2012

# Hip-Hop and Procedural Justice: Hip-Hop Artists' Perceptions of Criminal Justice

Howard M Henderson, *Texas Southern University*

# Hip-Hop and Procedural Justice: Hip-Hop Artists' Perceptions of Criminal Justice

Kevin F. Steinmetz and Howard Henderson

The online version of this article can be found at:

http://raj.sagepub.com/content/2/3/155

Additional services and information for *Race and Justice* can be found at:

**Email Alerts:** http://raj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

**Subscriptions:** http://raj.sagepub.com/subscriptions

**Reprints:** http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

**Permissions:** http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

**Citations:** http://raj.sagepub.com/content/2/3/155.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Jun 29, 2012

What is This?

# Hip-Hop and Procedural Justice: Hip-Hop Artists' Perceptions of Criminal Justice

**Kevin F. Steinmetz[1] and
Howard Henderson[1]**

## Abstract

Despite its popularity, hip-hop has remained one of the most woefully underexamined topics within criminal justice and criminology. Given the reality that hip-hop music represents lyrical expressions from criminal justice's most overrepresented population; the aforementioned paucity is all the more perplexing. Utilizing a latent and manifest content analysis of a random sample of 200 hip-hop songs, drawn from platinum-selling albums between the years 2000 and 2010, the current study examined the manner and extent to which hip-hop artist's portrayed the criminal justice system. The results demonstrated that law enforcement was the branch of the criminal justice system most likely to be mentioned by hip-hop artists (58.27% of mentionings) followed by corrections (33.81%) and courts (7.91%). Subthemes that emerged from hip-hop discussions of law enforcement and corrections are also discussed. Unfairness and powerlessness inductively emerged as the two general themes from the hip-hop criminal justice portrayals and are discussed within a procedural justice framework. Suggestions for future research and policy implications are put forth.

[1] Sam Houston State University, College of Criminal Justice, Huntsville, TX, USA

**Corresponding Author:**
Kevin F. Steinmetz, Sam Houston State University, College of Criminal Justice, P.O. Box 2296, 816 17th St., Huntsville, TX, 77341, USA
Email: kfs006@shsu.edu

# Introduction

From its inception, hip-hop music (commonly referred to as rap) has been vehemently critiqued for its violent, misogynistic, and antipolicing rhetoric, all the while simultaneously being supported, by some, as an emergent mechanism in the furtherance of social justice.[1] The extant literature, concerning the relationship between hip-hop, deviance, crime, and the criminal justice system, posits that for the most part, hip-hop's culture and lyrical content have led to increased acceptance of aggression, derogatory perceptions of women, and disrespect for the criminal justice system, most notably the police (Bogt, Engels, Bogers, & Klooserman, 2010; Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, & Reed, 1995; Nisker, 2007). Hip-hop music is derived from a subculture disproportionality impacted by the criminal justice system, with findings consistently indicating that African Americans receive higher rates of arrest and more severe forms of punishment than all other racial/ethnic groups in the United States (Rocque, 2011). Despite numerous studies (Alridge, 2005; Cheney, 2005; Dennis, 2007; Kubrin, 2005a, 2005b; Martinez, 1997; Nisker, 2007; Quinn, 1996; Rose, 1994) that mention the criminal justice reality within hip-hop music, to date, mainstream criminal justice and criminology journals have yet to systematically examine the symbiotic relationship between criminal justice and hip-hop music.

The lack of hip-hop research in criminal justice and criminology journals is all the more perplexing, given the continual criminal justice ''intra muros'' entreat to measure public perceptions of the criminal justice system and its impact of such perceptions on behavioral outcomes (for example, see Gabbidon, Higgins, & Potter, 2011). Therefore, examining hip-hop's criminal justice relevant thematic content provides an alternative, contemporary avenue for assessing public portrayals of the system. As a result, situating our research within the broader body of knowledge focused on examinations of criminal justice perceptions, this study utilizes a systematic latent and manifest content analysis to assess hip-hop artist's portrayal of the criminal justice system.

Hip-hop music involves spoken word laid over a backing music track, typically with a prominent beat. Much like other musical art forms, hip-hop, from its inception, has served as a communicator of cultural messages to an audience that had few other socially acceptable accessible outlets for expression (Alridge, 2005). In the art form's early years, it was noted that ''[h]ip-hop is like a CNN that black kids never had'' (rapper Chuck D as quoted in Gates, 1990). While contemporary social media outlets threaten this once predominant avenue for expression and cultural transmission—with research showing African Americans are just as likely to use social media as other racial/ethnic groups (Smith, 2011)—hip-hop continues to provide an outlet of and for this artistic expression for a culture historically denied the benefits of the principles theoretically extended by the Bill of Rights. The music is a medium for the transmission of common experiences, struggles, and aspirations to other members of the hip-hop community and listeners from all strata of society: domestic and international. Given that this community also experiences an overrepresented reality within the criminal justice system, it is imperative that examinations of the perceptions of the system be assessed through the music.

Hip-hop emerged from economically, politically, and socially marginalized racial minority groups who have been disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system (Tonry, 2011). Research has demonstrated this same group has been disproportionately targeted by criminal justice policies, such as the ''War on Crime'' and the ''War on Drugs'' (Agozino, 2000; Tonry, 2011). As such, over the past 25 years African American men have faced incarceration rates five to seven times greater than those of White men (Tonry, 2011). Because criminal justice has an ever present reality within the hip-hop community, as a result of the disproportionate criminal justice experience of the African American population, the discipline's lack of hip-hop examinations is potentially overshadowing an intricate opportunity to understand the manner in which a cultural art form perceives institutionalized methods of social control (i.e., criminal justice system).

The disproportionate level of interaction between the hip-hop community and the criminal justice system gives the community more firsthand and vicarious experiences with the law enforcement apparatus, corrections system, and judicial process than many other groups. As such, the music generated by this population contains insights and narratives about criminal justice, which may be able to serve as a ''report card'' on the system and an alternative avenue by which to determine the public sentiment. In other words, the music of the hip-hop community may provide a unique lens in which to examine the impact criminal justice has on those under its purview—a perspective criminal justice and criminological researchers should not ignore.

