

The Threat to Police Legitimacy in New Zealand

The Notion of Synergistic Erosion.

John Buttle

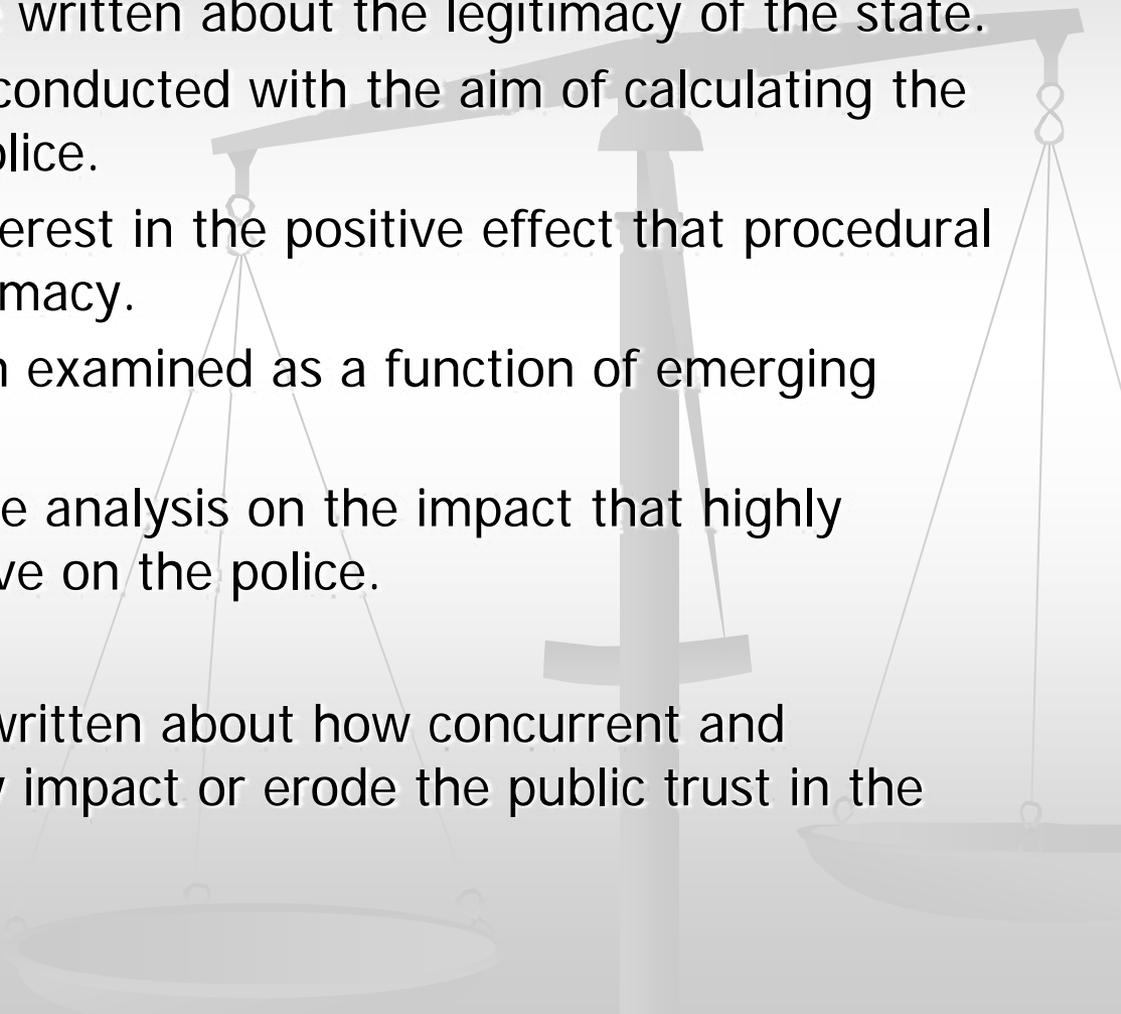
