

 Forensic & Clinical Psychologist



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## Child Sex Tourism:

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Case studies of offenders and the impact of the global pandemic on offending behaviour and prosecution

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Please join me in acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land and waters we share today, and pay respect to their Elders who hold the memories, traditions, culture and hopes of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia.



*Why did I choose this topic to present?*

## Child Sex Tourism

- Tasmanian criminal law cases prosecuted before and after the COVID pandemic – I observed increases, not decreases in child sex tourism prosecution cases, but the mode of offending had changed
- Observations of changes in offending behaviour – of men and women involved in child exploitation offences
- My thoughts: Are the Tasmanian cases representative of general trends across Australia? I looked into the available data...

# Child sex tourism: My observation of the changes

## *Before the pandemic...*

- Men living in Australia would travel overseas (e.g., Asia) to engage in sexual activity with children
- Less likely to be prosecuted in Australia as the offending behaviour occurred overseas and went unreported

## *During the pandemic...*

- The child sex tourism industry changed, and the change has persisted
- Travel bans and lockdowns increased online sexual activity
- The demand increased online availability of children for live-streaming content
- Families in poverty in Asia became more vulnerable to involvement in child exploitation activities; and school closures resulted in increased vulnerability
- Female relatives of children in Australia and Asia increasingly engaged in marketing children and facilitating abuse for financial gain, including social media influencers

## *Some of the statistics...*



- 264% surge in reports of online sexual exploitation of children in the Philippines during 2020 (commencement of the pandemic) [CyberTipline, Philippines]
- 404,002 tips to Thailand authorities in 2020 regarding surge in online sexual exploitation of children [UN Human Rights Council records]
- Australian Federal Police annual report statistics describe increased online child exploitation workload commencing from 2020, and continuing to climb each year since the pandemic (e.g., 40,232 cases in 2022-23 and increasing thereafter)
- The global reporting hub NCMEC's CyberTipline (USA) logged a record 21.7 million child online sexual exploitation reports in 2020, reflecting global spikes as activity moved online during lockdowns
- Europol and Interpol both issued warnings in mid 2020 regarding surges in online child sexual exploitation and distribution of CSAM, and concern regarding heightened vulnerability of children.
- Positively, Australia has been very active with international cooperative efforts to protect children and prosecute offenders.

*Since pandemic restrictions have eased...*

### Some of criminal law cases I have been involved with in Tasmania:

- International relationships between offenders and children that were established during lockdown, including online sexual exploitation of children, have led to contact offending with the resumption of overseas travel
- Some men established relationships with very young children on a promise they could have sex with them when the borders opened, and provided financial support to the family to secure their right to the child
- Encrypted chat apps and payment by cryptocurrency became increasingly popular to facilitate private communications and “untraceable” payments
- Social media influencers have continued to be targeted for sexual images/videos of their featured children, and some of those approached have agreed to provide that content for a price

# Examples of cognitive distortions expressed to me by male and female offenders

Female social influencer, sold videos of her sexually abusing her young children:

**“They were too young to remember, and I made sure we did it in a place where they felt comfortable and relaxed in nature. It was not traumatic for them at all.”**

Elderly male purchased online live streamed child sex content:

**“The family had nothing, they were living in poverty, I sent money to them every week, I provided the children with a job and made life better for the whole family.”**

Professional young male purchased child exploitation images and videos :

**“I thought that crypto was not traceable, and they don’t have the same laws in that country regarding sex with children.”**

Married male with children, paid family for online content and a promise for future sex with child:

**“They live in poor conditions over there, they are lucky to survive, most kids don’t make it, they don’t live long enough to be badly affected by having sex with them.”**

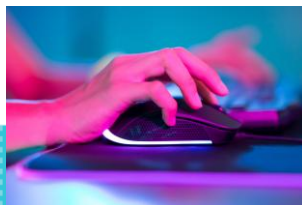
## > Are my observations in Tasmania reflective of national trends?

