

# Challenges in the Career Opportunities of Registered Criminologists Beyond Age Threshold: A Qualitative Study

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## ABSTRACT

The career aspirations of registered criminologists often revolve around joining law enforcement agencies, a pathway that aligns closely with their academic training and professional goals. This study explored the challenges in the career opportunities of registered criminologists beyond age threshold. This study used qualitative phenomenological research design. The participants of the study were 10 registered criminologists aged 31 years old and above chosen using purposive and snowball sampling to identify the potential participants. An interview guide was used as an instrument of the study. Moustakas' method of data analysis was used in analyzing the data gathered. Results yielded six themes: experiencing institutional hiring barriers, emotional struggles from job rejection, inquiring about waivers and special eligibility rules, reaching out to support networks, exploring other law enforcement opportunities and shifting to alternate careers and further education. The findings emphasized the emotional, financial, and psychological impact of systemic limitations, as well as the resilience demonstrated by participants in adapting to alternative career paths such as teaching, private security, entrepreneurship, and further academic pursuits. These experiences highlight the critical importance of providing support systems and resources to ease career transitions for affected individuals. Therefore, there is a need for inclusive employment policies and curriculum reforms that enhance employability and career adaptability for age restricted professions.

**Keywords:** age restriction, career adaptability, career opportunity, law enforcement, over-aged, recruitment

## INTRODUCTION

Career progression in the field of criminology often hinges on successful entry into law enforcement and other public safety agencies, where age requirements are strictly enforced as part of the recruitment process. In the Philippines, registered criminologists often aspire to join law enforcement agencies such as the Philippine National Police (PNP), Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), and Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP). These institutions, however, enforce age restrictions for entry-level applicants, usually capping eligibility at 30 years old, regardless of an applicant's qualifications or licensure (Martinez & Cruz, 2021). As a result, qualified professionals who exceed the age threshold face systemic barriers that significantly hinder their ability to pursue careers aligned with their academic preparation and professional aspirations.

The impact of age-based limitations in government hiring practices has been the subject of increasing academic scrutiny in recent years. Scholars have argued that these restrictions contribute to underemployment and emotional stress among skilled individuals, especially in fields where employment pipelines are narrowly defined by public sector hiring (De Leon & Ramos, 2022). For registered criminologists who are unable to enter uniformed services due to age, the search for alternative careers often involves emotional struggle, financial instability, and psychological uncertainty (Villanueva, 2023). Moreover, while some displaced professionals transition into teaching, private security, or entrepreneurship, such paths are frequently unplanned and lack institutional support or guidance (Santos & Javier, 2020).

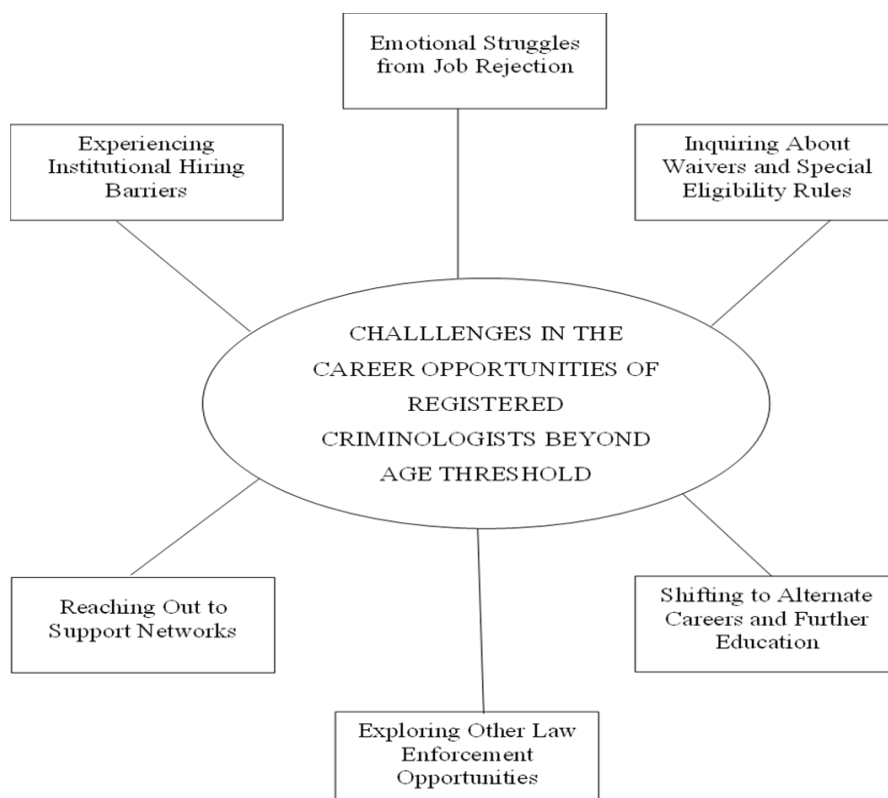
Although several studies have examined the employment outcomes and career preferences of criminology

