Crime Interrupted
An AFP and Casefile Presents podcast.
Episode 2, Operation Skarde

Host – introduction
The Australian Federal Police is Australia's national policing agency. It's aim? To defend and protect Australia and Australia's future from domestic and global security threats. The AFP works with Australian, regional and global partners to keep Australia and our region safe.

In Australia, the AFP prevents, disrupts and investigates online child sexual exploitation. In the past financial year alone, 2024 to 2025, AFP investigations led to 96 people being charged with child sexual exploitation offences.

These are the real stories of the AFP. Everyday people doing legendary work.

Host
Please be aware that this case contains detailed discussion of child sexual exploitation. Listener discretion is advised.

Every day, the AFP works to keep children safe and remove them from harm. Behind every child exploitation image, every message, every livestream, there is a child who is being abused. The law is clear: using a phone or the internet to exploit a child, is a serious criminal offence. To meet the growing scale and severity of these crimes, the AFP leads the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation – ACCCE for short – a national hub that unites government agencies with other partners in the fight against child abuse.

Operation Skarde began when intelligence identified suspicious international bank transactions by a man in Sydney to a woman in the Philippines. From there, it took a dedicated detective, a team of victim identification experts, and a digital forensics expert with a knack for puzzle solving, to save three young girls six thousand kilometres away.

Host
Detective Sergeant Nicole Kenny had worked in child protection before joining the AFP and it was this work that drew her to the AFP's Child Protection Team.

Nicole Kenny
My background, prior to joining the Federal Police, I worked for what is now the Department of Community and Justice as a child protection caseworker. So, in my former life, I had been studying psychology and working in that space. And through that work, I'd worked with a number of agencies including New South Wales Police and the Federal Police, and developed a real interest in the criminal investigation of child exploitation offences. So that's how, for me, joining the Federal Police and joining the Child Protection Team was always a goal. I'd

probably been working in this space for about four years before Operation Skarde came on my desk. So I had a bit of knowledge about child exploitation matters, but nothing that had really prepared me for Skarde. A lot of those investigations were around the dealing of child exploitation material, and I hadn't actually seen anything that really related to the actual exploitation of live children and real victims until Skarde came across my desk.

Host
A common perception by offenders is that possessing and circulating child abuse material such as photographs and videos, is somehow not as bad as contact offending in person.

Nicole Kenny
I think that is a social cognitive distortion that we do see, is that it's just pictures and I suppose there's that failure to understand that each image and each video that we review as part of an investigation like this is evidence of a sexual assault or a sexual abuse that has occurred against a real child. So for investigators in this space, we take that very seriously. And as much as there is a perception that: *we're just dealing in the actual material, I'm not hurting children* – that's not the view of the law enforcement community. Each time that you deal in this material it is re-traumatising or it is recirculating abuse that has actually happened to a real child. And we take that very seriously.

Host
To assist law enforcement, governments around the world require that social media and internet service providers monitor their platforms for the distribution of child abuse materials.

Nicole Kenny
The electronic service providers have their own terms and conditions and obligations within international laws that they operate. So effectively, their obligations are to detect child abuse material on their programs. And what they do is utilise algorithms, the rise of AI has obviously assisted with this, but effectively they can detect child abuse material on their service and then report it to law enforcement and deal with it appropriately.

Host
Because of these safeguards, Operation Skarde came to the attention of Nicole's team from two different sources – AUSTRAC and the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children called NCMEC for short. AUSTRAC, which provides financial intelligence to the AFP, had identified a man making over 395 transactions totalling $113,000 to recipients in the Philippines over several years.

Nicole Kenny
The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children is a not-for-profit organisation that sits in the United States. And effectively what they do is they receive and distribute reports of child exploitation material that is detected on the internet, and they distribute that to the relevant law enforcement jurisdiction. So if, for example, child abuse material is being traded on Facebook, Facebook would make that report to NCMEC, and then that would be distributed to whatever relevant jurisdiction. So in this case, what happened for Operation Skarde was we received a referral from AUSTRAC. And then that information coupled with a NCMEC report

that was received in respect to his internet activity, gave us a clearer picture of exactly what those funds were supporting, if you will, or the suspicion of what they were supporting. So it was the two pieces of information coming together that really initiated this investigation. We have on one hand the financial picture that doesn't seem to fit with an Australian person having connections overseas in that manner. And then we also have this report of child abuse material being shared from his Facebook as well that comes from the United States to support that picture that we're building.

