Changing Images of Violence in Rap Music Lyrics: 1979-1997
Author(s): Denise Herd

Original Article

Changing images of violence in Rap music lyrics: 1979–1997

Denise Herd

School of Public Health, 50 University Hall, University of California, Berkeley 94707, CA, USA.

Abstract Rap music has been at the center of concern about the potential harmful effects of violent media on youth social behavior. This article explores the role of changing images of violence in rap music lyrics from the 1970s to the 1990s. The results indicate that there has been a dramatic and sustained increase in the level of violence in rap music. The percentage of songs mentioning violence increased from 27 per cent during 1979–1984 to 60 per cent during 1994–1997. In addition, portrayals of violence in later songs are viewed in a more positive light as shown by their increased association with glamor, wealth, masculinity, and personal prowess. Additional analyses revealed that genre, specifically gangster rap, is the most powerful predictor of the increased number of violent references in songs. The discussion suggests that violence in rap music has increased in response to the complex interplay of changing social conditions such as the elevated levels of youth violence in the 1980s and changing commercial practices within the music industry.
Journal of Public Health Policy (2009) 30, 395–406. doi:10.1057/jphp.2009.36

Keywords: violence; media; youth; alcohol; drugs; rap music

Violence, particularly among youth, has long been recognized as a serious health problem. Youth violence is a leading cause of death and injuries; costly and damaging to the health of families and communities.[1] Exposure to violence in the media is associated with aggressive behavior in readers, viewers, and listeners. In US society, it may play a critical role in promoting violent and antisocial behavior. According to Anderson *et al*,[2] 'Research on violent television and films, video games, and music reveals unequivocal evidence that media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior in both immediate and long-term contexts' (p.1).[2]

Rap music has recently been at the center of the concern about the potential harmful effects of violent or misogynic lyrics on social behavior.[3,4] Despite these concerns, the relationship between rap

music and violence is poorly understood. Only a handful of studies have explored the issue, and results have been conflicting and inconclusive. While some studies suggest that a relatively small portion of rape songs contain references to violence, others have argued that violence is an almost essential element of the genre, occuring in most songs. Toop's[5] analysis suggests that the emergence of rap music and hip-hop culture served an antiviolence function in the South Bronx (New York City) neighborhoods from which it emerged in the late 1970s. Armstrong[6] noted that despite the stereotypes, violence is not the central focus of rap or country music. A later article by Armstrong[7] examined 490 rap songs produced from 1987 to 1993, finding that only a minority of the songs, 22 per cent, expressed violent and misogynist lyrics. Brutality and 'graphicness' in 'gangsta' rap lyrics, however, celebrates a 'rape culture'. In contrast, Kubrin's work[8] examined 130 platinum albums with 430 songs released from 1992 to 2002 using Anderson's conceptualization of 'the street code' and found that violence was a central theme of the lyrics along with wealth, violent retaliation, nihilism, and objectification of women.

To begin to address some of the conflicting findings in the literature, this study explores changes in the prevalence and social context of violence references in rap music lyrics from this music's earliest stages through to becoming a full-blown American musical genre. The study addresses the following research questions: (1) Have levels of violence in rap music lyrics changed significantly in the history of the genre? (2) Have attitudes towards violence in rap music lyrics, and the social contexts and functions of violence in rap music lyrics, changed over time? (3) Have increases in references to alcohol and drugs in rap music lyrics led to more mentions of violence? (4) Are changes in the level of violence associated with changes in the distribution of particular genres of rap music?

Method

Sampling

We described the process used to select the 340 songs used in the present analysis in a previous publication from this study.[9] In summary, we chose the most popular rap songs from 1979

through 1997 as rated by Billboard and Gavin charts, reviewing all relevant charts (for example Dance/Disco, Hot Black/Hot Soul Singles, and Rap). We identified rap songs, and selected as many as 15 of the most popular songs per year from each source. When the most popular songs from the two rating services were combined, there were 367 songs in the final sample. Three hundred and forty songs were used in the analyses. Songs included in the analyses were performed by African American artists or artist groups with significant representation of African Americans. Songs performed by non-African American artists such as the Beastie boys ($n = 13$ songs) were excluded because of concern that they were not representative of African American rap music during the time period of the study. Analyses were performed with and without inclusion of these songs and the basic trends reported in this paper are similar. (Tables including these songs are available from the author).

Coding

The principal investigator and a research assistant transcribed the lyrics for each song and coded for references to violence. To assure that there would be no errors or differences in coding between different raters, the principal investigator and research assistant each reviewed all lyrics and reached a consensus on all codes assigned for every song.

