

# Federal Crime Threat Picture

# 2024



# AFP





## Commissioner's foreword

I am pleased to launch the second annual Australian Federal Police (AFP) Federal Crime Threat Picture. This high-level snapshot provides insight into the trends and shifting landscape of criminal and security threats that the AFP is working tirelessly to counter.

It highlights the challenges of policing in an uncertain world driven by constant technological advancements, which provide new opportunities for criminality throughout the Commonwealth, while also offering law enforcement new avenues to identify, detect and disrupt those who threaten the safety of our communities and the security of our democracy.

Our community is facing evolving challenges including geopolitical instability, impacts of climate change, socio-economic pressures and accelerated digital transformation. Challenges arising from a cybercrime, fraud, economic vulnerabilities and traditional security frameworks are amplified by advancements in technology. We are seeing border control measures and socio-economic strains reshape the dynamics of organised criminal networks.

To address these complexities, the AFP must remain agile and continually positioning to respond to an ever-evolving threat landscape. The AFP is focused on establishing an adaptable, agile workforce that represents the communities we serve and protect, and bolstering cybersecurity infrastructure.

Policing, like the environment in which we operate, is changing and requires a skilled, tech-enabled workforce that is grounded in its humanity. As Australia's national law enforcement agency, it is vital that we stay a step ahead of crime and prevent harm to Australians and Australia's interests.

Reece P Kershaw APM  
Commissioner

## Addressing global challenges through a focus on partnerships

**Enduring positive partnerships and accelerating disruptions, particularly for transnational and multi-jurisdictional matters, are crucial to effectively combatting crime.**

Fundamental shifts in geopolitical, economic, and technological domains, along with societal changes are shaping the increasingly complex Australian criminal threat environment. Critically, threats often have international links so our international partnerships with intelligence and law enforcement agencies are vital to combatting complex crimes.

Climate change, geopolitics, and strategic competition place ongoing pressure on the stability of Australia's region. This pressure comes in the form of political instability, supply chain disruptions, and an increase in the number of displaced people. Criminal threat actors will take advantage of vulnerable institutions and individuals, and quickly adapt to maximise their financial gain. This operating environment is expected to become increasingly complex over the coming years as a result of these instabilities.

Building law enforcement capacity and capability with our partners, especially across the Asia Pacific region builds a more secure and stable region. It increases our ability to investigate complex crime, combat corruption and respond to emergencies. A coordinated approach to foreign police assistance will support Australia's security and border management.

The AFP will continue to take a multifaceted approach to fight crime at its source, including relying on our partnerships to prevent, detect, disrupt, investigate, and prosecute criminal actors and stop activity seeking to do Australians harm.



Protection of life



Protection of livelihoods



Protection of the Commonwealth





## Protection of life

**Protecting Australian lives is of the highest priority for the AFP and ensuring Australian lives are safe is a key driver for what we do, and how we prioritise our efforts.**

### Protecting Australians from terrorism and violent extremism

Terrorism is an enduring threat to the safety of the Australian community and the threat is increasingly complex and diversified.

- / Vulnerable young people are increasingly being targeted for radicalisation, particularly those who have diverse cognitive profiles or are experiencing mental health conditions.
- / Violent extremists are exploiting technology to radicalise and recruit to their cause. Ease of access to social media and other platforms will continue to provide extremists the ability to easily spread propaganda material, as well as radicalise, recruit, and organise.
- / Extremists are continuing to see airports, Australian Parliament House and other protected establishments as symbolic targets. Terrorism will remain a threat with catastrophic consequences, that has enduring risks to the broader Australian community.

The AFP takes the threat of terrorism and the threat from violent extremists, both individuals and groups, regardless of their background, motivations, or ideologies, seriously.

### Ensuring Australians are safe from exploitation

Ensuring Australians and those travelling to Australia are safe from exploitation is a key priority for the AFP. The displacement of communities due to climate disasters and subsequent deterioration of personal support networks coupled with cost-of-living pressures has increased the number of vulnerable people who are prime exploitation targets.

Australia continues to be a highly attractive destination for migrants from around the world, which opens a market for people smugglers intent on exploiting exposed people. Additionally, the threat of modern slavery has increased in recent years, as broad socio-economic instabilities including the pandemic, lack of education and rising debt has increased forced labour and reporting of forced marriage.