graduates, most of these focus on younger individuals who fall within the standard age range for entry into law enforcement agencies. There is a noticeable lack of research that explores the experiences of registered criminologists who are aged 31 and above—an age group often excluded from law enforcement careers due to strict institutional age limits. This underrepresented population faces distinct challenges, including emotional distress from repeated rejections, limited access to alternative career pathways, and the absence of targeted support systems. Despite being professionally licensed and academically qualified, their voices and experiences remain largely absent from academic discourse. Addressing this population gap is essential to better understand their struggles and to inform policies and educational reforms that promote inclusive career opportunities for all registered criminologists, regardless of age.

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the lived experiences of registered criminologists aged 31 and above who face challenges in pursuing careers in law enforcement due to age restrictions imposed by government hiring policies. Specifically, the study aims to examine the emotional, professional, and social impacts of being excluded from traditional criminology-related employment pathways and to identify the coping mechanisms and alternative career strategies these individuals adopt. By using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research seeks to give voice to a marginalized segment of the criminology profession and to generate insights that may inform the development of more inclusive employment policies, support systems, and academic curriculum enhancements that foster greater career adaptability and resilience.

This study is significant because it sheds light on the often-overlooked experiences of registered criminologists who are disqualified from law enforcement careers due to age restrictions, despite having the necessary qualifications and licensure. By focusing on this marginalized group, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how institutional hiring policies impact professional identity, mental well-being, and career development. The findings can guide policymakers in re-evaluating age-based employment criteria, encourage academic institutions to integrate more adaptable career preparation strategies into the criminology curriculum, and inform government agencies and private sector employers about the untapped potential of overage professionals. Furthermore, the study provides a platform for affected individuals to share their challenges and coping strategies, offering valuable perspectives that can lead to the creation of support systems and inclusive employment practices. In doing so, this research addresses both a social justice concern and a practical workforce development issue within the field of criminology.

## Conceptual Framework



## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the challenges of registered criminologists who were unable to pursue careers in law enforcement due to age restrictions. The research was conducted in the province of Misamis Occidental, Philippines, where participants shared their personal and professional challenges related to their exclusion from law enforcement agencies. A total of 10 participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques, ensuring that they met specific inclusion criteria. Participants were required to be: (1) registered criminologists; (2) aged 31 years old and above; (3) unsuccessful in securing employment within law enforcement agencies; (4) currently employed in an alternative job or career; and (5) willing to voluntarily participate in the study. In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide to elicit detailed narratives.

The data gathered were analyzed using Moustakas' method of phenomenological data analysis, which involved horizontalization, clustering significant statements into themes, and the development of textual and structural descriptions to capture the essence of the participants' lived experiences. Ethical standards were strictly observed in accordance with the university's research protocols. The researcher applied for ethics review along with necessary forms, including informed consent and assessment documents. Approval was granted by the Ethics Review Board, and the study was conducted with full consideration of the participants' rights, confidentiality, and voluntary involvement.

### Study Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size was limited to 10 participants, which, while appropriate for in-depth qualitative exploration, may not capture the full diversity of experiences among over-aged, registered criminologists in other regions. Second, the geographic scope was confined to Misamis Occidental province in the Philippines, potentially limiting the generalizability of results to other provinces or urban areas with different recruitment policies and labor market dynamics. Additionally, the use of purposive and snowball sampling may introduce selection bias, as participants were primarily those accessible within existing professional networks. Lastly, the reliance on self-reported data during interviews may be influenced by participants' recall bias or social desirability, which can affect the accuracy of their narratives. Future studies could expand sample size and geographic coverage and incorporate mixed methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by over-aged criminologists.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part presents the different themes that were derived from the different responses of the participants of the study during the conduct of the interview. The study explored the challenges in the career opportunities of registered criminologists beyond age threshold.

