

OPINION:

Who Killed Cock Robin? Lyrics on trial – the criminalisation of urban sub-genre music and the defence of Digga D

28th July 2021
Gwen Jones, Policing Studies Graduate



Drill and grime music has often been linked (rightly or otherwise) to urban gangs, with claims that lyrics and videos posted on social media are an incitement to violence; but Liverpool John Moores University Policing Studies graduate Gwen Jones argues that the use of Criminal Behaviour Orders to prevent artists recording or publishing new material has criminalised those musical genres, often without evidence of preventing crime.

UK drill and grime music may not be to everyone's taste, but performers suggest that the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) has unfairly targeted individual artists, bands, and music in an attempt to remove their words from YouTube.

This article (part of a much broader dissertation project) focuses on the many laws and strategies that restrict young Black musicians' freedom of speech in the UK. It aims to fill a gap in sociological and criminological research to date, which has failed to recognise how UK drill music has been treated by the MPS as a threat to the public.

Against the current backdrop of a legislative approach to lyrics that has been implemented with a lack of equality against specific genres of music, we consider how MPS officers would apply the legislation when reading other lyrics.

For example, the popular nursery rhymes found in the 1744 edition of *Tommy Thumbs Pretty Song Book* by Mary Cooper, can be found in the British Library. Tucked away as one of the 39 rhymes is *Who Killed Cock Robin?* Much of the research available suggests the rhyme commemorates the death of Robin Hood, but others argue it refers to Robert Walpole, the 18th century English Prime Minister.

Either way, the 'Sparrow' immediately admits to killing Cock Robin and describes his weapon of choice on line two as a "Bow and Arrow" – lyrics which would fall foul of the current legislation as it is applied to some young Black musicians.

We also review the findings of research conducted by Kleinberg and McFarlane (2019/2020), which examined drill music through sentiment trajectory analysis and compared the results with the crime rates in London, to see if crime really is intrinsically linked to music. Spoiler alert – it isn't.

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The link between music and protest is hardly new. Bob Dylan is well-known for his 'finger-pointing' protest songs, while the 'Teddy Boys' in the 1950s were a youth subculture that listened to rock'n'roll music.

Moderators and rockers regularly clashed throughout the sixties, with over a thousand youths involved in [large scale fights during the Whitsun weekend in 1964](#) throughout Brighton and Margate.

The Rolling Stones released the song *Midnight Rambler*, written by [Mick Jagger and Keith Richards in 1968](#), which included lyrics declaring: "I'll stick my knife right down your throat, baby." The song received no police criticism for its violent lyrics.

Neither did The Beatles' song *Run For Your Life*, containing the lyrics "[I'd rather see you dead little girl than be with another man](#)" (Lennon-McCartney, 1965). Interestingly, both songs are still available on YouTube at the time of writing.

Drill and grime: the soundtrack to London's murders?

Drill music has unhelpfully been described as the "soundtrack to London's murders" ([Fatsis, 2019, p.1300](#)) as the level of knife crime increases. Sadly, there is a limited amount of academic research around drill and grime and how artists are targeted by the MPS for encouraging Black youths to behave criminally.

Groups such as 1011, Zone 2, Moscow17 and the Harlem Spartans are popular drill groups in the UK. They all write lyrics expressing the tough experience of their lives in deprived South London areas, and representing their local estates. The stories they tell are shocking; however, this can be a blend of reality and fiction ([Paul, 2021](#)).

We must accept that some drill groups keep count of the stabbings that have happened within their group, which has been understood to be a violent 'scoreboard' system. In the song [Scoreboard](#) by drill rap group Moscow17 featuring LooseScrew, you will hear the lyrics: "Someone check out the scoreboard please, Moscow March and then lean, Splash him, do him up, watch him bleed."

The MPS introduced the [Operation Domain strategy](#) with the intention of reducing gang-related music videos on social media, improving the Serious Violence Strategy, and targeting 'drillers' by treating them as 'terror suspects' under the Terrorism Act 2000 ([Fatsis, 2019](#)). By 2021, the police had [removed 319 drill and grime music videos](#) for displaying too much violence

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In addition to using Operation Domain to reduce drill gang violence, Criminal Behaviour Orders (CBOs) were introduced in 2014, replacing Antisocial Behaviour Orders (ASBOs). Police began to use CBOs to target drill groups such as 1011 (pictured above) from Ladbroke Grove, West London, for making music without police approval. [Digga D](#) and four other members of 1011 have been banned from mentioning death or injury, and postcodes in a gang context in their songs.

