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# Rap music, race, and perceptions of crime

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**Abstract**

Scholars who study rap music have long expressed concerns that criticism of the genre is inextricably linked to stereotypes of young Black men in the United States. Yet minimal research has empirically examined how rap music is linked to race in ways that legitimize and maintain anti-Black attitudes, particularly attitudes related to crime. This article reviews how scholars have typically challenged seemingly racialized concerns about rap music before surveying the handful of studies that empirically examine attitudes related to rap music, race, and crime. In so doing, this essay highlights a growing need for broader conceptualizations of race/ethnicity and social control.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

For decades, researchers have documented the persistence of racial inequality in the United States, particularly for criminal justice outcomes (e.g., Baldus, Pulaski, & Woodworth, 1983; Bridges & Steen, 1998; Johnson & Lee, 2013; Zatz, 1987). Much of the research examines how race, or a person's assigned racial category based on phenotype, contributes to racially disparate outcomes. However, in an attempt to reconcile declines in reported implicit and explicit racial prejudice with continued racial disparities in criminal justice outcomes, recent research has begun examining the role of ostensibly race-neutral practices. Attitudes about rap music provide an important example of how anti-Black attitudes, specifically those related to crime, can be articulated without ever mentioning race (e.g., Kubrin & Nielson, 2014; Stoia, Adams, & Drakulich, 2017) and suggests new avenues for research on race/ethnicity and social control.

For example, in 2012, Jamal Knox, an emerging star in the Pittsburgh rap scene, was arrested after police found heroin and a stolen firearm in his vehicle. Shortly thereafter, Knox and a friend wrote a rap song called "F— the Police" and posted it on Facebook, calling out the arresting officers by name and making references to killing them. Upon the named officers learning about the video, Knox was charged with and convicted of witness intimidation and making a terroristic threat.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court upheld Knox's conviction, ruling that his lyrics are admissible evidence because they "do not include political, social, or academic commentary, nor are they facially satirical or ironic" (as cited in Liptak, 2019). In other words, contrary to Knox's argument that his lyrics are a form of

artistic expression, specifically one meant to pay homage to earlier gangsta rap songs, the court viewed the lyrics as indicative of Knox's intentions to carry out violent acts. In 2019, the case has made its way to the doorstep of the U. S. Supreme Court. A central legal question in this case is whether a reasonable listener would have understood the statement to be a true threat, an answer that is arguably influenced by the listener's knowledge about rap music.

The case of Jamal Knox, and the many others like it,<sup>2</sup> also raises important questions about how rap music may be interpreted in ways that legitimize and maintain anti-Black attitudes, specifically those related to Black criminality. As such, studying attitudes about rap music can expand our understanding of how laypeople take race into consideration, more broadly, when making assessments about dangerousness, a particularly relevant site of exploration given recent reports that implicit and explicit racial prejudice is declining (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019; Sawyer & Gampa, 2018). In the remainder of the article, first, I briefly survey longstanding debates about perceptions of violence and crime in rap music. Next, I review the handful of studies that empirically examine attitudes about rap music, race, and crime, specifically noting how attitudes about rap music may act as a proxy for anti-Black attitudes related to crime. Lastly, I discuss the need for further research examining the varied ways in which laypeople take race into consideration when making judgments about crime and criminal justice policy.

## 2 | CONTEXTUALIZING CRIME AND VIOLENCE IN RAP MUSIC

The origins of rap music, a genre that utilizes rhyme, rhythmic speech, and street vernacular, are somewhat contested. Some consider rap music to be an outgrowth of the slave trade (e.g., Gilroy, 1995), others characterize the music as a response to structural inequality and community violence (e.g., Emdin, 2010; Rose, 1994), and others describe rap music as emerging from house parties in the 1970s (e.g., Keyes, 2002). Regardless of rap music's origins, one thing is readily apparent: Rap music has had a contentious relationship with the criminal justice system and, more broadly, the public. Scholars who study rap document when record stores have been prohibited from selling rap albums (Blecha, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991; Dixon & Linz, 1997), when rap concerts have been canceled by local authorities (Blecha, 2004; Hyman, 2015), and when prosecutors have used rap lyrics as confession evidence in criminal trials (Calvert, Morehart, & Papdelias, 2014; Dennis, 2007; Hirsch, 2014; Kubrin & Nielson, 2014; Powell, 2009). More generally, politicians, media pundits, and the public at large have criticized rap music for its references to drug use, violence, and other criminal activities.

