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Between Work and Wheels: Lived Experiences of Working Criminology Students

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Index Terms:

working students, commuting experience, criminology education, urban mobility context, academic well-being

Abstract. Working university students increasingly face the dual burden of employment and academic responsibilities, a challenge intensified by the demanding urban mobility conditions in Metro Manila. This descriptive phenomenological study explored the lived commuting experiences of working criminology students and how these experiences shaped their academic engagement and well-being. Eight (n = 8) working Bachelor of Science in Criminology students from a private higher education institution were purposively selected for the study. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method. Four interconnected themes emerged: persistent time pressure characterized by rushing and sacrifice of personal time; heightened vigilance and safety awareness shaped by traffic risks and environmental threats, with prayer serving as a coping mechanism; criminology-informed discipline and situational awareness as adaptive resources during commuting; and cumulative physical exhaustion that compromises academic focus and performance, prompting compensatory efforts. The findings reveal that commuting functions as a critical lived space where employment demands, academic expectations, urban risks, and survival strategies converge. While criminology training fosters resilience, behavioral regulation, and adaptive coping, these competencies do not fully mitigate the structural burdens of prolonged commuting and the fatigue it causes. This study underscores the need for student-centered institutional policies, including flexible scheduling, workload sensitivity, and wellness support mechanisms tailored to working students. Recognizing commuting as a significant determinant of academic engagement and well-being is essential for promoting equity, persistence, and sustainable professional development in criminology education within high-density urban contexts.

Introduction

University students worldwide engage in part-time and full-time work to support their educational expenses and family responsibilities, which challenges their academic and psychological well-being (Akiba et al., 2024). In developing countries, urban centers face severe transportation problems, such as congestion and long commuting times, increasing stress and safety concerns for commuters. These factors contribute to heightened stress, fatigue, and role conflicts among working students, particularly in metropolitan areas with complex urban mobility issues. Commuting significantly affects student well-being by impacting their physical health, mental resilience, and academic persistence. Metro Manila's dense urban mobility presents unique challenges that further intensify the pressure on working students managing work–school transitions (Akiba et al., 2024).

Criminology students occupy a unique space in higher education, equipped with discipline, vigilance, situational awareness, and risk assessment skills that reflect their specialized training (Ware et al., 2024). Many work in demanding, service-oriented roles, often involving irregular hours, which add complexity to their academic commitments (Ware et al., 2024). Despite the rising enrolment of working criminology students, institutional support tends to prioritize academic outcomes over students' lived experiences and survival challenges (Williams & Roberts, 2022). Research mostly explores curriculum and professional readiness, neglecting the everyday realities and commuting risks that intertwine with their academic and personal lives—an important yet insufficiently studied area in criminology education (Ware et al., 2024; Williams & Roberts, 2022).

Working criminology students navigate the simultaneous demands of employment, commuting, and academic responsibilities daily, often under conditions of persistent time pressure that result in rushed routines, reduced personal time, and compromised self-care (Ware et al., 2024). The transition from the workplace to the classroom is further complicated by prolonged travel exposure to traffic congestion, environmental hazards, and financial vulnerability, intensifying psychological and physical strain. These commuting realities intersect with criminology training, shaping students' perceptions of risk, vigilance, and adaptive coping behaviors during transit (Antojado & McPhee, 2024; Ware et al., 2024). While criminology education has been shown to influence students' competence and professional readiness through structured instructional experiences (Anselmo et al., 2025), the everyday mobility challenges that accompany academic formation remain underexplored. Prolonged fatigue and sleep deprivation resulting from balancing multiple roles can impair cognitive focus, academic performance, and classroom engagement, often compelling students to rely on compensatory strategies to sustain academic progress (Ware et al., 2024). These lived realities reflect a complex interplay between work, study, and exposure to urban hazards, underscoring the need for institutional awareness and targeted support.

Despite the growing scholarship on working students, much of the existing literature relies on quantitative assessments of academic performance, with limited attention to the subjective meanings students attach to their commuting experiences. Phenomenological investigations into how working criminology students interpret and make sense of their post-work mobility are scarce. Research in criminology education has emphasized training effectiveness and professional competency development (Anselmo et al., 2025), often overlooking the everyday structural and mobility-related challenges that shape students' academic engagement and well-being. Consequently, commuting as a lived context of risk, adaptation, and identity formation among criminology students remains insufficiently examined, particularly in the urban setting of Metro Manila. Addressing this gap necessitates a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry capable of capturing the nuanced physical, emotional, and academic implications of commuting for working criminology student.

