

Music Exposure and Criminal Behavior: Perceptions of Juvenile Offenders

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The purpose of this investigation was to examine young offenders' perceptions of the relationship between exposure to music and their criminal behavior. Using a tool designed for the study, male felony offenders ages 12 to 17 were questioned about their music listening patterns and the perceived influence of listening on their offending fantasies and behavior. Rap music was the predominant choice across all participant profiles. While 72% of respondents believed that music influenced the way they feel at least some of the time, only 4% perceived a connection between music listening and their deviant behavior. Narrative comments provided by the youths were largely consistent with objective data. Most respondents believed in the reflection-rejection theory, in which music is perceived as a mirror of the adolescents' lives rather than a causative factor in their behavior. Two additional theoretical perspectives were espoused: drive reduction theory, which states that music serves as an expressive vehicle (thus reducing the likelihood of emotional and physical outburst); and excitation-transfer theory, wherein residual physiological arousal affects subsequent behavior. In the latter, music was perceived as harmful only when applied to pre-existing states of negative arousal.

Introduction

There is no shortage of published research supporting the use of preferred music to reduce stress and promote overall physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Until recently, however, far less scientific attention has been given to the potential of music to

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arouse unhealthy or destructive feelings and contribute to maladaptive behavior. Societal and parental concern about the destructive effects of music is not a recent phenomenon, nor is the effort to stave off these alleged effects. Binder (1993) writes, "Popular music has always been denigrated by adult society" (p. 757). Musical genres such as jazz and blues and the rock 'n' roll of the 1940s and 1950s were believed to have contributed to teenagers' moral disintegration. Howard (1992) writes that even in this decade, "Rock music is often charged with being a perverter of America's youth and an underminer of Christian moral values" (p. 123).

In addition to rock music, performers of newer popular styles, particularly heavy metal and rap, have recently come under attack for their perceived potential to negatively influence young audiences. In a 1985 standing-room-only U.S. Senate hearing, several prominent political families rallied testimony to the harmful effects of the pornography and violence present in the lyrics of heavy metal music. Rap music was lambasted just 5 years later when a recording by a group called *2 Live Crew* was declared obscene by a federal court in Florida and members of the band were arrested after performing material from the recording.

As would be expected with any political or moral issue of relevance to a specific community or to society at large, the debate surrounding the alleged effects of heavy metal and rap music has drawn significant attention from the popular press (i.e., magazines and newspapers). Far less writing, however, appears in the professional literature base.

Heavy Metal Music and Its Presumed Influence

Heavy metal, an offshoot of mainstream rock music, was popularized by Led Zeppelin with the release of the band's first album in 1969. Metal is characterized by a pounding beat, high-pitched vocals that are sung or shouted, and distorted electric guitars that provide a metallic sound. It is, to most adult listeners, "painfully loud and very aggressive" (Trzcinski, 1992, p. 13). Lyrics of many popular metal songs revolve around topics such as extreme rebellion, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, perversion, and satanism (Steussy, 1985). Critics contend that recent metal music emphasizes anger, violence, homicide, and suicide. Arnett (1991) argues that youths involved with metal music have a greater tendency than

those not involved to engage in life-risking or reckless behavior such as drunk driving and assault. However, while many adolescents enjoy listening to heavy metal recordings, only a very small percentage appear to become immersed in the dress code, language, and other behavioral norms of the metal subculture (Stack, Gundlach, & Reeves, 1994).

Parental and law enforcement systems campaigned vehemently against metal music. Rosenbaum and Prinsky (1991) found extreme bias against the heavy metal subculture among mental health professionals. Performing groups have come under attack by organizations such as Parents Music Resource Center and the National Parent Teachers Association. The fact that these activists have been successful in convincing the music industry to place warning labels on recordings by groups such as *AC/DC*, *Anthrax*, *Twisted Sister*, *Guns N' Roses*, and *Motley Crue*, seems to indicate a pervasive social belief in the power of metal music to psychologically and behaviorally influence its audience. But despite claims that heavy metal has been the cause of destructive and self-destructive behavior (Litman & Farberow, 1994), attempts to hold those in the music industry legally responsible for damages have consistently failed on the basis of First Amendment free speech provisions.

