

**Read between the headlines: Framing police bias in
New Zealand media**

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the intricate landscape and uncovers how New Zealand news media portray the complex issue of police unconscious bias. It investigates the research question: *How do New Zealand news media portray police unconscious bias?* Employing a qualitative methodology that integrates content analysis and framing analysis, the study examines a corpus of news articles, reports, and multimedia content spanning the period from anywhere before 2014 to 2024. The aim is to critically assess how unconscious bias within the New Zealand Police is constructed, contextualised, and communicated by mainstream media outlets.

The findings indicate that news media predominantly frame police unconscious bias as a systemic issue embedded within structures of institutional racism. Particular attention is given to its disproportionate impact on Māori, with recurring representations highlighting over-policing, higher prosecution rates, and disparate justice outcomes. Media narratives frequently centre on specific incidents, thereby catalysing public discourse on racial profiling, institutional accountability, and the limitations of reform efforts such as diversity and unconscious bias training.

This study argues that media representations play a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of unconscious bias and in influencing policy discourse and advocacy efforts. By illuminating the ways in which the media frame and problematise police bias, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the media's role in reinforcing or challenging dominant power structures. The findings underscore the imperative of critical media engagement in fostering equitable social outcomes and advancing public accountability within law enforcement institutions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	3
ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP.....	5
Acknowledgements	6
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	7
1.1 Significance of the study	9
1.2 Definition of Terms	10
Chapter 2: Literature Review	13
2.1 Policing and Bias.....	13
2.2 Police Colonisation.....	13
2.3 Policing	17
2.4 Criminal Justice System	21
2.5 Unconscious bias as a mechanism perpetuating systemic racism	21
and white supremacy	21
2.6 Whiteness and the role of the police	24
2.7 Police Perception of Māori.....	26
2.8 Concept of Unconscious bias in policing	27
2.9 News Media in New Zealand	30
2.10 Media, Racism, and the Police	34
2.11 Media Influence on Perceptions of the Police	35
2.12 New Zealand Police and Unconscious Bias	39
2.13 Media's role in shaping public perceptions	43
2.14 Police Legitimacy	44
Chapter 3: Research Design, Methodology & Method	46
3.1 Research Question	46
3.2 Research Design	46
3.3 Method.....	49
3.4 Data Collection	50
3.5 Data Analysis.....	53
3.6 Framing Analysis as a Methodological Approach	55
Chapter 4: Findings	58
4.4 Quantifying the Narrative: Media Patterns in Framing Police Bias and	103
Systemic Racism.....	103

4.4.1 Table 1: Representation of Themes and Frames in Media	103
Coverage	103
4.4.2 Table 2: Media Focus on Unconscious Bias vs. Systemic Racism	104
4.4.2 Table 3: Prevalence of Systemic vs. Individual Framing	104
4.5 Summary of Findings/ Conclusion	105
4.6 Addressing the Research Question and Comparing Findings Across	106
Time Frames: Shifts in Understanding and Addressing Unconscious	106
Bias in New Zealand Policing	106
4.7 Similarities Between the Timeframes	109
4.8 Differences Between the Timeframes	109
4.9 Reasons for Discrepancies	111
Chapter 5: Discussion	113
5.1 Timeframe 1: Pre-Bush Era (Before April 2014)	114
5.2 Timeframe 2: Mike Bush Era (April 2014–March 2020)	117
5.3 Timeframe 3: Andrew Coster Era (April 2020–2024).	121
5.4 Conclusion	125
5.5 How does New Zealand news media portray police unconscious	125
bias?	125
5.6 Limitations	130
5. 7 Recommendation/ Suggestions	132
Chapter 6: Conclusion	135
References	138
Appendix	190

ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this thesis is my work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly stated in the acknowledgements). This work has also not been submitted in whole or in part for any other degree or qualification at this or any other university. All sources used or referred to have been duly acknowledged. The status is the result of my independent research and investigation, except where otherwise stated. I have clearly stated and referenced all contributions by others to this work.

Signed: J. Beuge

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Among the numerous issues, examined through the lens of media representation, the portrayal of police bias and racism stands out as a critical domain with far reaching consequences for societal cohesion, justice, and public trust in law enforcement (Chermak, 1995; Dukes & Gaither, 2017). As media platforms evolve and expand, their influence on public discourse about police behaviour toward ethnic minority groups grows stronger, reflecting and perpetuating complex socio-cultural dynamics. The portrayal of police unconscious bias or racism in media narratives not only reflects societal attitudes and power structures but also shapes public perceptions and understanding of law enforcement practices (Szczepan, 2024). The media uses a variety of mediums, including news reports, television dramas, films, and social media, to shape how incidents of police unconscious bias or racism are framed, interpreted, and disseminated to audiences. The concept of police legitimacy, which refers to the perceived fairness, effectiveness, and moral authority of law enforcement agencies in society, is central to the debate over media representations of police bias/racism (Kappmeier & Fahey, n.d.). The medias portrayal of police conduct towards ethnic minority groups can either reinforce or undermine perceptions of police legitimacy, depending on how incidents of bias or racism are framed and emphasised (Chermak et al., 2006; Jackson et al., 2012; Sibley et al., 2011). The relationship between police and ethnic minority communities, predominantly indigenous populations like Māori in New Zealand, is rooted in colonisation, discrimination, and marginalisation, both historically and today (Yeats, 2022). In many countries, “those who control a society’s discourses about itself” (Denzin, 1996, p. 319) are neither transparent nor innocent. Instead, they actively create rather than reflect realities, gradually transforming the ingrained ways we make sense of the world and those inhabiting it. Spoonley and Butcher (2009) argue that media representations in New Zealand impact how individuals and groups are perceived.

Furthermore, the popular media is critical in shaping attitudes toward criminal justice and its agents. Most public knowledge about crime and justice comes from media consumption

(Ericson et al., 1987; Graber 1980; Roberts & Doob, 1990; Surette, 2007). As a result, the medias portrayal of victims, criminals, and law enforcement officials significantly impacts public perception. The literature on media portrayals of police yielded two contradictory findings. Some studies found that the police were presented favourably, well others found they were negatively represented (Surette, 2007). Several researchers, such as Dowler, 2003; Surette, 2007 claimed that the media presented policing in a negative light. For example, print and broadcast media portrayed the police as ineffective and incompetent, whereas reality police shows, and news tabloid programmes portrayed the police as heroes fighting evil (Surette, 2007). The differing portrayals of police stem from each media types distinct goals and audiences. Print and broadcast media often focus on accountability and systemic issues, highlighting police incompetence or inefficiencies to inform and scrutinise power structures. In contrast, reality police shows, and tableau programmes prioritised entertainment, using simplified “heroes versus villains” narratives that glorify the police to captivate viewers (Pitts, 2022). These programmes often rely on police cooperation, producing biased, positive portrayals. Ultimately, these contrasting depictions perfect the media's role in critically analysing authority or reinforcing societal trust in law enforcement (Deckert et al., 2023).

The primary goal of this research is to answer how New Zealand news media portrays police unconscious bias. It will also examine how media portrayals of police bias/racism affect perceptions of police legitimacy in society and the relationship between police and ethnic minority communities, particularly Māori. Lastly, the impact of historical and contemporary factors, such as colonisation, discrimination, and marginalisation, on media representations and societal attitudes toward police behaviour and ethnic minority groups will be considered. This will contribute to a better understanding of the intricate relationship between media discourse, police practises, and societal perceptions of racial justice and equity.

1.1 Significance of the study

"Unconscious Bias" has frequently been used as a convenient scapegoat to avoid directly confronting racism. According to Neilson (2022), the New Zealand Police and the criminal justice system have struggled to acknowledge and confront racism and its imperialist legacy. Other police documents associated with the bias program such as The Independent Police Conduct Authority Reports (IPCA) show that officers have a poor understanding of terms like systemic and structural racism, and the use of the term 'racism' continues to be divisive, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and understanding approach (Cardwell, 2022). While the topic has sparked increased interest, it is critical to recognise the existing gaps in the current body of research. Many studies have primarily focused on identifying bias among individual police officers. However, there is still a significant gap in understanding the structural and institutional factors contributing to unconscious bias (Braddock et al., 2020). There is limited research on how news media portrays unconscious bias, especially for marginalised groups like Māori, Pacific Islanders, and immigrants (Cardwell, 2022). Understanding how these portrayals interact with racial and gender identities is a necessary but largely unexplored dimension. Finally, more research must be done into how news media covers initiatives, policies, or practices to address police unconscious bias (Cardwell, 2022). This gap in understanding impedes our ability to comprehend potential solutions and represents an important area for future research.

The portrayal of police unconscious bias in New Zealand's news media has far-reaching implications for various aspects of society. The media significantly influences public perceptions, so how unconscious bias is depicted is critical (Kulaszewicz, 2015). This portrayal can sway public understanding of the issue, influencing support for necessary reforms (Kulaszewicz, 2015). Furthermore, media coverage significantly impacts how law enforcement agencies address unconscious bias within their ranks (Skolnick & McCoy, 1984). When news organisations provide balanced and critical reporting, it can increase accountability and pressure policymakers to implement meaningful reforms (Skolnick & McCoy, 1984). Beyond

the immediate scope of policing, understanding how news media portrays unconscious bias can shed light on broader social justice and equity concerns. It adds to ongoing discussions about systemic racism, discrimination, and the lived experiences of marginalised communities (Banaji et al., 2021). Most importantly, insights gained from studying media portrayals can directly inform the development of policies and interventions to combat unconscious bias in law enforcement and the media industry (FitzGerald et al., 2019). This research could have far-reaching implications for public awareness, accountability, social justice, and policymaking.

1.2 Definition of Terms

There has been some disagreement regarding the correct usage of terms such as "race" and "ethnicity," as well as more debate over the precise definition and appropriate use of terms such as "disparity," "discrimination," "prejudice," "racism," "bias," institutional racism," and "systematic bias." According to Smith (2002), such terms represent "essentially contested concepts," with meanings that are "inherently unstable and liable to shift over time and in different contexts" (Smith, 2002). While many of these terms are used interchangeably, as Cunneen (2006) points out, they are frequently based on different assumptions about the nature (intentional or unconscious) and level of bias (individual, cultural, organisational, or structural) in criminal justice decision-making. As this thesis will demonstrate, the variable uses of such concepts have led to confusion within the research literature. Authors use the same terms to mean very different things or use different terms to describe the same results. Bias is a subtle and pervasive human tendency toward a specific entity or individual, whether positive or negative. It weaves through the fabric of people's thoughts and actions, frequently escaping our conscious awareness (Byyny, 2017). These biases take many forms, from subconscious to deliberate (Fridell, 2017). Unconscious bias, a well-known phenomenon in psychology and social science, is defined as an overreliance on previously acquired

knowledge, even if it is not the most relevant or accurate information (Epstein, 1994; Gawronski, 2019; Gigerenzer, 1991; Kahneman, 2011). It frequently finds itself embedded in social contexts, owing to the limited scope of media discussions. This means that unconscious bias, which refers to unintentional prejudices or stereotypes people hold, becomes a part of societal norms and attitudes because the media often fails to provide a comprehensive or nuanced discussion of complex social issues. Instead, the media focuses on simplified, sensationalised, dominant narratives reinforcing existing stereotypes. By not addressing deeper, systemic causes or counter-narratives, the media allows these biases to persist and shape public perceptions, embedding them into the social fabric. Media outlets frequently focus on biases against protected values and reinforcing public perception (Dijk, 1991; Entman, 1993; Hall, 1997).

Protected values are moral principles that individuals or societies consider non-negotiable, such as fairness, justice, equality, or human rights. These values often guide public opinion and are shielded from compromise, especially in discussions about discrimination or bias. Racism is "the practice of classifying people based on physical differences and then believing that these differences indicate biological and social superiority and inferiority" (Spoonley, 1994, p. 174). Racism is also linked to power, as it typically occurs when one group has beliefs about another and the ability to discriminate against them (Mann, 1995; Spoonley, 1993; Cole 2006). Systemic racism is defined as a system in which patterns, policies, and processes contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities and discrimination against one or more racial or ethnic groups. Structural racism, a set of norms, rules, routines, patterns, attitudes, and behavioural standards, creates a sense of inferiority and exclusion against a group of people in general. These characteristics are perpetuated over time and even generations. Institutional racism, a related concept, refers to the impact on specific racial groups as policies, practices, and institutions consistently disadvantage or favour them. The term also encompasses pervasive beliefs and accepted methods of doing things within an institution, fostering empathy and understanding in the audience. The concept of institutional racism has

been the subject of considerable debate, disagreement and misunderstanding. As Lord Macpherson defines institutional racism as it relates to the police:

"It is the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviours which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantaged minority ethnic people" (Macpherson Report, 2021).

This definition, however, sparked significant debate and disagreement about the concept of institutional racism. Several scholars, such as (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Wellman, 1993; DiAngelo, 2018; Silva, 2006) have argued that this definition was problematic because, while highlighting problems at the level of organisational policy and practices, it was interpreted as indicating a widespread problem in the police force instead of individual racism. This made it unclear whether the problem was related to overt forms of conscious racism on the part of individuals or whether it also included unconscious forms of bias operating at a deeper organisational level. Institutional racism is frequently the result of overt racism (Morrison, 2009).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Policing and Bias

Research on ethnic bias in the criminal justice system has primarily focused on policing, given its role as the gatekeeper to the criminal justice system. Police control initial entry into the justice process, and studies have shown that ethnic disparities in arrest rates align with disparities in imprisonment (Morrison, 2009). Scholars such as Tonry (1995), Blumstein (1993) & Crutchfield et al., (2009) argue that these disparities are established early, suggesting that racial discrimination is most likely to occur at the arrest stage, which is influenced by police decision-making. Police have more discretion than other criminal justice actors, determining criminal behaviours when to stop, search, or arrest individuals, and what charges to bring (Huff, 2021). Their actions are under greater public scrutiny, making policing a focal point in investigations into racism in criminal justice practices (Goldstein, 1963; Kelling, 1999; Kleinig, 2012; Poyser, 2004; Brown, 2022). Government inquiries have led to a growing requirement for police agencies to report data on ethnic outcomes, providing researchers with valuable insights into police practices. This scrutiny, particularly around stop-and-search practices, has sparked significant tension between police and ethnic minority communities, as reflected in international studies like "The Lammy Review" (Lammy, 2017), "Racial Disparities in Law Enforcement Stops" (Lofstrom et al., 2021), and "Police Discrimination and Police Distrust Among Ethnic Minority Adolescents in Germany" (Kogan et al., 2024).

2.2 Police Colonisation

Colonisation, which involves settling away from one's place of origin and exerting control over indigenous populations, is intricately linked to the role of policing in settler colonial states such as New Zealand (Te Kōmihana Whai Hua o Aotearoa / New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2022). Police forces in these regions were established to enforce colonial laws, protect settler

interests, and suppress indigenous resistance. This historical foundation continues to shape contemporary policing, contributing to systemic biases, the over-policing of Indigenous communities, and disparities in justice outcomes (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Buttle, 2023). In New Zealand, the police played a significant role in enforcing laws that dispossessed Māori of their land, undermined their sovereignty, and reinforced structural inequalities. These colonial legacies persist today, with Māori facing disproportionate rates of prosecution, incarceration, and use of force, fuelling distrust in the justice system (Te Kōmihana Whai Hua o Aotearoa / New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2022). The dominance of colonial power structures in the legal system remains a critical issue that requires commitment to reform across political, social, and economic boundaries.

Institutional racism within New Zealand's police force was first publicly revealed by Dr Ranginui Walker in 1985, a prominent Māori academic and activist. Since then subsequent investigations have confirmed the existence of systemic, structural, and institutional racism across the country's institutions (Morrison, 2009). The government has acknowledged that racism—based on hierarchy, superiority, and inferiority continues to affect Māori communities, which were historically displaced from their land and culture. This history has contributed to poor outcomes for Māori in the justice, health, and education sectors (Te Kōmihana Whai Hua o Aotearoa / New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2022). Scholars such as Barnes & Creanor (2019) argue that Māori experiences of racism are deeply rooted in their colonial history and experience. Furthermore, New Zealand's colonial history has influenced other ethnic groups.

"The significant losses of land resources and culture experienced by Māori because of colonisation have been carried throughout generations, contributing to cycles of intergenerational trauma and disadvantage for many. This disadvantage is further exacerbated by the modern structures and systems in New Zealand largely operating under a Western model" (Te Kōmihana Whai Hua o Aotearoa / New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2022)

Policing practices in New Zealand are deeply rooted in the country's colonial past. Historically, the police were used to enforce colonial control and suppress Māori resistance, frequently using military force to subdue indigenous communities (Buttle, 2023). Bull (2001) contends that in the nineteenth century, policing in New Zealand was focused on controlling those perceived as threats to the colonial state, particularly Māori. This legacy of racialised policing has shaped how Māori are treated in the justice system, with police and state agencies often using race as an indicator of guilt and suspicion (Savage et al., 2021). For example, Māori youth were disproportionately labelled as delinquent in the 1970s, with their perceived criminality attributed to racial characteristics (Zimmerman, 1971). This racial prejudice continues to impact Māori, who face biased treatment at every stage of the criminal justice process, leading to mass incarceration, especially among Indigenous communities (Curcic, 2019).

Māori have long faced systemic discrimination within New Zealand's legal system, which was evident in the high number of Māori children taken into state care between 1950 and 1999 (Mead & Grove, 2001). Analysis of the settler state's institutions, including the Ministry of Justice and the New Zealand Police Service, reveals a pattern of discrimination that continues to disadvantage Māori families (Savage et al., 2021). Socioeconomic barriers and racial disadvantage have made it more difficult for Māori to defend themselves in court, leading to harsher sentences and higher rates of incarceration (Walker, 2018). Justice statistics reveal that Māori youth comprise only 14% of the population and represent approximately 66% of youth court appearances and 63% of serious youth offender charges (Tautari, 2024). Additionally, Māori account for 42% of criminal apprehensions and 50% of the prison population, illustrating the overrepresentation of Māori in the justice system (Department of Corrections, 2004/2006).

The persistence of these disparities highlights the ongoing role of policing as a tool of colonial control. Since the founding of the settler state, police forces have been involved in the rationalisation of crime and the differential treatment of Māori (Savage et al., 2021). This pattern of police targeting Māori has persisted throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond.

Research has identified several factors contributing to Māori disadvantage in the justice system, including cultural conflict, low socioeconomic status, organisation, and selective processing by state agencies (Savage et al., 2021). Several researchers, such as McIntosh, 2011; and Jackson, 1988 have shown that the justice system treated Māori differently and disadvantaged them compared to Pakeha. Such ethnically disparate treatment has been identified as having serious consequences, contributing to Māori overrepresentation in justice statistics since the 1950s. Savage et al. (2021) research has shown that institutional racism within New Zealand's police, Ministry of Justice, and other state agencies has directly contributed to Māori overrepresentation in criminal justice statistics (Savage et al., 2021). For example, Māori youth constitute approximately 66% of those appearing in the youth court despite representing only 14% of the national population (Walker, 2018). Moreover, Māori youth classified as serious offenders accounted for 63% of all charges in court in 68% of all youth justice cases, indicating a bias in the classification and treatment of Māori youth (Tautari, 2024). When it comes to criminal apprehension and imprisonment, Māori individuals are involved in 42% of all criminal apprehensions and constitute 50% of the prison population despite being a minority and the overall population (Department of Corrections, 2004, 2006). Hendy (2021) notes that the New Zealand police force is deeply entwined with the country's ongoing colonisation process. The historical and contemporary practices of the New Zealand police reflect the broader colonial structures that continue to marginalize Māori. From the early enforcement of colonial laws that dispossessed Māori of their land to the modern-day over-policing and disproportionate incarceration of Māori men, the police force functions as an instrument of systemic control rather than community protection. Research has shown that unconscious bias within policing contributes to racial profiling, reinforcing the unequal power dynamics established through colonisation (Hendy, 2021)."

Despite clear evidence of systemic racism, many continue to believe in the neutrality of New Zealand's justice system. This assumption fails to account for the historical and ongoing impact of settler colonialism on policing practices. Between 1950 and 1990, a series of systemic failures rooted in structural racism resulted in the insufficient protection of tamariki

(Māori children) interacting with the legal system. Tauri (2014) argues that both the courts and the police acted as agents of the colonial settler state, actively contributing to the marginalisation of Māori. ACORD's statistics from 1967 to 1971 demonstrate the extent to which racism permeated the police, welfare, and justice systems, including the racialisation of crime and the disproportionate blaming of Māori (Savage et al., 2021). For instance, in 1971, Māori comprised approximately 7% of the population but accounted for a significantly higher percentage of institutionalised youth. By the early 1970s, Māori were consistently overrepresented in criminal justice statistics, facing higher rates of apprehension, prosecution, and conviction (Jackson, 1987).

This overrepresentation cannot be explained solely by individual officer bias; rather, it reflects a broader culture of racialised policing embedded within institutional structures. Skolnick (2002) emphasises that police culture characterised by values such as loyalty, implicit bias, and a "code of silence" reinforces racial profiling and shields harmful practices from scrutiny. Rooted in colonial systems, this culture sustains racial hierarchies and systemic bias, normalising the over-policing of marginalised communities while resisting reform and accountability. To address racialised policing, it is essential to confront these entrenched inequalities by dismantling systemic racism, acknowledging historical injustices, and fostering transparency and accountability within law enforcement agencies (Morrison, 2009).

2.3 Policing

The police force in New Zealand has long used its discretionary powers to oppress Māori communities. As an official branch of the government, the police have played a key role in the disproportionate number of Māori children being placed in state custody (Jackson, 1988; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2020). Research indicates that Māori families were treated differently by the police than non-Māori, with a strong anti-Māori sentiment embedded in law enforcement practices. Data from the 1960s to 1990s reveals systemic biases, with Māori subjected to harsher treatment due to racial prejudice (Savage et al., 2021). For

example, Savage et al., (2021) indicates that during the 1950s and 1960s, Tamariki children were disproportionately targeted by police, leading to differential treatment and contributing to systemic disparities (Savage et al., 2021). Studies such as Pūao-te-ata-tū (1988) and He Whaipaanga Hou (1987) emphasise the racial discrimination that underpins the treatment of Māori children and their families in the justice system. The Pūao-te-ata-tū (1988) report highlighted institutional racism within the Department of Social Welfare, emphasising the negative impacts on Māori children and families. The He Whaipaanga Hou (1987) examines the criminal justice system's treatment of Māori, revealing significant biases and recommending reforms to address systemic discrimination. For example, a report by the IPCA and the New Zealand Police (2021) found that Māori men are more likely to be stopped or tasered by police due to "bias" and "structural racism" within the force. Despite comprising approximately 16% of the population, Māori accounts for 42% of all criminal apprehensions and over 50% of the prison population, indicating systemic disparities (Department of Corrections, 2007). Furthermore, being Māori increases the likelihood of prosecution by 11% compared to New Zealand Europeans (Ministry of Justice, 2019).

Māori mistrust of the New Zealand police is primarily a result of these biased practices. Tauri (2005) argues that Māori have experienced systemic discrimination by law enforcement, leading to a breakdown in trust. Maxwell and Smith (1998) found that a significant proportion of police officers had heard colleagues make racist remarks about Māori, and many were more likely to suspect Māori of criminal behaviour. This ethnic stereotyping has reinforced the overrepresentation of Māori in the criminal justice system, perpetuating the link between race and criminality (Savage et al., 2021). As a result, Māori communities experience heightened scrutiny and are more frequently involved in the justice system due to the perpetuation of biased policing (Latu & Lucas, 2008). The concept of "usual suspects" demonstrates how the police focus disproportionately on individuals with prior involvement in the justice system. This practice often results in Māori, who are more likely to be known to the police, being subjected to increased surveillance and repeated interactions with law enforcement (Sindall et al., 2016).

Latu and Lucas (2008) note that:

"Police may be drawn to specific offenders already known to them, producing A cause and effect motion whereby police become acquainted with particular people and areas by the history of offending or offences which inevitably influences police attentiveness." This may add to the explanation of why Māori have higher recidivism rates. The increased scrutiny leads to more frequent arrests and perpetuates systemic inequality (Latu & Lucas, 2008, cited in Jones, 2016, p. 15).

Hampton's (1974) study highlighted the differential treatment of Māori by police, with factors such as low socioeconomic status and broken homes exacerbating bias. Māori were more likely to be arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced more harshly due to the racial stereotyping of police officers between 1967 and 1971. This racial bias in policing practices perpetuates disparities in legal outcomes, with Māori receiving harsher penalties compared to non-Māori. Jackson, 1988; Cunneen, 2001; Tauri, 2014 have argued that the criminal behaviour of Indigenous and ethnic minorities is rooted in cultural factors and the disarray caused by colonisation rather than ethnicity itself. However, no evidence supports the claim that criminal behaviour is inherently linked to Māori ethnicity. Instead, the disproportionate involvement of Māori in the justice system can be better explained by the historical and ongoing effects of colonisation (Department of Corrections, 2007).

Based on this, it was determined that:

"The level of Māori over-presentation in the criminal justice system is very much what could be predicted given the combination of individuals' life experiences and circumstances regardless of ethnicity. In the sense over presentation is not a Māori problem (Department of Corrections 2007a, p.36)."

Jackson (1988) contends that government-imposed restrictions on building homes on Māori land, along with the depopulation of rural Māori communities, significantly contributed to Māori marginalisation. These restrictions forced many Māori into urban environments where they faced systemic disadvantages, including limited access to secure housing, employment, and cultural support. The resulting disconnection from land and community led to a cycle of poverty, alienation, and overexposure to state control experiences markedly different from those of Pākehā.

Furthermore, Jackson emphasises that risk factors commonly used to explain overrepresentation in crime statistics fail to account for the specific historical and cultural context of Māori communities (Jackson, 1988). Economic stress, exacerbated by the legacy of colonisation, impacts Māori more severely than other ethnic groups in similar social and economic positions (Robson & Harris, 2007). Furthermore, generic risk factor approaches fail to recognise the cultural differences that shape Māori experiences and the lasting impact of colonisation on their way of life (Came & Griffith, 2018). These subtle biases contribute to ethnic disparities in criminal justice outcomes, which are rooted in historical structures that continue to shape contemporary practices (Morrison, 2009). To effectively address these disparities, researchers argue that a deeper examination of the criminal justice system's decision-making processes and structures is necessary (Morrison, 2009). While bias in policing is a significant factor contributing to the overrepresentation of Māori in the criminal justice system, it is not the sole cause. The long-term consequences of colonisation, including discriminatory legislation and policies, have compounded over time and are still reflected in economic, educational, health, and social disparities (Te Kōmihana Whai Hua o Aotearoa / New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2022). The legacy of colonisation continues to influence contemporary issues in New Zealand, and efforts to address these inequities must consider both historical and current factors that perpetuate disadvantage for Māori communities (Te Kōmihana Whai Hua o Aotearoa / New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2022).

