

Revolution in technologies creates new opportunities for crime

'Virtual Predators' is not the title of the latest cyberspace game. They are a real online menace threatening the safety of our children which the AFP has a duty to protect.

The revolution in information and communication technologies has led to new ways of committing traditional crimes, presenting a world of opportunity and risk to children who may unwittingly become the victims of crime in the same places as they learn, play and communicate.

Children are particularly vulnerable because they often use the Internet unsupervised and have easy access to portable recording devices, digital photography and mobile phones. Children face dangers online in many ways. For example, they may be exposed to offensive material online that makes them uncomfortable. The Internet also provides fertile ground for sexual predators who can hide behind assumed persons while they build trust and confidence in the inexperienced who are unaware that they are being groomed.

Ironically, new technologies which have helped criminals are also the key in the fight against online child exploitation, according to Online Child Sex Exploitation Team (OCSET) National Coordinator, Federal Agent Greg Harrigan. He explained that policing the next generation of communications would demand a constantly evolving approach.

"In July 2007, a Queensland man became the first person to be charged

with transmitting child pornography via SMS messages on his mobile phone. In a separate incident, two men were recently charged in New South Wales and Western Australia with grooming through an online chat room before engaging the victim in conversations of a sexual nature using mobile phones.

"New technology has definitely created challenges and there are going to be even more challenges in relation to how we acquire information from telecommunication companies," Federal Agent Harrigan said.

The arrest of 12 Australians on child exploitation charges in February this year, demonstrated the AFP's global capacity and continued commitment to reduce the incidence and impact of online child sex exploitation. As part of the multi-agency *Operation Lobate*, the AFP's Online Child Sex Exploitation Team collaborated on this global investigation into an Internet paedophile network earlier this year. Significant breakthroughs from *Operation Lobate* resulted in 63 arrests across 35 countries, including the rescue of 22 child victims from around the world.

In Australia, *Operation Lobate* has led to four arrests as well as the execution of five search warrants and two convictions on child pornography offences. Another two cases are still before the court. During this operation, the AFP seized laptops, hard drives, MP3 players and a large quantity of pornographic images of children discovered during the raids.

Operation Lobate is one of many



ongoing investigations carried out by OCSET in collaboration with law enforcement agencies around the world which form the international Virtual Global Taskforce working to oppose online child abuse.

The National Manager of Economic and Special Operations, Federal Agent Roman Quaadvlieg explained that online child pornography offences are not victimless crimes. The pornographic images create the market for the sexual exploitation of children.

"These arrests are a stark reminder to parents and children to remain vigilant regarding who they pass on personal details too via the Internet and even in seemingly innocent chat rooms," he said.

OCSET – a specialist unit

OCSET began in January 2005 as a \$28 million government initiative to prevent online child exploitation

Top left: AFP officer with students at the Cybersmart launch in September 2006.
Top right: OCSET member at AFP Headquarters



Photo by Greg Primmer

following a global investigation, *Operation Auxin* which led to 191 arrests in Australia alone. The Australian arm of the investigation, which was referred by the United States and centred around a Russian-based international 'pay per view' child pornography site, resulted in more than 700 Australian referrals (lines of enquiry) for the team to investigate.

In March 2005, tough new Commonwealth child sex exploitation legislation came into effect, enabling OCSET to infiltrate chat rooms and websites through the AFP's national and international capacity to investigate criminal activity and pursue prosecutions. Australia is now one of the top five countries with effective legislation to prosecute online child sex exploitation matters globally.

OCSET functions as a specialist unit within the AFP with approximately 35 staff and more than 100 additional agents specially trained to assist investigations when required. A core evaluation team is now based at AFP Headquarters in Canberra with an intelligence team continuing to operate from Queensland.

Not a pleasant business for anyone

A rigorous selection process exists for those who volunteer for this work to ensure they are not unsettled by the explicit nature of the abuse depicted online. Specialists in the team include experienced investigators, forensic analysts and IT experts who receive ongoing support from psychologists.



"If a candidate is not selected, it does not mean they do not have the skills to do the work," Psychologist Karen Procter said. "It might mean they are more at risk of being affected by the work because of the types of images they will see."

