

Closing The Net – Episode 1, Hiding in Plain Sight

Disclaimer:

Due to themes of child sexual abuse and exploitation, the content of this podcast may be distressing to some people. It is not suitable for children and listener discretion is advised. For advice and support, please visit accce.gov.au.

Toby Dagg:

I don't think anybody who works in online child sexual abuse material in any of its forms ever forgets the first time they came face to face with very high end abuse material.

Hetty Johnson:

There are sex offenders in every walk of life and they are numerous in number. And because this is such a difficult topic, it's such a touchy topic, it's easy to look the other way.

Grant Stevens:

Complacency is a great riskier and that's where our children will fall through the cracks if we're not keeping a close eye on what they're doing, but in a constructive way, not in a surveillance type way. So there's a fine balance there for parents to get that right, but we have to be tuned into it.

Simone McKeough:

The responsibility for protecting kids, we would say is a community wide responsibility. It starts with parents and carers and teachers, that everyone has a role to play in keeping children safe from harm online.

Hamish Hansford:

The impact that it has on an individual's life, potentially for the rest of their life is really at the heart of the government's focus on child exploitation.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The internet has arguably become one of the greatest advancements of the modern era. People across the globe use it for work, for research, for keeping in touch with family and friends, and for sharing images and videos. Yet within the millions of images and videos being circulated and housed on computers across the globe, there are vulnerable children and teenagers being subjected to acts of sexual abuse and exploitation. It's a global race to identify these children, to arrest and charge the offenders, and to prevent similar harm from happening to other children.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

I'm Rodger Corser and this is Closing The Net, a podcast series that explores the world of those policing the borderless crime of online child sexual exploitation, their commitment to preventing abuse through education and their dedication to seeking justice for the victims. Throughout the series, you'll get an understanding of what constitutes online exploitation and how easily children can be targeted. You'll get information on how to better protect your kids online, as well as how to identify and report offensive online behaviour. Along the way, you'll go inside the world of those in the frontline, women and men

who dedicate their lives to ending this horrendous crime type, who work tirelessly to find and bring online child sex offenders to justice.

Jon Rouse:

Stopping the sexual abuse of children at as young age as possible is really why we go to work.

Hilda Sirec:

There's this passion that everyone has in working these crime type while some people might think, "Why do people do it? Why do people constantly have to push this borough and work so hard at something like this?" Every time a child is saved, every time we identify someone from a child exploitation image, you get a win and it's all those little wins that are going to add up and that's why people do it.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

We'll also hear from those who are dedicated to raising awareness of this issue amongst parents, providing knowledge, tools, and education to help protect our children and keep them safe in the online space.

Sonya Ryan:

I just knew I had to do something and I guess I just didn't see any limitation. If my daughter had to face what she had to face, she's not going to go through such suffering for nothing, and I'm going to make sure of it.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

As a human race, we're now more connected than at any other point in history. With a click of a button, billions of emails and messages race around the globe in the blink of an eye. Files, images, videos, and comments are being uploaded and shared instantly. Yet it's the same connectivity which has seen online child sex offender networks flourish on social media and what's known as the dark web. Through heavily encrypted channels, they groom their victims and share their collections. Some of these offenders are hiding in plain sight, but for most of us, we just can't see them. That's where the expertise of Australia's Federal Police comes to the fore. There are more than six and a half thousand people working within the Australian Federal Police. They're tasked with keeping Australians safe as they investigate serious and complex transnational crimes, such as drug smuggling, terrorism, human trafficking, and child exploitation. Reece Kershaw is the AFP Commissioner and says Australians need to wake up to just how serious this issue is.

Reece Kershaw:

It's a bit of a dark secret that no one really wants to talk about. I don't think people understand this is rape and torture. It's not pictures of naked young girls or young boys. It's way beyond that. And I think that is hard for society sometimes to comprehend that people could do this, adults could do this to young children. It's not what you think it is. These offenses carry anywhere between 15 and 30 years imprisonment, that sort of reflects how serious the Commonwealth in particular takes these kinds of these offenses.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

There are many dedicated professionals who investigate online child sexual exploitation, and unfortunately, their case loads are growing.