Host
Many people think of AUSTRAC primarily as a financial crimes regulator. But during COVID, the need for a dedicated team focused on child sexual exploitation intelligence became clear. Jodie leads that team at AUSTRAC.

Jodie Baumgartner
AUSTRAC is a government agency which plays an important financial intelligence role in investigations in both Australia and overseas. We were established as the Child Sexual Exploitation Response Team in 2021. And that was to target the increase of reporting and child exploitation matters with financial gain.

Host
Jodie and her team identify potential offenders who may be sending money overseas to pay for the online sexual abuse of children. Disturbing as it is, this offending is more common than many people realise.

Jodie Baumgartner
Child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation is a global and borderless crime, so it's got devastating impacts on victims and communities. AUSTRAC acts as the early warning system, so we're sharing financial intelligence with Australian and international law enforcement and partners. Offenders often leave a financial trail, so when they're hiding online, this financial intelligence will identify the offenders before the victims are usually even known. So we work behind the scenes and we follow that money trail.

Host
There is a common public perception that AUSTRAC and other financial institutions only track amounts over ten thousand dollars, but this is incorrect. In detecting child exploitation, much smaller amounts are tracked. An offender goes online and sends a payment commonly between twenty dollars and two-hundred dollars to witness child abuse.

Jodie Baumgartner
We have a lot of indicators that we look for, but on their own, it doesn't indicate child exploitation. We are turning this financial data into actionable intelligence that will identify the offenders and the victims. We can usually find their locations and any networks that are linked to them, and we then refer those directly to law enforcement to initiate or support investigations.

Host

AUSTRAC doesn't just monitor transactions. Their investigation reports can paint a really specific picture of an offender, sometimes, even what they are purchasing.

Jodie Baumgartner
If they're purchasing from overseas, we are seeing a high level of receipt activity. So we're seeing the likes of motel room bookings and flights. It will show their location, potential travel, whether it be even purchasing petrol from a local petrol store. We have seen the use of IP addresses, so we have a lot at our fingertips that we can refer directly to the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation.

Host
For the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation, information from AUSTRAC is an invaluable investigative tool.

Jodie Baumgartner
My team do know the patterns to look for so we can see transactions now, we are usually able to tell straight away if we think a person is purchasing live distance child abuse. So that's to pay someone overseas to sexually abuse their child on webcam. We are looking at negotiations to purchase between $20 and $200, and that's for live distance child abuse in this instance. It's a flag to us.

Host
The offender in Operation Skarde raised red flags for those monitoring such behaviours and his name soon landed on Nicole's desk at the AFP. Over 390 transactions, he had sent a large amount of money to a woman in the Philippines, and he had been flagged with child abuse materials on Facebook Messenger.

Nicole Kenny
The thing that stood out for this case, and the offender was that he had travelled to the Philippines on a number of occasions, and as we looked at him a little bit more, we understood that he had the means to travel through his employment. So, whilst he didn't have immediate access to children in Australia that we could see, he certainly posed a risk to the international community and those children overseas that we believe he had direct access to. So for us, that's automatically going to bump up his risk. Access to children is always something that we consider in terms of prioritising this investigation. If somebody has a sexual interest in children and access to children, then for us, that's going to receive as much resourcing as we can give it straight away

Host
So when Nicole called, Michael Fletcher from the AFP's digital forensics team, he was quick to help.

Michael Fletcher
Anything to do with child safety is critically important, and the culture within the AFP, if you know that Child Protection Operations has a job, people will find resources to help. If a Child Protection Operations team calls up forensics and say, 'We've got a job. It's last minute and

we know you guys are packed…' You'll watch the digital forensics team leaders, you'll watch everyone go, *we're gonna find someone*. The phones will start running. There'll be messages, there'll be emails and people will rally and turn up. You'll sit with people just making calls to their partners back home, seeing if they can pick up the kids, if they can move X, Y, Z, because it really does matter, like the smallest amount of work, and you never know what job you're gonna go on. The message came over from Nicole in Child Protection Operations, and they said they've got a warrant coming. Then the conversation sometimes between a federal agent and someone in digital forensics or support areas, it was kind of a conversation of like, 'This is what we've got coming up. What do you think we'll need? Will we have people?' And just straight away talk to the team leader: 'Hey, can we get people ready for this so we can go out and do this job?' On paper, a standard forensics job. It wasn't something that looked overly complicated from the assessment of what the offender was doing. It didn't look like anything like it was going to end up being. We just knew the one indicator that there was travel overseas.

