



Why Are Violent Rap Lyrics Being Blamed for a Crime Wave in London?

Dan Hancox | Tuesday, Nov. 6, 2018

LONDON—In late August, this city achieved a grim milestone: The Metropolitan Police announced (https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/met-launches-100th-murder-inquiry-this-year-after-death-of-woman-73-zss39vwlk) they were investigating the 100th “violent death” recorded since the start of the year.

Well before that case was recorded, a spate of violent crime in London had already sparked a lot of somber rhetoric and debate. After an especially bloody spring, media on both sides of the Atlantic seized on the fact that London’s murder rate had eclipsed that of New York City for the first time. In truth, that statistic only applied to February and March (https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/04/03/londons-murder-rate-higher-than-new-york-citys/480860002/); by the year’s halfway point, New York had seen 147 homicides compared to 70 in London. But that did not stop U.S. President Donald Trump from invoking the dangers of the British capital in a speech to the National Rifle Association in May, highlighting knife crime in particular. “They don’t have guns. They have knives and instead there’s blood all over the floors of this hospital. They say it’s as bad as a military war zone hospital. Knives, knives, knives, knives,” Trump said (https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/05/politics/trump-london-hospital-nra/index.html), miming a stabbing motion. “London hasn’t been used to that. They’re getting used to it. It’s pretty tough.”

In the U.K., the murder statistics have fueled alarmist media coverage and increased police scrutiny on areas of the city seen as hotbeds for crime. Along with some of the usual, stereotypical suspects—drug gangs, a lack of parental role models—this attention has focused on a relatively new kind of rap music known as “drill.” Born on the south side of Chicago in the early years of this decade, drill spread quickly via YouTube clips and has been embraced by black British boys and young men in London’s poor housing projects. It has thrived in neighborhoods and among young people associated, fairly or not, with hyper-local criminal activity, small-time drug dealing and conflict, often involving violence or threats of violence.

The name “drill” is intended to carry military connotations, and it befits a genre that is typically monotone,



A rally organized near Downing Street to call for more action to curb knife crimes, London, June 3, 2018 (Photo by Alex Cavendish for SIPA via AP Images).

repetitive and shot through with grim social realism; the songs are not especially bright or melodic. There is also a remarkable aesthetic consistency to drill songs and their accompanying music videos. (Because the primary platform for drill is YouTube, the songs and videos are inseparable.) The rappers' bleak lyrics frequently depict knife crime and other forms of violence, local rivalries, poverty and drug-dealing. The videos are often shot at night, and the rappers they feature are dressed in black and wear masks.

To be sure, these are tropes that have figured in rap music for decades. But where drill differs from 1990s gangster rap is the precise specificity of the violence, and its routine descriptions of real-world incidents and threats to rivals on the streets of London. These descriptions and threats also appear on social media, primarily Snapchat and Instagram.

Rising public concern about drill's capacity to fuel violence has coincided with a media frenzy and stern words from Britain's senior police commanders, politicians and judicial officials. In May, when asked about the apparent rise in violent crime, Cressida Dick, London's police chief, said

(<https://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/presenters/nick-ferrari/met-police-chief-calls-on-youtube-drill-music/>) the problem was partly due to reductions in police resources, but also condemned "lyrics which glamorize violence, serious violence, murder, stabbings." She dismissed the notion that drill was "just music," contending instead that such songs have "a terrible effect."

For all the controversy over drill, little attention has been paid to the lives of the men and boys creating it.

Reflecting this viewpoint, one aspect of the police's response to the crime wave has been to censor so-called drillers by publicly pressuring YouTube to remove some drill videos. Law enforcement officials have also initiated unprecedented and contentious legal proceedings to forbid rappers from discussing certain topics, using certain words and addressing certain individuals in their lyrics.

Yet despite officials' apparent desire to curb the purported influence of drill, little attention seems to have been paid to the harsh socioeconomic realities facing the men and boys creating it, and how those realities have been compounded by cuts to public services after years of austerity.

