

The Cook Report

As the Head of the NCA's Child Exploitation Online Protection Command (CEOP), Tony Cook has led some of the highest profile investigations into serious online offending. He talks to Carol Jenkins about his current role and reflects on his extraordinary policing career.

Tony Cook realised his calling to become a police officer at a young age. He remembers with great fondness the night that was to shape the trajectory of his life and begin a career that has spanned nearly five decades.

'I remember going to a career's evening at my school and two officers beckoned me over to their stand,' he recalls.

'They had all these fantastic pictures of officers catching crooks as well as a video in which officers were jumping out of cars and making arrests. It really appealed to me and I realised that I wanted to be out there where the action is, catching criminals and keeping the public safe.'

Tony joined as a cadet in 1976 and then became a PC in 1978. Little did he know that more than four decades later, Tony is still 'out there where the action is, catching criminals and keeping the public safe'. He is the Head of Operations at the National Crime Agency's Child Exploitation Online

Protection Command (CEOP) in which he is playing a pivotal role in detecting, investigating and arresting some of the UK's most serious online offenders.

Advisor

His career with CEOP began in 2014 when as the National SIO Advisor working for the then National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA), he was called in to support a proactive operation into online offending called Operation Notarise.

The investigation resulted in the arrest and conviction of 750 low level online offenders which sent a powerful message that police were proactively targeting them.

As a result of the success of this operation, Tony was appointed Head of Operations of CEOP the following year, where he has for the past eight years, led some of the most significant operations into serious online offending, that the organisation has seen.

This job is not for the fainthearted as online offending against children continues to be one of the most serious challenges currently facing law enforcement globally. This is due to the proliferation of the internet and the growing threat of encryption, where criminals can communicate and commit their offending with relative anonymity.



'I've never shied away from a challenge, however difficult the task might appear and my focus has always been to be on the frontline arresting the most serious criminals,' he explains.

Tenacity

Looking back over his career, Tony remembers that he had always wanted to become a detective.

'I knew from day one that I wanted to get into the CID and that I wanted to arrest criminals. I'm an Oldham lad, born and bred and my first post was in Oldham working for Greater Manchester Police which was a proud moment for me.

He then went on to joined the force Drug Squad, which he says stood him in good stead for the difficult and challenging roles he has undertaken over the years due to the diversity and seriousness of the investigations. His tenacity and hard work quickly led to promotion to sergeant when he was posted to Collyhurst, an underprivileged inner-city division in Manchester where he says 'I really cut my teeth and developed my trade as a detective sergeant.'

'Working as a DS was probably the best rank I've ever had because it was so hands-on and I was really in the thick of it, which I have always enjoyed.'

'The six years I spent there saw me deal with some of the most difficult crimes. It was the foundation that gave me a lot of impetus to keep working hard and progressing in my career. At this point, I was working on many murders in and around Manchester and I watched colleagues who I admired and learnt all I could from them.

'I had always wanted to write a Policy Book so I asked one of the SIOs if I could write his Policy Book for him and he agreed. It was a fantastic opportunity which I relished, and I've been challenging myself ever since and doing all I can to develop my skills.'



Successes

He went on to become involved in numerous major crime cases and had some great successes. 'My maxim has always been to work hard and your career will look after itself and I've found this to be true.'

Tony's career continued to develop and he was made acting Detective Inspector and was hand-picked to work on a specialist unit that worked on gun and gang crime in and around Manchester's Moss Side. This was during the 1990s in the era of the notorious Gooch gang and its rival the Doddington gang, who were operating on the streets of Manchester. Tony developed an expertise in gang crime investigations and was rewarded for his efforts by being made Detective Chief inspector at Moss Side.

Memorable

When asked what his most memorable murder investigations were, Tony cites the murder of 17-year-old Carly Bateman in Bolton in 2002. It was given a lot of publicity as Carly was a sex worker who was found strangled in an alleyway. There was fear locally that there was another Yorkshire Ripper on the streets of Manchester. Tony said the team 'worked night and day' to catch the killer. They were successful and 41-year-old local man Geoffrey Porter was convicted of her murder.