Host
With the team on stand-by, Nicole prepared for the day they would arrive on the doorstep of the offender with a search warrant.

Nicole Kenny
We are always in that assessment phase. We are always constantly prioritising work according to who is the greatest risk to the community. In this case, because the offender had means and ability to access children overseas and we believed had done so, he was given pretty high priorities. So, we start to build out a picture and a profile of who we believe he is according to the information we have available. So, we are looking at his social media profiles. We are looking at his employment, his associates, anything that we can find out to build a picture of who this person is, the risk that they pose to the community, their offending, and what evidence we may be able to collect in respect to proving these allegations. They're all the sorts of things that we will start to collate when we receive a referral like this. Generally if there's a situation like we have with this offender where we believe that there is evidence at their home, on their electronic devices in particular, a search warrant is usually the first port of call. We are looking to obviously secure that extent evidence. And electronic evidence, it's an evidence type that degrades over time and needs to be secured and captured in a particular way. Which is where Michael's team comes into the equation, because without them, we really can't preserve that evidence and produce that evidence in court as we might need. And if we lose that evidence as well, we may fail to identify some of our child victims. So we are considering all those things when we receive a referral like this before we make any decisions or take any action.

Host
Even with the most careful preparation, things do not always go to plan.

Nicole Kenny
Like all best laid plans, we'd done a lot of planning, we'd done a lot of movement projection, and some surveillance on the lead up to the search warrant. We expected the offender to be there on the morning, but unfortunately, no. We are met with an empty home on this date

Host

Entering the offender's home, AFP investigators found some unexpected elements.

Nicole Kenny
I think you do get a feel for who somebody is in all the intelligence work that you do before you plan an operation like this. I think in this situation, none of what we expected was really what we found. The house was pretty old and pretty dark, and had been, occupied by the offender's late father and had some really antique items in the house. I don't think anyone expected this house to be as dark and as cold and as almost like a museum as it was. To enter a house like that was completely not what we thought.

Host
As Michael prepared to follow the team in, he got the message about the offender not being home.

Michael Fletcher
You'll kind of get a rundown of what's going on in the house. And the rundown we got was: *small problem – he's not home*. And if you are there to do digital forensics, particularly on someone's phone, that was the target here, was the person's phone. It does interrupt the plan for the warrant. So we enter the premises, have a look around, and one thing that digital forensics members can do is search with the operations team. So they're trained searchers; if the operations team does want them to search, they can. And so we just got to join in on the search and found lots of interesting things.

Host
While they found electronic evidence at the scene, Nicole knew that the offender's phone would potentially have the most evidence on it.

Nicole Kenny
I at this point have a real concern that I've missed the opportunity to secure the most important evidence being his phone. There's an older laptop. There's a digital camera that we locate, a couple of SD cards, but not a whole lot of electronic devices that are really going to tell us where this person's been and who he's interacted with or some of the activities he's been up to. So I was losing hope at this stage when we've started the search.

Host
The AFP team had to do some quick thinking to get the suspect to come home. In the end, Nicole decided to call him.

Nicole Kenny
Unfortunately, the balloon had gone up really. We started the search warrant and commenced reviewing the evidence that we were able to find at the house. We were very aware at that stage that our best evidence was probably going to be on the offender in his mobile phone. So I had to make the decision to call him really and notify him that there was a search warrant. There were certain things that I needed to talk to him about and could he attend the house. And that was not an easy decision to make. I can tell you.

Hostf
The team became concerned when what should have been a short journey back from work for the offender stretched out to over an hour.

Michael Fletcher
The offender worked at Sydney Airport in that location and probably lived maybe 35 minutes from there. And even by public transport that trip, would it mostly be about 45 minutes.
The offender took about an hour and 45 minutes to get home from there.

Host
Luckily the phone wasn't the only thing Michael and his digital forensics colleague could examine.

Michael Fletcher
In the house we located an old phone; it was a Samsung device. There was a older laptop, and one of the key pieces that became evidence was a shoebox that had some very old storage device cards in it. So the little SDs, mini SDs and micro-SD cards that you'll have in cameras and android phones to extend storage. That was it. One phone, a laptop, and some SD cards.

Host
While the team doesn't do a full examination of evidence at the scene, they do make sure that the evidence they're collecting will be useful later in preparing the case for court.

Michael Fletcher
On a warrant. You're triaging. You're very rarely capturing evidence at a warrant, but you have devices that you can plug in and do a preview of very quickly, in a way that doesn't alter the devices. So there's still specialist forensic equipment and you can do further examination at the warrant if you have time. And in this case, we had time.

