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## Mapping the deterrence affordance of the plea-bargaining culture among selected drug cases in Biñan and Calamba

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### Abstract

**Aim:** This study aimed to assess the level of awareness of plea bargaining and the perception of its deterrent effects among Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDL) charged with drug-related offenses in Biñan and Calamba City, Philippines. It examined how awareness of plea bargaining influences perceptions of fairness, voluntariness, judicial oversight, and punishment within the criminal justice system.

**Methodology:** A quantitative, descriptive-comparative research design was employed using a structured questionnaire administered to a purposive sample of 106 PDL respondents from Biñan and Calamba City jails. Guided by Deterrence Theory, Rational Choice Theory, and Social Learning Theory, the study analyzed respondents' awareness of plea bargaining and their perceptions of the certainty, severity, and swiftness of punishment. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Mann-Whitney U tests, and Spearman's rank-order correlation.

**Results:** Findings revealed a high level of awareness of plea bargaining among respondents, particularly in terms of fairness, voluntariness, judicial approval, rights protection, and enforcement. Respondents strongly agreed that plea bargaining facilitates timely, certain, and proportionate punishment. Significant differences in awareness were observed between Biñan and Calamba respondents, indicating the influence of institutional and geographic factors. A strong and statistically significant positive correlation was found between awareness of plea bargaining and perceived deterrent effects.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that greater awareness of plea bargaining enhances PDL perceptions of its fairness, legitimacy, and deterrent function in drug-related cases. The findings underscore the importance of strengthening legal literacy and ensuring consistent implementation of plea bargaining practices across detention facilities to promote equity and informed decision-making within the criminal justice system.

**Keywords:** *plea bargaining, deterrence, legal awareness, Persons Deprived of Liberty, BJMP policy*

### INTRODUCTION

Plea bargaining has emerged as a global criminal justice mechanism aimed at addressing persistent challenges such as court congestion, prolonged pretrial detention, and limited judicial resources. Across various jurisdictions, negotiated pleas have increasingly replaced full adversarial trials, reshaping how criminal responsibility, punishment, and efficiency are balanced within justice systems. While widely adopted for pragmatic reasons, plea bargaining has also generated debate regarding its implications for deterrence, fairness, voluntariness, and the protection of accused persons' rights.

In the Philippine criminal justice system, plea bargaining has become particularly significant in drug-related cases, where delays in adjudication and jail congestion remain longstanding concerns. The Supreme Court's issuance of guidelines allowing negotiated pleas for selected offenses under Republic Act No. 9165 marked a policy shift intended to expedite case resolution and reduce overcrowding in detention facilities. However, this development has raised critical questions about whether negotiated penalties may alter offenders' perceptions of the certainty, severity, and swiftness of punishment the key elements of deterrence (Ciocchini & Lamchek, 2023). While law



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enforcement and judicial institutions acknowledge the administrative benefits of plea bargaining, concerns persist that its perceived leniency may weaken the deterrent objectives of drug laws.

These issues are particularly evident at the local level in Laguna, where the cities of Biñan and Calamba continue to experience drug-related offenses alongside heavy court dockets. Local trial courts frequently utilize plea bargaining to manage case volume and promote jail decongestion. However, emerging observations suggest that some offenders may come to view plea bargaining as an expected relief mechanism rather than an exceptional legal remedy, potentially reshaping how risks and consequences associated with drug offenses are interpreted.

Despite the expanding use of plea bargaining, empirical research remains limited on how Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDL) themselves understand and perceive this legal mechanism, particularly at the detention-facility level. Existing studies have largely focused on legal doctrine, judicial discretion, prosecutorial practices, and policy outcomes, with minimal attention to the awareness, perceptions, and decision-making frameworks of accused persons. More specifically, there is a lack of localized, comparative studies examining how PDL awareness of plea bargaining relates to perceptions of fairness, voluntariness, judicial oversight, rights protection, and deterrence.

Addressing this gap, the present study examined the level of awareness of plea bargaining and perceptions of its deterrent dimension among PDL charged with drug-related offenses in Biñan and Calamba City. Awareness was assessed in terms of agreement, voluntariness, judicial approval, rights involved, and enforcement, while deterrence was examined through perceptions of certainty, severity, and swiftness of punishment. By linking legal awareness to perceived deterrent effects within jail-based contexts, this study contributes empirical evidence to deterrence scholarship and offers localized insights relevant to policy implementation, legal education, and the administration of justice within Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) facilities.