Research Questions

General Research Question
How do working criminology students in Metro Manila experience and make meaning of commuting to school after work within the context of balancing employment, academic responsibilities and personal well-being?

Specific Research Questions

1. How do working criminology students describe their lived experience of commuting to school in terms of time pressure and daily routines?
2. What safety concerns, risks, and vigilance-related behaviors do criminology students experience during their daily commutes?
3. In what ways does criminology training shape students' perceptions, disciplines, and coping strategies during their commutes?
4. How do commuting experiences after work affect students' physical conditions, emotional well-being and academic engagement?
5. What common meanings and essences emerge from the commuting experiences of working criminology students as they navigate work, study, and survival in an urban setting?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the lived commuting experiences of working criminology students in Metro-Manila. Phenomenology was selected because this study sought to capture the essence of participants' subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations of commuting after work within the context

of balancing employment and academic responsibilities. Guided by Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological framework, this study focused on uncovering the fundamental structure of the phenomenon rather than testing hypotheses or measuring predefined variables. This approach is appropriate for examining underexplored lived realities in complex social and urban environments.

Research Locale

The study was conducted at a private higher education institution in Metro Manila that offers a Bachelor of Science in Criminology program. The institution was selected because of its substantial population of working students who regularly commute from their workplaces to attend evening or post-work classes. Metro Manila's dense urban mobility context—characterized by traffic congestion, long travel times, and public transportation dependency—provided a relevant setting for examining the intersection of work, commuting, and academic engagement.

Participants and Sampling

Eight (n = 8) working criminology students participated in this study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that all had direct and sustained experience commuting to school after work within Metro Manila. In phenomenological research, the depth of experience is prioritized over numerical representation. The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, which was achieved when no new meanings or thematic insights emerged from subsequent interviews.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were selected based on specific inclusion criteria to ensure direct and sustained engagement with the phenomena under investigation. Eligible participants were currently enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Criminology program, employed either part-time or full-time, and regularly commuted to school after work within Metro Manila. In addition, participants were required to provide informed consent and demonstrate their willingness to share their lived experiences openly during the interview process. These criteria ensured experiential richness, relevance, and alignment with the study's focus on understanding the commuting realities of working criminology student.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by an interview protocol developed by the researcher. The interview guide was designed to elicit rich, reflective narratives while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions based on the participants' responses. The core questions explored commuting experiences after work, safety-related concerns, coping mechanisms, and the physical, emotional, and academic effects of daily mobility. Prior to implementation, qualitative research experts reviewed the interview guide to ensure clarity, content relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives.

Before data collection, formal permission was obtained from the appropriate institutional authority. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality safeguards, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on the availability of the participants. Each session lasted approximately 30–60 min and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Field notes were documented to capture the nonverbal cues and contextual observations. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve their linguistic accuracy and depth.

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method. The analytic process involved repeated reading of transcripts to achieve immersion, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of emergent themes, and development of an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. The fundamental structure of the participants lived experiences was then synthesized.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured by establishing qualitative rigor. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement, member checking, and accurate transcription of interviews. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting the research procedures and analytical decisions. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling to minimize researcher bias and ensure that the findings were grounded in participants' narratives. Transferability was supported through thick descriptions of the participants and research context, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings.

Results and Discussion

Presents the findings of the study derived from the demographic profile, work conditions, and commuting characteristics of the participants, followed by the thematic analysis of their lived experiences. Descriptive results are first presented to contextualize the participants' backgrounds and commuting realities within Metro Manila's urban mobility environment.