Host
Before long, Michael and his digital forensics partner had gathered the evidence that they would examine at length back at the office for Nicole, those images alone were enough to warrant charges being laid against the offender. There were three young girls in the pictures. One looked in her early teens; the youngest looked to be barely old enough for school.

Nicole Kenny
At the warrant we locate the very first sort of imagery of the abuse of the children. And I think the thing to note here is that the abuse actually developed over time as well. It starts with images of the girls in the shower, but then it actually progresses and becomes more graphic, more explicit, and yeah, worse, effectively. So the offending that we start with, we walk away from the warrant knowing that he has produced child abuse material with these girls, but we don't know the full extent of it.

Host

The offender wasn't German himself, but there would soon be an unexpected German connection when Michael discovered boxes of handwritten journals.

Michael Fletcher
So the one thing that stood out for the offender; this was a behaviour that was very unique to them, was a massive collection of journals. And as a digital forensic examiner, on the outside, it doesn't sound interesting, but the one thing that someone that prolifically writes might do is take notes about passwords, devices, storage locations, logins. So we are thinking maybe the images, that lack of other material present in the house might mean that it's stored elsewhere. And if this person writes as much as they do, and to give perspective on how much they wrote the journal for the year that we were present, there were four journals already written for that year, full. And there were boxes and boxes of journals and there were archived journals as well. Over their whole adult life. And this offender was in the sixties, but prolific journaler.

Host
Michael began flicking through the journals and soon became absolutely absorbed.

Michael Fletcher
Reading the journal, it's so detailed. Every day the offender went to work, like: *I worked on seat 36C of this plane* and *the plane was this model* and *on one of the wings that needed a maintenance check on this part…*-unbelievably specific detailing of every day of the offender's life. And we knew dates the offender had allegedly travelled to the Philippines. And when we go through the journals, we've got hours to spare. The offender hasn't turned up, so I'm sitting on the floor of offender's living room with one of the other investigators, Brendan. And so we're going through them. We target those dates and suddenly we get to the dates that it was about that week leading up to the travel, and things in the journal started to change. And one of the things that changed was very orderly journal, just every page was just written word, nothing else on it, no drawings. And then suddenly that week leading up to it, there is drawings in the border of the journal, the squiggly lines, decorations, sort of what you'd see for a kid wasn't paying attention in school and they just start drawing. But inside the lines is still words, but they're not English words. Suddenly the journal starts being written in German. he's writing in German here. And I turn to Brendan and I'm like, 'I'm gonna translate it.' Pulled out a translator app and translated pretty much one sentence. The first sentence I chose to translate said something to the effect of, I did this act with a 12-year-old, and went on. So that's where the translation came at us straight away.

Host
The translation was certainly shocking for Michael.

Michael Fletcher
I was like, 'No way! No way!' And I turned the translation app to Brendan who was sitting next to me. I was like, 'You gotta be kidding!' Brendan straightaway is like, 'Nicole! Nicole, where are you?' Nicole comes over. We show her. Yeah. So the mood in the room changed very suddenly. And that was one sentence. And as I said, he journalled a lot.

Host

Before that discovery, Nicole had been puzzled at Michael's attention to the journals.

Nicole Kenny
We're a little confused why the digital forensic examiner is reading something that's not digital or forensic for that matter. But as it turns out, he actually comes across some really important information for us in looking at some of those things. It's an unusual sight, but at this stage we're hoping to find anything we can. When he says to me, 'Hey, I think I've got something over here,' that was definitely the turning point for us in the investigation.

Host
Putting more of the German text into the digital translation app revealed more offences.

Nicole Kenny
He kind of flagged us to the fact that he had been transcribing what he was doing in German, and that there was some real value in it. And then as we're reading it, we come across this date, and the date in particular describes two sexual acts against two children in enough detail that we understand, at that point, he's actually detailed, the offences that he's taken against these kids. This person has travelled overseas, he has offended against kids, and he's documented it. So all the evidence that we are looking at, we're now looking for this direct evidence of abuse against children as opposed to someone who's just dealing in child abuse material. So it completely changes the tone and the scope of what we're now doing at the house.

Host
Finally, the offender begins heading towards his house.

