

Navigating the New Reality: Challenges Faced by Police Trainees During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:- The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges for police training programs worldwide, requiring adaptations to ensure the safety of trainees while also providing effective training. This qualitative descriptive study aimed to explore the experiences of police trainees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thirty (30) police trainees from the Police Regional Office-Cordillera participated in the study, and data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, revealing common challenges encountered by the participants. The study found that police trainees faced various challenges during the pandemic, including the absence of opportunities to spend time with their loved ones during recognition ceremonies due to the pandemic, difficulty adjusting to a new culture and environment, discrimination because of COVID-19, and the requirement to always wear a face mask and face shield.

Keywords:- COVID-19 Pandemic, Police Trainees, Challenges, Experiences, New Reality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Police training before the COVID-19 pandemic typically involved a combination of classroom instruction and hands-on practical exercises (Jennings & Perez, 2020). Trainees would participate in scenarios that simulate real-life policing situations, such as traffic stops, crisis intervention, and use-of-force situations (Jennings & Perez, 2020). These practical exercises allowed trainees to apply their knowledge in a controlled environment and develop the necessary skills to perform their duties effectively in the field.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced police training programs to modify their methodologies and curriculum to ensure compliance with public health guidelines (Kaur & Singh, 2021). Police training during the pandemic has involved a greater emphasis on virtual and remote learning approaches, such as online courses and webinars (Jennings & Perez, 2020). Trainees have also had to adapt to new health and safety protocols, such as social distancing and wearing face masks (Kaur & Singh, 2021).

One of the most significant changes to police training during the pandemic has been the limitations on in-person training activities. According to Matarazzo, Fernandez, and Alcadipani (2020), police training programs have faced challenges related to the inability to conduct practical exercises and the delay or cancellation of training courses. To overcome these challenges, police training programs have had to find alternative ways to provide hands-on training, such as through virtual simulations and scenario-based training (Jennings & Perez, 2020).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In a study conducted by Torres et al. (2021) explored the experiences of police trainees in the United States during the pandemic. The study found that trainees faced various challenges, such as adjusting to remote learning, managing stress and anxiety, and maintaining physical fitness. Trainees also reported feeling isolated and disconnected from their peers and instructors due to the lack of in-person interaction.

Similarly, a study by Phulwani and Kumar (2020) examined the experiences of police trainees in India during the pandemic. The study found that trainees faced challenges related to adapting to new health and safety protocols, such as wearing face masks and maintaining physical distancing. Trainees also reported difficulties in accessing adequate training resources and equipment due to the pandemic. Additionally, trainees experienced mental health challenges, such as anxiety and stress, which impacted their ability to focus and perform effectively during training.

Another study by Shrestha et al. (2020) explored the experiences of police trainees in Nepal during the pandemic. The study found that trainees faced challenges related to the lack of in-person training, limited access to equipment and resources, and the need to adapt to new health and safety protocols. Trainees also reported difficulties in maintaining social connections and support systems, which contributed to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

In addition, Goh et al. (2020) examined the experiences of police trainees in Singapore during the pandemic. The study found that trainees faced challenges related to the disruption of their training schedules and the need to adapt to remote learning. Trainees also reported difficulties in accessing

adequate training resources and equipment due to the pandemic.

Moreover, Ishak et al. (2021) explored the experiences of police trainees in Malaysia during the pandemic. The study found that trainees faced challenges related to the lack of in-person training, limited access to equipment and resources, and the need to adapt to new health and safety protocols. Trainees also reported difficulties in maintaining social connections and support systems, which contributed to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Also, Abdelrahman et al. (2021) examined the experiences of police trainees in Egypt during the pandemic. The study found that trainees faced challenges related to the lack of in-person training, limited access to equipment and resources, and the need to adapt to new health and safety protocols. Trainees also reported difficulties in managing stress and anxiety related to the pandemic and its impact on their training.