### Review of Related Literature and Studies

Global scholarship shows that plea bargaining has reshaped criminal justice systems worldwide, replacing traditional trials with negotiated resolutions (Langer, 2021). Its application across jurisdictions varies, reflecting institutional, cultural, and procedural differences. In Singapore, plea negotiations occur through structured mechanisms such as the Criminal Case Management Scheme and Criminal Case Resolution program, where judicial involvement is intentionally facilitative to avoid coercion (The Law Library of Congress, 2020). Similar reforms are observed in other Asian jurisdictions: Indonesia has explored abbreviated proceedings for defendants who admit guilt to reduce case backlogs and costs (Husin & Husin, 2024; Hakim & Zulhuda, 2020), while Japan introduced a cooperation-based plea bargaining system in 2019 that grants prosecutorial benefits in exchange for aiding investigations (Kawatsu, 2021). These reforms highlight how legal cultures shape the internalization of justice mechanisms, consistent with emerging perspectives on how law and culture influence one another (Stępień & Klakla, 2022). Ghaleb's (2024) concept of "legaculturation" further explains this interplay, illustrating how legal norms become embedded in social practices and public behavior.

Deterrence literature underscores the role of certainty, celerity, and severity in shaping compliance with law; however, scholars argue that punishment severity alone does not consistently deter crime, as social, institutional, and behavioral factors also intervene (Nagin, 2013; Hydén, 2023; Hellgren & Kassin, 2022). Optimal deterrence theory reframes offending as rational behavior influenced by perceived costs and benefits, suggesting that responses to law violations depend on individual decision-making vis-à-vis state sanctions (Raskolnikov, 2021; Paternoster, 2010). At the global level, jurisdictions differ significantly in how they formalize and utilize plea bargaining, with economic, cultural, and procedural factors influencing adoption and negotiation outcomes (Paolini et al., 2023). Studies in India similarly highlight that plea bargaining addresses excessive trial delays and incarceration but remains uneven in practice due to structural and procedural limitations (Jeevalaya, 2018). Research on criminal deterrence further reveals that while police presence and socioeconomic conditions influence crime reduction, punishment severity shows inconsistent effects across contexts (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017). Complementary analyses emphasize that plea negotiation systems require strong safeguards to preserve accused persons' rights, ensuring voluntariness, informed consent, and fairness (Kisekka, 2020).

In the Philippines, plea bargaining under Republic Act 9165 continues to evolve, particularly after the 2018 Supreme Court guidelines that restricted negotiations to less severe drug offenses. While designed to expedite resolution and reduce congestion in detention facilities (Chi, 2023), the policy intersects with broader political and punitive contexts. The Duterte administration's "War on Drugs" significantly shaped how plea bargaining was used, especially as the campaign disproportionately targeted the poor and generated widespread concerns over extrajudicial killings and systemic bias (Johnson & Fernquest, 2018). Empirical studies show that legal professionals' moral judgments and class-based assumptions heavily influenced plea outcomes, often reinforcing inequalities within



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the justice process (Ciocchini & Lamchek, 2023; Thompson, 2020). Further, punitive paternalism emerged as a framework that rationalized state violence while channeling defendants toward plea agreements without fully addressing structural injustices (Ciocchini, 2024). Despite these challenges, local scholarship identifies the potential of plea bargaining to facilitate rehabilitation, particularly through alternatives such as drug treatment and community-based reintegration programs (Balana & De Leon, 2024; Canoy & Villasanta, 2022). Broader policy discussions on drug enforcement in the Philippines similarly highlight the limitations of punitive approaches and call for rights-centered, evidence-based reforms (Estacio et al., 2022; Lasco & Yarcia, 2022).