Nicole Kenny
We intercept him at the driveway. I consider, with my sergeant at the time, whether it's worth attempting to intercept him elsewhere, attempting to see if we could locate him as he travels back. The problem is we didn't know how he was travelling back; we make the decision not to. And so as soon as he sets foot on the property, we meet him at the driveway, introduce ourselves, search him, locate his mobile phone, and then bring him into the house and talk to him about what's going on.

Host
As soon as the offender arrives home, Michael's attention is totally on his phone.

Michael Fletcher
I'm looking, waiting for them to ask the question, 'Hey, do you have your phone on you?' To which he answers, 'Yeah, I do,' then pulls out a smash phone, freshly smashed. There's a moment where you go, *ah, like it does make things harder*. We have to do different things now and we have to assess damage and the triage may work in location we're in, it may not. But yeah, we just go, 'Cool. That's not a problem.' And then the questions start. 'Oh, when did it get damaged?' 'Ages ago.' It's like the glass is still falling off the screen at this point while handing it over. And in the triage still coming off. The SD storage card slot was missing from the phone. We said, 'Oh, where's the SD storage?' He said, 'Oh, I never have it.' And I go. 'Well, the phone can't function. It says it can't read anything now. So I think you did need it

because there's a big warning on the screen that says you need the SD storage.' 'No, no. I just always use it that way.' So the offender turned up with a smashed phone. And there was no SD cards in the phone, no storage devices, which would've contained any media.

Host
Nicole was more nervous about the smashed phone and what digital forensics might be able to recover.

Nicole Kenny
Michael's confidence versus my confidence in that moment was very different. Electronic evidence is something that needs to be dealt with in a very particular way, and that's Michael's expertise. So thankfully he was there and he could acknowledge that he was likely to get the evidence back from it.

Host
Nicole left Michael to process the phone while she concentrated on the offender.

Nicole Kenny
So at that stage, I was just dealing with our offender and building rapport, and at least seeing what information he was willing to give me before I could get to the electronics of it.

Host
Despite how Nicole might be feeling on a personal level about what the offender had done, it was important to present as a good listener in her interactions with him. Offenders are more likely to talk if they feel someone wants to listen to their story.

Nicole Kenny
When the offender first arrives at the house, we go through all the administrative process. This is who we are, this is what we're doing here, this is the legal authority that we have to be here. Here are your rights while you are present and while we are present to conduct this search today. So we start with all those basic things. We start by explaining that and giving them an opportunity to speak to the allegation that's brought us here today. So generally speaking, what you're investigating will be on a search warrant and you'll invite that person to comment or provide any information that they wish to do so about that allegation. So at this stage, we are just getting a feel for what's happening. Where that all changes is when we identify the abuse material that he's actually produced over in the Philippines, the very earliest material that he had produced of two of the young girls in particular. So once that changes and our belief that an offence has occurred is there, then we move into a different phase of the investigation, and at that stage they're placed under arrest and then we present the evidence to them that we've collected about that offence, and we give them the opportunity to respond. I'm genuinely interested in what they have to say. I think that in this crime type. I've had offenders say to me over the years, 'I have had this sexual interest in children for a very long time, and I've never spoken to anybody about it.' And for the first time, sometimes they are face to face with a police officer who's willing to listen. And we do that. It's their opportunity to tell us things. So in some respects, it's their first time that they've ever mentioned that this is how they feel and

you just have to hold space to hear it. It's the best evidence that we have to be able to identify other children that may have been harmed or may be at risk.

Host
Did the offender in this case open up?

Nicole Kenny
No, in this case, he doesn't, at this case, in the first instance with, I think because he was given the opportunity to what he believed, destroy evidence, he's pretty confident when he first walks in the door. He thinks he's beaten the investigation. He believes he's managed to get rid of everything that he needs to, and he doesn't expect that there will be anything there to tie him to his offending. So when he first walks in, he's quite confident, quite charming, willing to engage with police, willing to speak to us about his travels in the Philippines, and doesn't think that there's anything untoward that we'll be able to show.

Host
With the offender making no admissions, it was time to being the investigation proper. Back at the office, Nicole worked on her investigation while Michael went through the evidence recovery from the seized devices including the smashed phone.

Nicole Kenny
Michael didn't thankfully make me any promises telling me, 'Hey, I've got this. I can recover this data.' Because you really don't know that until you take it back to the lab and start working on it. So it wasn't until he took it away and did his magic and actually recovered the data that we needed and then came to me and said, 'You need to see this. We've managed to get it. We've managed to recover everything.

Host
With each new recovery of materials, the true extent of the offending became more obvious.

