



Pangumusta: A Narrative Study on Drug Surrenderers of Oplan Tokhang in Cateel, Davao Oriental

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the experiences and motivations of drug surrenderers under the Oplan Tokhang campaign, focusing on their reasons for surrendering, the stigma they face, and their efforts toward rehabilitation and recovery. Conducted in Cateel, Davao Oriental, this study interviewed 10 participants who had graduated under the Oplan Tokhang Program. The researchers utilized thematic analysis following the Miles and Huberman framework for qualitative data analysis. The findings revealed that participants experienced a stable life and strong family connections before engaging in drug use, which deteriorated as they faced health, financial, and social decline. The primary factors leading to surrender included personal realization, family and community support, safety concerns, health deterioration, and the influence of the Oplan Tokhang program. Participants' experiences during the program involved inconsistent livelihood support, drug testing, and participation in educational activities. Despite challenges, the program contributed to improved relationships, personal growth, and a greater understanding of the negative impacts of drug addiction. The study emphasizes the importance of a supportive environment, accessible healthcare, and government programs in fostering successful rehabilitation and reintegration. Insights from participants highlight the need for early intervention, tailored care, and a holistic approach to drug rehabilitation.

Keywords: Drug surrenderers, experiences, motivation, Oplan Tokhang

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INTRODUCTION

Oplan Tokhang is an anti-drug campaign initiated in 2016 under the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte. Its primary goal was to address the long-standing issue of drug abuse and addiction in the Philippines (Maglinte, 2019). The campaign employed a “knock and plead” approach, where police officers visited the homes of suspected drug users and encouraged them to surrender voluntarily (Lee, 2020).

Within the first 20 days of President Duterte’s administration, nearly 114,000 individuals involved in drug use voluntarily surrendered to authorities (Gutierrez, 2020). From July 1, 2016, to January 31, 2019, the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) reported that 170,689 drug suspects were arrested, while 5,176 individuals were killed for allegedly resisting arrest (Delizo, 2019). By 2019, Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. reported to the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) that over 1.4 million drug users had surrendered for rehabilitation as part of the government’s anti-drug campaign (Galvez, 2019). With this rehabilitation government program, healthcare professionals play a crucial role in identifying and assisting individuals whose substance use poses risks to their well-being. Additionally, they engage in preventive measures to promote overall health. However, despite the critical role of nurses in healthcare and rehabilitation, many countries, including the Philippines, face a shortage of trained nurses due to factors such as low pay, inadequate benefits, and poor working conditions, which affect retention in private hospitals (Hamad et. al., 2020; Norh, 2024). The Mental Health Gap (MH GAP) Intervention Guide, incorporating recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) and Universal Projects and Tools (UPT), serves as a valuable resource for healthcare providers monitoring drug surrenderers in non-specialized healthcare settings (Jimenez, 2022; Campeceño et. al., 2022).

Despite the numbers and success of the program, little attention has been given to the struggles and experiences of voluntary surrenderers (Cunanan and Yabut, 2019). Hechanova et al. (2018) state that many of those

individuals hesitate to seek treatment due to societal perceptions. In the Philippines, seeking professional psychological help is often associated with mental instability, which can bring shame to one’s family. This stigma discourages individuals from accessing available rehabilitation programs, even when they recognize their need for help (Hechanova et. al., 2017). Furthermore, the punitive approach of law enforcement reinforces this reluctance, as voluntary surrender does not always guarantee protection from legal consequences or social exclusion (Iyer, 2025). Without adequate support systems, many individuals struggle with recovery, increasing their risk of relapse and reinforcing the cycle of substance dependence.

Stigma remains one of the most significant barriers to the reintegration of drug surrenderers into society. According to Gershman (2016), drug users often face intense social prejudice, negative stereotypes, and discrimination. They are labeled as “lazy,” “losers,” or “people with no future” (Wassie, 2025). This perception stems from the belief that drug dependence is a criminal issue rather than a mental health condition (De Roos, 2025). Stigma can manifest in two forms: public stigma, which involves social distancing and prejudice from others (Vogel et. al., 2013), and internalized stigma, where individuals feel guilt, shame, and reduced self-worth (Mayo Clinic, 2021). Many drug surrenderers cope with this stigma by isolating themselves and avoiding social interactions (Cunanan and Yabut, 2019; O’Dowd et. al., 2025). Family, workplace, and community discrimination further hinder rehabilitation efforts. Many families react negatively upon discovering a loved one’s history of drug use, offering little support for their recovery (Shaw, 2025). In professional settings, former drug users often face job loss or ridicule, affecting their productivity and workplace relationships (Chang et. al., 2025). Even after completing rehabilitation, they continue to be viewed with suspicion, with people questioning whether they have truly recovered (Trang et. al., 2025). The psychological impact of social rejection can lead to feelings of failure, guilt, and shame, causing many to retreat into isolation (Mayo Clinic, 2021).