In this study, six themes were developed, namely: experiencing institutional hiring barriers, emotional struggles from job rejection, inquiring about waivers and special eligibility rules, reaching out to support networks, exploring other law enforcement opportunities and shifting to alternate careers and further education.

### Experiencing Institutional Hiring Barriers

This theme highlights systemic obstacles in institutional hiring practices that limit employment opportunities for registered criminologists exceeding the age limit. Despite meeting academic and professional qualifications, such as a criminology degree and passing the licensure examination many candidates are disqualified from joining the Philippine National Police (PNP) solely due to age restrictions. Participants' accounts reveal a disconnect between educational attainment and actual employability. The PNP enforces a strict age threshold (typically 21 to 30 years old), excluding otherwise capable individuals based only on their age. As Rojas (2024) points out, such policies reinforce systemic ageism and prevent institutions from tapping into a broader, skilled talent pool.

These are the responses of the participants:

*"I have encountered discrimination; they did not review my qualifications and automatically disqualified me because of my age." (P1)*

*"The strict age limit was the biggest obstacle. I couldn't afford the financial burden of applying without assurance my waiver would be approved, so I had to step back." (P2)*

*"It limits opportunities for qualified people just over the age limit." (P5)*

*"The age cap is too rigid. It discourages career growth and blocks second chances." (P9)*

Aguilar et al. (2024) argue that such rigid policies shrink the talent pool and exclude applicants with valuable experience, maturity, and diverse skill sets essential for modern policing. These may include individuals with prior work experience, advanced degrees, or community engagement backgrounds, qualities critical to addressing evolving public safety challenges. Excluding candidates solely based on age overlooks the importance of emotional intelligence, critical thinking, cultural sensitivity, and technological literacy in law enforcement. Refugia (2021) notes that restrictive qualifications, often based on outdated standards, demoralize criminology graduates and deter them from pursuing law enforcement careers. When academic achievements, licensure, and community service are overshadowed by arbitrary age limits, qualified candidates may redirect their talents elsewhere, weakening institutional competitiveness.

This study's findings underscore an urgent need for policy reform in recruitment, particularly within the PNP. Age limits, originally designed to maintain physical standards, now act as outdated barriers conflicting with goals of professionalization, diversity, and merit-based hiring. Revising these policies could unlock a larger pool of motivated criminologists who bring not only academic credentials but also valuable life experiences and perspectives. Inclusive hiring practices would benefit individual aspirants and strengthen the country's criminal justice institutions.

### **Emotional Struggles from Job Rejection**

Job rejection often triggers deep emotional responses, especially when individuals invest significant hope, time, effort, or personal identity into the opportunity (Lamia, 2018). This theme highlights the mental health impact, lowered self-esteem, reduced motivation, and altered personal outlook faced by registered criminologists, particularly in cultures like the Philippines where employment is closely tied to family pride and social status. Workplace rejection is a common yet damaging experience that can affect professionals at any career stage.

These are their responses during the interview:

*"Initially, I questioned my career path, but I regained confidence when I found value in mentoring others. A recruiter once said I was 'too late to start.' I felt insulted but used that as fuel to prove myself elsewhere." (P8)*

*"At times, I wondered if I made the wrong choice." (P9)*

*"The biggest obstacle is how to overcome the emotional disappointment. The feeling that I was left behind by my batch mates, it was so hard to accept that I already exceed the age requirement in the PNP." (P10)*

Rejection often leads to burnout, stress, and negative moods (Paterson et al., 2023). For criminologists over the age threshold, these emotional effects are intensified by years of dedicated preparation and the deep personal investment in their career goals. Many experience frustration, hopelessness, and a sense of wasted effort, especially when rigid age limits disregard their skills and motivation (Demirbilek, 2023). This emotional toll can extend beyond the individual, affecting their social identity and family pride, particularly in collectivist cultures like the Philippines. The exclusion based on age alone can trigger feelings of diminished self-worth, anxiety, and even withdrawal from professional engagement, highlighting the urgent need for more compassionate and supportive recruitment policies that consider not just eligibility but also the psychological well-being of applicants.

The psychological impact underscores the urgent need for institutional and policy interventions that address not only eligibility but also the human cost of exclusion. Disqualification based on age can cause long-term consequences including reduced motivation, diminished self-worth, and withdrawal from the profession. These burdens are amplified in collectivist societies like the Philippines, where career success is linked to family honor and social standing. If unaddressed, systemic rejection may contribute to underemployment, mental health challenges, and the loss of qualified talent within the criminal justice system. Institutions must therefore adopt more compassionate recruitment frameworks incorporating flexible age waivers, psychosocial support for rejected applicants, and alternative career pathways within criminology to mitigate emotional harm and foster professional resilience.