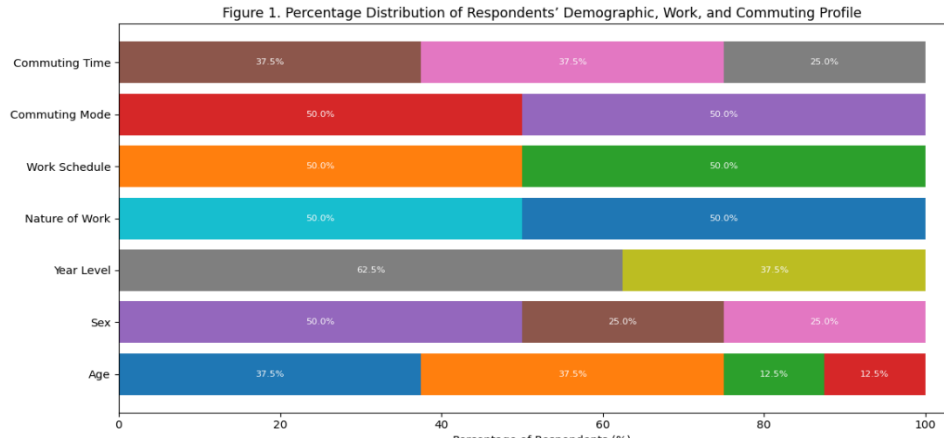

Figure 1. Demographic, Work, and Commuting Profile of the Respondents

Figure 1 shows the percentage distribution of respondents' demographic characteristics, work conditions, and commuting patterns. In terms of age, respondents were mainly 20 years old (37.5%) and 22 years old (37.5%), while those aged 21 and 23 years old comprised 12.5% of the sample. Regarding sex, half of the respondents identified as male (50.0%), followed by female (25.0%), and other gender identification (25.0%). Most respondents were in their third year of study (62.5%), with the remaining 37.5% in their second year. Regarding employment, respondents were evenly distributed between food delivery work (50.0%) and fast-food service (50.0%). Work schedules were equally split between rotating or flexible schedules (50.0%) and night shift work (50.0%). In terms of commuting mode, respondents reported equal reliance on motorcycles (50.0%) and jeepneys (50.0%). Finally, commuting time from work to school was reported as less than 30 minutes by 37.5% of respondents, 1–2 hours by 37.5%, and 30–60 minutes by 25.0%, reflecting the varying mobility demands of working students.

Thematic Analysis

Constant Struggle Against Time Pressure

Codes: *time scarcity*, *always rushing*, *conflict between work and school*, *sacrificed personal time*
Participants consistently described their daily commutes as struggles marked by severe time constraints. Many expressed feeling rushed as they transitioned from work responsibilities to academic obligations. The pressure to meet both work and school demands results in sacrificing personal care and social interactions.

"Always gahol sa time." (P3)
"Laging nagmamadali sa oras." (P4)
"Wala na time minsan mag-ayos sa sarili." (P6)
"Wala ng barkada time, need maghanap-buhay." (P7)

Participants' descriptions of commuting as a daily struggle with severe time constraints align with research that frames commuting as a significant work-related demand contributing to work-family conflict. Commuting imposes time-based strain, limiting individuals' flexibility and increasing boundary conflicts between work and personal domains. Longer commute times are associated with increased challenges in managing the transition between work responsibilities and other life areas, such as school or family duties (Elfering et al., 2020). This scarcity results in participants feeling constantly rushed, mirroring findings that commuting reduces available leisure and personal time, which, in turn, negatively impacts life satisfaction and well-being (Chairassamee et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2022).

The conflict between work and school commitments during the commute creates a compounding form of time pressure that often forces individuals to sacrifice personal care and social interaction. This self-sacrifice under dual demands appears to be a common consequence of individuals allocating limited time to fulfill competing obligations. The sacrifice of personal time aligns with evidence from various settings indicating that long commutes exacerbate time poverty, particularly among individuals balancing employment with additional responsibilities, thereby limiting their time for leisure, recovery, and socializing (Carmichael et al., 2024). Studies also suggest that these time pressures contribute to emotional exhaustion driven by work-family conflict unless moderated by factors such as a strong self-sacrificing disposition or perceived meaningfulness in work or school roles (Mostafa, 2021). Without such buffers, the continuous rush and inability to recover during personal time may heighten stress and reduce the overall well-being.

Heightened Vigilance and Safety Consciousness

Codes: *constant alertness*, *perceived risk*, *prayer as coping*, *traffic-related danger*
Participants reported heightened awareness and caution during their commutes, which was driven by safety and environmental risks. Their narratives revealed a constant need to remain alert, particularly because of traffic congestion, financial vulnerability, and exposure to urban risks.

"Laging alisto." (P1)
"Pray before go to work." (P3)
"Napaka-traffic." (P4)
"Hazard lagi." (P1)