In the same year, Tony worked on another memorable murder which also generated much

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publicity – the murder of Karen Doubleday which ended in the conviction of her former boyfriend Adam Hamilton.

Both were tragic murders of young women that caused shockwaves among the local communities and highlighted just how devastating murder is as a crime to the victim, their families, friends and on the wider community.

Digital

These were examples of murders that occurred prior to the widespread use of mobile devices and the internet. Tony remembers that prior to the advent of digital evidence, CCTV and indeed DNA, investigators relied heavily on their ability to engage with the public and gain their confidence in a bid to glean key information about a crime.

Tony says that while digital and DNA has transformed the nature of the investigations for the better, he always advises sergeants and constables to 'don't give up that skill to investigate.'

'That was one of the key qualities I had as a younger officer. I was good at winning people's trust and talking to them. I had more informants than anybody else did because people used to talk to me.'

'It's amazing when you go to crime scenes and see officers sat in cars and there are lots of people milling about.'

'It used to frustrate me, and I would go to a job as an advisor and see flowers and tributes at a crime scene and you see an officer stood there guarding the scene and there are all these people walking past. I used to say, 'why don't you speak to those people walking past because one of them could be a key witness or even the offender?''

Tony also emphasised the importance of keeping an open mind, free from judgement and bias about a person's lifestyle.

'I've studied a lot of past miscarriages of justice and have seen the negative affect that our unconscious bias can have on the outcome of an investigation and so it's important to be aware of the factors that can have a negative impact and do all we can to mitigate them.'

History

As his career progressed, Tony went on to make history by becoming one of the first PIP3 Senior Investigating Officers (SIOs) in GMP. As an SIO, he worked in many high-profile major crime roles and relished his role as a Superintendent.

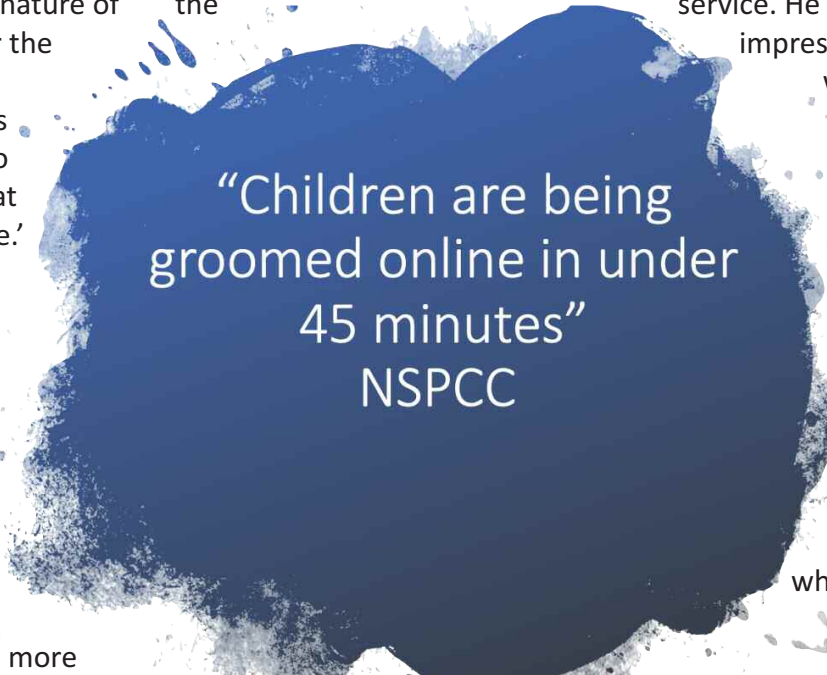
He then qualified as an SIO in Counter Terrorism and worked on the unit throughout the rest of his service. He notched up an impressive 31 years' service working in every CID rank in operational policing.

At this stage, Tony was contemplating retirement but the then National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) had other ideas and asked him to become one of the National SIO Advisors who were drafted out to forces to support major investigations. Tony worked in this role for six years and became a PIP4 SIO.

Again, as he was contemplating retirement, fate had other ideas and in 2015 he was appointed Head of Operations at CEOP.