**Theoretical Framework**

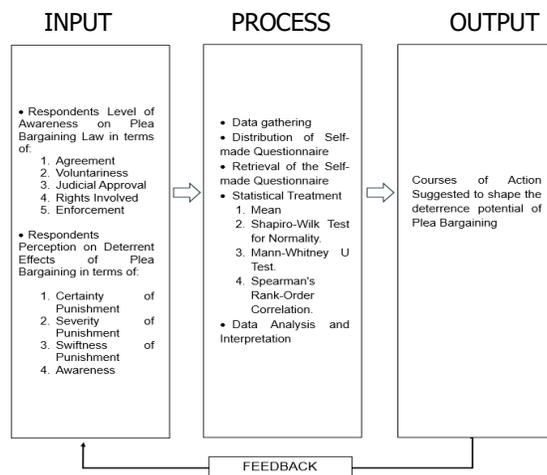
This research was grounded in Deterrence Theory, Rational Choice Theory, and Social Learning Theory, which together provided a framework for understanding both individual decision-making and social influences on persons involved in drug-related cases subject to plea bargaining. Deterrence Theory asserts that the likelihood of punishment deters criminal behavior when sanctions are perceived as certain, swift, and proportionate (Beccaria, 1764/1995; Paternoster, 2010), it guided the examination of respondents’ perceptions of the certainty, severity, and swiftness of sanctions under plea bargaining. Rational Choice Theory posits that individuals make decisions through a cost-benefit analysis (Cornish & Clarke, 1986), informing the assessment of how PDL weighed risks and benefits of entering plea agreements, particularly regarding reduced penalties and expedited case resolution. Social Learning Theory emphasizes that behaviors and attitudes are shaped through observation and social interaction (Bandura, 1977; Akers, 2009); in this study, it explained how respondents’ perceptions were influenced by observing the experiences of fellow detainees and courtroom outcomes. Collectively, these frameworks guided the selection of study variables and informed the analysis of how awareness, rational evaluation, and social learning interact to shape perceptions of plea bargaining’s deterrent effects.

**Conceptual Framework**

This research utilized the Input-Process-Output (IPO) model which was inspired by the three key theories. The input phase of the study could be identified as the respondents’ knowledge of the plea bargaining law that included six areas: agreement, voluntariness, judicial approval, rights, and enforcement, and their perceptions of the law’s deterrence in terms of certainty, severity, swiftness, and awareness. The main method of data collection was survey questionnaires.

Administering the survey, counting the responses, and performing statistical analysis to find out if there were significant differences in the awareness and perceptions of the groups were the main steps of the process. Firstly, data normality was checked using the Shapiro-Wilk test; if the normality assumption was not satisfied, non-parametric tests such as Mann-Whitney U Test and Spearman’s Rank-Order Correlation were used for comparing and relating deterrent perceptions and awareness.

The analysis of findings was part of the last phase of the research, and recommendations regarding plea bargaining were given to the authorities to boost its deterrent effect based on the knowledge of and the perception about its efficacy.





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### Statement of the Problem

Plea bargaining has become a central mechanism in resolving drug-related cases in the Philippines, particularly under A.M. No. 18-03-16-SC. Despite its increasing use, uncertainties remain regarding the extent to which Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDL) understand the plea-bargaining process and whether such awareness influences their perceptions of its deterrent value. Variations in institutional practices and access to legal information across detention facilities may further shape how PDL perceive fairness, voluntariness, judicial oversight, and the protection of rights. Moreover, perceptions regarding the certainty, severity, and swiftness of punishment associated with plea bargaining remain insufficiently documented. Limited empirical evidence comparing these factors across local contexts underscores a gap in understanding how awareness interacts with deterrence perceptions. Addressing this gap is necessary to inform policy development, strengthen legal education programs, and enhance the legitimacy and deterrent function of plea bargaining in drug-related cases.

### Research Objectives

#### General Objective:

This study aims to assess the level of awareness of plea bargaining and the perception of its deterrent effects among selected drug cases in Bifian and Calamba.

#### Specific Objectives:

1. To determine the level of awareness of respondents regarding the plea-bargaining law in terms of:
  - 1.1. agreement;
  - 1.2. voluntariness;
  - 1.3. judicial approval;
  - 1.4. rights involved; and
  - 1.5. enforcement.
2. To determine whether there is a significant difference in respondents' awareness of the plea-bargaining law between the two groups.
3. To assess respondents' perceptions of the deterrent effects of the plea-bargaining law in terms of:
  - 3.1. certainty of punishment;
  - 3.2. severity of punishment;
  - 3.3. swiftness of punishment; and
  - 3.4. awareness.
4. To determine whether there is a significant difference in respondents' perceptions of the deterrent effects of the plea-bargaining law between the two groups.
5. To examine the relationship between respondents' level of awareness of the plea-bargaining law and their perceived deterrent effects.
6. To propose recommendations to enhance the deterrent potential of the plea-bargaining law based on the study's findings.