Rap Music and Its Presumed Influence

Rap music, also known as 'hip-hop,' is characterized by its "... staccato beats, driving, lancing rhythms, and hip lyrics" (Dyson, 1989, p. 142). Hip-hop, as the name implies, began in the 1970s as an inner-city expression of the youth subculture. It was initially a hybrid of dance music patterned after songs by performers such as *Lightning Rod* and *James Brown*. Rap's characteristic grating, rhythmic sound was cemented with the development of "scratching," the technique of sliding a phonographic needle back and forth in the groove of a record album to create a complex beat.

In the 1980s rap radiated from the East Coast toward the West Coast and was transformed into a powerful symbol of and vehicle for African American nationalism. Henderson (1996) writes;

Arguably, hip-hop has become a conduit for African American culture to a greater extent than even jazz. Where the latter could, through its polyrhythmic syncopations, embrace both the

nuances and jagged edges of the collective Black experience, it could not self-consciously energize the national ethos in quite the way the more lyrically focused hip-hop does. (p. 309)

Earlier East Coast rhymes focused on the accumulation of material wealth in a "rise from the ashes" theme; West Coast rappers now reflect the values of a much more corrupt lifestyle in a rap subtype called 'gangsta rap.' Since 1992, Death Row Records, one of this country's most notable gangsta labels, has sold more than 15 million records (Hirschberg, 1996). Ironically, while increasingly embodying the essence of African American urban life, rap has expanded its audience to include suburban listeners, mostly male and white (Hirschberg, 1996).

Critics of rap music contend that explicit lyrics in selected raps promote violence against women and whites (Dyson, 1989) and glorify sex and the degradation of women (Samuels, 1991). The lyrics of one specific rap, "Cop Killer" "by *Ice-T*, were thought by many to be the catalyst for the murder of a police officer in Texas (Aldrich & Carlin, 1993). Addressing the claims that rap music causes violence, Henderson writes, "That makes about as much sense as arguing that 'Love Child' by the *Supremes* caused teen pregnancy" (1996, p. 309).

Theoretical Perspectives

Extant literature about the relationship between exposure to so-called "controversial" musical genres and antisocial or aggressive behavior appears to fall into four distinct camps. The first of these is *reflection-rejection* (as termed by the author). Individuals espousing this theory purport that music, no matter what the genre or source, is neither good nor bad; it is simply a reflection of societal values, issues, and responses and can be rejected as a potential threat. In other words, art (music) imitates life. Thus, the fact that lyrics and musical elements associated with metal and rap styles embody alienation, powerlessness, and aggressiveness (Epstein, Pratto, & Skipper, 1990) is merely indicative of the prevailing problems inherent in the adolescent subculture. In her book, *Feeling the Sound*, Kay Sherwood Roskam (1993) offers her perspective:

Much of the current popular music is angry, revealing great frustration, hatred of 'other' races, 'other' genders, and 'other' life styles, and disrespect for authority. Perhaps our concern about

the music of the young needs to shift to actions that work toward solutions of the attitudes and problems expressed in the music, rather than trying to change or control the music itself. (pp. 56–57)

Particularly for adolescents, involvement with music satisfies a curiosity about and a need to explore life values and issues. One recent newspaper commentary embraces this notion:

Millions of adults read real-crime books, murder mysteries and vampire novels without feeling the slightest urge to spill blood. They are acting on an ageless desire to inspect and even enjoy the dark and unfamiliar elements of human nature at a safe distance. So are the kids who listen to music decried by senators. Plenty of affluent white teenagers buy CDs by thug rappers, but they don't really want to get a pistol and shoot cops. They merely want a window into a subculture that is very different from their own. (Chapman, 1997)

A disparate concept, but one that results in the same theoretical outcome, is what Binder (1993) has aptly termed the *no harm* frame. She argues that audiences know not to take seriously the explicit or "cartoonish" lyrics frequently found in metal and rap music. In neither of these models is music believed to cause any maladaptive behavior; thus, metal and rap genres can be dismissed as a threat to social integrity.