The CBO censors all of Digga D's music, preventing him from talking about his upbringing, what he has been through, and what he has seen. Any lyrics that incite violence breach his order; however, Digga D argues that [talking about his trauma helps him](#).

Skengdo and AM are also Drill artists who have been [given CBOs from the police](#). They performed a song called *Attempted 1.0* at a London concert at KoKo, with lyrics featuring a list of gang members who had been stabbed, which "incited violence against rival gang members" according to Fatsis ([2019, p.1304](#)).

They had both been given a nine-month custodial sentence after breaching their gang injunction in 2018 and are prohibited from broadcasting songs that refer to the reality of their lives living in London. This is hugely significant because it is the first time in British history that an individual has been given a prison sentence for performing a song.

Interestingly, the grime artist Dizzee Rascal collaborated with Armand Van Helden for *Bonkers* in 2009 and the repeated use of the lyric "All I care about is sex and violence" attracted no attention at all. Nor did verse one of his 2004 release *Respect me*, which [includes the lyrics](#): "UK rapper stabbed in Napa, cause of gossip, cause of chatter, He's still breathing, he's still a dapper. Retaliate with gun clapper."

Form 696 – may it rest in peace

The Risk Assessment Document, Form 696, provided a new way for police to influence artists and their output when it was introduced in 2008 after a spate of shootings at music events in London. The document looked to tackle serious violent crime linked with live music events and to end the fear of the postcode wars ([Fatsis, 2019](#)).

Performers were required to sign and submit the document to the police two weeks prior to their concert. A failure to co-operate with Form 696 meant artists could be liable for a fine of up to £20,000 or face six months imprisonment (Scott, 2020).

The document helped police gather up-to-date intelligence on other live music venues; however, it came to light that the police were using these forms to target and prevent shows happening specifically from the drill, rap and grime genres.

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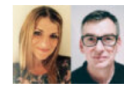
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Some rappers who were unable to perform as a result of Form 696 felt they had been targeted, but the MPS denied using the form as a way to exclude Black artists from performing ([Fatsis, 2019](#)).

Form 696 [was eventually scrapped in 2017](#) after numerous complaints and protests over accusations of the police using it to “disproportionately discriminate against grime, rap and drill music events” (Scott, 2020, p.62).

Moving on, in 2012 the MPS introduced the [Gangs Violence Matrix](#), a London-wide data collection and risk assessment tool, with the stated purpose of identifying and assessing people involved in gang violence.

Individuals on the database – known as ‘gang nominals’ – are assigned an automated risk score based on police information about past arrests, convictions and ‘intelligence related to violence/weapons access’, although according to [Amnesty International](#), “in practice numerous sources of information are used, including that gleaned by social media monitoring”.

This involves investigating young people’s behaviour on social media platforms, such as Snapchat and YouTube, to identify any intelligence on gang affiliation and where they are based.

Grime music videos are viewed to gather evidence of people committing violence or carrying weapons; those individuals are then later allocated a level of threat – red, amber or green – depending on the police’s view about their ‘propensity for violence’.

Grime music videos uploaded on YouTube are monitored and those who are found in the video or who associate with the artist(s) online risk being labelled as a criminal and being targeted by the MPS Trident Gang Crime unit, despite the fact they are not involved in wrongdoing.

By banning drill, you’re making the situation worse

In 2018 the Youth Violence Commission conducted the Safer Lives Survey, designed to learn more about and understand any link between violence and young people, and to have a better understanding of how to make them feel safer.

The Commission’s [interim report](#) states that the media often report misapprehensions on youth violence, which creates confusion for the public and leads them to believe that issues are a much greater problem than they are in reality; such is the case with drill music.

While the Commission found that there are debates on whether drill music affects youth violence, it argued that the discussion is a disruption from identifying and stopping the real root causes. These have been identified as “childhood trauma, undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues, inadequate state provision and deficient parental support, poverty and social inequality”.

In their 2015 track *F.W.T.S / Active*, Krept and Konan featuring Skepta [criticise police stop and search tactics](#): “Police stopped me, asked to search my whip, said if you ain’t got no grounds, you ain’t searching shit.”

