularly where evidence handling and

chain-of-custody compliance affect prosecution outcomes (Bohol Sunday Post, 2014). This localized condition makes Bohol an appropriate site for examining how public prosecutors experience, cope with, and aspire to improve their work.

This study is anchored on Self-Efficacy Theory by Albert Bandura and supported by Competence Motivation Theory and Self-Determination Theory. Self-efficacy explains how individuals' belief in their ability to accomplish goals influences motivation, persistence, stress resistance, performance, and well-being (Bandura, 1997). It also explains how personal agency affects choices, effort, perseverance, and professional development (Bandura, 1978). Individuals with strong efficacy beliefs are more likely to view challenges as manageable, maintain commitment, and recover from setbacks (Bandura & Wessels, 1997). A sense of control is also central to well-being, while lack of control may lead to fear, apathy, and despair (Bandura, 2013). Self-efficacy further predicts the ability to overcome anxiety and avoidance, making confidence in one's capability important for long-term development (Bandura & Adams, 1977). Competence Motivation Theory supports the study by explaining how individuals are driven by the desire to master tasks and develop capability. Competence motivation links belief, effort, mastery, and performance (Sublime People, 2025). The competency model further emphasizes that successful performance requires technical ability, motivation, confidence, adaptability, and structured competency development (Sen, 2025). Competence is shaped by knowledge, skill, experience, and attitude, and may be developed through mentorship, training, delegation, and coaching (Odero, 2024). Achievement motivation is also influenced by competence acquisition, competence validation, and self-theories about personal growth and ability (Dweck & Molden, 2005). Self-Determination Theory further explains motivation through autonomy, competence, and relatedness. It identifies the sources of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and their role in cognitive and social development (Center for Self-Determination Theory [CSDT], 2025). Self-determined individuals believe their actions affect outcomes, which increases motivation and engagement (Cherry, 2021). The theory identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs necessary for growth (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research [GQR], 2020). When these needs are met, intrinsic motivation, well-being, and sustained behavioral change are strengthened (Flannery, 2017). Social and cultural contexts may support or hinder self-determination, achievement, and well-being (Legault, 2017). The theory also distinguishes autonomous and controlled motivation and explains how social environments affect performance, relationships, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Deci & Ryan, 2008). Together, these theories provide a motivational lens for understanding prosecutors' experiences. Self-efficacy explains their confidence in handling difficult cases, competence motivation explains their drive for legal mastery, and self-determination explains how institutional conditions may support or weaken autonomy, competence, and relatedness in prosecutorial work.

Existing studies have widely examined prosecutorial responsibilities, ethical challenges, legal discretion, political influence, professional identity, workload, trauma, and justice-sector reform. However, there remains limited empirical research on the lived experiences of public prosecutors in highly localized settings such as Bohol Province. Much of the literature focuses on broader legal systems, international prosecutorial models, or institutional reform, while less attention has been given to how prosecutors in local Philippine settings experience procedural lapses, flawed investigations, coordination gaps, resource constraints, and emotional pressures in actual case handling. This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experiences of public prosecutors in Bohol, Philippines. Specifically, it seeks to understand their experiences in the performance of their duties, their coping mechanisms in responding to challenges, and their aspirations to improve prosecutorial performance. By focusing on public prosecutors in Bohol, the study may generate localized evidence useful for improving prosecutorial practice, inter-agency coordination, institutional support, criminal justice administration, and justice outcomes.

This study is most directly aligned with SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions because it examines the work of public prosecutors as justice-sector actors responsible for pursuing crimes, protecting rights, evaluating evidence, and supporting the rule of law. Its focus on prosecutorial experiences, ethical justice, procedural integrity, and institutional barriers contributes to the broader goal of strengthening justice institutions. The study also relates to SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being because the literature and research focus include psychological strain, workload stress, vicarious trauma, burnout, moral injury, and the need for occupational health support among prosecutors (Rostad & Langvik, 2025; Forlong, 2024; Kim et al., 2023; Oliveira et al., 2025). It further connects with SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth by addressing workload, staffing, professional development, safe working conditions, competence, and institutional support in public service. Finally, it supports SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals because effective prosecution requires coordination among prosecutors, courts, law enforcement agencies, the Department of Justice, local government units, and other justice-sector stakeholders.