A second theoretical perspective, *social learning*, can be attributed to Bandura (1973) and his colleagues. Social learning theory asserts that individuals' antisocial, aggressive responses are shaped by early experiences with parents and other significant adults. In short, children pattern their lives after those individuals on whom they rely to attend to their basic human needs. In the absence of parental influence, or when dependency needs are unmet, children search for other role models. The mass media offer plenty of respectable options. As researchers have noted, however, metal and rap music may attract a "vulnerable listener"—the youth who is looking to fill a void and cope with feelings of failure. Metal music and the behavioral norms of its subculture, for example, may appeal to this individual because of the identity, peer acceptance, and feelings of power it provides (Took & Weiss, 1994).

Drive reduction theory suggests that music can serve as a conduit for the expression of difficult feelings such as anxiety, anger, or hostility. The implication is that people function much like steam kettles or balloons: Too much internal pressure will cause them to explode, but experiences that permit a physical, verbal, or emotional catharsis can help prevent this explosion (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). Raw and aggressive music, then, has a purgative effect. Young listeners who adhere to the drive reduction theory describe music as a “vicarious release of aggression” and “a kind of tranquilizer” (Arnett, 1991).

Excitation-transfer (a term borrowed from physics and chemistry) describes the fourth theoretical position. This theory presumes that physiological states (regardless of their source or cause) transfer to subsequent situations and intensify postexposure emotional states (Zillman, 1971). This being the case, arousal during exposure to metal and rap music may “bleed” into subsequent situations, contributing to postexposure aggression. The work of Arnett (1991) lends support to this theory. Thirteen percent of the male adolescents he interviewed adamantly believed that listening to metal music contributed to their postexposure, antisocial behavior (namely, vandalism and assault). Although the excitation-transfer theory addresses states of arousal, its basic tenets would allow the claim that depressive physiological states also transfer.

A review of available research on this important topic reveals that inquiry is scant and inconclusive. Stratton and Zalanowski (1997) write, “Indeed, the idea that individual music-listening habits have not been connected to individual feelings and acts represents a major lack in music-mood research” (p. 132). While some researchers have examined relationships between exposure to popular music and undesirable feelings or actions (Ballard & Coates, 1995; Stratton & Zalanowski, 1997; Wannamaker & Reznikoff, 1989), and a few have targeted populations in corrections or residential treatment (Brotons, 1987; Bushong, 1997; Harris, Bradley, & Titus, 1992), no studies appear to have addressed the offenders’ perceptions about the possible link between exposure to controversial musical genres and deviance. Does exposure to heavy metal or rap music contribute to delinquency among young people? What do juvenile offenders believe?

The purpose of this study was to examine young offenders’ perceptions of the relationship between exposure to music and their

criminal behavior. More specifically, the researcher aimed to answer the following questions: What styles of music do the participants listen to and under what conditions? Will they perceive a relationship between their music exposure and their criminal fantasies and/or actual offenses? If a causal relationship is identified, will any patterns emerge among their personal profiles or habits of exposure? How do their beliefs interface with current theoretical perspectives on this topic?

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were 106 male students at a private residential facility in southcentral Michigan. The testing facility was selected for two reasons. First, the youths incarcerated there represented all geographic regions of the state. Second, the facility administrators were knowledgeable about music therapy and amenable to related investigation. All students were adjudicated felony offenders. They participated voluntarily and with parental consent.

The respondents ranged in age from 12 to 17, with an average age of 15 years, 1 month. Of those who checked one response option to indicate their race, 43 (47%) identified themselves as Caucasian/White, 35 (39%) as African American/Black, 3 (3%) as Native American/American Indian, and 3 (3%) as Hispanic. Ten students identified themselves as biracial, indicating this either by checking more than one response option or specifying the races in the "other" category. Race combinations included African American/Caucasian, African American/Hispanic, African American/Native American, Caucasian/Native American, Caucasian/Hispanic, and Hispanic/Asian American.

The average length of stay in the residential facility was computed at 7.5 months, although a wide range existed (.5 to 23 months). Most students had been in the school for approximately 8 months. Only four students reported never having been in a prior placement as a result of their illegal behavior. The average number of placements (including the current placement) was 3.2. Six students reported 10 or more. As one might expect, the number of placements increased with age.