### Research Questions

1. What is the level of awareness of respondents regarding the plea-bargaining law in terms of:
  - 1.1. agreement;
  - 1.2. voluntariness;
  - 1.3. judicial approval;
  - 1.4. rights involved; and
  - 1.5. enforcement?
2. Is there a significant difference in respondents' awareness of the plea-bargaining law between the two groups?
3. What are the respondents' perceptions of the deterrent effects of the plea-bargaining law in terms of:
  - 3.1. certainty of punishment;
  - 3.2. severity of punishment;



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- 3.3. swiftness of punishment; and
- 3.4. awareness?
4. Is there a significant difference in respondents' perceptions of the deterrent effects of the plea-bargaining law between the two groups?
5. Is there a significant relationship between respondents' level of awareness of the plea-bargaining law and their perceived deterrent effects?
6. Based on the results, what recommendations may be proposed to enhance the deterrent potential of plea bargaining?

## Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

- $H_0$  (Null Hypothesis):

There is no significant relationship between the respondents' level of awareness of the plea bargaining law and their perceived deterrent effects of plea bargaining in selected drug cases.

- $H_a$  (Alternative Hypothesis):

There is a significant relationship between the respondents' level of awareness of the plea bargaining law and their perceived deterrent effects of plea bargaining in selected drug cases.

## METHODS

### Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, descriptive-comparative design. It compared the levels of awareness of plea bargaining and perceptions of its deterrent effects among two groups of Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDL): those who accepted plea bargaining and those who merely applied for it. The study was cross-sectional in nature and was conducted in May 2025, capturing respondents' knowledge and perceptions at a single point in time. This design was appropriate as it enabled the assessment of group differences without manipulating variables, thereby providing a clear depiction of respondents' knowledge and perceptions in a natural setting.

### Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of 106 PDL charged with drug-related offenses and confined in the Biñan City Jail ( $n = 59$ ) and Calamba City Jail ( $n = 47$ ). Participants were either beneficiaries or applicants of plea bargaining under A.M. No. 18-03-16-SC (Plea Bargaining Framework for Drug Cases). Purposive sampling was employed, selecting respondents who (1) were charged with drug-related offenses and (2) had participated in plea bargaining proceedings. PDL who did not meet these criteria were excluded. A minimum sample size of 85 was determined through statistical power analysis (medium effect size  $r = 0.30$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ , power = 0.80). The final sample exceeded this requirement, ensuring sufficient statistical power for correlation and Mann-Whitney U tests.

### Instruments

The study utilized a researcher-made questionnaire designed to measure the level of awareness of plea bargaining and perceptions of its deterrent effects among PDL. The instrument underwent a content validation process conducted by a subject-matter expert knowledgeable in plea bargaining and a research methodology expert. Their feedback focused on item relevance, clarity, and proper classification of constructs. All recommended revisions were incorporated, and the revised version was subsequently reviewed by the research adviser for grammatical accuracy and content appropriateness.

A pilot test was conducted to evaluate the instrument's reliability. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a coefficient of  $\alpha = 0.973$ , indicating excellent reliability. The instrument development, validation, and reliability testing were completed prior to actual data collection.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section gathered demographic and background information of the respondents. The second section assessed respondents' level of awareness of plea bargaining in terms of agreement, voluntariness, judicial approval, rights involved, and enforcement, using a four-point scale (4 – Very Aware, 3 – Aware, 2 – Less Aware, 1 – Least Aware). The third section measured respondents' perceptions of the deterrent effects of plea bargaining in terms of certainty, severity, and swiftness of punishment using a four-



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point Likert scale (4 – Strongly Agree, 3 – Agree, 2 – Disagree, 1 – Strongly Disagree). Weighted means were interpreted using established verbal interpretation ranges.

To ensure comprehension, the questionnaire was translated for clarity using language-assistance tools, and the final translated version was manually reviewed by the researcher to ensure semantic and contextual accuracy. No automated responses or analyses were generated through these tools.

**Data Collection**

Data collection was conducted within the month of May 2025 at the Calamba City Jail and Biñan City Jail. Prior to data gathering, permission to conduct the study was secured from the BJMP Regional Office CALABARZON, followed by clearance from the respective City Jail Wardens.

