

'Beat-up crew' kept kids in drug ring

DETROIT (AP) — Small-town boys and girls kept in line by a "beat-up crew" were lured into operating a \$3-million-a-day drug ring that once accounted for half of Detroit's crack trade, prosecutors and witnesses say.

Opening arguments began Thursday in the federal trial of 14 members of the ring allegedly headed by four brothers, Billy Joe Chambers, Larry Marlowe Chambers, Otis Bernard Chambers and Willie Lee Chambers.

Each grew up in Marianna, Ark., and allegedly returned to that rural town from 1982 to 1987 to recruit teen-agers for the Detroit operation, in what U.S. Attorney Roy Hayes called "A Tale of Two Cities."

The Chambers brothers and 10 other people are charged with cocaine conspiracy, firearms and tax evasion. The trial before U.S. District Judge Richard Suhrheinrich is expected to last six to eight weeks.

Crack and murder among youths has grown to a problem of staggering proportions in the nation's sixth-largest city.

Some 1,000 crack houses are operating here. And Detroit's juvenile homicide rate reached 4.1 per 100,000 in 1986, the latest year for which figures are available.

That rate was more than three times the 1986 rate of 1.3 in the 10 largest U.S. cities. Detroit also has had the nation's highest per capita homicide rate for cities over 100,000 population for most of

the past 10 years, according to FBI statistics.

"The Chambers brothers decided to recruit young people, 14- to 16-year-old people ... who were not streetwise, people who would not rip them off," Hayes said in opening arguments.

He said the organization had as many as 400 employees, operated up to 300 crack houses — which manufactured crack, cocaine's smokeable form — and cleared hundreds of thousands of dollars in profits daily.

Hayes' first witness, former organization member Patricia Middleton, backed his descriptions of an expanding network of trusted lieutenants and child drug dealers, kept in line by a no-holds-barred "wrecking crew or

beat-up crew."

In March, 22 people were indicted. Four have pleaded guilty. Four others remain fugitives.

Authorities confiscated 41 cars, including Mercedes-Benz, Cadillac and Jeep models, 250 weapons, \$500,000 in cash and \$500,000 in jewelry in serving 107 search warrants leading to indictments in the case.

Defense attorneys said Hayes sought to base his case on witnesses who were testifying in exchange for immunity.

"That is the lowest form of testimony the government can present, someone who is trying to save his skin," said William E. Bufalino II, representing defendant Kevin Duplessis. David Harris, representing

defendant Morris Hampton, told the jurors that by the trial's end,

"You will be reading a different book: 'Much Ado About Nothing.'"

But Middleton, 33, of Detroit said she worked for about six months as a driver picking up cash from crack houses before she braved intimidation and went to police.

Middleton wept as she described her decision to go to police after Larry Chambers held a gun to her head and said if she talked,

"I'll blow your ... brains out."

She backed Hayes' descriptions of a network of trusted lieutenants and child drug dealers kept in line by strict rules, threats and violence.

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Larry Chambers beat one gang member for selling soap in place of crack, another member was beaten with a baseball bat and a third was pushed out of a window on the third floor of her apartment building, she said.

Middleton said she made money pickups for about six months, earning \$800 a week, but worked under threats from Larry Chambers that the man she lived with would be hurt.