2.4 Criminal Justice System

The criminal justice system is a cornerstone of societal governance, designed to uphold laws, protect communities, and administer justice. However, these systems are not neutral; their design and application can perpetuate existing power dynamics (Eubanks, 2018). In countries like New Zealand, where the justice system is built on English common law principles, the concept of “one law for all” is foundational (Jackson, 1987). However, this framework fails to account for the unique rights, values, and forms of social control specific to Māori, leading to systemic institutional racism. The monocultural attitudes embedded within the system disproportionately disadvantage Māori and other minority groups, highlighting enduring inequities in the justice system (Jackson, 1987). The police play a critical role within this broader system, enforcing laws and maintaining social order. Their actions are often guided by societal perceptions of crime severity, which are heavily influenced by media narratives (Jackson, 1987). For instance, public concern over gang activity can lead to focused police crackdowns on gangs. When gang membership predominantly consists of Māori individuals, such enforcement disproportionately impacts Māori communities, inflating the “Māori crime rate” and perpetuating stereotypes (Jackson, 1987). This cycle of law enforcement and media representation reinforces public perceptions of police bias and systemic racism, creating a feedback loop where marginalized groups bear the brunt of intensified scrutiny and criminalization (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016).

2.5 Unconscious bias as a mechanism perpetuating systemic racism and white supremacy

The concept of whiteness refers to the social, cultural, and political constructs that privilege those identified as white, particularly in societies shaped by colonialism, imperialism, and racial hierarchies. It extends beyond skin colour, encompassing norms, values, and ideologies that sustain white dominance while marginalising non-white groups (Cancelmo & Mueller,

2019). Whiteness represents both a position of power and a set of systemic advantages often invisible to those who benefit from them (Cancelmo & Mueller, 2019). In Aotearoa New Zealand, whiteness is deeply intertwined with the legacy of British colonisation, which established Eurocentric systems and values as dominant. This has contributed to the ongoing marginalisation of Māori and Pacific communities, reinforcing white privilege in education, the justice system, and governance (Gray et al., 2013).

Unconscious bias operates as one of the subtle yet powerful tools that uphold the system of whiteness. Frequently cited as a more "palatable" explanation for racial disparities, unconscious bias refers to the implicit associations and assumptions that influence how individuals perceive, evaluate, and interact with others often without conscious awareness (Tate & Page, 2018). While these biases are not always overtly racist, they continue to reproduce structural inequalities, disproportionately disadvantaging non-white groups. According to Mills (2017), unconscious bias is deeply embedded in the racialised structures of society and serves as a "technology of racialised governmentality" a mechanism that enables the racial contract and the maintenance of white supremacy. The term itself has come under critique, particularly the prefix (*un*), which is seen as part of a broader denial and erasure of racism (Tate & Page, 2018). By framing racism as unintentional or unconscious, this narrative allows individuals particularly those who are white to deny responsibility for perpetuating racial inequalities (Tate & Page, 2018). In this way, unconscious bias becomes a political alibi, maintaining white innocence and supporting what Tate & Page (2018) call the white "will to forget."

This disconnect between intent and impact is further complicated by the fact that unconscious biases are not exclusive to white people. As Saul (2013) notes, members of marginalised groups can also internalise dominant prejudices for example, women holding biases against other women. This reflects how dominant cultural narratives, produced and maintained by whiteness, shape collective thinking and perception, even among those it harms. As Mills (1997) argues, white people continue to benefit from a "racial contract" that creates a world in their cultural image, supported by political states, economic systems, and

even psychological processes that legitimise their privileged position. This structure of whiteness normalises differential racial entitlement and renders it largely unquestioned. Unconscious bias is thus not just a psychological phenomenon but part of a larger epistemology of ignorance a strategic mode of not knowing that enables the maintenance of racial hierarchies (Mills, 1997).

While psychological research (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami & Gaertner, 2002) suggests that reflecting on implicit attitudes can help reduce unconscious bias, such efforts are limited if they focus solely on individuals. As the Equality Challenge Unit (2013) asserts, addressing unconscious bias requires looking beyond the individual psyche and examining the cultures and practices of institutions. It is within these institutions shaped by colonial histories and whiteness that unconscious bias is embedded and reproduced. Indeed, institutional responses to racism often fall short because they frame bias as a matter of personal failure, rather than systemic design. This individualistic focus obscures the institutional and structural roots of racism. Tate and Page (2018) critique this framing, arguing that contemporary approaches tend to ignore the structural embedding of whiteness in favour of a narrative that foregrounds ignorance and unintended harm. This, in turn, limits transformative change.

The institutionalisation of unconscious bias is also entangled with white fragility, a term coined by DiAngelo (2011) to describe the defensive reactions white people often display when confronted with racial injustice. In this framework, unconscious bias acts as a shield allowing individuals and institutions to claim they are not "racist" because any harm caused was unintentional. This denial prevents meaningful engagement with the structural nature of racism and upholds white dominance. Even as individuals become aware of their biases, scholars like Saul (2013) argue that they cannot always be held morally responsible for them, as such biases are often the product of living in a racist culture. Still, this awareness must lead to more than personal guilt it must prompt institutional change. Tate and Page (2018) emphasise that dismantling the systems that support unconscious bias requires not only moral commitment but also a practical one: institutions must ensure their decisions and actions are based on evidence rather than stereotypes and must actively challenge the norms that

reproduce racial inequality. Finally, Yancy (2015) argues that unconscious bias functions as a strategic mechanism used particularly by white individuals to distance themselves from the accusation of racism. This deflection undermines accountability and perpetuates the racial status quo. As Weheliye (2014) notes, the issue is not whiteness per se, but the structural racism it enables. Yet whiteness, as a process of subject formation, limits individuals' and institutions' capacity to truly recognise or confront this racism.

In sum, unconscious bias is not simply a matter of faulty thinking or individual prejudice. It is a systemic feature of whiteness, functioning to sustain racial hierarchies while masking their operation behind the language of neutrality and unintentionality. Understanding and addressing unconscious bias thus requires a shift away from the individual and toward an institutional, historical, and structural analysis one that centres the role of whiteness in the ongoing production of racial inequality.

2.6 Whiteness and the role of the police

Andrew Coster, the Once Commissioner of Police, has used the term "unconscious bias" to address racial disparities in policing. His goal is not to deny the existence of bias but to find neutral language that allows for a more objective discussion. By using the term "unconscious bias," he hopes to foster a less emotionally charged conversation about the issue, making it easier for people to engage with it (RNZ, 2021). He suggests that some individuals may find it less offensive to be called out for unconscious bias rather than being labelled as racist. However, regardless of the terminology, the core issue remains: the systemic bias that affects Māori and other marginalized groups in New Zealand's criminal justice system (RNZ, 2021). The police, through programs like the Understanding Police Delivery (UPD) initiative, are working to examine these issues and initiate meaningful change (NZ Police, 2021).

Despite these efforts, significant concerns persist about the lack of definitive evidence regarding the extent of bias in the police force. Even 15 months after the launch of the UPD

program in 2022, no concrete findings have emerged on the existence and impact of bias within the force (RNZ, 2022). This is troubling given the substantial body of research documenting systemic bias in law enforcement, including both explicit and unconscious biases (Eberhardt, 2019). Studies from government agencies, academic institutions, and non-governmental organizations have confirmed the prevalence of bias in the police force (New Zealand Police & IPCA, 2021; Independent Police Conduct Authority, 2023). However, documents released about the bias program reveal that many officers do not fully understand terms like "systemic" and "structural racism," and the use of the term "racism" remains highly divisive within the force (RNZ, 2022).

The statistical data on warrantless searches starkly highlights the racial disparities in policing. Māori are nearly four times more likely than Pākehā to be subjected to a search without a warrant and 3.9 times more likely than Pākehā in the last two years (Bingham & Mayron, 2023). This disparity is also reflected in the police statistics: Māori comprise 16% of the population but accounted for 33.5% of warrantless searches between 2019 and 2021 (Bingham & Mayron, 2023). Despite acknowledging these "appalling" disparities, Coster has recognized that addressing the issue will require long-term, systemic changes and collaboration with the community. The need for reform is evident, with the ongoing overrepresentation of Māori and Pacifica people in the criminal justice system and persistent historical distrust between these communities and the police (Te Uepū Hāpai i te Ora – Safe and Effective Justice Advisory Group, 2019).

Research further demonstrates that Māori experience racism daily, with 93% of Māori in a 2021 survey (A Survey of Māori Experiences of Racism) reporting experiencing racism regularly and 96% identifying it as a problem within their families (Smith et al., 2021). Moreover, 70% of Māori in a 2022 survey believed there was racism within the police, with 37% reporting personal or familial experiences of police racism (Horizon Research, 2022). Despite efforts through the UPD to understand the reasons behind these disparities, the structural issues remain entrenched, requiring a systemic and community-wide effort to address them.

In response to the growing recognition of unconscious bias within policing, New Zealand's political leaders have acknowledged its presence but often minimize its impact. For example, Prime Minister Chris Hipkins (2022) acknowledged unconscious bias in the police but stopped short of calling it institutional racism. While there is an awareness that historical practices and attitudes have contributed to current disparities, addressing these issues is framed as a broader societal responsibility, not just the responsibility of law enforcement (Te Uepū Hāpai i te Ora – Safe and Effective Justice Advisory Group, 2019, New Zealand Police, 2021). Police Minister Stuart Nash (2022) also acknowledged unconscious bias within the police force, noting that efforts were underway to address it through changes in training. However, these efforts are complicated by the broader legacy of essentialism and white supremacy that continues to affect the overrepresentation of Māori in the criminal justice system (Cunneen, 2014).

Ultimately, while unconscious bias is recognized as a factor in racial disparities within New Zealand's policing and justice system, the issue cannot be addressed in isolation. It requires a systemic examination of the broader cultural and historical contexts that sustain white privilege (Mills, 1997; Tate & Page, 2018). Policymakers and law enforcement must engage in ongoing reflection, consultation with marginalized communities, and commitment to reform to dismantle the persistent structural inequalities (Te Uepū Hāpai i te Ora – Safe and Effective Justice Advisory Group, 2019).

2.7 Police Perception of Māori

According to Maxwell and Smith (1998), nearly one-fourth of police officers hold negative attitudes toward Māori, a reality that significantly impacts Māori experiences with policing. This includes both differential policing and institutional racism, underscoring the urgent need for systemic change. Research overseas also frequently reveals negative attitudes, discriminatory behaviour, and even racist abuse by police toward ethnic minorities and

Indigenous peoples (Maxwell & Smith, 1998). In New Zealand, when asked whether police officers respond differently to offenders from various ethnic groups, 70% of respondents said yes. In comparison, only 19% noted that the responses sometimes considered cultural differences constructively (Maxwell & Smith, 1998). These findings suggest that certain police officers hold stereotypical attitudes toward ethnic minorities, particularly Māori. Some officers reportedly speak to offenders in a demeaning manner, using slower, simplified English or adopting an arrogant tone (Maxwell & Smith, 1998). Such behaviours indicate a lack of respect and contribute to a sense of inequality in the policing experience (Maxwell & Smith, 1998). Furthermore, there are claims that police officers often make racist remarks in private rather than in the presence of offenders or others who might be offended, reinforcing the notion of a hidden culture of racism within the force (Maxwell & Smith, 1998). This situation raises important questions about the dynamics of police interactions with offenders. Maxwell and Smith (1998) argue that how offenders react to police can influence how officers respond, with offenders sometimes controlling the situation through their behaviour and attitudes. This dynamic may be indicative of deeper issues in how police view and treat ethnic minorities, raising concerns about whether the police might be unfairly blaming offenders for the interactions that unfold (Maxwell & Smith, 1998).

2.8 Concept of Unconscious bias in policing

Unconscious bias in policing refers to the implicit attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices law enforcement officers may harbour towards specific groups, influencing their decisions and actions (Reiner, 2010). These biases, shaped by societal stereotypes, personal experiences, media portrayals, and cultural influences, can impact how officers interact with individuals from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Cherry, 2023). Despite the intention to act fairly, unconscious bias exists in all individuals and can lead to automatic judgments based on racial or ethnic characteristics. These associations are difficult to overcome and may

influence decision-making without conscious awareness, highlighting the importance for officers to recognise and address these biases to ensure fairness in their interactions. (Stark, 2021).

According to Easterly and Richard, most human decisions are emotional, and we then collect or generate facts to justify them. Police officers must make decisions that are sometimes incorrect or appear biased toward a specific group of people (Easterly & Richard, 2011, as cited in Tate & Page, 2018). Dovidio et al., (2002) study shows that bias significantly impacts decisions on both the conscious and unconscious levels. Research by experts such as Banaji et al., (2013) and Devine et al., (2012) suggests that unconscious biases play a significant role in shaping decision-making processes, often influencing judgments without conscious awareness. Studies in cognitive psychology indicate that a substantial portion of thought processes occur automatically, with estimates suggesting that unconscious cognition accounts for the majority of mental activity (e.g., Mayer et al., 2011; Myers et al., 2016). Although individuals may consciously reject biased beliefs, unconscious biases can influence their behaviour. This underscores the importance of engaging in activities to redirect and re-educate the unconscious mind, which can help dismantle stereotypes and improve decision-making within the police force. Effective policing requires officers to make sound, unbiased decisions to serve diverse communities better and improve organisational performance (Staats et al., 2016; Fridell, 2017).

Bias in policing can manifest in various forms, including profiling, where officers disproportionately target specific groups based on stereotypes, and decision-making, where bias influences actions such as stops, searches, arrests, or charges (Chan, 1997; Gelman et al., 2007). These biased actions can escalate situations unnecessarily and lead to excessive force, particularly against marginalised communities. Biases in communication can also erode trust between police officers and the public, contributing to misunderstandings and conflict (Goff et al., 2014; Tyler & Huo, 2002). However, unconscious bias is not synonymous with systemic racism. Systemic racism refers to deeply ingrained structural inequalities within institutions, including the criminal justice system (Banaji & Fiske & Massey, 2021). Analysis of

police behaviour has consistently revealed disparities among different social groups. For example, the Ministry of Justice data indicates that Māori are more likely to be arrested than their European counterparts (Ministry of Justice, 2020). A 2020 report by the Independent Police Conduct Authority found that Māori were more likely to be stopped by police. Furthermore, a 2019 report found that Māori were subjected to police use of force at a rate 1.6 times higher than Pākehā, highlighting the disproportionate treatment of Māori by law enforcement (New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2019). Disparities in police treatment of majority and minority citizens have been observed in a wide range of police functions, including but not limited to citizen stops and searches, arrest investigations, and charging decisions (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006; Smith & Alpert, 2007). However, traditional criminological perspectives have made determining the causes or motivations underlying these differences difficult. Engel et al. (2002) found that early research on police bias lacked theory and thus failed to provide insight into possible causes of disparities discovered. Overseas research frequently reveals negative attitudes, discriminatory behaviour, and racist abuse by police against ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples (Bowling & Phillips, 2002; Glover, 2009). Police do not have unconscious racial bias; the bias is more overt, and systemic racism pervades the entire criminal justice system (Weekes, 2022).

As noted by Waititi, systemic racism is "embedded" within police forces and extends to other sectors of the criminal justice system, influencing disparities in youth justice programs and the overrepresentation of Māori individuals (Weekes, 2022). Simply attributing disparities to unconscious bias overlooks the broader, historical context of systemic racism, which perpetuates disadvantages for marginalised groups (Morrison, 2009). While unconscious bias may influence individual police officers, it is important to recognise that systemic racism is pervasive in laws, policies, and practices (Braveman et al., 2022). Furthermore, it is important to note that systemic racism and unconscious bias are not the same thing. Psychologist Jacqui Maguire questions whether the treatment of Māori by police is solely due to unconscious bias (1News, 2020). The police minister, Stuart Nash, claims that there is no systemic racism in the police force. However, there are signs of unconscious bias, and statistics show that people

in the force have unconscious biases against people of colour, Pakeha, and so on (1News, 2020). As Banaji et al. (2021) note, systemic racism is not a new issue but a continuation of historical injustices, particularly those stemming from colonial practices. This enduring problem complicates efforts to address Māori communities' disadvantages within the criminal justice system (Morrison, 2009). Research has shown that while unconscious bias training is essential, it alone may not improve outcomes unless there is a broader societal shift towards addressing both unconscious bias and systemic racism (Kempf, 2020; Greenwald & Lai, 2020).

In conclusion, unconscious bias and systemic racism are distinct yet interconnected issues in policing. Addressing unconscious bias is vital for improving police decision-making and interactions with the public, but it must be understood within the larger framework of systemic racism (Fridell, 2017; Eberhardt, 2019). It is not a new phenomenon, and, as directed against Indigenous people, it is a long-standing, wicked problem with origins in the discriminatory colonial practices of colonisation and assimilation (Smith, 2012). Hence, it should be noted that policing in this country should also be contextualised in both the origins of the force and the ongoing colonial model of controlling and managing Māori communities (Hill, 2008 & Workman, 2021).

2.9 News Media in New Zealand

News media and former European colonies have long used ethnic labels to describe indigenous people accused of crimes while failing to label people from dominant cultures (McCreanor et al., 2014). Thompson (1954) contended that the underlying stressors of colonisation and the then-current pressures of urbanisation were the most likely causes of the differential. The pressure of urbanisation, in particular, marked a significant shift in Māori life. As increasing numbers of Māori migrated from rural, iwi-based communities into predominantly Pākehā urban centres, they encountered a range of structural challenges.

These included cultural displacement, systemic racism, economic hardship, and the breakdown of traditional support systems such as whānau and hapū networks. In the city, Māori were often excluded from stable employment, adequate housing, and education while also being subjected to greater police surveillance and social control. Urbanisation, then, did not simply mean geographic relocation; it signified a deeper disconnection from tikanga Māori and immersion into an unfamiliar and often hostile colonial infrastructure. Contemporary scholars have since affirmed that this urban transition contributed to the institutional marginalisation of Māori and exacerbated the enduring effects of colonisation (Erueti, 2017; King et al., 2018). Thus, urbanisation must be understood not only as a demographic shift but also as a socio-political process that intensified inequalities already rooted in colonisation.

Journalists often portray Māori in stereotyped and decontextualised ways. New Zealand's news media has created periodic moral panics that portray Māori as threatening or violent (Thompson, 1954). Nairn et al. (2009) and Newbold (2016) argued that reporting on Māori crime reflects objective reality. Newspapers in New Zealand use ethnic labels for Māori and Polynesian crime suspects up to four times more frequently than European or Caucasian. Police news releases label suspects as Māori rather than Caucasian, and physical descriptions of pakeha suspects are used more frequently than ethnic labels (McCreanor et al., 2014). Several common news media themes portray Māori as threatening to non-Māori. The news media's themes perpetuate persistent public discourses (Nairn et al., 2009). Māori are disproportionately portrayed negatively in crime-related media coverage, reinforcing stereotypes that associate them with criminality and deviance (Moewaka Barnes, McCreanor, & Rankine, 2005). This media framing shapes public perceptions and influences how Māori are treated by law enforcement. Research shows that Māori are overrepresented in arrest and sentencing statistics, leading to widespread perceptions of institutional bias within the justice system (Quince, 2007; NZ Police, 2019). As a result, even law-abiding Māori may experience anticipatory anxiety in everyday encounters with authorities, stemming from fear of racial profiling or unfair treatment (Came et al., 2020; Workman, 2016). This erosion of trust undermines effective policing and perpetuates systemic injustice.

Another issue is that without contact with Māori, the media only reports crime rates. When the media reports on crime rates without engaging with Māori communities, it often leads to a one-dimensional, stereotypical portrayal of Māori individuals. Crime statistics, presented without context, can reinforce negative stereotypes, suggesting Māori are more prone to criminal behaviour without considering the systemic factors such as poverty, lack of access to education, and historical discrimination. Without input from Māori voices, these reports miss important perspectives, contributing to a harmful "them vs. us" mentality and ignoring the broader issues like colonization and inadequate social services. This lack of nuance can perpetuate misconceptions, while neglecting the positive contributions of Māori to society. Reporting style and imbalance had a negative impact on perceptions of Māori crime. Media professionals continue to wield extraordinary power in shaping public opinion and mediating Māori-Pakeha relations (McCreanor et al., 2014). While contemporary expressions of Māori marginalisation and dominance in the media are arguably more nuanced than previous renditions, they continue to do the racist work necessary to maintain the colonial state despite claims that they only reflect reality (Smith, 1999; Elliott, 2016). They create and reproduce Māori as deviant and threatening in what Gargett (2005) refers to as a "continuing drone of colonialism" that perpetuates our historically unjust status quo. Gargett's argument contends that colonialism's legacy and effects are still felt in modern society. It implies that colonialism is more than just a historical event but rather an ongoing process that shapes current social, economic, and political structures in ways that perpetuate injustice and inequality (Smith, 1999; Coulthard, 2014).

"Deviance, its control, and its opposite, normality, are the primary discursive objects of news making" (Jakubowicz et al., 1994, p. 27). Journalists use these normative positions and phrasings because they are short on time and space, and these hegemonic resources are widely available; they are familiar with how these resources have altered their work and assume that it is understandable to a wide range of readers (Devereux, 2013; Radford, 2014). In 2019 Kendis book refers to this as "cultural blindness," the assumption that the dominant population operates on superior values and that culture exists only in other groups. In short,

when journalists frame, they create a specific point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted in a certain way. Thus, journalists can, knowingly or unknowingly, guide readers' interpretation toward a particular point of view (Kuypers & Cooper, 2005). Research in New Zealand confirms the media's portrayal of Pacific, Māori, and Muslim people as "other" (Kabir & Bourk, 2012; Kupu Taea, 2008, 2014; Loto et al., 2006; Kolo, 1990; Barnes et al., 2012; Noorzai, 2014).

According to researchers, despite implicitly "claiming to speak for all New Zealanders," much mainstream media coverage is produced "by Pakeha, for Pakeha, and about Pakeha" (Cosgrove & Bruce, 2005, p. 340; Moewaka Barnes et al., 2012). Recent surveys show that Pakeha has a higher representation in journalism than the general population. In 2013, 74% of New Zealanders identified as Pākehā. However, 81-86 per cent of journalists were Pākehā (New Zealand Census, 2013). Despite accounting for 15% of New Zealand's population, Māori are underrepresented in journalism (4-6%) (Journalism, 2014; Hollings, 2007; Hollings et al., 2007; Statistics New Zealand, 2015). It is not surprising that mainstream New Zealand media portrays non-Pākehā ethnicities through a lens that implicitly normalises Pākehā perspectives (Loto et al., 2006; Barnes et al., 2012; Spoonley & Trlin, 2004). The outcome is that white power "reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences, and goodwill" (Dyer, 1997, p. 9). The Ministry of Justice figures reveal in 2015, 26.3 per cent of Māori convicted of assault were imprisoned in the last decade, compared to less than 13 per cent of Europeans who were found guilty of the same crime (Bond, 2016).

The truth is that Māori have been overrepresented in the justice system "for many years." Labour's spokesperson for Māori development, Mr Davis, stated that there is an unconscious bias" right throughout the judicial system." He stated that incarceration rates were only one component of the "ugly" criminal justice system, which disproportionately affected Māori (Bond, 2016). According to David Ferguson, the figures reflect a "class bias" rather than prejudice against Māori. Since 1980, the highest rate of imprisonment for Europeans convicted of assault (14.7%) has never surpassed the lowest rate for Māori (16.3%) in any year (Bond, 2016).

2.10 Media, Racism, and the Police

Racism in the media is often framed ideologically, with the media acting as “a powerful source of ideas about race” (Hall, 2011, p. 82). Media discourse shapes public understanding of racism, often using dismissive language such as “playing the race card” or accusations of “political correctness” to undermine the legitimacy of racial grievances, particularly those expressed by marginalised communities (Hall, 1997; Teo, 2000; Titley, 2020). This ideological framing contributes to a climate of denial and apathy, reinforcing systemic racism by normalising discriminatory ideas and limiting the scope of anti-racist conversations. In New Zealand, media discourse continues to be influenced by colonial legacies that uphold Pākehā cultural dominance. Rankine et al. (2014) argue that this hegemonic need drives racism against Māori in contemporary media. Research demonstrates that language-based racism is subtle and covert (Kendall et al., 2005; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), which aligns with international studies describing modern racism as symbolic, indirect, and difficult to challenge. Nairn & McCreanor (1991) found that racist talk is embedded within New Zealand’s institutions and often manifests through apparently neutral discourses, such as neoliberal arguments that downplay systemic inequalities and instead blame individuals for their lack of success (Pack et al., 2016).

One of the most persistent and damaging ways the media perpetuates racism is through the portrayal of Māori as inherently criminal or problematic. McCreanor et al. (2011) showed that even in the absence of overtly racist language, Māori are disproportionately associated with negative news coverage. This has tangible effects, influencing public opinion and contributing to institutional discrimination such as limited employment opportunities (Robson, 2008) and harsher sentencing in the justice system (Morrison, 2009). Policing practices reflect this bias. Māori are more likely to be stopped, searched, arrested, and subjected to police force (IPCA, 2021). These outcomes are not isolated incidents but part of broader systemic racism embedded in both media and policing institutions (Fergusson et al., 2003; McIntosh & Workman, 2017). The media reinforces assumptions of Māori criminality

through repeated negative portrayals, legitimising over-policing and racial profiling. This is supported by findings that suggest Pākehā often position themselves as ignorant of racism to maintain privilege and avoid accountability (McCreanor, 1993). Such portrayals are part of a larger ideological system that shifts the focus from institutional and historical causes of inequality to individual behaviour. The framing of Māori as the problem obscures the role of structural racism and contributes to continued disparities in policing outcomes. As Came (2014) explains, institutional racism may not always be intentional, but the systems themselves continue to produce discriminatory outcomes. This allows individuals within those systems whether well-meaning or not to deny responsibility by blaming the system rather than confronting personal biases (Morrison, 2009; Tonry, 2003). Efforts to address these injustices must include a reckoning with the role of the media. As Came and McCreanor (2015) argue, breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Paradise, 2006)¹ and the state's inaction in redressing them have been perpetuated by a media landscape that privileges Pākehā narratives. Only through critical media literacy, structural reform, and honouring Tiriti obligations can these patterns begin to shift.

2.11 Media Influence on Perceptions of the Police

The media is not only a mirror of society but also a tool that actively shapes public perception especially around law enforcement. As Malcolm X famously said:

"The media is the most powerful entity on earth... because they control the minds of the masses." This influence is particularly significant in the portrayal of the police and how different racial groups experience policing (Kulaszewicz, 2015, p.4).