### **Inquiring About Waivers and Special Eligibility Rules**

This theme highlights the hopeful and determined pursuit of alternative pathways by registered criminologists who face age-related hiring restrictions. Many actively seek eligibility through waivers, special qualifications, or appeals, demonstrating resilience and perseverance in pursuing their career goals despite significant obstacles. Their efforts illustrate that meaningful achievement requires sustained effort, patience, and refusal to accept immediate rejection (Garcia-Perez et al., 2021).

These are the responses of the participants:

*"I attempted to find ways, such as reaching out to recruitment officers, inquiring about possible waivers, and even checking if there were other law enforcement agencies with more flexible requirements." (P1)*

*"I explored options like seeking a waiver or considering special recruitment programs, though the chances of success were uncertain." (P4)*

*"One of my initial steps was to submit a request for an age waiver... The procedure was challenging—there were numerous documents to prepare, lengthy waiting periods, and no guarantee of acceptance. (P5)*

*"To overcome the age-related barriers... I had to secure a long list of documentary requirements—birth certificate, diploma, board rating, certificates of good moral character, and even justifications explaining why I should be granted the waiver. (P2)*

The participants' stories reflect profound determination and optimism. This hope is a crucial psychological resource that helps sustain mental well-being and promotes a positive attitude toward challenges, encouraging growth and learning (Arslan, 2023). Many believe that merit—demonstrated by passing licensure exams and maintaining physical and mental fitness—should weigh more than rigid age cutoffs, which seem unfair when candidates meet or exceed other qualifications.

Despite their resilience, participants expressed frustration with the rigid and often opaque waiver process. They questioned the fairness and consistency of institutional policies, feeling disheartened when disqualified solely due to age despite fulfilling all other requirements. This sentiment reflects a broader perception that merit, grounded in documented educational and professional achievements, should be prioritized over technicalities (De Vos et al., 2021).

Overall, this theme underscores the urgent need for more flexible, transparent, and equitable recruitment systems within law enforcement agencies. The participants' persistence and belief in meritocracy highlight the potential benefits of reforms that value competence and dedication above arbitrary technical limits. By revising eligibility criteria and enhancing transparency in waiver processes, institutions can foster trust, inclusivity, and allow a broader pool of qualified criminologists to contribute meaningfully to public safety and justice.

### **Reaching Out to Support Networks**

This theme examines how individuals facing repeated job rejections cope by turning to their support network



family, friends, peers, mentors, and professional groups. These networks provide vital emotional encouragement, practical advice, and psychological stability, helping individuals process disappointment and make informed decisions about their career paths. Despite the discouragement from institutional barriers, many find strength and clarity through conversations with loved ones or those who have faced similar challenges. Support networks become essential in helping applicants reframe failure, maintain self-worth, and regain direction after setbacks. Personal communities, comprising significant social ties, play a crucial role in managing mental health by offering access to varied social support (Brooks et al., 2020).

These are the evident responses of the participants:

*“I attempted to find ways, such as reaching out to recruitment officers, inquiring about possible waivers, and even checking if there were other law enforcement agencies with more flexible requirements.” (P1)*

*“I asked about possible openings in allied agencies, where age policies might not be as strict. These conversations helped broaden my understanding of the different pathways available outside the PNP recruitment.” (P4)*

*“I also considered agencies like BuCor, Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), and even local government units involved in peace and order programs.” (P5)*

*“So, I reached out to friends, former classmates, mentors, and professionals already inside the law enforcement field. I asked about possible entry points, the likelihood of any internal programs that might accept applicants with my background. Some of the people I spoke to offered to refer me or update me when openings came up, especially in specialized units or support roles that didn’t always follow the standard entry procedures.” (P7)*

These responses illustrate the critical role of social support in managing emotional distress and fostering resilience. Various types of support—emotional, instrumental, and information help combat feelings of loneliness and isolation (Casini et al., 2023). Participants’ outreach to diverse mentors and professionals highlights the importance of relationship-building to overcome career challenges.