Nicole Kenny
It's the beginning of a deeper investigation. It's again, that next layer. So it went from someone who we think might've been sharing a child abuse material to somebody who, okay, we know he's actually produced his own material, but it looks that he hasn't actually sexually assaulted the girls in any way. And then that develops again. So each time we have a breakthrough in this investigation, the offending becomes worse. The victimisation of these children becomes worse. So each time we get a breakthrough, we understand on a deeper level exactly the crimes that this man has committed and exactly how awful it is.

Host
The discovery of the child abuse material marked the beginning of a slow and painstaking process to identify the victims. Payments were being made to a woman, and it was assumed she was facilitating the abuse of the children.

Nicole Kenny
When we first detect the child abuse, when we first see the images of the girls that were abused and had child abuse material created of them, we didn't actually have a sense of the woman at that stage. We didn't know initially who these girls were. We could roughly tell their ages, but we didn't know what the relationship with between our offender and the girls were at all. It's kind of a job where the investigation came as the evidence was being unravelled, if you will. When we arrested him, we knew he'd had access to two young girls. He'd produced child abuse material with them, but we didn't know the relationship between them or how he came to have access to them at all.

Host
So that meant the most pressing task for Nicole and her team was to identify those young girls so they could be removed from future harm.

Nicole Kenny
We don't know who these girls are, so we don't know how to protect them. We don't know what circumstances they're in or how they've come to be there. How do we protect them while this investigation is ongoing as well. So we haven't identified them yet. That doesn't mean he doesn't know how to access or contact them and tell them of the investigation that's afoot.

Host
Detective Acting Sergeant Kate Laidler is the team leader of the AFP's Victim Identification Team which does incredible work in cases like Operation Skarde.

Kate Laidler
In these types of investigations, each team really has a quite distinct and specialised role. So the investigators obviously deal with the alleged offending, putting the brief in the prosecution; whereas our job is to review the material that's been seized during the investigation our task to find those children. So, you know, the devil's in the detail in our work. Sometimes it is looking for a needle in a haystack, there's no doubt about it. And we treat all of those images as crime scenes. They're real actual crimes and they're real children that are depicted in them, and that's how we treat them.

Host
When examining child abuse materials, the purpose is to identify the children and potentially save them from future harm. What kinds of things does the team look for?

Kate Laidler
It could be something in the background that helps us. It could be something that we can hear that helps us narrow down where that child might be. So for an example, we had a case where we were working on where we had an image of a child standing on a playing field, and in the background, we could see some buildings. And so we worked together collectively with the

team with other victim identification specialists around the world: *where is that child? Where is that location*? And sometimes it can be someone's unique life experience, work experience, that will be: *oh, that's such and such a playing field in whatever city or country it might be*. And we've certainly had cases where other countries have been looking for things. And unless you are Australian, you would have no idea that that's an Australian cricket bat or a football team or whatever it might be. So we work collectively together to try and work out where that child is.

Host
At university, Michael hoped to become a video game designer. When he joined the AFP, he never imagined how valuable his video-games skillset would be to the world of digital forensics.

Michael Fletcher
Yeah, that was the thing that was really funny, is how much crossover there is if you're studying to make video games, and what can be valuable in a technical role. So one of the big ones for creating video games, you have to be able to edit memory, and you need to be able to learn how to read and process memory and that helps you create save games. And that is exactly the skillset that is very, very useful in video games, as well as digital forensics. The other one is what's called hex editing and that's to create cheats or to modify a game so that you can get an advantage. And if you can edit hex, you can do digital forensics very effectively.

Host
As Michael closely examined the offender's phone, one particular image that stood out because there was enough detail in the background to potentially find the location and bring the team closer to finding the girls.

Michael Fletcher
We found this image on the phone, and it's what looks like the offender, blurred out face, in a hotel room. The offender is in a shower and there are three young girls in physical contact with the offender – not in a sexual act, but in physical contact. And all of the people in the image, they're not clothed. Shower's running. Just the offender's face is blurred out. So someone has been in there and created that image and then blurred out and the offender was viewing it on the phone. There are a few things in the image that you have to go off, and one of them is the tiles in the bathroom. There's some metadata on the phone that says that that's roughly when the image was created. So we're looking at tiles in the hotel room. We're looking at the handles on the shower, looking at the shower head, any fixtures in this image, and there's not much to go on. And in the bottom right corner of the image is what looks like the beginning of the walls of a bath. And this is where that investigator mindset comes in. This was Nicole going, 'Oh well, the tiles; I'm gonna find the tiles. And see how the bath is on this angle. That's not a normal angle for like a hotel room. This is going to be specific. I wonder if we can go and find this hotel room.' And I go, 'Well, how are you gonna do that? Is there some kind of automated thing we can put the image in?' She goes, 'No, I'm just gonna search every picture of every hotel room in the Philippines, and I'll eventually find this because this is a specific angle for