Vulnerable people are being coerced into debt bondage on the false promise of work. Technology is being increasingly adopted by offenders to generate false employment advertisements that are indistinguishable from legitimate opportunities.

Human exploitation is a hidden crime, with no regard for borders, making it difficult to tackle. The AFP will continue to partner with law enforcement agencies both domestically and internationally to educate, prevent, respond, and disrupt those who seek to exploit others.

### Protecting our children from harm

Increased access to the internet has amplified the threat of predators targeting our children. Most pre-teens now have internet access with limited supervision; however, they are not always prepared to recognise or defend themselves from online exploitation.

In the past five years the number of child sexual exploitation cases reported to the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation has doubled, with an increase of self-generated explicit content being shared through social media.

Concerning trends of children self-generating and sharing explicit material online as well as criminals deceiving children into producing exploitation material and then extorting them are rising. The methods for sharing child sexual abuse material (CSAM) are also a growing concern as criminals attempt to use the dark web and encrypted platforms to avoid detection.

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) is being used to sexually exploit children by creating new ways to victimise and re-victimise children. The technology unlocks the ability for a single child predator to quickly create CSAM at scale. Victim identification is becoming more difficult as law enforcement has to sift through huge amounts of content to find the child in harm's way.

Australians conduct large parts of their life online and online safeguards can no longer be relied upon in isolation. The AFP will continue to make every effort to evolve the capability required to keep pace with the dynamic nature of child exploitation threats.

## Protection of livelihoods

**Protecting Australia's collective economic and societal interests from criminal threats by deterring malicious actors and making Australia a hostile environment for criminals to operate in, is a cornerstone of the AFP's mission.**

### Dismantling and tackling organised crime syndicates

There are thousands of transnational and serious organised crime (TSOC) entities impacting Australia, operating both onshore and offshore. TSOC groups are a national security threat undermining Australia's economy, social security, financial systems, and the health and wellbeing of our citizens. Australia's drug market is heavily driven by TSOC groups importing illicit drugs. Domestic drug production forms a small part of the overall picture, with criminals using improvised materials and methods in clandestine drug laboratories to meet local demand.

Psychoactive substances are becoming more prominent with dangerous consequences for our society, as manufacturers use new and different mixes of chemicals which are not yet subject to regulation to stay ahead of the law.

Despite significant efforts of law enforcement to seize methamphetamine domestically and offshore, consumption levels in Australia have reached the highest level recorded since 2019-20, with Australians consuming approximately 10.6 tonnes in 2022-23.

Organised crime groups use legitimate businesses across all sectors of our society to launder money to facilitate a broad range of crime. In doing

so, criminals evade contributing to Australia's economic prosperity and undermine domestic and international trust in, and the stability of, our financial institutions.

Technological advancements, including in AI and encrypted communications systems, are strengthening criminals' capabilities, and making it more difficult for law enforcement to intercept communications.

The AFP will continue building and maintaining strong partnerships with domestic and international law enforcement partners to counter TSOC entities that seek to target Australia from overseas. We will invest in and adopt a technology based approach to disrupt the new and emerging threats that arise from technological advancements.

### Rising threat from technology and malicious actors

Malicious cyber activities perpetrated against Australia are becoming more frequent, more sophisticated and are having a more adverse impact on our national and economic interests than ever before. Cybercrime has direct and indirect implications for society, causing financial loss, disruption to essential services, reputational damage for individuals and businesses, and distrust in the digital economy.

The expanded use of cloud services, transnational service providers and identity and location masking technologies, particularly among offshore cybercriminals, presents complex challenges for the AFP. Offshore criminals are exploiting governance structures around data sovereignty and using offshore information technology infrastructure in jurisdictions hostile to law enforcement, to evade policing efforts.

Programs and software that are commercially available are reducing the technical knowledge required of criminals, making it easier to commit crimes. Generative AI models, like FraudGPT and WormGPT, provide cybercrime-as-a-service tools which assist cybercriminals in developing and deploying a wide variety of methodologies.

The use of end-to-end encryption, deepfake and AI technologies by criminals is progressing faster than legislative reform can effectively address. The AFP is a key stakeholder and source of advice for government on the criminal and policing law reform and policing powers required to more effectively counter cybercriminals. The AFP will continue to engage with its partners overseas to counter and prosecute cybercrime perpetrated offshore against Australia and its interests.