Critics of the genre often cite references to violence, prostitution, and other criminal behavior present in the music as evidence that the genre glorifies crime (Gore, 1987; Jackson, 2004; Lyddane, 2006; Stickle & Tewksbury, 2015) and contributes to violent behavior (Geliebter, Ziegler, & Mandery, 2015; Johnson, Jackson, & Gatto, 1995). For example, in order to validate concerns about the genre, some politicians and media commentators have cited studies showing that individuals are more likely to accept anti-social behavior (Johnson et al., 1995), misogynistic attitudes (Gan, Zillmann, & Mitrook, 1997; Wester, Crown, Quatman, & Heesacker, 1997), and teen dating violence (Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, & Reed, 1995) after exposure to violent rap music. When compared to other music genres that are also criticized for promoting violence, rap music is still viewed as uniquely dangerous. After analyzing news and opinion articles from 118 nationally published periodicals, Binder (1993) found that, even though heavy metal and rap music both reference violence and defiance of authority, the media is more likely to characterize rap music as inspiring youth to commit crime. More recently, some critics in the media have suggested that rising crime rates can be attributed to rap music more so than the proliferation of guns, with some going as far as concluding that rap has done more damage to African-American youth than racism in recent years (Murphy, 2014; Ra, 2015).

Concerns about the violence and crime in rap music is not, however, isolated to media and political commentary. In the past decade, rap lyrics are increasingly being introduced as evidence in criminal trials, with prosecutors often using the lyrics to characterize rappers as criminal offenders who are writing about their violent and illicit exploits in the form of music lyrics (Calvert et al., 2014; Dennis, 2007; Hirsch, 2014; Kubrin & Nielson, 2014; Powell, 2009). For example, Larry Yellin, a senior prosecutor for the Orange County District Attorney's Office, contends that rap lyrics

can be useful evidence because they may illuminate whether a defendant had intent or motive to commit a crime (Punkte, 2015). Similarly, other prosecutors have explained that rap lyrics "verbalize [rapper's] attitudes, motivations, and lifestyles" (Lyddane, 2006, p. 2) and that introducing them at trial can help prosecutors "invade and exploit the defendant's true personality" (Jackson, 2004, p. 16), implying that lyrics are indicative of a certain type of person. Regardless of whether rap lyrics are viewed as promoting crime or as evidence of criminal activity, the outcome remains the same. Rap music, unlike music from other genres, is characterized as an example of the capacity for violence and crime among the people who create the music, predominately Black men from low-income neighborhoods.

In contrast, some scholars and political activists argue that criticism of the genre, and particularly the legal response to rap music, is merely another form of racial profiling, one which plays on anti-Black biases related to crime while avoiding explicitly mentioning race (Liptak, 2019; Reyna, Brandt, & Viki, 2009). For example, according to Killer Mike, a rapper and activist, concerns about the dangerousness of music "only seems to apply in an unfavorable manner when you're talking about a 6-foot-3 black guy" (Barnes, 2015). In other words, concerns about rap music are, in reality, concerns about "someone who already looms as a threatening stereotype in the minds of society" (as cited in Nielson, 2012). Thus, scholars have sought to challenge seemingly racialized concerns about the genre by highlighting the socio-historical conventions that contextualize the violence and crime present in the music.

One way scholars challenge concerns about the genre is by highlighting how rap music is rooted in a broader entertainment media culture that glamorizes violent behavior (Negus, 2012; Quinn, 2013; Richardson & Scott, 2002; Serrienne, 2015; Watts, 2012). Proponents of this perspective point to the violent and misogynistic imagery prevalent across television and movies, musical genres, and literary classics as evidence of a general American culture of violence (Armstrong, 1993; Grier, 2001; Lowell et al., 2014; Richardson & Scott, 2002; Stoia et al., 2017). Contemporary rap music is, therefore, merely another outgrowth of prevailing entertainment norms, and scholars who study rap music point to changes in the music industry to suggest that this, in fact, may be the case (Fitts, 2008; Herd, 2008; Herd, 2009; Mendez, 2019; Myer & Kleck, 2007; Negus, 2012; Serrienne, 2015).