this bath and the tiles on the floor. Like there will be a combination that hits.' That's where she went to. She just went, 'This is what I'm gonna do.' Nicole did that for days, days and days we're interacting. Every workday, I'm sitting there pulling more stuff out of the phone and she's going through listings of hotel rooms. And then she went to historic listings of hotel rooms using an archive service on the internet, which archives URLs. And she found the old versions of the hotels' rooms and found a hotel room in the Philippines, Angeles City, exact tiles, the exact bathroom listed.

Host
Nicole had suddenly found herself with more time on her hands to trawl through photos because the world had changed.

Nicole Kenny
It was the beginning of COVID, if you remember. It was lockdown period. So not only are we dealing with a world that's all of a sudden shut and nobody can communicate in the same way that they used to, we're also dealing with foreign law enforcement and COVID, and the fact that it's just that little bit harder to get information out of anything really. So it takes me months, I think, to actually trawl through all the data that we had available to us and reading messages, years, years of communication between our offender and his associates to get little pieces of information to be able to identify the girls. And then ultimately who ends up being a family member who's facilitated the girls being abused for financial gain. So piecing together this picture of who these girls are, where they live in a country of millions of people, I've got first names that are potentially English first names and very little else to go on. So, it's hours and hours of investigation with thankfully nowhere to really go during COVID, so it took a long time to build that up.

Host
The more data Michael extracted from the phone, the closer Nicole got to tracing the offender's trajectory of offending.

Nicole Kenny
He'd travelled with them. So it wasn't just one location either. He had travelled around the Philippines with the family, with the girls and the relative, so it was a number of actual offence locations that we were looking for. So what I ended up doing was tying GPS data from the phone and creating a timeline effectively of where the device had gone, coupled with communications he'd had with people back in Australia; he'd told some people where he really was, but he'd told other people other stories. So having to sift through what the physical phone's actually able to tell us about where he was at any one point in time, marry that up with photographs that he's taken of some of his travels and the surrounding, and effectively map out his travels through the Philippines, through the data that's available on the device. And then couple that with anything else that we could obtain from the Filipino authorities as well. So we're getting requests to the Filipinos for statements, for witnesses, for hotel bookings. So we're effectively trying to build this timeline, as we're piecing it all together. And then I had a shortlist of about 10 locations that I was looking at. I systematically went through reviews available on social media, and actually just looked through every single photo that's ever been

uploaded to TripAdvisor for these potential hotels. Just to see if I could at least narrow them down and identify where the abuse had actually occurred.

Host
And when Nicole found a match, she shared it with Michael.

Nicole Kenny
One of the photos that Michael's team was able to recover from the deleted data, our offender had taken a photo of two of the girls exactly in front of a bed that was featured almost mirror for mirror on TripAdvisor. And I remember sending it to Michael and saying, 'Is it just me or does this look like an actual match?' And he was like, 'That's hundred percent the room. That's the room. It's almost like it was taken from that photo.'

Host
Finding the hotel meant other pieces of information could fall into place, including identifying who was facilitating the abuse from the Philippines.

Nicole Kenny
The locations help us with the identity. So we had a suspicion of who the woman was from the names that he called her in their communications, also, again AUSTRAC and some of the money being sent overseas – we had some information about who we thought was the recipient of that money, but just because you send money overseas doesn't mean that that's the person who is the end recipient of the money. So we're building a picture the whole time. And so once we identify the hotels, that's when we can actually obtain the guest names. That's when we can actually obtain the CCTV. That's when we are able to put all those things together because we have a location, we have a date, we have a time, we have a place, and then we're able to have a person.

Host
The Philippine Internet Crime Against Children Centre – PICACC for short – is a specialised international law-enforcement taskforce in the Philippines dedicated to combating online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Nicole Kenny
So the AFP sit in what's called the PICACC, and we referred the matter over to the Philippines with the information that we had. So I'd managed to compile a short list of suspects for the woman who was facilitating the children being present, and also who I suspected the girls were in relation to her, with some potential names, ages, and obviously imagery. So that's actually gets referred into our PICACC and then the AFP works in conjunction with the Filipino national police to go and identify that woman and rescue those children. So that's actually done through our liaison, through our post over there.