Happer and Philo (2013) argue that in situations where people have no direct experience, they rely heavily on the media for understanding. In the context of policing, this means that the way

¹ Te Tiriti o Waitangi is a foundational document signed in 1840 between the British Crown and Māori Chiefs in NZ aimed to establish a partnership between the two parties, outlining their respective rights and responsibilities and provide a framework for governance. However, there were significant differences between the Māori and English versions of the treaty, leading to ongoing debates about its meaning and application.

police are portrayed in the media strongly influences public attitudes about who is seen as trustworthy and who is perceived as dangerous. For example, if the media repeatedly depicts Māori as offenders and police as heroic responders, it reinforces a binary of innocence and guilt rooted in racial bias. Kulaszewicz (2015) highlights that racial bias in media reporting especially in crime stories can lead to distorted public perceptions. When crimes committed by Māori or other minorities are reported in more graphic or sensationalised terms, while similar crimes by Pākehā are downplayed, it contributes to the stereotype that non-Pākehā groups are inherently criminal. This in turn legitimises disproportionate policing, which is then portrayed as necessary rather than discriminatory. Entman (1990) showed that Black individuals in the U.S. were often shown in handcuffs or mugshots, while White suspects were pictured in more neutral or humanising contexts. A similar dynamic is observable in New Zealand, where Māori are frequently depicted in ways that emphasise aggression or dysfunction, while Pākehā offenders are framed more sympathetically. These framing devices shape the viewer's subconscious beliefs, reinforcing stereotypes and bolstering support for punitive policies. This cycle creates a feedback loop: of media representation that justifies over-policing, which results in more negative encounters between Māori and police, which in turn produces more media stories reinforcing these stereotypes. It erodes public trust in police among Māori communities and contributes to the racial divide in perceptions of justice.

The media's role in shaping perceptions of race extends to its impact on criminal justice practices. Barnes et al., 2012 research shows that the media often exploits racialised crime stories, reinforcing the portrayal of Māori as the "criminal other." This narrative has been used to deny the existence of systemic racism in the criminal justice system. McGovern and Lee (2010) discuss how the media's reliance on police sources for crime reporting allows for the uncritical reproduction of police perspectives, which often portray the justice system as neutral rather than acknowledging its colonial history and ongoing discriminatory practices (McGovern & Lee, 2010). The media, by framing issues of police bias as "unconscious," further dismisses systemic racism and perpetuates the idea that such behaviours are isolated incidents rather than part of a larger pattern of racial injustice (McGovern & Lee, 2010). In New Zealand, police

practices, including racial profiling and disproportionate use of force against Māori communities, have been influenced by media narratives. However, this influence is not one-directional. Police institutions also act as **primary definers** in the news cycle, shaping how crime is perceived and reported. Hall et al. (1978) describe how institutional sources like the police occupy a privileged position in defining events for the media. In Aotearoa, this power enables police to control the release of information, frame suspects and victims, and determine which incidents are newsworthy.

As a result, police influence public perception not just through their actions but through their narrative dominance. The portrayal of crime becomes racialised, with Māori overrepresented in news reports as offenders rather than victims. This framing normalises state surveillance and punitive action against Māori while reinforcing stereotypes of inherent criminality (McCreanor, 1997; Rankine et al., 2014). The media, in turn, amplify this framing by relying on police sources without critical interrogation, contributing to public fear, moral panic, and the perception of crime as a Māori problem. This feedback loop between police and media reinforces institutional racism and justifies ongoing inequities in the criminal justice system. As Loader and Mulcahy (2003) note, policing is not just a practice of control but a **cultural performance**, one that relies heavily on public visibility and legitimacy. In New Zealand, that legitimacy is both constructed and maintained through selective media coverage, often at the expense of Māori communities. Recognising the media's significant role in shaping perceptions of police, researchers such as Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Intravia et al., 2018 have attempted to investigate media effects empirically. Although police images are inconsistent in the media (Surette, 2015), most empirical research on media effects fails to distinguish between media content, particularly how the media portrays the police. Sometimes, the police are portrayed as brave and selfless heroes; other times, they are shown to be irredeemably corrupt and hostile to the public (Benekos & Merlo, 2006; Dirikx et al., 2012). Furthermore, police images in the media are frequently contradictory and complicated (Tyler, 2006). As a result, different portrayals of the police may have varying effects on public attitudes toward the police. Given that most people

rely on the media to supplement their lack of firsthand experience with the police (Surette, 2015), incorporating the media can help to clarify the potential missing link between police activities and an individual's perceptions of the police. Most studies investigating media effects on perceptions of crime and justice use cultivation theory (e.g., Chiricos et al., 1997; Eschholz et al., 2003; Intravia et al., 2018; Roche et al., 2016).

According to cultivation theory, the media significantly impacts public attitudes. According to this theory, people who are exposed to the media tend to adopt a worldview that is consistent with the images presented in the media (Custers & Van den Bulck, 2011; Gerbner et al., 1980; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). For example, Bradford et al. (2009) conducted a large-scale survey with a representative sample of London residents to investigate what shapes public perceptions of the police. Their findings expanded on Skogan's (2006) earlier work, which argued that people tend to form their opinions of the police based mainly on negative experiences or media portrayals what he called a "negativity bias." Bradford and colleagues confirmed that negative encounters with police had a stronger and more lasting impact on public trust and confidence than positive ones. In other words, even a few bad experiences or stories could significantly damage public perception, while good experiences did not have the same powerful or lasting effect. This supports the idea that trust in policing is fragile and highly sensitive to negative input, whether from personal experience or media coverage. To change public perceptions, media outlets must take greater responsibility for how they report on crime and policing. This includes critically examining who is given voice, whose perspectives are marginalised, and how visual and linguistic framing impacts public belief. Supporting Indigenous-led and alternative media, promoting accurate and balanced reporting, and embedding media literacy in education are key steps toward dismantling this cycle.

2.12 New Zealand Police and Unconscious Bias

In public discourse, the New Zealand Police (NZP) are often positioned as key agents in upholding law and order and ensuring justice across communities. However, public trust in the institution has increasingly come under scrutiny, particularly concerning the role of racial bias both conscious and unconscious in policing practices. This tension became particularly visible during the leadership of two successive Police Commissioners, Mike Bush and Andrew Coster. Bush, who served as Commissioner from 2014 to 2020, initially denied the presence of systemic racism within the NZP, asserting that all individuals were treated fairly under the law. In contrast, his successor, Coster, acknowledged the existence of unconscious bias and institutional challenges, initiating reforms aimed at improving cultural competency and equity within the force. The contrasting stances of these two leaders reflect broader societal debates around racism and policing and illustrate the evolving ways in which law enforcement institutions engage with public criticism and accountability. These developments are also closely intertwined with how the media has framed issues of bias, either amplified institutional narratives or critically interrogating them, thus shaping public perception of police legitimacy and reform. This section discusses the views of former Police Commissioner Mike Bush and former Commissioner Andrew Coster on unconscious bias within the NZP.

Mike Bush's Acknowledgement of Unconscious Bias

During his tenure, Mike Bush acknowledged the presence of unconscious bias within the NZP. In 2015, following evidence that Māori were disproportionately subjected to formal actions such as arrests, specifically towards Māori men, Bush publicly admitted the existence of unconscious bias but rejected the term "racism" (Owen, 2015). When asked if he meant racism by the police, he rejected it and instead argued:

"Unconscious bias, we have spent a significant amount of time getting to understand that, and it does not mean racism. It is something that everyone inherently has, and it is important that, as police officers and professionals, we know how to understand that and ensure that we do not practice unconscious bias (Owen, 2015)."

"I think, like any good organisation, you have to recognise that there can be some unconscious bias in your organisation (Mike Bush, 2015)."

Bush accepted that unconscious bias against Māori existed within the police but maintained that police officers did not intentionally target individuals based on ethnicity (Scoop, 2015). Despite this, there is significant evidence that unconscious bias manifests in disparities in applying police discretion. For example, Māori were found to be less likely than non-Māori to receive pre-charge warnings, with a 2015 report revealing that Māori first-time offenders were less likely to receive a warning than their non-Māori counterparts (Owen, 2015). This data pointed to systemic issues in the application of police discretion, yet Bush argued that this bias was a result of individual officers' unconscious biases rather than systemic racism (Johnsen, 2020). So, despite the evidence, the NZP Commissioner denies systemic racism in the force. Naida Glavish highlighted bias findings, which the police acknowledge and address through measures such as cultural competency training, unconscious bias training, and incorporating the Treaty of Waitangi principles into policing (Neilson, 2020). In 2020, Bush's assertions faced scrutiny when it was revealed that Māori were still disproportionately stopped and searched by police (Johnsen, 2020; RNZ, 2024). Despite efforts to address unconscious bias, such as cultural competency training and workshops on human rights, reports indicated that Māori continued to be overrepresented in arrests and incarceration rates (Jones, 2018). Critics, including Green Party co-leader Davidson, emphasised the entrenched nature of unconscious bias, suggesting that efforts to address this issue required training and broader systemic changes (Jones, 2018).

There is ample research (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Greenwald & Banaji, 2013; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004) demonstrating that unconscious bias exists, albeit the presence

and influence of unconscious bias are rarely obvious and easily overlooked. Some people within an organisation will prefer to conceal it, while the majority will be unaware, making the term "biased" offensive (Jones, 2018). Bush suggested in 2015 that officers' unconscious bias could contribute to Māori overrepresentation in offender statistics (Jones, 2018). For example, in 2017, Māori accounted for about 44% of all arrests despite making up only 16.5% of the population (Deckert et al., 2023). According to a report published in 2019, Māori were disproportionately stopped and searched by police. For instance, Māori comprised 11% of the population but were subject to 24% of police stops in urban areas (Neilson, 2020). After being accused by Davidson that police are racially profiling people, he stated that this perception is "a real concern we need to address" (Jones, 2018). New Zealand police claim to uphold core values such as diversity, professionalism, respect, and commitment to Māori and the treaty, which contradict suggestions of racial profiling or "systemic racism" in headlines (Jones, 2018). According to Bush, people are not intentionally targeted based on the colour of their skin; however, the problem lies in the distinction between racial profiling and unconscious bias, which may feel the same to the person on the receiving end (NewstalkZB Staff, 2019). Justice advocates like Julia Whaipooti argue that the system perpetuates bias, not just individual officers (Johnsen, 2020). While police initiatives aimed to build fairness and trust, progress remains slow as Māori continue to be overrepresented in arrests.

Reports indicate that unconscious bias training increases awareness but lacks evidence of sustained behavioural change. Broader systemic reforms are needed as legislation like the Misuse of Drugs Act disproportionately impacts Māori. Community Trust surveys also show Māori have little confidence in police fairness, emphasising the need for more transformative efforts (Public Service Commission, 2020; Everding, 2023). The police commissioner acknowledges unconscious bias as a natural human behaviour present in every organisation but distinguishes it from racism, which he denies exists in the New Zealand police force (RNZ, 2021; Webb & Deckert, 2023). Critics argue this distinction is misleading as evidence shows Māori, particularly young Māori, face systemic racial profiling. For instance, Māori is 7 times more likely to be charged with public order offences, three times more likely

to be arrested, twice as likely to experience police use of force, and 30% more likely to be denied bail than non-Māori (New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2020). According to Kelvin Davis, police strategies were still not improving negative perceptions of Māori (Brown, 2015). While the police have implemented unconscious bias training and strategies like the Whanau Ora-based Turning of the Tide Policy, which led to a 35% decrease in Māori youth prosecutions since 2012, these efforts, according to Māori's lawyer Kyle Quince, have not significantly reduced overall Māori arrests (Te Ao Māori News, 2017). Critics, including Māori leaders and advocates, argue that the term "unconscious bias" is used as a shield to avoid confronting institutional racism. Until the police explicitly acknowledge and address racism within the system, biased behaviours and disparities in justice outcomes for Māori will persist (Paewai, 2024, RNZ, 2024).

Andrew Coster's Approach to Unconscious Bias

Upon assuming the role of Police Commissioner in 2020, Andrew Coster continued to acknowledge the presence of unconscious bias within the police force, framing it as a universal human trait (Forbes, 2020). Coster initiated the "Understanding Policing Delivery" (UPD) research program in 2021 to investigate how bias might exist within police policies and practices (RNZ, 2021). This initiative explored the disproportionate representation of Māori and Pacifica communities within the justice system. Although the findings have not led to significant changes, the police have continued to recognise the issue of unconscious bias, with Coster stating that this was an active focus for the force (RNZ, 2021). Willie Jackson, the Māori Development Minister, stated that the police have made some changes recently and that he does not see this as racist. However, critics argue that focusing on unconscious bias as the root cause of racial disparities in policing risks obscuring deeper, systemic issues (Morrison, 2009). Social psychologists and critics of the NZP have pointed out that framing racism as a problem of biased individuals rather than a structural issue can inadvertently minimise the impact of entrenched racial disparities (Webb & Deckert, 2023). It may guide

policy attitudes and preferences in ways that unintentionally support or perpetuate racial disparities. Certain narratives, such as unconscious bias, may be used to distract attention from institutional racism in the context of policing (Webb & Deckert, 2023). A high-level police research paper referred to this shift in framing, stating that "the term bias has become a 'scapegoat for not addressing racism directly'" (Neilson, 2022). By labelling racism as unconscious bias, the police may avoid confronting the systemic and historical factors that contribute to the overrepresentation of Māori in the criminal justice system (Neilson, 2022).

2.13 Media's role in shaping public perceptions

The media plays a significant role in shaping public perception, particularly when it comes to issues of race and crime. When certain groups, such as Black men or Māori in New Zealand, are consistently portrayed as criminals, dangerous, or aggressive, these stereotypes become ingrained in the public's mindset (Webb & Deckert, 2023). This portrayal influences people's attitudes and behaviours, reinforcing racial biases and perpetuating racism. Media coverage can harm society by promoting false beliefs and stereotypes, especially when giving disproportionate attention to specific groups or incidents (Equal Justice Initiative, 2021; Anand & Taneja, 2024). In New Zealand, the mainstream media often depicts Māori as dangerous criminals, radicals, or activists who threaten the country's social stability (Deckert et al., 2023). This portrayal influences how the public views Māori and how they perceive the criminal justice system's fairness. The media's influence on public opinion, particularly regarding police bias or racism, is shaped by its framing of these issues, along with personal experiences and broader societal discussions (Jackson, 1987). While the media plays a crucial role in shaping discussions about policing and systemic bias, it is not the sole factor that impacts public understanding. Other elements, such as individual experiences and institutional structures, also contribute to how people perceive these issues. Nonetheless, the media's power to shape

beliefs and values remains substantial, making it a critical component in the ongoing conversation about race, policing, and justice (Fridkin et al., 2017).

2.14 Police Legitimacy

Police legitimacy refers to the perception that the police have the legal authority to enforce laws and maintain social order (Bradford & Jackson, 2010). It is crucial for effective policing, as communities are more likely to follow the law voluntarily when they perceive the police as legitimate (Mazerolle et al., 2013). A legitimate police force can de-escalate tension, minimise resistance, and reduce the need for coercive enforcement. Additionally, legitimacy encourages public cooperation, such as reporting crimes and participating in crime prevention efforts (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). In New Zealand, legitimacy is fundamental when considering the relationship between the police, the media, and Māori communities. The framing of systemic racism as unconscious bias raises concerns about police legitimacy (Webb & Deckert, 2023). If the police are seen as downplaying or denying systemic issues, public trust and legitimacy may erode, particularly among communities that experience discriminatory practices (Brown & Hobbs, 2023; Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2024). The collaboration between the police and the media can influence perceptions of legitimacy. However, suppose the media only presents the police perspective without critically addressing systemic issues (Graziano & Gauthier, 2018). In that case, it may reinforce the police's legitimacy in the eyes of the public but further damage trust within marginalised communities like the Māori (Kappmeier & Fahey, n.d.).

The media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of police legitimacy. In New Zealand, coverage of police actions, particularly regarding allegations of bias and racism, can either strengthen or undermine public trust (Kappmeier & Fahey, n.d.). For instance, media reports on the disproportionate targeting of Māori and Pacific communities can highlight systemic issues within the police force (Deckert et al., 2023; Webb & Deckert, 2023). For

example, a higher rate of police stops and searches among Māori has received widespread media coverage. Such coverage has the potential to erode trust in police in these communities (RNZ, 2024; Bingham et al., 2020). On the other hand, positive media coverage of police reforms and initiatives to address bias, such as cultural training programs and community engagement efforts, can enhance police legitimacy (College of Policing, 2013; Jones, 2020). Balanced reporting that acknowledges the challenges faced by the police while addressing concerns about bias can foster a nuanced understanding, helping to maintain trust even during complex incidents (Hanway & Hambly, 2023; Hobbs & Brown, 2023). In New Zealand, public perception of police legitimacy is shaped by direct interactions with officers, community initiatives, and media coverage. When the media highlights incidents of bias and racism, it can raise awareness and increase calls for accountability (Hanway & Hambly, 2023). Conversely, positive portrayals of police reforms and community policing can boost public trust. Finally, addressing the historical traumas caused by colonisation within the police framework may help restore legitimacy. By acknowledging and addressing these historical injustices, the police can regain public trust, but this process may require a "period of accountability" to ensure fairness and legitimacy in their practices (Gallen, 2023).

To summarise, how the news media portrays issues of bias and racism within the police force significantly impacts New Zealanders' perceptions of their legitimacy. Media coverage that exposes systemic issues and holds the police accountable can erode legitimacy, particularly among affected communities. However, media coverage of police reform and positive community engagement can help restore and maintain public trust. To maintain legitimacy, the New Zealand police must continue to address bias, engage with diverse communities, and ensure transparency and accountability in their operations.

Chapter 3: Research Design, Methodology & Method

This chapter serves as a methodological roadmap, offering transparency into the research design, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques applied to study police unconscious bias. The primary purpose of this study is to answer the proposed research question on how the New Zealand news media portrays police unconscious bias to raise awareness and make a systemic change to New Zealand's policy reforms aimed at reducing bias in policing. Furthermore, the study sheds light on how unconscious bias is constructed, discussed, and contextualized to see how it shapes our understanding of bias.

3.1 Research Question

1. How does New Zealand news media portray police unconscious bias?

3.2 Research Design

The research conducted here takes a mixed method approach, combining quantitative content and qualitative framing analysis, to provide a comprehensive understanding of media portrayal and the topic of this study. The study intends to investigate how New Zealand news media portray police unconscious bias. For this purpose, the study uses content analysis, focusing on news articles from reputable online news sources and framing analysis, to investigate how news media portrays the issue of racism/bias in the police. Content analysis is a widely used method for examining how language, themes, and narratives operate within media texts. Gheyle & Jacobs (2017) define content analysis as counting and identifying common themes, concepts, language, and structure, highlighting both its quantitative and qualitative dimensions. This approach allows researchers to systematically analyse patterns across large volumes of text, offering insights into the framing and repetition of particular ideas. In the context of this study, content analysis is employed to examine how news media construct

narratives around Māori and their relationship with the justice system. By identifying recurring language and themes such as depictions of Māori men as aggressive, references to crime statistics, or discussions of police reform this method helps uncover subtle forms of unconscious bias and the ways in which media discourse may reinforce or challenge existing social hierarchies (Krippendorff, 2004). It entails quantitative and qualitative analysis of the characteristics, themes, patterns, and meanings contained in a set of data (Krippendorff, 2004). Content analysis will assist the researcher in understanding the frequency of specific topics, communication tone, language use, and representation of various elements within the content (Krippendorff, 2019). As a result, in the context of this study on police unconscious bias portrayal in New Zealand news media, content analysis will entail examining news articles to identify and quantify elements such as the frequency of reported unconscious bias incidents, the language used to describe these incidents, the source attributed in articles, the contextual details provided, and any other relevant features.

Also, the researcher employs framing analysis (Goffman, 1974), which focuses on understanding how media or communication sources present issues through shaping and interpretation (Carter, 2013). Frames are the broad perspectives, narratives, or lenses through which information is presented, influencing how audiences perceive and comprehend a topic (Carter, 2013). Furthermore, it entails identifying and analysing these frames to discover the underlying messages, assumptions, and implications they convey (Arowolo, 2017). Stephen Reese (2001) proposed a general definition of frames, stating that frames are shared social concepts that endure over time and help shape how people interpret and understand the world by providing a symbolic structure for organising meaning (2001). Frames derive their power from the widespread assumption that individuals, organisations and institutions operate under the belief that society shares a common understanding of the frame. Effective communication relies on shared meaning between communicators (Goffman, 1974). For successful interaction, the speaker and the audience must similarly interpret words, symbols, gestures and other forms of expression. As a fundamental part of a culture's deep structure, frames play a crucial role in shaping shared meaning. They provide communicators with implicit,

unspoken knowledge that enables discussions based on a foundation of shared assumptions (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). On a social level, organisations and institutions can create content that their audiences will interpret as they intend. As Reese (2001) points out, frames are constructed over long periods and with input from many social actors. Organisational and institutional frames exist to organise human behaviour in ways that advance organisational goals, such as reducing uncertainty in inputs and outputs, ensuring organisational survival and growth, and improving efficiency and task completion (Reese, 2001).

Not only can they be found in political or news coverage, where most of the research has been focused on, but they can also be found in entertainment programming, conversations among society members, and even popular music (Hooks, 1994; Croteau & Hoynes, 2017). Moreover, they shape our understanding of social phenomena in various important ways. The first frames determine which content is relevant to discussing a social concern. A second way to gain a structural understanding of social phenomena is to define the roles that various individuals, groups, organisations, and institutions play. The third frame outlined how different beliefs, values, and actions are related (Goffman, 1974). Fourth, the symbolic representation of a topic, including language use, sentence structure, code words, and modifiers, is affected by frame selection (Goffman, 1974). Finally, frames describe the values and goals inherent in the structure of a content area. Each frame will prioritise a specific set of goals and ethics over others. This does not imply that it focuses solely on one or two moral guides but that one or a few are considered concepts, and the others are peripheral (Entman, 1993). Reese (2001) uses "organising" to describe how frames "make sense" of collections of ideas and phenomena. When a topic is "framed" to an existing cultural frame, the frame heavily influences the topic's meaning. Choosing which frame to place problematic social phenomena in may impact their meaning more than lengthy discussions of the facts or arguments about them (Reese et al., 2001).

Frames provide a widely accepted context for understanding new phenomena. When a topic is "framed," its context is established; its significant tenets are prescribed; individuals, groups, and organisations are assigned the roles of protagonist, antagonist, or spectator; and

the legitimacy of various action strategies is defined (Goffman, 1974). The researcher will use framing analysis to identify how the news media frames the issue of police unconscious bias. In this case, one frame may portray unconscious bias as a systemic issue in law enforcement, whereas another may focus on individual instances. As a result, analysing frames will assist the researcher in understanding how media construct the issue's narrative and how those narratives may influence public perception and understanding (Arowolo, 2017).

3.3 Method

The purpose of the study is to determine how police unconscious bias is represented in New Zealand news media, as well as how this perception of unconscious bias is framed to influence people's understanding of police legitimacy. For this purpose, the study employs content and framing analysis. The framing analysis method is appropriate because it allows the researcher to investigate how a specific issue is presented, thereby revealing implicit perspectives and biases embedded in media content. It is helpful to investigate how media frames influence public perception and attitudes toward the issue of unconscious bias because how information is presented can shape how people interpret and respond to it (Entman, 1993). Framing analysis allows the researcher to delve beneath the surface content and uncover the information's underlying messages, assumptions, implications, and meaning (Entman, 1993). To identify and analyse frames, the researcher must read each publication/text and identify how news media frames the issue relevant to the field of study by paying attention to keywords/concepts. Certain words and images are used repeatedly and together, making them more prominent in the texts and evoking ideas typically associated with a specific type of discourse (Entman, p.11). Furthermore, the researcher should consider how the media shapes the narrative around the issue.

Tate & Page (2018) has revealed that unconscious bias is the acceptable face of racism, a term that a majority white sector feels comfortable using and discussing to describe itself. Labelling racism as unconscious bias is often seen as a convenient way for

organisations to evade accountability, redirecting responsibility from systemic structures to individuals perceived as faultless (Ahmed, 2012; Lodge, 2017). This focus highlights the inherent weakness of contemporary approaches: the emphasis on the individual, which ignores the institutional and systemic and positions unconscious bias as an enabler of whiteness through claims of ignorance (Tate & Page, 2018). Unconscious bias is a strategy used to distance the white self from the charge of racism, even though one may be complicit in its perpetuation. "Unconscious bias cannot fix institutional racism because racist white relationalities extend from and to the white self through the process of white subject formation that restricts access to understanding the extent of white racism through epistemologies of ignorance" (Tate & Page, 2018, p. 152). So, when reading publications/texts, the researcher should highlight terms relative to the field of unconscious bias/racism, bias, institutional/systemic racism, and white fragility. The combination of framing analysis and content analysis yields a comprehensive approach. Framing analysis investigates meaning and context qualitatively, whereas content analysis examines patterns and trends quantitatively (Lindström & Marais, 2012). Together, these methods provide a more comprehensive understanding of media content, allowing the researcher to investigate the explicit content of messages and the implicit framing devices used to convey those messages. The use of both framing analysis and content analysis in this study will allow for methodological triangulation, which will improve the credibility and reliability of the findings (Lindström & Marais, 2012).

3.4 Data Collection

This study conducted a comprehensive review of various online newspaper sources and articles, focusing on unconscious bias. This thorough approach was taken because other research has shown that terms like institutional and systemic racism are often used interchangeably with 'bias,' whether it is unconscious or conscious (Van Dijk, 1991; Jones, 1997; Silva, 2003; Alexander, 2010; DiAngelo, 2018). The role of the media and the police-

media relationship were also carefully examined. The study concentrated on news articles published anywhere before 2014 to 2024, ensuring that recent developments and changes in media discourse and the New Zealand police's response to the issue of unconscious bias/racism were captured in full. The articles were selected using a systematic sampling approach. The researcher classified the time frame into three categories. The first category and the articles chosen examined what was known about unconscious bias/racism before the appointment of New Zealand police ex-commissioner Mike Bush. It is critical to understand that systemic and structural racism are forms of racism that are pervasive and deeply embedded in and throughout the systems, laws, written policies, practices, and established beliefs and attitudes that produce and perpetuate widespread unfair treatment of people of colour (Braveman et al., 2022). This thesis also examines the period before the Bush administration to understand how racial bias in policing and media narratives were framed before the concept of "unconscious bias" entered mainstream discourse. By looking at this earlier period, the research identifies how earlier media and institutional language shaped public understanding of racial disparities without relying on the now-prevalent framing of unconscious bias. This historical context is essential for tracing the evolution of how police racism is explained and justified, highlighting the shift from overt to more subtle, institutionalised forms of bias and the accompanying changes in media representation. The articles chosen here included anything before April 2014, however, especially the 2000s and earlier did not have much media or political focus on "unconscious bias" in policing at all since the term "unconscious bias" was not widely used publicly by police or media before 2014. So the articles that were being analysed for the data analysis only included anything before 2014. In total though 10 articles were collected, using terms that reflected the language and framing that were relevant before the term "unconscious bias" became popular. For example, "systemic racism New Zealand policing, " racial profiling New Zealand police," "institutional racism NZ police," "bias in policing New Zealand," police colonisation."