Participants' narratives of constant alertness during their commute reflected a pervasive state of heightened vigilance necessitated by perceived environmental risks and traffic-related dangers. Such vigilance aligns with neurocognitive research demonstrating that individuals engaged in vigilant coping show increased monitoring and attentional processing of threats, which may be adaptive responses to urban hazards and traffic congestion (Günther et al., 2022). The consistent need to maintain alertness suggests a cognitive workload associated with navigating complex and potentially hazardous environments during driving. Perceived commuting risk amplifies stress, which participants reportedly mitigated through prayer as a coping strategy. Prayer as a spiritual coping strategy is supported by evidence indicating that religious and spiritual involvement can buffer stress and adverse physiological effects, although its effects may vary depending on the connection and strength of faith (Cozier et al., 2018; Wnuk, 2023). Importantly, prayer provides psychological resilience by fostering a sense of control or comfort amid uncontrollable external dangers, such as traffic risk and financial vulnerability encountered during commuting. Furthermore, the risks associated with traffic, including exposure to accidents or urban hazards, are recognized concerns that require constant cognitive and behavioral adaptation to avoid accidents (Coles & Hirschboeck, 2020). These dangers foster a coping environment in which maintaining vigilance is essential for their safety. Collectively, these findings illustrate that daily commutes under risk-laden urban traffic conditions engender continuous alertness and psychological coping through prayer, underscoring the interplay between cognitive vigilance and spiritual resilience in managing stressors.

Criminology Training as a Source of Discipline and Adaptation

Codes: *discipline*, *situational awareness*, *behavioral regulation*, *adaptive coping*
Participants indicated that their criminology education influenced their management of commuting issues. Training in discipline, social awareness, and behavioral control helped them adapt to stressful situations and interact effectively with others during travel.

"Disiplinado, pakikisama, may isang salita." (P7)
"Marunong mag-adjust." (P3)
"Palakaibigan at behave." (P4)

Participants' assertion that their criminology education shaped how they managed commuting challenges aligns with the established literature emphasizing the role of discipline, situational awareness, and behavioral regulation in adaptive coping processes. Criminology training cultivates structured thinking, heightened social awareness, and behavioral control—competencies transferable to navigating dynamic and potentially stressful commuting environments (Coetzee et al., 2025). Such professional formation strengthens self-regulation, enabling individuals to modulate emotional responses, assess risks more critically, and adjust their behavior appropriately in response to situational demands encountered during travel. This interpretation is consistent with broader research demonstrating that enhanced self-regulation and mindfulness are associated with greater reliance on problem-focused coping and reduced dependence on maladaptive strategies when confronting stressors (De La Fuente et al., 2018). Moreover, instructional experiences have been shown to

significantly influence students' competence and readiness to apply learned skills in real-world contexts (Anselmo et al., 2025), suggesting that academic preparation extends beyond theoretical knowledge to embodied practice. Training that develops situational awareness—the conscious understanding of environmental elements and their interactions—further enhances individuals' capacity to respond effectively to rapidly changing conditions (Feller et al. 2023). In this study, criminology education appears to function as a mediating resource, equipping students with adaptive cognitive and behavioral tools that foster resilience, improve situational appraisal, and facilitate smoother social interactions within uncertainty-laden commuting routines.

Physical Exhaustion and Academic Compromise

Codes: *sleep deprivation*, *fatigue*, *reduced academic performance*, *compensatory effort*
Participants commonly reported physical exhaustion and emotional strain resulting from prolonged working hours and commuting. Fatigue negatively affected their academic performance, although many attempted to compensate for it by increasing their efforts in other tasks.

"Puyat lagi." (P4)
"Inaantok sa klase lagi at laging gutom." (P5)
"Minsan bagsak sa exam pero nakakabawi din." (P1)
"Mababa ang exam pero bawi sa recitation." (P6)

Participants' accounts of physical exhaustion and emotional strain resulting from extended work hours and post-work commuting are consistent with a substantial body of evidence linking sleep deprivation and fatigue to diminished cognitive and academic functioning. Sleep deprivation disrupts core cognitive processes, including sustained attention, response speed, and sensorimotor coordination, thereby undermining academic performance, as observed in students during high-stakes assessments (Janocha et al., 2023). Fatigue further intensifies subjective perceptions of effort and mental exhaustion, reducing sustained engagement, and impairing learning efficiency (Cullen et al., 2019). Empirical findings also demonstrate that inadequate sleep contributes to vigilance decrements and compromised information-processing capacity, thereby increasing task difficulty and reducing academic precision (Patterson et al., 2019). Although individuals often attempt to compensate for this through heightened cognitive effort, such strategies consume limited mental resources and may not be sustainable under prolonged strain (Sullan et al., 2020). As fatigue accumulates, the accuracy and response time inevitably decline, reflecting the physiological limits of compensatory regulation. These findings parallel qualitative evidence suggesting that sustained role demands and institutional pressures contribute to psychological and emotional strain in educational contexts (Anselmo & Anselmo, 2024). Taken together, the convergence of sleep deprivation, emotional burden, and cognitive overload illustrates how combined work and commuting responsibilities compromise the mental functions that are essential for academic performance. Although compensatory efforts may temporarily buffer these effects, they cannot fully offset the cumulative impact of chronic exhaustion (Janocha et al., 2023; Patterson et al., 2019).

