

New study finds glamorization of drugs in rap music jumped dramatically over 2 decades

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A new study finds that references to illegal drug use in rap music jumped sixfold in the two decades since 1979, the year Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" hit the charts and introduced to a mainstream audience a music genre born from inner-city America.

Moreover, illegal drug use became increasingly linked during this time period to wealth, glamour and social standing, marking a significant change from earlier years, when rap music was more likely to have depicted the dangers and negative consequences of drug abuse, according to the study authored by Denise Herd, associate professor in the division of Community Health and Human Development at the University of California, Berkeley's School of Public Health.

"This trajectory in rap music raises a number of red flags," said Herd, who also is associate dean for student affairs at the School of Public Health. "Rap music is especially appealing to young people, many of whom look up to rappers as role models. As a public health researcher, and as a parent of a 7-year-old, I'm concerned about the impact that long-term exposure to this music has on its listeners."

The new study, published in the April issue of the peer-reviewed journal *Addiction Research & Theory*, is the first scientific survey to analyze the content of rap music over two decades.

Herd and her team examined the lyrics of 341 of the most popular rap songs - as determined by Billboard and Gavin music rating services - from 1979 to 1997. Researchers coded songs for drug mentions, behaviors and contexts surrounding the mention of drugs, as well as the attitudes and consequences stemming from illicit drug use.

Of the 38 most popular rap songs between 1979 and 1984, only four, or 11 percent, contained drug references. In the early 1990s, the percentage of rap songs with drug references experienced a sharp jump to 45 percent, and steadily increased to 69 percent of the 125 top rap songs between 1994 and 1997.

The study found that drug references in early rap songs - "White Lines" by Grandmaster Flash, "Crack Monster" by Kool Moe Dee and "Night of the Living Baseheads" by Public Enemy - often depicted the destructiveness of cocaine and, particularly, of crack, its freebase form.

This cautionary tone about cocaine gave way to rap lyrics in the early 1990s that increasingly portrayed marijuana use as a positive activity. The UC Berkeley study documented a threefold increase between 1979 and 1997 in rap songs' mentions of marijuana and marijuana-stuffed cigars, or "blunts," and noted marijuana's association in those songs with creativity, wealth and status.

Herd noted that the study puts hard numbers to a trend that has long been noted anecdotally among observers of the music industry. She referenced a 1996 article in Vibe, a magazine that covers hip hop culture, highlighting the success of Cypress Hill's 1991 debut album celebrating marijuana use as a turning point in rap music's popularization of the drug. The Vibe article noted that other rap artists, including Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg, soon followed suit with their own references to marijuana as an appealing drug to use.

Herd said that after rap albums celebrating marijuana use started going platinum in the early 1990s, drug references became increasingly common in rap music, as if they were a key ingredient to success.

"There is a common perception that drugs and rap music are inextricably linked, but that wasn't always the case," said Herd. "The fact that rap music didn't always have those drug references is compelling because it shows that this music didn't depend on that as an art form. The direction of the music seemed to change with the music's growing commercial success."

Herd's analysis stopped at 1997, but she noted that a recent study suggests the continued prevalence of substance abuse references in contemporary rap music. That study, led by Dr. Brian Primack from the University of Pittsburgh's School of Medicine, found that of Billboard's 279 most popular songs in 2005, a staggering 77 percent of the 62 rap songs portrayed substance use, often in the context of peer pressure, wealth and sex. He also found that only four of the 279 songs analyzed contained an "anti-use" message, and none of them was in the rap category.

Notably, other music genres had far lower rates of substance abuse references. Country music came in a distant second to rap with 36 percent of songs referencing substance abuse.

Herd noted that the image that rap artists portray of drug use in the African American community distorts reality. "Young black people actually have similar or lower rates of drug and alcohol abuse compared with their white peers, but you wouldn't guess that based upon the lyrics in rap music," said Herd.

The reasons behind rap music's shift in drug references are complex, said Herd. They may reflect the nuanced interplay of changes in the drug

use habits of rappers and listeners - particularly the growing popularity of marijuana during the study period - greater commercialization of rap music, and the rise of gangsta rap and other rap music genres. It could also be a reflection of social rebellion stemming from the disproportionate punishment of African Americans in the U.S. government's War on Drugs.

"Rap is inherently powerful," said Herd. "It has experienced phenomenal growth in many sectors of society in this country and even abroad. Rap artists have become key role models and trendsetters, and their music serves as the CNN for our nation's young people by providing them with a way to stay current. But we have to ask ourselves whether there are other kinds of messages rap music could deliver. We need to better understand how this trend got started so we can find effective ways to counter it."

Herd did not study whether rap music's glamorization of illegal drugs actually led to increased drug abuse, but the debate about the potentially negative influence on young people of various media, from movies to music to video games, that depict drug and alcohol use in a positive light is certainly not new.

Herd's paper cited other studies linking certain movies and music videos to the onset of smoking, alcohol and drug use. One study specifically linked greater exposure to rap music videos to a greater risk of alcohol and drug use among adolescents over the next 12 months, while another survey associated the use of codeine-laced cough syrup among some at-risk Houston teens with an emerging form of rap music called "screw music," in which cough medicine abuse was promoted.

"Most adults have very little idea about what's going on in music these days," said Herd. "This new study reinforces the need for adults to pay closer attention to the music children are listening to."

This study is part of a larger research project analyzing changes in rap music funded by the Innovators Combating Substance Abuse program of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the nation's largest philanthropic organization devoted exclusively to health care.

Through this project, Herd published an earlier study that found a significant increase in references to alcohol in rap music over the years, and she is now analyzing rap music's depiction of violence.

Source: University of California - Berkeley

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