The second category focused on articles published after April 2014 till March 2020, when Mike Bush was New Zealand's police commissioner. In 2015, Mike Bush's

acknowledgment of 'unconscious bias' among police officers against Māori played a pivotal role in sparking discussions on the issue. For this 12 articles have been collected, and search words such as "Unconscious bias police Māori," "Māori racial profiling police NZ," "Institutional racism New Zealand police," and "Mike Bush unconscious bias Māori" were used. The third and final category examined articles from April 2020 to 2024, during the tenure of the then new police commissioner Andrew Coster. This period was selected to assess whether any shifts had occurred in media framing, whether the term "unconscious bias" remained prominent, and whether racism within the New Zealand Police continued to be denied or minimised. Coster was widely perceived as a progressive police commissioner, appointed with the expectation that he would lead meaningful reform within the police force and improve relationships with marginalised communities, particularly Māori. His leadership was often framed in the media as a break from more punitive policing approaches, with an emphasis on de-escalation, community engagement, and equity. This made it an important timeframe in which to evaluate whether media narratives evolved alongside these reformist ambitions, or whether long-standing patterns of minimising systemic racism through the language of unconscious bias persisted. For this 15 articles have been collected for this period, and search words such as "Andrew Coster police racism," "Systemic racism NZ Police", "Māori police relations Andrew Coster era," "Unconscious bias training NZ Police," "Media portrayal of police racism New Zealand" were used.

The researcher selected news articles that explicitly addressed unconscious bias, racism/bias, or institutional/systemic racism about New Zealand police. Data collection included articles on topics such as racism in New Zealand, racism in the media, policing and mass media, racism against Māori, media representation of Indigenous people, police and Māori, bias in the criminal justice system, colonisation, and police legitimacy. Articles that did not primarily focus on the topic or did not provide significant information about media representation and police bias were excluded. The researcher chose articles if they included concepts such as media portrayal of police, media bias, police-community relations, and unconscious bias in various combinations. The study also looked at articles about the topic,

such as studies on media portrayal of racial and ethnic groups, research on police perceptions of Indigenous people, and media coverage of police misconduct or controversial incidents. Furthermore, the following framing strategies and effects were examined when selecting articles if the article provided a solution to the proposed issue topic and what potential impact it might have on public perception or policy.

3.5 Data Analysis

The researcher employs a dual-method approach to address the research question, combining content and framing analysis. This involves examining news and newspaper articles alongside existing literature and studies to explore media representations of police bias and racism. Given the substantial content volume, the data is divided into three distinct categories, to reflect significant shifts in public discourse, media framing, and police acknowledgment of racial disparities in policing. Once sufficient data is collected, each category is analysed independently and the analysis will focus on identifying patterns in language, narrative framing, and thematic emphasis in media coverage during each period.

Timeframe 1: Pre Bush Era (Before April 2014)

The portrayal of police unconscious bias in New Zealand media must be understood within the broader historical and societal context of racial disparities in policing (Jackson, 1988). This timeframe spans from the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) through to the late 20th century. It captures foundational developments in policing and the media's portrayal of Māori. The police force and other state institutions were created within this colonial framework, embedding biases and power imbalances that persist today (Jackson, 1988; Cunneen, 2006). The New Zealand police force has been significantly influenced by colonial attitudes, contributing to ongoing bias against Māori (Cunneen, 2006). This institutional racism has led to distrust and negative perceptions of the police among Māori communities. The historical

context, including policies that restricted Māori land use and led to socio-economic disadvantages, has shaped the current disparities in policing and social outcomes for Māori (Savage et al., 2021). This period is crucial for establishing a baseline understanding of how racial disparities were historically represented often without any reference to concepts like unconscious bias. Media texts from this era will be examined to identify how Māori were framed in relation to the criminal justice system and how media discourse aligned with colonial and institutional narratives.

Timeframe 2: Mike Bush Era (April 2014 – March 2020)

This period begins with then-Police Commissioner Mike Bush's public acknowledgment of unconscious bias within the New Zealand Police in 2015. This shift in recognition is critical for understanding the evolution of police media portrayals of bias and racial disparities, as it introduced a new narrative framework to publicly discuss these issues. Analysis in this timeframe will focus on how the media represented this acknowledgment, whether unconscious bias was framed as a systemic or individual issue, and how the police's proposed reforms were reported. The study will assess the extent to which news coverage critiqued or endorsed these narratives. This timeframe is crucial because it sheds light on how media narratives shape public understanding of police practices and racial disparities. Media framing plays a crucial role in shaping the discourse around systemic racism, bias, and reform efforts within institutions such as the police force. Understanding how the media framed unconscious bias and its relationship to broader issues of systemic racism can help us assess whether the public has been adequately informed about the nature and extent of racial disparities in policing.

Timeframe 3: Andrew Coster Era (April 2020 - 2024)

The timeframe is significant concerning unconscious bias because it represents a period during which the New Zealand police made a concerted effort to acknowledge and address bias through initiatives like the understanding policing delivery programme. This programme was launched in 2021 when Andrew Coster became commissioner of the NZP to investigate the presence and impact of unconscious bias within the organisation (Cardwell, 2022). He was brought on as the reform commissioner. His public acknowledgement of unconscious bias and the launch of the Understanding Police Delivery (UPD) programme made a pivotal shift in how the police force began addressing racial disparities (NZ Police, 2024). This period is included to explore how media narratives have evolved in response to police initiatives aimed at addressing unconscious bias and racial disparities. The analysis will assess whether media portrayals have shifted towards deeper structural critiques or continued to focus on individual-level bias explanations. This time frame is crucial because it captures a transitional moment where unconscious bias became a focal point for police reform. While this framing allowed for some progress, such as introducing new policies and training, it also revealed the limitations of addressing bias at the individual level while confronting systemic inequalities. The persistence of racial disparities during this underscore the need for a more comprehensive approach that goes beyond acknowledging unconscious bias to addressing institutional and structural factors driving these outcomes.

3.6 Framing Analysis as a Methodological Approach

Researchers frequently use frame analysis to understand how print and other media present information. Media scholars have used the concept of framing to explain how the media structure their news delivery, promoting certain interpretations of events by selecting specific facts (Marais & Linström, 2012). In media research, frame analysis serves four primary functions: defining problems, diagnosing a course, making value judgments, and suggesting solutions (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing has been defined as a concept, approach, theory,

class of media effects, perspective, analytical technique, paradigm, and multiparadigm research program (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010, p. 2). "News is anything but an accurate representation of reality." This is what Oosthuizen (in Fourie 2001: 465) claims. Terkildsen and Schnell (1997: 881) argue that "framing is important whenever an issue can be presented in multiple ways, potentially influencing how people think about an issue." Qualitative framing analysis requires repeated and extensive engagement with a text and a holistic view of the material to identify frames. This approach to frame analysis examines the keywords and metaphors in the text, identifying what was included in the frame and what was left out (Marais & Linström, 2012).

The various news sources used different framing strategies. The articles were classified according to source type, and framing analysis was performed independently for each stratum. Patterns and differences in framing were examined. The researcher used framing analysis to identify the various ways in which the news media frames the issue of police bias/racism because, as previously stated, the news media does not always reflect reality. Wrongful media portrayal frequently influences our perceptions and understandings of specific issues. As a result, each category and time frame were analysed separately. Each period is significant in examining how the issue of unconscious bias/racism has evolved and what has changed over time. Individual news articles selected within a specific time frame served as the unit of analysis. Each article was read several times, and the researcher took detailed notes, which were later used to determine the frames. The researcher must know "how" and "what" to identify news frames. When looking for frames within the articles, words like institutional racism and systemic racism frequently appear, and these words represent what is known as bias. The same is true for implicit bias or racial prejudice, so when searching for unconscious bias, those terms were frequently mentioned or appeared instead of unconscious bias. This revealed a pattern and gave the researcher insights into how different parties shape and frame the issue, such as how the public understands it, how the media portrays it, and how the police interpret it. Through this structured approach to framing and content analysis, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how police

unconscious bias is portrayed in online news media. It highlights the role of framing in shaping public discourse and emphasises the importance of accurate and balanced reporting on complex issues such as unconscious bias.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the content and framing analysis to answer the research question: How does New Zealand news media portray police unconscious bias? The analysis focused on news articles from various media outlets to identify the recurring themes and frames that shape the narratives around police bias. Significant patterns, correlations and insights have emerged through rigorous data collection and analysis. The following sections detail the key findings organized around media representation of police unconscious bias, offering both quantitative content analysis and qualitative framing analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of media portrayal and the issue of this study. These findings not only contribute to the existing body of knowledge around police bias, but they also shed light on people's understanding and perspective regarding the issue. Each subsection offers a nuanced exploration of the data, supported by relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, to provide a robust foundation for interpretation and discussion.

4.1 Timeframe 1: Pre- Bush Era (Before April 2014)

Frame: Colonial Legacy and Institutional Racism underrepresented

Theme: Weak Historical Framing

While some media outlets acknowledge the historical context of police bias, the issue of colonialism's lasting impact on institutional racism is often underrepresented. Discussions on unconscious bias rarely connect police practices to New Zealand's colonial past, where policing has been historically used as a tool of control over Māori populations. Although there have been attempts at reform, advocates argue that these measures fail to effectively tackle the colonial history that has influenced policing, which has long been used as a means of controlling Māori communities since the 19th century (Savage et al., 2021). This suggests that despite reform efforts, advocates argue that policing in New Zealand continues to be

influenced by a colonial legacy. This critique positions reforms as insufficient in addressing deeper systemic issues, including the historical role of policing in controlling Māori populations. This framing aligns with broader media narratives around institutional bias and the persistence of colonial structures in modern institutions. Furthermore, it serves as a critique of the superficiality of reforms and a reminder of the enduring impact of colonial systems on modern policing. Its analysis within media coverage reveals the tension between reformist narratives and the acknowledgement of deep-seated institutional legacies.

The media frequently frames racial disparities in policing under the language of “unconscious bias,” a term that often obscures the deeper colonial roots of institutional racism in Aotearoa New Zealand. While such framing may signal a recognition of inequality, it tends to individualise the issue and deflect from the structural legacy of colonial control embedded within the justice system. This systemic bias is often marked under the terminology “unconscious bias” without fully acknowledging the impact of historical policing practices that disproportionately targeted Māori communities. There is substantial evidence of disparity in the justice system. Despite being only a minority demographic, Māori men are consistently overrepresented in media reports detailing police stops, taserings, and arrests.

In October 2007, the New Zealand Police, including members of the Armed Offenders Squad (AOS) and Special Tactics Group (STG), conducted a highly publicised series of raids in the Urewera region targeting alleged paramilitary training camps linked to Māori activists, including Ngāi Tūhoe figure Tame Iti:

“About 300 police, including members of the Armed Offenders Squad and Special Tactics Group, were involved in the raids... arrests were made under the Terrorism Suppression Act... The raids were highly controversial and their legitimacy was debated by politicians, the media and the public.” ... “In 2014 the Police Commissioner formally apologised to the Ruatoki community and Ngāi Tūhoe for police actions during the raids” (Wikipedia, 2007).

This highlights the disproportionate involvement of Māori in interactions with these specialized units. This over-representation is particularly concerning given that Māori

constitute a significantly smaller proportion of the overall population, indicating ongoing disparities in policing practices. The introduction of ARTs and the subsequent data on their deployment serve as a focal point for discussions about the militarization of policing in New Zealand, the impact on marginalized communities, and the broader implications for social justice and equity in law enforcement practices.

Bull (2001) argues that policing in 19th-century New Zealand was directed towards "those who, by class or race, were perceived to threaten actual or potentially colonial state and vision concepts of order and regularity" (p. 515). Within the context of colonisation, it is the colonised who pose a threat to the status quo. This underscores the central role of colonisation in shaping the justice system. Within this framework, the colonised Māori were not only perceived as a challenge to the emerging colonial state but also systematically positioned as "other" to justify their subjugation (Barnes et al., 2012). Media representations often reinforce negative stereotypes of Māori men as violent or criminal, perpetuating colonial narratives of disorder and threat. This remains embedded in modern institutions, perpetuating disparities and reflecting the ongoing impact of colonisation in New Zealand. The framing of Māori men as inherently threatening especially in discussions surrounding the use of Tasers suggests a racialised perception of danger rather than actual threat. A law review article in 2005 recounts a striking example:

"an unemployed Māori in his early 20s ... likely to be driving an early model car ... a repeat offender with previous traffic and criminal convictions ... young male Māori ... have little regard for others on the road" (Coxhead, 2005).

These descriptions collectively paint a picture of the young Māori male as poor, destructive, dangerous even inherently criminal.

Such narratives reinforce colonial stereotypes of the "violent Māori male" and legitimize excessive force through a racialised logic of pre-emption. As a result, media portrayals do not just reflect existing biases but actively participate in the construction and maintenance of racial hierarchies in policing. Furthermore, those media reports that highlighted these disparities often serve to draw attention to systemic racism and unconscious bias within the justice system by framing these issues through statistical evidence the media legitimises the claims

of Māori Communities and advocates for reform. The focus on disparities undermines the perception of police as neutral. Racial and historical biases influence forces of the law, showing that policing practises, and by linking modern disparities to colonial legacies, the media positions these issues as structural rather than isolated incidents. By connecting the data to the colonial history of policing, media representations reinforce the argument that disparities are not coincidental but are rooted in structures established during colonisation.

Historical explanations of higher Māori offending rates and imprisonment have consistently blamed Māori and not the settler state mechanisms that administered European Law. According to Savage et. al. (2021) Māori faced institutional racism within the judicial process as they were treated differently to non-Māori. Māori men are often depicted as more prone to criminal behaviour, which feeds into the narrative of "bad apples" within the community, which suggests that they are inherently more violent or criminal, leading to over policing and higher arrest rates. A study on police Ten7 found that Māori and Pacific men were disproportionately shown as violent criminals reinforcing negative stereotypes (Deckert et al., 2023). The media often focuses on offences committed without context or acknowledging the systemic factors. This framing can present them as "exceptionally" criminals rather than acknowledging the broader social, economic, and historical contexts (Surette, 2014). Headlines such as "Māori make up over half of New Zealand prison population" are familiar but often lack a deeper analysis of the underlying causes of these disparities. New Zealand mainstream media tend to portray Māori as "a problem" – as dangerous criminals, radicals, and activists, a threat to their country's social fabric (Barnes et al., 2012; Gregory et al., 2011; McCreanor et al., 2014). They have been portrayed as uncivilised, violent savages since the beginning of the European invasion of New Zealand, and such stereotypes continue to influence their representation of Māori today (Allen & Bruce, 2017; Bull, 2017; Cunneen & Tauri, 2016).

“Māori men are portrayed as unreliable and irresponsible across modern film and television media within New Zealand, leading to negative societal perceptions” (Hobbs, Weebly, n.d.).

Such portrayals, though sometimes meant to provoke empathy or critique social issues, can reinforce harmful stereotypes when not balanced with diverse and positive representations. This aligns with McCreanor's (2008) analysis, which found that Māori were frequently depicted in the media in connection with crime, poverty, and dysfunction framing their identity in negative, deficit-based terms. When repeated across multiple platforms, these images contribute to a societal perception of Māori men as unreliable, shaping public opinion and potentially influencing institutional bias in areas such as policing, employment, and social services. This framing places the blame for social issues on Māori culture or identity rather than addressing the structural inequalities, systemic racism and historical trauma that disproportionately affect Māori communities.

Institutional racism is firmly rooted within New Zealand's colonial history and within the New Zealand Police Service, which has contributed to the over-representation of Māori in State Care. Policing has endured as a colonial tool to coerce Māori into submission by force (Savage et al., 2021).

"The relationship that exists between the Maori as the tangata whenua of New Zealand and the Pakeha who settled in the country in the last 150 years is one of social, political and economic subjection. This unequal relationship is derived from the process of colonisation by an industrialised imperial nation of a tribal people isolated for a thousand years" (Coxhead, 2005).

According to Savage et al. (2021) the differential treatment incurred during this period is likely to have directly influenced contemporary rates of Māori imprisonment and offending. Differential treatment is linked to structural racism and the enduring colonial environment (Savage et al., 2021).

"It is within this context of an unequal relationship and subjection that some understanding of the media may be gained. The media in New Zealand has been controlled by Pakeha. It is seen and experienced by Maori as a Pakeha institution"

(Coxhead, 2005).

The policing practices in New Zealand are deeply intertwined with the colonial history that sought to control and suppress Māori communities, resulting in systemic biases that continue to this day (Hill, 1986). Acknowledging that policing practices are deeply rooted in New Zealand's colonial history demonstrates a shift in the media's narrative toward historical accountability. By explicitly linking contemporary systemic biases to the colonial project of controlling and suppressing Māori, this framing highlights the structural nature of racism in policing. It challenges the notion that bias is merely a result of individual prejudice or unconscious behaviour, emphasising instead the institutionalised and historically ingrained nature of such practices. Furthermore, Moana Jackson has long argued that police practices against Māori are shaped by historical colonial policies designed to control Indigenous populations.

"The idea that 19th century Māori had no real law or government proves the racism of colonial history" (NZ Herald, 2010).

He emphasized that Māori continued to engage with newcomers according to tikanga and maintained certainty of mana, meaning that colonial dismissals of Māori legal authority were deeply racist.

In contrast, framing these issues as manifestations of "institutional racism" or "colonial oppression" directly challenges the status quo and demands transformative change (Came & McCreanor, 2015). Over four successive decades, from 1950-1990, there were widespread systemic failures underpinned by structural racism that resulted in inadequate protection (Savage et al., 2021). When looking at media coverage, the majority fails to adequately link current police practices to colonial legacies, instead framing bias as a contemporary issue. This omission can obscure the role of historical injustices in shaping modern-day disparities in policing, particularly the over-policing of Māori communities. By presenting issues of police bias as contemporary problems, the media neglects the historical roots that inform these dynamics, leading to an incomplete portrayal of reality (Jackson, 1988). New Zealand police

said they could not explain the high rate of fatal shootings due to the different operating environments between countries. In an article for example about the coverage of police shootings the media often focuses on the immediate circumstances without delving into the systemic issues rooted in New Zealand's colonial past. This approach can lead to an incomplete portrayal of reality, neglecting how historical injustices continue to shape modern-day disparities in policing. Media coverage of policing in Aotearoa New Zealand frequently presents racial disparities through the lens of "unconscious bias," a framing that often obscures the historical and structural foundations of systemic racism. This language individualises police actions, detaching them from the broader colonial legacy that has shaped the justice system. The over-policing of Māori populations is a direct consequence of colonial policing methods, which continue to perpetuate systemic discrimination in contemporary law enforcement. However, few media narratives incorporate this historical context, which is critical to understanding the roots of current disparities. Walker (1990) reinforces the need for historical framing in public discourse, noting that media must engage with colonialism's long-standing impact if genuine reform in policing practices is to be achieved. Yet, many news reports fail to establish these links, portraying police bias as a contemporary anomaly rather than a product of enduring colonial structures. As Webb & Deckert (2023) observes, media narratives that fail to connect current police practices to historical injustices contribute to a misunderstanding of the complexities surrounding Māori over-policing. By omitting these contexts, media narratives risk misinforming the public and perpetuating the status quo. Statistical reporting alone often lacks explanatory depth.

Frame: Media normalisation of police narratives

Theme: Media reliance on official sources

A significant finding in the media analysis is the consistent prioritisation of police narratives in mainstream reporting. Media outlets frequently rely on official police statements and institutional reports, which results in the uncritical reproduction of perspectives that obscure the structural nature of racism in policing. For instance, much of the reporting on Māori crime

relies heavily on police press releases and official statements. As a result, broader questions about systemic bias or historical inequalities are rarely explored, and the public is presented with a version of events that reflects the police perspective. This highlights how media coverage can reinforce institutional narratives while underplaying structural factors that contribute to racial disparities in policing. Taylor further notes, when biases are framed as unconscious, the media obscures the systemic issues within policing that contribute to racial profiling and discrimination, allowing these practices to continue unchallenged. Such framings not only minimise the urgency of structural reform but also serve to uphold the status quo. By portraying bias as a product of individual psychology rather than institutional design, media narratives deflect responsibility away from systemic forces. Moreover, when media outlets uncritically amplify police statements, they risk reinforcing harmful stereotypes about marginalised communities, particularly Māori, and ignoring the historical and ongoing effects of institutional racism. The failure to critically analyse the relationship between police narratives and systemic bias allows for the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and a lack of accountability for police actions. The media's reliance on police narratives often leads to a lack of scrutiny regarding the broader institutional failures that enable bias.

Frame: The Overrepresentation of Māori in Criminal Justice

Theme: Focus on Individual level solutions

While some media coverage acknowledges the overrepresentation of Māori in the criminal justice system, this is often presented without sufficient examination of the structural and historical roots behind such disparities. Instead of contextualising these patterns within legacies of colonisation, state violence, or institutional racism, many reports default to generic references to “unconscious bias.” This framing fails to account for how systemic inequality has been perpetuated through generations of state practices. Discussions around the overrepresentation of Māori often lack a critical examination of the historical context, such as colonisation and its enduring effects, which have significantly shaped the current realities of Māori communities (Pool, 2011). Media narratives often simplify the discussion of Māori

overrepresentation by attributing it to unconscious bias, neglecting the broader socio-economic conditions and historical injustices that contribute to these disparities (Jackson, 1988). The disproportionate impact of policing practices on Māori communities is often underreported, with media narratives that overlook how systemic inequalities manifest in law enforcement actions (Schultz, 2019). The focus on Māori overrepresentation in crime statistics is frequently framed through a lens of bias, missing the opportunity to discuss the consequences of punitive policing practices on these communities (Department of Corrections, 2007).

When discussing Māori overrepresentation, the media often frames solutions regarding individual interventions, such as improving officer training or increasing cultural competency within the police force. This neglects broader systemic changes, reinforcing the idea that the issue can be resolved at the level of individual behaviour rather than through institutional reform. For example,

“The police are personally positioned around our neighbourhood because of a high crime rate. It doesn't make us feel safe having to see you constantly patrolling our streets, looking to target and make trouble for us” (Paewai, 2024).

This excerpt underscores the importance of acknowledging the colonial foundations that continue to influence contemporary law enforcement practices in New Zealand.

Furthermore, a case study by ANZSOG details the introduction of cultural training for police officers, covering topics like race relations and the Treaty of Waitangi, aiming to improve interactions between police and Māori communities (Boniface, 2007). Many media narratives propose solutions to Māori overrepresentation that centre on individual-level changes, such as increasing cultural competency training for police officers. This approach tends to individualize systemic issues, suggesting that improving personal behaviours and awareness among officers is sufficient to address deep-rooted disparities.

“Police initiatives have increasingly focused on cultural awareness courses to help officers understand Māori perspectives, yet critics argue that such programs, while useful, do not tackle the structural issues that drive disproportionate Māori contact with

the justice system” (Department of Corrections, n.d.).

Media portrayals that prioritise individual solutions reinforce the misconception that the challenges faced by Māori can be resolved through improved officer behaviour rather than necessitating comprehensive institutional reforms (Stanley, 2017; Savage et. al., 2021). The persistence of Māori overrepresentation cannot be addressed solely through individual-level solutions; rather, a commitment to structural reform and dismantling systemic inequalities is essential for meaningful progress. Moreover, media reporting on policing reform in Aotearoa New Zealand often highlights initiatives like de-escalation training as a response to public concerns over excessive force, particularly against Māori communities. However, these portrayals can oversimplify complex institutional problems by focusing on surface-level interventions rather than the structural conditions that enable over-policing. A critical issue raised in internal police discussions is the lack of consistent and reinforced support for de-escalation tactics, which reflects a deeper cultural resistance within the force to sustained change.

“While the police have introduced training programmes on de-escalation and cultural awareness, there is little evidence these initiatives alone will reduce Māori overrepresentation. The systemic nature of the problem is largely absent from media coverage, which tends to emphasise personal responsibility over institutional accountability” (Department of Corrections, 2007).

This quote highlights how media narratives often foreground individual interventions like training or behaviour change while downplaying the structural and historical factors driving Māori over-policing.

By framing unconscious bias as a solvable issue through incremental reforms, the media risks perpetuating the idea that the justice system operates fairly, even as disproportionate outcomes for Māori and other ethnic minorities continue. This narrative subtly denies the historical and structural conditions that have long contributed to these disparities. Moreover, the consistent emphasis on individual conduct detaches current practices from their colonial origins, limiting public understanding of institutional racism. The question remains whether it is an individual problem or the responsibility of an institution to

address bias. Some articles framed unconscious bias as an issue of individual responsibility, focusing on officers' personal attitudes, while others framed it as a broader institutional problem. Police acknowledge the need for officers to be aware of their own unconscious biases, but critics argue that focusing on personal attitudes ignores the systemic practices and policies that produce disproportionate Māori arrests and convictions. This illustrates how media coverage can frame bias either at the individual level (personal attitudes) or at the institutional level (structural practices), which influences public understanding of the problem.

This sentiment is echoed by Whaiti and Roguski (1998), who argue that perceptions of unfair treatment and racial bias by police have long eroded trust particularly among Māori and Pacific communities. These groups frequently report feeling that their interactions with police are influenced by racial stereotypes. Unconscious bias not only shapes individual encounters but also reinforces broader systemic inequities in policing, compounding the breakdown of community-police relations. Media narratives often foreground this distrust, situating it within longer legacies of racial profiling and state-led over-policing. However, the extent to which these narratives interrogate the structural causes behind such issues varies. Māori communities continue to express deep mistrust of the police, citing repeated experiences of over-policing and racial profiling. While some reports acknowledge this distrust, few explore the historical and institutional reasons that sustain it. Media coverage of such initiatives often adopts a positive tone, portraying police-led reforms as sincere and necessary. Training programmes on unconscious bias and cultural competency are frequently highlighted as pivotal in improving community relations (Murphy & Cherney, 2011). Headlines such as “World-leading research into systemic bias points the way” and “Police release progress report on work on the bias” reflect this framing, suggesting that progress is being made.

4. 2 Timeframe 2: Mike Bush Era (April 2014 – March 2020)

Frame: Unconscious bias as a systemic Issue

Theme: Unconscious bias as a shield for systemic racism / As a deflection from systemic racism

In 2014, when Mike Bush became New Zealand's Police Commissioner, he stated that:

"Unconscious bias is inherent in human nature and is not the same as deliberate racial discrimination" (Owen, 2015).

While Bush acknowledged the existence of unconscious bias, he differentiated it from racism, describing bias as a universal, unintentional predisposition. This statement reflects a standard media framing that individualises the issue of bias while minimising systemic racism by describing unconscious bias as an inherent part of human nature. It suggests that it is a natural, unintentional occurrence, which implies that the issue is a personal behaviour rather than a broader societal or institutional problem. The media often frame this distinction as a justification for why systemic racism may not be explicitly addressed. Systemic racism is frequently portrayed as a contested concept within law enforcement. Often, the media emphasise the resistance from police leadership or government officials to fully acknowledge systemic racism, presenting it as a polarising issue.

Articles sometimes critique how police leadership uses terms like "unconscious bias" as a softer way to address racial disparities, avoiding the more substantial implications of "racism". The media often frame those statements to reflect underlying tensions between individual accountability and systemic responsibilities. The framing suggests a reluctance by police leadership to confront the plain situation and historical patterns of discrimination. This distinction has been criticised for shifting focus to individual behaviours rather than addressing structural disparities, particularly in the treatment of Māori. The media often underscores how leadership's reluctance to use the term racism can signal a refusal to engage with systemic issues. A fair and unbiased police force is vital to the justice system. This highlights that the bias in policing is not just about individual prejudice but is deeply embedded within broader institutional and societal structures.