In the current article, we contribute to the scholarship on hip-hop by conducting a latent and manifest lyrical content analysis. To date, this is the first systematic inductive content analysis of hip-hop portrayals of criminal justice conducted within those journals focused on criminal justice and criminology. The primary research question driving this study is centered on the manner and extent to which hip-hop lyrics portray criminal justice. To address this question, a random sample of 200 hip-hop songs was drawn from all platinum-selling hip-hop albums from 2000 to 2010. The lyrics within these songs provide an opportunity to examine the perceptions of hip-hop artists regarding the criminal justice system and its primary components. As noted in the review of the literature, vicarious experiences of the criminal justice system are as significant as actual; therefore, lyrical analysis of a music genre coming from a group so intertwined with the criminal justice system is pertinent. Research has shown that personal and vicarious experiences of injustices threaten the systems legitimacy and lead to a host of outcomes (i.e., noncompliance with law enforcement, delinquency, etc.). Examination of criminal justice portrayals through the lyrical content of hip-hop music subsequently offers a rare contribution to the extant literature on cultural influences and relevancy within criminal justice. In addition, this research simultaneously provides an opportunity to situate hip-hop research within the broader body of recent literature focused on the measurement of public perceptions of the system and the outcomes thereof.

We begin with a brief review of the previous literature comprising systematic and empirical analyses of hip-hop music, providing both the various foci of the research and their results. Then, a description of the methodology used in this content analysis

will be summarized, which consists of a random sample of songs selected from platinum-selling albums utilizing a grounded theoretical-based coding approach. Lastly, the results of the analysis are provided which identify (1) various themes that emerged from the hip-hop lyrical portrayals of each component of the criminal justice system and (2) consistent underlying themes of unfairness and powerlessness which permeated the portrayals of criminal justice in rap.

## Examining Hip-Hop

Despite hip-hop's position as one of the most popular and potentially influential music forms in contemporary popular culture, relatively little academic attention has been directed toward it within criminal justice and criminology journals. As such, this review of the literature broadens itself beyond the scope of immediate disciplinary publications and reviews specifically systematically conducted empirical studies examining hip-hop. Previous empirical research on hip-hop generally consists of content and legal analyses and behavioral outcomes. While there have been many notable essays and treatises written about hip-hop music (i.e., Dyson, 2007; Gilroy, 1993; Rose, 1994), the foci of this literature review remains limited to frame the state of systematic and empirical research on hip-hop. An exception to this rule is a brief mention of Butler's (2004, 2009) *Hip-Hop Theory of Justice* as it is one of the few theoretical pieces directly related to criminal justice and criminology.

Several studies have examined hip-hop for its effect on the behavior of juveniles. These studies found correlations between hip-hop music and youth acceptance of violence (Johnson et al., 1995; Johnson, Jackson, & Gatto, 1995), juvenile deviance (Miranda & Claes, 2004), and negative gender stereotypes (Bogt et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 1995). Each of these examinations found rap music or videos were associated with increased commission and acceptance of these behaviors. For example, Johnson, Jackson, and Gatto (1995) conducted a quasi-experimental study on a nonrandom sample of 46 adolescent African American males. In this study, they required one group to watch violent rap videos, one group to watch nonviolent videos, and a third control group which did not watch videos at all. After showing the videos and administering a vignette survey, the study found adolescents exposed to violent rap videos were more likely to accept violence in the vignettes than the other two groups.

Mahiri and Connor (2003) conducted a study that differed substantially from other behavioral outcomes studies that assume a simple causal link between exposure to hip-hop and negative outcomes. Their study is unique in that it is a qualitative examination of the process youths go through while interpreting and internalizing their exposure to hip-hop's various messages. The authors examined a nonrandom sample of 41 middle-school students and found that instead of passively receiving the metaphorical messages conveyed through hip-hop, the youths were capable of critiquing, interpreting, and looking beyond hip-hop's ascribed negative features (i.e., hedonism and misogyny) to find the positive or pro-social messages in the music.

Like all research, hip-hop behavioral outcome studies are confronted with limitations. First, four out of five of these studies are limited by small sample sizes ($n \leq 60$;

Johnson, Adams, et al.,1995; Johnson, Jackson, et al.,1995; Mahiri & Connor, 2003; Miranda & Claes, 2004). Second, all of these studies utilized nonrandom samples. Third, two of these studies examined *acceptance* of violence without drawing connections between acceptance, commission, and willingness to commit violence (Johnson, Adams, et al.,1995; Johnson, Jackson, et al.,1995). Finally, four out of five of these studies assumed a simple causal link between exposure to hip-hop and negative outcomes rather than the dynamic process of internalizing and interpreting the art form (Bogt et al., 2010; Johnson, Adams, et al.,1995; Johnson, Jackson, et al.,1995; Miranda & Claes, 2004).

Numerous studies in hip-hop have derived conclusions based on a content analysis of hip-hop lyrics (Armstrong, 2001; Knobloch-Westerwick, Musto, & Shaw, 2008; Kubrin, 2005a, 2005b; Weitzer & Kubrin 2009) or music videos (Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009; Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad, 2010). Collectively, these studies deductively found support of hip-hop's violent endorsements, misogyny, materialism, colorism/afro-centrism, and nihilism which results from living in harsh, oppressive, and otherwise negative conditions. For example, Weitzer and Kubrin (2009) conducted a content analysis examining portrayals of women in a random sample of 403 gangsta rap songs in which they found that rap music "naturalizes certain alleged characteristics of men and women and, in accordance with these imputed differences, seeks to restrict, rather than broaden, women's proper roles and resuscitate male domination" (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009, p. 24).

Hip-hop content analyses are not without limitations. First, these studies have largely focused exclusively on the perceptibly negative features of rap—that is misogyny and violence. By negative in the previous context we are referring to the nature of research drawing attention to the socially disapproved themes predominant throughout hip-hop, without spending any or much time (1) contextualizing the art form, (2) discussing any socially redeeming qualities of the music, or (3) examining the lyrics in such a way as to provide an avenue for the messages contained in hip-hop to be expressed in the artist's own words. As such, the research has been myopic in its examination of hip-hop lyrical content. Perhaps the only exception to this negative focus is Kubrin's (2005b) study looking at nihilism in hip-hop music. As described in this study, however, nihilism—while not necessarily a negative feature of hip-hop in-and-of-itself—may be analogous to a negative characterization because it is a result of "living in an environment filled with violence and limited opportunities" (Kubrin, 2005b, p. 441) and is conducive to or correlated with negative outcomes. Second, content analyses of hip-hop have been exclusively deductive. While not diminishing the importance of deductive research, inductive research is useful for (1) providing alternative interpretations of hip-hop and (2) allowing the words and meanings of hip-hop artists to be heard in the research.

Hip-hop has also been examined from a legal and theoretical-development perspective. For example, by examining the use of hip-hop lyrics in criminal proceedings, Dennis (2007) found that hip-hop lyrics composed by defendants were being unfairly used by prosecutors as criminal evidence. The courts were failing to contextualize the hyperbolic nature of hip-hop lyrics. Rather, lyrics were taken at face value and

submitted as criminal evidence against a defendant. In short, Dennis (2007) unveils a disjuncture between courts and their interpretation of hip-hop culture. Understanding this disjuncture is important because of its implications beyond the court room. For example, hip-hop artist Common created a controversy recently as a result of being invited to the White House by President Obama to read poetry to inner city youth (Marikar, 2011). Critics asserted Common's lyrics incited violence and lacked artistic merit—an interpretation with a disjuncture similar to the one discussed by Dennis (2007). These critics chastised Common for a few violent lyrics while (1) ignoring the fact that most of his other lyrics are nonviolent and (2) not considering the context in which Common's work is situated.