The lack of public awareness and education on substance use disorders further reinforces negative stereotypes. Many Filipinos view drug users as inherently deviant rather than individuals struggling with a health condition. Media portrayals often sensationalize drug-related crimes, which amplifies public fear and limits empathy for those undergoing rehabilitation (Gershman, 2016). The absence of rehabilitation narratives in mainstream discourse also results in limited policy support for inclusive and sustainable reintegration programs, making it even more difficult for former drug users to reintegrate into society (Ayres and Taylor, 2025).

With the above statement, the researchers chose to conduct this study in order to shed light on the often-overlooked experiences and struggles of individuals who voluntarily surrendered under the government's anti-drug campaign. While much attention has been given to the statistics and outcomes of Oplan Tokhang, little is known about the personal journeys, challenges, and societal reintegration of drug surrenderers, particularly

in rural communities like Cateel, Davao Oriental. This study aims to explore their stories, delving into their motivations for surrender, the stigma they face, and their efforts toward rehabilitation and recovery. By giving voice to their narratives, the researchers seek to contribute to a more compassionate understanding of their circumstances and to inform more inclusive and effective interventions for their reintegration into society.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Description of the study area

The study was conducted in Cateel, Davao Oriental, a first-class coastal municipality with 16 barangays. This location was chosen based on data from the Provincial Anti-Drug Abuse Council (PADAC) of Davao Oriental, which reported that 30 drug surrenderers from Cateel and Boston participated in Project Tulay—a 12-day in-house clinical intervention held on March 8, 2021, at Balay Silangan in Sitio Magay which provided essential context and relevance to the study.

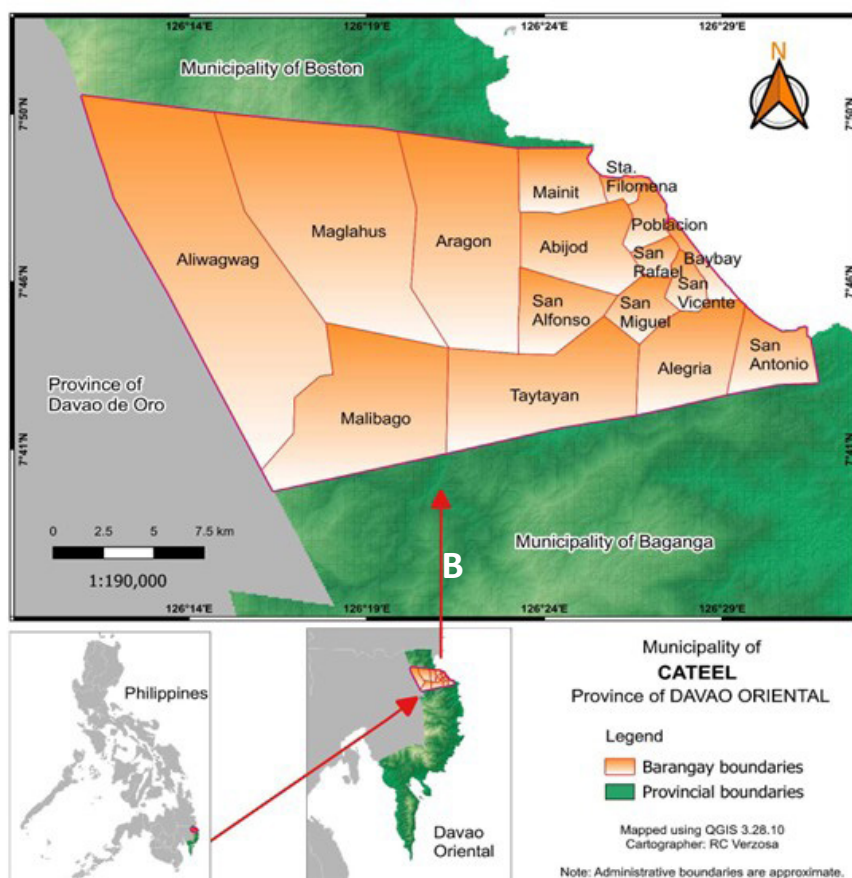


Figure 1. Map showing Cateel, Davao Oriental.