“We argue the concept of unconscious bias only masks the problem. The inherent racism that shapes our institutions and their policies and practices ... is the issue” (Auckland University of Technology, 2020).

Māori academic Moana Jackson is quoted critiquing the persistent cycle of police bias and lack of effective systemic reform. "Through every decade since, the New Zealand police have been shown that they engage in racist discrimination against Māori... and the police go straight back to engaging in racist discrimination" (Jackson, 1980). These representations imply that the over-representation of Māori in the justice system is not solely a result of individual prejudice but a consequence of systemic and historical factors embedded in the institution of policing. By presenting systemic bias in policing as a reflection of protests aside from inequality, the media underscores the interconnectedness of institutional racism and societal structures. This framing shifts the narrative from individual prejudice to systemic accountability, prompting discussions on reform and equity within New Zealand's justice system. Disparities in police use of force continue to highlight deep structural inequities in New Zealand's justice system. Media reporting often provides statistical evidence that directly challenges police assurances of neutrality and fairness.

For instance, Neilson (2019) reported that:

“Māori were “nine times more likely to be tasered” than non-Māori (The New Zealand Herald, 2019).

These figures directly challenge official narratives that deny systemic racism, highlighting how Māori remain disproportionately targeted even under initiatives that claim to address bias.

McGovern & Phillips (2017) argue, the media's normalisation of police narratives plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of policing and racial bias, often leading audiences to accept these narratives without question. By adopting this language, the media often positions unconscious bias as an unfortunate but inevitable flaw, rather than as a symptom of deeper institutional failure. Taylor further notes that when biases are framed as unconscious, the media obscures the systemic issues within policing that contribute to racial profiling and discrimination, allowing these practices to continue unchallenged. Similarly, Curcic (2019)

observes that the media frequently highlights Māori overrepresentation through a surface-level lens, lacking engagement with the enduring impacts of colonisation on Māori communities. The absence of critical historical context limits the public's understanding of the full scope of institutional harm, ultimately depoliticising the issue and framing racial disparities as accidental or isolated rather than systemic. Mike Bush stated that individuals are not deliberately targeted based on their skin colour. The difference between racial profiling and unconscious bias may feel the same to the person who is on the receiving end (Newstalk ZB Staff, 2019).

"We cannot have people thinking that they are being racially profiled or targeted. So if people think that, we as an organisation have got to own that and deal with it" (Newstalk ZB Staff, 2019).

Furthermore, an RNZ article states:

"Perception is a real concern we need to address" (Jones, RNZ, 2018).

This suggests that the problem lies in how people view the police rather than critically engaging with the deeper issue of how racial profiling and unconscious bias manifest in police practices. By stating that the police must address the perception of racial profiling, Bush acknowledges that public concern over bias is significant. However, his focus on perception rather than systemic reality replaced the media's tendency to downplay structural racism. The media often amplifies this framing by emphasising training and organisational responses to perceived bias, portraying police as responsive to public concerns without fully confronting the systemic nature of racial discrimination in policing. The problem is that this shifts the conversation from examining institutionalised practises to managing public relations, implying that the solution lies in changing public perceptions through individual officers' awareness and training rather than addressing the more profound structural changes needed to combat racism in the criminal justice system.

Many media reports emphasised the distinction drawn by police commissioner Mike Bush between unconscious bias and systemic racism, framing unconscious bias as a universal but unintentional human trait; however, this framing was often critiqued in the media as a deflection from deep institutional issues. Several articles highlighted how Bush's

statement differentiated unconscious bias from racism, which was widely circulated in official communications. In a 2015 interview, Bush stated:

"I think like any good organisation, you have to recognise that there can be some unconscious bias in your organisation. We've recently started some training with the executive, which will filter through the rest of the organisation, because the first thing you have to do is acknowledge that it exists" (Harley, The Stuff, 2015).

This reflects a particular way of framing unconscious bias that is quite common in official police and government communications. The police (and broader public institutions) often frame unconscious bias as a fixable human error within otherwise sound systems, using training programmes as a public response while avoiding deeper conversations about institutional or structural racism. While unconscious bias is still framed as an unintentional problem, as many news articles have shown, it is also well-meaning but flawed human behaviour that can be corrected through training or awareness programmes. The narrative emphasises that police officers do not intend to discriminate. However, their actions may still result in unequal treatment, thus humanising the police and downplaying the need for structural change. As Bush states:

"Everyone has implicit or unconscious bias. People are not intentionally targeted by the colour of their skin. Every organisation has it, and it is a natural human behaviour. Everyone has biases; we grow up with them" (Newstalk, 2019).

Furthermore, Bush was also sort of implying that:

"Everyone who enters the police has an unconscious bias against certain individuals, communities and so forth and that their bias unconsciously manifests itself in, say, a tendency to profile certain individuals/groups/communities during the course of police work" (Tauri, 2015).

The statement suggests that unconscious bias is an inherent part of human psychology, meaning that every police officer enters the force with some degree of implicit bias toward certain individuals or communities. This bias is not necessarily intentional or malicious but is shaped by social conditioning, media portrayals, and personal experiences. In policing, these

biases can unconsciously influence decisions, such as who officers choose to stop, question, or perceive as suspicious. This can lead to racial or ethnic profiling, where certain groups are disproportionately targeted, even if officers believe they are acting fairly. Media and public discourse on this issue vary. Some argue that unconscious bias is part of a larger systemic problem within law enforcement, requiring structural reforms such as policy changes and accountability measures. Others believe that unconscious bias training and awareness programs can help officers make more objective decisions. Another article discussed the police focus on unconscious bias as something that can be "trained away" through awareness and sensitivity programmes; however, Māori advocates criticised this approach, arguing that it fails to address "systemic and structural racism" and instead humanises individual officers discriminating appear unintentional and thereby limiting calls for comprehensive reform.

"Focusing on unconscious bias alone "humanises" the police force, which may inadvertently overshadow the call for structural reform."

"All humans have unconscious bias, and police are no exception to that" (Forbes, Stuff, 2020).

This framing reflects a tendency to offer surface-level solutions that maintain the status quo. It reflects the public's focus on individual behaviour and training programmes, obscuring the broader need for systemic change. Such framing also undermines accountability by shifting the narrative from deliberate institutional racism to unintended individual errors, making it easier for institutions to deflect criticism without implementing meaningful reforms. In doing so, the media inadvertently supports a cycle where disparities persist, and true equality remains unachieved. By focusing on unconscious bias, the police were able to present a socially acceptable explanation for disparities in policing while avoiding the more serious implications of systemic racism. Media outlets frequently referenced Commissioner Bush's statement about unconscious bias, framing them as attempts to shift public discourse away from accusations of intentional discrimination. The use of unconscious bias is a less controversial term seen as a way for the police to protect their public image by minimising the severity of racial disparities in their practices.

"Police strongly reject the racial profiling allegation, but training to combat "unconscious bias" was being stepped up. "We strive to be a fair, impartial and bias-free police service, and we continue to ensure we achieve this" (Jones, The New Zealand Herald, 2018).

These reflect a typical institutional response aimed at managing public perception by rejecting allegations of racial profiling while emphasising efforts to address unconscious bias. The statement frames the issue as one of unintentional individual behaviour rather than systemic practices, allowing the police to deny racial profiling outright while positioning themselves as proactive in combating bias. By focusing on unconscious bias training and affirming their commitment to fairness, the police signal a willingness to reform without directly addressing evidence of structural racism or discrimination practices.

This framing is significant in media coverage as it reinforces that the institution is fundamentally fair and unbiased, requiring only minor adjustments through training. It shifts the narrative away from deeper scrutiny of systemic issues, such as policies or practices that disproportionately affect marginalised communities. Media coverage of such statements often echoes this framing, focusing on the affirmative steps the police claimed to take while sidelining critical questions about whether these measures address the root causes of racial disparities in policing outcomes. Nevertheless, according to Davidson:

"There have been some positive signs, but it is probably going to take at least a generation of sustained work at all levels to stamp out and have a zero tolerance towards racial bias and profiling" (Jones, The New Zealand Herald, 2018).

The statement softens accountability by balancing acknowledgement of bias with optimism about progress but delays real systemic change by framing it as a long-term, generational project rather than an urgent institutional failure requiring immediate structural overhaul. This is shown by the ECU report (2013) stating that confessions of unconscious bias do not lead to diminishing institutional racism (ECU report, 2013). The ECU (2013) points out that to understand unconscious bias, we cannot merely examine the individual psyche but also our

institutions, cultures, and practices. Certain narratives like "unconscious bias may be used to deflect attention from institutional racism within the context of policing.

4.3 Timeframe 3: Andrew Coster Era (April 2020 – 2024)

The ex-police commissioner, Andrew Coster, continued to repeat this narrative of unconscious bias and initiated a research programme to explore this type of bias in the organisation (RNZ, 2021). The relabelling of systemic institutionalised discrimination as a form of bias lessens the visibility of entrenched structures of racism.

“Three decades after Moana Jackson’s *He Whaipaanga Hou* found systemic and irredeemable racism at every level of our criminal justice system, nothing has gotten better for us. Police racism against Māori is more brutal, more violent, more common. The bad old days are now” (TheSpinoff, 2020)

This excerpt highlights the persistent nature of systemic racism within New Zealand's policing, underscoring the importance of acknowledging the colonial foundations that continue to influence contemporary law enforcement practices.

"Although the police are very uncomfortable with the term, there is fairly clear evidence that Māori and particularly young Māori are racially profiled" (RNZ, 2020).

Despite the evidence of its existence, this quote highlights a tension between the police's discomfort with acknowledging racial profiling. Despite the discomfort, the media acknowledges the disparity and challenges the police to confront these realities. So, the media is inviting a critical engagement with the issue, urging a recognition of the systemic nature of racial profiling. The media frequently reported on the distinction drawn by police leadership between unconscious bias and systemic racism, portraying unconscious biases as an individual issue rather than a systemic problem. Also an RNZ report noted that:

“Terms like 'systemic' and 'structural' racism were not well understood by officers, and the use of the term 'racism' was considered very polarising” (Cardwell, RNZ, 2022).

This highlights a gap in understanding and willingness within the police force to engage with systemic racism. The media frames this as a sign of resistance to addressing deeper structural issues, contributing to the perception that systemic iniquities are downplayed. By emphasising unconscious bias, police leadership was portrayed as framing racism as an unintentional and universal human trait. Media narrative is often described as a form of avoidance where leadership can acknowledge disparities without committing to meaningful systemic reform. The reluctance to use the term "racism" is presented as a significant barrier to addressing the issue. For example, RNZ (2020) reported:

"The police say their actions are not racially motivated and are working to address unconscious bias through training and policy changes" (RNZ, 2020).

While this article acknowledges bias, it fails to interrogate the deeper colonial and institutional structures that produce these outcomes, reinforcing a narrative that places the problem at the level of individual attitudes rather than systemic conditions. Another article stated that:

"Police admit to the presence of unconscious bias but reject the use of the term 'racism' to describe issues within the police force" (Paterson, *The New Zealand Herald*, 2024).

The media frames this avoidance as indicative of a broader resistance within the police force to acknowledge the institutional nature of discrimination. This framing often includes perspectives from activists and academics who argue that systemic racism cannot be dismantled if it is not explicitly acknowledged.

Media outlets noted that Commissioner Coster cautioned against labelling policing disparities as racism, emphasising a focus on unconscious bias as a more palatable explanation. Articles have discussed how police leadership by referring to biases and unconscious side steps accusations of systemic racism. Workman (2021) has argued that "labelling racism as unconscious bias conveniently shifts responsibility from the institution to individuals (p. 324). For example Neilson (2022) suggests:

"The use of the term "bias" has become a "scapegoat for not addressing racism directly."

This perspective calls for a deeper examination of institutional structures and practises rather than solely focusing on individual biases. By framing bias as an unintentional individual issue, the media allows the systemic nature of racism to be overshadowed. In this framing, discussions about systemic racism are often downplayed or avoided altogether. Here, the media, by focusing on unconscious bias or individual behaviour, does not sufficiently address the deeper institutionalised forms of racism that shape policies, practises, and outcomes, which then allows institutions to appear as though they are taking actions, such as through bias training, without making meaningful structural changes, to combat racial inequality. Hence why, the term "bias" then becomes a convenient way to deflect attention from the more challenging and uncomfortable task of addressing institutional and systemic racism.

Frame: Systemic vs Individual Perspectives on Bias

Media coverage of racial bias in New Zealand policing has evolved over recent years, reflecting a complex interplay between institutional efforts and public perception. While some reporting acknowledges steps taken by police to address racism such as bias training and internal reviews many outlets critique these initiatives as insufficient in addressing the deeper, systemic issues at play. An article in 2020 by the Spinoff reported that:

"Over the past couple of years, New Zealand police have taken some steps to address racism in the force. But until that racial bias is eliminated completely, we should not be militarising police" (Rapira, The Spinoff, 2020).

Here, the media are critiquing the ongoing efforts by New Zealand police to address racism, emphasising that while progress has been made, systemic racial bias remains a significant issue. Furthermore, it links the persistence of racial disparities to broader concerns about police practises, particularly the militarisation of law enforcement. However, raising the police through tactics, equipment or authority without first addressing racial bias risks exacerbating existing inequalities as Māori and other marginalised groups are more likely to face this proportionate scrutiny, arrests, and use of force. Introducing military-style policing could

deepen distrust in communities already disproportionately affected by over-policing, therefore prioritising the call for systemic reforms such as dismantling structural racism and fostering community-oriented policing before expanding police power. Media framing around this issue often balances highlighting police reform efforts with critiques of their limited impact, suggesting that without eliminating racial bias, militarisation may worsen inequality rather than enhance public safety.

Frame: Unconscious bias over systemic racism

Across the analysed media content, unconscious bias is positioned as the primary issue, overshadowing systemic racism. The media has focused on unconscious bias and portrays it as an individual-level problem often described as an unintentional and personal prejudice held by officers rather than as part of a broader structural issue.

“Unconscious bias describes a phenomenon that we all have internalised belief systems or schemas that we're unaware of ... and that can be based on race...” (One News, 2020)

Further examples of media focussing on the individual rather than the institution involve a focus on training.

"Unconscious bias is often addressed through training and community engagement aiming to modify individual behaviour without labelling the broader system inherently racist" (RNZ, 2020).

This highlights the media's focus on unconscious bias as an individualised issue that can be addressed through personal interventions rather than systemic reforms. By emphasising training in community engagement, the narrative shifts the spotlight to behaviour modification rather than institutional change. This approach, according to Auckland University of Technology Kylie Quince, underscores a reluctance to address the structural elements that contribute to racial disparities, potentially downplaying the role of systemic racism (RNZ, 2020).

"I think we can refute any claims of there not being racism in the New Zealand police with their own data." "Their experience (Māori) of racism and systemic injustice, those are experiences that resonate with us - they came from a different place and different history so that I would not overlay that too much, but racism is racism, systemic injustice is systemic injustice" (RNZ, 2020).

Kyle Quince's quote is a powerful call to action, emphasising the importance of empirical evidence and lived experiences in dismantling racism within the New Zealand police force. It reinforces the idea that systemic injustice must be addressed universally regardless of historical or cultural nuances and challenges institutions and society to confront these realities. Moreover, it challenges the media to confront institutional denials, amplify Māori experiences and adopt direct language when addressing racism and injustice. Alternatively, the then police Minister Stuart Nash takes the approach of denying racism:

"Systemic racism is not a problem in New Zealand police force, but there may be issues of unconscious bias." "Police had no issue with systemic racism, and the organisation was addressing unconscious bias" (RNZ, 2020).

The above statement by Stuart Nash reflects a broader institutional strategy of denying systemic racism, framing the issue instead as one of unconscious bias while also acknowledging racial disparities. This presents a critical challenge for the media: whether to expose the contradiction and demand accountability or reproduce institutional narratives that minimise systemic issues. It is an example of how media framing can perpetuate or challenge institutional denial of systemic racism in the New Zealand justice system. Furthermore, media framing unconscious biases as the primary issue risks reinforcing the narrative that Māori's over-representation can be addressed without significant institutional change. The problem is that the media often echoes this language, which depoliticises the issue and reduces it to an unintentional or individual-level problem rather than one requiring systemic reform. The persistence of such disparities suggests that framing bias as an individual, unintentional issue ignores the structural drivers of unequal policing outcomes. This reliance on official discourse reinforces a broader media trend that normalises police perspectives.

Nevertheless, NZ police have failed to reduce the number of Māori arrested. (Te Ao Māori news, 2017). This is significant as quantitative data continues to reveal persistent disparities. As the Ministry of Justice (2020) points out, Māori are significantly overrepresented in New Zealand's criminal justice system, comprising a disproportionate percentage of arrests, convictions, and incarceration rates compared to their population size. The media occasionally reports on these alarming statistics, with some articles noting that:

"Māori make up over 50% of the prison population, despite being only about 15% of the overall population" (Just Speak, 2018). These disparities are mirrored in policing outcomes. Bond (2020) found that:

"Māori made up more than 50% of arrests and use of force by members of the armed response teams police" (Bond, RNZ, 2020).

As the previous section suggests, this narrative allows police to publicly acknowledge bias while resisting calls for fundamental reform. Against this backdrop, calls for genuine transformation must emphasize systemic change rather than superficial acknowledgments. As Kylie Quince noted:

"Ultimately, this is about meaningful system change through learning opportunities both in training and on the job.. recommendations cover the gamut from police training and operations to service delivery," emphasising the need for comprehensive systemic reforms rather than only addressing individual bias (RNZ, 2024).

The media portrays the police force as resistant to change, focusing instead on easier, less controversial initiatives like unconscious bias training. This is contrasted with calls from Māori leaders and experts for systemic reforms to address historical and ongoing racial disparities.

"Reforms need to target the entire policing structure rather than just focusing on individual officers' biases (RNZ, 2022).

The article discusses the need to view unconscious bias within the context of "structural racism and systemic inequalities.

"Unconscious bias serves as a convenient explanation that avoids confronting the structural racism within the police force" (Quince, 2024).

By framing racial disparities in policing as the result of individual biases that can be corrected through training, the media enables the narrative that the problem is rooted in personal actions, not in the broader entrenched structures of racism within the police force itself. This allows police institutions to focus on surface-level solutions like unconscious bias training without addressing the more complex systemic problems and historical legacies of racial injustice. Other articles similarly linked unconscious bias to systemic racism, arguing that reforms needed to target not just individuals but the entire policing structure. For example the Māori Party said in an article:

"Police do not have an unconscious racial bias – the bias is more overt, and systemic racism permeates the whole criminal justice system" (Weekes, The New Zealand Herald, 2022).

Unconscious bias in police forces is seen not merely as isolated behaviour but as part of a systemic pattern reinforcing broader inequalities. This quote reflects a significant critique of the narrative often adopted by law enforcement. It challenges their framing of racial bias as unconscious, arguing that it minimises the more profound, more entrenched systemic racism within institutions like the police and the broader criminal justice system.

Many articles framed unconscious bias as a systemic issue within the police force, often discussing it in the context of institutional structural racism. An article finds bias and structural racism in New Zealand police.

"The over-representation of Māori in the criminal justice system could not be explained solely by "racism" on the part of individual police officers or even "structural racism" but had its roots in the wider failure of society" (RNZ, 2024).

Here, the media are implying that the police are expressing the racism inherent in New Zealand society. This serves to remove the blame from the police by framing police racism as a reflection of societal bias against Māori with the suggestion that Police racism is then unavoidable. Nevertheless, as an arm of the state, the police have made an inexcusable and

substantial contribution to the over-representation of Māori in state care. For instance, while *RNZ* (2024) reported that:

“Māori are disproportionately affected by police use of force such as tasers”, such accounts seldom explain how these practices echo colonial mechanisms of control.

This disconnect reinforces a superficial understanding of bias in policing and avoids confronting the structural racism embedded within institutions (Savage et al., 2021). Historically, policing in New Zealand functioned less to protect Māori communities than to monitor and contain them. Contemporary disparities particularly the disproportionate targeting of Māori men—mirror this legacy, underscoring that present-day policing issues cannot be understood in isolation from their colonial origins. For example, *RNZ* (2024) revealed that:

"Māori are involved in 54% of all events where a Taser was produced and 45% of events where the taser was discharged" (RNZ, 2024).

"Māori are proportionately at least three times more likely to be apprehended for a criminal offence than non-Māori" (RNZ, 2024).

These figures highlight a clear and persistent pattern of disproportionate policing. However, many mainstream media outlets report these disparities without embedding them in the broader historical context of colonialism, where policing functioned explicitly to surveil and control Māori populations.

These statistics highlight a persistent pattern of disproportionate policing and the targeting of Māori communities. However, many mainstream media outlets report these disparities without embedding them in the broader historical context of colonialism, where policing functioned explicitly to surveil and control Māori populations. The omission of this context allows such disparities to be presented as contemporary anomalies rather than as outcomes of enduring colonial structures and systemic racism. Moreover, research indicates that:

“Physical appearance including size, gender, age, and ethnicity often play a role in police officers perception of aggressive behaviour and their decision to use force”

(RNZ, 2024).

This underscores how unconscious and conscious biases are operationalised in practice, with ethnicity explicitly shaping officers' responses and amplifying the risks Māori face in encounters with police.

The disparities continue beyond policing. According to The Facts (2023):

"Māori men, who make up approximately 8.7% of the general population, accounted for 40.9% of all violent crime proceedings in 2023."

This reinforces that racialised inequality persists at every stage of the justice system, from frontline encounters to courtroom outcomes, illustrating that unconscious bias cannot be separated from broader systemic racism.

"In the 1970s, most children taken into state care were Māori and over-representation of Māori children in care has continued" (The Guardian, 2022).

This narrative acknowledges historical trends but attributes them to societal dynamics, suddenly framing police actions as inevitable products of the system within which they operate. Both articles highlight this contradiction, showing that while systemic racism reflects broader societal issues, police practices amplify its effects. Media coverage of police racism and Māori presentation in state care illustrates the complex interplay between societal bias and institutional accountability. By framing racism as both inevitable and inexcusable, the media prompts critical discussions on the role of police within a colonial legacy or calls for systemic reform to address these enduring inequalities.

News media has played a role in shaping public discourse by reinforcing the idea that bias in policing is an unconscious individual-level issue, thereby downplaying systemic racism. By focusing on isolated incidents of racial bias and representing them as correctable through training, the media contributes to the normalisation of these practices, implying that the justice system remains fundamentally fair and neutral despite evidence to the contrary.

"Blaming the entire system for the actions of a few 'bad apples' is counterproductive and demoralises those officers who serve with integrity" (NZ Herald, 2023).

The few bad apples metaphor is frequently employed in media coverage to frame racial discrimination as the result of individual misconduct rather than a reflection of systemic issues (Bains, 2018). The narrative reassures the public of the justice system's fairness by suggesting that most officers operate with integrity. Here, the media reinforces public trust in the police and justice system because readers are more likely to view incidents of racial bias as unfortunate exceptions rather than as evidence of a broader problem. By deflecting from structural critiques, this narrative protects institutional legitimacy and limits public understanding of systemic injustice, which highlights how the media can shape public discourse in ways that normalise racial disparities.

“While there have been instances of racial profiling, these are isolated cases and do not reflect the overall integrity of the police force” (Stuff, 2023).

Statistical data on racial disparities in arrests, stops, and convictions of Māori in New Zealand contradicts the idea of isolated incidents. Framing incidents as exceptions to an otherwise fair system perpetuates the myth of institutional neutrality. This implies that racial disparities can be addressed through individual accountability rather than structural change.

Unconscious bias in policing is not simply an unconscious and unintentional phenomenon but is overt and actively perpetuated within practices and policies. The media often uses such critiques to highlight the limitations of unconscious bias training, suggesting it inadequately addresses the reality of racial profiling and discriminatory practices that are deliberate or systemic. The claim that systemic racism "permeates the whole criminal justice system" expands the critique beyond policing to include courts, sentencing, and incarceration. Here, the media often frame systemic racism as being evidenced by disparities in arrest rates, conviction rates and imprisonment statistics, particularly for Māori in New Zealand. The persistent disparities in policing outcomes such as the disproportionate incarceration rates of Māori men, harsher sentencing for Māori and Pacific individuals compared to Pākehā for similar offences, and policing practices like stop and search operations that disproportionately target Māori highlight the structural nature of racial injustice (McIntosh & Workman, 2017). An article by RNZ (2024) states:

"New figures released by the Department of Corrections show Māori continue to be disproportionately represented in the prison population, making up over 50% of all inmates despite comprising just 16.5% of the general population. Experts say these statistics reflect deeper structural issues within the justice system, including discriminatory policing practices and biases in sentencing. 'This is not just about individual actions it is a systemic problem,' says a spokesperson from Just Speak, a youth-led justice advocacy group."

This quote functions as a typical example of how media outlets report on racial disparities: by using hard statistics to point toward deeper institutional failings, and by including expert commentary to frame the issue as systemic rather than incidental or individual. Many articles linked institutional racism to the over-policing of Māori communities. Findings indicate that these biases are embedded in the police structure, indicating that addressing them requires more than individual officer reform. A 2024 report from RNZ revealed that:

"Results indicate that inequity exists in the policing system and operates at different levels: structural, institutional and interpersonal" (RNZ, 2024).

We have to confess to unconscious bias to move towards diminishing institutional racism (Tate & Page, 2018). Here, it shows that unconscious bias may be a starting point for addressing deeper systemic issues yet highlights the insufficiency of individual-level reforms and tackling institutional racism. The media often frames this issue by linking institutional racism to the over-policing of Māori communities, emphasising that addressing such disparities requires structural reform rather than solely focusing on individual behaviours. By framing unconscious bias as something that must be first "confessed," the media positions it as an entry point for dialogue but not a solution, which underscores the need to move beyond personal awareness to confront the systemic structures and policies embedded within policing institutions. Reports that tie institutional racism to the disproportionate policing of Māori communities serve to challenge the narrative that racial disparities are the result of individual prejudice alone, instead pointing to broader entrenched inequalities within the justice system.

"Māori are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, but the blame should not be on the police" (RNZ, 2024).

The statement reflects a common media tendency to deflect responsibility from institutions by framing over-representation as a complex societal issue rather than a problem rooted in systemic racism within the police force. By explicitly stating that the blame should not rest on the police, the media neutralises critique of institutional practices, redirecting attention away from the structural factors that perpetuate disparities. This type of framing absolves the police of responsibility, presenting them as reactive agents within a flawed system rather than active participants in perpetuating racial disparities.

"Māori disproportionately affected by state and faith-based care abuse. Up to 200,000 people were abused in care between 1950 and 2019, with Māori reporting higher levels of physical abuse compared with other ethnicities" (McDowell, RNZ, 2024).