At the same time, it's difficult to argue that some public concern about drill isn't justified. There is significant, though by no means complete, overlap between drillers and young people engaged in criminal activity. This makes it difficult for well-meaning proponents of the arts and free expression—those inclined to say that the songs are "just a performance"—to defend everything that the rappers have

produced.

In the past two or three years, a staggering number of artists in London's drill scene have ended up in jail. Others have been involved in violent altercations in which they've been stabbed and, in some cases, killed. One South London drill crew, called Moscow17, lost two members in a matter of months this summer: 17-year-old Rhyhiem Barton, known as GB, was shot dead (<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/teenage-rapper-shot-dead-london-12501815>) in May, and 23-year-old Sidique Kamara, known as Incognito, was murdered (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-45039590>) in August; they died on the very same street.

Only a week before Kamara's killing, 18-year-old Latwaan Griffiths had been stabbed to death nearby. Griffiths rapped under the name SA, for Splash Addict, which is a reference to stabbing. He was a member of the Harlem Spartans, a drill crew based out of a housing project less than a mile away from Moscow17.

After Griffiths' death, his family issued a public plea (<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/end-the-wall-of-silence-camberwell-knife-victim-s-family-plead-as-gang-videos-fuel-violence-on-a3903101.html>) for information about the perpetrator and for an end to the violence. "We as a family are broken, we are riddled with heartache, we will never be the same. We want to put Latwaan to rest, but we cannot do that unless you help us with this murder inquiry," the family's statement said. "We know that nothing we do collectively as a family or community can bring Latwaan back to life, but what we do know is that his murderer is still out there, and there is nothing stopping YOU from being the next victim of a knife or gun crime."

'Like There's No Way Out'

Drill is an almost exclusively male rap subgenre, and toxic masculinity—manifesting in casual sexism as well as violence—compounds the artists' troubled home lives and the social problems they encounter. In this context, it's no surprise that young women from similar backgrounds are often left out of discussions of the issues affecting their brothers and friends. But that doesn't mean they don't experience them, too.

Ray BLK, an R&B singer from South London whose real name is Rita Ekwere, has firsthand knowledge of many the issues that inform drill lyrics. She still remembers the horror she felt the first time she saw a gun brandished during an argument at a party, when she was just 14. She can also describe her male peers' rapid desensitization to this type of violence, and their experience of adolescence as kind of trap—an impression exacerbated by alienation from the state. "You can't go to a local youth center because they've all been closed. You definitely can't talk to the police," she says. "A lot of people feel like they're not going to give you any sort of protection, if you ask for help, and you'll be ostracized by your community. So you feel like there's no way out."

While the media fixates on violence, the psychological trauma suffered by those growing up in these environments is barely considered. "So many of these young boys have mental health issues and aren't

even aware of it. They don't know why they act or feel the way they do," she says. "When you listen to drill music, a lot of the words are very powerful, very dark, and you can hear the pain in the music. As much as they are speaking about violent crimes and drug dealing, they are trying to speak the truth, and using music as a form of catharsis. You're hearing a 14-year-old rapping about how his family don't know where he is, because he's in a trap house somewhere outside of London, sleeping on the floor with 10 crackheads. It is so traumatic, it's unimaginable."

Such details, she says, underscore the need for better mental health services for young people. Yet these services are currently in a desperate state, having been gutted by funding cuts in the years since the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition came to power in 2010, with David Cameron as prime minister. According to one study (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/31/slashing-youth-services-tories-betrayed-generation-labour-legal-requirement>), total spending on youth services has fallen by more than 60 percent in that period.