Essence of the Phenomenon

Following Colaizzi's phenomenological analysis, the fundamental structure of commuting among criminology students in Metro Manila is marked by persistent time pressure, heightened vigilance, disciplined adaptation, and cumulative physical exhaustion. Commuting is not merely perceived as movement between work and school but as a critical lived space where academic demands, employment responsibilities, safety concerns, and survival need continuously converge. Consistent with prior research, prolonged and demanding commutes intensify role strain and time scarcity, compelling students to sacrifice personal time, social life, and recovery to sustain work and study commitments (Carmichael et al., 2020; Carmichael et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2022).

Within this constrained context, students demonstrate heightened situational awareness and vigilance, which are shaped by their exposure to traffic risks, urban hazards, and financial vulnerability. Spiritual coping, particularly prayer, functions as a stabilizing response that supports psychological resilience in the face of uncertainty (Cozier et al., 2018; Wnuk 2023). Criminology training further mediates this experience by fostering discipline, behavioral regulation, and adaptive coping, enabling students to manage stress and navigate commuting challenges effectively (De La Fuente et al., 2018; Feller et al., 2023). Despite these adaptive strategies, chronic fatigue and sleep deprivation compromise academic focus and performance, prompting compensatory efforts that remain limited in the face of sustained exhaustion (Janocha et al., 2023; Sullan et al., 2020). Overall, the essence of the phenomenon reflects endurance through adaptation, wherein commuting becomes a defining condition that shapes students' well-being, learning, and identity as working criminology students.

Discussion

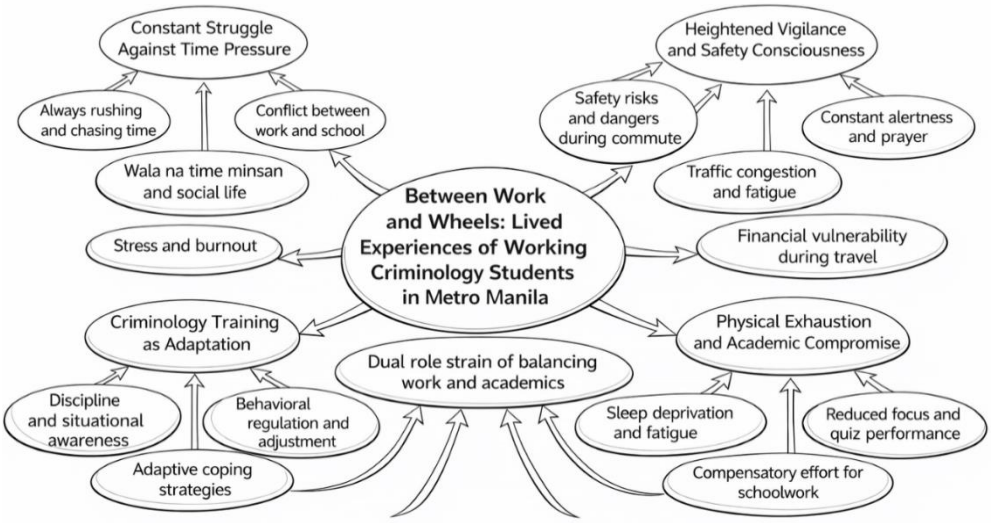

Figure 2: Conceptual Synthesis of the Lived Commuting Experiences of Working Criminology Students

Figure 2 synthesizes the lived commuting experiences of working criminology students, illustrating how time pressure, safety vigilance, criminology-informed adaptation, and cumulative physical exhaustion dynamically interact to shape students' academic engagement and overall well-being. Rather than operating as isolated stressors, these elements form an interconnected system in which commuting functions as a central mediating context between employment and education. This integrative perspective reinforces the study's central argument that commuting is not a neutral transition between roles but a structurally demanding condition that continuously influences students' learning processes, health, and emerging professional identity. As depicted in Figure 2, persistent time pressure emerged as a foundational constraint in structuring students' daily routines. The combination of work schedules and commuting demands compresses available time, compelling students to rush through activities, compromise self-care, and reduce their social interactions. This pattern aligns with scholarship conceptualizing commuting as a time-based demand that exacerbizes role conflict and time poverty among working individuals (Carmichael et al., 2020; Carmichael et al., 2024). Simultaneously, students' ability to navigate these constraints reflects the exercise of critical thinking, adaptability, and self-regulation—competencies increasingly emphasized across higher education disciplines as essential 21st-century skills (Anselmo et al., 2025). However, from a criminology education perspective, this highlights a significant policy gap: institutional academic expectations often fail to account for the structural time limitations confronting working students enrolled in demanding professional programs. While students demonstrate resilience and adaptive competence, reliance on individual coping should not substitute systemic academic support and mobility-sensitive policies.