This history of institutional abuse reinforces how systemic racism has been embedded across state agencies, not only in policing but also in the wider machinery of government care and control. Situating present-day police bias within this trajectory highlights that disproportionate policing of Māori cannot be understood outside of the colonial legacy of surveillance and harm. The quote serves as a media example of how deeply racialised harm is reported, but under analysed. The media sometimes reports racial disparities in state care without adequately linking them to the colonial and structural forces that created them. It helps demonstrate how media framing can obscure institutional accountability by not addressing why these disparities exist. While these figures highlight the persistence of disproportionate policing of Māori, some media critiques emphasise the inadequacy of framing such disparities solely as "unconscious bias." As one RNZ article (2024) stated:

"Simply framing these issues as 'unconscious bias' neglects the need for structural change and overlooks the colonial roots of institutional racism."

This reflects a gradual shift in media discourse, where the limitations of unconscious bias as an explanatory framework are increasingly acknowledged, and calls for systemic accountability are foregrounded.

Earlier RNZ reporting also illustrates this tendency. For example, RNZ (2021) noted that:

“Police will not say it is an inquiry into racism.”

This reflects a framing that deliberately avoids naming systemic racism, instead positioning the issue as a matter of individualised “unconscious bias.” Such reliance on official discourse reinforces a broader media trend that normalises police perspectives. As McGovern and Phillips (2017) argue, the media’s normalisation of police narratives plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of policing and racial bias, often leading audiences to accept these narratives without question. By adopting this language, the media positions unconscious bias as an unfortunate but inevitable flaw, rather than as a symptom of deeper institutional failure. Other reporting reinforced this emphasis on training and awareness. For example, 1 News (2020) highlighted that:

“The police are investing in cultural competency training to help officers better understand Māori communities.”

While seemingly progressive, such reporting framed solutions in terms of interpersonal awareness, thereby avoiding systemic critique. By doing so, the media reinforced the belief that improving individual relations could resolve deeply rooted inequities, sidelining calls for structural transformation and decolonisation of policing practices. Similarly, Helm (2024) called for “empathy-driven leadership and cultural responsiveness to build trust and address the root causes of crime,” it emphasizes the importance of positive interactions and calls for better funding for training to improve police-community relations.” Focusing on training and individual behavioural changes can inadvertently shift the responsibility for addressing systemic issues onto individual officers, thereby absolving the police institution from accountability. Furthermore, it can also mislead the public into believing that individual training is sufficient to address deeply rooted institutional biases. As one report notes:

"This lack of a consistent approach results in a fragmented and inadequate learning system for supporting and reinforcing de-escalation learning among officers. Participants pointed out the need for support from leadership and a cultural shift within the police force to prioritise de-escalation over more physical and invasive tactics" (The New Zealand Herald, 2024).

This quote highlights how institutional commitment beyond individual training is essential for meaningful reform, yet often overlooked in both media narratives and policy responses.

Media narratives that emphasise unconscious bias often frame it as a problem rooted in individual behaviour, placing the burden of change on officers rather than addressing the broader systems that uphold racial inequities in policing (Eberhardt, 2019). This approach contributes to a perception that the justice system itself is fundamentally sound and requires only minor adjustments, such as cultural competency training or policy tweaks, rather than deep structural reform. For example, Cardwell (2022) notes:

"Police have released a progress report on their work on bias, but 15 months after the programme started, there are few concrete findings or definitive actions."

This focus on individual-level interventions without tangible institutional accountability illustrates how media reporting can reinforce the notion that unconscious bias is a matter of personal improvement, rather than a symptom of embedded systemic racism. As a result, the root causes of racial disparities in policing remain largely unchallenged. A similar framing appeared in media coverage of the long running TVNZ show *Police Ten 7*. Auckland City Councillor Efeso Collins was particularly vocal in calling out racialised media portrayals, demanding the cancellation of *Police Ten 7* on the grounds that the programme:

"Feeds on racial stereotypes, and it's time you acted as a responsible broadcaster and cut it" (Collins, RNZ, 2021).

The long-running reality show disproportionately portrayed Māori and Pasifika individuals as offenders, reinforcing a narrative that young brown men were naturally violent or dangerous,

despite crime statistics reflecting more complex social realities. An internal review recommended that:

“TVNZ staff undertake training on Te Tiriti o Waitangi, bias, and racism” (Tovao, 2024), reflecting a wider tendency to frame these problems as issues of “unconscious bias” to be corrected by training.

However, such approaches proved insufficient, as the show continued to rely heavily on police perspectives while avoiding deeper engagement with structural racism and inequality in the justice system. The show’s eventual cancellation illustrates the limits of training-based solutions when broader systemic reform is required.

However, not all coverage adopted this surface-level framing. Some media outlets went further, acknowledging that racism within the justice system is not confined to individual bias. As Weekes (NZ Herald, 2022) argued:

“The criminal justice system is permeated by overt and systemic racism, not merely unconscious bias.”

This framing represents a shift towards recognising the structural dimensions of racism, yet it often stops short of addressing colonisation as the root of these inequities. The system itself was designed to marginalise Māori and protect settler interests, embedding racial inequality into laws, policies, and policing practices. This structural legacy is visible today in the persistent over-policing of Māori, their disproportionate prosecution rates, and harsher sentencing outcomes. Not all reporting, however, was willing to directly engage with the structural roots of bias. For instance, an article in The Guardian (Neas, 2022) stated that:

“There are too many factors to try to compare, and to then subsequently understand what leads to the outcomes of these types of events.”

Such framing risks minimising the role of institutional racism by presenting outcomes as overly complicated or unknowable, thereby diluting calls for systemic reform. In an article from People Against Prisons, Aotearoa Emilie Rakete expressed concerns that:

"Framing unconscious biases as an unintentional error could lead to surface-level corrections instead of structural reforms." "There is no doubt that bias exists."

“The issue is that the police will not stop engaging in racist discrimination... and that they will put off making any of these meaningful changes” if bias is treated only as a corrective human flaw diverting attention from systemic issues” (Cardwell, RNZ, 2022).

This critiques the framing of unconscious bias as an unintentional human flaw, arguing that such a narrative risks diverting attention from the systemic racism embedded within institutions like the New Zealand Police. Media often emphasises training programmes and awareness initiatives as solutions to racial disparities, putting training bias as an individual-level issue rather than a systemic problem. This framing alliance with public relations strategies allows police to appear responsive and reform-minded while avoiding deeper accountability for racial profiling and systemic discrimination, particularly against Māori communities. By framing unconscious bias as an inherent but correctable issue, the media creates a narrative that minimises the need for structural reforms. This perspective risks normalising race-based disparities in policing outcomes, such as the over-representation of Māori in arrests and incarceration.

While these reports highlight how unconscious bias is often framed at the individual level, other media outlets extended the framing further. For instance, RNZ noted:

“Unconscious bias is about individuals and how they see and view the world and make decisions; bias more broadly looks at the impact of an organisation as a whole” (RNZ, 2021).

This presents bias as both an individual and organisational issue, but often stops short of acknowledging the historical and structural roots of racism in policing. Similarly, another article suggested that:

“The overrepresentation of Māori and the criminal justice system cannot be explained solely by racism on the part of individual police officers or even structural racism but has its roots in the wider failure of society” (RNZ, 2024).

This broader framing minimises the importance of addressing specific institutional racism within policing, instead locating the problem in society at large. Activists and scholars, however, directly challenged this minimisation. As Paewai (RNZ, 2024) argued:

“The New Zealand police apologise for engaging in racist discrimination against Māori, and the police go straight back to engaging in racist discrimination against Māori.”

Likewise, Professor Kylie Quinn called for deeper reforms:

“Ultimately, this is about meaningful system change...our recommendations cover the gamut from police training and operations to service delivery” (RNZ, 2024).

These critiques emphasise that systemic racism cannot be reduced to either individual attitudes or abstract “societal failures,” but requires confronting the embedded institutional practices of policing.

The erosion of public trust further illustrates the consequences of framing unconscious bias in limited ways. A New Zealand Police report (2024) acknowledged:

“Police bias undermines the very fabric of trust we should have in those meant to protect us.”

Media accounts stressed how such bias significantly damages confidence among Māori and Pacific communities, reinforcing how media framing of unconscious bias has real-world implications for police–community relations. According to an article by Workman (2022):

“People still use the term “unconscious bias” as an excuse. They say: “I didn’t realise I was doing it — therefore, I can’t be blamed” (Workman, E-Tangata, 2022).

Furthermore, an article by The New Zealand Herald (2021) noted:

“Using the word unconscious bias sounds slightly less offensive” (The New Zealand Herald, 2021).

This reflects of how unconscious bias is framed and operationalised within the New Zealand context, particularly in the policing of Māori communities. The first statement by the ECU report underscores that acknowledging bias at the individual level is insufficient to dismantle the structural racism embedded in police institutions. By emphasising the need to examine institutions' casuals and practises, this framing challenges and narrative that individual officers' reform can resolve systemic inequalities. The second quote critiques how "unconscious bias" is sometimes used to avoid accountability. By claiming bias was unintentional, individuals or institutions can deflect responsibility essentially saying, “I didn’t

mean to be biased, so I'm not at fault." This framing can excuse harmful actions and stall meaningful change by shifting focus from outcomes to intent. Lastly, the third quote highlights a common media critique that focusing on unconscious bias can be a distraction. This framing positions unconscious bias as a convenient explanation and denies systemic failings and personal flaws. It also implies that the media and institutions may use such narratives to soften the conversation around racism and avoid addressing its structural roots. Using the word unconscious bias instead of racism further critiques the linguistic framing of unconscious bias as a euphemism that sanitises discussions of racism. In New Zealand, where over-policing and over-representation of Māori in the justice system are significant issues, this framing can minimise the severity of institutional racism and make the problem more palatable for public consumption. It shows that the media both critiques and complicates the discourse around unconscious bias in New Zealand. While acknowledging bias is a real issue, the media highlights its limitations as a framework for addressing systemic racism. By framing unconscious bias as a softer, less confrontational term, they may contribute to a discourse that avoids the structural reforms necessary to address racial inequities in policing. According to police Association president Chris Cahill:

"There are issues around unconscious bias, and police are not without fault. However, police were already researching and addressing factors that might lead to such bias. So, they are owning up to the fact that they want to understand why it is that Māori are stopped, spoken to and arrested by police in more numbers than others" (Weekes, The New Zealand Herald, 2022).

Cahill acknowledges the existence of police being unconsciously biased and admits that Māori are being treated differently. However, it also frames the police as proactive in researching and addressing these disparities. Nevertheless, this is a partial admission of responsibility signalling that the police recognised the existence of bias, albeit framed as unconscious and unintentional resident systemic or deliberate. The media might frame this as a cautious acknowledgement of bias without fully confronting the real issue. This framing suggests that the police are taking steps in the right direction but are not fully transparent.

In E-Tangata, Yates (2024) praises police openness:

“So far is the responsiveness and openness of the police to undertake the project, in stark comparison to the culture of denial that exists overseas. In that regard, the New Zealand Police lead the world. It was also prepared to innovate and experiment in order to gain the trust and confidence of the public.”

Furthermore, Quince states:

"If the police are not delivered fairly and equitably to all citizens no matter their ethnicity, disability, sexuality or other characteristics, it requires us to investigate the root causes and make recommendations for meaningful systemic change" (New Zealand Police, 2024).

While such reporting recognises genuine efforts, some scholars caution against over-relying on training as a panacea. The medias portrayals of reform may overstate their effectiveness, creating a sense that bias is being sufficiently addressed without the need for deeper structural change. This narrative risks shifting focus away from the need for comprehensive institutional reform. Indeed, Yates (2024) acknowledges key gaps in police training:

“For many years now, the focus in training has been on understanding what you lawfully can and can't do, but not on when and how to use discretion in different circumstances, or on de-escalating potentially violent or difficult situations. While there is some de-escalation training at the college, officers have told us it's still not nearly enough.”

This highlights a critical shortfall: while officers are taught legal boundaries, they are not adequately trained in compassionate or context-sensitive application of discretion. This gap can lead to unnecessarily aggressive policing especially in interactions with vulnerable or marginalised individuals. Tuiburelevu et al., (2023) assert that both historical and contemporary experiences of discriminatory treatment have led many Māori and Pacific peoples to view police as lacking legitimacy. This perspective is often misunderstood or dismissed in mainstream discourse, as highlighted by legal scholars and community advocates. In New Zealand there is a specialized unit within the New Zealand Police called

the Armed Response Teams (ARTs) who were established to respond swiftly to incidents involving firearms or other high-risk situations. These teams were equipped with firearms and tactical gear, enabling them to handle potentially dangerous scenarios such as armed robberies, standoffs, and incidents involving individuals who may pose a significant threat to public safety. The ARTs were introduced to provide a more rapid response to violent crimes and to support frontline officers when dealing with armed or highly dangerous offenders (Buttle, 2023). One particularly powerful example appears in a Pacific Media Network article by Khalia Strong (2025), which amplifies community reflections on intergenerational trauma linked to policing:

“Our families still carry the trauma of events like Operation Pot Black in the 70s, cops stopping us in the middle of the street just because we look brown, ‘show me your passport’ and then it led to horrible, traumatic things like the Dawn Raids. Our people don’t forget those things. It remains in our families, our communities, our psyches” (Strong, PMN, 2025).

This quote underscores the enduring impact of racially targeted policing and illustrates how such historical events remain deeply embedded in collective memory. The media’s inclusion of these voices positions these harms not as isolated incidents, but as part of a broader, enduring pattern of racialised policing. Strong further captures the ongoing divide in perceptions of police:

“For others, police presence is just a part of life, it’s safety, it’s ‘they’re just doing their job’, but for marginalised communities, it’s a reminder that we’re being monitored and that we’re not fully trusted” (Strong, PMN, 2025).

This highlights the stark contrast in how police presence is experienced where dominant groups may interpret it as protection, minoritised groups often perceive it as surveillance. Media representations of these experiences help challenge the prevailing assumption of police neutrality and call attention to racialised disparities. In addition to these community narratives, several reports present empirical data supporting claims of institutional racism. Jurist News (2024) documents alarming disparities:

“Police were 11 percent more likely to prosecute Māori than NZ Europeans for the same offence, 54 percent of taser events were against people experiencing mental distress, and when photographing children, police concentrated on whether their actions were lawful instead of the effects on public trust and confidence (Rive, JustNews, 2024).”

While this reporting provides crucial evidence of inequity, its focus on legality over legitimacy reflects a common media framing one that risks downplaying the deeper societal consequences. By centring procedural lawfulness rather than community harm, such narratives may inadvertently obscure the structural roots of these disparities. Media portrayals often connect racial stereotypes to policing outcomes, constructing a broader narrative that situates unconscious bias as a critical factor in systemic injustice. Reporting frequently highlights the disproportionate impact on Māori and Pacific peoples, framing their mistrust as a rational response to both historical trauma and ongoing discrimination. The media tends to present the issue through a lens of fairness and legitimacy, advocating for reforms that address bias as essential steps toward restoring public trust. The New Zealand Police themselves have acknowledged these challenges:

“People in many countries, including New Zealand, have questioned the legitimacy of policing” (New Zealand Police, 2024).

Such institutional acknowledgments are frequently included in media coverage to demonstrate responsiveness. However, this can also reinforce institutional framing portraying the problem as one of public perception rather than systemic practice. This framing risks diminishing the lived experiences of discrimination among Māori and Pacific peoples and contributes to a narrative that treats trust as a communication issue, rather than a matter of substantive justice. Further reinforcing these concerns, Tuiburelevu et al., (2023) note that perceived discrimination contributes to widespread disillusionment with the justice system among Indigenous and Pacific communities. The resulting alienation deepens the rift between these communities and state institutions. Additional reporting in E-Tangata by Yates (2024) offers further evidence of racially disparate policing:

“Both Māori and Pasifika complaints also referred to greater levels of force which included intimidation, assault (such as punching and kicking), and the use of tasers and police dogs.”

These accounts contribute to a broader narrative of excessive and racially selective enforcement, reinforcing perceptions that these communities are disproportionately targeted and mistreated. In response to these concerns, several articles emphasise police efforts to address unconscious bias through training and reform initiatives. According to Inside Government (2024):

“NZ Police says the UPD offered an unfettered view into the current operating system to tackle inequities faced by whānau Māori and communities across New Zealand, establishing a benchmark for policing in partnership with the public.”

Similarly, the New Zealand Police (2024) note:

“Whilst this new report will be for the incoming Commissioner and Executive to consider, the recommendations are broadly in line with work already underway in Police across a range of different work programmes.”

Other articles contrasted unconscious bias with systemic racism, with media commentators arguing that focusing on unconscious bias allowed the police to avoid acknowledging the deeper, more damaging issue of institutional racism. Te Pāti Māori co-leader Rawiri Waititi said:

“What is unconscious bias? Is that being biased while asleep? We want the police to admit that they have systemic racism” (Weekes, The New Zealand Herald, 2022).

By focusing on unconscious bias, police leaders avoid admitting to the existence of systemic racism within the force. This critique echoed in several media reports that argued that unconscious bias was a surface-level intervention that failed to tackle the root causes of racial disparities.

“Fifteen months after starting its bias training programme, police had few concrete findings or definitive actions raising questions about its tangible impact on reducing racial disparities” (Cardwell, RNZ, 2022).

While biased training is a step, it risks becoming a tick box exercise failing to confront the entrenched racism in police practice that disproportionately affects Māori. This highlights the limitations of unconscious bias training as a stand-alone solution to address racial disparities within the New Zealand police force. It critiques the performative nature of such initiatives and underscores the risk that these programmes may serve more as a symbolic gesture than as effective measures to dismantle institutionalised racism. These efforts may avoid addressing deeper structural issues, such as discriminatory policies or practices, by framing the issue as individual bias rather than systemic inequity. Furthermore, it points to the lack of measurable progress from these interventions and highlights the disconnect between the intent of such programmes and their actual outcome.

Many articles have used the term institutional racism rather than unconscious bias. Institutional racism as a structural issue is often obscured by terms like "unconscious bias." This frame suggests biases are embedded within the system rather than from individual prejudices. In 2021, an article by RNZ stated that there was a report by the New Zealand police that discussed institutional factors, noting that:

"Police and subject disproportionately target Māori to greater use of force particularly in lower socio-economic areas, which suggests that racism is moving into the police structure rather than arising solely from individual officers biases" (RNZ, 2021).

This statement highlights institutional or systemic racism within police practices, using the example of disproportionate use of force against Māori, especially in lower socio-economic areas. This shift in focus from individual prejudice to structural conditions aligns with critical perspectives on policing and racism. It suggests that reform efforts need to address how police are trained, deployed, and incentivised, not just how they personally feel about different ethnic groups. It also opens up the conversation about how race and class intersect to shape policing outcomes in Aotearoa New Zealand. This tendency to focus on unconscious bias while denying systemic racism was also evident in political discourse. Chris Hipkins said:

"He believes there is unconscious bias within the NZ police but not institutional racism".... When asked if the police institution was racist, he said, "It was a broad cross-

section of New Zealand society, and if we look at the history of New Zealand society, they have been practising views and attitudes in the past that do not reflect the type of society we aspire to today" (Hipkins, 2022).

His statement reflects a standard narrative in discussions about policing and racism where unconscious bias is acknowledged, but institutional racism is denied. He frames the issue as reflective of societal attitudes rather than systemic problems within the police institution itself. This framing shifts responsibility from the police as an organisation to society as a whole, downplaying the specific role of institutional practises and structures in perpetuating racial disparities. Furthermore, his reference to New Zealand's history and the evolution of societal values acknowledges past discriminatory practices but a voice directly addressing whether those practices remain embedded within current systems. This, on the other hand, creates a narrative that focuses on progress and aspiration, subtly deflecting accountability for present-day issues such as the over-policing of Māori communities and their disproportionate representation in the justice system. Media framing of this type of statement often reflects the tension between acknowledging individual or societal biases and confronting systemic racism. By limiting the discourse to unconscious bias, such narratives can obscure the need for structural reforms within the police force, such as reviewing policies and addressing institutional cultures that sustain racial iniquities.

Frame: Progress and Limitations of Police Reforms

Theme: The Impact of Police Training on Unconscious Bias

Media coverage of the UPD programme launched to assess unconscious bias within the police was mixed. While some reports highlighted the initiative as a step forward, others pointed out its limited impact and lack of significant findings even after 15 months of research. Articles such as "Police Release Progress Report: Work on Bias but Few Concrete Findings at This Stage" and "Police Launch Investigation into Unconscious Bias Against Māori" initially presented the UPD programme as evidence of police efforts to address bias. In an article from Inside Government (2024), Commissioner Andrew Coster stated that:

"It is a genuinely innovative partnership that has allowed us to make real progress in a relatively short period of time."

He further remarked:

"Equally, the research has provided a range of new insights for us, and I'm committed to exploring how we maximise the value of all this work. We welcome this level of scrutiny and expectation as an important part of Police being accountable to the community, and ensuring we retain and build trust from the community" (Inside Government, 2024).

The programme specifically focused on Police systems, rather than individual officer behaviour, and was "sense-checked by officers from the realities of day-to-day policing" (Inside Government, 2024).

However, later media coverage became more critical of the programme's limited actionable results, with commentators arguing that such initiatives are insufficient for addressing deeper systemic issues. Despite efforts to reduce bias through training and policy changes, the media continued to report on the disproportionate number of Māori arrests, suggesting that unconscious bias alone cannot explain these disparities. For example, a 2024 RNZ article found that Māori men are more likely to be stopped, tasered, and prosecuted by police, concluding that:

"Being Māori increases the likelihood of prosecution by 11% compared to NZ Europeans when all other variables remain constant" (RNZ, 2024).

These findings indicate that while unconscious bias training is important, it may not be sufficient to eliminate the systemic factors contributing to the overrepresentation of Māori in the criminal justice system. Further advocacy from Māori leaders like Sir Kim Workman has emphasised the need for systemic reforms rather than surface-level interventions like bias training, arguing that:

"Such training alone cannot address the structural inequities contributing to differential policing outcomes" (RNZ, 2024).

Critiques of unconscious bias training suggest that it often reinforces a "safe" approach to addressing racism, focusing on awareness rather than structural change. Such training can create an illusion of progress without tackling the foundational inequalities that underpin systems like policing. This approach may lead institutions to offer superficial reforms that ultimately preserve existing hierarchies of privilege and exclusion (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; DiAngelo, 2018; Kendi, 2019).

Media coverage often amplifies these concerns, framing unconscious bias training as performative and insufficient. Meaningful progress, according to critics, requires systemic reforms such as decolonising the justice system, implementing equality-focused policies, and increasing Māori leadership within institutions. Without addressing structural inequalities, unconscious bias training risks becoming a symbolic gesture rather than a transformative solution. The literature further shows that New Zealand police and the wider criminal justice system have historically struggled to confront issues of racism and the legacy of colonialism (McIntosh & Workman, 2017). Commissioner Coster acknowledged that part of the research into unconscious bias was to "establish the terms and parameters of the debate" (RNZ, 2021). However, Coster also warned:

"People have to be careful about labels because that ends up being some of the talking past of each other" (RNZ, 2021).

This reflects the tension between individual and systemic understandings of racism within New Zealand policing. While unconscious bias is framed as an unintentional, universal human tendency, critics argue that this framing diverts attention away from systemic racism evidenced by disproportionate policing outcomes for Māori. Coster's cautionary approach toward using the term "racism" was further illustrated when he stated:

"If you say racism to an officer, they will feel like they are being called individually racist" (RNZ, 2021).

In contrast, advocates argue that racism refers to systemic structures that consistently disadvantage one group over others. Thus, framing bias as unconscious and unintended risks minimising institutional accountability for enduring disparities. As Waititi (2021) and Neilson

(2022) argue, this language can unintentionally maintain the comfort of those in power while delaying critical reforms. The media's reporting often reflects this critique, highlighting the disconnect between leadership rhetoric and persistent disparities. Coverage tends to frame unconscious bias initiatives as deflecting from the more uncomfortable but necessary conversation about systemic racism and colonial legacies within New Zealand's justice system. Using neutral language may foster dialogue, but it risks postponing genuine change by failing to directly name and address the structures that perpetuate injustice.

Articles discussed the presence of racial bias within the New Zealand police and emphasised the need for systemic change. They highlighted that while individual biases are problematic, they often reflect broader institutional issues.

"The release of a major report into bias in policing shows deep systemic change is needed" (Rahman, The Spinoff, 2024).

Furthermore,

"When the Commissioner announced the project, we had media reporting that we were looking for unconscious bias and individual racism. That is not it at all. We are looking at what the evidence shows about systemic bias, which is about policies of the police, the procedures, the practices, the legislation" (Workman, E-Tangata, 2022).

Coster clarifies that the police project focuses on systemic bias, examining policies, procedures, practises, and legislation, which contrasts with how the media initially framed the issue. Early reports often emphasised unconscious bias and individual racism, reflecting a narrower interpretation of the police's intent. This framing has led the public to view the initiative as addressing personal prejudice among officers rather than tackling institutional factors that perpetuate disparities. This divergence in media portrayal shapes public perception, with some seeing the police efforts as progressive and others viewing them as insufficient or misdirected. Neilson reported in 2022 that:

"Police have come a long way, and unconscious bias is a word that has been accepted right across the spectrum" (Neilson, RNZ, 2022).

According to Māori Development Minister Willie Jackson, past leadership in police has accepted unconscious bias. He admired the changes the different commissioners have brought in over the last few years, so he doesn't see that as racist at all (Neilson, RNZ, 2022).

"Unconscious bias is a narrow topic that's about individuals and how they see and view the world and make decisions, but bias more broadly looks at the impact of an organisation as a whole," Coster said (RNZ, 2021).

Views on the use of the term 'racism' were mixed and would likely provoke an adverse reaction from some members of the workforce. The term 'racism' generates strong feelings and is not about personal behaviour, it will be focussed on structural/institutional matters in line with the focus of the overall programme. It is important to consider how the legacy of colonialism influences how different social/ethnic groups view the police and vice versa.

Lastly, it is important to note that Webb & Deckert (2023) suggest that although today's mass media may present more complex and subtle narratives than in the past, they still play a key role in reinforcing racism and upholding the structures of the colonial state. This reflects the ongoing tension between progressive reporting and entrenched systemic biases. While modern media increasingly highlight systemic inequities, such as racial disparities in policing and the justice system, their coverage often frames these issues in ways that sustain colonial narratives. For example, Māori's overrepresentation in crime statistics is frequently reported as a problem of individual or community failure rather than the result of historical dispossession and systemic oppression (Department of Corrections, 2007). Media narratives may focus on Māori as offenders rather than victims of structural inequities perpetuating stereotypes of criminality. Even when addressing systemic racism, coverage often avoids challenging the foundational colonial structures underpinning these disparities, thereby limiting calls for transformative change. The media produce and reproduce Māori as deviant and threatening in what Gargett (2005, 1) has described as a 'continuing drone of colonialism' that seamlessly reproduces our historically unjust status quo" (p. 137). This framing aligns with the interests of the colonial state, which benefits from maintaining a narrative that downplays its role in creating and perpetuating inequalities. By doing so, the media reinforces the status

quo, ensuring structural reforms addressing colonial legacies remain sidelined. While the language of bias and inequality may appear more progressive, the underlying function of preserving power dynamics rooted in colonisation persists, as seen in the limited critical engagement with Māori calls for Tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) (Webb & Deckert, 2023).