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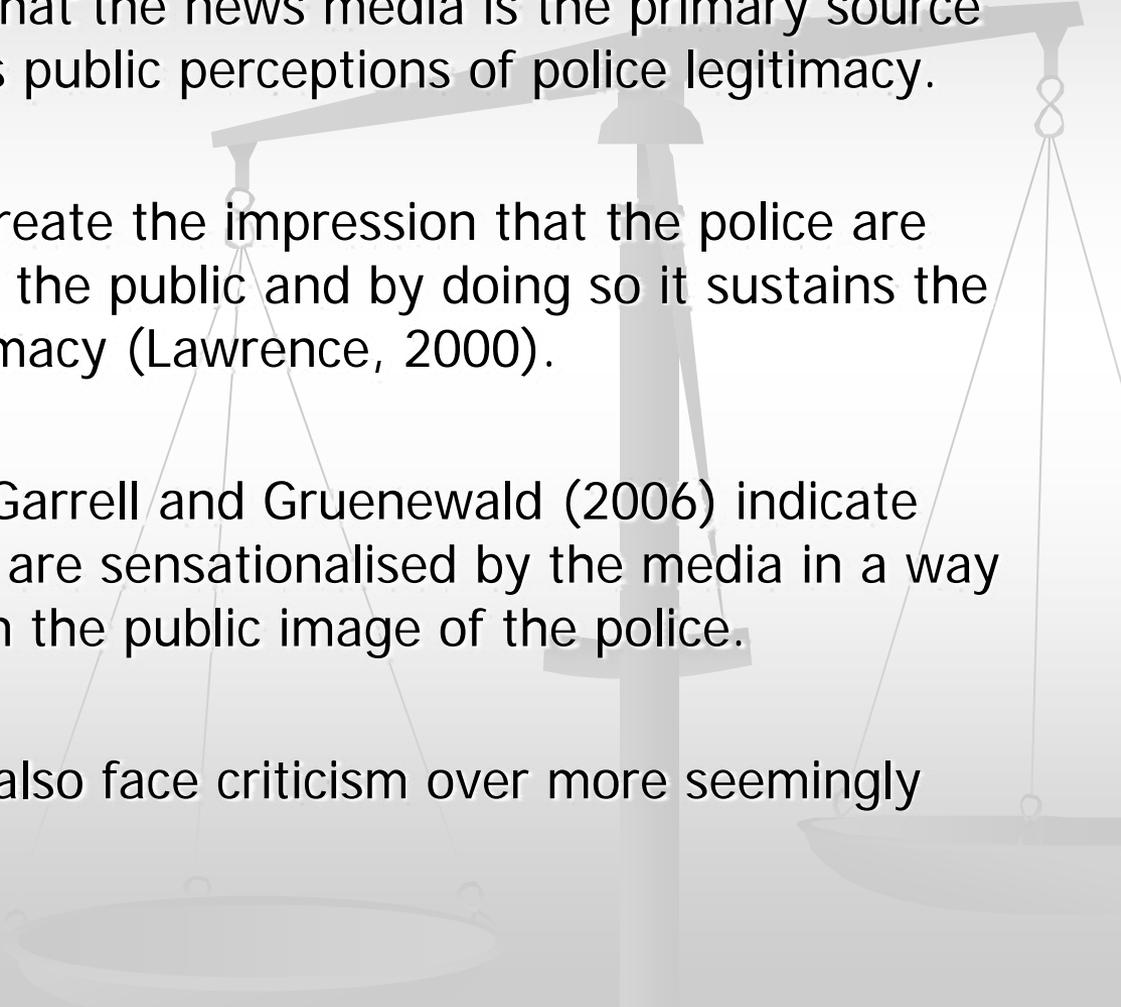
Massey University, New Zealand