Data collection

Prior to data collection, the researchers obtained ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Office (REO) at Davao Oriental State University—Cateel Extension Campus. They also requested permission from the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the Municipal Anti-Drug Abuse Council (MADAC) to proceed with the research. Once the necessary approvals were obtained, the

researchers officially began the study.

Before conducting interviews, the researchers verified the identities of the participants to ensure they were drug surrenderees who had graduated under the Oplan Tokhang Program. This verification was done by seeking confirmation from Barangay officials and Indigenous People Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs).

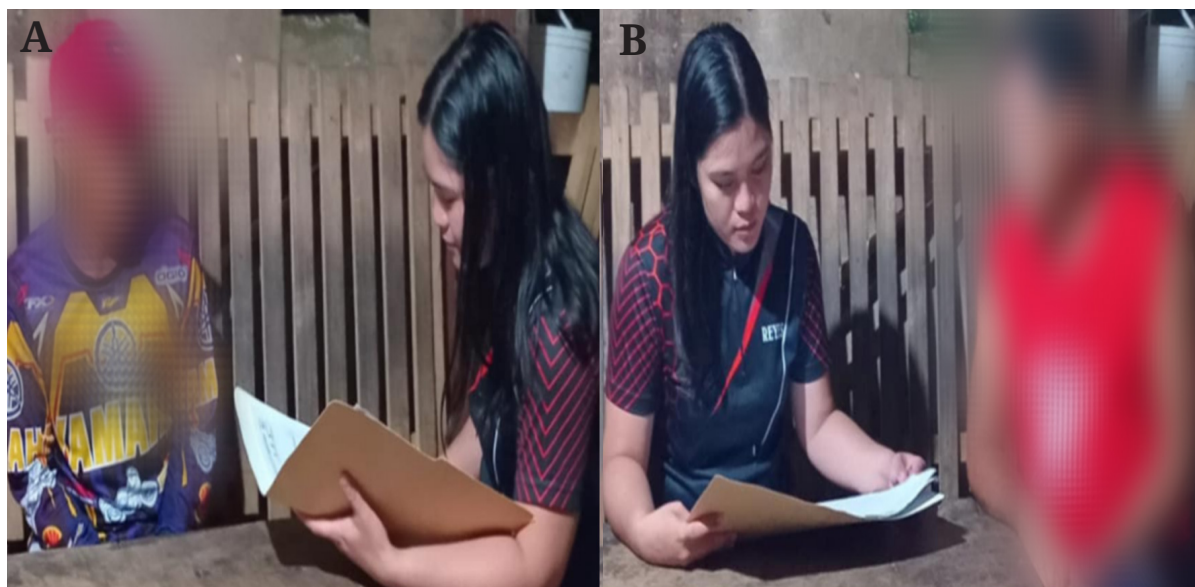


Figure 2. The researcher conducting the one-on-one interview with a respondent (A, B).

The researchers identified ten (10) participants for the study. Each participant was informed about the purpose and nature of the study, including the fact that their responses would be recorded. They were then asked to sign a consent form as evidence of their voluntary participation. Once consent was obtained, the researchers coordinated with the participants to schedule interviews at a time most convenient for them.

To ensure the validity of the participants' responses during the interviews, the researchers utilized the triangulation method where they cross-checked the information provided by the participants with other individuals who were familiar with them, such as family members, Barangay officials, and community members. This process helped verify the accuracy and consistency of the data collected.

During the interviews, the researchers

respected household rules and maintained ethical standards throughout the process.

Data analysis

The researchers utilized thematic analysis following the Miles and Huberman framework for qualitative data analysis, which consists of three key steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. All collected data were transcribed and transferred to a computer for analysis. Transcripts were printed with wide margins and spaces between lines to facilitate memoing and coding. A two-column table was created, with the original transcript in one column and its translated version in the other. To ensure accuracy, the researchers reviewed the recordings and transcripts twice. Once the data were prepared, a hired expert thematic analyst interpreted the information, ensuring a structured and comprehensive analysis of the participants' responses.