Offending histories of the participants were extremely varied. The majority of students were multiple offenders. More than half

of the respondents (54%) had committed a "violent act against person(s)." "Violent against property" was reported by 44% of the students. Other reported offenses were "nonviolent against person(s)" (31%) and "nonviolent against property" (24%). Twenty-seven percent of those individuals surveyed had committed sex offenses.

Procedure

The tool used to assess the students' opinions about music and their criminal behavior was a 26-item questionnaire constructed by the investigator. Development of this survey progressed through several phases. First, content was established over a 2-year period through brief, informal discussions with incarcerated youths about the role and function of music in their lives. (Many of these individuals identified music as a "trigger" in their own offense cycles, i.e., it was perceived as a stimulus that evoked antisocial responses. Others related that music served as an integral component of bizarre, ritualistic behavior such as gang-related activities and sacrificial ceremonies of satanic cults.) A rough draft was developed, incorporating questions patterned after those used successfully in similar clinical trials (Arnett, 1991; Epstein, Pratto, & Skipper, 1990). The draft was then pilot tested with approximately 40 male and female felony offenders. Based on responses to the pilot test, slight alterations were made in structure and content. Once the actual testing site was identified, the survey vocabulary was modified to reflect the nomenclature of the treatment program to which the participants were accustomed. The final draft was developed with assistance from two experienced researchers at Michigan State University.

The questionnaire was administered to the youths on two separate afternoons. Testing took place in groups of 8 to 12 students in the two school buildings on the campus of the facility. The researcher introduced herself to each group and briefly explained the purpose of the study. The questionnaires and pencils were distributed and the printed directions read aloud. The students were then instructed to begin. Each participant was allowed as much time as needed to complete the form; for most individuals this was about 10 minutes. (In one classroom each item on the form was read aloud by the teacher due to reading difficulties among the

youths.) In order to comply with facility policy and to encourage honesty, all responses remained anonymous.

A total of 100 questionnaires were collected. Of these, three were suspected by facility staff to contain falsified information; these were eliminated prior to analysis. The objective responses of the remaining 97 questionnaires were computed and analyzed using SPSS for Windows 7.5.

Results

Initial Student Response

One hundred and six individuals from 12 classrooms were administered the questionnaire. Participants approached the task with varying degrees of cooperation. Most individuals demonstrated a positive attitude (i.e., pleasant, attentive, curious), but some appeared apathetic and a few displayed a negative attitude (i.e., disruptive, sarcastic, defiant). Six of the students began the task but, after reading some of the questions, elected not to turn in the form. Others participated selectively, answering some questions and not others as dictated by their comfort levels. For this reason, the results of the study are often presented here as percentages.

Music Listening Patterns

Participants were asked to identify one style of music as their favorite. Seventy-eight students followed this directive. Of these, 60 (77%) were proponents of rap and three youths (4%) selected heavy metal. Eighteen students indicated multiple preferences. Here again, rap music figured prominently, having been chosen by 17 of these 18 respondents (94%). Heavy metal was selected by 8 youths (44%), only slightly increasing its cumulative popularity to 11%. The total number of youths selecting rap was 77 (80%). Genres specified in the "other" category included alternative ($n = 3$), jazz ($n = 2$), house music ($n = 1$), death metal (a specific type of heavy metal) ($n = 1$), gospel ($n = 1$), contemporary ($n = 1$), collective ($n = 1$), Christian ($n = 1$), and "any soft music" ($n = 1$).

Participants listened to an average of three hours of music per day. Not surprisingly, more listening occurred during early and late evening (i.e., between 5:00 p.m. and midnight) than during morning or midday hours. A third of the respondents indicated that they

listened to music at all times of the day. The majority (61%) listened in the presence of other people; 23% usually listened alone. Fifteen students (16%) selected both response options.

Perceived Influence

When asked, "How often does listening to music affect the way you feel?", only 16 youths (17%) answered "always." Fewer (9%) answered "usually." Almost half of the students (46%) believed that music sometimes affected the way they feel. Twenty-eight percent believed that there was absolutely no connection between music listening and their feelings.