One theoretical review warrants mention because of its direct relationship to the dynamic between hip-hop and criminal justice. Butler (2004, 2009), drawing from hip-hop music and culture, developed a hip-hop "theory of justice." He asserts that within hip-hop lyrics lies a theory of punishment, which values the individual while simultaneously supporting the idea of "just desserts." His scholarship represents the only academic attempt (known to the authors) to develop a theory of punishment premised on the cultural expressions of the hip-hop culture.

In sum, previous literature has predominantly been pessimistic toward hip-hop by primarily focusing on its perceived misogynistic, deviant, and violent undertones. In particular, studies which have focused on the relationship between hip-hop's lyrical/ visual content and impact on behavioral outcomes have taken a jaundiced view toward hip-hop. Despite a few exceptions to this derogatory evaluative norm (Butler, 2004, 2009; Dennis, 2007; Mahiri &Connor, 2003), most empirical hip-hop research has fallen victim to the negative interpretive lens of examining the music.

The current study builds on the previous literature in multiple dimensions. Unlike most of the prior research, this study will utilize an inductive approach which allows the words and meaning of hip-hop artists to be expressed and synthesized into a cohesive framework rather than imposing a deductive framework onto the lyrics. More importantly, the current study builds upon the extant literature by being the first to examine hip-hop and its discussion of criminal justice for insights which could provide an alternative framework of understanding the hip-hop community's perspective on the criminal justice system. In short, the overall goal of this research is to provide guidance for researches and policy makers regarding future criminal justice interactions with this population, which has typically perceived the system as unjust (Rocque, 2011).

## The Present Study

The purpose of this study is to conduct a content analysis of hip-hop lyrical portrayals of the criminal justice system. "Criminal justice" is operationalized as the three branches (i.e., law enforcement, corrections, and courts). Hip-hop lyrics were chosen as the unit of analysis for two reasons. First, as highlighted in the literature, limited research has been conducted specifically on hip-hop's perspective of the criminal justice system even though this art form has expressed opinions about

social control and criminal justice since its inception (Butler, 2004). Despite the prevalence of criminal justice in hip-hop, scholars have yet to determine the nature and extent of these portrayals.

Our perceptions-based examination situates itself within the broader body of knowledge on the criminal justice system which involves surveys of the general public to assess their perceptions of the system's legitimacy (Henderson, Wells, Maguire, & Gray, 2010; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002). For this study, the lyrics provide the data for assessing hip-hop artists' perceptions and, as detailed further in the discussion, have implications for understanding the hip-hop community's perceived legitimacy of the criminal justice system.

Second, hip-hop lyrics were also chosen as the unit of analysis as a result of its position at the center of many controversies in public discourse. For example, hip-hop has been derided as an endorser of violence against the police (Hamm & Ferrell, 1998). Considering the controversial nature of hip-hop, its implied message, increasing popularity, and representation of a community so intimately associated with the criminal justice system, who also happen to have a less favorable view of the system, researchers interested in social and cultural processes should look into hip-hop as a potential object of study.

## Methodology

### Sample

Consistent with previous hip-hop research, the lyrics chosen for this sample were taken from 200 hip-hop songs randomly selected from 1,507 tracks on 87 platinum-selling hip-hop albums released between 2000 and 2010 using a random-platinum sampling procedure similar to those used by Kubrin (2005a, 2005b) and Weitzer and Kubrin (2009).[2] Platinum albums (1 million or more sold) were chosen to increase the likelihood of listenership. A lyric was operationalized as a single thought expressed through the words of the song. Due to their redundancy, "greatest hits" albums and soundtracks were excluded. Given that this research focuses on the perceptions of the American criminal justice system, the two platinum-selling European albums were also omitted.

Multiple sources were consulted in order to develop the sample. Platinum status was determined by referring to data from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). Amazon.com was used to provide track listings. ARTISTdirect.com, an online resource with information on music artists and groups, was utilized to (1) decide which songs were classified as rap/hip-hop and (2) provide track listing information unavailable on amazon.com. lyrics from the randomly selected songs were obtained from The Original Hip-Hop/Rap Lyrics Archive (www.ohhla.com) with clarification of various slang terms provided by The Rap Dictionary (www.rapdict.org).

### Plan of Analysis

The first level of analysis in the current study consisted of a latent content analysis which allowed for the inductive and systematic examination of the lyrics for the

identification of common themes. Second, a manifest analysis was then used to develop frequencies for the latent themes so comparisons could be drawn between them. A song was considered to discuss criminal justice if it mentioned police, corrections, or courts in a literal and/or metaphorical sense. Below is a more detailed description of the inductive approach adopted in the current study.

## Coding Procedure

Using a grounded theoretical approach (Charmaz, 2006), the qualitative notes derived from each lyric were initially coded based on the characterization or portrayal given by hip-hop artists regarding each branch of the criminal justice system.[3] A single word or phrase which best captured the characterization given by the artists was assigned to each lyric in this phase. In addition to reading each song's lyrics multiple times, every song was listened to at least twice. Listening to the music allowed for consideration of the lyric's musical context to ensure proper interpretation of hip-hop characterizations of criminal justice.

The next stage of coding involved finding patterns among the criminal justice characterizations. To avoid detachment from textual context, any possible patterns were checked against the song's lyrics to provide confirmation. The identified patterns constitute ''thematic categories'' of criminal justice portrayals. For example, in order to be categorized under policing, any lyric that characterized the police as ''chasers'' or ''watchers'' was coded as the thematic subcategory of *police as predatory*.

Once the process of developing thematic categories was complete, two general themes emerged from the data: (1) the unfairness of the criminal justice system, and (2) feelings of powerlessness in confronting this unfairness. In this study, unfairness is defined as the exercise of authority which differentially applies to individuals based on ascribed attributes such as race, class, or gender.[4] Premised on previous research (Geis & Ross, 1998; Thomas & González-Prendez, 2009), powerlessness involves a perceived loss of control, an inability to (1) access ''valued resources,'' (2) overcome obstacles, and (3) seek resolutions. Drawing from this literature, we developed a definition of powerlessness which takes into consideration the criminal justice focus of the study. As such, we defined powerlessness as the perceived inability to seek restitutions and reparations through the legitimate legal apparatus and/or the inability to cope with challenges created by the imposition of authority.

