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Sweep picks up dozens of teens; more than 571 suspects arrested

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AP Associated Press
updated 2/23/2009 3:20:35 PM ET

WASHINGTON — The FBI has rescued 48 suspected teenage prostitutes, some as young as 13, in a nationwide sweep to remove kids from the illegal sex trade and punish their accused pimps.

Over a three-night initiative called Operation Cross Country, federal agents working with local law enforcement also arrested more than 571 suspects on a variety of federal and state prostitution-related charges, the bureau said.

The teenage prostitutes found in the investigation ranged in age from 13 to 17.

"We may not be able to return their innocence but we can remove them from this cycle of abuse and violence," said FBI Director Robert Mueller.

Meanwhile, in Memphis, Tenn., a man pleaded guilty Monday to federal civil rights charges for sex trafficking in minors. Leonard Fox faces at least 10 years in prison after admitting that he arranged for underaged girls to engage in sex for money.

"To sexually prey upon young girls in this manner for financial gain is particularly damaging to the victims and an affront to the society in which we live," said Loretta King, acting head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division.

Historically, federal authorities rarely play a role in anti-prostitution crackdowns, but the FBI is becoming more involved as it tries to rescue children caught up in the business.

"The goal is to recover kids. We consider them the child victims of prostitution," said FBI Deputy Assistant Director Daniel Roberts.

"Unfortunately, the vast majority of these kids are what they term 'throwaway kids,' with no family support, no friends. They're kids that nobody wants, they're loners. Many are runaways," Roberts said.

Kids in custody

Most of the children are put into the custody of local child protection agencies.

Agents in cities from Miami to Chicago to Anchorage, Alaska, took part in the operation.

Video: Alone on the streets Special Agent Melissa Morrow of the FBI's Washington office said the operation has put them on the trail of a particular 16-year-old prostitute they still haven't found.

Adult prostitutes arrested during the operation provided key tips about the girl, the agent said.

"She is currently 16 and started when she was 13. Now she is out there recruiting other juveniles as well," said Morrow, adding that finding the girl is "at the top of our list."

The federal effort is also designed to hit pimps with much tougher prison sentences than they would likely get in state criminal courts.

Government prosecutors look to bring racketeering charges or conspiracy charges that can result in decades of jail time.

"Some of these networks of pimps and their organizations are very sophisticated, they're interstate," said Roberts, requiring wiretaps and undercover sting operations to bring charges.

The weekend's roundup marked the third such Operation Cross Country, and is part of a broader federal program launched in 2003 to crack down on the sexual exploitation of children.

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