4.4 Quantifying the Narrative: Media Patterns in Framing Police Bias and Systemic Racism

While the above qualitative framing analysis already helped to analyse how police bias is framed in news reporting the study also employed a quantitative content analysis to identify overall patterns and reoccurring themes and patterns. This will be shown in the section below. As indicated in Table 1 the frame “Unconscious Bias as a Deflection from Systemic Racism” appeared in 65% of the analysed articles, while the theme of “Disparities in Police Discretion and Māori” was present in 75% of the coverage. These findings suggest a strong emphasis on police discretion disparities, with unconscious bias frequently positioned as a factor that shifts focus away from systemic racism.

4.4.1 Table 1: Representation of Themes and Frames in Media Coverage

Theme/ Frame	Frequency (%)
Disparities in Police Discretion and Māori	75%
Unconscious Bias as a Deflection from Racism	65%
Police Training Reform on Unconscious Bias	55%
Public Statements on Unconscious Bias	50%

Additionally, Table 2 highlights that 65% of the articles focused primarily on unconscious bias while only 30% mentioned systemic racism as a contributing factor to police disparities. This indicates a tendency in media and narratives to frame bias as an individual level issue rather than a broader structural concern.

4.4.2 Table 2: Media Focus on Unconscious Bias vs. Systemic Racism

Theme/Frame	Frequency (%)
Focus on Unconscious Bias	65%
Mention of Systemic Racism	30%
Focus on Police Reforms	40%
Criticism of Progress	25%

Further analysis in Table 3 reveals that the most prevalent framing across the article supports “Unconscious bias as a systemic issue,” appearing in 70% of the analysed articles. Meanwhile the frame “Focus on training and reform” was present in 40% of the coverage. These findings indicate that while unconscious bias is acknowledged as a systemic issue reform efforts remain a significant but less dominant focus.

4.4.2 Table 3: Prevalence of Systemic vs. Individual Framing

Theme/Frame	Frequency (%)
Unconscious Bias as a Systemic Issue	70%
Focus on Training and Reform	40%

Individual Responsibility	30%
Public Perception and Trust	50%

Overall these findings demonstrate a recurring media narrative that acknowledges unconscious bias but often frames it in ways that deflect from deeper discussions on systemic racism. The emphasis on training and reform further underscores the tendency to propose individual or institutional adjustments rather than addressing broader structural inequalities.

4.5 Summary of Findings/ Conclusion

The data analysis reveals several significant findings regarding racial bias within the New Zealand police force, highlighting the persistent challenges of institutional and systemic racism, particularly against Māori communities. Racial bias within the NZ police force is deeply rooted in systemic racism, particularly against Māori communities. Historical and institutional factors stemming from colonial practices have resulted in persistent disparities in the treatment of Māori by the police. This unconscious bias stems from systemic racism, which refers to unintentional prejudiced behaviour, though both contribute to the ongoing discrimination. The analysis also highlights the role of the media in reinforcing negative stereotypes about Māori, exacerbating the issue. Despite initiatives like the UPD programme addressing unconscious bias, these efforts have been largely ineffective in tackling the deeper systemic issues. The framing of racial disparities because of unconscious bias by police leadership appears to deflect attention from the more pervasive problem of systemic racism. Ultimately, the findings emphasise that addressing racial disparities within the police force requires a comprehensive approach that targets the systemic structures and policies perpetuating inequality among residents, focusing solely on individual biases. These findings highlight the complexities of addressing racial bias within the New Zealand police force, as well as the importance of a

comprehensive approach that goes beyond individual accountability to address the systemic roots of racism.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for understanding the role of media in shaping public perceptions and discourse on police bias and racism. This research underscores the importance of media literacy and critical engagement with information about law enforcement practices by unpacking the prevailing themes and framing strategies employed by different media outlets. This thesis contributes to the evolving discourse on media representations of police bias and racism in several key ways: Integrating content analysis and framing analysis provides A holistic understanding of media representation, offering insights into the explicit content and implicit framing devices used in news coverage. By exploring the nuances of media framing and content, the study deepens our comprehension of the complexities surrounding police bias and racism. It highlights the diversity of perspectives and narratives in media coverage and underscores the need for nuanced, context-aware reporting. Furthermore, the identification of prevalent themes and framing strategies can inform public discourse and policy-making efforts aimed at addressing police bias and racism. It underscores the importance of holding media accountable for responsible and accurate reporting on matters of social justice.

4.6 Addressing the Research Question and Comparing Findings Across Time Frames: Shifts in Understanding and Addressing Unconscious Bias in New Zealand Policing

The findings show that New Zealand media consistently portrays police unconscious bias as a critical issue, but with important nuances across different timeframes. Media narratives link unconscious bias to broader systemic racism, which is framed as deeply rooted in the colonial legacy of New Zealand's policing practices. The media highlights the disproportionate impact of policing on Māori communities, reinforcing the perception that racial bias is not merely an issue of individual prejudice but rather a systemic problem embedded in police structures.

Over the three timeframes, this narrative has evolved but remains consistent in its portrayal of the ongoing impact of colonialism. Each timeframe reflects a distinct stage in the media and police narratives surrounding racial inequality, with shifts in how the issues are framed and addressed. By comparing the three timeframes, we can highlight both continuities and changes in the discourse. The Pre-Bush Era lacked a focus on "unconscious bias," a concept that would later become central in discussions about racial disparities within New Zealand policing. Instead, media narratives in this period primarily centred on overt forms of discrimination or racial disparities, without the framework of unconscious bias. The emphasis was more on the effects of colonial legacies, but discussions around systemic racism were limited and disconnected from contemporary police practices. Māori overrepresentation in the justice system was often framed as a contemporary issue or isolated incident, rather than a result of deeply embedded systemic structures. While there was an awareness of colonial histories, this was not fully linked to current policing practices or seen as a significant cause of ongoing disparities. Bias was often portrayed as a general societal issue, without critically connecting it to the police institution itself. In this era, media narratives largely minimized or failed to address the structural and historical roots of systemic racism within New Zealand policing. Disparities in policing, such as the over-representation of Māori in arrests and incarcerations, were often framed as isolated incidents or the result of unconscious bias, rather than being recognized as part of a broader system of institutional racism. This perspective framed police bias as a contemporary issue that could be addressed through individual behaviour change, like training, while ignoring the colonial legacies where police forces historically marginalized Māori communities. A significant challenge during this period was the lack of engagement with the historical context, which limited the ability of the media and public discourse to confront the lasting impact of colonization on the justice system. As a result, superficial reforms like unconscious bias training were positioned as effective solutions, without addressing the structural changes needed. Additionally, Māori men were frequently depicted in the media as inherently criminal, reinforcing colonial stereotypes that connected Māori identity to deviance and social disorder.

The Mike Bush era represented a significant shift in the institutional narrative, with an explicit acknowledgment of unconscious bias within the New Zealand Police, particularly with Bush's 2015 public admission of bias. This era marked a shift from a denial of systemic racism to the recognition that unconscious bias contributed to racial disparities in policing. However, while this acknowledgment was progressive, it still framed the issue within a narrow focus on individual bias, often downplaying the structural and historical factors at play. Media coverage of the time increasingly highlighted the limitations of unconscious bias training as a standalone solution. Critics, including Māori advocates and scholars, argued that addressing unconscious bias at an individual level did not tackle the systemic and institutional factors that perpetuate racial disparities. The media, in contrast to the earlier era, became more critical of superficial reforms, but still struggled to directly challenge the broader institutional structures. This era saw an increase in the recognition of systemic inequalities, but a reluctance to label these disparities as "systemic racism," with some media opting instead for terms like "societal bias" or "unconscious bias." The dual framing of racial inequality acknowledging it as a problem but reframing it as an individual flaw reflected the continuing struggle to confront and address the root causes of racial injustice in policing.

The Andrew Coster era marked the most progressive turn in terms of acknowledging racial disparities and introducing reforms aimed at addressing unconscious bias. Coster's leadership pushed for a more equitable and community-focused approach to policing, exemplified by the launch of the Understanding Policing Delivery (UPD) program. However, despite these efforts, the persistence of Māori over-representation in the criminal justice system, particularly in arrests, prosecutions, and sentencing, demonstrated the limitations of framing racial disparities primarily through the lens of unconscious bias. The media, during this era, was more critical of the police's emphasis on unconscious bias as a catch-all explanation for racial disparities. Journalists and commentators increasingly called for a shift away from individual-level solutions, arguing that unconscious bias training, while helpful, could not address the deeper structural issues embedded in New Zealand's policing system.

Critics also pointed out that framing unconscious bias as an individual issue allowed the police to avoid addressing institutional and colonial factors that continue to shape policies and practices, such as racial profiling and the over-policing of Māori communities. The media's critique of this framing became more pronounced, as they questioned whether the reforms were substantive or merely symbolic.

4.7 Similarities Between the Timeframes

Across all timeframes, there is a consistent acknowledgment of racial disparities in the policing of Māori communities, but these disparities were framed differently depending on the era. In all cases, there was resistance to fully confronting systemic racism and a tendency to focus on individual behaviour or unconscious bias as the primary explanation. The colonial legacy remained a recurring theme in the Pre-Bush Era and continued into later timeframes, although the connection to contemporary policing was more direct and critical in the Andrew Coster Era. Moreover, in all timeframes, the media struggled to fully address the colonial legacies of policing, though this was more pronounced in the earlier timeframes. Even when police leadership acknowledged unconscious bias, they often stopped short of addressing the historical role of police in marginalizing Māori communities. Lastly, across all periods, media and police were hesitant to label racial disparities as the result of systemic racism. Instead, the disparities were often framed as unintentional or as a product of societal bias rather than structural inequality.

4.8 Differences Between the Timeframes

The **Pre-Bush Era** was largely framed around historical and overt racism, with less focus on the nuances of unconscious bias or systemic factors. Policing was viewed through the lens of colonialism and structural inequalities, but there was limited engagement with solutions. The **Mike Bush Era** introduced the concept of unconscious bias as a potential solution but also

revealed the limits of this framing, as it shifted focus from structural issues to individual behaviour. The introduction of unconscious bias was a significant shift in the discourse, but it did not fundamentally challenge the system. Furthermore, the recognition represented a departure from earlier denials of bias and laid the groundwork for a shift in how racial disparities were discussed in the media. The **Andrew Coster Era** continued the unconscious bias framing but added more media criticism and calls for deeper structural reforms. This era is characterized by a growing critique of the inadequacies of focusing on unconscious bias alone and increasing calls to address systemic racism more directly. The Bush and Coster eras saw increasing media critique of unconscious bias training as an inadequate response to systemic racism. Media coverage during these periods became more critical of the emphasis on individual responsibility and highlighted the failure to address structural inequalities within policing practices.

In contrast, the Pre-Bush era lacked such critical engagement, and the focus remained more on individual actions and perceptions. In the earlier timeframes, Māori communities were often framed in the media as inherently criminal or problematic, reinforcing negative stereotypes. In contrast, the later timeframes began to reflect a more nuanced view, with increasing recognition of systemic inequalities and the need for reform. However, even in the more recent era, media narratives still struggled to fully distance themselves from colonial stereotypes, particularly in the context of over-policing. While all three eras focused on unconscious bias as an individual issue, the later timeframes, particularly under Andrew Coster, began to more openly challenge the effectiveness of this focus. The framing shifted slightly toward a call for institutional reform, though still not fully confronting systemic racism as an entrenched part of policing. Earlier periods, particularly before 2015, were more focused on individual biases or cultural misunderstandings, without a critical examination of the police institution itself.

4.9 Reasons for Discrepancies

The shift from the Pre-Bush Era to the Bush Era can be attributed to a growing global and local recognition of implicit and unconscious bias as part of the broader conversation around racial inequality. This shift was influenced by evolving academic and public discourse on racism, as well as increased attention to police practices worldwide. The change in leadership from the pre-Bush era, through Mike Bush, to Andrew Coster marked different approaches to confronting racial disparities. While Bush began the process of acknowledging unconscious bias, Coster's approach pushed for more public-facing reform initiatives, though still framed within the limitations of individual accountability. The discrepancies between timeframes can also be explained by differing levels of political will and institutional resistance. While the Pre-Bush Era saw limited public acknowledgment of the problem, the Mike Bush and Andrew Coster Eras represent attempts by police leadership to respond to public pressure and emerging understandings of racial inequality. Media narratives shifted in line with changes in public policy and police leadership, with each era reflecting varying degrees of progress, resistance, and critical engagement with the issue of racial inequality in policing. Moreover, over time, media coverage became more sensitive to the critiques of unconscious bias as merely symbolic. The growing public demand for systemic change, influenced by Māori advocates and scholars, pressured the media to engage more critically with institutional racism.

The early "unconscious bias" framing (instead of systemic racism) started under Bush, but it wasn't deeply developed or publicly emphasized yet. Under Bush the New Zealand Police started using "unconscious bias" language especially in 2019 when public conversations about policing and racial profiling increased. Media reporting on unconscious bias was emerging, but not as intense or critical as it became later. Under Coster the unconscious bias narrative became much more formalised and public. Coster, more than

Bush, was under direct public pressure to address systemic racism, particularly post-George Floyd and in global "Black Lives Matter" context (2020–2021).

In conclusion, the findings show a clear progression in how New Zealand media portrays police unconscious bias over the three timeframes, moving from an emphasis on individual bias to a more nuanced understanding of systemic racism. While earlier periods framed the issue as one of individual prejudice, the more recent era reflects a broader societal shift towards recognizing the structural nature of racial inequalities within law enforcement. The findings confirm that unconscious bias alone cannot resolve racial disparities in policing and that meaningful reform requires addressing deeper, systemic issues. The evolution of media narratives over time aligns with this conclusion, highlighting the growing recognition of the need for comprehensive, institutional reforms to tackle systemic racism in New Zealand policing.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter will review the purpose of the study, the research question, the literature review, and the study's findings. It will then present conclusions, discuss them, and make recommendations for practice and further research. The primary goal of this research was to determine how the media portrays police unconscious bias, which brings attention to systemic issues and inequities. Furthermore, the study sheds light on how unconscious bias is constructed, discussed, and contextualised, revealing how these factors shape our understanding of bias. It also looked at the perception of unconscious bias and its representation by the media, which can influence people's understanding of police legitimacy. To critically examine how New Zealand news media have portrayed police unconscious bias, this discussion is structured around three key timeframes: **the Pre-Bush Era (Before 2014)**, **the Mike Bush Era (April 2014 – March 2020)**, and **the Andrew Coster Era (April 2020–2024)**. These periods were selected not only for their historical and institutional relevance but also for the ways they reflect shifting narratives around race, policing, and accountability.

The Pre-Bush Era provides essential historical context, tracing how colonial ideologies embedded systemic racism within policing structures, long before the language of unconscious bias entered public discourse. This period establishes a foundation for understanding how media traditionally framed Māori in relation to law enforcement. The Mike Bush Era marks a pivotal institutional moment, where unconscious bias was first publicly acknowledged by police leadership (Scoop, 2015). Media during this period began to engage with the term more explicitly, offering a lens into how bias was depoliticised and individualised, rather than understood systemically (McCreanor et al., 2014). Finally, the Andrew Coster Era is defined by more formalised efforts to investigate and mitigate unconscious bias through state-led programmes like Understanding Policing Delivery (New Zealand Police, 2021). This phase represents an attempt at reform, yet also reveals the limits of unconscious bias as a framework when systemic issues remain unaddressed (Came et al., 2017). Together, these

timeframes illustrate the evolving strategies of media representation, institutional accountability, and public discourse surrounding race and policing in Aotearoa.

5.1 Timeframe 1: Pre-Bush Era (Before April 2014)

The findings reveal a persistent gap in media narratives addressing systemic bias's structural and historical roots within New Zealand policing. While some media outlets acknowledge the colonial legacy of policing, they often frame the issue as disconnected from current practices, thereby minimising the systemic racism embedded within the justice system (). This narrative undermines efforts to address the more profound structural changes necessary to confront institutional racism. A recurring theme in the findings is the media's tendency to frame police bias as a contemporary issue, often using terminology like unconscious bias. This framing shifts attention away from the colonial origins of policing in New Zealand, where law enforcement was historically used to control and suppress Māori communities (Jackson, 1988; Hill, 2009). Scholars such as Bull (2001) argued that colonial policing practises targeted groups perceived as threats to the emerging colonial state, embedding racial hierarchies into institutional structures. Media coverage frequently acknowledges disparities in policing, such as the disproportionate use of tasers or higher arrest rates for Māori men (Workman, 2011; Newbold, 2016). However, the media risks presenting these disparities as isolated or incidental rather than structural and systemic by failing to link these consistent practices to colonial histories (Nairn et al., 2006).

The representation of Māori in media narratives also perpetuates stereotypes that reinforce systemic racism. Māori men are often depicted as inherently violent or criminal, with headlines emphasising offending rates while neglecting the broader socio-economic and historical contexts that contribute to these disparities (Rankine et al., 2014). For instance, studies of programmes like Police 10/7 highlight the over-representation of Māori Pacific men as violent offenders, reinforcing colonial narratives of disorder and threat (Yan et al., n.d.). Such portrayals feed into public perceptions that blame Māori culture or identity for social

issues rather than addressing structural inequalities rooted in colonisation (Jackson, 1988; Spoonley, 1993). Policing practises in New Zealand remain deeply intervened with colonial structures that are thought to control and marginalise Māori populations. Evidence from media and scholarly resources highlights how these colonial legacies manifest in modern disparities, including over-policing higher arrest rates and disproportionate use of force against Māori communities (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016). Media narratives that focused solely on unconscious bias failed to interrogate the systemic racism that underpins these practices and it also neglects the institutional and historical roots of racism, reducing the conversation to individual reform rather than systemic change (Came et al., 2017).

The media's limited engagement with historical accountability contributes to an incomplete public understanding of systemic racism within policing. By presenting police as a contemporary issue, media narratives obscure the enduring impact of colonialism and perpetuate the misconception that reform can be achieved through superficial measures (Tuffin, 2008). The findings suggest that integrating historical context into media reporting is essential to challenging colonial narratives, fostering public understanding, and advocating for transformative change in the New Zealand justice system. Furthermore, the findings illustrate how New Zealand media narratives often frame police unconscious bias in ways that amplify police perspectives, downplay systemic racism and emphasise individual solutions (McCreanor et al., 2014). These patterns have significant implications for how public discourse around racial inequality in policing is shaped, and they reflect broader societal tendencies to depoliticise structural injustice. A recurring theme is the media's reliance on official police narratives. By prioritising police statements, media outlets frequently frame unconscious bias as an unavoidable aspect of human behaviour rather than a symptom of systemic racism (Came et al., 2017). This uncritical amplification of police perspectives fosters public perceptions of law enforcement as well-intentioned and capable of self-reform even in the face of evidence suggesting entrenched institutional biases. For instance, reports highlighting policy commitments to training programmes or internal reviews are presented as sufficient responses to bias despite the absence of meaningful change (New Zealand Police, 2021).

Such portrayals diminish the urgency of addressing systemic racism within policing and divert attention from the broader colonial and historical roots of injustice.

The over-representation of Māori in the criminal justice system, while occasionally acknowledged, is similarly framed through a narrow lens of unconscious bias. Media narratives often simplify the issue, attributing disparities to individual behaviours rather than systemic inequities (Workman, 2011). This framing obscures the colonial history of the New Zealand justice system and its ongoing impact on Māori communities (Jackson, 1988). By focusing on individual solutions such as cultural competency training, the media perpetuates the misconception that bias is a personal rather than a structural problem. This reinforces the narrative that the justice system is fundamentally fair, requiring only incremental reforms to address racial disparities. Further, the media's focus on individual solutions shifts the responsibility for addressing bias from institutions to individuals (McCreanor et al., 2014). Training programmes and reforms are presented as pivotal measures for reducing unconscious bias, overshadowing the need for structural changes. While these initiatives are portrayed positively, they risk creating the impression that the problem is being adequately addressed even as Māori communities continue to experience policing, higher incarceration rates, and systemic discrimination (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016). This narrative downplays the systemic nature of racism, contributing to societal denial of its existence within the justice system (Tuffin, 2008).

Public trust in law enforcement is another significant issue, particularly for Māori and Pacific communities. Media narratives often highlight instances of racial bias within policing and underscore how these incidents can erode public trust especially among communities that have historically experienced over-policing and discrimination (Yan et al., n.d.). However, these accounts frequently frame mistrust as stemming from individual police behaviour rather than acknowledging broader systemic failings (Spoonley, 1993). While police-led reform narratives suggest an effort to rebuild trust, they often fall short of addressing the structural changes necessary to restore legitimacy and achieve equity in policing practices (Came et al., 2017).

5.2 Timeframe 2: Mike Bush Era (April 2014–March 2020)

The Mike Bush era marks a turning point in police discourse, beginning with his 2015 public acknowledgment of unconscious bias within the New Zealand Police (Scoop, 2015). This admission represented a significant departure from previous institutional denials of systemic racism and signalled a change in attitude by the police. It introduced a new lens through which racial disparities in policing were framed shifting the focus from overt discrimination to implicit, unintentional bias. While this shift was seen as progressive, it also risked minimising the structural roots of inequality.

The analysis of media framing around unconscious bias and systemic racism within the New Zealand police force reveals a complex narrative that both highlights and obscures the structural inequalities faced by Māori. The findings demonstrate that media representations often framed systemic racism as a reflection of broader societal biases rather than as a core issue within the institution of policing itself (Nairn et al., 2006). This dual framing, where racism is seen as both an inevitable product of societal structures and an inexcusable institutional failure, creates contradictions that can impede accountability and meaningful reform. Several media articles position systemic racism within the police force as an expression of broader societal inequities (Rankine et al., 2014). By emphasising the role of societal bias in shaping police behaviour, these narratives deflect blame away from the police as an institution. Statements such as "the over-representation of Māori in the criminal justice system could not be explained solely by racism" Reinforced this perspective, framing police practises as reactive to societal conditions rather than as active contributors to systemic disparities. This framing neutralises critiques of institutional practises suggesting that police racism is an unavoidable extension of societal inequalities despite evidence showing that police actions amplify these effects (Workman, 2011).

A significant finding is the media's tendency to emphasise unconscious bias over systemic racism. By portraying unconscious bias as an individual issue that can be addressed through training and community engagement, the media often downplays the structural and

institutional factors driving disparities (RNZ, 2021). For example, RNZ 2021 notes that unconscious bias training aims to modify individual behaviour without labelling the broader system as inherently racist. This framing shifts attention away from systemic accountability, implying that disparities can be addressed without fundamental institutional change. Moreover, the use of terms like structural racism is noted to be polarising and poorly understood by police officers (Tuffin, 2008). This polarisation limits the scope of discussions on systemic racism as defensive reactions to the term racism often led to resistance. Media coverage highlighting this misunderstanding can perpetuate the problem by oversimplifying systemic issues or focusing excessively on individual acts of bias. This approach risks reinforcing the notion that racism is solely about personal prejudice, diverting attention from institutional practises and systemic accountability.

The media also exposes contradictions in how institutional racism is addressed. On one hand, there is acknowledgement of historical and structural factors contributing to Māori overrepresentation across state systems. For example, some coverage highlights the continued overrepresentation of Māori children in state care since the 1970s, drawing attention to the long-standing nature of institutional inequities (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016). However, this recognition often coexists with narratives that downplay the systemic roots of these issues, focusing instead on individual behaviours or isolated incidents. On the other hand, statements like the blame should not be on the police dilute the responsibility of police practises, framing them as reactive agents within a flawed system. This dual narrative creates confusion, making it challenging to identify clear pathways for reform. Additionally, institutional denial of systemic racism, as highlighted by police minister Stuart Nash's statement that "systemic racism is not a problem in the New Zealand police force", reflects broader resistance to acknowledging structural inequities (New Zealand Police, 2021). This denial aligns with media narratives that emphasise unconscious bias, further depoliticising the issue and reducing it to an individual level. The media's failure to challenge these denials robustly risks perpetuating institutional narratives and undermining calls for systemic reform.

The findings highlight the need for a shift in media framing to more directly and critically address systemic racism. Māori academic Moana Jackson has long critiqued the persistence of police bias, emphasising the historical continuity of institutional racism and the failure to implement meaningful reform (Jackson, 1988). His assertion that police "go straight back to engaging in racist discrimination" (Jackson, 1988) reinforces the urgent need for systemic accountability. Similarly, Kyle Quince's emphasis on empirical evidence and life experiences challenges institutions and media to adopt more direct language and confront systemic injustice head-on (Yan et al., n.d.). To promote meaningful reform, media coverage must go beyond framing racism as an inevitable societal issue or an individual unconscious bias problem. Instead, it should emphasise the interconnectedness of structural institutional and interpersonal racism, amplifying Māori experiences and challenging institutional denials. By doing so, the media can play a critical role in fostering discussions on equity, accountability and systemic change within the New Zealand justice system.

The media's portrayal of unconscious bias and New Zealand policing reflects a critical tension between individual and systemic perspectives on racial inequality. By framing unconscious biases and unintentional human flaws, media narratives are often individualised to issue humanising police officers while deflecting from the systemic roots of racial disparities (McCreanor et al., 2014). This framing allows institutions like the New Zealand police force to adopt socially palatable explanations for racial inequities, emphasising surface-level interventions such as unconscious bias training rather than confronting structural racism embedded in policies and practices. The distinction frequently made between unconscious bias and systemic racism is essential to how the media has shaped public discourse. Statements by figures like former police commissioner Mike Bush, which describe unconscious bias as a universal human trait, align with media narratives that emphasise individual behaviour (Scoop, 2015). This approach effectively minimises the need for structural accountability. By focusing on training and awareness initiatives, the media portrays the police as reform-minded, reinforcing public trust in the justice system by deflecting from systemic issues such as racial profiling and over-policing of Māori communities (Newbold, 2016). This

framing aligns with the bad apple's metaphor, which normalises racial disparities as isolated incidents caused by individual misconduct rather than institutional failings. By perpetuating the myth of institutional neutrality, the media reassures the public of the justice system's integrity, limiting deeper engagement with the systemic nature of racial injustice.

The focus on unconscious bias as a corrective human flaw risks oversimplifying the problem of racial discrimination in policing. Critics argue that this narrative serves as a convenient distraction from the need for structural reforms (McCreanor et al., 2014). Initiatives like bias training are often critiqued as symbolic gestures with limited tangible outcomes. Media coverage that highlights the police rejection of racial profiling while emphasising efforts to address unconscious bias illustrates how institutions manage public perception without addressing the root causes of racial disparities (Came et al., 2017). Furthermore, as Māori advocates and researchers have pointed out, framing unconscious bias as an unintentional error enables institutions to avoid confronting more profound legacies of systemic racism (Hill, 2009; Spoonley, 1993). Reports linking institutional racism to the disproportionate policing of Māori communities challenge this narrative, calling for comprehensive reforms to dismantle the entrenched inequalities within the justice system. The media is reporting on unconscious bias in sectors like education, health, and employment, revealing the broader societal dimensions of racial disparities. These findings suggest that systemic racism extends beyond policing, contributing to the marginalisation of minority communities across multiple domains. For example, implicit bias in education and employment has been shown to disadvantage Māori and other minority groups, limiting their opportunities and increasing their likelihood of interacting with the criminal justice system (McCreanor et al., 2014). By situating policing within this broader context, the media underscores the interconnectedness of systemic inequalities and the need for society's broad reforms.