## Results

Table 1 presents the number of lyrical mentioning's relative to each specific branch of the criminal justice system (i.e., law enforcement, corrections, and/or courts). In this sample, 128 separate lyrics made a mention of criminal justice in some form or fashion. In addition, some lyrics would mention multiple distinct components of the criminal justice system. As such, this study distinguishes between lyrics (single thoughts expressed by the words of the song) and mentionings (each time a distinct component of the criminal justice is mentioned in the lyrics, with multiple

**Table 1.** Overall Criminal Justice Themes

| Lyrical theme | N | % | χ² |
|---|---|---|---|
| Law Enforcement | 81 | 58.27 | |
| Corrections | 47 | 33.81 | |
| Courts | 11 | 7.91 | |
| Total | 139 | | 80.69*** |

*Note.* Percentages will total more than 100% due to rounding.
***$p < .0001$.

mentionings occurring occasionally in a single lyric). Within the 128 lyrics that referred to criminal justice, there were 139 individual mentionings. Of these 139 mentionings, 81 (63.28%) mentioned law enforcement, 47 (36.72%) mentioned corrections, and 11 (8.59%) mentioned the criminal legal system. For purposes of this analysis, hip-hop portrayals of each branch are presented separately with their corresponding thematic categories. Example lyrics are pulled from the sample to provide illustrations of each theme. To ensure clarity of lyrical portrayals and to avoid miring the reader in excessive detail, only one or two lyrical examples of each theme are provided, as the utilization of more would not provide additional clarity.

As demonstrated in Table 1, of the three identifiable criminal justice themes, mentionings of law enforcement (58.27%) occurred most frequently. A chi-square test showed that mentionings of criminal justice were significantly more likely to be of law enforcement than the other two branches ($\chi^2 = 80.69$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). This finding is supported by the reality that law enforcement is the branch of criminal justice most likely to be encountered by the citizenry.

Table 2 provides frequencies for the thematic categories under each criminal justice branch to provide an examination of the extent of these mentionings. The reader should note that because of the infrequency of lyrics relevant to the judicial system, thematic categories could not be adequately developed. Nonetheless, this data remains useful for the general conclusions drawn and will be highlighted in the discussion section.

Chi-square tests were run to determine the prominence of each respective subtheme within law enforcement and correctional mentionings. The results of the chi-square tests are discussed within their respective subthemes. These tests assess the significant likelihood of a particular subtheme portrayal within a lyric.

## A Hip-Hop's Portrayal of Law Enforcement

The most discussed branch of the criminal justice system was law enforcement ($n = 81$; 58.27% of lyrics). There are three subthemes in law enforcement mentionings which emerged—*law enforcement as hunters*, *law enforcement as oppressors*, and *law enforcement as illegitimate*. A degree of conceptual overlap between these categories exists. For example, various aspects of law enforcement can be viewed as both oppressive and illegitimate, such as in a case of police corruption. As a result,

**Table 2.** Identified Subthemes of Criminal Justice Branch Mentioning's

| Focus of criminal justice Branch mentionings | N | % | $\chi^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| Law enforcement | | | |
|   as predatory | 43 | 43.88 | 0.309*** |
|   as oppressors | 20 | 20.41 | 20.753 |
|   as illegitimate | 21 | 21.43 | 18.778 |
|   passive and indirect references | 14 | 14.29 | 34.679 |
| Total | 98 | | |
| Corrections | | | |
|   interferes with social ties | 47 | 53.41 | 6.149*** |
|   conditions and effects | 8 | 9.09 | 20.447 |
|   oppressive | 13 | 14.77 | 9.383 |
|   punishment as appropriate | 9 | 10.23 | 17.894 |
|   nondescript negative | 5 | 5.68 | 29.128 |
|   passive and indirect references | 6 | 6.82 | 26.064 |
| Total | 88 | | |

*Note.* Percentages will not total more than 100% due to rounding.
***$p < .001$.

rather than creating mutually exclusive categories, this analysis focused primarily on distinguishing the different qualities of the portrayals.

*Law enforcement as predatory.* In the hip-hop lyrics within this sample, law enforcement officers are often described in a way that makes them seem predatory ($n = 43$; 43.88%). Of the law enforcement subthemes, discussing law enforcement, the chi-square test demonstrated that the category *law enforcement as predatory* was significantly more likely to be mentioned than any of the other themes within hip-hop discussions of law enforcement ($\chi^2 = .309$, $df = 4$; $p < .001$). Within this sample, rap artists often portrayed police as those who chase, stalk, watch, catch, and cage. Taken together, these portrayals characterize the police *as predatory*. Jay-Z provides an example of hip-hop's portrayal of law enforcement as predatory in "December 4th" (2003) where he raps, "Goodbye to the game all the spoils, the adrenaline rush / your blood boils, you in a spot, knowin' cops could rush / at you in the drop, you so easy to touch." In other words, the cops are portrayed as a lurking threat, as Jay-Z engages in a drug deal, he knows the police could be lurking out beyond his sensory range, ready to strike as he places himself in the vulnerable position of committing a crime.

*Law enforcement as oppressors.* Another way in which law enforcement is characterized by hip-hop artists is *as oppressors* ($n = 20$; 20.41%; $\chi^2 = 20.753$; $df = 4$; $p > .05$). Here, we find the oppression enacted by police officers taking two general forms. The first being in the form of *direct oppression* which involves law enforcement directly engaging in activities perceived as oppressive. Direct oppression is often

lyrically expressed as cops acting in a way that impedes on hip-hop artist's upward mobility and the predatory behavior of law enforcement. Under direct oppression, the hip-hop artist's environment, sense of safety, and security are affected by the police. The second form is *indirect oppression*, in which law enforcement actions, while not necessarily oppressive in-and-of themselves, become oppressive as they contribute to an already negative or harsh environment hip-hop artists find themselves in. These portrayals involved a discussion of the negative features in their lives or environment such as poverty or violence in which the police were included as an additional negative feature.

Jay-Z expresses *direct oppression* by discussing the police as inhibitors of upward mobility. He notes, "You know why they call The Projects a project, because it's a project! / an experiment, we're in it, only as objects / and the object for us to explore our prospects / and sidestep cops on the way to the top—yes!" ("Kingdom Come," 2006). In this song, Jay-Z describes selling drugs as a means (of very few available) to achieving socioeconomic upward mobility. In the aforementioned lyric, the cops are portrayed as an obstacle that must be "sidestepped" to climb the socioeconomic ladder. We also find this example to be one of *indirect oppression* as well because "The Projects"—housing specifically built for the impoverished—is associated with poverty. As such, any actions by the police which must be "sidestep[ped]" as the artists "explore [their] prospects" are viewed as oppressive because it contributes to the negative lived experience of poverty (Jay-Z, "Kingdom Come," 2006).