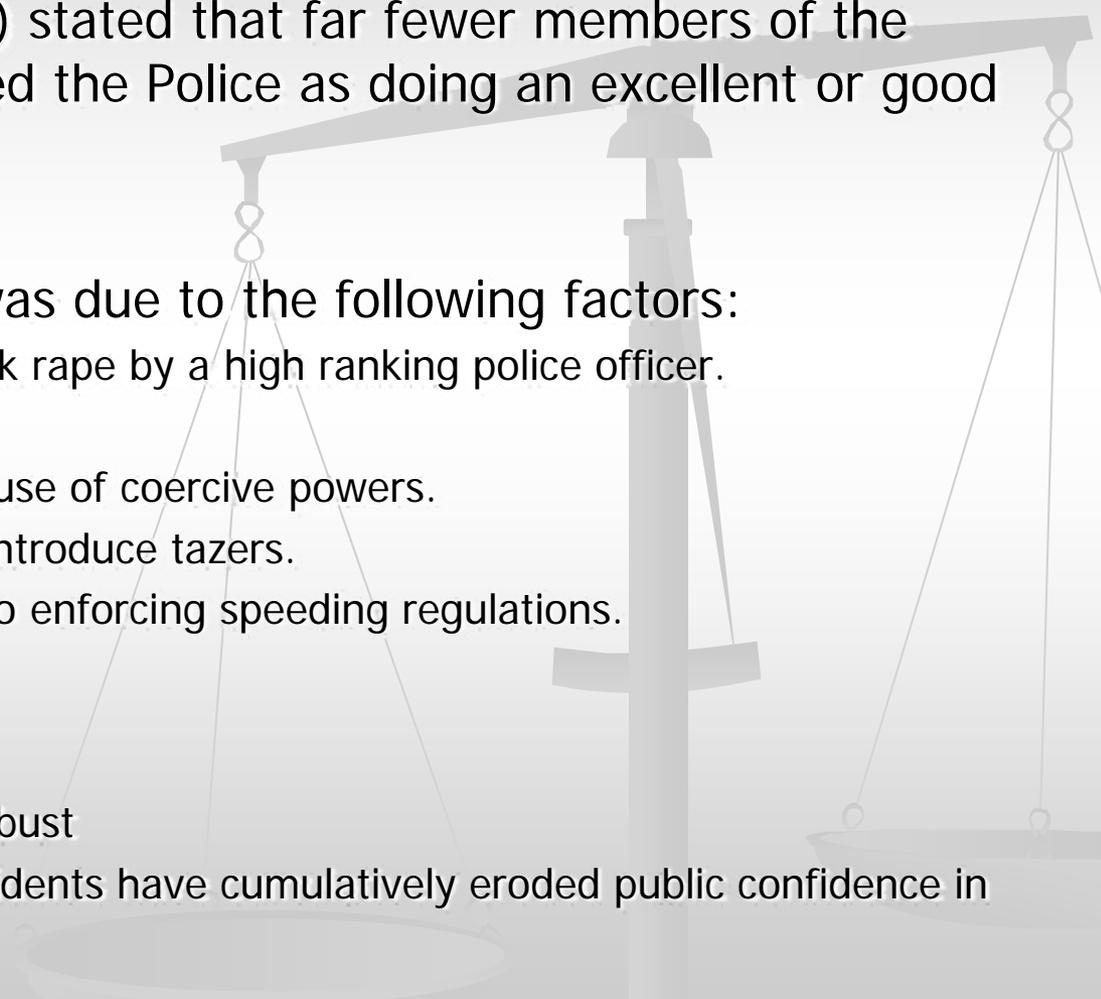
Setting the Scene

- Weber and Beetham have written about the legitimacy of the state.
 - Many surveys have been conducted with the aim of calculating the the public's trust in the police.
 - There has been recent interest in the positive effect that procedural justice has on police legitimacy.
 - Police legitimacy has been examined as a function of emerging states.
 - There has even been some analysis on the impact that highly controversial incidents have on the police.
 - However, little has been written about how concurrent and consecutive incidents may impact or erode the public trust in the police.
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Media Influences