We coded references to violence at the word level, using categories derived from two basic sources. We adapted the first set of categories from the 'Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire', which includes behaviors referring to the following domains: Conventional Crime, Child Maltreatment, Sexual Victimization, and Witnessing and Indirect Victimization.[10] We based the second on categories used in the 'Revised Conflict Tactic Scale', which contains items related to Psychological Aggression, Physical Assault, and Sexual Coercion.[11]

In the first stages of coding, we recognized that it was important to distinguish references to real violence from the use of violence as metaphor – for example, mock battles, verbal dueling contests, and words associated with music slang, such as hits or cuts. We did not analyze references to metaphoric violence as part of the violence trends presented in this article.

We counted the mentions of violence in each song and transcribed verbatim each type of violence as mentioned. By examining the overall context and consequences surrounding violence in each song, we rated attitudes towards violence as positive, neutral, ambivalent, or negative. We created codes to describe the social context of violence in lyrics, for example, alcohol or drug use, crime, glamour, and wealth, and assigned each song lyric to a particular music genre – brag, gangster, party, political/culture, love/sex raps – based on overall lyric content and the music.

We created variables from the descriptions and counts of references to violence. The variables included presence or absence of violence in lyrics; number of violence references; and attitudes towards violence. Data on violence, attitudes towards violence, social context, consequences of violence, and music genre for all 340 song lyrics were entered into SPSS (Macintosh version) for statistical analyses: frequencies, cross tabulations, analysis of variance, and multiple regression.

Results

Our results show that over the period 1979–1989, the level of violence mentions in top rap songs was moderate and relatively stable. During the initial years in which these songs were released, 27 per cent of them contained violence. From 1985 to 1989, the average percentage of songs containing references to violence increased to 32 per cent. Beginning in 1990, however, the proportion of songs with violent lyrics escalated dramatically. These songs increased by 23 per cent in the first 4 years of the 1990s. As a result, more than half or 55 per cent of the most popular rap songs released

Table 1: Changes in presence of violence in rap music, 1979–1997

Years	All songs (n=340)	Total number of songs with violence (n=165)	Percentage of songs with violence
1979–1984	37	10	27
1985–1989	81	26	32
1990–1993	98	54	55
1994–1997	124	75	60

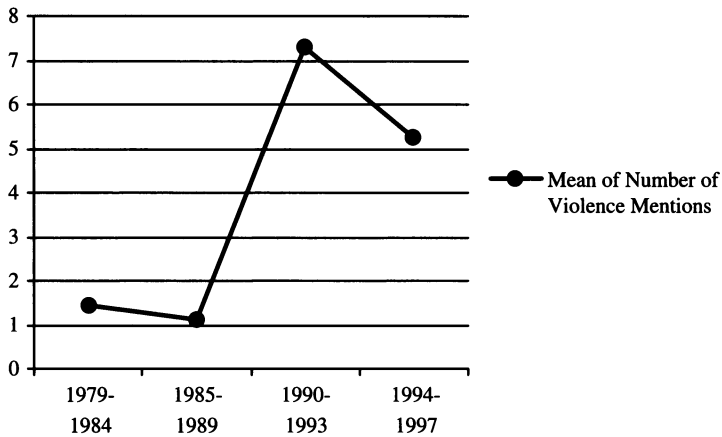Likelihood ratio=24.949, df=3, P=0.000.

Figure 1: Changes in mean number of violence references, 1979–1997.

from 1990 to 1993 mentioned some form of violence. The high level of violence was sustained in rap song lyrics for songs released from 1994 to 1997. Sixty per cent of songs from this period included violence references. In addition, the average number of violence references per song increased dramatically in the later decades – from 1.43 to 5.27, $F = 8.194$, $P = 0.000$ (Table 1; Figure 1).

Attitudes towards violence in rap music lyrics also changed tremendously from 1979 to 1997. In the earliest rap songs, violence was viewed primarily in negative or ambivalent terms. No song appeared between 1979 and 1984 was coded as representing violence in a positive manner. Songs released during each subsequent period were more likely to portray violence in a positive light and less likely to depict it in negative terms. During 1979–1997, positive violence portrayals in rap music lyrics increased from 0 to 45 per cent and negative ones decreased from 50 to 13 per cent (Table 2).

The social context of violence in rap music lyrics shifted from the late 1970s to the 1990s. First, violence was increasingly associated with hoodlums and gang lifestyles – from 3 per cent before 1990 to 39 per cent from 1990 to 1997. The relationship between violence and drugs in rap music strengthened over time, as songs depicting these themes increased fivefold – from 6 to 30 per cent – over the study period. The association of violence with alcohol also increased, but the relationship was not as pronounced as that with drugs.