Other scholars point out that, although American entertainment media generally glamorizes flashiness, sex, and violence, rappers face unique pressures to construct a hyper-aggressive, hyper-masculine persona (Perry, 2004; Quinn, 2013; Rose, 2008; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). More specifically, rappers who embody what Quinn (2013) describes as "black ghetto realness" (p. 32) are typically viewed by record labels as more marketable and often receive more financially lucrative contracts (Charnas, 2011; Harkness, 2014a; Krims, 2000; Rose, 2008; Serrienne, 2015; Stoia et al., 2017). This may explain the proliferation of rap videos on YouTube and other social media platforms that depict gang-related activity and other criminal exploits. Research has documented how rap videos posted on YouTube often emphasize or exaggerate a rapper's capacity for lethal violence (Harkness, 2014b; Lauger & Densley, 2018; Lozon & Bensimon, 2017; Patton, Eschmann, & Butler, 2013), with some noting that the videos "sell the image of the violent gang member to the audience" (Lauger & Densley, 2018, p. 826). In sum, presenting lyrical accounts of a rapper's willingness towards violence and crime has become critical to ensuring success in the industry (Kitwana, 1994; Kubrin & Nielson, 2014), a demand arguably rooted in America's racial histories, politics, and ideologies (e.g., Hooks, 1994; Kitwana, 2005).

Another perspective scholars use to challenge characterizations of rap espoused by critics is to highlight how the music is a form of cultural expression. As Kelley (1996) notes, rappers are essentially street ethnographers, reflecting the experiences occurring within structurally disadvantaged communities by assuming the persona of, for example, a gang banger, hustler, or ordinary working person. As such, rap music can be understood pedagogically, in that it educates the public about the aspirations, concerns, and vulnerabilities of many street-identified Black men and women (Kubrin, 2005a; Kubrin, 2005b; Payne, 2016; Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012). Indeed, various ethnographic and historical accounts describe how rappers reference gang activity in their music, typically from the first-person perspective, even if the rappers are not gang members or are only peripherally associated with street gangs (Chang, 2005; Harkness, 2014a, 2014b; Quinn, 2013). Lyrics may be based on the life of the artist, but they may also be based on the lives of loved ones or other members of the community, or some combination of stories. Regardless, the lyrics serve an artistic purpose. Thus, when Nas imagines himself as a gun in the song *I Gave You Power* or when Michael

Render assumes the stage name Killer Mike, the rappers are not declaring their violent tendencies but rather demonstrating their resilience and agency in the face of broader police surveillance, political disenfranchisement, and economic instability.

In sum, criticism of rap music is inextricably linked to perceptions of young Black men in the United States. Those that produce and consume rap music, mostly young Black men from impoverished neighborhoods, are often perceived as dangerous because of concerns that rap music is causally linked to crime. Scholars and activists have, in various ways, challenged these notions, consistently pushing back against the seemingly racialized concerns about the music. Yet amid concerns that criticism of rap music is, in reality, a method of maintaining and legitimizing anti-Black attitudes, relatively few studies have empirically examined this issue, which is notable given a growing awareness that American society has entered a new era of color-blind racism (e.g., Alexander, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Lopez, 2014).

### 3 | ANTI-BLACK ATTITUDES IN DISGUISE

As previously noted, minimal research has explored how fears about rap music may reflect contemporary anti-Black attitudes and, in particular, how those attitudes contribute to racial disparities in criminal justice outcomes. Much of the existing research aims to highlight that negative stereotypes about rap music exist (Fried, 2003; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007; Shevy, 2008), the real-world consequences of those stereotypes (Dunbar, Kubrin, & Scurich, 2016; Fischhoff, 1999; Fried, 1996; Reyna et al., 2009), and how those stereotypes directly relate to racial prejudice (Dunbar & Kubrin, 2018; Johnson, Trawalter, & Dovidio, 2000; Rudman & Lee, 2002). For example, research reveals that the public often associates fans of rap music with particular alcohol and drug preferences, personality types, and personally held values (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007). Related research has demonstrated that fans of rap are often associated with crime and violence, even when compared to fans of other genres that commonly reference violence (Fried, 2003; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007; Shevy, 2008). In one such study, Fried (2003) randomly assigned participants to describe a typical fan of heavy metal music or a typical fan of rap music and found that fans of heavy metal were often characterized as self-destructive whereas fans of rap were often characterized as angry, threatening to society, and involved in gang activity.

