

# Does drill kill?

## Moral panics, race and music

Lambros Fatsis

Do musical genres encourage, or even 'cause', violence? Or are they simply expressions of the social conditions in which violence becomes possible?

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## EXAM LINKS

- Crime and deviance
- Culture and identity

**D**uring the last 2 years, our regular news diet has been saturated with stories about knife crime in London and Britain's other major metropolitan areas. And a new suspect for encouraging such outbreaks of violence emerged: UK drill music. This rap subgenre attracted not just noisy headlines but a heavy-handed police response too.

Described as the 'demonic' and 'nihilistic' 'soundtrack to London's murders' and even characterised as 'knife-crime rap', drill music groups such as 67, Moscow17 or the Harlem Spartans would soon become associated with fatal stabbings in the minds of broadcasters, commentators, the Home Office, the police and the courts. As a result, what was once an obscure music subculture took the blame for violent crime and became criminalised through a variety of discriminatory and illiberal police tactics.

## Lyrics that kill?

UK drill music attracted media and police attention following incidents of violence which involved drill rappers. In the aftermath of such brutal killings, the lyrical content and imagery of this new music genre came under police and media scrutiny. Video clips emerged of masked-up drill rappers issuing threats to rivals from different 'crews' or neighbourhoods and keeping a tally of stabbings on YouTube 'scoreboards'.

The response to such fatalities was fast and it involved taking action against gang-related videos, consolidating a new Serious Violence Strategy and pursuing 'drillers' as 'terror suspects' under the Terrorism Act 2000. In addition to such measures, drill rappers became targeted by, threatened with, and subjected to Criminal Behaviour Orders, gang injunctions, suspended prison sentences and the increased use of stop and search.

Worse still, drillers were also banned from entire postcodes, forbidden to use certain words, or refer to specific people and

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places in their lyrics. They were also prohibited from contacting or associating with certain people, wearing hoods, using social media or unregistered mobile phones, and they even had their videos removed from YouTube (Fatsis 2019).

## Protecting rights of expression

The breadth and weight of such criminal justice responses is extraordinary and it might be welcomed by some as a set of entirely appropriate and justifiable crime-fighting tools. Unfortunately, however, no proof was available (or required) to pursue drill rappers as terrorists or violent gang members, and there is no concrete evidence to connect the rise in knife crime to music or to gang membership (Fatsis 2019). Such strategies, therefore, fail to meet the professional, legal and ethical standard of evidence-based



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policies that we would otherwise expect from any criminal legal system.

Some criminologists go as far as to describe such responses as 'inaccurate', 'unhelpful', 'counterproductive' and 'street-illiterate' (Ilan 2020). Likewise, 65 signatories from human rights organisations, musicians, lawyers and academics wrote an open letter likening the criminalisation of drill to an attack on civil liberties (*Guardian* 2019).

Such displays of concern for civil liberties and well-reasoned criminal justice policy are often dismissed as being overly sensitive to drillers' rights, but *insensitive* to the threat that drill ostensibly poses to public safety. Opposing the arbitrary exercise of state power and calling for the rule of law and due process, however, does not mean that the violence in drill lyrics is denied or condoned. Nor does it justify a descent into lawlessness.

What is criticised instead is the danger of a 'moral panic' — automatic and unthinking reactions to perceived threats that are unsupported by relevant evidence, threaten civil liberties and lead to unjust outcomes that challenge the legitimacy of any criminal justice system. The fact that (some) drill music contains (some) violent lyrics does not and cannot mean that it is responsible for *all* street violent crime in London. However shocking, objectionable, disagreeable or vulgar drill might sound to many, our aesthetic revulsion towards a musical genre cannot be the basis for considering it a criminal enterprise — especially when reliable evidence for doing so is lacking.

### Perpetrators or victims?

Given the graphic imagery and unsettling lyrical content of some (but by no means all) drill music videos, it may seem imprudent to object to the policing tactics that are used against it, regardless of how arbitrary, hostile, discriminatory or illegitimate they may be. Yet, denying or turning a blind eye to the harm that discriminatory policing inflicts on our fellow citizens would be, we might say, a complete cop-out.

It seems necessary, therefore, to reintroduce drill rappers as typical victims of criminalisation, not as perpetrators of crime, especially if we wish to target the root causes of violent crime instead of focusing on its superficial manifestations.

Drill music, like all forms of artistic expression, is produced in a context that cannot be ignored if we want to properly understand its message.

### Context

Quite simply, drill is not made in a social vacuum but in specific places, by specific people, who live in specific social environments, grow up in specific circumstances and have specific experiences that come from somewhere. Inequality, poverty and social exclusion, in the form of poor housing, lack of stable employment, blocked educational opportunities, inadequate mental health support, underfunded youth clubs and negative experiences of policing, all combine to create the background for music genres such as drill to emerge as 'the artistic expression of disadvantaged urban youth' (Ilan 2020).

It is therefore no surprise that drill lyrics sound a little raw, crude, uncompromising and violent. As the African-American poet and scholar June Jordan (1995) puts it:

“If you make and keep my life horrible, then when I can tell the truth, it will be a horrible truth; it will not sound good or look good, or God willing, feel good to you, either.”