Table 2: Changes in attitudes towards violence in rap music, 1979–1997

Years	Total number of songs with violence (n=165)	Percentage of songs with positive attitude	Percentage of songs with neutral attitude	Percentage of songs with ambivalent/ negative attitude	Percentage of songs with negative attitude
1979–1984	10	0	40	10	50
1985–1989	26	19	35	19	27
1990–1993	54	32	22	15	32
1994–1997	75	45	28	13	13

Pearson's C=−0.276, P=0.000, (two-sided).

Table 3: Changes in the social context of violence in rap music, 1979–1997

Violence context	Percentage of songs (n=165)	1979–1989 (% songs) (n=36)	1990–1997 (% songs) (n=129)	Fisher's exact P (two-sided)
Alcohol	10	0	13	0.025
Drugs	25	6	30	0.002
Thuggish lifestyle	31	3	39	0.000
Glamour/wealth	18	6	21	0.045
Increase social status	7	0	9	0.071
Masculinity	13	3	16	0.049
Bragging/bravado	28	11	33	0.011
Metaphoric Use	77	64	81	0.044

In addition, the association of violence with glamour and wealth increased more than threefold – from 6 to 21 per cent – and there was a trend for violence to be associated with increasing social status. The use of violence as a way to assert masculinity and personal prowess through bragging also intensified. Finally, the metaphoric use of violence in the lyrics of rap songs increased significantly over the study period (Table 3).

Our results show significant relationships between genre and the presence of violence in rap music lyrics. Gangster rap is profoundly associated with violence – 93 per cent of these lyrics contain references to violence. A substantial portion of political/cultural or message raps also depicts violent themes. The distribution of rap music genres has, moreover, changed considerably over time (Table 4).

Given these patterns, we examined the simultaneous influence of temporal period and genre on the presence of violent lyrics in

Table 4: Presence of violence in rap music by genre

Genre	Total number of songs	Percentage of songs with violence
Gangster	30	93
Political/cultural	38	71
Party	73	32
Love/sex	25	16
Other	24	42
Total	339	48

songs using logistic regression. The results showed that both time period and genre significantly predict which songs are likely to contain violence. Gangster rap songs, songs with political/cultural themes, and more recent songs were more likely to mention violence while love/sex raps were statistically less likely to contain references to violence ($F = 13.314$, $P = 0.000$, $R^2 = 0.179$).

We also examined whether changes in the level of alcohol or drugs themes in rap songs affect the level of violence portrayals. Previous articles, using these data have shown dramatic increases in substance use portrayals over time.[9] A logistic regression analysis using data from the present study showed that the presence of drugs in rap songs was strongly associated with violence: songs with drugs were 2.4 times more likely to have violence references than other songs. Song year was also statistically significant, with earlier songs less likely to have violence present. The presence of alcohol in songs was not, however, a significant predictor of violence, when the presence of drugs and the year of the song were taken into account. Models predicting violence references that included alcohol, drugs, and genre showed that genre (gangster rap) alone accounts for 34 per cent of the variance in the number of violent lyrics. Other variables, such as drug references, were not significant, whereas love/sex raps, and the number of alcohol references approached significance ($F = 24.964$, $P = 0.000$, $R^2 = 0.368$).

Discussion

Previous results indicate that references to violence in rap music lyrics have increased dramatically and that those references have become increasingly positive and linked to glamour, wealth, and

personal prowess. The analysis also showed that the emergence of gangster rap is very strongly associated with increases in violent lyrical content.

Explanations for the rise of gangster rap and violence in rap music have tended to focus on two basic themes. Representatives from the music and other media industries have argued that media violence is a reflection of actual social trends.[12,13] Echoing this perspective, some scholars have focused on the structural conditions – oppressive economic and social conditions, the crack cocaine drug trade and ensuing drug war, and high levels of police brutality – within urban ghettos that promote violent themes in rap music.[8,14–16] Within this framework, other writers have focused on the violent lifestyles of major rap artists as an explanation for the rising tide of violence in the lyrics.[17]

In a contrasting theme, some commentators state that the music industry has promoted violence in hip-hop music to increase popularity and sales of the music. Salaam[18] argues that after 1989, rap music, which had initially been exclusively recorded by independent record companies, became dominated by major recording labels. In his view, the result was a decline in artistic creativity and quality and an increase in a focus on profiteering, in which violence and graphic sexuality figured prominently. From a similar perspective, journalists note that promoting conflicts between rappers appears to be a popular industry tactic for increasing the commercial success of rap music. The New York Times published an article entitled: 'Feuding for Profit: Rap's War of Words',[19] which asserted that many of the conflicts or 'beefs' between rival rappers were often created as publicity stunts to raise flagging careers and sales, or create interest in new releases.

