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Two teenagers appeared in court yesterday charged with slavery offences

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Two teenagers suspected of running a 'county lines' drugs gang appeared in court yesterday charged with slavery offences in the first case of its kind.

The 17-year-olds were accused of grooming three girls to peddle heroin and crack cocaine on the streets of a Home Counties town.

They are the first juveniles in Britain to face a crown court over modern slavery offences.

Police chiefs warned of more cases in the future and said such crimes were the modern equivalent of the Artful Dodger pickpocket character in Oliver Twist.

Despite their age, police and prosecutors took the unprecedented decision to charge the 17-year-olds as slave masters rather than drug dealers.

The case exposes the depth of the county lines crisis, in which dedicated mobile phone lines are used to sell, buy and ferry drugs from cities to provincial towns.

The teenagers, of Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, and Ilford, east London, are alleged to have exploited three girls, who at 16 were only a few months younger, to traffick Class A drugs.

The prosecution under the Modern Slavery Act comes after Kent Police smashed a suspected drugs network in July.

They arrested the two teenagers and four older men aged 18 to 61 on accusations of enslaving children to sell drugs in Maidstone, Kent. The youths, who cannot be named due to their age, were also charged with being concerned in the supply of heroin and crack cocaine.

They appeared at Woolwich Crown Court, south-east London, with four other alleged members of the gang. The younger boy, who is in care, is accused of trafficking the girls over five days in July.

During yesterday's hearing, he appeared agitated, shaking his head, muttering and gesturing at the police officer in the court.

He sat on the lawyers' bench next to a social worker who appeared so young she was mistaken by the judge for his sister. She and his lawyer had to warn the boy several times to be quiet.

He denied a total of six charges including supplying heroin and crack cocaine, arranging or facilitating the travel of a person with a view to them being exploited under the Modern Slavery Act and possession of Class A drugs.

Both 17-year-olds were dressed identically in white shirts, black jackets and black skinny jeans.

The other teenager was told to sit in the dock as he will be 18 when the case goes to trial in January and classed as an adult.

He denies six charges relating to drug supply, possession of Class A drugs, possession of a diving knife and facilitating the travel of a person with a view to them being exploited under the Act. Both boys were granted bail.

The hearing heard that the teenage gang was operated by 18-year-old Reis Bhandal, who was said to have had control over several county 'lines and players'.

Prosecutor Alex Rooke said: 'The allegation is of drug running in the Maidstone area using people from London to transport drugs and sell them.'

'It is said that Mr Bhandal orchestrated this having overall control of lines and players from an address in Gravesend.'

Bhandal, who appeared via video link from prison, denied supplying drugs and modern slavery. The other three defendants denied all charges. One was returned to custody and two were bailed.

The Act has only been used since 2017 in a handful of cases targeting the ringleaders of large drug networks and has not previously been tested in the case of alleged child drug traffickers.

The landmark trial comes after the National Crime Agency revealed the number of county lines operations has nearly trebled in just one year.

Director general Lynne Owens estimated there are almost 2,000, up from 720 in November last year. The gangs are believed to be making profits of £7million a day.

An NCA report due this month is expected to warn that the phenomenon has exploded across all areas of the UK.

Vince O'Brien, NCA head of drugs operations, said there are likely to be more young people charged with slavery in future as police adopt new tactics against the use of child drug mules.

Youths aged 17 to 19 were acting as recruiters and groomers in a way that might be compared to the Artful Dodger in the Charles Dickens novel of 1839, he added.

Mr O'Brien conceded the public would be shocked at children being charged with slavery but it is hoped the stigma will stop youngsters becoming involved. Prosecuting county lines cases under the new law allows for heftier sentences than drug dealing as the maximum sentence for modern slavery is life imprisonment.

In September, the Daily Mail revealed how children as young as 17 were setting up their own phone lines to sell heroin and crack cocaine. More than 400 juveniles have been arrested in county lines operations between 2014 and 2018. However, the Children's Commissioner has estimated that as many as 50,000 could be involved.

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