'The reason I'm still working in policing is I still enjoy the job. I've always said to myself that the day that I drive to work and say I don't want to do this is the day I finish. And it hasn't happened yet,' he reveals.

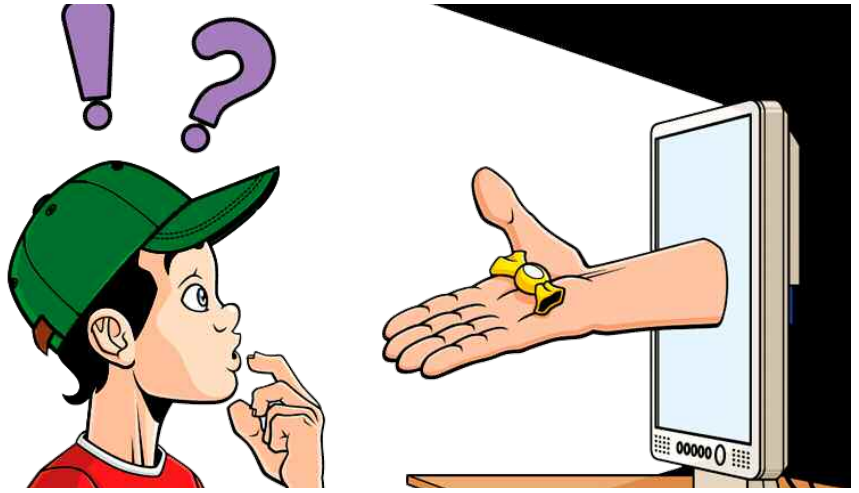
He admits that providing justice for victims and protecting the public has been the golden thread



“Children are being groomed online in under 45 minutes”
NSPCC

that has weaved through his career.

'I've dealt with numerous major crimes including murders and I've always had compliments and good feedback from the public. However, I receive most thanks for the public in my current role. Safeguarding vulnerable children is at the heart of everything we do at CEOP and it's one that we take very seriously.'



Encryption

Tony speaks of his current role as 'rewarding but challenging'. He cites encryption as a key challenge and says that despite the fact offenders are getting more sophisticated at communicating under the radar, that the NCA has a team of 'very clever, talented and dedicated staff', who work tirelessly in often challenging circumstances to find these offenders.

Another key concern is the increase in self-generated imagery that young people are readily sharing online and the adults who are pretending to be children to try and persuade vulnerable young people to send them self-generated images.

One of the recent examples of this, was the successful conviction of David Wilson, who posed as a teenage girl online and blackmailed 51 boys into sending him indecent images of themselves.

His victims were aged between four and 14 and his offending took place over a period of four years. He was jailed for 25 years in 2021 following a successful investigation by the NCA.

Despite these successful investigations, Tony admits that online child sexual abuse and exploitation continues to be a burgeoning challenge and that investigators can't tackle it alone.

'We need a lot more help from industry,' he says.

'Social media companies need to do more to remove these images and do more searching and checks. The Online Harms Bill will help because it will mandate these companies to take greater responsibility.'

Tony commends his staff and all those working in CSAE across the UK. Their efforts are leading to an average of 800 arrests a month and 1,200 safeguards.

'We all feel a great sense of achievement that we are helping to safeguard so many children. We have our own Child Protection Team here who are all qualified social workers who do a fantastic job to support victims.'

Well-being

Staff well-being is high on his priority list as he admits that viewing indecent material is incredibly challenging to deal with for staff.

'I can't even begin to explain how horrendous these indecent images, chats, calls and message are. They are truly shocking.'

'We do need to support our staff who view this material as it's not just 'another day at the office' and can really take its toll on us all.'

When asked if he's ready to retire yet. Tony is adamant that he still 'hopes to continue as long as they keep putting up with me!'

He is also proud to be an investigator and is keen to celebrate the role.

'It's a wonderful career. You do get such negativity and criticism but I would urge investigators to keep going. We all do a fantastic job.'

'I hope that everybody reading this has had a good a career and that it's fulfilling as the one I have had and hopefully will continue to have in future.'