Figure 2 highlights increased vigilance and safety awareness as key aspects of students' commuting experiences. Exposure to traffic congestion, environmental hazards, and financial vulnerabilities necessitates continuous alertness, thereby adding cognitive and emotional strain beyond academic demands. This constant vigilance aligns with evidence indicating that navigating risk-laden urban environments elevates cognitive load and stress (Coles and Hirschboeck, 2022; Coles and Hirschboeck, 2020). In criminology education, these findings suggest that students lived exposure to risk extends beyond theoretical instruction and may influence their perceptions of safety, law enforcement, and vulnerability. Educational policies should recognize commuting as an experiential extension of criminology training, rather than as an external factor unrelated to learning. Furthermore, it illustrates the moderating role of criminology training in facilitating adaptive coping strategies for police officers. Discipline, situational awareness, and behavioral regulation—competencies emphasized in criminology curricula—are employed by students to manage commuting challenges. This supports the literature indicating that self-regulation and situational awareness skills enhance adaptive coping in high-demand contexts (De La Fuente et al., 2018; Feller et al., 2023). However, while these competencies foster resilience, they should not be presumed to fully offset the structural stressors. Relying solely on students' adaptive capacity risks normalizing excessive burdens rather than addressing systemic constraints.

Despite adaptive strategies, physical exhaustion and academic compromise remain persistent outcomes (Figure 2). Chronic fatigue and sleep deprivation impair focus, examination performance, and classroom participation, prompting compensatory efforts. This pattern aligns with evidence linking sleep deprivation to reduced cognitive functioning and the

limited sustainability of compensatory strategies (Janocha et al., 2023; Sullan et al., 2020). These findings underscore the need for criminology programs to adopt student-centered support policies, such as flexible scheduling, workload adjustments, and access to wellness and counseling services tailored to the needs of working students. Overall, Figure 2 positions commuting as a critical educational concern rather than a peripheral issue. These findings call for criminology education policies that integrate academic rigor with structural support, recognizing commuting as a determinant of student well-being and learning quality. By aligning curricular demands with realistic student conditions, institutions can better support the persistence, safety, and professional development of working criminology students.

Conclusion and Implications

This phenomenological study reveals that commuting is not merely a transition between work and school but a defining lived condition that shapes the academic engagement, resilience, and well-being of working criminology students in Metro Manila. Persistent time pressure, heightened vigilance toward urban risks, criminology-informed discipline, and cumulative physical exhaustion intersect to influence students' daily functioning and their academic performance. While criminology training fosters situational awareness and adaptive coping that help students navigate traffic dangers and social uncertainties, these individual competencies cannot fully compensate for structural burdens, such as long working hours, congestion, and sleep deprivation. The findings position commuting as a significant educational determinant that institutions must recognize in student support frameworks. Criminology programs should adopt flexible scheduling, context-sensitive workload management, and targeted wellness services to support working students, without compromising academic standards. Faculty members are encouraged to integrate empathetic pedagogical approaches that acknowledge commuting-related constraints while maintaining academic rigor. Addressing commuting as part of students' academic ecology is essential for promoting persistence, equity, and sustainable professional formation in criminology education.

In light of these findings, criminology education institutions should adopt student-centered academic policies that acknowledge the realities of working students, including flexible scheduling, considerate workload management, and access to targeted wellness and counseling services. Faculty members should employ empathetic instructional practices that recognize commuting-related constraints while maintaining academic rigor and integrating students' real-world risk and coping experiences into criminology instruction. Policymakers and student support services should strengthen institutional mechanisms that holistically address commuting-related stressors. Future research should extend this phenomenological inquiry across disciplines and institutional contexts and explore policy-level interventions that effectively support working students navigating the intersections of employment, mobility and higher education.

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known financial conflicts of interest or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Data Availability Statement

Access to the data utilized in this research can be obtained by submitting a formal request to the author of the study.

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Appendices

No appendices are included in this article