*London Mayor Sadiq Khan, Labour Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn attend a roundtable meeting to discuss gun and knife crimes, London, April 10, 2018
(Photo by Stefan Rousseau for Press Association via AP Images).*

Schools, youth centers and dedicated youth mental health programs have all suffered. In the South

London borough of Lewisham, one English teacher whose students have included multiple aspiring drill rappers says he's seen good teachers and support workers leave the profession because they were overwhelmed by the challenges facing them. Homework clubs and extracurricular programs like music clubs and group outings to cultural events in central London have been canceled due to cuts in funding. The limited resources that remain have gone toward so-called behavior officers tasked with addressing disciplinary problems and "putting out fires." Outside of school hours, students are left to fend for themselves on the streets, especially those whose parents, many of whom are in precarious employment situations, work long and difficult hours.

"Some of the places we've lost in the last few years, hundreds of families relied upon them—places the kids would be supervised and safe," says the teacher, who spoke to WPR on condition of anonymity so as not to jeopardize his job. "It's a travesty. Mental health is a huge, huge issue, and counselors would work with the people running the youth club sessions, and the local schools. Those safety nets are all disappearing."

The scale of the gaps in services is not lost on the students. "What's also shocking is, when we've gone around and talked to the children about the support available to them," the teacher says, "they are very lucid and aware that they're not getting the same support that they would have received five years ago."

In London's City Hall, Mayor Sadiq Khan of the Labour Party, who took office in 2016, has vowed to take a more holistic approach to the problem of rising violence, saying his administration will be "tough on knife crime, but tough on the causes of knife crime, too." In May, he pledged an extra £1.15 million (<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/mayors-office-policing-and-crime-mopac/my-area-0/community-seed-funding>), or about \$1.5 million, for community projects for young people, including martial arts and peer mentoring. The mayor's ongoing "London Needs You Alive" campaign uses television, social media and billboards to broadcast messages from rappers discouraging young people from carrying knives.

Meanwhile, the Conservative national government offered an additional £11 million—about \$14.3 million—to the Early Intervention Youth Fund, which is intended to "support groups at the heart of our communities who educate and interact with youths—and provide them with an alternative to crime."

For many of drill's teenage stars-in-waiting, the city they once knew has been transformed beyond all recognition by development.

But in the face of ongoing and deep budget cuts to local government and police funding since 2010, these initiatives look inadequate, mere kneejerk responses to bad headlines. Sian Berry, a Green Party member of the London Assembly, the citywide elected body, has compiled a series of reports on the state of youth services in the capital. Her research (<https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/assembly/sian-berry/time-to-save-youth-services-from-the-brink>) shows that 81 youth clubs and council youth projects in London have closed their doors since 2011, and that annual cuts to youth services since 2011 exceed £39 million, or \$51 million. In comments accompanying the launch of a report detailing these findings, she described the government response to the crisis as “a token handout” that is “nowhere near enough to reverse the damage inflicted by austerity.” She demanded that youth services be made a statutory service, meaning they would receive protected direct funding from the central government, and that funding for local councils be restored to pre-austerity levels. “There’s a long, uphill road ahead,” she concluded.

Another London

In conversation with the rappers, it becomes clear that they see themselves not as antagonists or instigators of violence, but as documenters of the real dangers that have been around them all their lives—revealers of dark truths that some would prefer to ignore.

The much-hyped drill duo Skengdo and AM have seen some of their videos removed from YouTube at the request of the Metropolitan Police, and their music demonized in the right-wing Daily Mail newspaper. One of their biggest hits, “Macaroni,” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHK1tfD0V-4>) is chock full of references to gun and knife violence.

But AM, a 21-year-old from Brixton, in South London, says that cracking down on music won’t make the city safer. “There’s so many aspects to this, but there’s a deeper problem going on in the communities, and until that problem is solved, [the violence] is going to keep going on,” he says in a phone interview while on his way back from a sold-out show in Barcelona. “The media, the government—whoever’s up at the top of society—they don’t want public attention on those negative externalities of the economy, they don’t want people to see that stuff going on. So their attitude is, if we can shut down the music, everyone will feel safer.”