Reece Kershaw:

This is a real issue, and we're seeing an increase and the offenders have increased. So if that wasn't the case, I wouldn't be as concerned as what I am now. But I'd say that if it's one child that we are able to remove from harm. I know our hardworking detectives and support staff and specialise staff, they wake up every day stressed out. Victim identification teams are out there trying to identify a victim. They can take sometimes years to rescue that child. And the AFP works with all of its partner agencies, whether that be state law enforcement, different state agencies, the eSafety Commissioner and others to try and keep our kids safe online, and our international partners are critical, whether it's INTERPOL, Europol and our main partners across the globe.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Last financial year, the ACCCE received more than 21,000 reports of online child sexual abuse. In 2013, that figure was 3000. So what constitutes online child exploitation? Here's Detective Superintendent Paula Hudson from the AFP.

Paula Hudson:

Surprisingly, it takes many forms. There is simply the uploading and transmission of child exploitation material by people who are actually creating it through committing the crimes themselves, and then uploading it to the internet, which gets it on the system and then that perpetuates people being able just to access and download it. So that's a crime to access and download. A recent phenomenon in the last couple of years in Australia, the live-distance child abuse is a emerging issue, and what that is, is that people go online and they contact the child sex den facilitators, and they direct the abuse of a child. So they can actually pay money and they say they want X, Y, or Z to take place to that child please. And they direct the abuse themselves. So that's the live-distance abuse that's taking place off shore.

Paula Hudson:

There's grooming offenses, whereby predators will groom children through gaming applications and anything that has a direct messaging capability to talk. And they can convince them to go offline from that platform to a private platform, and then groom them into meeting or groom them into sending inappropriate images to them. There's a number of ways I guess the online component of offending can take place. Recently here in Australia, we've had a number of cases where people have convinced children to meet in private, and then they are arrested at the scene.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Australia is recognised as a global leader in tackling online child sexual exploitation through the work of its state and territory law enforcement agencies, the AFP and strong international relationships. In 2018, the Australian Center to Counter Child Exploitation was established to bring together these resources in a concentrated move to prevent and disrupt the online sexual exploitation of children. Known as the ACCCE, it's a unique entity among global law enforcement. The ACCCE was born out of an Australian Government determination to tackle this crime type head on. Peter Dutton, the former Minister for Home Affairs says the goal is clear.

Peter Dutton:

Well, for our government, we've made it a number one priority. I've been determined to make sure that we do that because I think the Australian Federal Police, over many decades, have done an amazing job in this area. But I did think that it needed a refresh and we needed to refocus, bring new leadership in, and provide a greater impetus. They have wonderful relationships with their law enforcement partners domestically and internationally, but again, it was a time for a refresh of those relationships and also their relationships with NGOs and victim support groups, et cetera, and the private sector. There's an enormous amount of interest from the private sector in providing support to the work of the police. And so leveraging off all of those relationships into the outcome that we've achieved with the ACCCE has been an absolute priority. And for me, it's about trying to protect the innocence of children.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Chris Woods is Superintendent of Operations at the ACCCE.

Chris Woods:

So the ACCCE is a unique construct internationally here in Australia, where we've brought together law enforcement with governments, non-government, that's Commonwealth states and territories, organisations, academia and players in the child protection space to collaborate and really look for ways to protect children. It's about the online exploitation of children. The ACCCE has been established to group together all these really passionate and dedicated organisations, and to give them basically a central point to work together, to find pathways to have greater impact and to be more effective in all of our various mandates. It's led by the Australian Federal Police. And I'm a AFP officer, but it's both in law enforcement and policing, but it's a unique construct. It's the first time we've brought these disparate groups together in the child protection space to really have maximum impact. I think that the need for national consistency and collaboration and having a bit of a focal point within Australia, but also an ability to interact internationally is the drive behind the ACCCE concept.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

That notion of collaboration, coupled with the drive for innovation is a core strength of the ACCCE.