Host
And once it's passed on through the AFP's liaison officer posted in the Philippines, it's a waiting game for Nicole and her team.

Nicole Kenny
You wait, you just really wait for it. I mean, you've done all this work, you've put it all together, and then all of a sudden the finale to your investigation is out of your hands. And it's a really hard spot to be in because everything that you've done up until that point is to make sure that those kids are safe and removed from harm. But ultimately, when that happens and we refer it to our other agencies, we don't get to be involved in it sometimes. And in this case, it was completely up to our partners to do. So when you receive that email to say, yes, we've located this family. Yes, we've located the children. They have been removed, they are safe, and they have confirmed the identity of your offender and also the abuse that's happened to them. It just makes every single minute worthwhile. There's not a feeling like it. It's the reason that we do the job.

Host
The successful rescue of the girls marked a profound moment for everyone who had worked on the case.

Michael Fletcher
The response from the Philippines law enforcement for those girls was unbelievable. Being told, 'Hey, we've identified these girls and where they are in the Philippines and we believe they are in servitude,' And the amount of people that were on site… there is a picture that was sent to the AFP and to myself and Nicole of the Philippines agencies rescuing the girls and carrying them out, especially the younger girl hugging her rescuer. They were provided a lot of support and there was community support as well. Oh, I still have that photo. Yep. That, hands down, it was the most… I would have that email with that picture in a folder and I just open it and go like, you gotta remember, you don't know what your work is gonna turn out to be, because this was just a call to go out and do a job and we didn't know. And that was the result. And I have that picture always around, yeah.

Host
Back in Australia, the offender faced charges of producing child abuse material and charges associated with child sex tourism. He was found guilty and sentenced to eight years and 10 months in prison, with a non-parole period of six years. When the three girls were located, a woman who was the mother of two of the children, and the stepmother of the third, faced several decades in jail for her part in the abuse of the children for financial gain.

Host
For Nicole, this offender was another reminder of how men like him can hide in plain sight in the community.

Nicole Kenny
This offender was well spoken, pleasant, polite, could not be more forthcoming with information; it was just completely deceptive. He was very good at being deceptive, and very good at reminding us that what we see is not what we're actually getting. So, with him, I still to this day don't know that he would ever really be as honest with me about his offending, that perhaps some others have been. He concealed it every step of the way. And his intent and his planning was so much more calculated than we had expected, and that really hit home. I think

when you compare the polite gentleman that you're dealing with, compared to what we actually saw in the videos of how he treated these children. It was a complete contrast.

Host
For AUSTRAC investigators like Jodie, it's not about identifying just one offender, it's about uncovering a network and enabling rapid, coordinated action across many jurisdictions. The aim is to identify offenders and to protect children.

Jodie Baumgartner
We then worked further with the Philippine authorities. We identified additional Australian and international persons as well as their locations and addresses that were making similar transactional payments to the woman who was arrested in the Philippines. So we identified that network and many of them have been arrested.

Host
For Kate and her AFP victim identification team, the rescue of children is why they do their jobs. Now, they ask the public for help in this important work. In line with successful programs overseas, the AFP has its own Trace an Object program which asks the public for help.

Kate Laidler
Trace an Object is an initiative started up by the ACCCE – Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation. Some years back, Europol started a very similar sort of concept where we have these items or these locations that are depicted in child abuse material that across the country, across the world, we haven't been able to narrow down what that item is or where that location is. Now we're not only seeking the expertise of victim identification specialists, now we're asking the public, can you please help us work out what that item is or where that location might be or whatever it is that we're looking for. So the ACCCE, working with Europol have developed our own version of Trace an Object, which is more Australian geographically centred. And so we release quite regularly new images looking for something that's in that image. So can you please go on there and have a look? It'll say what it is that we might know in the image, so we might know what one item is, but there's another one in there that might assist us in working out where their location is and where that child may be.

Host
Working in child protection is hard, but we will leave the final word to Kate about what it means to her team.

Kate Laidler
What more rewarding work can you do then that walking out of work at the end of the day, knowing that because of the work that you've done and the team has done, you have changed someone's life. What more motivation do you need to keep coming back to work every day?

Outro
Host

Interested in learning more about how the AFP works to protect children in Australian and overseas from abuse, and how Nicole, Michael, Kate and Jodie investigated this case? Visit a-f-p-dot-gov-dot-a-u to discover more.

The AFP. Everyday people, doing legendary work