

Closing The Net – Episode 7, Prevent, Prepare, Pursue and Protect

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.

Lesla Gale:

It centers around protecting those members of our community that are our most vulnerable. They don't often have a voice for themselves. And so, for me, it's been about being able to be that voice and find justice for those children in child protection matters, where often they are unable to speak for themselves, just to make sure that we get justice for them.

Denzil Clark:

This is the most collegiate group of police that I've experienced, that anyone who works in this space puts protection of kids first. It's all about working together, sharing information, targeting offenders wherever they are across the world, and saving kids.

Lana Palmer:

It causes me anxiety when we get to a dinner party and you've never met people and they start talking about their jobs and I kind of go, "Ah, here we go. This is going to get awkward."

Hilda Sirec:

I certainly look at ACCCE as a superhero type of character. The powers that this persona is trying to have is the different sort of technical arms that people, or the intervention pieces, the prevention pieces, they're the kind of the superhero strengths that the ACCCE persona has.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Each and every day, a dedicated team of Australian women and men go to work and surround themselves with some of the most horrendous material you could ever try to imagine. These dedicated women and men are part of the ACCCE, the Australian Center to Counter Child Exploitation, a team of exceptional people whose motivation can be summed up in four words, prevent, prepare, pursue, and protect. Their work often goes unrecognised, and it's not until an arrest is made that we begin to get an inkling of what's been happening behind the scenes as the rest of us go about our lives. I'm Rodger Corser, and this is Closing The Net, a podcast series that explores the world of those policing online child sexual exploitation, the borderless crime. Coming up, we'll talk with members of the ACCCE and AFP teams who work tirelessly to protect children from harm, bring child sex offenders to justice and educate us all on how to report this heinous crime type.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Some of the stories you'll hear may be confronting, but I encourage you to stay the course as these are stories that need to be told, stories that can shape a wider conversation around technology and child protection. Online child sexual abuse is something we'd all prefer not to talk about, but their numbers make it something we all need to talk about. In 2020, the AFP received more than 21,000 reports of child sexual exploitation involving Australian victims or offenders. In 2009, that figure was around 1,000.

Each report can contain thousands of images and videos of children being exploited or tortured for sexual gratification or financial profit. The AFP is now receiving more and more reports of children aged as young as four engaging with online child sex offenders from around the world. In Australia, in the mid-2000s, the average number of child sex abuse images seized when an offender was arrested was around 1,000. Today, the average seizure is between 10,000 and 80,000 images and videos, some contain more than a million.

Hilda Sirec:

Humans exploiting other humans is not a new phenomenon. What is new and what we're trying to understand with the Center is the prevalence of what's happening online, the fact that technology has enabled the proliferation of this crime type, not only in Australia, but globally.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Commander Hilda Sirec leads the team at the ACCCE.

Hilda Sirec:

The effort coming in, we've started to scratch that surface. So whilst I believe it's always been there, we're starting to take away the fog and revealing the wound. The wound is that children are exploited in Australia all over the world. By ensuring that we have a little bit of more structure and understanding that we have to take the taboo out of talking about child exploitation, I think we'll get more community involvement, more NGOs and more parents and teachers and piece of people that are potentially exploited willing to have the conversation about what's not right.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

When it comes to combating online child sexual exploitation, the ACCCE is a globally unique facility right here in Australia. A world-class hub of knowledge, expertise, and resources, the ACCCE brings together law enforcement with government, non-government and other groups in the child protection space to collaborate and look for ways to prevent and disrupt this horrendous crime type. Superintendent Chris Woods heads up ACCCE Operations.

Chris Woods:

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. I'm a AFP officer, but it's both in law enforcement and policing. It's the first time we've brought these disparate groups together in the child protection space to really have maximum impact.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The AFP works closely with police in each state and territory through units known as Joint Anti-Child Exploitation Teams. Introduced in 2014, the JACETs are Australia's frontline police who play a pivotal role in child protection, investigations and arrests. AFP Assistant Commissioner Lesa Gale led the implementation of the JACETs across the country.

Lesla Gale:

I would say prior to the ACCCE, when we first established the Joint Anti-Child Exploitation Team construct, that was probably the first step from an Australian perspective where we started to reform how we operate in this environment. We call them the JACETs. What the JACETs are, are partnership co-location model between the Australian Federal Police, so national with our state and territory counterparts. We have JACETs all around the country. One of the things that that has really contributed to from a law enforcement perspective is that connection between the state response versus the national response. And so, the different capabilities we bring together to support each other so that our response is much more effective has really been critical to some of the successes that we've seen in recent years with our response to this issue. The Australian Center to Counter Child Exploitation, the ACCCE, as we call it, that's where that has really taken it to the next step.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Tom Clayworth is a federal agent with the Queensland JACET. The collaboration and expertise that teams from other states and territories provide to his team is vital in helping them take down child sex offender networks across the country.