Chris Woods:

This is a world first in terms of such an organisation. We've got some similarities with some partner organisations. So the US has a National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which is where all the social media companies in the US and law enforcement do channel their reports and referrals. And that is a pathway that is used to transmit material to us. But in terms of the ACCCE's wider remit more than just taking on reports of crime, but having that national collaboration piece, working with all industry and law enforcement partners, we're a unique construct, so we're receiving requests from abroad, from around the world, for briefings and for advice on how we've built the ACCCE and why it is constructed the way it is. It's a project in motion, really, it's an innovation hub. So we don't have a set state. And we're still thinking about what we need to be doing to keep ahead of this particular crime type.

Chris Woods:

I think that there's a greater awareness, and this is a really key part of what we're trying to achieve with the ACCCE in terms of our engagement with the community, a greater awareness amongst parents and carers, and I'd even say children and teenagers of the internet, social media, our use of social media, where our information goes, the existence of predators and actors in this space, of pedophiles online, a

greater consciousness, although there's so much more that people need to understand about the dark web and what sits below the surface of the internet. So I think that technology has assisted people who are offenders in this area to collaborate, to share and swap, and to operate with anonymity, but commensurate with the growth of their ability to do that has been the community building a greater awareness through a lot of really good work from NGOs, from policing and law enforcement agencies internationally, a greater awareness of the threats that exist out there.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

To build that awareness, it's critical that the ACCCE team have detailed knowledge around the global scale of the crime type they're dealing with. As a result of their collaborative work with international partners, the ACCCE is now building a specific database to better protect children now and in the future. It will be the largest in the Southern hemisphere. Detective Inspector Jon Rouse believes the database will be a game changer for investigators.

Jon Rouse:

We deal with some very challenging content, video, audio, screaming, crying, but ultimately, a lot of the work that we do through the analysis of that video content or those images, leads to the successful resolution, but we work pretty hard to try to resolve that, which is why the importance of analysis of the offender's collection and applying the victim identification protocols to that is critical. It's not about just making the arrest. Yes, that's great. Our role is to stop the sexual abuse of children and the importance of that database that's being imported into the ACCCE right now is critical. That database will help us rescue children.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Beyond the technology, one of the cornerstones of the ACCCE is its commitment to bringing together not just law enforcement agencies, but also child protection professionals from all walks of life. It's a relatively new concept in policing online child exploitation, but it's one that AFP Commissioner Reece Kershaw believes can further strengthen already strong relationships.

Reece Kershaw:

I think having a dedicated center that's bricks and mortar, populated with not just detectives and support staff and special staff, but also NGOs and other organisations that are embedded there with us, or are welcome to just come and be a part of the ACCCE. I think that partnership with the community is first class, we haven't seen that around Australia. The next step for us is to look at having our state and territory partners embedded in the ACCCE and that's something we're working on, and even having perhaps some international placements as well. That's in the next generation of the ACCCE but it's a first class set up that not only does all the triaging and coordination, but makes sure that they act on those cases that need that immediate action, and it's great to see that center up and running.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Keeping our children safe online is a global effort with Australian police working closely with investigators working around the world. In the US, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, commonly referred to as NCMEC was established in 1984, following the abduction and murder of six year old Adam Walsh. Adam's parents sought to channel their grief by working to protect other children. While the initial focus was missing children, NCMEC has since evolved to tackle the broader issue of child sexual exploitation. Michelle DeLaune is vice president and CEO of NCMEC. The

organisation CyberTipline has become an invaluable tool for law enforcement agencies in the US and around the world, including Australia.