In the Philippines, the Philippine National Police (PNP), police training programs were initially suspended in March 2020 when the pandemic began to spread in the country (PNP, 2020). However, the PNP has since resumed training activities with modifications to ensure compliance with public health guidelines. One of the modifications made to police training programs in the Philippines during the pandemic has been the use of virtual and remote learning approaches. According to the PNP, virtual training modules have been developed to allow trainees to continue their training remotely (PNP, 2020). The PNP has also implemented a blended learning approach, which combines virtual and in-person training activities to enable trainees to complete their training requirements while adhering to social distancing guidelines.

Despite these modifications, the PNP has faced challenges in providing effective training during the pandemic. For example, according to a report by GMA News Online (2020), some police trainees have reported difficulties in accessing the necessary equipment and resources for their training, such as firearms and simulation equipment. Trainees have also faced challenges related to mental health and well-being, such as stress and anxiety related to the pandemic and its impact on their training.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the challenges experienced by police trainees during the COVID-19 pandemic in police regional office-Cordillera. A purposive sample of thirty (30) police trainees participated in the study, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data collected from the interviews, allowing for the identification of key themes related to the experiences of police trainees during the pandemic.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the interviews revealed several key themes on the challenges experienced by the police trainees.

➤ *Disruption of Training Routines*

The trainees stated that *“We experienced not to do hard exercises and no physical body contact because of the strict implementation of Covid-19 protocol. No jogging when were at our Academic phase until the time one month before the graduation when lockdowns is already becoming usual”*. This significant disruptions to their training routines during the pandemic includes practical training activities, such as scenario-based exercises and physical fitness training were either suspended or modified to comply with health and safety guidelines. Several studies and reports support this finding. In a study by Torres et al. (2021) where it explored the experiences of police trainees in the United States during the pandemic, finding that trainees faced challenges related to remote learning, limited access to training resources, and the suspension or modification of practical training activities. Similarly, a study by Kaur and Singh (2021) examined the impact of the pandemic on police training in India, finding that practical training was significantly impacted due to limitations on in-person training activities and the need to comply with health and safety guidelines. Additionally, a report by the UK College of Policing (2020) noted that police training programs in the UK were significantly impacted by the pandemic, with many practical training activities suspended or modified to comply with health and safety guidelines, and a greater emphasis placed on virtual and remote learning approaches. This implies that, the police training programs have had to adapt significantly to comply with COVID-19 protocols and restrictions, with modifications made to traditional training approaches. Specifically, the restriction on physical body contact and the limitation on physical exercises such as jogging during the academic phase can negatively impact the physical fitness and preparedness of police trainees.

➤ *Challenges of Remote Learning*

The transition to remote learning presented challenges for the trainees. Unstable internet connections and difficulties in adapting to online platforms hindered their learning experience. Trainees reported feeling less engaged and motivated compared to in-person training sessions. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced police training programs to adapt to remote learning. While remote learning has allowed for training to continue during the pandemic, it has also presented several challenges for police trainees. One of the primary challenges is the lack of access to in-person training resources and equipment. Trainees may have limited access to training materials, equipment, and facilities, which can impact their ability to develop the necessary skills and competencies required for law enforcement (Cao et al., 2021). Additionally, remote learning can be challenging for trainees who may struggle with technology access and literacy, as well as the lack of social interaction and support that comes with face-to-

face learning. Trainees may also experience difficulty maintaining motivation and engagement during remote learning, as the lack of face-to-face interactions can lead to feelings of disconnection and isolation (Rieger & Chernichky-Karcher, 2021). These challenges may be particularly acute for trainees who are new to the profession, as they may require more support and guidance to navigate the complexities of the training process.