Tom Clayworth:

I guess the advantages of that in terms of interacting with other JACETs is a lot of the time we might go to a job and you never really know what you're going to get when you get there. You might be there for one type of offending and find something completely different. They might be chatting to another offender online or whatever that might be. And then you may identify that offender maybe in say Sydney, for example. And then it's just a matter of ringing up Sydney and going, "Hey, I've got this guy. I think he might be down there in Sydney." They'll take that on and go from there. And that's happened on quite a large scale, where we might sort of ping all around the country. It might go from we identify someone here in Queensland and identify someone in Victoria and then Sydney, and then it comes back to Queensland, and then that's how you may identify an entire network.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

There's a saying within the AFP and the ACCCE that it takes a network to break a network, and the ACCCE has already built an impressive network of agencies across the country and the world to establish a reliable information pipeline to feed them reports about suspicious activity. As Chris Woods explains, those reports land first at the Child Protection Triage Unit before being distributed to the wider team.

Chris Woods:

So there's a real pathway that exists that begins at the ACCCE Child Protection Triage Unit. As the name suggests, we have offices dedicated to receiving inbound reports from members of the public from law enforcement domestically or internationally, or in large part from this NCMEC, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in the United States. This is probably our greatest channel of inbound reports to Australia. Those reports are received at this CPTU, the triage unit. Offices there work six days a week from very early in the morning until late in the evening, working through each of these inbound reports.

Chris Woods:

We cross-reference the IP addresses and any other elements of those reports that might indicate a person or a location or a region with our police databases through our National Collaborative Center we have unified database access for our officers to run that triaging operation, to look for those elements of

the reports that might indicate where we need to direct the report. With our ability to check data with telecommunications companies, we are able to very quickly run checks on IP addresses, work out who telecommunications providers are, which company and ask who the subscriber is.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Leanne Cooper is a Federal Agent attached to the Child Protection Triage Unit. She's one of those dedicated investigators whose day begins by viewing images that the rest of us would never, ever wish to see.

Leanne Cooper:

Every morning we log on and we see what reports have come to us overnight. We then go into every single report. We look at all the images and we try and do an assessment as to see if we can identify the person who's done this. We then triage them, so we put them... The worst case ones are on our top priority list and the others go down the list. Some of them, we just will never find so they go to the bottom of the list. We try and do that before mid day, get it all sorted into a list. This is for our priorities. Then, in the afternoons, we will try and find these people, try to identify them. And then once we've identified the person and figure out who they are, what they do, whether they have kids themselves, have contact with kids through their occupation or through a voluntary, like a sporting coach or something like that, they then get prioritised again and then they get sent out to our JACET teams for investigation.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

On a daily basis, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in the U.S. delivers anywhere between 40 and 100 reports to the Child Protection Triage Unit at the ACCCE. Each one of those reports might contain one image or hundreds of images, as well as videos, images and videos depicting children being subjected to sexual harm. If these children are to be identified, to be found and rescued, someone has to look at these awful images. Within the ACCCE, there are women and men who perform this task each and every day, driven by a singular desire to stop the abuse of children and remove them from harm. They're part of what's known as the Victim Identification Unit, whose role requires an analytical mind and a keen eye for detail. Kirsty Clark works in Victim Identification at the AFP.

Kirsty Clark:

We're analysing every single thing that we can see in their material. It's basically putting all the pieces of the puzzles back together to give us the best possible chance of finding that child somewhere in the world. The victims may be located here in Australia, or they may be located internationally. Our primary focus is to identify Australian children within that abuse material, but this crime particularly has no borders and it really requires a borderless response.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Lana is part of the Victim Identification Unit inside the ACCCE, and she knows only too well the importance of cross-border collaboration in her day-to-day work.

Lana Palmer:

There's a lot of things we can look for in that material that might help us work out where in the world the child is. We work collaboratively with all the other overseas international victim identification units to try and work together, I guess, to take out the long delays that we have looking through all of this

media. If we can identify something here that's happened in Canada, we can send it really quickly over to the authorities over there and they can have a little more specifically within that for anything that they might recognise in their country. So I think the first step in our job is to try and work out where in the world this abuse has happened so that we can send it over and people can take a closer look and see for material that they might recognise as being in a particular province or a particular area of their country.