Michelle DeLaune:

The CyberTipline has been in existence since 1998 and it started as an online reporting mechanism for members of the public to report incidents of potential child sexual exploitation. The CyberTipline in 2019 received 16.9 million reports, and more than 96% of those reports resolved to users who are outside of the United States. So we are providing reports to countries all over the globe, we actually have the ability to refer CyberTipline reports to law enforcement agencies and a 130 countries. And these eight countries, as you can imagine, have varying levels of sophistication and capacity to respond to these types of reports. In cases where a report resolves to a user in Australia, those reports are made available within minutes to the Australian law enforcement agency, in this case, AFP. The reports will go to the Australian Federal Police for review.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

It's the Child Protection Triage Unit within the ACCCE that receives these reports, which then need to be prioritised and disseminated. Many reports will come from the US via NCMEC, which then refers to the ACCCE any material that may depict an Australian victim, offender or location. 93% of the cyber tips NCMEC receives are for international countries, not the US. The Child Protection Triage Unit at the ACCCE also receives reports from parents and carers who might stumble across something on their child's phone or other electronic device, and sometimes it's a member of the public who makes the disturbing discovery. What they've seen is material with younger and younger children, who is self-producing child abuse material and uploading it to the internet. Some of these children are as young as four. At the ACCCE, Leanne Cooper works within the Child Protection Triage Unit and says there's often an increase in concerning online activity once kids are back at school.

Leanne Cooper:

After school holidays, and it's usually the week or two after school holidays, and we get reports from platforms where kids like to upload videos of themselves. These kids, I don't know, they're either being told to do it by grooming to do it, or they've just done it because it's fun, or they think it's fun and silly. They'll upload videos of themselves naked or sexualised dancing, or sometimes inserting objects, depending on what they've been told. So they usually come out a few weeks after school holidays. We seem to get us a bit of spam of those ones.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Whether or not they produced and uploaded material themselves, these children are victims. The ACCCE is determined to better educate kids, their parents, and their carers to stop it happening. Some of the reports handled by the ACCCE Child Protection Triage Unit will end up being too difficult to investigate, but they remain on the books and in the database in the hope that one day, they'll be able to put a name to a face or match an offender to a crime.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The relationship shared between the AFP and NCMEC is mirrored in Europe, through law enforcement agencies, such as Europol and INTERPOL. In fact, it was a tip-off from INTERPOL that led to the arrest of a man considered to be Australia's worst child sex offender, South Australian Ruecha Tokputza.

Operation Blackwrist was launched as detectives homed in on a pay-per-view website that was being used to exploit children for a paying audience.

Grant Stevens:

From those very small pieces of information they're able to build a fairly substantial case against him and another offender based in Thailand.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Grant Stevens is the South Australian Police Commissioner whose detectives pursued Tokputza. A two year investigation revealed Tokputza's heinous activities in Australia and Thailand where the youngest of his victims was just 15 months old. 50 children were rescued and dozens of arrests made in nearly 60 countries. Tokputza pleaded guilty to 50 counts of abuse involving 11 children.

Grant Stevens:

One of the most notorious offenders in this crime type. The fact that he was an Australian citizen born in Thailand, and we had, I think over 850,000 child exploitation images that we identified that he was responsible for the production or dissemination of, the number of children that were exploited by him with 51 indictments against his name, 40 something year penalty attached to that, I think is a mark of just how sinister he was as a child exploitation offender.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Rob Blount is embedded within the AFP's International Command and believes international collaboration and communication are critical to tracking down offenders such as Tokputza.

Rob Blount:

There are a number of different options and processes available to law enforcement. The key one is being able to share that information and make those inquiries initially. So when we do become aware of such an offender, we're working with our foreign partners, we're working across different databases, trying to obtain further details. We can also start looking at putting them on global alerts. You may have heard of INTERPOL notices. So that's one of the key ones that we do use, and an INTERPOL green notice is there to warn about offenders, but when they're at the suspect stage, they're under investigation, we can put them on a blue notice. So this is about trying to identify further information, intelligence, and sometimes details on where they are. And then when we do know that there is an offender that has a serious criminal history and may potentially pose a risk elsewhere, we'll put them on green notices. And so that gets circulated around the world and it can help other countries, other communities protect their children and their community against these same offenders.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Social media is fertile ground for offenders like Ruecha Tokputza, who used it to share the hundreds of abuse videos he produced. Julie Inman Grant is Australia's eSafety Commissioner. Her office works closely with the ACCCE and the AFP, keeping tabs on suspicious activity in the online space and helping to protect people online. It's Australia's first and only regulatory body of its kind and they definitely have their work cut out for them.

