Operation Pedro Pan

The Secret Exodus of
More than 14,000 Cuban Children to
the United States
In a revolution led by Fidel Castro, Cuba was transformed into a one-party, socialist country.

Private property and businesses were seized.

Opponents to the new government were imprisoned or executed.
Youth were conscripted by the government to serve in revolutionary programs, such as the Union of Rebel Pioneers and the mass literacy crusade of 1961

Private schools were closed

Reports of children being sent to the Soviet Union for communist indoctrination, the establishment of state-operated dormitories, and the opening of government childcare centers
Rumors were soon heard of *patria potestad* — the government having legal authority over children and the loss of parental rights.

Some parents panicked and began looking for ways to help their children escape the island.
Some began sending their children to the U.S. for protection, believing that they would be separated for only a short while with the help of Father Bryan O. Walsh, a young Irish-born Catholic priest, and James Baker, the director of the American Ruston Academy in Havana, Cuban children began leaving the country clandestinely.
Like Peter Pan --- the boy who could fly --- the children ...
Underground Network

- Visa waivers, passports, and airline tickets, were procured and distributed through a secret network.
- Many individuals were caught and imprisoned for many years.
Arriving in the U.S.

- The children travel unaccompanied.
- Although they were supposed to be between the ages of 6 and 16, some were as young as 3 years of age.
- About 60% were teenage boys (many parents sent their sons to avoid the military draft in Cuba).
- Although all economic classes were represented among the children, the majority were from wealthy families.
- The exodus lasted from Dec 1960 to Oct 1962.
Making their home in the U.S.

Some of the children went to live with relatives living in the U.S.

Others were sent to live with foster families, juvenile homes, or orphanages.

There were some reports of abuse at the hands of caretakers, but the majority of the placements seemed to have had positive outcomes.
Reunification

- Nearly half the children were reunited with their families in less than a year
- For some, the separation lasted for years
- Some children did not see their parents again until they were adults
Reactions by the Pedro Pans

- Reports from children of nightmares, resentment, and feelings of abandonment
- Coped with anxiety and fear by focusing on survival
- Despite the extreme pressure they were under, the group as a whole seemed to be remarkably resilient
Operation Pedro Pan Group

Operation Pedro Pan Group is made up of the former child refugees. The group helps refugee children and preserves the history of the Pedro Pan exodus.

http://www.pedropan.org
Pedro Pan children today

Many have become successful business-people, educators, lawyers, judges, and entertainers.

Senator Mel Martinez was a Pedro Pan child.

Singers and songwriters Willy Chirino, Lissette Alvarez, Marisela Verena, and Carlos Oliva were all *Pedro Pans*; together they produced a song based on their experiences as child refugees.

American singer Tori Amos also wrote and recorded a song, “Operation Peter Pan”.