Lana Palmer:

Similarly, we want get in leads or clues from other countries and they say that we think this is in Australia. You can hear an Australian child talking in this video and then we'll have a look at it and see if there's anything in there that we can recognise as belonging to a particular Australian state, and then we can send it to that state to have a look at further to narrow it down. So I guess it's sort of a bit of filtering where in the world this abuse has happened and then sending it to the experts in that particular area to have a closer look at.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Collaboration with the University of Queensland led to the development of software that now helps the victim identification teams sort through the volume of material that can be mind-boggling in size. One particular seizure involved 2.5 million media items. The software looks for any kind of commonality that may help narrow the focus for police.

Kirsty Clark:

So, things I might look for when I'm looking actually at the material, so I'd look for audio clues. So with videos, we might be looking at a language or an accent, background noises. We would be analysing what's happening. It might give us a particular region or a radio program or something like that. We're also analysing all the objects seen in the imagery as well, so clocks or PowerPoints, and that might give us a where it's been produced. We're not only viewing the material, analysing it, building that intelligence profile around it, trying to find a location, we're also uploading all of the material that we're seeing to the INTERPOL International Child Sexual Exploitation database as well. So that is a database that is an intelligence tool that is used by experts around the world. It shares material with victim ID experts globally. It allows everyone to analyse and review that material. It also holds the status of their identification. If you have a series of images where you think, "Okay. I need to do some victim ID work on this," we'll first upload that to the database. That particular database will tell us whether that victim has been identified. So it stops you straight away if the child's been identified.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In the eyes of AFP Commissioner Reece Kershaw, those who work in victim identification as part of child protection are heroes.

Reece Kershaw:

Yeah. They are special kind of people to do that, to perform that kind of function within policing. I think you have to be a person who is able to cope with high level of stress dealing with trying to save a victim that you know is consistently being victimised or abused. They're special people. They're our warriors, but also they're our guardians as well. They're out there making sure they're protecting our children as best that they can within the law and within the bounds of our policies and so on.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

So, what does the personality profile look like of someone who works in this area?

Paula Hudson:

The reality is we're asking people for their daily job to do the worst job that there is, actually, I would argue the worst job that we have in policing to do.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Detective Superintendent Paula Hudson works for the AFP in the area of child protection operations, and also inside the ACCCE.

Paula Hudson:

Resilience is obviously a really big key to working in the crime type. Over the years, that takes a toll. In my role as a Superintendent, as a manager, it's about how I equip my people with the right tools to work in the area around their mental wellbeing and that resilience piece. So whilst I would say it's a particular passion and it's a particular calling for police, absolutely, but it's not necessarily a profile of a person. It's a calling. It's about having that resilience in yourself and in your colleagues and to get through the daily tasks. I absolutely admire particularly our victim ID specialists. The job they do is the worst of the worst. That's all they do all day, but they're driven by rescuing those children, removing them from harm, and bringing those perpetrators to justice. So I feel that people working in our space are very passionate, but very justice-driven to bring people to justice.

Lana Palmer:

There are definitely some people that can do this job, and there are other people who think they would be able to do it and they come in and then they realise straight away that that's not actually a job for them. On the other hand, there's other people who say, "I don't think I could ever work in that job," and they come in and they're actually really good at it they're able to distance themselves from taking that emotional trauma home with them, can go on and switch off at the end of the day and say, "That's just a job. That's what I do here. Now, I can go home and still see my children the same way." There often comes a question of when you coming into the area, whether or not you have children, does that make a difference? Does it make a difference if you have children that you then go home to? Are males without children better equipped to deal with looking at this sort of material every day, or is a mother that has a child? Is there any psychological difference between those different people? I think it's just some people can do it and some people can't.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

It's hard to imagine having to deal with such confronting material on a day-to-day basis, let alone find the ability to switch off at the end of the day. It's why staff mental wellbeing is a top priority for those working in victim identification.

Leanne Cooper:

We always do it in pairs. So there's always two of you looking at it, which kind of takes the emotion out of it. Because the two of you are there, you're looking at it more of an investigative things, or you're trying to figure out how old the child is, where the offender might be. And so, it kind of takes the emotion out of it because you're talking to each other about those types of things and not how sad it is,

what's happening to that child. But yeah, some of the images are confronting and some of them are... They are quite horrific, but then others, they kind of just become everyday images for us. We take the emotion out of it. It's hard to explain.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Regardless of how well this amazing team of people manages to take the emotion out of their daily work, their mental health is of utmost importance.