### Increasing challenges from elaborate financial deceptions and corrupt conduct

Safeguarding Australians and Commonwealth revenue streams from malicious fraudulent activity and corruption remains a key focus for the AFP. An increasingly complex financial environment requires enhanced AFP capability and policing response.

Monetary loss and identity deception is growing due to the advancement of AI and biometrics. Technology is making it easier for criminals to conduct illegal activities and significantly more difficult for law enforcement to identify and counter scams and fraud.

Tax evasion, particularly through misreporting and account manipulation, is significantly impacting the Australian economy. Criminal syndicates often use trusted insiders and non-traditional facilitators, such as health professionals, accountants and business consultants for Australian Government programs and payments, to make it more difficult for law enforcement to identify and counter attempts to defraud the Commonwealth.

The increasing popularity of cryptocurrency continues to create new avenues for fraud, including the ability for criminals to hide illegal financial transactions. We are increasingly seeing criminals exploit and influence for-profit and not-for-profit entities for private gain.

As criminals continue to exploit technological advancements for their own advantage, the threat of financial deception and corrupt conduct in Australia will continue to grow and become more complex. The AFP will continue to assist other Commonwealth entities to harden their programs against the evolving threat of fraud and corruption.







## Protection of the Commonwealth

**The AFP plays a crucial role in safeguarding the Commonwealth and protecting Australia's democratic system. This includes combatting foreign interference and espionage, and protecting high office holders, other dignitaries, our borders, and critical infrastructure.**

### Threats to Australia's democracy and way of life

Espionage and foreign interference represent a serious threat to Australia's people, sovereignty, security and the integrity of our national institutions. It is a principal security concern for Australian security agencies.

Australian government employees, political leaders and their associates will continue to be attractive targets for foreign powers and their proxies, seeking to influence government decisions and policy.

Government and critical infrastructure networks are increasingly being targeted by foreign actors to conduct espionage and foreign interference which impacts social cohesion, democracy, and freedoms. Emerging markets, such as those associated with the green economy, continue to be susceptible to foreign bribery, due to weaker governance frameworks and regulatory oversight.

The insidious nature of espionage and foreign interference means even a small level of activity can have severe consequences, which can take years to be realised. The AFP will continue to evolve its strategies and tactics to investigate and disrupt these threats.

### Ensuring the safety of Australian high office holders, protected persons and critical infrastructure

Threats involving federal politicians have risen in the past 12 months, with more than 1009 reports during the 2023-24 financial year involving reports of harassment, nuisance, offensive and threatening communications against federal Parliamentarians and Electorate Offices.

Together with more traditional forms of harassment and threats of force, threats such as cyberattacks, phishing scams, hacking and data breaches have risen. This has the potential to compromise sensitive information, disrupt operations, and undermine trust in government institutions.

Numerous factors can drive threatening behaviours towards Australian high office holders including increased interactions between parliamentarians and the public and trending socio-economic challenges, such as inflation, increasing interest rates, cost of living pressures and geopolitical issues. It remains important for the AFP to deliver a high visibility protective security and armed first response at protected establishments to detect, deter and disrupt criminal activity.

### Ensuring the security of Australia's airports

People travelling through Australian airports expect their travel to be safe and secure. Australian airports face heightened risks with increases in international travel after the pandemic. Fifty-two bomb threats and 218 assaults occurred at Australian airports in 2023, an increase of 44% and 32% respectively from 2022.

Firearms, weapons, drugs, prohibited items, bomb threats and assaults are likely to continue presenting at Australian airports.

Counter-terrorist first response at all nine designated Australian airports, in addition to major incident first response, will remain a focus for the AFP. This will ensure the AFP can continue to deliver on the community's expectations of safe travel.

### The importance of public order management in protecting the Commonwealth

An increase in violence offshore may trigger an increase in community interest and protest activity from issues motivated groups.

Social media is fueling polarisation of topics. Provocative and inflammatory online commentary inspired by international conflict is expected to continue, increasing community tensions on global issues.

The AFP recognises the right to peacefully protest, and most protests in Australia will almost certainly be lawful. However, the potential for isolated issues-motivated individuals to undertake unlawful actions, including isolated acts of violence, remains an enduring risk.

Violent or destructive protest activity of any kind will not be tolerated. Working with organisers and community leaders to ensure the safety of protesters and maintain public order will remain a key focus area for the AFP.