While some media narratives perpetuate the individualisation of bias, others critically engage with the limitations of this framing. Articles that emphasise the systemic nature of racism, such as those highlighting the over-policing of Māori communities, challenge the narrative that unconscious bias alone can explain racial disparities (Yan et al., n.d.). These

perspectives invite deeper scrutiny of institutional structures and practises, moving the conversation beyond personal prejudice to confront the systemic roots of inequality. At the same time, the media's reliance on less confrontational terms like unconscious bias over racism reflects a broader reluctance to engage directly with institutional accountability. This linguistic framing softens the discourse, making systemic racism more palatable while risking the normalisation of racial disparities. By positioning bias as an inherent but correctable human flaw, the media may inadvertently perpetuate inequities by failing to push for the structural changes necessary to achieve true equality.

5.3 Timeframe 3: Andrew Coster Era (April 2020–2024).

Commissioner Andrew Coster entered office with a clear reform mandate, positioning himself as a progressive leader committed to addressing racial disparities within the New Zealand Police. From the outset, Coster advocated for a more equitable and community-focused approach to policing, marked by the 2021 launch of the Understanding Policing Delivery (UPD) programme (RNZ, 2021). This initiative aimed to investigate and mitigate the impacts of unconscious bias within police operations. Coster's reforming aspirations signalled a shift in tone and policy direction; however, the outcomes of these efforts revealed both the potential and limitations of framing racial disparities primarily through the lens of unconscious bias. Despite his emphasis on reform, the persistence of disproportionate policing outcomes for Māori and Pacific peoples raises questions about the effectiveness of these initiatives in tackling deeper systemic issues (Tuiburelevu et al., 2023). The media's portrayal of New Zealand police handling of racial disparities underscores critical tensions between acknowledging bias and addressing systemic racism. Central to this discussion is the narrative of unconscious bias, which police leadership frequently invokes as a softer and less contentious explanation for racial disparities in policing practices (Tuiburelevu et al., 2023). While unconscious bias acknowledges that disparities exist, the framing often diverts attention away from systemic and institutional racism, a more entrenched and consequential issue, by

focusing on unconscious bias police leadership to flex accountability from the institution to individuals, creating a narrative of unintentionality that downplays the structural and historical roots of racial inequality. The media often critiques this framing as insufficient and performative. Articles highlight that terms like unconscious bias offer a sanitised alternative to the stronger term racism, avoiding the implications of system change. This reluctance to label policing disparities as systemic racism is portrayed as a significant barrier to meaningful reform. For example, critics such as Kylie Quince and Sir Kim Workman emphasised that addressing bias at an individual level through training or research cannot resolve structural inequities embedded in policies, practices, and historical legacies (Workman, 2021). Media narratives often amplify these critiques, framing police initiatives like unconscious bias training as surface-level solutions that fail to address profound systemic disparities.

The distinction between unconscious bias and systemic racism is frequently analysed through the length of Māori's overrepresentation in the criminal justice system. Media outlets stark disparities in arrest prosecution and sentencing rates as evidence of systemic racism, with statistics showing that Māori are disproportionately targeted and penalised compared to Pakeha (Savage et al., 2021). These disparities, media narratives argue, reflected not just unconscious prejudice but the deliberate or entrenched nature of institutional racism. For instance, Māori individuals with no prior criminal history are more likely to be charged and prosecuted than their pakeha counterparts. This disparity cannot be explained solely by unconscious factors. Such patterns are tied to colonial legacies where policing historically served as a tool for controlling Māori populations (Gordon & Webb, 2023). The media frames these disparities as ongoing manifestations of this legacy, challenging attempts to minimise them as unintentional.

Moreover, media critics frequently point out that police leadership's emphasis on unconscious bias normalises and perpetuates systemic discrimination by presenting bias as universal and unintentional. Police rhetoric diminishes the urgency of addressing systemic reforms. As noted by commentators such as Workman (2021), the reliance on unconscious bias shifts responsibility from the institution to individuals while leaving structural disparities

intact. This framing aligns with broader critiques of unconscious bias training, often characterised as a performative measure that creates an illusion of progress without challenging the underlying systems of privilege and exclusion. Calls for systemic reform, particularly from Māori leaders and rights advocates, are often juxtaposed against police leadership's reluctance to engage with terms like systemic racism. Proposals for reform emphasised the need to address structural issues such as unequal treatment of Māori and Pacific individuals, losing the justice system, and increasing Māori representation in leadership roles. However, media narratives suggest that the police remain resistant to such transformative changes, favouring less controversial measures like bias training that do not disrupt existing institutional hierarchies (Webb & Deckert, 2023).

The media coverage of the New Zealand police's unconscious bias programme reveals a complex interplay between progressive reporting and the persistence of colonial legacies within the criminal justice system. While some media outlets initially framed the program as a positive step toward addressing bias, most of the coverage highlighted the programme's limited impact and failure to produce meaningful change (RNZ, 2022). This mirrors the broader tension between individual and systemic understandings of racism within the New Zealand police force. The media's framing of unconscious bias as a primarily individual issue distracts from the structural inequality embedded within policing practices. Early reports focused on unconscious bias training and individual prejudice among officers, positioning these initiatives as the core solution. However, critics surfaced in later reports emphasising the ongoing disproportionate arrests of Māori despite these efforts (Tuiburelevu et al., 2023). This suggests that unconscious bias training, while valuable, does not address the deeper systemic issues that fuel racial disparities. As a result, coverage has consistently pointed to the inadequacies of focusing on individual bias without confronting the institutional practices and policies perpetuating these disparities.

Andrew Coster's framing of unconscious bias as a universal human trait in a necessary part of the conversation about policing highlights a key challenge: the reluctance to address systemic racism directly (RNZ, 2021). The commissioner thought of fostering dialogue without

provoking defensiveness by using neutral terms like unconscious bias. However, this approach risks minimising the broader structural causes of racial inequality in the justice system. Critics argued that such language sidelines discussions on the colonial legacies that contribute to shaping policy practice and outcomes, particularly for Māori communities (Mahuta, 2011). The media is inconsistent in its portrayal of bias oscillating between individual prejudice and systemic issues, which significantly impacts public perception. While some articles argue for a more nuanced approach to unconscious bias, others call for a fundamental shift in police practices to address institutional racism. The media's failure to fully engage with the structural causes of racial inequality perpetuates and narrative decriminalises Māori communities, framing them as deviant and problematic rather than as victims of a historically under system (Webb & Deckert, 2023).

Furthermore, the framing of unconscious bias as a narrow individual issue also obscures the broader systemic changes needed to address the over-policing of Māori. The media's continued focus on training as a solution rather than addressing structural racism within the police force reflects an unwillingness to confront the realities of colonialism and its lasting effects on policing (Walsh, 2021). This reluctance is compounded by political figures such as the then police minister Poto Williams, who accept unconscious bias as a legitimate concern but avoid engaging with the broader structural issues at play. In line with Webb and Deckert's (2023) assertion, the media continues to produce and reproduce narratives that serve the interests of the colonial state. By framing Māori's over-representation in crime statistics as a problem of individual or community failure rather than a consequence of historical dispossessions and systemic oppression, the media reinforces stereotypes of criminality while sidelining the need for transformative structural change. The lack of critical engagement with Māori calls for Tino rangatiratanga (Self-determination) underscores the persistence of colonial power dynamics, which continue to shape the justice system, and it is the treatment of Māori.

5.4 Conclusion

While there have been efforts to address unconscious bias within the New Zealand police, the media's portrayal of these initiatives reveals deep-seated tensions between individual responsibility and systemic reform. The ongoing focus on unconscious bias is an individual issue, coupled with the reluctance to engage with the structural causes of racial inequality, limits the potential for meaningful change. Until the media and the police fully confirm the colonial legacies that continue to shape New Zealand's criminal justice system, progress will remain superficial, and Māori will continue to face disproportionate outcomes.

5.5 How does New Zealand news media portray police unconscious bias?

To answer the research question, the media's role in perpetuating institutional racism through subtle and symbolic means needs to be acknowledged. This includes biased portrayals of Māori, such as overrepresentation in crime stories and underrepresentation in positive narratives, that contribute to systemic disparities in areas like the criminal justice system. Understanding and challenging these media representations are crucial steps in combating unconscious bias. Policing in New Zealand is rooted in a historical colonial model aimed at controlling and managing Māori communities (Hill, 2008; Workman, 2021). Systemic issues such as unconscious bias have deep roots in discriminatory colonial practices, contributing to ongoing challenges (Smith, 2012). It is important to note that unconscious bias has also been associated with other terms like systemic and institutional racism. The portrayal of police unconscious bias and systemic racism in New Zealand's news media reflects pervasive and deeply embedded inequalities within the criminal justice system. Moreover, systemic racism permeates the entire criminal justice system, extending beyond individual biases to institutional structures and historical injustices. The urgency of addressing this issue is

underscored by research and analysis demonstrating the New Zealand police service's entanglement with the enduring colonisation process in New Zealand. Settler colonial and racist ideologies have been an intrinsic component of policing practices used against Māori communities, a situation that demands immediate attention and action.

The portrayal of police unconscious bias by NZ media is pivotal in shaping public discourse and policy reform within the policing sector. Unconscious bias stemming from implicit attitudes and societal stereotypes influences police officers' decisions and interactions with diverse demographic groups. This bias intersects with systemic racism evident in statistics revealing disparities in the treatment of Māori communities, highlighting broader systemic issues beyond individual prejudice. Despite being unintended, unconscious bias perpetuates racial disparities in policing outcomes, impacting profiling, use of force, decision-making processes and community relations. Critics argued that systemic racism entrenched across the criminal justice system exacerbates these disparities, not solely within law enforcement. Media coverage plays a crucial role in raising awareness, fostering accountability, advocating for reform within policing practices and advocating for equitable treatment of all communities, particularly Māori and Pacific populations. Journalists influenced by dominant cultural norms construct narratives that marginalise Māori and Pacific peoples, perpetuating power imbalances.

This media portrayal lacks diversity, often presenting European viewpoints as normative and authoritative, thereby excluding Māori perspectives and reinforcing systemic biases within the justice system. The media's role in shaping racial discourse cannot be understated as it often dismisses claims of racism and normalises systemic injustices. Pan and Kosicki (1993) further connect biased media representation to broader societal prejudices, illustrating how negative racial attitudes are reflected and perpetuated through media narratives. In NZ, the police are depicted as central in perpetuating systemic racism through biased media portrayals, exemplified in controversies like the armed response team trials and database use targeting Māori youth, reflecting racial profiling and institutional bias. Both the NZ police and mass media face criticism for downplaying or reframing accusations of systemic

racism as mere unconscious bias, a narrative strategy that shapes public opinion and policy discussions, potentially minimising the seriousness of racial issues. Research drawing from cultivation theory underscores how media portrayals influence public attitudes toward law enforcement, whether depicting them as heroic figures or corrupt agents. Critical studies highlight the historical and ongoing racialisation and criminalisation of Māori by state institutions and the media, tracing back to colonial-era press that justified violence and perpetuated racial stereotypes throughout the twentieth century.

In New Zealand, the portrayal of police unconscious bias by news media is a critical issue intertwined with broader societal debates on systemic racism within law enforcement. The acknowledgment of unconscious bias by figures like Police Commissioner Mike Bush in 2015 sparked significant discourse through distinctions between bias and racism have been scrutinised. Efforts by leaders like Commissioner Andrew Coster to address bias through initiatives like the UPD program aim to increase awareness. However, the pressing need for reform to tackle embedded racism persists. Media coverage plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions, often reflecting official narratives that frame discussions around bias and racism within the police force. The emphasis on unconscious bias while aiming for objective discussion has been critiqued for potentially perpetuating systemic racism by diverting attention from broader institutional factors contributing to racial inequalities. Moreover, unconscious bias is critiqued for this role in maintaining white privilege and power. It is portrayed as part of an institutional framework that upholds racial hierarchies by normalising differential racial entitlements and perpetuating ignorance about systemic racism. Media coverage often reflects the statements of police commissioners framing discussions around bias and racism within the New Zealand police.

To conclude, media coverage highlights how historical injustices and colonisation continue to impact Māori communities through biased policing practices. Their coverage emphasises systemic failures within law enforcement, urging reforms to address racial prejudice embedded in policing. Furthermore, media plays a significant and influential role in shaping public perceptions of police, influencing attitudes towards systemic racism and

unconscious bias. Biased crime reporting in crime stories perpetuates racial stereotypes and affects public perceptions of law enforcement. The NZP and media's narrative control regarding unconscious bias versus systemic racism has a profound impact on public discourse and policy responses, demonstrating the power of media influence in shaping societal attitudes.

Research examining the perception of racism and unconscious bias about people's understanding of police legitimacy reveals a complex interplay influenced by media portrayal, personal experiences and societal discussions. With its significant power, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of various societal groups, including how they are represented about crime and law enforcement. When the media consistently portrays certain groups as criminals, dangerous and aggressive, it can influence public perception to perceive them through these stereotypes. This portrayal not only affects attitudes but also impacts expectations and behaviours towards these groups. The media's responsibility in influencing public opinion and actions is immense. Its portrayal of racial and ethnic minorities, such as Māori in New Zealand, can perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce biases within society.

This can lead to the stigmatisation of these groups and affect their interactions with law enforcement. Moreover, the media's disproportionate coverage or biased reporting can distort public understanding of crime and justice. When certain groups are overrepresented in crime reporting or negatively portrayed, it can create false beliefs and reinforce systemic biases. This phenomenon is particularly evident in how media coverage frames discussions around policing, criminal justice and systemic bias. However, while media influence is substantial, it is not the sole determinant of public opinion. Personal experiences, community interactions and broader societal discussions also shape perceptions of police legitimacy and bias. Individuals' individual beliefs and values influenced by personal encounters and media narratives contribute to their understanding and attitudes towards law enforcement and racial issues. Therefore, while acknowledging the media's significant role in shaping perceptions of racism and bias, it is essential to recognise that it is just one of many factors influencing public understanding and opinions.

The influence of media portrayal on public perception of police legitimacy is a critical topic, particularly when examining the impacts of historical injustices like colonisation on policing frameworks. Addressing systemic biases within police practices is crucial for preserving public trust and acceptance. This necessitates a period of accountability where past wrongs are acknowledged and rectified to ensure fairness and legitimacy in police actions. Police legitimacy hinges on the perception that law enforcement operates within the rightful authority to uphold societal order. This relationship is especially pertinent within marginalised communities such as the Māori population in New Zealand. They are denying systemic racism by framing it merely as unconscious bias, which undermines this legitimacy, especially if such issues are perceived to be downplayed by police authorities. Media collaboration in shaping these narratives can amplify these perceptions, either reinforcing police legitimacy or exacerbating distrust among marginalised groups like Māori. Media coverage plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception of police legitimacy. In New Zealand, news reports detailing allegations of bias and racism within police actions can significantly impact trust levels. Instances of disproportionate policing towards Māori communities extensively covered in the media have eroded trust among these groups.

Conversely, positive media coverage of police reforms and efforts to address bias can bolster legitimacy by portraying law enforcement proactively and responsibly. The dynamic interplay between direct police interactions, community initiatives, and media portrayal is at the heart of public perception regarding police legitimacy in New Zealand. Media scrutiny of bias incidents prompts calls for accountability, whereas highlighting successful community engagement efforts fosters confidence in law enforcement. Balanced reporting acknowledging police challenges and concerns about bias is instrumental in cultivating a nuanced public understanding and trust in police actions. It is crucial to note that while police responses to bias are widely studied, they are not singularly responsible for ethnic disproportionality in justice outcomes. Scholarly debates often cite broader structural inequalities as underlying causes where disparities in offending rates reflect societal disadvantages faced by ethnic minority groups (Jackson, 1988; Cunneen, 2006; Workman, 2016). Therefore, attributing

overrepresentation solely to bias oversimplifies the complex interplay of societal factors influencing crime rates and justice outcomes.

In conclusion, media portrayal significantly influences public perceptions of police legitimacy in New Zealand. Transparency, accountability, and ongoing efforts to address bias are imperative for maintaining the trust and acceptance of law enforcement within diverse communities. Recognising and rectifying historical injustices, such as those stemming from colonisation, is pivotal in fostering a more equitable and legitimate police force that impartially serves all segments of society.

5.6 Limitations

While this study provides valuable insight into how unconscious bias in policing is framed within New Zealand's online news media, several limitations must be acknowledged. The analysis is based on a relatively small sample of 37 articles, which may not capture the full diversity of perspectives across the media landscape. By focusing exclusively on English-language online news, the study excludes other influential sources such as television, radio, social media, and Māori-language or community-based outlets, which may offer alternative framings of police bias.

Additionally, this study does not include audience reception data, limiting insight into how these media portrayals influence public understanding of police legitimacy. The timeframe analysis is also restricted, as the term "unconscious bias" only entered mainstream media and police discourse around 2013–2015, making it difficult to draw direct comparisons with earlier periods where different terminology was used. This is also why there is limited research and articles available Pre Mike Bush Era because the term unconscious bias had not been used or there was not much attention around it during this time. Another key limitation is the study lacks a comparative framework, making it difficult to determine whether New Zealand's media coverage of police bias is distinctive or reflects broader global trends. Another limitation is that

the study's methodology focuses solely on media texts, without incorporating audience reception or feedback from communities most impacted by police bias. As a result, it does not address how Māori and other minoritised groups perceive or are affected by these portrayals, nor does it examine the potential influence of media framing on public trust, police legitimacy, or policy decisions. The use of content and framing analysis also introduces interpretive subjectivity, and without inter-coder reliability testing, the validity of identified frames depends on the researcher's own positionality and judgment.

One key limitation of this research is the exclusion of direct perspectives from Māori and other minoritised groups. As the study focuses solely on media content, it does not include insights into how these communities perceive both media portrayals and their relationships with police. This absence risks producing an incomplete analysis, as it overlooks the lived experiences and responses of those most affected by police bias and media framing. Additionally, the research does not explore how media representations of unconscious bias influence public perceptions or impact the relationships between police and marginalised communities. This is a significant gap, as media narratives can shape real-world trust, engagement, and institutional legitimacy. Another challenge is the nature of unconscious bias itself it is inherently difficult to measure and often identified indirectly through discourse. As such, the way unconscious bias is portrayed in media may not accurately reflect how it operates within actual policing practices, limiting the ability of this study to assess its full impact.

Finally, these limitations highlight areas where the study may have underestimated the complexities of police bias portrayals and their real-world implications. Future research can address these limitations by broadening the scope of media analysis, incorporating more interdisciplinary and community-based perspectives, and emphasising both systemic and individual portrayals.

5. 7 Recommendation/ Suggestions

Based on the findings about how New Zealand news media portrayed police unconscious bias and the systemic issues identified in policing practices, several recommendations and suggestions for future research can be made to deepen understanding and drive meaningful change. They include A broader focus on systemic and structural racism, extending research beyond unconscious bias. Future research should focus on systemic and structural racism within institutions, including how policies, laws, and practices perpetuate racial disparities. This could include looking into the historical roots of institutional racism and its ongoing impact. Researchers could also investigate how unconscious bias training and other individual-focused interventions interact with larger institutional frameworks. The efficacy of these approaches in addressing systemic inequality should be critically assessed. Furthermore, a longitudinal study on policy reforms that evaluates the impact of policy changes could be conducted to track the implementation and outcomes of recommendations to reduce systemic biases. Longitudinal studies can determine whether policy changes, such as revised training programs, altered decision-making processes, and collaborations with other sectors, such as health and welfare, effectively reduce racial disparities in police outcomes. It could also look at alternative policing models, which means that researchers could investigate community-based policing or non-police responses to mental health crises to see how these approaches might alleviate systemic bias and improve outcomes for marginalised communities. Furthermore, the intersection of race, gender, and mental health could be studied further. More research is needed to understand how race interacts with other social factors like gender and mental health to produce specific outcomes and police encounters. For example, the disproportionate use of cases against Māori and mental distress could be investigated alongside gender and socioeconomic studies.

Research should also investigate how broader social factors such as poverty, education, housing, and access to social services contribute to the over-policing of specific racial and ethnic groups. Understanding these intersections will provide a more complete

picture of why disparities exist. In terms of the media's role in shaping public understanding, a comparative media analysis could be conducted, with studies comparing how different countries frame discussions of police bias and racism in the media, revealing patterns and differences in how media portray systemic versus individual bias, which may influence public opinion and policy in a variety of ways. Researchers could investigate how media portrayals of police powers shaped public understanding and support for policy reforms by conducting surveys or experiments to determine whether framing police bias as a systemic rather than an individual issue influences attitudes toward institutional reforms. A community-centred approach prioritises collaboration with marginalised communities, including Māori, to ensure the voices of those most affected by systemic bias are central to the research process. This leads to more culturally relevant and actionable insights.

Future research could look into the effects of reforms on trust between police and minority communities, especially after specific interventions are implemented. Understanding how these relationships change over time will be critical to the success of anti-bias initiatives. Future research could also broaden the scope of data collection by collecting a broader range of quantitative and qualitative data to capture a more complete picture of systemic bias. This could include more detailed police records, qualitative interviews with officers and community members, and death case studies of individual incidents. Researchers could also develop methodologies to better isolate the impact of systemic factors on religious practices in policing outcomes by conducting mixed-method Research that combines statistical analysis with ethnographic approaches, resulting in a more nuanced understanding of how these disparities are perpetuated.

Researchers could also look into how other countries have dealt with police bias and systemic racism and identify best practices and lessons that can be applied to the New Zealand context. This could include looking into reforms in jurisdictions where systemic bias in policing has been successfully reduced. Furthermore, the role of right fragility could be investigated further in studies focusing on white fragility in institutional settings. For example, the studies could look into how widespread fragility, as described by Robin D'Angelo,

manifests in law enforcement and media organisations. Understanding how defensive reactions prevent conversations about racism within institutions. This could give us insight into how to overcome systemic reform barriers. Finally, the research could look into ways to ensure more accurate and comprehensive ethnicity data collection in policing decisions, allowing for better disparity reduction and more precise reform targeting. In conclusion, future research must shift its focus away from individual-level explanations of bias and toward systemic institutional issues that perpetuate racial inequality. By broadening the scope of inquiry, incorporating longitudinal studies, and engaging directly with affected communities, researchers can provide actionable insights to inform meaningful reforms in policing and media portrayals of police bias.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how New Zealand news media portray police unconscious bias, aiming to unpack the framing and content of media narratives between 2014 and 2024. Through a comprehensive content and framing analysis, this research revealed that the media's treatment of unconscious bias often minimizes the broader, systemic realities of institutional racism within policing. Rather than acknowledging the historical and structural factors that drive racial disparities particularly for Māori the media frequently frames bias as individual, unintentional, and correctable through training and awareness.

One of the key findings of this study is that the emphasis on unconscious bias serves to deflect attention away from the entrenched colonial structures that underpin New Zealand's justice system. Media narratives tend to portray racial disparities as the result of individual prejudice, rather than examining the institutional policies and practices that continue to disadvantage Māori communities. This framing is not merely superficial it actively shapes public understanding and discourse, contributing to a culture in which institutional accountability is obscured and genuine reform is deferred. Despite some progress such as reduced Māori youth prosecutions the persistent overrepresentation of Māori in negative police encounters, including arrests, taser use, and mental health callouts, underscores the depth of the problem. The framing of unconscious bias as a stand-alone issue fails to account for the deeply rooted structural racism that continues to shape policing outcomes. Moreover, by positioning unconscious bias as a palatable explanation for racial disparities, both the media and police institutions avoid the discomfort and resistance that often accompany discussions of white supremacy and colonial legacies.

The findings also show that media coverage often mirrors institutional narratives. Police-led initiatives, such as unconscious bias training, are frequently presented as adequate and progressive responses to racism, without critically engaging with whether such measures are effective or sufficient. This reflects a broader trend in mainstream research and journalism,

where dominant institutions are seldom scrutinized through a critical, decolonial lens. In doing so, the media becomes complicit in maintaining white racial equilibrium by shielding the police from deeper scrutiny and perpetuating narratives that sideline calls for structural transformation. To address these issues, it is not enough to focus solely on individual-level solutions like unconscious bias training. The research highlights the need for systemic reforms that confront the colonial and institutional roots of racial inequality in policing. This includes overhauling police policies, decision-making frameworks, and accountability structures to ensure equitable treatment of all communities especially Māori, who have historically borne the brunt of policing injustice.

Ultimately, this study provides a foundation for further research into how unconscious bias and systemic racism are understood and portrayed in New Zealand. While there is a growing awareness of these issues, the depth and framing of media narratives still play a significant role in shaping public understanding and the political will for change. By critically analysing these narratives, we can begin to challenge the status quo and advocate for a justice system that is truly equitable, accountable, and reflective of the communities it serves. This study highlights how New Zealand news media often frame police unconscious bias in ways that obscure deeper systemic racism within the justice system. While some coverage acknowledges institutional inequality, much of it focuses on individual misconduct, reinforcing the notion that racial disparities are accidental rather than structural. This framing aligns with broader settler-colonial patterns seen in countries like Australia and Canada, where Indigenous overrepresentation in criminal justice systems stems from ongoing colonial legacies. Despite reforms such as the UPD programme, Māori continue to face over-policing and negative portrayals in the media, which contributes to public distrust and marginalisation. The findings build on prior research that criticises unconscious bias training for being insufficient and highlight the need for meaningful institutional reform. Ultimately, the media's portrayal of unconscious bias plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and policy

discourse, making it essential to critically examine these narratives and advocate for systemic change.

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Appendix

As indicated in Table 1 the frame “unconscious bias as the flexion from systemic racism” Appeared in 65% of the analysed articles, while the theme of “Disparities in police discretion” Was present in 75% of the coverage.

Theme/Frame	Frequency (%)
Disparities in Police Discretion and Māori	75%
Unconscious Bias as a Deflection from Racism	65%
Police Training Reform on Unconscious Bias	55%
Public Statements on Unconscious Bias	50%

As shown in Table 1, 65% of the articles focused primarily on unconscious bias while only 30% mentioned systemic racism as a contributing factor to police disparities.

Theme/Frame	Frequency (%)
Focus on Unconscious Bias	65%
Mention of Systemic Racism	30%
Focus on Police Reforms	40%
Criticism of Progress	25%

As shown in table one the most prevalent frame across the article supports “Unconscious biases systemic issue,” appearing in 70% of the articles analyzed. The frame “Focus on Training and Reform” appeared in 40% of the articles.”

Theme/Frame	Frequency (%)
Unconscious Bias as a Systemic Issue	70%
Focus on Training and Reform	40%
Individual Responsibility	30%
Public Perception and Trust	50%