

US Marshals Help Rescue 60 'Critically Missing' Children

Nearly five dozen missing children have been rescued in Florida in an operation that one of the nation's top law enforcement agencies is calling the "most successful" in America's history.

The U.S. Marshals Service announced Monday that 60 critically missing children were rescued by the agency's office for the Central District of Florida and its partners in the Tampa Bay area recently.

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Operation Dragon Eye resulted in eight arrests, including charges of human trafficking, child endangerment, narcotics possession, and custodial interference, authorities explained in a press statement.

The task force included federal, state, and local government agencies, working in tandem with social service entities, the medical community, and non-governmental organizations as they executed a two-week operation to safely recover and locate children ages nine to 17.

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"The number is not just a statistic," said Rita Peters, special counsel to Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier. "It actually represents a life and a future that was given one more chance."

All the children were either reported as missing, endangered, or were victims of trafficking, according to Florida's Attorney General office.

"The real heroes behind this operation are the law enforcement who built and executed this mission. As your Attorney General and a father of three young kids, protecting children is my top priority," said Uthmeier. "If you victimize children, you're going to prison, end of story."

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The U.S. Marshals Service outlined the operation had three components: "recover critically missing youth, provide them with essential services including appropriate placement, and to deter bad actors exploiting missing child vulnerabilities."

They defined "critically missing" children as "those at risk of crimes of violence or those with other elevated risk factors such as substance abuse, sexual exploitation, crime exposure or domestic violence."

During the operation, authorities rescued several young girls who were pregnant – one was pregnant by her trafficker, WTVT reported.

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"This child was forced to use substances," said Natasha Nascimento, the founder of the non-profit Redefining Refuge, which supported the mission. She further explained that the young mom was "being sold every day."

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