Can drill rappers be blamed, therefore, for writing vividly shocking or sensationally violent lyrics when they experience such violence as part of their daily lives? Can they be held responsible for living in environments, situations and contexts they did not create? Can they make choices in circumstances they do not choose, or have little control over? Is it justifiable or fair to pursue as violent, people who are being violated?

Some might argue that none of this is unique to young black rappers or black Britons more broadly, so such 'excuses' do not apply. While it is true that social disadvantage is not only suffered by young black people or black people in general, what *is* true is that they are disproportionately locked into positions of disadvantage in most spheres of social life (Fatsis 2019).

### The individual and responsibility

Others might also add that despite such dire circumstances, not all disadvantaged black people speak or act violently, so young black rappers have no excuses for doing so. This is also true, but it is also irrelevant unless we wish to blame individuals for

the social problems which lie at the root of their behaviour. Insisting otherwise displaces and misunderstands the problem. The fact that not everybody expresses themselves through violent means does not mean that the preconditions for violence go away. Nor does it mean that problems of social structure can be solved by individual conduct.

Not everybody lives the exact same reality, nor does everyone react to it in the same way. Some have the capacity not to act out, while others do not. The question is why we blame people for living in a context that encourages violence instead of making sure that nobody has to live in such a context? Paradoxically, drill music is one of the few tools some young black people have at their disposal for escaping that context and avoiding, rather than engaging in, violence by translating their anger, bitterness and frustration into rap lyrics, instead of picking up a knife or a gun.

Understanding the violence in drill, therefore, requires us to understand that violence is not just something that some drill rappers engage in, but they also suffer from, in the form of racism. Racism in this context should be understood not as individual prejudice, but as an instrument of discrimination which creates damaging forms of social exclusion in housing, education and employment. Seen this way, policing against drill music because it is seen as a 'cause' of crime amounts to policing victims of state violence, racism and police racism — and then charging *them* for it.

### Should music (ever) be blamed for the rise in violent crime?

Having argued about how UK drill music is policed, it is impossible to avoid discussing whether drill, or any other music genre, can ever be blamed for fluctuations in violent crime. To ask that question implies that a connection between the two is likely, and perhaps assumes that if the music is rap then that connection is *the only one possible*. As Nielson and Dennis argue (2019):

“The criminal justice system has effectively denied rap music the status of art, allowing police and prosecutors to present it to juries as autobiography, rhymed over a beat.”

Yet, why is it that rap and its various offshoots are rarely considered valid or acceptable art forms? Does this have something to do with the music itself or with





Drillminister ran for mayor of London in 2020

the way it is perceived? If it is the former, is rap the only music whose lyrics are violent? If it is the latter, why is it perceived this way, by whom and with what criteria or standards in mind? According to Nielson and Dennis:

“Rap is not the only art to trade in outlaw [...] narratives. It is not the only art form to draw from real life for its creations [...]. Yet is it the only form of artistic expression to be mischaracterised as pure autobiography, real-world documentary.”

Yes, the rules of evidence allow, in theory, for other musical genres and other art forms, such as poetry, films and novels to be used as evidence. But that rarely happens, and not in the same manner and to the same extent, it seems, as with rap music. That must therefore mean that drill rap lyrics are seen exclusively as real-life descriptions of crimes committed or about to be committed, rather than as first-person narratives that may be fictional, as is the case with many other music lyrics or literary works.

Do we *really* think that the American country music star, Johnny Cash, actually ‘shot a man in Reno just to see him die’ as the lyrics of ‘Folsom Prison Blues’ suggest? Do

we *ever* think that that Homer celebrates gang warfare in the Ancient Greek classic, the *Iliad*? Should we ban Nietzsche’s work for inciting violence against women when he wrote: ‘You are going to women? Do not forget the whip?’

Even asking these questions sounds ridiculous because these are examples of literature and philosophy, not hard evidence of criminal intent. The same rule, however, is not applied to rap, suggesting that it is too vulgar and ‘too realistic’ to count as artistic, fictional, intellectual production.

### Conclusion

If we believe that drill music is the real culprit in Britain’s ‘knife-crime epidemic’ then shouldn’t anyone listening to it count as a suspect? Would I, a securely employed, well-educated white university lecturer living in a nice area, count as a knife-crime suspect if I were exposed to drill?

The suggestion is never made, but what makes me different to other audiences? If it is not the music *itself*, then it must be the context in which it is made. If that is so, then drill has nothing to do with violent crime, but social conditions do. There is no need, therefore, to pretend that the reason why drill is banned has anything

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to do with public safety, when it is simply policed against because of long-standing and deep-seated prejudices about rap and crime infused with racist myths about ‘black criminality’ (Gilroy 2002).

If we, as sociologists and criminologists, want to understand what causes crime or whether drill can ever kill, we must go beyond headlines, question police motives and confront racism as a social problem which causes us to blame the wrong people for the things we rightly fear.

## KEY POINTS

- Drill music and its lyrics have been increasingly associated, by the justice system and some media, with violence and in particular with knife crime.
- As a result many young black men, especially drill rappers, have been subjected to a wide range of penalties which, in the absence of supporting evidence, can be seen as a contravention of their civil liberties.
- Drill music, unlike many other genres, is not seen as an art form but as an actual threat.
- The lyrics of drill music should instead be seen as an expression of the many forms of discrimination, social disadvantage and deprivation experienced by young urban black men.

Lambros Fatsis is lecturer in criminology at the University of Brighton.