- Surette (1998) indicated that the news media is the primary source of information that affects public perceptions of police legitimacy.
 - The news media acts to create the impression that the police are trustworthy in the eyes of the public and by doing so it sustains the perception of police legitimacy (Lawrence, 2000).
 - Conversely, Chermak, McGarrell and Gruenewald (2006) indicate that high profile incidents are sensationalised by the media in a way that impacts negatively on the public image of the police.
 - However, the police can also face criticism over more seemingly mundane concerns.
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Problems For the New Zealand Police



- ✦ Mayhew and Reilly (2007) stated that far fewer members of the public in 2006 (60%) rated the Police as doing an excellent or good job than in 1999 (74%).
- ✦ This drop in confidence was due to the following factors:
 - ✦ Allegations of historical pack rape by a high ranking police officer.
 - ✦ Botched 111 calls.
 - ✦ Numerous instances of misuse of coercive powers.
 - ✦ Controversy over plans to introduce tazers.
 - ✦ A mean spirited approach to enforcing speeding regulations.
- ✦ This indicates two things
 - ✦ police legitimacy is fairly robust
 - ✦ But nevertheless. these incidents have cumulatively eroded public confidence in the police.

Not all Incidents Have the Same Impact

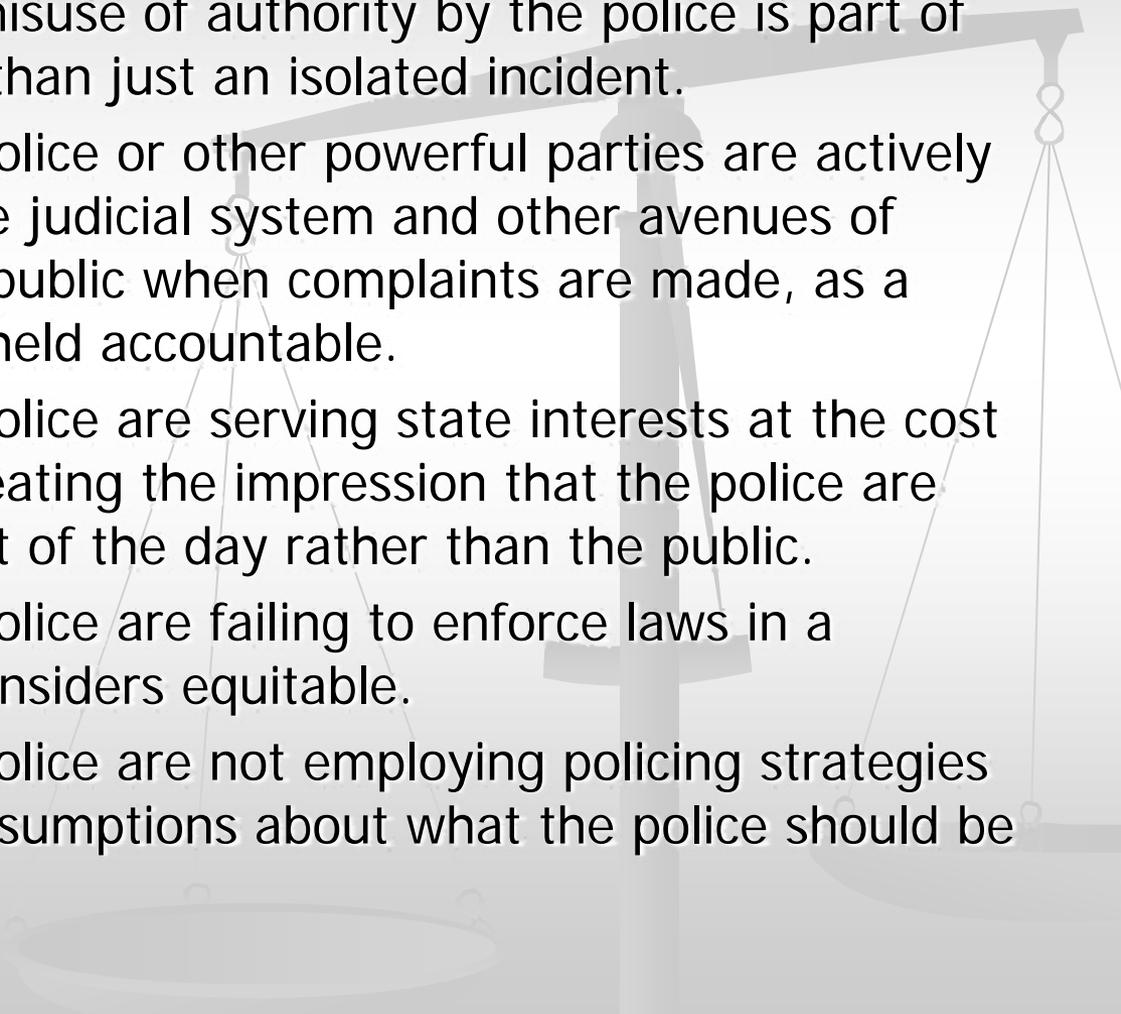
⚖️ Rodney King (Stacey Koon, Lawrence Powell)