Trend data on violence in US society suggest that both societal changes and commercial forces within the music industry contributed to the increases in violent lyrical content that we described for the late 1980s through 1990s. Violent crime rates in the United States rose substantially from the 1980s through the early 1990s.[20] Among youth, a surge of violent crime started in the mid-1980's, lasting through 1993. According to Cook and Laub,[21] 'The increase was concentrated among black males: between 1984 and 1993, the homicide-victimization rate more than tripled for thirteen to seventeen year old adolescents, and the homicide-commission rate increased

by a factor of 4.5, reaching levels with no precedent in this century' (p. 28).

After the early 1990s, however, violent crime fell substantially. Perkins[22] notes that 'From 1993 through 2001 violent crime declined 54 per cent; weapon violence went down 59 per cent; and firearm violence, 63 per cent' (p.1). During the same period, violent victimization rates declined for both blacks and whites.[23] Cook and Laub[24] also report that homicide commission and victimization rates for adolescents and young adults fell sharply after 1994. In contrast, rates of violence in rap music remained very high through 1997 and probably beyond.[2]

Therefore escalation of violence in rap music lyrics during the late 1980s and early 1990s may reflect increasing acts of violence, especially among young blacks. However sustained violence in rap music lyrics in the late 1990s, despite the downturn in societal rates, seems, at least in part, orchestrated and driven by commercial forces. Changes within the music industry, such as higher production costs and sales slumps, may have increased the pressure to sell 'by any means necessary'.

Media violence prevention implications

The increasing focus on violence in rap music, especially with messages that enhance its social desirability, as well as research indicating the potential harm that they can evoke[2] make it imperative that social scientists suggest strategies to limit the prevalence and/or impact of these themes. To date, most violence prevention approaches seem to consist primarily of political attacks on the music and rappers[15,16,25] plus criminal justice monitoring and surveillance of rap music venues and performers.[26–28] Record companies have, in addition, used 'Parental advisory' labels to identify albums and compact discs with explicitly violent lyrical content.[29] None of these measures has been particularly effective. The political and criminal justice attacks on rappers have polarized artists and further alienated young people, already marginalized by ghettoization, racial profiling, and criminalization. The music rating system appears to have increased the attractiveness of 'R'-rated lyrics for youth who want to be rebellious and popular with peers.[29]

These analyses suggest the need for multifaceted structural approaches. At the most basic level, preventing media violence requires changing social conditions – poverty, poor access to education, and discrimination – that promote violence in the lives of rappers and the communities from which they emerge. Reducing gun availability and revamping punitive drug enforcement policies might reduce violence levels in communities.[30]

New media policies are needed to reduce the level of violence in music lyrics and in sales promotions. Corporate awareness about linking the marketing of consumer goods, such as sneakers and soft drink beverages, to violence already seem to be helping reduce violent public confrontations among rappers.[31] Encouraging more accountability at the corporate level could help further undo the notion that violence is commercially profitable.

Finally, media literacy programs focusing on rap music lyrics can promote critical thinking and awareness that may diminish the harmful impact that lyrics have on listeners, particularly youthful audiences. Theorists like Freire[32] suggest that interrogating and decoding elements of popular culture can empower audiences by increasing awareness of how media messages are socially produced and how they affect social perceptions and relationships. Research on existing media literacy programs has shown promising results for increasing participants' awareness of media distortions such as 'the minimization of consequences of violent behavior' (p. 29).[33]

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Denise Herd is Associate Professor of Health and Social Behavior, Division of Health & Human Development, School of Public Health at the University of California, Berkeley. Professor Herd has a longstanding interest in multicultural health and has taught in the field for years. Her research focuses on health disparities in drinking and drug use patterns and problems, images of alcohol and violence in rap music, activism regarding local alcohol policy in African American communities, and social movements. Herd contributed to the Institute of Medicine report on *Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility*.