Only four students (4%) believed that listening to music certainly had affected their illegal behavior. Twenty-three percent responded that music had "slightly" influenced their criminal actions. An overwhelming majority (73%) perceived no connection. In related questions, the students were asked to identify what types of music they had listened to while thinking about committing a crime and the frequency with which they had actually carried out these criminal fantasies. Three musical categories were chosen: Forty-five youths (46%) selected rap, five (5%) selected heavy metal, and two (2%) checked "other." Consistent with results from related items, most youths indicated that music listening was in no way paired with their criminal fantasies.

The participants were nearly equally divided between those who had listened to music 5 to 10 minutes before committing a crime ($n = 45$) and those who had not ($n = 47$). Of those who had, 27 had listened exclusively to rap, 2 had favored heavy metal, 1 had chosen rock, and 15 had listened to various combinations of rap, heavy metal, rock, country, rhythm & blues, and "other" styles. Several questions addressed the elemental characteristics of this music. The majority of students described the beat as "steady" and the volume as "loud." Thirty-four students (61%) selected "fast" for the tempo of the music; nine (16%) listened to "slow" music prior to engaging in criminal behavior.

When asked about the nature of the lyrics of the music, 34 students (77%) rated them as "extremely" or "somewhat" violent, while 7 (16%) indicated that the lyrics were "nonviolent." Seventy-five percent ($n = 33$) described the music as having "extremely" and "somewhat" sexual lyrics, whereas 9 respondents (20%) believed the lyrics to be of a "nonsexual" nature.

The information most helpful in addressing the final research question came in the form of narrative comments at the end of the survey. Sixty-one youths (63%) provided comments about music and their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Comments ranged in clarity, depth, and sentiment. Responses were divided into theoretical categories based on content themes.

Several students made nonspecific comments about music and their preferences or experiences. For example, one youth wrote, "I think that all rap is not bad. Some people don't like it but I do." Another stated his general belief that "... music is a gift from God." None of the comments in this group were of a negative nature.

Responses in the first theoretical subgroup, *reflection-rejection*, were slightly longer and more highly developed than the others. One youth wrote, "Rap music tells how the world really is." Another agreed, writing, "I don't really feel that groups like N.W.A. and *Nirvana* really influence anything. They're talking about their lives. They're telling it how it is." Some of the comments in this group revolved around the notion that criminal behavior stems from bad decisions and faulty thinking. One 16 year-old wrote, "Crimes are committed because people think they're slick and could get away with whatever they try to do. And all of the actions committed by criminals are conscious decisions, or thinking errors." Four individuals purported that music is not responsible for violence and that, as one young man put it, "People use rap and other music to get off with bad behavior." Another individual's comment embodied well Binder's *no harm* frame. He wrote, "I feel that music has nothing to do with the way I act. I listen to rap music and the stuff that they rap about half the time is not real. So in order for me to commit a crime because [of the music], I would have to take the music seriously and I don't do that."

Only one of the respondents remotely suggested a social learning framework. This 15 year-old wrote, "I think that music really isn't the problem nowadays. It is the way parents raise their kids."

Drive reduction theory was, however, well represented. Consistent with responses to survey questions about the connection between music and feeling, roughly two-thirds of the students' comments supported the notion that exposure to music had some kind of an effect on their level of arousal or mood, mostly positive. One respondent wrote, "I think music is good for you in lots of ways. Like it can bring you up from a bad mood." Another concurred, writing,

"When I listen to music I like or even music that I don't like, it takes me from a bad mood to a good mood. But different moods for different musics." Another wrote, "I love rap music. It slows me down when I'm upset. I don't think it creates a negative impact. Some rap calms people down if [they] like it." These comments are consistent with findings of a similar survey in which two-thirds of the teen respondents who listened to preferred music when they were upset believed it had a calming effect (Arnett, 1991). The use of music as an expressive vehicle appeared in comments such as, "I listen to music to express my hard thoughts." Two teens identified music as a sort of haven, like those who wrote, "I enjoy rap when I'm feeling emotional and everybody is against me" and "When I'm depressed and all alone I listen to slow songs like *Boyz 2 Men*."

