

Samuel Williams
Prof. Teresa Lew
ENG 102 – 32656
April 25th, 2023

Does Rap Music Set a Bad Example for the Youth?

Rap and Hip Hop music has emerged as one of the most influential genres of music worldwide, specifically among young children and young adults. Research conducted in the United States found in the survey that rap music is the favorite genre of music among 12- to 24-year-olds (Hip-Hop). Rap music has a history that dates back all the way to the 1970s in the Bronx, New York. In the article “How Rap Music Got Its Bad Rap,” Frank B Williams described the culture surrounding rap back then as “a world in which Puma tennis shoes with fat shoelaces, sweat suits, and breakdancing battles in the streets with boom boxes blasting” (Williams). Rap music served as a platform to represent black culture but also discussed social and economic conditions of inner cities that were poverty stricken. Since many rappers have come from poor neighborhoods, rap music has become a source of inspiration for young adults that grew up in similar conditions. Although the positive impact of rap has been grand, it is also important to address the negative shift in the genre over the years. Rap music has become more malicious than ever with lyrics about gun violence, street gangs, and even drug abuse. While rap and hip hop have been a cultural phenomenon that have given a voice to marginalized communities, it’s promotion of explicit content and glorification of gun violence can have a negative impact on children and young adults.

In order to explore the dark turn that rap music took, it's important to examine how rap music was founded and what the initial message was in rapper's lyricism. Rap was founded in the Bronx by DJ Kool Herc in 1971. Kool Herc, who was a Jamaican immigrant, had moved to New York City and was heavily influenced by soul, rock, funk, reggae, and dancehall music (Goldman). As a teenager, Herc would attend block parties and play two turntables by hand and loop a break in songs from musicians like James Brown. By manipulating the turntables like this, he created an entirely new sound. During these performances, he would engage in Jamaican dancehall toasting, delivering chants in a monotone melody while rhyming over the beat. He would also employ a crew of break-dancers to back him up. Combining these aspects, he pioneered the culture and sound of rap. As noted in an article surrounding the history of rap music, "These innovations would gain Herc notoriety across the five boroughs of New York, leading him to club performances around the city for a wide spectrum of audiences (Goldman). As its influence deepened and broadened, the music spread from block parties onto the radio. In 1979, a group known as "The Sugarhill Gang" released a single known as "Rapper's Delight" and the lyrics were about dancing. It became one of the first rap songs on the radio and it was very popular.

As rap evolved, it became a passion shared by millions of young Americans who used it to articulate their identity and their politics, creating a vibrant multi-cultural community across the country. Public Enemy was one of the groups to introduce social and political elements from the black community into their music. An article about the famous rap group states, "Public Enemy resulted and brought radical Black political ideology to rap music in an unprecedented fashion on albums with titles that read like

party invitations for leftists and warning stickers for the right wing: *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back, Fear of a Black Planet* (Tate). Not long after, a rap group called N.W.A took their radical views in their lyrics to even more extremes which caused controversy amongst politicians and religious leaders. In 1988, NWA wrote a song titled "F Tha Police", this song pushed rap's lyrics from subtle messages against police brutality to all-out assaults, exacerbating an already tense relationship between police and black males. In Williams' analysis regarding the issue, he adds "Rappers consistently began to write in the starkest terms about how joblessness, the lure of selling drugs and the resulting violence affected a generation of young black Americans. The increased outbreak of gun violence in poor neighborhoods and limited economic opportunities directly sparked the music the rappers were writing (Williams).

Mary Eberstadt elaborates more on this in her article "Eminem is Right: The Primal Scream of Teenage Music." She explains how rappers such as Tupac and Jay-Z had a dysfunctional childhood. Tupac grew up in a single parent home with his mother who suffered from drug abuse. Jay-Z did not know his father growing up and sold drugs to support his mom and siblings. When they became rappers, the lyrics of their songs pertained to abandonment, anger, and drugs. The message of rap changed in the 1990s. Rap's major players of the decade before, like Public Enemy and the Sugar Hill gang, whose messages about black empowerment were overshadowed by rappers like Snoop Dogg and the Wu-tang Clan, whose lyrics such as "It was just a dream for the teen who was a fiend, started smokin' woolies [cocaine laced cigars] at sixteen" placed more emphasis on using drugs and the challenges of living in areas such as South-Central, Los Angeles and Staten Island.

Moreover, Young rappers often came to believe that securing a record deal meant selling themselves as thugs or looking “hard.” The reputation of a rapper is not only based on their ability to articulate the challenges of the “hood” but also on their credibility of staying close to the lifestyle of the streets. For many rappers, this duality creates a problem for most, pushing them to continue the habits of maintaining their street image. Decades later, this cycle has continued to the next generation and has developed into something more malicious in the form of drill music. Drill music is a sub-genre of rap that was founded on the South Side of Chicago. With social media growing rapidly, many popular sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter were used as a platform for young people in Chicago to show off the unfiltered reality of their everyday lives. With the rapidly deteriorating conditions of the inner cities in Chicago, including the closing of public schools and gentrification of neighborhoods that forced black Chicagoans into lower-income housing, it became a battleground amongst young rival gang members/street affiliations who did not have opportunities for employment. One way that young Chicagoans saw as a way out of poverty was creating music. The evolution of technology made it easier for music to be made without the need for an expensive recording studio. This allowed many teenagers involved in street gangs to create songs detailing gang activities in drill songs.