AM considers it pointless to try to hide deeper social problems from the public. And in any case, he says rappers are committed to making them as visible as possible. “We’re going to keep pushing the music until something is actually done about the actual, deep-rooted problems,” he says.

AM and his fellow rappers are creating their art in a city that is rapidly changing—especially the areas where they grew up. For many of drill’s teenage stars-in-waiting, the London they know has been transformed beyond all recognition in their short lifetimes. Few politicians at any level have stood in the way of high-end developers who have completely distorted the city’s housing market with a flurry of

projects that are reshaping the capital.

The Harlem Spartans and Moscow17 are from the district of Kennington, in South London, where gentrification and controversial urban renewal schemes have seen average housing prices more than triple since 2000. Social housing projects are squeezed in blocks of new, shiny steel-and-glass buildings offering multimillion-dollar apartments. Moscow17's home, a project known as Brandon Estate, is one mile south of Elephant & Castle, an area where the Labour-run local authority has joined forces with two of the world's biggest property developers, Lendlease and Delancey, to demolish massive postwar housing projects like the Heygate and Aylesbury Estates and replace them with luxury housing.



Police forensics officers at the scene where a 50-year-old man was stabbed to death, Southwark, South London, Aug. 17, 2018 (Photo by Ben Cawthra for SIPA via AP Images).

On the other side of Brandon Estate, to the southwest, Vauxhall and Nine Elms, two areas of South London, constitute one of Europe's biggest "regeneration" zones, where a "major new cultural quarter" is promised. The transformation here is best symbolized by the 50-story St. George Wharf Tower on the Thames, home to 214 flats, the most expensive of which sold for £51 million, or \$66 million. Like other glassy skyscrapers popping up across London, many of its flats are seen purely as investment opportunities, especially for foreign buyers. They are purchased and left empty; most of the lights are

never on.

In this changing urban context, turf wars between rival crews—often called “postcode wars” in the British tabloids, a phenomenon that predates the arrival of drill—have intensified. And this has arguably been made worse by the atomizing effects of the digital revolution. As Ciaran Thapar, a writer and volunteer at a youth center in Brixton, writes (<https://www.redbull.com/gb-en/kenny-allstar-uk-drill-interview>), drill “has developed as an inherently digital breed of music, thriving on apps like Snapchat and Instagram... Some artists don’t even need to leave their block to become recognized.” Without a physical music scene, with clubs, radio stations and record shops, drillers never break bread, heal rifts or get to know one another and collaborate. In place of this type of interaction, suspicion and detachment exacerbate tensions that might have once stayed playful, or at least more performative than real.

Taking Drill to Court

In June, the drill crew 1011, based in West London, made headlines not for an act of violence they had committed, but for the state’s response to concerns about an act of violence they were allegedly planning. A local court found five of its members guilty of conspiracy to commit violent disorder. Police believed they were planning an attack on the rival drill crew 12 World.

The verdict came with prison sentences ranging from 10 months to three and a half years. The court also issued a three-year Criminal Behavior Order, or CBO, prohibiting 1011’s members from mentioning death, injury or rival drill crews in their songs, and requiring them to inform police of any new music videos ahead of their release. While the prison terms did not seem especially remarkable, the attempt to control the rappers’ creative pursuits even after their release prompted an outcry from fans and free speech groups.

In fact, such rulings have been occurring under the radar for some time. So-called gang injunctions, a tool similar to a CBO, have been used against rappers before. In 2011, before drill reached the U.K., a young South London rapper named Stigs was served with the country’s first ever gang injunction, banning him from making any songs or videos that might encourage violence. This summer, several gang injunctions have been issued against drill rappers who, unlike 1011, are not facing any criminal charges. These injunctions come with the same instructions, specifically that those named in them should not rap about particular individuals, crews or postcodes. They are currently being fought in the courts.

Social media exacerbates tensions among rappers that might have once stayed playful, or at least more performative than real.

