# Deny. Deflect. Defend: How untrustworthy institutions duck accountability

Institutions responsible for committing wrongdoing will often fight back when confronted with evidence of their misconduct, deploying stratagems whose intent is to suppress and neutralise emergent truth narratives and to delegitimate those who voice them.

This study investigates the responses of public service leaders and the government of the day to those who raised their voices against the Australian social welfare repayment scandal known as Robodebt. The constellation of critical voices included victims, frontline workers, legal experts, and community organisations. Silencing and diverting their warnings enabled Robodebt to impact the lives of 320,000 of society's most vulnerable members before being declared unlawful.

Through this prism, we identify the techniques that institutions may deploy to suppress, minimise, denigrate, isolate, discredit, intimidate, and sanction warning voices, together with the dynamics that facilitate their success. Extending criminological theories of neutralisation and victimisation into the institutional domain, we explore the mechanisms by which an institution's policies, codes, and processes can be operationalised to constrain the possibilities for internal resistance to wrongdoing, while also recontextualising resistance as a violation of institutional standards. Lastly, we highlight how legal structures may be vulnerable to manipulation by institutions determined to retain control of their narrative.

Together, these findings crystallise into a playbook of institutional denial of wrongdoing that may offer broader insights into untrustworthy institutional behaviours, and which forms our initial contribution to the emerging field of institutional gaslighting.