The study contributes to institutional sustainability by generating localized evidence that may help strengthen prosecution offices, improve case management, and support ethical justice administration. It contributes to governance sustainability by examining how prosecutorial independence, discretion, procedural validity, and coordination affect public trust and justice outcomes. It also contributes to occupational and public service sustainability by highlighting the need for workload management, training, mental health support, and institutional safeguards for prosecutors. From a socio-legal perspective, the study is significant because it connects criminal justice, criminology, public administration, psychology, governance,

and organizational development. By examining the experiences, coping mechanisms, and aspirations of public prosecutors, the study provides a multidisciplinary basis for improving prosecutorial effectiveness, protecting professional well-being, strengthening police-prosecution coordination, and promoting a more responsive justice system in Bohol and similar local contexts.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study applied the transcendental phenomenological method to examine the work experiences of public prosecutors in the pursuit of crime and justice. Transcendental phenomenology is a qualitative approach that explores human experiences by setting aside prior assumptions through *epoche*, allowing the meaning of experiences to emerge objectively and naturally (Moustakas, 1994). This design was appropriate because the study focused on understanding the lived experiences of public prosecutors based on their direct narratives.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Bohol Province, particularly in the Provincial Prosecutor's Office and prosecution offices connected with the regional trial courts in Bohol. The Office of the Provincial Prosecutor is part of the National Prosecution Service under the Department of Justice and is responsible for implementing policies on criminal justice administration within the province. Bohol has prosecution offices connected with courts in Tagbilaran City, Loay, Carmen, and Talibon, with public prosecutors assigned in these areas (Bohol Provincial Planning and Development Office, 2009). Bohol is located in Central Visayas and consists of one city, 47 municipalities, and 1,109 barangays, with a 2020 population of 1,394,329 and a population density of 292 persons per square kilometer or 757 persons per square mile (Phil Atlas, 2025).

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents, referred to as informants in the qualitative study, were ten public prosecutors working in the regional trial courts in Bohol Province. They had at least three years of work experience in handling criminal cases. Four informants came from Tagbilaran City, two from Talibon, two from Carmen, and two from Loay, Bohol. All ten informants participated in individual interviews.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study used purposive sampling to select informants who had direct knowledge, experience, and relevance to the phenomenon being studied. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which participants are intentionally chosen based on their competence, relevance, or knowledge of the research issue (Hassan, 2024). The selection of ten informants was considered appropriate for qualitative inquiry, as Creswell (1998) recommended five to twenty-five participants, while Morse (1994) recommended at least six participants for qualitative studies.

2.5 Research Instrument

The researcher used an interview guide to gather data through personal interviews. The guide contained questions focused on three areas: the informants' experiences in performing their duties, their coping mechanisms in addressing work-related challenges, and their aspirations for improving their performance. The instrument was presented, validated, and approved by the panel members and the university research ethics committee to ensure the quality of the interview process and the credibility of the responses.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Before data collection, the researcher requested from the Provincial Prosecutor's Office the names and addresses of public prosecutors assigned in the prosecution offices of the regional trial courts in Tagbilaran City, Carmen, Talibon, and Loay. After approval was obtained, the researcher coordinated with the concerned prosecution office staff to seek permission from the informants. Individual interviews were then scheduled at the informants' convenient time. The researcher distributed informed consent forms, explained the purpose of the study, and proceeded with the interviews only after consent was secured. The interviews were conducted in a language comfortable to the informants and were held in their respective offices to ensure privacy. The conversations were audio-recorded, transcribed, translated when necessary, and presented to the informants for verification and acknowledgment to reduce bias and ensure accuracy.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis developed by Clarke and Braun (2017). The researcher first immersed himself in the data by repeatedly reviewing and analyzing the interview transcripts. Significant statements were then identified and coded. Similar codes were grouped into meaningful themes, which were reviewed, refined, and named based on their central meanings. The final themes were synthesized into a narrative that provided a comprehensive understanding of the public prosecutors' experiences, coping mechanisms, and aspirations.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study observed the ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy (Bishop, 2016). Beneficence was upheld by prioritizing the welfare and safety of the informants, ensuring informed consent, anonymity, and the exclusive use of gathered information for research purposes. Non-maleficence was observed by protecting confidentiality, securing consent, explaining the purpose and process of the interview, and ensuring that participants felt safe and comfortable. Justice was maintained by selecting informants fairly through formal coordination with the Provincial Prosecutor's Office and by treating all participants with respect and equal concern. Autonomy was respected by allowing informants to participate voluntarily, withdraw from the study at any time, decline to answer questions, and freely express their views and experiences.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Experiences of Public Prosecutors in the Performance of Their Duties