⚖️ Christopher Wilson (Keith Empsall)



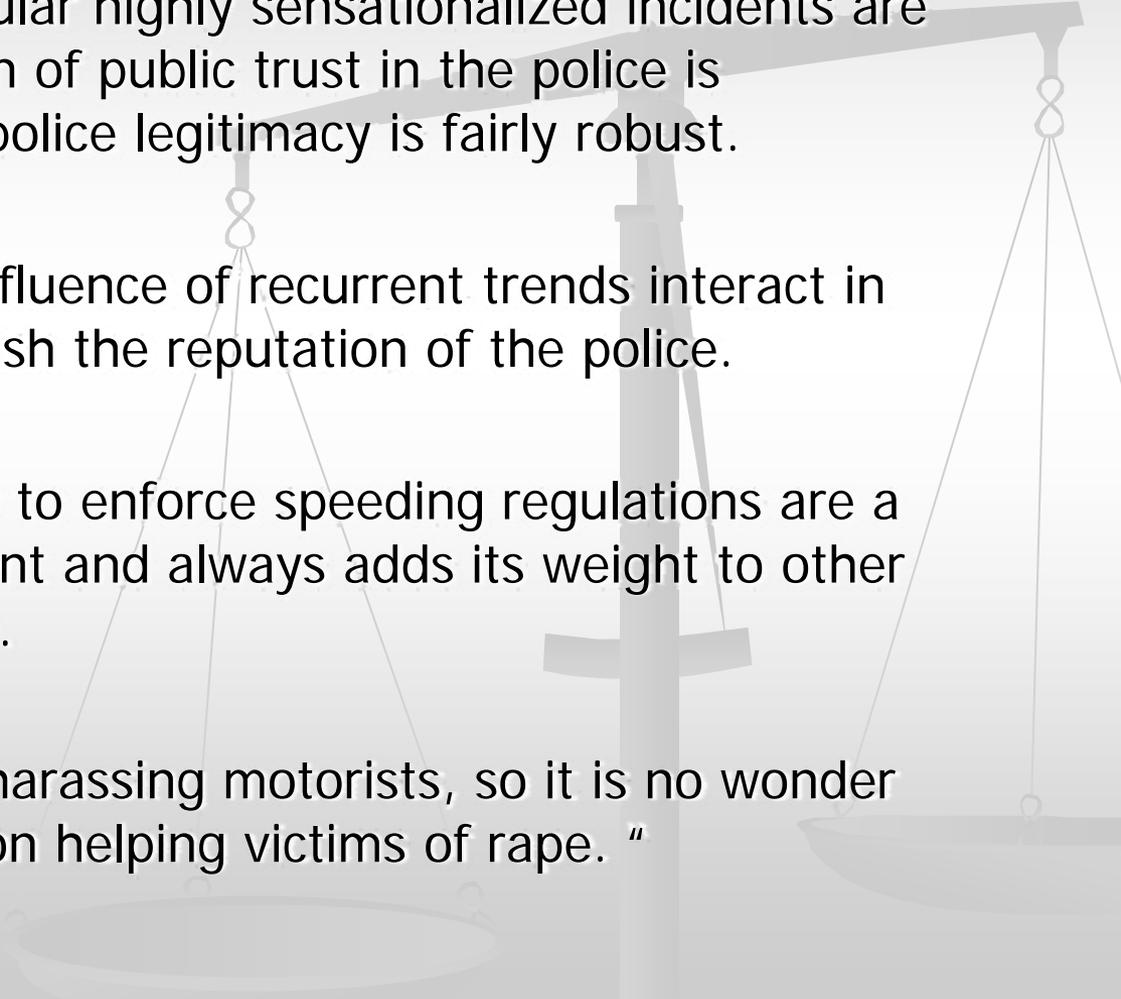
Perceptual Factors Influencing the Erosion of Trust