Due to the explicit nature of OCSET investigations, members can only serve between two and four years with the team before moving elsewhere within the organisation. They are regularly debriefed by the OCSET psychologist with ongoing support available as required.

Who commits these crimes?

Typically, OCSET has 50 cases under evaluation at any one time. Since its inception OCSET have received more than 800 referrals, arrested 62 offenders, laid 167 charges and rescued nine child victims.

As to who commits these crimes, Federal Agent Harrigan explained:

"While offenders are predominantly male, there is no 'typical' demographic for committing this type of crime,

and we have seen from 22-year-old students through to 79 year-old retired professionals charged with online sex offences against children.

"Yet the percentage of these offenders who may physically act out a sexual offence remains unknown and that's the challenge for the team. We're still learning a lot about the impact of viewing sexually explicit material on individuals, but what we have learned is that there is a huge volume of people viewing child pornography and a lot of reckless behaviour which needs to be looked at carefully. Technology has also created an opportunity for people who may not have thought about doing this kind of thing before to try it," he said.

Raising community awareness and understanding of online sex crimes

Combating online child exploitation requires a community-wide response and OCSET considers crime prevention just as important as the investigations themselves.

Campaigns ranging from community service announcements on Foxtel cable television to appointing a crime

prevention officer to work with state and federal government and the private sector, build community awareness that will assist in encouraging people to protect themselves and their children online. The Australian Government NetAlert, a free advisory service to all Australians, and Microsoft's *Think U Know* campaign are significant services assisting in educating the community about Internet safety.

Federal Agent Harrigan said empowering kids through community awareness may be the key in preventing potential referrals to OCSET.

"It's all about teaching 'stranger danger' online. What happens in the real world happens in the virtual world too and kids who are aware will be able to simply block inappropriate communications.

"But we also have to make some hard decisions. Do we focus our resources on investigations, or can crime prevention messages assist us in better managing the problem? It's vital to get the message out there to help prevent it," he said.

In collaboration with Internet service providers, the OCSET team is establishing a peer-to-peer network project that will enable them to intercept child pornography searches on the Internet. An automatic message will notify offenders that they are in breach of Australian law and may be contacted by police.

"We want to people to be aware that this is a serious offence and one which they won't want to do again," Federal Agent Harrigan said.

Working locally, nationally and with overseas law enforcement agencies

In conjunction with state police and numerous global partners OCSET works to address this worrying trend of online predators. Federal Harrigan explained:

"This cooperative effort to share information and skills has seen the AFP represent Australia on the Virtual Global Taskforce. We are also a member of the National Police Child Protection Committee with State and Territory police and next year OCSET will host the 26th Meeting of Interpol's 'Specialist Group on Crimes Against Children'," he said.

In the not-too-distant future, Federal Agent Harrigan also sees the AFP conducting virtual policing on websites like *Second Life*, *My Space* and *You Tube* as well as the AFP marked as a point of reference on major Australian search engines and websites.

"As a father, I admit that OCSET can sometimes be a challenging place to work. You can't remove things you see from your mind and it can change how you deal with people. However, as a team we firmly believe in sending a strong message that the AFP will continue in a global capacity to protect and save children from this form of exploitation," Federal Agent Harrigan said.

For more information or help with an Internet safety issue, visit www.netalert.net.au for access to Internet safety advice, resources and NetAlert help services or make a free call to 1800 880 176.



Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Helen Coonan with student at the Cybersmart launch in September 2006.

Protecting Australian Families online

On 10 August 2007, the Prime Minister, John Howard was joined by Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Helen Coonan to announce the Government's \$189 million program to protect Australian families from online dangers on the Internet.

Commissioner Keelty welcomed the additional funding of \$43.5 million over four years to strengthen the AFP's online protection efforts as part of the Australian Government's Protecting Families Online initiative.

"The rapid expansion of child sex exploitation in the past decade highlights this as a problem of global proportions," Commissioner Keelty said. "The new funding will assist in recruitment for OCSET and AHTCC and to increase the AFP's capacity to prevent this crime."