3.1.1 Judicial Gatekeeping

The data showed that public prosecutors found professional fulfillment in serving as judicial gatekeepers. Their work involved evaluating complaints, determining whether evidence was sufficient, checking the validity of arrests, and ensuring that only legally and factually supported cases proceeded to court. This role gave them a sense of responsibility because they protected the public from baseless prosecution while also ensuring that meritorious cases moved forward. This finding indicates that prosecutorial work is not limited to securing convictions but also involves institutional guardianship. Public prosecutors exercise discretionary authority that requires confidence, legal competence, and ethical judgment. This is consistent with self-efficacy theory, which explains the importance of a person's belief in the ability to perform required actions successfully (Artino, 2012). The finding also supports the view that internal regulation within prosecution offices strengthens protection against human error and wrongful convictions (Scheck, 2009), while adequate leadership, integrity, and transparency are needed to sustain the moral authority of prosecutors (Gramckow, 2011; Underwood II, 2024; Johnson, 2024).

3.1.2 Victim-Centric Advocacy

The results revealed that prosecutors considered victim-centered work as one of their positive experiences. They described their role as extending beyond legal processing to include helping victims obtain closure, financial reparation, safety, and fair treatment. Some prosecutors viewed plea bargaining, victim advice, and moral evaluation of cases as ways to balance legal requirements with the actual needs of victims. This finding suggests that prosecutors experience fulfillment when justice becomes meaningful to victims, not merely when a conviction is obtained. Victim-centric advocacy reflects the restoration of agency among victims, which relates to the self-efficacy perspective that individuals can pursue goals when given support and opportunities (Gallagher, 2012). The finding also agrees with the idea that advocacy can support restorative justice and victim healing (Suindrayani et al., 2025). Since trauma survivors may experience difficulty recounting painful events in court, prosecution must also be treated as an ethical process that considers the well-being of all parties (Prata, 2025).

3.1.3 Adversarial Mastery

The data showed that prosecutors also experienced professional growth through adversarial mastery. They described the courtroom as a demanding environment that required preparation, legal strategy, litigation skill, case management, and continuous study. Handling heavy and complex criminal cases strengthened their confidence and allowed them to develop expertise in prosecution work. This finding shows that prosecutorial mastery develops through repeated exposure to difficult legal tasks. Self-efficacy is strengthened when prosecutors successfully perform demanding courtroom functions, because cognitive confidence is reinforced by behavioral performance and trial experience (Van Hout and Emmelkamp, 2002). The finding also reflects the evolving nature of legal professionalism, where prosecutors must integrate diverse perspectives and specializations to remain effective (Ashraph et al., 2025). In complex cases, mastery also requires the use of forensic knowledge and expert evidence (Sup, 2025), although such mastery may come with personal and institutional costs, especially in high-risk prosecution environments (Ingrasci, 2025).

3.1.4 Systemic Resource Austerity

The negative experience identified in the study was systemic resource austerity. Prosecutors reported that heavy caseloads, limited personnel, lack of time, inadequate resources, security concerns, and insufficient institutional support affected their work. These conditions forced prosecutors to operate under pressure and sometimes reduced their capacity to give every case the depth of attention required by justice. This finding means that prosecutors' effectiveness is constrained not only by personal skill but also by institutional capacity. External support, training, supervisor assistance, and access to resources strengthen perceptions of professional effectiveness (Shrestha et al., 2021). When resources are lacking, prosecutors may experience "survival mode" litigation, where legal ideals are weakened by administrative pressure. This aligns with observations that rights may be weakened when administrative demands exceed available resources (Skolnik, 2025), and that plea bargaining often becomes a mechanism for managing case backlogs (Robinson, 2025). In the Philippine setting,

fragmented institutions and corruption may worsen these limitations (Pei, 2026), while competing agency roles and political interference may further weaken fair judicial processes (Ojeabulu et al., 2025).