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- The perception that the misuse of authority by the police is part of an ongoing trend, rather than just an isolated incident.
 - The perception that the police or other powerful parties are actively attempting to obstruct the judicial system and other avenues of recourse available to the public when complaints are made, as a means of avoiding being held accountable.
 - The perception that the police are serving state interests at the cost of public service. Thus creating the impression that the police are owned by the government of the day rather than the public.
 - The perception that the police are failing to enforce laws in a manner that the public considers equitable.
 - The perception that the police are not employing policing strategies that match the public's assumptions about what the police should be doing.

The Salient Potential for the Erosion of Trust

- ✦ While some incidents are perceived by the public as more damning of the police due to the prevalence of the perceptual factors we just mentioned, serious consideration must be given to who perceives the problem.
- ✦ It is often the case that those people who are most at odds with the police have the greatest contact with them. Whereas those that support the police (the majority) rarely have any contact and are relatively ignorant of policing matters (Morgan and Newburn, 1997).
- ✦ Therefore, a public largely ignorant of policing will base their opinion of the police on how an incident is most salient to them.
- ✦ Consideration must also be given to the quantity of people who will potentially be upset by any given incident.
- ✦ For example: police brutality and speeding tickets.

Synergistic Erosion of Trust



- The assumption that singular highly sensationalized incidents are responsible for the erosion of public trust in the police is overexaggerated because police legitimacy is fairly robust.
- However, over time a confluence of recurrent trends interact in ways that can slowly tarnish the reputation of the police.
- For example, police policy to enforce speeding regulations are a trend that is always present and always adds its weight to other problems when they arise.
- “The police are too busy harassing motorists, so it is no wonder they cannot concentrate on helping victims of rape. ”