RESULTS

Challenges Encountered by Participants

Table 1. Themes and core ideas of challenges encountered by the participants before, during, and after they surrendered.

Stages	Themes	Core ideas
Before drugs	Stable Life	Participants had a stable life with good financial income and strong family relationships
	Positive Relationships	Strong connections with family and community, which deteriorated after starting drug use.
	Influence of Friends	
During drugs	Health and Financial Decline	Majority of participants were influenced by friends to start using drugs.
	Negative Social Impact	Health issues, financial struggles, and deteriorating relationships.
		Negative effects on social interactions and community perception.
After surrender	Fear of Repercussions	Fear of being killed or harmed and concerns about the safety of the family.
	Broken Promises	Promises made by authorities were not fulfilled, leading to continued fear and mistrust.
	Need for Support	

Table 1 outlines the different stages of the participants' experiences with drug use and surrender. In the "Before Drugs" stage, participants had stable lives, marked by good financial income and strong family connections, which were key to their well-being. However, during their drug use, they faced significant declines in health, finances, and relationships, with the influence of friends being a major factor in their initiation. The negative social impact of their drug use also

strained their social interactions and how the community perceived them. After surrendering, participants expressed fear of repercussions, especially regarding potential violence or harm to their families. They also felt disillusioned due to broken promises by authorities, leading to continued mistrust. Additionally, there was a lack of effective support, highlighting the need for better post-surrender assistance.

Factors that Led the Participants to Surrender

Table 2. Themes and core ideas of factors that led the participants to surrender.

Themes	Core ideas
Personal realization and desire for change	Self-motivation to quit drugs Desire for a better life Recognition of the harmful effects of drug use
Family and Community Influence and Support	Encouragement from family members Concern for family well-being Community members urging surrender Positive community reaction post-surrender
Fear for Personal Safety	Fear of being killed due to drug-related violence Fear of law enforcement actions
Health Concerns	Deteriorating health due to drug use Fear of long-term health consequences.

Influence of Oplan Tokhang Program	Fear of repercussions from the program Promises of support and livelihood Perception of the program's benefits.
Legal and Societal Pressure	Fear of arrest or death, encouragement from local authorities and officials.

Table 2 explores the various factors that motivated participants to voluntarily surrender. Personal realization and the desire for change were key, with participants recognizing the harmful effects of their drug use and seeking a better life. Family and community support played a vital role, with family encouragement and concern for well-being, alongside positive community reactions, further influencing their decision. Fear for personal safety, stemming

from drug-related violence and law enforcement actions, was another significant motivator. Health concerns, particularly deteriorating health from drug use, also pushed participants to reconsider their lifestyle. The Oplan Tokhang program's perceived promises, such as support and livelihood, as well as societal and legal pressure, were other contributing factors that led to their decision to surrender.

Experiences of Participants while Undergoing Oplan Tokhang Treatment Program

Table 3. Themes and core ideas of experiences of participants while undergoing the Oplan Tokhang treatment program.

Themes	Core ideas
Participation in activities	Various activities were experienced during the program.
Livelihood Programs	Inconsistent availability and delivery of promised livelihood programs.
Seminars and Education	Participation in educational activities like seminars, symposiums, and bible studies.
Drug Testing and Surveillance	Regular drug tests and surveillance to ensure compliance and abstinence from drugs.
Family, Community, and Official Support	The role of family, community, and local officials in supporting and encouraging surrenderers.
Personal Perceptions of the Program	Mixed feelings about the effectiveness and implementation of the Oplan Tokhang program.
Good or Bad Experience	Overall positive or negative perception of the Oplan Tokhang program.
Help in Overcoming Problems	Positive impact on overcoming addiction-related issues and improving life quality.

Table 3 highlights the participants' experiences while undergoing the Oplan Tokhang treatment program. The involvement in various activities, such as seminars, education, and livelihood programs, was central to their experience, though the availability and consistency of these programs were a challenge. Drug testing and surveillance were regular parts of the process, ensuring compliance with the program.

The support of family, community, and local officials played a crucial role in motivating participants to stay engaged. Participants had mixed feelings about the program's effectiveness, with some feeling that it positively impacted their lives, while others remained critical of its implementation. The overall experience, however, had a positive influence on overcoming addiction and improving life quality.

The Effect of Oplan Tokhang on the Lives of Participants

Table 4. Themes and core ideas of the effect of Oplan Tokhang on the lives of participants.