These stereotypes have been shown to have real-world consequences for how people evaluate the content of rap lyrics. For example, in one study, Dixon and Linz (1997) presented participants with rap lyrics or non-rap lyrics and varied the sexual explicitness of the lyrics. Participants were then asked to judge the lyrics based on their perceived offensiveness, prurient nature, and artistic merit. They were also asked a series of questions related to their general attitudes about rap music, such as whether “rap causes trouble” and whether “rap promotes rebellious sexual attitudes.” Dixon and Linz (1997) found that rap lyrics were consistently rated more harshly than similarly explicit non-rap lyrics and that this effect was stronger for participants who reported negative attitudes about rap music. Notably, related research has revealed that negative judgments of rap lyrics can be detected even when the lyrics are held constant. In particular, individuals judge lyrics to be more threatening, offensive, and literal when they are identified as rap compared to when identical lyrics are identified as a different genre (Dunbar et al., 2016; Fried, 1996; Fried, 1999). These findings suggest that attitudes about the genre, in part, explain why rap lyrics have often been viewed as violent and misogynistic testimonials rather than as art or entertainment.

Stereotypes associating rap music with dangerousness do not, however, only affect evaluations of lyrics. Prior studies also find that stereotypes about rap music inform impressions of the people who write the music (Dunbar & Kubrin, 2018; Fischhoff, 1999). For example, Fischhoff (1999) found that people make negative judgments about a person from the mere fact that the person writes violent rap lyrics. In his study, participants were presented with biographical information about an African-American male high school senior who has a good academic record, is on the track team, and plans to attend college on an athletic scholarship. However, Fischhoff (1999) varied whether participants were presented with violent, misogynistic lyrics the young man had written as well as whether the young man

was being charged with murder. Subsequently, participants evaluated the young man's character across nine dimensions, including whether he was likable, honest, sexually aggressive, and capable of murder. Results indicate that participants made more negative character judgments about the young man when they were presented with his violent lyrics than when they were not and that these judgments were worse than when participants learned the young man was being charged with murder. Building on this research, Dunbar and Kubrin (2018) found that negative character judgments are not solely based on the content of a person's lyrics. Instead, participants are more likely to infer that a songwriter has a violent and criminal disposition when his lyrics are identified as rap rather than country or heavy metal.

The belief that rap music is strongly associated with crime also influences approaches towards crime control. For example, Dabney, Teasdale, Ishoy, Gann, and Berry (2017) explored how appearance characteristics associated with rap music (e.g., braids, wearing sagging pants, and having artificial gold teeth) inform police arrest decisions. After analyzing 934 police–citizen interactions, Dabney and his colleagues found that citizens displaying appearance characteristics associated with rap music were three times more likely to be arrested than not be arrested, even when controlling for relevant legal factors (e.g., suspect demeanor, priors, and seriousness of the offense). The researchers point out that future research needs to consider situational factors, in addition to a person's phenotype, when examining the role of race in police–citizen interactions. In a similar vein, research has revealed that negative attitudes about rap music predict increased support for punitive criminal justice policies more broadly (Reyna et al., 2009) and result in less empathetic judgments towards Black victims (Johnson, Bushman, & Dovidio, 2008).

As some have suggested, existing negative stereotypes about rap music may, in fact, act as a proxy for anti-Black biases (Butler, 2004; Dunbar & Kubrin, 2018; Kubrin & Nielson, 2014; Stoia et al., 2017). To address this concern, scholars have begun examining how rap lyrics activate stereotypes related to race more broadly, that is, beyond stereotypes of rap music. For example, studies have shown that people use music preferences to infer a person's race, which results in racially stereotypic judgments about that person (Dunbar & Kubrin, 2018; Fried, 2003; Marshall & Naumann, 2018; Rentfrow, McDonald, & Oldmeadow, 2009). Furthermore, exposure to rap music has been shown to increase the ease of associating Black people with negative traits like hostility, aggressiveness, and misogyny (Johnson et al., 2000; Rudman & Lee, 2002). Thus, it may be the case that, as Reyna et al. (2009) suggest, “Anti-rap attitudes are really anti-Black attitudes in disguise” (p. 363).

## 4 | RECONCEPTUALIZING ANTI-BLACK ATTITUDES

Research on attitudes about rap music, race, and crime reflects a growing need for broader conceptualizations of race/ethnicity and social control. That is, in an era that some consider “post-racial,” it is clear that social science can better illuminate how situational and contextual factors, in addition to race, enhance the perceived association between African-Americans and crime. Extensive sociological research has already explored how a general fear of crime often explains support for policies that disproportionately impact Black communities (e.g., Baker, Metcalfe, Berenblum, Aviv, & Gertz, 2015; Unnever & Cullen, 2010; Unnever, Cullen, & Jones, 2008), suggesting that racial disparities in criminal justice outcomes are allowed to occur because race is no longer perceived to be the explicit and direct cause of punishment (e.g., Alexander, 2010; Lopez, 2014). Others have similarly suggested that attitudes about poverty are being used to justify racially discriminatory policies (e.g., Costelloe, Chiricos, & Gertz, 2009; Hogan, Chiricos, & Gertz, 2005). Yet less is known about how racialized cultural expressions as well as other contextual factors are used to legitimize racially discriminatory decision making, which is critical as studies report declines in overt and implicit racial prejudice.

