



## Research Paper

# Kalaban: Young drug users' engagements with law enforcement in the Philippines



Gideon Lasco

Department of Anthropology, University of the Philippines Diliman, Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** A violent 'war on drugs' continues to be waged in the Philippines, even as the use of drugs – particular methamphetamine – continues to rise. Furnishing contextual background to the current situation, this paper explores how long-running law enforcement approaches in the Philippines might be viewed by those in their receiving end by presenting findings of an ethnography among marginalized young men.

**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted among 20 young men throughout a 12-month period of participant-observation from December 2011 to September 2013.

**Findings:** Young people make use of various 'tactics' to keep using drugs and evade law enforcement, even as drug use itself is a tactic in their everyday lives. A sense of hypocrisy and injustice, borne of their own experiences, informs their view of law enforcers, whom they call *kalaban* (enemy). They feel they are being unfairly targeted, but in their view, this danger is just part of the perils of their everyday lives.

**Conclusion:** Young men's resort to various tactics speaks of an agency that is often ignored in public discourses. Their 'lay assessments of risks' and experience-based perceptions of law enforcement raises questions about the efficacy of fear-based anti-drug campaigns. Overall, the study offers an ethnographic argument *against* the punitive methods being employed by the Philippines, and *for* measures that reframe the relationship between police and young drug users – from hostility to trust.

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## Introduction

'Kalaban' is a Tagalog word that means 'enemy' and this is how young drug users in a Philippine port community call the police. Held in the context of an environment where drug use is highly criminalized – and where getting jailed or killed is a very real possibility – the young men's word choice seems understandable. But what is the deeper context that informs their hostile view of law enforcement, and what policy insights can we learn from it?

This paper attempts to illuminate the ways urban poor young drug users in the Philippines engage with the *pulis* (police), and make sense of their perspectives of law enforcement. Contrary to public discourses that depict them as passive victims of both the drugs they use and the punitive measures that target them (see, for instance, Sotto, 1993; Vidal, 1998), the young men actively make use of 'tactics' (De Certeau, 1984) – or what they term '*diskarte*' – to evade the police and negotiate their dangerous lifeworlds. However, some of them do get caught, and narratives of arrest

and detention also figure in their accounts, further shaping their perspectives of law enforcement – and their broader outlook in life amid the risks and dangers they face.

Much attention has been accorded the Philippines in light of President Rodrigo Duterte's "War on Drugs"<sup>1</sup>; and the thousands of deaths attributed to "legitimate" police operations and "vigilante killings" (Amnesty International, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2017). Significantly for this study, young people have been not been spared of the drug war's fatal consequences (Agoncillo & Ramos, 2017; Ateneo Human Rights Center, 2017).

On top of criticism over the present administration's drug policies and human rights violations, however, there is also a long-standing concern about the government's long-running approach to has been punitive, prohibitionist, and grounded on various misconceptions on drug use and addiction (Campos, 1975; see also Csete et al., 2016; Lasco, 2017a). Despite "serious lack of research"

<sup>1</sup> For sample reportage on the war on drugs, see "Thousands dead: the Philippine president, the death squad allegations and a brutal drugs war" (The Guardian, April 2, 2017), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/02/philippines-president-duterte-drugs-war-death-squads>.

E-mail address: [gideonlasco@gmail.com](mailto:gideonlasco@gmail.com) (G. Lasco).

on this topic, police vigilantism has also been documented for the past several decades (Kreuzer, 2016: 5–7). Rather than see the current drug war as an exceptional moment in Philippine history, it can thus be more accurately viewed as a sequelae of increasingly-draconian drug policies. Looking at various facets of this history can help contextualize the present situation in the country.

This paper, which draws from a study conducted three years before the present drug war, seeks to make sense of drug users' perspectives of (and experiences with) law enforcement in order to help craft humane and effective policy alternatives, particularly in reframing the vital, if currently hostile, relationship between police and vulnerable populations such as the youth.

### Background: the Philippine drug situation

The Philippine government identifies methamphetamine (locally known as *shabu*) followed by cannabis (*marijuana* or *tsongki*) as the drugs of choice in the country, and the inter-agency Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB) estimates that there are 1.76 million drug users out of a population of over 100 million (DDB, 2016). Recent studies suggest that despite several decades of drug control, the prevalence of drug use, particularly methamphetamine, is on the rise in the region in general and in the Philippines in particular (McKetin et al., 2008; UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2016).

The country's recent anti-drug efforts can be traced to the establishment of the Dangerous Drugs Board in 1972, which in turn can be considered part of the global move towards greater drug control in the 1960s–70s (Sinha, 2001). Successive administrations have sought to deal with drug use with increasing penalization, employing state power primarily through the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) (Reyes, 2017).