Themes	Core ideas
Positive Impact on Relationships	Improved relationships with family, friends, and community
Personal Growth and Transformation	Making better decisions Finding employment Engaging in positive activities
Awareness of Drug Effects	Understanding the negative impact of drug addiction.
Empowerment and Decision-Making	Feeling empowered to make better decisions. Focusing on positive goals and avoiding negative influences.
Adoption of Healthy Lifestyles	Finding employment and financial stability. Engaging in productive activities.
Advice to Others	Warning against drug use. Encouraging alternative, healthier pursuits.

Table 4 outlines the positive changes that participants experienced due to their involvement in the Oplan Tokhang program. Relationships with family, friends, and the community were notably improved, fostering a sense of personal growth and transformation. Many participants found employment and began making better life decisions, emphasizing positive activities over drug use. The program also helped them become

more aware of the detrimental effects of drug addiction, empowering them to make better decisions and adopt healthier lifestyles. These transformations led to financial stability and increased engagement in productive activities. Additionally, participants offered advice to others, warning against drug use and encouraging healthier alternatives.

Insights Shared by the Participants to Youth

Table 5. Themes and core ideas of insights shared by the participants to youth/individuals who were still engaged in drug addiction.

Themes	Core ideas
Warning against Drug Use	Participants strongly advise against engaging in drug activities, emphasizing the negative consequences on health, relationships, and overall well-being.
Sharing Personal Experiences	Participants share their own experiences with drug use to deter others and provide insights into the struggles and consequences they faced.
Encouragement to Stop Drug Use	Participants encourage current drug users to stop their drug habits and seek help, highlighting the opportunity for change and the possibility of a better life.
Providing Alternatives	Participants suggest alternative activities and hobbies as healthier alternatives to drug use, promoting a positive lifestyle.
Empathy and Concern for Others	Participants express empathy and concern for individuals who may be considering or currently engaged in drug use, demonstrating a desire to prevent others from experiencing the same hardships they faced.

Table 5 showed that the participants share their insights and advice with youth or individuals still engaged in drug addiction. The participants strongly advise against drug use, highlighting the negative consequences it has on health, relationships, and overall well-being. By sharing their personal experiences, they aim to deter others from following the same path and offer a glimpse into the struggles they faced. They also encourage current drug users to stop their habits, seek help, and embrace the opportunity for change. Furthermore, they suggest alternative activities that can help individuals live healthier, more fulfilling lives. Throughout their advice, participants express deep empathy and concern for others, hoping to prevent others from enduring the hardships they have experienced.

DISCUSSION

The challenges encountered by drug surrenderers before, during, and after their surrender are consistent with the findings from Cunanan and Yabut (2019), which highlight the profound effects of drug addiction on individuals' lives. Before using drugs, participants often led stable lives with strong family relationships and financial security. However, once they began using drugs, their health deteriorated, finances were strained, and relationships with family and the community suffered, as noted by Gershman (2016) and Kulesza et al. (2014), who discussed the social and psychological consequences of addiction. After surrendering, many participants feared repercussions from both drug-related violence and law enforcement, echoing the experiences of surrenderers (Maglinte, 2019; Gutierrez, 2020). The lack of fulfillment of promises made by authorities regarding support and rehabilitation programs further contributed to their sense of mistrust and fear, aligning with the struggles identified by Mora-Ríos et al. (2017) regarding stigma and the reintegration process. Additionally, mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression, are prevalent among individuals facing social and psychological distress, as research has shown a heightened prevalence of moderate-to-severe depressive and anxious symptomatology due to uncertainty and external stressors (Wang et al., 2020; Law-Ay, Fermil and Agod, 2022).

The factors that led participants to surrender align with research on the complex motivations for seeking rehabilitation. Personal realization and the desire for change are critical factors, as participants recognized the harm caused by their drug use and sought a better life (Tracy, 2021). Family and community influence played an essential role, with encouragement from loved ones helping many surrenderers make the decision to seek help, as emphasized by Richardson (2020) and Cunanan and Yabut (2019). Fear for personal safety, stemming from drug-related violence and concerns about law enforcement, was another significant factor influencing the decision to surrender, reflecting the pressures (Delizo 2019; Galvez, 2019). Health concerns and the physical toll of drug addiction also motivated many participants, emphasizing the connection between addiction and deteriorating health (Mayo Clinic, 2021). Finally, the influence of offered promises of support and livelihood, also contributed to their decision, as indicated by the Department of Health (2017).