Julie Inman Grant:

There's no question that these issues are proliferating and are out of the scope and control of most governments. But of course, the AFP is a law enforcement agency and in the child sexual exploitation space, they're focused on arresting the perpetrators and identifying the victims. Our role is as the Australian National Hotline we are part of the INHOPE network, which is a group of about 46 hotlines around the globe. And our function is to take down harmful content and we have a range of civil powers. Civil powers and the civil agency where we're taking down content, the longer that content is up, the more a victim is traumatised. We do a lot of disruption. We're looking at the economic drivers and we do lots of disruption work. We share a lot of that intelligence with law enforcement, including with the ACCCE, and we've got operational agreements that dictate how that happens.

Julie Inman Grant:

And so when people come to us as victims of image-based abuse, sometimes that's all they want is the content taken down. If they decide to move to prosecution, it's often time-consuming. It's expensive. They have to bring their images up in the court of law. So sometimes internet prosecution either is not going to happen, or it's not going to be what gives that particular victim relief. The fact that they've got a range of solutions available to them in Australia makes us unique in the world.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Many of the big tech companies are already moving to clean up their platforms. In 2018, Twitter suspended almost a million accounts while Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube took down tens of millions of offensive posts and videos, but this positive momentum in the online space still has a long way to go. Despite having a billion users, Apple only reported 205 cases of child sexual abuse material to NCMEC's CyberTipline in the year 2019. That same year, Amazon Web Services, which hosts the vast majority of the world's content, reported just eight incidents of child sexual abuse material to the CyberTipline.

Julie Inman Grant:

We need to really hold their feet to the fire, have them scanning for child sexual abuse material, making sure that they're not accomplices effectively to this child sexual abuse. Even if it's not happening on their platforms, if they're using their platforms to store this content, to share or facilitate this content, they are absolutely culpable.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Toby Dagg is Head of Investigations at Australia's eSafety Commissioner. For the past seven years, he's seen industry come on board and work with global law enforcement agencies. He believes we're only just starting to grapple with how widespread the issue of online child sexual exploitation really is.

Toby Dagg:

We still don't have a full sense of just how vast a problem this is, but if I can rely on some statistics from the Canadian Centre for Child Protection and their Arachnid Project, which scales and automates a lot of the work against the hosting of child abuse material. In only a matter of years, they've issued something in the order of six and a half million take down notices in relation to known child abuse content that's been triple verified too. So this isn't just accidental content. This is material that trained classifiers have said, "Yep, meets the grade for the worst of the worst."

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The creation of the ACCCE has seen law enforcement across the country adopt a more unified approach in tackling online child sex offenders. They work together with the sole aim of ending the abuse of children and putting offenders behind bars. The former Minister for Home Affairs, Peter Dutton describes the ACCCE as a focal point for these types of investigations.

Peter Dutton:

We're bringing together partners, our state and territory colleagues, those who are in NGOs domestically and internationally, child support groups and many others, or people of goodwill and those that have got a common purpose, and if we can harness all of that energy in the one center, I think the outcomes, which we've achieved already, talk about the success ahead for the ACCCE as well. So we're in early days and there's a lot more success that we will enjoy and it's possible because of the ACCCE and the people who work there.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

It's a united front that sends a clear and direct message to those who victimise children and share or sell the resulting images across the internet. Denzil Clark is a Detective Superintendent with Queensland Police and believes the ACCCE has given law enforcement the opportunity to be proactive rather than reactive in their quest to protect children and remove them from harm.

Denzil Clark:

At times, it's fair to say that we are chasing the offenders, but with innovation and technology, more and more, we are starting to get ahead of the game, closing that gap.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

But that gap can have moving goalposts.