Chris Woods:

It is utterly confronting. It is such a difficult area of policing, let alone society that it takes special characters, special people who are willing and able to put their hand up to come into our environment. And so, we really do respect those people and really want to support them as best we can to make sure that their work experience and their life whilst they're attached to this area is as best supported as possible, but also keeping the conversation going with them around if they're going okay, encouraging those kinds of conversations, which in a policing sense or a policing detective or investigative sense is a little bit counter-intuitive. It's not the same as other crime areas, say like drugs or fraud or terrorism. And so, the building's been built very much so that people can step away from their workplace. Even in terms of where you go for your meals within the building, we want people to step away from their work areas so that it's just these subtleties of managing your own mental health that are built into the design that separates out the place where they're doing this work, viewing this kind of material or talking about these cases, and stepping into the rest of their life, which might be just their lunch break or just taking some time out.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Stopping child abuse and protecting children from harm is not just a challenge for law enforcement, it's a whole of community issue. Everyone involved in a child's life has a responsibility to educate and guide them and provide support when it comes to them staying safe online. We should know where to go for help and how to report any issues or concerns. Now, you and I can also lend our knowledge to those trying to identify victims of online exploitation and abuse. Modeled on a program used by Europol, Stop Child Abuse – Trace an Object is an ACCCE initiative, where members of the public are being encouraged to look at non-confrontational images extracted from child abuse material to help identify what it is or where it is.

Lana Palmer:

Often, the public really want to help us in our jobs. The more people that are looking at this material, the better chance we have of identifying this victim and removing them now instead of two or three years later when they've continued to be offended against for that time.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

An image of a child will never be shared by the ACCCE or the AFP, but Lana from victim identification says there may be clues in other images that can help lead to a child's rescue.

Lana Palmer:

So sometimes there'll be things like a logo on a t-shirt or a logo on the clothing. Other times it might be something in the background, landscape or environment in the background that they don't necessarily recognise where it is, but somebody in the public who's been to that place and it's much easier for them

to identify where it is. What we're asking is for members of the public to log onto the website and have a look and see if any of those items or objects or backgrounds to the child abuse material is recognisable to them so that they can send in a lead and we can go out and chase a rabbit down the hall and see if we can find the victim and/or the offender and the location of that abuse. There's so many images and videos on people's computers when we go out and do a search warrant. We're never going to get through it all quickly on our own. So the more people that we can have working on it, the quicker that results are going to be and the sooner those kids are going to get saved.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Every day across Australia, police are executing search warrants. On any given day, one of those search warrants could lead to a major national or international operation involving online child sex offenders. Around 1996 in Queensland, a crack team of police were brought together primarily to investigate institutionalised and historical child sex abuse cases that were brought together under the name Taskforce Argos. In the early 2000s, the scope for Taskforce Argos expanded to address the growing amount of child exploitation material across the internet. Argos was led by Detective Inspector Jon Rouse, who's now embedded within the ACCCE, working with the victim identification and covert online teams.

Jon Rouse:

We commence what was essentially Australia's first covert operation into the internet, keeping in mind that in the early 2000s, the communication platforms that were available were very limited. Internet Relay Chat, IRC, and MSN messenger and Bulletin Boards were pretty much all that was really available for us to look at. It's an interesting timeline to reflect back on because we were there at what was the dawn of essentially the use of this communications technology by child sex offenders, so we saw how it grew and evolved.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In 2002, Argos launched a groundbreaking covert operation to infiltrate an online pedophile network, where they identified a man in a chat room who was seeking underage girls for sex. He was arrested after an officer posing as a 14-year-old girl agreed to meet the man in a Brisbane hotel room. The work of Taskforce Argos would also aid in the arrest of notorious online child sex offender, Shannon McCoolle, a South Australian childcare worker and administrator of a global online child exploitation network currently serving a 35-year jail term.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In addition to his role with a victim identification and covert online teams at the ACCCE, Jon Rouse is there to train the next generation of investigators and strengthen Australia's international ties with law enforcement working in the child protection space. Jon's years of experience with Taskforce Argos taught him the importance of international collaboration, collaboration that's resulted in the arrest of many Australian child sex offenders. A tip-off from New Zealand would lead to one of the most high profile cases that touched all corners of the globe.

Jon Rouse:

One of the images contained a Queensland registration plate, and that began a two-year investigation. That was probably one of the most psychologically challenging ones that I've been involved in, because ultimately what we had was two male offenders from North Queensland that were in a homosexual

relationship that had adopted a little boy from Russia as a baby, boarding back to Queensland to raise him as the parents. On the face of it, it was a loving, caring relationship, and perhaps a benchmark for how these things could be done, but underpinning all of that was our suspicion about their activities, particularly the fact that their child appeared in the collection of a child sex offender that have been arrested in New Zealand, and that that offender appeared in images with the child.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Two years of meticulous work in international collaboration unveiled an horrific network of abuse, but resulted in arrests being made in the United States.