A few comments suggested *excitation-transfer* theory. One youth penned, "Music only affected me in a bad way when I was already pissed off." Another wrote, "Country music influenced me in crimes because if I'm in a bad mood it makes me more depressed." Finally, one youth described the following scenario: "When I listen to *Snoop*, I feel good and hyper. Whenever I'm about to do something gang-related I always listen to *Snoop* because his music puts me in a mood to where I'll do anything." These comments suggest that music, rather than being the initial arousal stimulus, actually served as an additive to an already undesirable or overwhelming emotional state.

Finally, there were two narrative comments that did not belong in the predetermined theoretical categories, but that warrant discussion. Both statements reflected the respondent's belief that music could have harmful effects. One 17-year-old proponent of East Coast rap wrote, "Well, I think music influences people alot, 'cause I know from experience that when I was listening to music whether it be about having sex or committing crimes, I wanted to do what the music was saying; even though I didn't always do the things, I wanted to do them. So I think the types of music we listen to affect what we do." Another youth offered this advice: "Music is good, when you do the right thing with it. Like play the right tapes. . . . Be concerned about explicit lyrics and signs on the tapes you buy. . . . Some music needs to be banned or excluded."

Discussion

A number of factors may have influenced the students' responses to this questionnaire. First, youths in some classrooms were

seated in close proximity to one another and were observed glancing at each others' forms. Although the young men were encouraged to answer the questions independently, there was no way to enforce this expectation. Peer influence was clearly a mitigating factor among youths in one cottage group, as evidenced by nearly identical narrative statements and marginal sketches.

Responses also may have been tainted by skepticism among the students: In two classrooms, students questioned the investigator in front of the group about the true purpose of the study. One youth asked, "Are you going to try to convince the [agency] staff that we should not be allowed to listen to our music?" Although the students were reassured that this was not the intent of the study, the question may have planted suspicion in the minds of the other respondents in the groups, leading them to answer more cautiously or less honestly. In fact, narrative comments such as "Music should not be banned, it's not fair" and "Don't ban rap" may have been indicative of this suspicion.

Clearly, the respondents in this study made little causal connection between their own music listening and their illegal behavior, with only 4% perceiving such a relationship. In fact, as illustrated by the narrative comments, most of the incarcerated youths believed more firmly in the power of music to enhance their lives by altering their mood and their behavior in a positive direction (*drive reduction theory*). This belief is consistent with a current popular zeitgeist that structured involvement in the arts (music, dance, drama, visual arts) can provide a means of self-expression and a source of self-confidence in those youths who have been identified as "at risk." Brock asserts that involving at-risk youth in the arts helps reduce crime by teaching empathy and respect for others, self-discipline, and self-expression. He writes, "You can't measure it, but people who are at-risk who get involved in arts programs deflect their life and go in a different direction" (as cited in "Arts Help Youths Paint Better Picture of Life," *Lansing State Journal*, January, 1997).

Survey results point to a major issue for professionals using music in their work with adolescents. Music therapists and educators make critical decisions on a daily basis about which music selections to use. Honoring a teenager's preferred style may capture attention, promote communication, and help to solidify respectful interpersonal relationships (Gardstrom, 1999); on the other hand, it may produce unpredictable or undesirable responses. In any

event, the issue of preference must be addressed since it may be a primary determinant in session structure (Steele & Smith, 1996), client motivation, and treatment outcome.

Summary

Upon careful study of the existing research on the effects of popular music, it seems reasonable to conclude that music is inherently neither capable of eliciting "good" behavior nor responsible for "bad." The particular style and rendition of the music, how it is used, by whom, with whom, and under what particular conditions are just a few of the factors that must be considered in the development of any music/behavior equation.

Although many parents and influential individuals in politics and education take it for granted that violence and vulgarity in music promote antisocial behavior, the evidence for that proposition is yet elusive. And, in spite of the perception held by some researchers that bad music causes bad behavior, the results of this study lend support to an opposing view, as demonstrated by this quotation of a 16-year-old sex offender: "I think that music is sometimes wrongly blamed for what goes on in the world. Music had nothing to do with the rapes I committed. Music is just music, and it's one of the greatest things ever to happen in the world." Music therapists, educators, and other professionals who use controversial musical genres such as heavy metal and rap in their work would be well-served by more complete investigations into connections between music and deviance.

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