In street slang, the term “drill” refers to committing a murder of an individual with automatic firearms. In a typical drill song, the lyrics consist of violent disses towards rival gang members that threaten murder and robbery and even going so far as to diss deceased friends and relatives. Instead of the groovy feel-good beats that rap first had in the 80s, this new sound is accompanied by warring 808 drum bass and gunshot

sound effects. Rappers would also create music videos that featured young teenagers showing off firearms and gang affiliations which drew notoriety from other young adults in same city. In the essay “Understanding the Relationship Between Black Chicago Youth and Chicago Drill Music Culture” Dan’iel Kendricks discusses the deadly feuds that mostly occur between teenagers in the drill music scene. In Chicago, there is a historic rivalry dating all the way back to the 90s between gangs known as “Gangster Disciples” and the “Black Gangster Disciples. Drill music has fueled much of the heated rivalry between the two gangs in recent times and rappers have garnered internet fame from being affiliated with one of the two. Kendricks explains a certain event that would add fuel to the fire. In September 2012, an 18-year-old rapper known by his stage name “Lil JoJo” was shot in the back and killed after riding his bike through rival territory. JoJo was an alleged member of the Gangster Disciples, and after witnessing the rise to fame of rival gang member Chief Keef (Black Disciples) through drill music, he attempted to replicate rap beefs between rappers Notorious B.I.G and Tupac Shakur. He posted his own music videos with fellow gang members waving guns and chanting death threats that were aimed at Chief Keef and his associates; Chief Keef would retaliate and do the same. Eventually Lil JoJo would be killed. These songs that were made mostly highlighted loyalty to their gang, killings, and hate for “snitches”. Essentially these rappers normalized and made it cool to be “hood”.

After Chief Keef’s hit single “I Don’t Like” garnered attention from major labels, he was offered a six-million-dollar recording contract with Interscope Records (Kendricks). He demonstrated to youth that a rapper from Chicago could make it out of their situation with only apps and a small music video budget depicting the gritty

lifestyles that they live. Chicago drill music made teens embrace the idea of carrying out violent acts as a means for survival and revenge. In the article "Crime as Pop: Gangsta Rap as popular staging of norm Violations" by Bernd Dollinger and Julia Rieger they elaborate on the idea that youth idolize rappers and look up to them as heroes. They state that "Well-known rappers earn considerable sums of money, a kind of success that stands in sharp contrast to the original narrative of gangsta rap, which refers to the lives of disadvantaged black youth" (Dollinger and Rieger). They further add that in rap, the rapper that portrays themselves to be a hero despite all the fame and success remains who he is at heart, one who comes from the struggle and honors street code. Young adults look up to rappers as such because they think rappers were just like them, and they can make it out of their poor communities by sticking to these values.

With the likes of Chief Keef and Lil Durk bringing drill music to the forefront of the music industry, debates whether drill music should be censored or even used as incriminating evidence to sentence rappers as drill music has influenced other parts of the United States and has even broken the international threshold becoming popular in countries such as the United Kingdom and Uganda. Author Deena Zaru reports on the controversy surrounding the genre in an article detailing the deaths of two aspiring drill rappers. The two victims were shot down leaving recording studio sessions. These two deaths just add to the major crime statistics. According to NYPD statistics, "New York City is up 38.5% from January 2021 to January 2022" (Zaru). This has even gained attention from the New York City Mayor Eric Adams who shared the story about the killings. During a press conference, Adams addressed the controversy of gun violence surrounding the drill community. Adam states "We're going to sit down and really bring

in the rappers and show how this is impacting and is causing the loss of lives of young people like them" (qtd. In Zaru). Adam is not the only one with plans on finding a possible compromise with drill rappers. In Philadelphia, there were a record 562 homicides recorded in 2021 according to Philadelphia Police Department data (Caiola). Armond James, a high school teacher in south Philly spoke with podcasts hosts and spoke about the knowledge of students in his class pertaining to the sheer violence in rap lyrics. Furthermore, a Philly rapper known as AKG reminisced on an encounter with children at a basketball court, recalling, "there were kids jumping around to drill music and they knew it word by word and they were little kids" (Searles). He discusses how he wants to change the narrative and steer kids in the right direction.

Law enforcement have targeted drill rappers for inciting violence and even some have been banned from returning to their hometowns. But there have been counterarguments from artists and advocates of freedom of speech. They argue that drill music is a form of self-expression that shows the reality of street life. Supporters of the genre also emphasize that criticism of rap music is rooted in stereotypes of black men as violent gang members. After examining news and opinion articles from 118 nationally published periodicals, Adam Dunbar found that, even though heavy metal and rap music both contain violent lyrics and defiance of authority, the media is more likely to characterize rap music as inspiring youth to commit crime. Besides the lyrics, advocates express that music videos that depict violent and explicit content is a form of artistic performance. Moreover, a drill rapper known as Fivio Foreign stated in support of drill "It's not the music that's killing people, it's the music that's helping people from the hood get out the hood" (Zaru). Although both sides can acknowledge the fact that

some rappers have gained success from their music, a large majority of rappers do not get that chance of success either ending up in jail or dying due to gun violence.