Jon Rouse:

Ultimately, through some very good cooperation across borders with our partners in U.S. Postal Service in the United States and with LAPD and Homeland Security, we brought the investigation to a conclusion with the arrest of both of these males in California, where they had the little boy with them at the time. He was on his third passport at the age of six. He had been trafficked across the world amongst child sex offenders. We found that one really hard because we knew what had happened, but trying to get the evidence was just so problematic because of encryption. But I guess through a dogged perseverance by our team at Argos, and once again, also with long-term friends and partners overseas, we managed to put these men in jail in the United States for 35 years.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In mythology, the Griffin is the protector of the innocent and the protector of those things with value. It seems appropriate then that it lends its name to an operation working in partnership with the ACCCE to advise the National Serious and Organised Crime Coordination Committee on all matters relating to child protection. Detective Superintendent Denzil Clark leads Operation Griffin.

Denzil Clark:

It's been in existence prior to the ACCCE, but this is the first time we've seen a dedicated team such as the ACCCE established. They have taken as leaps and bounds forwards in this space because they can dedicate the time, effort and resources to do so. So you do have organised crime in the traditional sense that they are committing crimes to gain a benefit. In this instance, it's not so much financial. There certainly is financial gain for certain people through online streaming, but the commodity itself, the child abuse material is one of the primary motivators for that. That's the organised crime aspect to it, but also one of the most base responses to the human nature is sexual. We see offenders across the nation and the world who promote and participate in child abuse, online in particular because of the ease of the environment, they form networks themselves to share and promote their perverse behavior.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Dealing with this crime type can take a toll on even the toughest of investigators. They develop coping skills, compartmentalise their lives and try not to bring their work home with them. But for Detective Superintendent Clark, at the end of the day, making an arrest and rescuing a child is the ultimate reward.

Denzil Clark:

Those who work in child protection get exposed to some of the most deprived and base level of horror and behaviors that humanity can commit on each other. To abuse a vulnerable child is horrendous and

you do see some terrible things, but those wins that we have where we can remove a child from harm, where we can bring one of these offenders to justice is a great moment in your career, and to be able to continue to do that, I find is the most satisfying work. You can bring drug offenders before the courts. You can do all sorts of other crime types, but I don't find they give me the same personal satisfaction and reward as protecting kids. This is the most collegiate group of police that I've experienced, that anyone who works in this space puts protection of kids first. It's all about working together, sharing information, targeting offenders wherever they are across the world, and saving kids, and that's what we see every single day.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

There's no denying the commitment of those policing, the online space being infiltrated by child sex offenders. They're committed to ending the misery suffered by so many children. In that regard, they are true heroes. Former Home Affairs Minister, Peter Dutton, was a serving Queensland police officer before launching a political career. He has nothing but admiration for the people at the ACCCE and the work they do each and every day.

Peter Dutton:

I really see them as people who are going into a war zone each day. We would hold up examples in the Second World War or in conflict since then of people that have sacrificed time with their family, sacrifice their own careers, their advancement within the AFP or defense force, whatever it might be, I really see them in that light because the war zone that they're going into each day is barely recognisable by people who go about their everyday chores and run their kids to school, go to sport on the weekend, go out with mates on a Friday night.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

For Commander Hilda Sirec and her team, it all comes down to a passion for protecting children.

Hilda Sirec:

There's this passion that everyone has in working these crime type. Whilst 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 these little wins that are going to add up and that's why people do it. I'm so thrilled to be able to work with the amazing people in the ACCCE and Child Protection across the country because they're really passionate in making sure that we can save these children. Everyone always asks why you do it. If you can, you do.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In episode eight of Closing The Net, we look at the various ways that online child sexual exploitation can be reported and those in the frontline of receiving those reports.

Katrina Lines:

Over 60% of adults won't actually do anything if a child discloses that they've been harmed. So we teach little kids to tell, tell, tell, and tell again, until someone listens and helps, which is a sad thing to have to teach little kids, but we want to empower them to be able to ask for help and get help if they need it.

Elliot Rubens:

You've got lots of different people that you can go to. With that kind of culture of safety that we can create around the child, hopefully that can then give them the sense of protection and confidence around themselves to then be able to make that really brave, scary choice to then reach out and speak to the AFP, ACCCE, or police or child protection.

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. 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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