Synergistic Erosion in New Zealand

Rape allegations



Abuse of coercive power



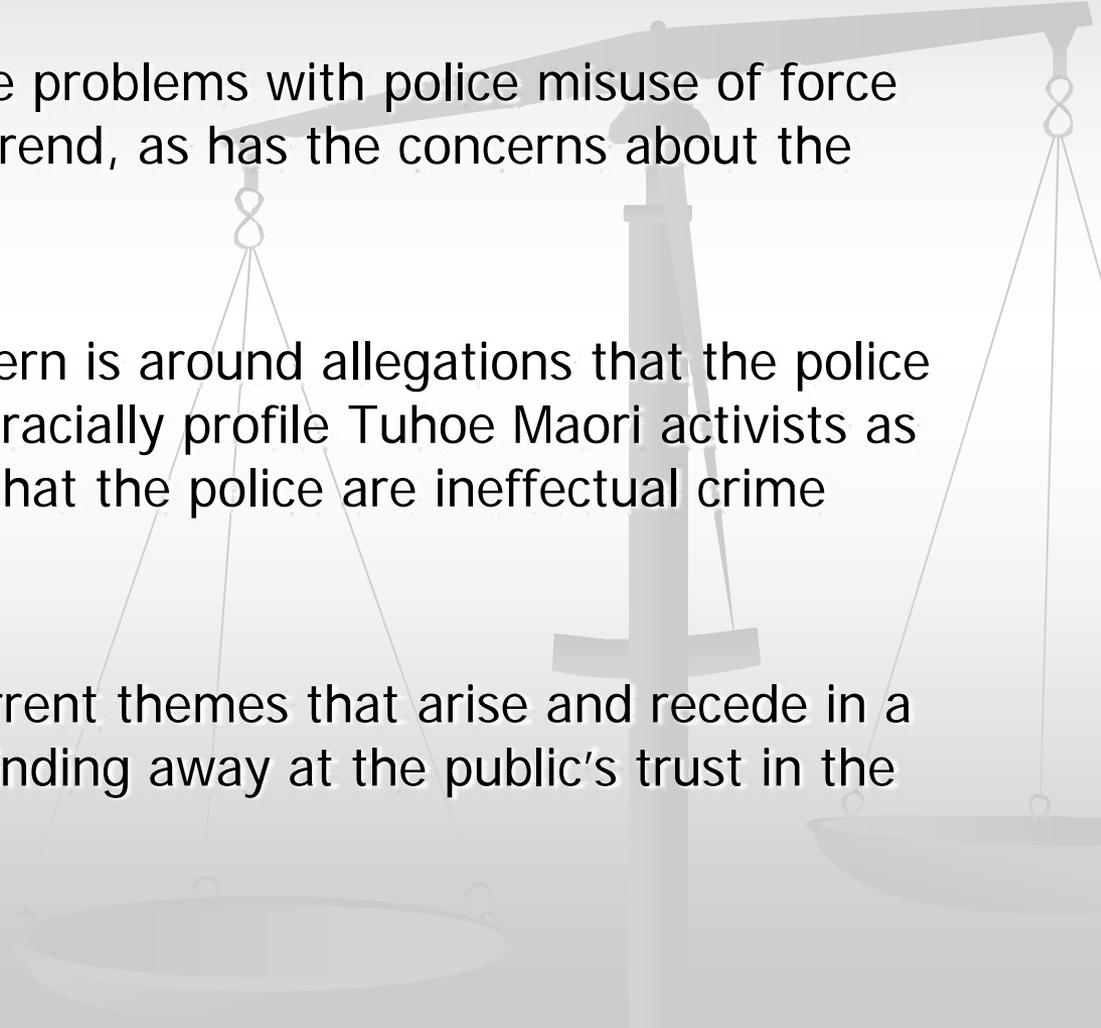
Focus on speeding



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"It's completely gutless. With all the money you save on speeding tickets it'll practically pay for itself."

As Time Moves On

- As time has moved on the problems with police misuse of force have remained a steady trend, as has the concerns about the criminalization of drivers.
 - The new incident of concern is around allegations that the police used the terrorism act to racially profile Tuhoē Maori activists as well as growing concern that the police are ineffectual crime fighters.
 - These are of course recurrent themes that arise and recede in a cyclical manner slowly grinding away at the public's trust in the police.
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To Conclude

- The notion of synergistic erosion acknowledges that police legitimacy is fairly robust in the short-term but can eventually be worn away over time.
 - Most problematic for sustaining police legitimacy is the formation of trends (police misbehavior or unpopular enforcement policies) perceived by the public as being unfair.
 - One perceived trend may have a greater impact than another due to how salient it is to the public when portrayed in the media, but these trends form synergies that strengthen public mistrust in the police.
 - The notion of synergistic erosion acknowledges the potential for relatively mundane unpopular police policies, such as the enforcement of speeding, to be as great a danger to legitimacy, if not more so, than sensationalized instances of police misbehavior.
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