The reliance on support networks underscores the value of social connectedness in promoting emotional resilience and informed career choices among registered criminologists facing institutional hurdles. Personal and professional relationships not only offer encouragement but also practical guidance and alternative opportunities, helping individuals transform setbacks into growth. This emphasizes the need to integrate social support structures into career guidance and recruitment processes. Academic institutions and law enforcement agencies can develop mentorship programs, alumni networks, and peer support systems that bridge the gap between education and employment. Such initiatives may reduce the psychological impact of rejection and enhance persistence and adaptability. More broadly, fostering community-based support and inclusive outreach can cultivate a more compassionate, resilient law enforcement workforce that reflects both merit and social equity.

### **Exploring Other Law Enforcement Opportunities**

This theme highlights how over-aged, registered criminologists, disqualified from the Philippine National Police (PNP) due to strict age limits, actively redirect their career aspirations toward alternative roles within the wider law enforcement and public safety sectors. Rather than abandoning their professional goals, these individuals pursue opportunities in agencies such as the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), local government units, or private security firms. This theme reflects their adaptability, resilience, and enduring commitment to public service, as well as their awareness of the transferable skills across law enforcement bodies. Their strategic shifts often target agencies with more flexible age policies or special eligibility provisions.

These are the evident responses of the participants:

*"I asked about possible openings in allied agencies such as the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), Bureau of Corrections (BuCor), and local government public safety offices, where age policies might not be as strict. These conversations helped broaden my understanding of the different pathways available outside the PNP recruitment." (P4)*

*"I explored opportunities in the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), where some age restrictions are slightly more accommodating, especially if you bring in relevant experience or credentials. I also considered agencies like BuCor, Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), and even local government units involved in peace and order programs. But I also failed to be employed." (P5)*

*"I turned to real estate, where investigative and communication skills from criminology helped a lot." (P7)*

*"Instead of stepping away from the field of criminology, I decided to build my own security agency. It was both a bold and practical move—one that allowed me to apply everything I had learned from my studies, training, and professional experiences." (P9)*

Adapting to change requires openness to new and sometimes unfamiliar opportunities. Gonzalez et al. (2022) define resilience not only as recovery from setbacks but also as the capacity to reframe goals, make constructive choices, and engage with new opportunities, a process clearly demonstrated by these criminologists facing PNP disqualification. Kundi et al. (2021) highlight how career adaptability influences proactive job crafting and subjective career success, moderated by personality traits such as perfectionism. Career adaptability is a dynamic, self-managing skill that enables individuals to navigate developmental challenges and evolving career landscapes by aligning with their values and environmental demands (Di Maggio et al., 2020). Resilience, broadly understood, is the capacity to positively adjust and adapt to adversities impacting one's development and functioning (Metais et al., 2022).

The capacity of over-aged criminologists to pivot toward alternative law enforcement and public safety roles underscores a vital aspect of career resilience amid institutional exclusion. Their shifts to agencies like BJMP, BFP, BuCor, or entrepreneurial ventures in private security reveal a deep-rooted dedication to their profession and refusal to let rigid age limits halt their aspirations. This calls for educational and institutional systems to embrace a more diversified understanding of criminology career pathways. Promoting cross-agency mobility, flexible recruitment standards, and entrepreneurial opportunities can empower individuals to pursue meaningful employment despite setbacks. Integrating career adaptability training such as decision-making, opportunity identification, and resilience development into criminology curricula will better prepare graduates to face barriers constructively. These findings should encourage policymakers and law enforcement institutions to revisit recruitment policies and broaden support mechanisms, fostering sustainable career opportunities and strengthening the criminology workforce.

### **Shifting to Alternate Careers and Further Education**

This theme explores how over-aged, registered criminologists who face barriers in joining the Philippine National Police (PNP) redirect their professional goals toward new career paths or further education to enhance their qualifications and marketability. Instead of giving up, many pivot toward roles in private security, teaching, business, or public administration, often aligning with their criminology background and skills. Notably, a significant number transition into academia as criminology instructors, allowing them to remain connected to the field by mentoring and training future law enforcement personnel. This shift aligns with Garcia (2021), who found that disqualified criminology graduates often find fulfilling careers in teaching, paralegal work, or community services when institutional policies limit direct field participation.