*Law enforcement as illegitimate.* In this category, *police as illegitimate*, we find law enforcement portrayed as liars, manipulators, harassers, corrupt, violent, discriminatory, and impotent ($n = 21$; 21.43%; $\chi^2 = 18.778$; $df = 4$; $p > .05$). It is in this characterization where hip-hop focuses on portraying law enforcement as deserving of none of the legitimacy it currently holds. Law enforcement is stripped of its image of altruism and its order-protecting veneer. Hip-hop artists portray the police as defaulters on the notion of protecting and serving as opposed to preservers of the peace. *Law enforcement as illegitimate* has a great deal of overlap with *law enforcement as oppression* because some of the same police behaviors are described in both, such as in cases of police brutality. The important distinction between these two categories is that portrayals of *law enforcement as oppression* focuses on the police contribution to social and psychological distress experienced by hip-hop artists and the law enforcement intention to keep the hip-hop community in their current social position, while *law enforcement as illegitimate* focuses on the police contradiction to that very image that supposedly gives them legitimacy. As an example of this conceptual overlap, police corruption (like a police officer stealing drugs from a hip-hop artists/ dealer) can simultaneously act to abuse hip-hop artists (*oppressive*) while eroding the image of law enforcement as just and righteous (*illegitimate*).

As mentioned previously, many topics are expressed by hip-hop artists that portray the police as illegitimate. Each one of these conveys an improper or poor exercise of police power and authority. For example, Snoop Dogg ("Set It Off") discusses police brutality when he raps, "It's somethin bout these motherfuckin' West coast G's / make

that cheese, when the cops come you bet' not freeze / blast on 'em like the Genovese, they yo' enemies / lock you up and fuck you up / talk shit to you beat you down then cuff you up / and leave you in a cell stuffed (damn!) / I ain't got no money for bail, that's real as fuck (f'real)" ("Set It Off," 2000). Here, the police are said to imprison and brutalize people with the implication that the treatment is undeserved. As such, Snoop Dogg portrays the police as antagonists who need to be deterred from action through gunfire.

*Passive and indirect references.* The final category for hip-hop discussions of law enforcement is the *passive and indirect references* category which serves as a "catch-all" including mentions of the police that do not fit into the aforementioned sections ($n = 14$; 14.29%; $\chi^2 = 34.679$; $df = 4$; $p > .05$). There are four types of lyrics which fall into this category. First are lyrics which provide a negative view of the police but do not provide enough detail to categorize the lyric as *law enforcement as predatory*, *oppression*, or *illegitimate*. For example, in "I'm With Whateva" (2005), Notorious B.I.G. states, "If you don't love yourself, I'll make you see your own heart / and we don't like the NARCs, stay away from the cell." Here, Notorious B.I.G. conveys the police ("NARCs") as negative but does not provide any other details to contextualize his portrayal. Second, this category includes lyrics which refer to the titles of other songs containing the words "cop" or "police." As an example, Snoop Dogg raps in his song "Pimp Slapp'd" (2002), "You're not able to compete with the heat that I drop / and I still ain't been paid for '1-8-7 on a cop.'" Here, Snoop Dogg is not talking about law enforcement per se but is only discussing a song with "cop" in the title. Third, neutral depictions of law enforcement are included in this category such as when the police are described as crime stoppers. Finally, this category also included lyrics that fit into other categories but also had a component that did not logically align with one of the main categories. For example, in Wyclef Jean's "Thug Angels" (2000) he raps "Police is in the news, watch yourself. Ya'll saw what they did to Diallo." Here, through the reference to police shooting victim Amadou Diallo, the police are recognized as possessing the ability to illegitimately exercise extreme force—placing this lyric into *police as illegitimate*. In the context of the rest of the song, however, this lyric also serves to continue Wyclef's argument that the police are generally a nuisance which is a characterization that does not necessarily fit into the main categories.

*Summary.* Hip-hop portrayals of law enforcement, according to this content analysis, generally take three forms. First, law enforcement can be portrayed as *predatory*, a characterization that was significantly more likely to occur than any of the other portrayals of law enforcement ($\chi^2 = 0.309$; $df = 4$). Officers are said to stalk, chase, catch, and cage hip-hop artists. Second, law enforcement is portrayed as oppressive. Artists claim that law enforcement officers act to directly oppress them by taking advantage and preventing upward mobility. They also are portrayed as indirectly oppressing the artists by contributing to an already difficult and negative social environment. Third, hip-hop artists describe the police as an illegitimate arm of the

government by acting in a way that does not fulfill the maxim of "protect and serve." In addition, while there were other types of portrayals within this sample, they were so few they could not reliably be condensed into thematic categories. The general characteristics of these portrayals, however, were negative or neutral (no indication was given in order to determine whether the artist favored or disdained the police in the particular lyric) and none were positive.

## A Hip-Hop's Portrayal of Corrections

Within the hip-hop lyrics, portrayals of corrections were the second most mentioned ($n = 47$; 36.72%). Of the correctional portrayals, six subthemes emerged: *interferes with social ties*, *conditions and effects*, *oppression*, *punishment as appropriate*, *nondescript negative*, and *passive and indirect references*. In general, characterizations of the correctional system were negative with the exception of one category: *punishment as appropriate*.

*Interferes with social ties.* The most prevalent portrayal of corrections presented in the sample focuses on corrections as an interferer of social ties ($n = 47$; 53.41%). A chi-square test indicated corrections as an *interferer of social ties* was significantly more likely to be mentioned than the other correctional subcategories ($\chi^2 = 6.149$, $df = 6$; $p < .001$). Here, hip-hop artists recognize the negative impact incarceration has on relationships within the community. The artists demonstrate that incarceration not only punishes the offender but also friends, family, and others who are socially connected to the offender/offenders. For example, Tupac ("Better Dayz," 2002) raps, "plus my P.O. [parole or probation officer] won't let me hang with the brothers I grew up with." Here, Tupac is describing how his probation officer, an agent of the correctional apparatus, prevents him from engaging with his friends. In this sense, the punishment is not only about *incarceration* (the denial of liberty) but also about the *separation from loved ones*. As expressed by the hip-hop artists, it seems punishment is inflicted on the offender, their friends, and family.

*Conditions and effects.* In addition to the severing of social ties, hip-hop artists also describe the conditions of incarceration and their effects ($n = 8$; 9.09%; $\chi^2 = 20.447$; $df = 6$; $p > .05$). Lyrics in this category compose 17% of all lyrical mentions of corrections. Within the lyrics, prison conditions are often described as brutal, inhumane, filthy, degrading, and cruel. For example, the Ying Yang Twins and Bun B ("23 hour lockdown," 2005), in their appeal to have their friend released from prison, describe prison conditions as "23 hour lockdown / where they treat you like a ho / slide you a plate up under the door / Nigga have to shit in the middle of the floor / prison ain't a place that we need to go."