Human rights lawyer Elena Papamichael says these rulings represent a worrying erosion of protections for free expression. They also potentially allow law enforcement officials to bring cases against rappers suspected of criminal activity even in the absence of tangible evidence. “I suspect part of the reason for these attempts to lower the burden of proof is because they sometimes struggle to get the evidence they need to bring a conviction,” Papamichael says. “But there’s a reason they’re struggling, and that’s because of the lack of trust of the police among some communities. The police should be working that out, rather than saying, ‘Let’s try and get around the fact we can’t get the evidence.’”

At the same time, the police have pursued additional, similarly unprecedented methods for intervening directly in the production and distribution of drill music. In May, it was revealed that the Metropolitan Police were keeping a database of more than 1,400 drill videos “to use as an intelligence tool” and had been pressuring YouTube to remove drill music videos that they claimed amounted to direct incitement to violence. YouTube complied with some of these requests, removing more than 30 videos that were found to be in breach of their guidelines.

Mike West, a detective superintendent in London, has argued that such aggressive policing moves are justified. “The gangs try to out-rival each other with the filming and content,” he said in a statement (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/drill-music-stabbings-london-youtube-violence-police-knife-crime-gangs-a8373241.html>) earlier this year. “What looks like a music video can actually contain explicit language, with gangs threatening each other. There are gestures of violence, with hand signals suggesting they are firing weapons and graphic descriptions of what they would do to each other.”

Some of those banned tracks, though, contain obvious cries for help alongside graphic descriptions of violence. In one of them, “War Ready,” the 18-year-old rapper T Face says, “I end up in [police] stations / that never made me bread [money]—I should have gone to school instead.” It seems somewhat counterproductive to ban a track in which a teenage rapper is lamenting such a predicament and trying to change it through creative expression. Indeed, the rappers being banned and served with gang injunctions have a lot to lose from these police interventions. They are the scene’s rising stars, with over 1 million views for many of their music videos, and some of them have signed with management companies and record labels that are organizing official nationwide tours. A CBO can throw all of this into jeopardy at the very moment they’re about to pull away from the streets, depriving them of the escape route offered

by a successful music career.

Blaming the Music

As bleak as London's crime situation currently is, it's not like there aren't clear social policy models and state interventions available to those with the budgets to implement them. For Ray BLK, the R&B singer, the first step should be for the authorities to put aside the distracting focus on drill's lyrical content and grapple instead with deep-set social issues. "With the demonization of drill music, it's like nobody in power wants to take responsibility," she says. "The government don't want to take responsibility for making the cuts, closing down youth centers, stopping after-school clubs and mental health schemes. The police don't want to take responsibility for not actually catching the criminals, so they blame it on music, and the media have a field day attacking the image of young black people."

Elena Noel, co-chair of the Anti-Knife Crime Forum, a London nonprofit organization, works with both the teenage boys at the center of this crisis and the stakeholders tasked with developing strategies to counter youth violence. She says it is the latter group, not the former, who have the best opportunity to change the situation. The millions of pounds spent trying to tackle crime has had little effect, she says, because of a lack of attention on how best to provide better education, jobs and mental health services.

"The problem is when policymakers don't understand systemic disadvantage, and don't understand the chronology of social problems in poor areas," she says. Noel, who has been working with street gangs since before drill existed, stresses that while many drillers have been demonized, they have enormous potential, if only policymakers could figure out how to nourish it.

"What you find when you work closely with these boys, is that behind their scary masks they are often low in self-esteem, but hugely aspirational, and very bright," she says. "What they talk about in drill is how bad life is for them, that they're disenfranchised. And with unstable family backgrounds, they turn to an alternative family: the family on the street."

Dan Hancox is a writer based in London who has been published by The Guardian and Observer, VICE, The New York Times and other outlets. His latest book, Inner City Pressure: The Story of Grime (<https://www.amazon.com/Inner-City-Pressure-Story-Grime/dp/0008257132>) (Harper Collins), is out now.