Yes. The national data reflects:

### Reasons for child sex tourism by Australians, and the evolving industry

- **Perceived Impunity and Opportunity:** Travelling offenders often target countries with weaker child protection systems, limited law-enforcement capacity, or high corruption. They perceive a lower risk of detection and believe local authorities can be bribed or will ignore their actions. Reduced scrutiny offending away from home. (*Note: Division 272 of Commonwealth Criminal Code criminalises sexual activity with children outside Australia*).
- **Cognitive Distortions and Moral Disengagement:** Offenders rationalise their actions through justifications such as “helping” poor families and claiming cultural acceptance, and these distortions support moral disengagement.

- **Socio-Economic Inequality:** Severe poverty in destination countries creates vulnerability. Offenders exploit this inequality by paying families or intermediaries for access to children. They also exploit gender inequality and cultural denigration of females.
- **Power, Control and Autonomy:** Travelling abroad provides psychological distance and a sense of dominance. Offenders often describe feeling powerful or anonymous.
- **Online Facilitation of Abuse:** Online connectivity allows offenders to research destinations, share tactics, and connect with facilitators. Networks normalise online and contact offending against children.
- **Clinical correlates:** Pedophilia, Hebephilia, personality disorder – e.g., narcissistic, anti-social, empathy deficits, social skills deficits, low impulse control, cognitive dissonance (e.g., fathers not equating the value of children overseas as they value their own children)



# > Interpol Green Notices: Current active known risks

## What is a Green Notice?

Used to warn other countries about persons who are considered a serious threat abroad, including travelling for child sex tourism

## Current statistic from AFP

Australia currently has over 900 active Interpol Green Notices, of which 94% are related to travelling child sex offenders from Australia ( $N = 846$ ).



## *The involvement of women in child sexual exploitation*

- Awareness of only one case of the prosecution of a woman who travelled to Honduras to engage in contact offending against an 8 year old boy (Sharon Darlene Church 2011, USA)
- Increase in women directly sexually abusing their own children/relatives/neighbour's children for financial gain (in Australia and overseas) since pandemic commenced – termed “Family-Based Commercial Sexual Exploitation” by the United Nations
- Women as intermediaries for online and grooming of children by Australian men (arranging online contact and live-streaming, and later contact offending in hybrid cases); may be acting alone or under pressure from male partners/spouses
- Economic strain on women and families due to the COVID-19 pandemic increased vulnerability to engagement in this type of crime



## *In summary*



- Men who travel to sexually offend against children are driven by the convergence of factors including deviant sexual interest, opportunity, moral distortion, and the systemic vulnerability of children in destination countries.
- Child sex tourists quickly adapted to the travel ban impacts of COVID-19, and created a heightened demand for online child exploitation content including live-streaming. This demand has continued to grow and has persisted after travel freedoms have returned.
- Females in Australia and overseas became increasingly involved for financial gain, many of whom were not previously involved in child sexual exploitation activities.
- Effective prevention requires a combination of approaches including:  
treatment availability and engagement programs for people with a sexual interest in children (pre and post conviction), integrated law enforcement across borders (thank you AFP), encrypted communication app regulation, financial surveillance including cryptocurrency, and support for child protection systems in high-risk destinations.

## *Further reading for the keen...*



Australian Federal Police (AFP) annual reports and Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) updates.

Benevenuto, K., et al. (2024). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the risk of sex trafficking recruitment and exploitation among adolescents involved with child welfare services.

ECPAT International (2021). Offenders on the move: Global report on sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism.

Interpol (2020). Impact of COVID-19 on child sexual abuse.

Salter, M. & Wong, W. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on the risk of online child exploitation and the implications for child protection and policing.

Smallbone, S., & Wortley, R. (2020). Preventing child sexual abuse: Evidence, policy and practice.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2021). The effects of COVID-19 on Trafficking in Persons.

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**Thank you for attending this presentation.**

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*Please email me if you would like a copy of this powerpoint presentation,  
or would like to ask any further questions.*