Upon approval, the researcher personally administered the questionnaires to the qualified respondents. Clear instructions were provided, and the purpose of the study was explained to ensure respondent understanding and cooperation. Participants were given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire to allow accurate and thoughtful responses.

After completion, all accomplished questionnaires were collected, checked for completeness, and compiled for analysis. The gathered data were prepared for statistical processing and interpretation. Respondent confidentiality was strictly observed, and all information collected was used solely for research purposes.

**Treatment of Data**

Descriptive statistics (mean scores and rankings) summarized awareness levels and perceptions. Normality was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test. Non-parametric methods were applied when data violated normality ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Differences between groups were assessed using the Mann-Whitney U test, and Spearman’s Rank-Order Correlation examined the relationship between awareness and perceived deterrent effects. All analyses were conducted using SPSS to ensure accurate interpretation.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance was obtained from the BJMP Regional Office-CALABARZON, which facilitated coordination with the Calamba and Biñan City Jails. Participants were informed of the study’s purpose, benefits, and risks, and provided written consent. Privacy and confidentiality were guaranteed, and participation was voluntary. The selection of respondents was conducted equitably, and safety measures were observed for both participants and the researcher. Study findings will be shared with relevant stakeholders to inform policy and practice improvements.

**RESULTS and DISCUSSION**

**Table 1**

*Summary of Respondents’ Level of Awareness on Plea Bargaining Law and Its Related Indicators*

Indicators	Overall Mean	Std. Deviation	Verbal Interpretation
Awareness on Plea Bargaining Law	3.69	0.38	Very Aware
Awareness on Voluntariness	3.60	0.41	Very Aware
Awareness on Judicial Approval	3.63	0.40	Very Aware
Awareness on Rights Involved	3.60	0.41	Very Aware
Awareness on Enforcement	3.62	0.45	Very Aware

*Legend:*

*Very aware: 3.26 – 4.00; Aware 2.51 – 3.25;*

*Less Aware: 1.76 – 2.50; Least Aware: 1.00 – 1.75*

Table 1 shows respondents’ awareness of plea-bargaining law. The overall mean was 3.69 (SD = 0.38), indicating a very high level of awareness. Scores across dimensions were also high: voluntariness (M = 3.60, SD = 0.41), judicial approval (M = 3.63, SD = 0.40), rights involved (M = 3.60, SD = 0.41), and enforcement (M = 3.62, SD = 0.45).



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These results indicate that respondents generally understand the plea-bargaining process, recognize their rights, and perceive judicial oversight as fair. Awareness of voluntariness suggests informed decision-making, while judicial approval scores reflect trust in court safeguards. Recognition of rights involved indicates understanding of due process and procedural protections. Minor variations highlight areas where clear communication and legal education may enhance uniform comprehension. These findings align with Respicio (2025) and Canoy and Villasanta (2022), who emphasize the importance of consistent explanation and education to support procedural fairness.

**Table 2**

*Mann-Whitney U Test Comparing Respondents' Awareness of Plea-Bargaining Law between Calamba and Biñan*

Component	Mann-Whitney U	Z	p-value	Interpretation
Agreement	1278	-0.738	0.461	NS
Voluntariness	1139.5	-1.626	0.104	NS
Judicial Approval	1087	-1.987	0.047	S
Rights Involved	944.5	-2.922	0.003	S
Enforcement	1129.5	-1.702	0.089	NS

The Mann-Whitney U test (Table 2) compared awareness between PDL in Calamba and Biñan. Significant differences were observed for judicial approval (U = 1087, p = 0.047) and rights involved (U = 944.5, p = 0.003), while agreement, voluntariness, and enforcement showed no significant differences. Mean ranks were higher in Biñan (94.07) than Calamba (69.69).

This indicates that institutional and geographic factors may influence awareness. Higher scores in Biñan may reflect greater exposure to court processes and access to educational programs, consistent with Dawal et al. (2020) and Ciochini and Lamchek (2023), who note that well-resourced facilities provide more consistent legal and educational programming. Despite differences, both groups displayed comparable understanding of fairness and voluntariness, suggesting core comprehension is maintained across locations.

