

Drill music offers a viable escape for urban youths—study shows that criminalising it does more harm than good

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A new study published in the *British Journal of Criminology* argues that censoring and criminalising UK drill musicians is frequently misguided and often causes more problems than it solves.

Dr. Jonathan Ilan took a cultural criminological approach to the research to demonstrate how the authorities "ignore the ambiguity, braggadocio and fact-fiction hybridity" of the genre.

Drill music has its origins in early 2010s Chicago, while UK drill is a sub-genre that adds elements of road rap and which originated in the south London district of Brixton from 2012 onwards. The genre has become strongly linked with criminal behaviour, in part through the way it has been covered by the media.

Authorities have asked YouTube to take down certain drill videos, issued a court order to one artist to inform police of any future intentions to make music, and gave another duo a nine-month suspended prison sentence for performing a controversial song.

Dr. Ilan, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology in City's Department of Sociology, immersed himself in the drill scene through systemised YouTube viewing. He subscribed to the main drill channels and let YouTube's algorithm guide his consumption, while also collecting samples of newspapers and websites when drill caused public outrage in

2018.

"The analysis of drill videos reveals a tapestry of street-cultural concerns that illuminate the grim challenges of existing at Britain's socio-economic margins," said Dr. Ilan.

"It reflects on how the aesthetic appeals of UK street culture are being harnessed by the disadvantaged in an attempt to thrive legitimately in the culture industries."

Street-illiterate authorities

The study illustrates how authorities frequently misread drill music due to their street illiteracy. They often can't interpret the slang terms used in lyrics and regularly have to employ 'translators' to decode them.

But even then, there is not enough recognition of context. Authorities often treat drill lyrics as literal truth, a hybrid of art form and coded criminal communications. This is deeply problematic, according to Dr. Ilan. "Interventions must come from a position of deep knowledge and street literacy," he said.

Interpreting drill music as nothing more than incitement to violence or online 'gang' conflict street-illiterately substitutes stereotypes for deeper understanding.

"It dismisses the ability of the (particularly black) urban disadvantaged to produce and participate in abstract artistic expression and cultural complexity," said Dr. Ilan.

"Indeed, the black arts have been plagued with the racist assumption that they cannot reach the same levels of sophistication as their white counterparts."

Dr. Ilan's analysis of drill and online discussions around it suggests there is significantly more evidence of violent discourse than of violence itself.

A street-literate reading of drill videos and lyrics understands that rhetoric is being deployed. "This is not to deny that crime and violence take place involving drillers as either victims or perpetrators—rather, it emphasises not to view the violence as directly related to, caused by or evidenced by the music."

Drill videos are better understood as evidence of particular processes and performances than the kinds of unequivocal, verifiable claims that should form the basis of evidence in a criminal trial or to underpin censorious measures.

The police should also consider their part in the image of drill. For instance, one drill artist's music video was added considerable dramatic tension by the Metropolitan Police descending in force (including armed response and helicopter support) to question musicians filming the video.

The filmmaker commented that the incident would have felt very different if the police response had been calm, respectful and proportionate. It certainly would not have provided the same level of free content.

By understanding that drill is primarily performance and that it is more likely a step away from violence than an attempt to precipitate it, the police may feel less pressure to disrupt it.

A viable career in drill music

Success in the UK drill scene, particularly on YouTube, can be a viable career alongside various other benefits. These include: existential

benefits, such as a feeling of belonging, a sense of voice; opportunity for emotional reflection within a harsh, masculinist culture; and a sense of accomplishment.

These positive outcomes can make a huge difference to the lives of young, disadvantaged people.

Drill is the epitome of street cool. Real violence is not needed alongside a drill career; indeed, it can even impede an artist's progress.

Dr. Ilan said: "The case of [drill](#) music demonstrates the extent to which historical patterns of racism and suspicion can be reproduced as new technologies emerge.

"Street illiteracy is tied up in this process, prompting the expressivity of the marginalised to be criminalised even if it might be understood in a far more nuanced manner."

The censoring of an artistic genre should not be a substitute for searching debates about what is driving contemporary urban violence.

"Ultimately, UK rap is increasingly communicating the message that there are opportunities for the marginalised in mainstream socio-economic life, if they avoid the worst of the crime and violence that bisect with some involved in the scene," said Dr. Ilan.

"The authorities would be well advised not to dampen this message."

Having taken part in research and discussions involving local authorities and the police, Dr. Ilan is keen to stress that his findings should not be interpreted as blanket criticism and that there is will in some quarters to make a positive change:

"The question comes down to how open and honest authorities can be about the sorts of assumptions that society makes about young, marginalised people of colour, and to what extent they are willing to challenge themselves and their working practices in response," he said.

More information: Jonathan Ilan. Digital Street Culture Decoded: Why Criminalizing Drill Music is Street Illiterate and Counterproductive, *The British Journal of Criminology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1093/bjc%2Fazz086](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc%2Fazz086)

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