The effects of prison are described as dehumanizing, animalizing, and often as engendered negative emotions like anger, frustration, and despair. For example, the Ying Yang Twins and Bun B ("23 Hour Lockdown," 2005) describe these effects when they rap, "23 hours lockdown in a cell / can drive a nigga crazy as hell / looking

at four walls / can do nothing at all/got you feeling like a dog in a cage / a monkey in a rage." Here, the artists use similes comparing the status of "prisoner" analogous to that of an "animal." The conditions are also said to drive a person toward anger and insanity.

*Oppression.* Similar to the discussion of law enforcement, hip-hop artists recognize the correctional apparatus as a source of oppression ($n = 13$; $14.77\%$; $\chi^2 = 9.383$; $df = 6$; $p > .05$). A lyric was considered to pertain to oppression if it described corrections as (1) interfering with upward social mobility; (2) a place where resistors are held (or as a place to resist); (3) the final stop after being victimized by the criminal justice system; or (4) housing for those failed by the collapse of other social institutions (i.e., schools, etc.). The underlying theme that unifies this category is that prison acts to secure people or populations into their current social position and also contributes to the victimization of hip-hop artists by other branches of the criminal justice system. For example, Tupac describes politicians as responsible for mass incarceration: "I shed tattooed tears and couldn't sleep good / for multiple years, witness peers catch gunshots / nobody cares, seen the politicians ban us / they'd rather see us locked in chains, please explain / why they can't stand us, is there a way for me to change?" ("Thugz Mansion," 2002). Here, incarceration is said to be an instrument of political force against Tupac and the hip-hop genre of music.

*Punishment as appropriate.* It is important to remember that, despite all of this resistance, the hip-hop community is not opposed to the idea of punishment ($n = 9$; $10.23\%$; $\chi^2 = 17.894$; $df = 6$; $p > .05$). These artists seem to support the idea that "people who harm others should be harmed in return" (Butler, 2009, p. 133). For example, Mystikal advocates for the punishment of the man who murdered his sister: "fuckin' well right I got a grudge / on your Ma, and her lawyer, and the courts / and the jurors, and the judge / defenses, your immediate family members / I'm pissin on it and burning the district attorney / You stepped down on us / shipped that coward out his fuckin' cell and let him skip town on us" ("Murderer III," 2000). Clearly, he supports the idea of punishment and retribution for the slayer of his sister through the means provided by the criminal justice system.

*Nondescript negative.* Within this category are discussions of the correctional branch of the criminal justice system which do not adequately fit into the previous categories, but do provide a negative characterization ($n = 5$; $5.68\%$; $\chi^2 = 29.128$; $df = 6$; $p > .05$). These portrayals are difficult to characterize beyond the quality of "negative." As such, they are labeled as *nondescript negative*. With 5 lyrics falling into this category, we find that these lyrics portray corrections as something to avoid, where "snitches" send people (perhaps reflecting more poorly on the supposed "snitch" than the corrections system itself), and as a general inconvenience. For example, Notorious B.I.G. raps, "If you don't love yourself, I'll make you see your own heart and we don't like the narcs, stay away from the cell, hey, I'ma shoot it out if I'm facing the ail [jail]" ("I'm With Whateva," 2005). He indicates he does not want to go to jail

but does not provide any other descriptions or reasons why. As such, jail is described as *negative* but this portrayal is *nondescript*.

*Passive and indirect references.* Like the *passive and indirect references* category in the law enforcement section, songs which do not fall logically into other categories and which are not numerous enough to justify their own categorization are found here ($n = 6$; 6.82%; $\chi^2 = 26.064$; $df = 6$; $p > .05$). Fourteen percent of the lyrical mentions of corrections were placed here. Eminem provides an example of a lyric that mentions corrections that does not fit into one of the main categories when, in the song "I'm Back" (2000) he raps, "Manson, you're safe in that cell, be thankful it's jail." Here, jail is portrayed as a haven that deviates from most of the other lyrics concerning corrections.

Providing support for Anderson's (1990) "code of the street," which argues convict or ex-convict status can be empowering in street culture, three lyrics claim having friends in prison actually acts as a positive status symbol. For example, Jadakiss (Eve, "Thug in the Street," 2001), while describing various aspects of his life associated with living in the ghetto, says "I got niggas in jail." Within the context of the rest of the song, this is meant to bolster his "street" status. Also, here are lyrics that had fit into another category described previously, like *oppression*, but also provided a reference to criminal justice that did not fit into any of the aforementioned sections. For example, in Tupac's "Mama's Just a Little Girl" (2002), he raps, "only functions at the pen, cuz everybody's in / paying back society, I'm guilty of a life of sin." Here, he recognizes the appropriateness of punishment ("I'm guilty of a life of sin") but also says something else about corrections by saying "everybody's in." While certainly we can infer what may have been meant, there is not enough detail to discern meaning which makes this lyric fall into the *passive and indirect references* category.

*Summary.* Within this sample, there were primarily five categorizations which typified the manner in which corrections were portrayed by rap artists. First, corrections were described as breaking apart social ties to family and friends. Second, the conditions of incarceration were described by hip-hop artists along with the associated effects. Third, the correctional apparatus was portrayed as oppressive. Descriptions of prisons or jails as impeding upward mobility, political weapons, contributors to past criminal justice system victimization, and a holding facility for those failed by other social institutions composed this category. Fourth, hip-hop artists—while denouncing corrections in general—upheld the idea of punishment's appropriateness. Finally, characterizations of the correctional system which were negative but did not provide any other details were described. In addition, while there were portrayals outside the scope of these aforementioned sections, they were not numerous enough to constitute their own category and were relegated to the *passive and indirect reference* section.

## Portrayal of Criminal and Civil Courts

The court system personnel, primarily consisting of judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and the judiciary system, in general, is the least discussed branch of the

criminal justice system by hip-hop artists ($n = 11$; $8.59\%$). It is beyond the scope of the data to determine why this would be the case but, this lack of portrayal may be emblematical of the reality that this is the area of the system that has the least amount of direct contact with persons as they are processed through the criminal justice system. Contact with police officers would happen more frequently than encounters with lawyers and judges and more time would be spent in jail or prisons than within a court room, and thus the lyrics may represent the degree of familiarity. Whatever the reason, the low level of discussion about the court system limits our ability to conduct logical inferences. Despite this limitation, we can still gleam relevance from what *is* mentioned about the judicial system by artists.