3.2 Coping Mechanisms of Public Prosecutors

3.2.1 Affective Compartmentalization

The results showed that prosecutors used affective compartmentalization to separate their emotional responses from their professional duties. They consciously built mental boundaries to manage exposure to traumatic evidence, serious crimes, and human suffering. This helped them maintain objectivity and prevented work-related distress from overwhelming their personal lives. This finding indicates that emotional distance functions as a survival strategy rather than a lack of concern. Affective compartmentalization supports competence motivation because prosecutors must believe they can master difficult emotional and legal demands (Sublime People, 2025). It is also connected with emotional intelligence, which helps legal professionals manage intense work stress while maintaining ethical judgment and job satisfaction (Darmawan et al., 2025). This coping strategy also reflects the functional role of prosecutors as enforcers of social norms who need particular cognitive strategies to preserve systemic order (Tetlock, 2002).

3.2.2 Principled Impartiality

The data revealed that prosecutors coped with pressure by grounding their decisions in law, evidence, and professional distance. Principled impartiality helped them resist bribery, political pressure, social expectations, and emotional influence. It enabled them to transform difficult personal and social pressures into objective legal decisions. This finding suggests that impartiality is both an ethical duty and a professional competency. The competency model emphasizes that successful performance requires not only technical skills but also internal motivation, confidence, and moral character (Sen, 2025). The finding is also important because prosecutors may face hostility from the public, law enforcement, and courts, which can threaten their safety and professional reputation (Davis and Taylor, 2025). Prosecutorial independence is therefore necessary to ensure fair legal decisions that are not controlled by public, private, political, or personal pressures (Green and Roiphe, 2025). In community-based contexts, impartiality becomes more complex because prosecutors must adapt traditional ethical standards to evolving roles (Kuykendall, 2016).

3.2.3 Collaborative Modernization

The results showed that prosecutors used collaborative modernization as a coping strategy by relying on professional networks, updated legal information, digital communication, interagency support, and shared learning. This reflected a shift from isolated legal work to a more connected and modernized prosecution environment. This finding means that prosecutors cope more effectively when professional development and institutional modernization work together. Competency development strategies such as mentoring, coaching, training, and delegation help strengthen problem-solving and teamwork (Odero, 2024). Effective management structures and clear assignment of specialized responsibilities also improve organizational performance (Pilat and Sultan, 2025). Modern prosecution further requires the integration of technology, artificial intelligence, forensic tools, and standardized evidence management. AI and machine learning may improve prosecution by identifying complex criminal patterns (Siraj et al., 2025), but technological tools must remain accountable to human judgment and fair legal procedures (Wu and Lin, 2025). Digital and forensic evidence also require standardization to ensure reliability in court (Bérubé et al., 2025), while advanced methods such as DNA testing may still face cost and admissibility barriers (Altubait, 2025).

3.2.4 Holistic Self-Preservation

The findings showed that prosecutors practiced holistic self-preservation through social, physical, emotional, spiritual, and personal coping strategies. They relied on colleagues and supervisors, exercise, travel, privacy, prayer, pets, rest, and short recovery routines to preserve their well-being and sustain their performance. This finding indicates that prosecutors' professional effectiveness depends on their ability to protect their well-being outside the courtroom. Holistic self-preservation is related to achievement motivation because prosecutors maintain their sense of competence by interpreting stress and difficulty as challenges for growth and self-care (Dweck and Molden, 2005). This is important because legal professionals face high risks of burnout, exhaustion, reduced productivity, depression, and substance abuse when stress is not addressed (Law Society of Ireland, 2024). Physical activity helps prosecutors recover from adversarial stress (Kelley Uustal Law Firm, 2024), while social support from family, friends, colleagues, and management can reduce job dissatisfaction caused by poor work-life balance and lack of recognition (Teichmann et al., 1983; Legal Society of Ireland, 2024).

3.3 Aspirations of Public Prosecutors to Improve the Performance of Their Duties

3.3.1 Ethical Justice Pursuit

The results revealed that prosecutors aspired to pursue justice ethically rather than merely win cases. They emphasized truth, evidence, fairness, protection of the innocent, just verdicts, and avoidance of persecution. Their sense of fulfillment came from ensuring that justice prevailed, whether through conviction, dismissal of weak cases, or protection of innocent accused persons. This finding shows that prosecutors define quality service through moral responsibility and legal integrity.