Since the Civil Rights Movement, sociologists have, in fact, long sought to explain the shifting forms of racial discrimination in the United States. For example, Bonilla-Silva (2015) explains that “racism in the United States is now characterized by subtle, institutionalized, and seemingly non-racial practices and mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality” (p. 75). Relatedly, Bobo (2011) describes contemporary attitudes about race as *laissez-faire* racism or a

more covert, culture-centered racist ideology. Both of these arguments, which have been echoed by numerous other scholars, highlight how opposition to cultural affectations and traditions is used to maintain a racial hierarchy. In fact, criticism of music, hairstyles, art, and language, to just name a few, has been extensively discussed to illustrate the relationship between cultural production and racial inequality (e.g., Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011; Lopez, 2014; Macon, 2014; Ramirez, 2005; Stoia et al., 2017). Thus, extensive research has theorized about broader conceptualizations of race/ethnicity and social control, yet this research rarely empirically examines how culture, specifically, is linked to race in ways that result in increased assessments of culpability and dangerousness.

When considering how racialized cultural expressions are used to legitimize racially discriminatory decision making, a number of potential approaches exist. For example, sociologists and criminologists can explore how racialized attitudes about culture are linked to criminal justice decision making (e.g., arrest, sentencing, and probation). Prior studies have already examined the relationship between appearance characteristics (e.g., clothing choices and tattoos) and arrest decisions (e.g., Camacho & Brown, 2018; Dabney et al., 2017), yet research rarely examines how the race of the offender mediates this relationship. Research also does not often explore the types of character attributions made based on cultural expressions (e.g., violent natured), nor how these attributions contribute to criminal justice outcomes, a relevant site of exploration given concerns that racial discrimination is now more covert and culture-centered. Additionally, the fact that racial inequality is inextricably linked to punitive social control policies (Alexander, 2010; Beckett, 1997; Lopez, 2014) suggests that future research should also consider how public perceptions of culture influence attitudes about criminal justice policy.

Notably, other disciplines have, in fact, begun to address how cultural expressions as well as other contextual factors strengthen the perceived association between African-Americans and crime. Social psychologists, political scientists, and economists have already shown how beliefs about the work ethic of African-Americans (e.g., Green, Staerkle, & Sears, 2006), attitudes about Black-sounding names (e.g., Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004), and generalizations about physical spaces associated with African-Americans (e.g., Bonam, Taylor, & Yantis, 2017) may explain support for racially discriminatory policies and practices. For example, prior studies reveal that negative perceptions of African-American cultural values predict increased support for punitive criminal justice policies generally (Green et al., 2006) and, in particular, increase the perceived appropriateness of a drug search in a hypothetical scenario (Peffley, Hurwitz, & Sniderman, 1997). Relatedly, Bonam et al. (2017) have demonstrated that, in addition to implicit bias and structural-level racism, the racialization of places has contributed to inadequate responses to public health crises and police brutality. In other words, the mental images of "Black spaces" are relevant to our understanding of a range of present-day racial disparities (e.g., Bonam et al., 2017; Correll, Wittenbrink, Park, Judd, & Goyle, 2011).

It should be noted that, in the fields of sociology and criminology, considerable improvements have already been made regarding research on racial disparities in criminal justice outcomes, including the use of more sophisticated statistical techniques, a greater focus on immigration, and analysis of the cumulative effects of racial discrimination (Johnson & Lee, 2013). However, a broader examination of the ways in which contemporary forms of prejudice influence racialized assessments of dangerousness and culpability can expand our understanding of racially discriminatory policing and punishment practices. Research on attitudes related to rap music, race, and crime is only one potential example. More broadly, scholars can and should examine the varied ways in which laypeople take race into consideration, including culture, physical space, and other situational factors, when making judgments about crime and criminal justice policy.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A true threat is defined as a statement that would be reasonably interpreted as imminent, causing fear, and threatening harm (see Rothman, 2001, for a detailed discussion of a true threat).

<sup>2</sup> See Kubrin and Nielson (2014) for other examples of cases where defendant-authored rap lyrics are introduced as evidence as criminal cases.



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