On paper and to a limited extent in practice, the government has also considered alternative approaches – from recruiting youth groups as 'anti-drug communities' (DDB, 2010) to exploring institution- and community-based treatments (DDB, 2014). Since the late 1990s, the 'therapeutic community' model has been adopted in jails and rehabilitation centers with varying degrees of commitment and success (Herradura, 2009). Punitive approaches, however, have dominated government rhetoric, policies, and programs (Reyes, 2017). On July 1, 2016, just a day after he assumed office, President Duterte ordered the Philippine National Police to embark on a campaign (PNP, 2016a) which has seen 2363 deaths in six months (PNP, 2016b) – a figure that has been criticized by observers as underreported (Amnesty International, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2017).

The killings have received much attention, but the lives of drug users themselves have remained hidden from view, and so have the ways they engage with law enforcement. This lacunae has left drug policy in the Philippines being decided with little or no input on how drugs – and the 'drug war' – are actually 'lived'. Important questions, however, remain: How in practice is the 'war on drugs' experienced by the young people who are targeted by it? What values, perceptions, and 'tactics' do they engage as they confront and resist law enforcement, even as they face their everyday struggles? These questions can be attended to by ethnographic or "experience-near" approaches (Hollway, 2009; Maher, 2002). As Ferrell (1995: 39) argues in a study of urban youth subcultures: "Carefully situating our research in young people's daily lives . . . broadens our scope to include the many and varied manifestations of authority and resistance entangled there and pushes us to pay attention to the particular meanings of authority and resistance in the everyday, collective experience of youth."

### Methodology

Conducted from December 2011 to September 2013, the study began as an open-ended survey of the different chemicals that young people use (see Hardon, Idrus, & Hymans, 2013) which led to a focus on the role drug use plays in their everyday economic lives (Lasco, 2014). Ethical approval for the research was secured from the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy of the University of the Philippines in Diliman.

20 semi-structured interviews, 12 follow-up interviews, and 3 group discussions were conducted, and the author spent a total of 12 months in participant-observation (i.e. *pakitambay* or 'hanging out' with the young men). The research design was made with the recognition that "qualitative research is often the only means available for gathering sensitive and valid data from otherwise elusive populations of substance abusers." (Wiebel, 1990: 5). This is particularly important in the Philippines where little or no qualitative research has been done to understand drug use. Briggs (2015: 308) adds that the ethnographic dimension – i.e. long-term participant-observation – is especially valuable because otherwise, "the full and rich experience of the drug user is almost immediately lost." Regional literature has profited from ethnographic work, not just in uncovering the lived experiences of drug users but also in making sense of the social contexts of drug use (Nasir & Rosenthal, 2009; Sherman et al., 2008).

Participants were recruited through peer referrals and snowball sampling (see Shaghghi, Bhopal, & Sheikh, 2011). Verbal informed consent was secured from them and a monetary token of 300 pesos (6 USD) was given to each after a successful interview. The name and location of the port community itself, alongside the names of participants, were anonymized.

FGD and interview transcripts were gathered in an NVivo 10 database, which was searched for references to law enforcement issues through an open reading and coding of the text. A second reading of all the coded material was then performed to identify core themes. Observational data (i.e. field notes and journal entries) were also reviewed to corroborate findings and furnish ethnographic illustrations that relate to the themes.

### Findings

#### Diskarte: the everyday 'tactics' of drug users

The young men, aged 18–25, received minimal education; none of them were able to finish high school. Most live in an informal settlement consisting of tiny houses, some stacked on top of each other; connected by a labyrinth of narrow alleys and sidestreets. The nearby port, which receives over 10,000 daily passengers, provides income opportunities for them and their families. The study participants themselves mainly work as 'vendors' who peddle food and beverages to passengers; pedicab drivers; porters; or as freelancers for whatever income opportunities might come. Others admitted to engaging in illegal activities, like pickpocketing or small-scale drug dealing. All these activities can be said to constitute an 'informal economy' (Ofreneo, 2013).

Alongside *shabu*, the participants also use cannabis and alcohol, both of which they claim can counteract *shabu's* effects. *Shabu*, however, is seen as particularly 'useful', giving them alertness and energy to perform manual tasks, disinhibition to engage in sex work, and sleeplessness that allows them to work at night (see Lasco 2014). The income they earn each day varies widely – they can earn P200 (\$4) from selling food and beverages; P500 (\$10) from sex work, or as high as P4000 (\$80) if they manage to steal a high-end mobile phone.

The police constantly threaten to break this routine, posing the possibility of arrest and detention. "Raids" (their own term) are

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