Ethical justice pursuit is connected to Self-Determination Theory because prosecutors' commitment to truth and fairness reflects autonomous motivation and a personally held professional purpose (Center for Self-Determination Theory [CSDT], 2025). This supports the view that prosecutors have a special ethical duty to pursue justice, not merely convictions, and must be willing to support both conviction of the guilty and exoneration of the innocent when evidence requires it (Kroepsch, 2016). Thus, ethical prosecution requires strict attention to evidence, procedural fairness, and moral accountability.

3.3.2 Pragmatic Dispute Resolution

The results showed that prosecutors also aspired to become pragmatic problem-solvers. They valued early settlement, plea bargaining, restorative justice, victim recovery, offender accountability, and efficient case resolution. This aspiration reflected their desire to reduce delays, protect victims from unnecessary burdens, and resolve conflicts in ways that are legally fair and socially useful. This finding indicates that prosecutors view justice as more than punishment. Pragmatic dispute resolution allows prosecutors to provide timely, resource-conscious, and victim-responsive justice. This is supported by the view that traditional prosecution may not always meet survivors' needs, especially when psychological support, reparation, and cultural sensitivity are required (Nichols et al., 2024). Structured plea bargaining also promotes accountability and protects rights by replacing purely ad hoc negotiations with clearer guidelines (Covey, 2024). Systemic efficiency may also be improved through forced mediation for selected offenses and automated tools (Respicio & Co. Law Firm, 2025). Victim recovery is further supported by reforms that remove technical barriers to compensation and expand support for mental health and funeral expenses (The ROAR Center, 2024).

3.4 Overall Interpretation of Findings

Overall, the findings show that public prosecutors in Bohol perform a complex role that combines legal judgment, victim advocacy, courtroom mastery, emotional regulation, ethical decision-making, and institutional adaptation. Their positive experiences demonstrate commitment to justice and professional competence, while their negative experience of systemic resource austerity reveals that individual resilience alone is not enough to sustain prosecutorial effectiveness. The discussion further suggests that public prosecutors need stronger institutional support, coordinated law enforcement-prosecution training, digital case management, mental health programs, forensic and technological resources, and ethical safeguards. The findings imply that the future of prosecution should balance adversarial competence with victim-centered justice, principled impartiality, restorative approaches, and sustainable occupational well-being.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concluded that public prosecutors in Bohol perform a complex and demanding role in the criminal justice system, with positive experiences reflected in judicial gatekeeping, victim-centric advocacy, and adversarial mastery, while their major negative experience is systemic resource austerity. The informants addressed work-related challenges through affective compartmentalization, principled impartiality, collaborative modernization, and holistic self-preservation. Their aspirations centered on ethical justice and pragmatic dispute resolution, showing that public prosecutors aim not only to secure convictions but also to uphold fairness, protect victims, manage cases efficiently, and strengthen public trust in the justice process.

It is recommended that the Department of Justice strengthen institutional support for public prosecutors by addressing resource limitations, improving staffing, providing adequate technological and forensic tools, supporting digital case management, and establishing safeguards that protect prosecutorial independence and ethical decision-making. The Department of the Interior and Local Government should promote coordinated training between police investigators and prosecutors to improve case build-up, evidence handling, and trial readiness, while local government units should strengthen the Katarungang Pambarangay system and provide logistical and administrative support to reduce minor-case congestion and help prosecutors focus on high-impact criminal cases.

The study was limited to the lived experiences of ten public prosecutors assigned in selected prosecution offices in Bohol Province; therefore, the findings are context-specific and may not fully represent the experiences of prosecutors in other provinces or highly urbanized areas. Future studies may further examine affective compartmentalization in high-profile or traumatic cases, explore how prosecutors' personal histories shape principled impartiality and dispute resolution, and compare how prosecutors in remote provincial offices and urbanized offices deal with systemic resource austerity.

Compliance with ethical standards

The study adhered to institutional ethical standards and was conducted after securing the necessary ethical approval and validation of the research instrument. Participation was voluntary, and all informants were properly informed about the purpose, procedures, and scope of the study before giving their informed consent. The confidentiality and anonymity of the public prosecutors were maintained, and all data gathered were used solely for research purposes. The researcher

observed beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy throughout the conduct of the study. The author declares no conflict of interest, acknowledges the contributions of the informants and concerned offices, and affirms that the copyright and responsibility for the content of the study belong to the author.

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