One way hip-hop artists describe various components of the court system are as instruments of control. In a rather gendered example, Cam'Ron raps, "Niggas don't listen to broads, they having you sitting in court / for kids that ain't yours, come home with me" ("Come Home With Me," 2002). As demonstrated by Cam'Ron, hip-hop artists sometimes describe the court system as a tool used by women to control them. Women are portrayed as dependent on the resources of the man and, to extract these resources, the court system is used.

While the court system is described as an instrument of control, hip-hop artists also describe how to resist this control through the use of defense attorneys. For example, Jay-Z recollects advice given to him, which involved keeping enough money to hire a lawyer if criminal activity should turn sour: "Old heads taught me, yung'un, walk softly / carry a big clip, that'll get niggaz off me / keep coke in coffee, keep money smellin' mothy / change is cool to cop but more important is lawyer fees" ("Never Change," 2001). In other words, to resist control imposed through the court system, one must fight it within the system itself through lawyers.

Hip-hop artists recognize a problem with trying to legitimately engage the court system, however, even with defense attorneys. The court system is portrayed as falling short of its promise to fulfill justice. In a lyric used as an example previously but still providing a powerful display of hip-hop's perceptions of the failures of the judicial process, Mystikal laments the court's treatment of the man who killed his sister: "fuckin' well right I got a grudge / on your Ma, and her lawyer, and the courts / and the jurors, and the judge / defenses, your immediate family members / I'm pissin on it and burning the district attorney / You stepped down on us / shipped that coward out his fuckin' cell and let him skip town on us" ("Murderer III," 2000). Here, Mystikal is asserting the court system failed to provide justice for him and his family by letting the killer go.

*Summary.* Hip-hop artists within this sample seldom discussed the court system. As such, prominent themes and categories did not emerge from the data. Regardless, there were three general ways the court system was described in the data. First, the court system was portrayed as an instrument of control. Second, hip-hop artists described the need to have a lawyer to avoid legal trouble. Finally, the court system was portrayed as falling short of its promise to serve justice. It should also be noted that none of the hip-hop artists had anything supportive or positive to say about courts; the discussion was pessimistic.

## Discussion: Unfairness and Powerlessness

The extant literature on hip-hop and its relevancy to criminal justice and delinquency have focused primarily on its derogatory mentionings of women, police, and influence on deviant behavior (Armstrong, 2001; Conrad et al., 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2008; Kubrin, 2005a, 2005b; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009; Zhang et al., 2010). Given the intimate relationship between the hip-hop community and the American criminal justice reality, it is perplexing that to date no research has intentionally focused on the systematic examination of the criminal justice nature within discussions espoused in the music of hip-hop culture. Criminal justice's oversight of this community is all the more troubling, considering the extant literature that focuses on measurements of public perceptions and their influence on human behavior. Given that hip-hop is an expression of the predominantly African American community, our research has been premised on the notion that African American's have a unique world view as a result of their lived experiences (Feagin, 2010; Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011). Initially, we sought to examine the criminal justice mentionings within the lyrical content of hip-hop music and whether or not there was a greater likelihood of that mentioning categorization. After deciphering the criminal justice relevant mentioning, we examined the extent of those criminal justice mentionings. In other words, what was the nature of the criminal justice lyrical content? The results from our findings are consistent with the existing literature which has noted that feelings of unfair treatment result from perceived procedural injustices and threaten the perceptions of legitimacy within the minority communities, the very components of which have served as the basis for procedural justice and legitimacy theory (Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002).

Procedural justice and legitimacy theory, rooted in Weber's (1968) study on power's legitimacy and resurged by the works of Tyler (2006), hypothesizes that as authorities enact fair decisions, premised on facts, as opposed to conjecture, the citizenry will feel personally obligated to comply with the established rules and ultimately possess greater levels of trust. In other words, procedural justice and legitimacy theory notes that as perceptions of unfairness increase, so to do perceptions of injustice. Research has demonstrated perceptions of illegitimacy lead to a lack of willingness to work with the criminal justice system, noncompliance, an inability to maintain order, delinquency, and an overall inability of the system to control criminal activity. The idea of fairness (i.e., procedural justice) has been found to significantly influence the acceptance of decisions made by police (Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002), correctional officials (Henderson et al., 2010), and legal decisions (Tyler, 1984). Research has also demonstrated that procedural justice increases perceived legitimacy of authorities as well as impact behavioral outcomes of delinquency and order maintenance (Henderson et al., 2010; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002).

After examining the hip-hop portrayals of criminal justice in this research, two overarching themes emerged. The first theme is *unfairness*. In examining the various themes from law enforcement (*as predatory*, *as oppressors*, and *as illegitimate*) and corrections (*separates social ties, conditions and effects*, *oppressive*, *punishment as*

*appropriate*, and *nondescript negative*) in addition to the findings for the judicial branch of the criminal justice system, many of the discussions portray the operations and actions of the system as patently unfair, which has ramifications from a procedural justice perspective (Tyler, 2006). The Wu-Tang Clan ("Let My Niggas Live," 2000) provide an example that clearly demonstrates the intersection between police brutality/lethal use of force and unfairness when they say, "I'm gon' be shot by some pig [police officer] who's gonna swear that it was a mistake / I accept that as part of my destiny!" Here, the artist is claiming to expect to die by a police officer shooting him and then lying about his intent. Consistent with research on public perceptions of the police, the before mentioned lyric echoes the notion of the unfairness of police actions, which may be detrimental to the legitimacy and acceptance of decisions made by law enforcement (Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002).

Along with the descriptions of unfairness is also an obvious lack of respect for the criminal justice system within these lyrics primarily as result of being the victim of unjust treatment. Tupac ("Crooked Nigga Too," 2004) provides an example that representatively characterizes the relationship between perceptions of unfair treatment and respect for the police when he raps, "Yo, why I got beef with police? / Ain't that a bitch that motherfuckers got a beef with me / They make it hard for me to sleep / I wake up at the slightest peep, and my sheets are three feet deep." Police action perceived as hostile and unfair engenders an equally hostile and indignant response from Tupac, indicating a tremendous amount of disrespect for the police. The relationship between perceptions of fairness and respect is consistent with research on procedural justice and legitimacy (Henderson et al., 2010; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 1984, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002), which, as noted above, holds that as perceptions of unfairness increase (gained through direct or vicarious experience), so do perceptions of injustice. Research has demonstrated the subsequent increase in perceptions of injustice leads to an unwillingness to work with the criminal justice system, noncompliance, an inability to maintain order, delinquency, and an overall failure of the system to control criminal activity. The idea of fairness (i.e., procedural justice) has been found to significantly influence the acceptance of decisions made by police (Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002), correctional officials (Henderson et al., 2010), and legal decisions (Tyler, 1984). In addition, increased perceptions of fairness have also been shown to lead to an increase in the perceived legitimacy of authorities and the behavioral outcomes of delinquency and order maintenance (Henderson et al., 2010; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Within hip-hop, artists not only convey their own or others experiences but the art form also provides vicarious experiences of unfairness to others which, according to procedural justice and legitimacy theory, will likely decrease the hip-hop community's perceived legitimacy of the criminal justice system.