**Table 3**

*Summary of Findings on Respondents' Perceptions of Plea-Bargaining Law*

Deterrent Effect / Awareness	Mean	Std. Deviation	Verbal Interpretation	Key Insights
Certainty of Punishment	3.63	0.47	Strongly Agree	Promotes fairness and proportionality; some regional disparities exist
Severity of Punishment	3.55	0.58	Strongly Agree	Ensures just yet lighter penalties; judicial oversight prevents leniency
Swiftness of Punishment	3.57	0.57	Strongly Agree	Process perceived as efficient process; expedites the administration of justice
Awareness	3.65	0.50	Strongly Agree	Greater awareness strengthens deterrence and trust in justice system

*Legend:*

*Strongly Agree: 3.26 – 4.00; Agree: 2.51 – 3.25; Disagree: 1.76 – 2.50; Strongly Disagree: 1.00 – 1.75*

Respondents' perceptions of plea-bargaining law were generally positive across all constructs. Means were: certainty of punishment (M = 3.63, SD = 0.47), severity of punishment (M = 3.55, SD = 0.58), swiftness of punishment (M = 3.57, SD = 0.57), and awareness (M = 3.65, SD = 0.50).

These results indicate that respondents perceive plea-bargaining as fair, timely, and transparent. Certainty of punishment suggests trust in proportional consequences, while severity scores reflect acceptance of judicially reviewed, potentially lighter penalties. Swiftness scores indicate that respondents perceive the process as expediting case resolution. Awareness scores suggest that greater knowledge of the law is associated with higher confidence in its fairness and application. Minor variations point to the potential benefit of consistent legal education across facilities.



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**Table 4**

*Mann-Whitney U Test Comparing Respondents' Perception of Plea-Bargaining Law between Calamba and Biñan*

Component	Mann-Whitney U	Z	p-value	Interpretation
Certainty of Punishment	1374	-0.086	0.932	NS
Severity of Punishment	1383	-0.023	0.981	NS
Swiftness of Punishment	1190	-1.387	0.165	NS
Awareness	1081	-2.003	0.045	S

The Mann-Whitney U test compared perceptions between PDL in Calamba and Biñan. Only awareness differed significantly ( $U = 1081, z = -2.003, p = 0.045$ ); certainty, severity, and swiftness of punishment did not differ.

This suggests that overall perceptions are similar across locations, but awareness may be influenced by geographic and institutional contexts, consistent with Zariski (2014). Access to legal information and educational programs may contribute to this difference, highlighting the need for equitable dissemination of procedural knowledge across detention facilities.

**Table 5**

*Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation between Respondents' Awareness of Plea-Bargaining Law and Their Perceived Deterrent Effects of Plea-Bargaining Law*

**Correlations**

		AWARENESS		PERCEPTION	
Spearman's rho	AWARENESS	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.814**	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	
		N	106	106	
	PERCEPTION	Correlation Coefficient	.776**	1.000	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	
		N	106	106	

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Spearman's rank-order correlation showed a very strong positive relationship between awareness and perceived deterrent effects ( $r_s = 0.776, p < 0.01$ ).

This indicates that respondents with higher knowledge of plea-bargaining tend to view it as a more effective deterrent. These findings imply that enhancing legal literacy may strengthen confidence in plea-bargaining as a fair and accountable mechanism, consistent with Edelen (2025). Transparent and accessible legal information may foster more informed perceptions of justice processes.

**Conclusions**

The study indicates that respondents generally perceive plea bargaining as a fair, voluntary, and protective legal mechanism aligned with due process. It is regarded as promoting accountability through certain, proportional, and timely sanctions, reinforcing its deterrent function in the criminal justice system. Observed differences in awareness across facilities suggest the influence of institutional resources and legal culture, while the strong positive correlation between awareness and perception underscores the role of legal literacy in promoting trust and acceptance of plea bargaining.

**Recommendations**

To enhance the perceived fairness and effectiveness of plea bargaining, detention facilities may consider implementing standardized legal and procedural literacy programs, including routine orientations, access to counsel, and paralegal support. Plea bargaining education may also be integrated into existing rehabilitation programs to



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promote consistent understanding among PDL. The judiciary and prosecution may enhance transparency and proportionality in plea negotiations through regular monitoring and communication. Future research may examine how legal education shapes perceptions and attitudes toward plea bargaining, providing evidence to guide policy and best practices within the justice system.

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