Apart from this, many people can agree that censoring an entire genre of music would violate freedom of speech and artists growing up in dangerous environments have a right for their voices to be heard just as much as singers in other genres. It is important to recognize the stories and tales that drill music depicts so that more awareness can be brought to the lifestyles that many children growing up in gang riddled communities face. It is also possible to help the youth growing up in these conditions in other ways while also validating their experiences. Chief Keef, Lil Durk, and a handful of other rappers from other harsh backgrounds were able to take advantage of technology and social media when they were teenagers and generate great wealth from it. Introducing a developmental program such as music production would be beneficial for young adults. The music program would be led by skilled instructors who can empathize with children and their experiences. In turn, they will be able to use music to reflect their feelings and express their emotions in a more healthy and constructive way. Moreover, teaching digital literacy and social media engagement can also help young adults gain the necessary skills to navigate social media safely and responsibly. This can encourage individuals to think twice about what they put online for their own safety. Through these developmental programs, young adults can learn how to healthily channel their emotions, gain self-confidence and create an opportunity for financial stability without having to resort to violence and crime. In conclusion, even though rap music has taken a much darker form due to the explicit content and violence

reflected in marginalized communities, there is hope for the next generation of rappers to bring out the redeeming qualities of rap.

Works Cited

- Caiola, Sammy, and Sam Searles. "Philly Saw Fewer Homicides in 2022, but Gun Violence Remains Ever-Present." *WHYY*, WHYY, 15 Dec. 2022, <https://whyy.org/articles/philadelphia-homicides-2022-gun-violence/>.
- Dollinger, Bernd, and Julia Rieger. "Crime as Pop: Gangsta Rap as Popular Staging of Norm Violations." *Arts (Basel)*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2023, p. 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12010021>
- Dunbar, Adam. "Rap Music, Race, and Perceptions of Crime." *Sociology Compass*, vol. 13, no. 10, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12732>.
- Eberstadt, Mary. "Eminem is right: the primal scream of teenage music." *Policy Review*, no. 128, Dec. 2004, pp. 19+. *Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A126927388/OVIC?u=rock77357&sid=bookmark-OVIC&xid=8811a3f9. Accessed 26 Apr. 2023.
- Goldman, Henry. "DJ Kool Herc/Clive Campbell (1955-)", *Black Past*, 11 Oct. 2021, www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/campbell-clive-dj-kool-herc-1955/#:~:text=During%20performances%2C%20to%20further%20excite,pioneering%20the%20art%20of%20rapping. Accessed 8 May. 2023
- "Hip-hop and Rap Music Favorite of Youth." *UPI NewsTrack*, 19 Oct. 2004. *Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A123380237/OVIC?u=rock77357&sid=bookmark-OVIC&xid=7fb8debb. Accessed 31 Mar. 2023.

Ilan, Jonathan. "Digital Street Culture Decoded: Why Criminalizing Drill Music Is Street Illiterate and Counterproductive." *British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2020, pp. 994–1013, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azz086>.

James, Mark. "What Is Drill Music? with 7 Top Examples & History." *Music Industry How To*, 15 Dec. 2021, <https://www.musicindustryhowto.com/what-is-drill-music/>.

Kendricks, Dan'iel T. *Understanding the Relationship Between Black Chicago Youth and Chicago Drill Music Culture*. 2022. National Louis University. Dissertation. Accessed 8 May 2023.

[Understanding the Relationship Between Black Chicago Youth and Chicago Drill Music Culture \(nl.edu\)](https://www.nlu.edu/understanding-the-relationship-between-black-chicago-youth-and-chicago-drill-music-culture)

Searles, Sam. "Changing the Beat: Philly Rappers Take the Violence out of Drill Music." *WHYY*, 23 Nov. 2022, whyy.org/articles/philadelphia-drill-music-gun-violence/. Accessed 2 May 2023.

Tate, Greg. "Public Enemy." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/topic/Public-Enemy. Accessed 10 May 2023.

Williams, Frank B. "How Rap Music Got It's Bad Rap: Violence: Experts Blame the Change in the Genre Partly on Newer Performer's Lifestyles." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 13. Jan. 1995 <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-01-13-me-19713-story.html>.

Wu-Tang Clan – C.R.E.A.M. Lyrics | Genius Lyrics, [genius.com/Wu-tang-clan-cream-lyrics](https://www.genius.com/Wu-tang-clan-cream-lyrics). Accessed 16 May 2023.

Zaru, Deena. "Killings of 2 Aspiring NYC Rappers Spark Debate about a Controversial Rap Genre." *ABC*

News, ABC News Network, 11 Feb. 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/killings-aspiring-rappers-spark-debate-controversial-rap/story?id=82798514>.
[nyc-](#)