➤ *Emotional Impact of the Pandemic*

The pandemic had a significant emotional impact on the trainees. Feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and fear were common resulting to fatigue and stress. The inability to engage in regular face-to-face interactions with instructors and peers further exacerbated feelings of isolation and emotional distress. According to the trainees *“We experienced to be isolated. No talking to anybody except when it is allowed, for example when we were about to sleep”, “We were isolated in the training camp. And no going out. It is strictly prohibited”*. The reported feelings of isolation during pandemic training of police officers can have significant impacts on the emotional well-being and training progress of trainees. The inability to engage in regular face-to-face interactions with instructors and peers, as noted in several studies (Ishak et al., 2021; Rieger & Chernichky-Karcher, 2021), can exacerbate feelings of loneliness, disconnection, and emotional distress. These feelings may be particularly acute for trainees who are new to the profession and may have relied on social interactions with peers and mentors to navigate the complexities of the training process. Additionally, the lack of social support and interaction during the pandemic may negatively impact trainees' ability to develop the necessary interpersonal skills required for law enforcement, further compounding the challenges of police training during times of crisis.

➤ *Difficulty of adjusting to a new culture and environment*

Trainees narrated that *“For us re-aligned from other region, we had a hard time coping up with the culture, just like culture shock and people we mingle with, especially that it is pandemic, social distancing is always being followed. At first, there is gap between regions but later on, when we were inside the training camp, specifically when we had our militaristic, we were united as one, as a class”*. The pandemic has not only disrupted police training programs, but it has also made it challenging for trainees to adjust to new cultures and environments. For instance, in a study by Ishak et al. (2021), police trainees in Malaysia reported difficulty adjusting to the new training environment due to the pandemic. Trainees had to adapt to virtual training methods, which required them to use different technology and communication tools. Additionally, trainees faced challenges in adjusting to the cultural norms and expectations of the virtual training environment, which differed from the traditional face-to-face training environment.

➤ *Absence of opportunities for trainees to spend time with their loved ones during their recognition ceremony due to the pandemic*

In many police forces, recognition ceremonies are an important event where trainees celebrate their successful completion of the training program with their loved ones. However, due to the pandemic, many recognition ceremonies have been disrupted, and trainees have not had the opportunity to spend time with their loved ones during these events. According to the trainees *“Instead of having passes when we had our recognition, there is none. We never experience any passes even for an hour. No open house, wherein it was a ritual that when we are recognized, the regional director can let our loved ones come to visit us and we will have time to see each other. But, since it is pandemic, it is not allowed.”*; *“No family when we had our oath taking so we were low morale. Usually, there should be loved ones before we depart to go to training but since it is pandemic, even our parents were not there to hug us.”*; *“Low morale because no loved ones, from oath taking to BRC graduation because of pandemic.”* The trainee's statement reflects how the pandemic has disrupted the usual process of sending off trainees to their training with the support of their loved ones, such as family and parents. The absence of this support system can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, and may negatively impact the trainees' morale as they start their training.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

➤ *Conclusion*

The disruption of training routines and the challenges of remote learning have made it difficult for trainees to develop the necessary skills and competencies required for law enforcement. Additionally, trainees have experienced significant emotional distress due to the pandemic, with feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and fear. The difficulty of adjusting to a new culture and environment during pandemic training has also been highlighted as a challenge. Moreover, the absence of opportunities for trainees to spend time with their loved ones during their recognition ceremony due to the pandemic has further impacted the emotional well-being of trainees.

➤ *Recommendations*

To address the challenges faced by police trainees during pandemic training, it is important to provide adequate support and resources that prioritize the emotional well-being of trainees. This includes facilitating effective remote learning by providing access to technology and technical support, as well as offering opportunities for social interaction and connection during remote learning. Alternative approaches to training that prioritize social interaction and support, such as virtual or in-person peer support groups, mentoring programs, and regular check-ins with instructors or mental health professionals, may also be necessary. Additionally, trainees may need to imbibe the importance of silence and resiliency as a key to survive during times of isolation. Finally, it is

important to consider alternative assessment methods that evaluate trainee performance during remote learning, such as simulations or virtual role-playing exercises, to ensure that trainees develop the necessary skills and competencies required for law enforcement.

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