Denzil Clark:

What we are seeing is a heightened effort by offenders to find ways to obfuscate their activities from law enforcement so that they can avoid detection. That is one of the primary outcomes that we are seeing, particularly during the COVID period where online engagements has increased, that rather than stopping, they are finding ways to avoid detection.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

But through the efforts of people working in organisations such as the ACCCE, offenders are being detected while more and more arrests are being made, which leads to a ripple effect within the community.

Denzil Clark:

There's two parts to the ripple effect. One part is offenders putting them on notice that if you participate in this type of crime, you will be detected sooner or later and brought to justice, and there's certainly some deterrent in that for them. But there's also the other side of that coin, which is to the community, the victim, removing them from harm. So that is certainly a win. Their families are supported. Again, their child has been removed from harm. So there's certainly another ripple and a win.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In Australia, there are thousands of people who dedicate their lives to the protection of children. Some work within law enforcement and NGOs, while others answer directly to government. The National Office for Child Safety or NOCS was born out of the Royal Commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse. While the Royal Commission primarily focused on historical reports, it revealed a need for a national response to ongoing issues. NOCS is tasked with ensuring the lessons of the past help prevent future abuse. Rebekah Kilpatrick heads up the team at NOCS, providing national leadership as our community deals with the growing issue of child sexual abuse, as it moves more into the online space.

Rebekah Kilpatrick:

So the online space is obviously this big challenge that we all face. It's kind of where things have moved on to. I think the Royal Commission did a lot of excellent work in terms of highlighting, I guess, the methodologies or highlighting the context of institutional abuse and how kids are vulnerable in institutions and what the response needs to look like, how we can strengthen institutions to make them child safe. I think we know less about the online safety space. I think it moves faster. I think it's difficult for parents to sort of keep up with the burgeoning number of apps and just the ways that kids now interact in the different platforms that you're supposed to understand and engage with. So for us, I think a lot of what we're doing is about trying to understand what the online space looks like, trying to work with our partners, so supporting the Australian Center to Counter Child Exploitation, supporting the eSafety Commission and programs such as ThinkUKnow, and making sure that people understand the work that they're doing, and I think giving them a bit of a boost.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Law enforcement agencies around the world are tasked with identifying these young victims, removing them from harm and prosecuting those responsible for abusing them and disseminating the images. For Detective Superintendent Chris Woods and his team at the ACCCE, it's a community wide responsibility to ensure we all play our part in keeping kids safe online and offline.

Chris Woods:

We all have an obligation in society to be looking after our kids. And we wouldn't let them go off and meet with people that we didn't know in a park or at the shopping center, so why do we allow them to do it on a device? Because we've got some sort of false sense of security, maybe they're in the lounge room of the house. So I think that when people start to think about the online environment, like a town common, you start to see that it's not the panacea to kids needing to kill some time or to be quietened.

Chris Woods:

And we really need to take responsibility. And I think it's about conversations, having open conversations with your children around online safety and also making it a safe place for them to speak up if something doesn't seem right or they've had a strange approach or they're having an interaction that doesn't make sense because I don't think the kids are going to stop using devices to communicate with their class friends and so on. So it's about getting smarter from a supervisory vantage point so that those people who are around children, have children in your life, I think we all have a part to play.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In episode two of Closing The Net, we look at the impacts of child exploitation on the victim, their families, and the families of offenders.

Natalie Walker:

When I first heard it, I ran out of the room and tried not to vomit because I had had the experience of discovering my ex partner was involved with child sexual abuse material only 18 months earlier. And it was really raw and traumatic.

Jessica Gilmore:

He not only groomed the children, pretty groomed his wife. He set up their home, so that it was difficult for her to have any idea what was going on.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

If the content in this podcast has caused any distress, or if you know a child is being contacted or groomed online, visit acce.gov.au to find out how to report and where you can seek support. If you see child abuse material online, it's important to report it to the Office of the eSafety Commissioner who can help get it removed. And if you think a child is in immediate danger, please call 000 or your local police. You can provide anonymous information to CrimeStoppers.com.au or by phoning 1800 333 000.

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