These are the shared statements of the participants:

*"But when that door closed, I knew I had to find another path where I could still contribute meaningfully to the field, I was passionate about. Becoming a Criminology instructor allowed me*

*to stay connected to my discipline while helping shape the future generation of law enforcers. I realized that, even if I couldn't serve directly on the field, I could still make a significant impact by training and mentoring students who dream of joining the PNP and other law enforcement agencies.” (P1)*

*“I became a Criminology instructor after realizing that my path into the Philippine National Police had been hindered by the age limit. (P3)*

*“Due to the rejections I got in the application for PNP, I found myself applying as an instructor in the criminology program.” (P6)*

*“I have received support from the school where I graduated. In fact, they have offered to teach me in the criminology program. It was a great help for me after the disappointment I got in the PNP recruitment process.” (P5)*

These statements demonstrate how individuals actively reframe their professional identities, embracing academic roles as both a coping strategy and a continued vocational commitment to criminology. This redirection exemplifies career adaptability, defined by Di Maggio et al. (2020) as a self-regulating capacity to adjust to career disruptions. Their forward-looking mindset reflects resilience and a purposeful pursuit of meaningful alternatives (Gonzalez et al., 2022).

The transition of over-aged criminologists into teaching and further education underscores the vital role of adaptability in maintaining professional purpose amid systemic barriers. This pathway not only preserves personal resilience but also ensures their expertise shapes future law enforcement through education. These findings highlight the need for educational institutions and policymakers to recognize and support alternative criminology careers as legitimate extensions of the profession. Structured support programs such as graduate assistantships or instructor training can facilitate smoother transitions for disqualified applicants. Furthermore, embedding career adaptability and employability skills in criminology curricula will prepare students for evolving career landscapes and unforeseen challenges, fostering a more resilient and versatile criminology workforce.

## FINDINGS

Based on the findings of the study, registered criminologists who are over the age limit face two major challenges in accessing career opportunities within the Philippine National Police (PNP): experiencing institutional hiring barriers and emotional struggles resulting from job rejection. These barriers are often rooted in rigid age policies that fail to consider individual merit and qualifications, leading to feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and a sense of wasted effort among applicants. To navigate these challenges, many over-aged criminologists actively seek waivers and special eligibility rules and explore opportunities in other law enforcement agencies such as the BJMP, BFP, and local government units. This approach demonstrates their resilience and determination to serve in public safety roles, even if not within the PNP. Furthermore, when completely excluded from PNP recruitment due to age restrictions, they often turn to support networks—including peers, mentors, and professionals—and choose to shift to alternate careers and pursue further education. These alternative paths allow them to remain connected to their discipline, particularly through teaching in higher education institutions, thereby continuing to contribute meaningfully to the field of criminology.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study reveals that age restrictions within the Philippine National Police (PNP) present significant barriers for registered criminologists, not only limiting their career access but also impacting their emotional well-being and sense of purpose. Despite these setbacks, affected individuals exhibit notable resilience by actively seeking waivers, exploring opportunities in other law enforcement agencies, and adapting to alternative pathways aligned with their criminology background. Support networks play a vital role in helping them cope with rejection, reframe their goals, and sustain motivation. Many eventually redirect their aspirations toward teaching or further education, reflecting a strong commitment to public service and the criminology



profession. These findings underscore the importance of more inclusive hiring policies and support mechanisms to retain skilled and passionate individuals within the law enforcement field.

## RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several key recommendations are proposed to support over-aged criminologists facing institutional barriers in law enforcement recruitment:

1. Policymakers and government agencies are encouraged to revisit age-related hiring policies within law enforcement institutions, particularly the Philippine National Police (PNP). They should consider adopting more inclusive and flexible age criteria, especially for applicants who possess licensure and relevant academic qualifications. Furthermore, the establishment of clear and transparent guidelines for waivers and special eligibility rules is essential, and these should be widely disseminated to avoid misinformation and confusion among applicants.
2. Criminology education institutions are advised to strengthen career counseling services within their programs to better prepare students for alternative career paths beyond the PNP, including opportunities in corrections, fire services, private security, and the academe. These institutions should also offer bridging programs or scholarships to support criminology graduates who choose to transition into teaching or academic careers.
3. Professional organizations and licensing bodies may collaborate with various employers to advocate for the broader career applicability of criminology graduates, emphasizing the versatility of their skills across both public and private sectors.
4. Over-aged criminologists and job seekers are encouraged to proactively seek further education and skills development in fields such as teaching, research, and consultancy, or in alternative law enforcement roles like the Bureau of Corrections (BuCor) and the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA). It is important for them to understand that career redirection does not signify failure but rather represents a meaningful realignment of professional goals, where criminological expertise continues to hold significant value.
5. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct further studies on the career trajectories and long-term success of over-aged criminologists who have transitioned into other professional roles, particularly within education and alternative public safety sectors.

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