References

1. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2008) Understanding youth violence: Fact sheet, http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/pub-res/YVFactSheet.pdf, accessed 24 February 2009.
2. Anderson, C.A. *et al* (2003) The influence of media violence on youth. *Psychological Science* 4: 81–110.
3. McLeod, D.M., Eveland, W.P. and Nathanson, A.I. (1997) Support for censorship of violent and misogynic rap lyrics: An analysis of the third-person effect. *Communication Research* 24: 153–174.
4. Fried, C.B. (1996) Bad rap for rap: Bias in reactions to music lyrics. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 26: 2135–2146.
5. Toop, D. (1991) *Rap Attack 2: African Rap to Global Hip-Hop*. London: Pluto Press.
6. Armstrong, E.G. (1993) The rhetoric of violence in rap and country music. *Sociological Inquiry* 63: 64–78.
7. Armstrong, E.G. (2001) Gangsta misogyny: A content analysis of the portrayals of violence against women in rap music. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 8: 96–126.
8. Kubrin, C.E. (2005) Gangstas, thugs, and hustlas: Identity and the code of the street in rap music. *Social Problems* 52: 360–378.
9. Herd, D. (2005) Changes in the prevalence of alcohol use in rap song lyrics, 1979–1997. *Addiction* 100: 1258–1269.
10. Finkelhor, D., Hamby, S.L., Ormrod, R. and Turner, H. (2005) The juvenile victimization questionnaire: Reliability, validity and national norms. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 29: 383–412.
11. Strauss, M.A., Hamby, S.L., Boney-McCoy, S. and Sugarman, D.B. (1996) The revised conflict tactics scales (CTS2): Development and preliminary psychometric data. *Journal of Family Issues* 17: 283–316.
12. Anderson, C.A. and Bushman, B.J. (2001) Media violence and the American public: Scientific fact versus media misinformation. *American Psychologist* 56: 477–489.
13. Miller, L. (2005) Violent music lyrics: Do they influence behavior? *Philadelphia Tribune*, 21 January.

14. Kubrin, C.E. (2005) I see death around the corner: Nihilism in rap music. *Sociological Perspectives* 48: 433–459.

15. Kelley, R.D.G. (1996) Kickin' reality, kickin' ballistics: Gangsta rap and postindustrial Los Angeles. In: W.E. Perkins (ed.) *Droppin' Science*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 117–158.

16. Rose, T. (1994) Rap music and the demonization of young black males. *USA Today Magazine*, pp. 35–36.

17. Toure, E.T. (2003) The life of a hunted man. *Rolling Stone*, 3 April, pp. 44.

18. Salaam, M. (1995) The aesthetics of rap. *African American Review* 29: 303–312.

19. Ogunnaike, L., Holson, L. and Leland, J. (2002) Feuding for profit: Rap's war of words; In rap industry, rivalries as marketing tool. *The New York Times*, 3 November http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE2DE143EF930A35752C1A9649C8B63&fta=y, accessed 24 February 2009.

20. Gould, E.D., Weinberg, B.A. and Mustard, D.B. (2002) Crime rates and local labor market opportunities in the United States: 1979–1997. *Review of Economics and Statistics* 84: 45–61.

21. Cook, P.J. and Laub, J.H. (1998) The unprecedented epidemic in youth violence. *Crime and Justice* 24: 27–64.

22. Perkins, C. (2003) *Weapon Use and Violent Crime*. Washington DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Department of Justice.

23. Rennison, C.M. (2001) *Criminal victimization 2000: Changes 1999–2000 with trends 1993–2000*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, US Department of Justice.

24. Cook, P.J. and Laub, J.H. (2002) After the epidemic: Recent trends in youth violence in the United States. *Crime and Justice* 29: 1–17.

25. Deflem, M. (1993) Revised 2001. Rap, rock and censorship: Popular culture and the technologies of justice. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Law and Society Association; May 27–30, Chicago, www.mathieudeflem.net.

26. Rose, T. (1991) Fear of a black planet: Rap music and black cultural politics in the 1990s. *The Journal of Negro Education* 60: 276–290.

27. Basu, D. (2005) Policing the colour line: Control, crime and culture and the hip-hop. *Left Curve* 29: 110.

28. Pablo, J. (2003) Rapper's lament: stop-and-search as a way of life. *Village Voice*, 16 December, http://www.villagevoice.com/2003-12-16/news/rappers-lament/1, accessed 24 February 2009.

29. Bushman, B.J. and Cantor, J. (2003) Media ratings for violence and sex: Implications for policymakers and parents. *American Psychologist* 58: 130–141.

30. Cohen, L. and Swift, S. (1993) A public health approach to the violence epidemic in the United States. *Environment and Urbanization* 5: 50–66.

31. Marshall, S. (2005) Keeping deals out of line of fire. *Crain's New York Business*, 21 March.

32. Freire, P. (2001) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*, Edited and Translated by M. Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum.

33. Moore, J., Dechillo, N., Nicholson, B., Genovese, A. and Sladen, S. (2000) Flashpoint: An innovative media literacy intervention for high-risk adolescents. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal* 51: 23–34.