The experiences of participants in the Oplan Tokhang treatment program reflect the mixed outcomes of rehabilitation efforts according to Cunanan and Yabut (2019) and Saldaña (2021). Participation in various activities, such as seminars and livelihood programs, was central to the program, but inconsistencies in the availability of these programs were a significant challenge. The lack of consistency in delivering promised support programs is a common critique of similar government initiatives, as seen in the struggles of participants (Mora-Ríos et al., 2017). Regular drug testing and surveillance were key elements of the program, ensuring accountability and compliance (Lee, 2020). Despite the positive aspects of the program, participants expressed mixed feelings about its effectiveness, mirroring the skepticism and criticisms of the program's implementation (Cunanan and Yabut, 2019). Nevertheless, many participants felt that the program positively impacted their lives, helping them overcome addiction and improve their quality of life, consistent with findings from the Department of Health (2017).

The positive effects of the Oplan Tokhang program on participants' lives align with the findings in studies on rehabilitation and reintegration. Improved relationships with fam-

ily and community were common outcomes, reinforcing the importance of social support in recovery, as noted by Kulesza et. al. (2014) and Richardson (2020). Personal growth and transformation were also significant, as many participants made better life decisions, found employment, and engaged in positive activities, echoing the rehabilitation outcomes (Yabut, 2019). Additionally, the presence of law enforcement in the community, such as the Revitalized Pulis Sa Barangay (RPSB), contributes to making communities safer and more secure (Llanto et. al., 2024). Participants' increased awareness of the negative effects of drug addiction helped them feel empowered to make better decisions and adopt healthier lifestyles (Mayo Clinic, 2021). Empowerment and self-efficacy, which allowed participants to focus on positive goals, were central to their recovery (Tracy, 2021). The contribution of the program to participants' financial stability and overall life improvement, highlights the importance of comprehensive support systems in addiction recovery (Gupta, 2022).

Lastly, the insights shared by participants with youth involved in drug use resonate with the advice and warnings highlighted in studies on the societal impact of drug addiction. Participants strongly warned against drug use, emphasizing the negative effects it had on their health, relationships, and overall well-being (Gershman, 2016; Cunanan, 2019). Sharing their personal experiences of addiction and recovery, participants hoped to deter others from making the same mistakes, a strategy often used in addiction prevention programs (Lee, 2020). They also encouraged others to stop their drug habits, seek help, and embrace the opportunity for change (Richardson, 2020; Mayo Clinic, 2021). By suggesting healthier alternatives and promoting positive lifestyles, participants aimed to guide youth away from drug addiction, showing empathy and concern for those who are struggling (Department of Health, 2017; Cunanan and Yabut, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study explores the experiences of individuals who surrendered under Oplan Tokhang in Cateel, Davao Oriental, providing

insights into the challenges and opportunities in drug rehabilitation. It highlights the importance of early intervention through education, resilience-building, and personalized care plans that acknowledge an individual's readiness for change. A supportive environment, including family and community involvement, is crucial in overcoming negative beliefs and fostering long-term recovery.

Addressing concerns about personal safety is essential, as fear of drug-related crimes may discourage individuals from seeking help. The study underscores the role of government programs like Oplan Tokhang in facilitating rehabilitation and reintegration through a holistic approach, including treatment planning and community-based support. By addressing health, education, and employment needs, rehabilitation efforts can become more effective and culturally relevant.

The findings offer valuable guidance for policymakers in improving rehabilitation initiatives, emphasizing accessible healthcare, economic reintegration, and mental health services. Strengthening community-based programs that integrate therapy, skills training, and employment assistance can help surrenderers rebuild their lives. Public awareness campaigns and clear law enforcement guidelines can further promote a rehabilitation-centered approach, reducing stigma and encouraging participation in recovery programs.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: A. P. and S. R.; methodology: A. P. and S. R.; software: A. P. and S. R.; validation: A. P., S. R. and M. L. M.; formal analysis: A. P., S. R. and M. L. M.; investigation: A. P. and S. R.; resources, data curation: A. P. and S. R.; writing-original draft preparation: A. P. and S. R.; writing-review editing: M. L. M.; visualization: A. P., S. R. and M. L. M.; supervision: M. L. M.; project administration: A. P., S. R. and M. L. M.; funding acquisition: A. P. and S. R.

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