The song *Gang Gang*, written by Cadet in 2019, [complains about racist stop and search](#): “Get searched ‘cause you’re black, again.” Additionally, Wretch 32 and Avelino in *Fire in The Booth* (2015) [sang about police brutality](#): “Can’t stop and search without tazing.”

Expression or criminality?

The Chief Executive and the founder of the young people’s charity Music Fusion, Jinx Prowse, argues that preventing artists from performing drill would be an [unsophisticated and ineffective response to knife crime](#), and would be ignoring the real issue of gang-related violence in the UK.

[Kleinberg and McFarlane \(2019\)](#) created a study to examine drill music through sentiment trajectory analysis, which is a database system that measures, categorises and stores the common words and sentences used in drill music ([Liu and Lee, 2019](#)). They examined the language that is used within London drill music through an intra-textual sentiment approach, to understand slang used by drill rappers.

Their findings showed that the drill music uploaded onto YouTube with a positive sentiment trajectory gained double the engagement in terms of views, likes and comments, compared to the drill videos that included negative sentiment trajectory. This finding could be beneficial for the police and researchers to explore the relationship between viral drill music videos and the violent messages included.

A more recent study was conducted by [Kleinberg and McFarlane in 2020](#) to see if there is any evidence to support the assumption that drill music influences listeners to become violent. The study aimed to understand the type of language used within London’s drill music, and hoped to compare the findings with homicide, robbery, and violence with injury in London between 2013 and 2018.

The research concluded that UK drill lyrics have in fact become more positive, rather than

speculating from the drill, rap and grime genres.

“ The Commission’s interim report states that the media often report misapprehensions on youth violence, which creates confusion for the public and leads them to believe that issues are a much greater problem than they are in reality; such is the case with drill music.

“ The research concluded that UK drill lyrics have in fact become more positive, rather than negative, over recent years ... Having compared their findings with the crime rates in London, they found no evidence which suggested that negative drill lyrics incite violence.



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negative, over recent years, compared to 2013/14. Their findings also suggest that from 150 different drill productions, the majority of drill artists share similar trajectories, with the most used words being 'splash' (stab), 'ching' (stab), 'shank' (knife) and 'opps' (enemies). Having compared their findings with the crime rates in London, they found no evidence which suggested that negative drill lyrics incites violence.

Inconsistent approach

There appears to be an inconsistent approach on behalf of the state. Music through the ages has included violent lyrics, but it does not necessarily mean violence is encouraged. It is interesting that The Beatles and The Rolling Stones received no criticism from the Prime Minister of the day – nor the MPS – for their violent lyrics, while Dizze Rascal performed on the world stage at the London Olympic Ceremony in 2012. Sadly, drill artists such as Digga D face challenges every day when composing music and must be careful about what they include in their art.

Was 'Sparrow' influenced by exposure to rap, grime or drill in 1744 prior to the death of Cock Robin? Probably not. But if he or she had been, Digga D couldn't wax lyrical about the Bow and Arrow used to kill Robin, nor could he describe how the Fish caught Robin's blood in front of a Fly who saw him die, nor describe the Owl who volunteered to dig the grave or attest to the crying and sobbing from those who heard the bell toll, commemorating death. As George Orwell wrote in the novel 1984: "It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words."

The Black community provide much of the support for rap and drill music today, so let us redress the Orwellian prophecy and encourage people to express themselves without interference by public authority. It's a great pity that in doing this currently through music, they may be targeted by the state.

Who Killed Cock Robin? Not I.

About the authors



Gwen Jones graduated from Liverpool John Moores University in July 2021 with a First Class BA (Hons) Degree in Policing Studies; this article is snapshot of her much broader, final year dissertation research.

Nick Kealey is a Lecturer at the Liverpool Centre for Advanced Policing Studies at Liverpool John Moores University.

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Political Drillin? What machine learning tells us about the reality of drill music

The violent language of drill music has caused controversy, with police demanding censorship and pursuing injunctions. But do we really understand how drill music is received? Dr. Paul McFarlane (pictured right) and Dr. Bennett Kleinberg (pictured left) from the Department of Security and Crime

Science at University College London discuss how machine learning and scientific evidence can help the police and policymakers better understand the complexity of the lyrical content of drill music and how it's consumed.

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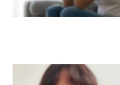
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Website design and development by GetSet Media

Policing Insight ISSN 2634-7822