While the literature on procedural justice and legitimacy primarily focuses on perceptions of fairness and injustice, the current study also revealed a second major theme within the sample of hip-hop lyrics which is separate but related to unfairness—*powerlessness*. Hip-hop artists often portray the criminal justice system as an institution with an immense amount of power over their lives; an ever present reality which

they must continually struggle against. Research has found that perceptions of power-lessness are linked to urban disorder (Geis & Ross, 1998)—relevant because hip-hop has historically been fostered in an urban setting—and may be conducive to feelings of anger and distress (Thomas & González-Prendez, 2009).[5] As such, it would be logi-cal to postulate that perceptions of powerlessness and its associated negative effects can easily contribute to perceptions of unfairness and injustice. Jay-Z ("Pray," 2007) provides an example of perceived powerlessness and its implications for proce-dural justice when he raps, "The same BM ["big mover"—a drug dealer] is pulled over by the boys dressed blue / they had their guns drawn screaming, 'just move or is there something else you suggest we can do?' / He made his way to the trunk / opened it like, 'huh?' / A treasure chest was removed / cops said he'll be back next month / what we call corrupt, he calls payin' dues." In this scenario, the officers steal from the drug dealer without fear of repercussions because they have the legal author-ity. In essence, the drug dealer was powerless to stop the corrupt activity of the police as they took advantage of him. The situation involves a power dynamic in which the dealer was unfairly taken advantage of but was unable to seek redress.

Powerlessness is also demonstrated in other scenarios, such as when hip-hop artists describe resisting the criminal justice system or boast about overcoming it. On their face, these situations indicate a sort of empowerment for hip-hop artists. Acts of resis-tance and boasting represents struggles against power and may even demonstrate cracks in the veneer of authority. In describing these incidents, however, the artists are enga-ging in these acts of resistance or evasion *in the face of the power wielded by the crim-inal justice system*. In other words, there is still recognition the criminal justice system possesses a great amount of power to be overcome or opposed. For example, in his song "Lil' Homies," Tupac (2001) raps, "runnin' from these punk police, cause lil' niggaz run the streets (my fuckin' lil' homies)." Here, Tupac notes that these "lil' homies" (delinquent hip-hop adolescents) evade the police and acquire some control of their immediate environment (they "run the streets"). Despite this, the very act of running from the police indicates recognition of the power and authority wielded by law enforce-ment. Tupac also describes the police as "punk," which indicates a disdain, a possible by-product of the anger, frustration, and indignation developed from perceptions of powerlessness (Thomas & González-Prendez, 2009) and unfairness (Tyler, 2006).

Hip-hop, as a culture and a form of music, is vehemently intertwined with the minority communities who most frequently encounter the criminal justice system (Rocque, 2011). Within our sample, we found that hip-hop artists often describe the criminal justice system as an institution of unfairness and a powerful antagonistic force in their lives. Under procedural justice and legitimacy theory, hip-hop can be construed as a vicarious experience of injustice for the entire hip-hop community. In addition, hip-hop music, as an indirect experience, may build upon community member's previous direct or indirect experiences with criminal justice. As such, hip-hop may also affect the perceptions of legitimacy for the entire hip-hop commu-nity. Similar to John Locke's notion that legitimacy is contingent upon the "consent of the governed" (Ashcraft, 1991), if criminal justice policy makers seek to overcome the loss of legitimacy among the hip-hop community, two areas need to be addressed:

(1) implementation of criminal justice duties—within every branch—need to be evaluated for procedural justice and (2) avenues of redress need to be opened up for those who believe that have been unjustly treated by the criminal justice system. If the implementation of criminal justice is made more perceptibly fair with opportunities for resolution, then members of the hip-hop community may confer more legitimacy onto the criminal justice system (Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002). According to procedural justice and legitimacy theory, legitimacy is a theory of social control and has serious criminal justice policy implications.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the advances of this research, there are a number of limitations that must be recognized. First, this sample was drawn from top-selling, mainstream hip-hop albums and this is a common limitation among hip-hop studies. It is unknown whether nonmainstream albums have increased freedoms to engage in more intense or different expressions of the criminal justice system, which may not be contained in hip-hop that climbs to the top of the sales charts. As such, future research should include songs from nonplatinum-selling, underground, or local rap artists. Second, the current study is limited in its sample size ($n = 200$). More rich and detailed results may have emerged from a larger sample. Considering the inductive and grounded approach of this study, however, the sample size is adequate. Inductive studies are often more labor intensive than many quantitative studies and, as such, concessions must be made to allow the research to be manageable. Despite the given justification, future research could benefit from a larger sample size. Sizable samples allow for themes to be more easily extracted and also provide more support for those themes. For example, the inability to reliably extract themes within hip-hop portrayals of the court system may have been resolved by drawing a larger sample that may have included more references to the legal system. Third, while our content analysis did provide support for procedural justice and legitimacy theory, future research would benefit from examining other sources of data, such as surveys/interviews of hip-hop listeners and artists to provide a more robust examination of hip-hop perceptions and their relationship to legitimacy. Despite the aforementioned limitations, this study explores a previously unexamined area of research and expands on the narrow scope of hip-hop music relative to the components of the criminal justice system.

Academic inquiry from criminal justice and criminology have done a disservice to itself by dismally focusing on hip-hop, and when so, conducting examinations primarily focused on the misogynistic or violent lyrical content and the music's impact on delinquency resulting from problematic methodological inquiries. The current study serves as an exploratory investigation into the insights of hip-hop artists toward the criminal justice system. The hip-hop community is disproportionately affected by the operations of the criminal justice system—a reality expressed within their music. As academics, to miss what they have to tell us is to ignore the perceptions of a population that has experienced the (rather dire) consequences of our criminal justice system, inherently violating the theory of consent.

## Acknowledgments

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

## Notes

1. For the sake of simplicity, the terms "hip-hop" and "rap" are used interchangeably. The authors, however, recognize hip-hop as a term that refers to a specific urban-based subculture, while rap music is recognized as the subculture's emergent music form.
2. There are many problems that confront the random-platinum method of sampling which should be noted. First, there is no guarantee that platinum-selling songs are the most influential or respected songs in the hip-hop community. Second, it serves as only a crude proxy to listenership. Considering the many ways music can be consumed—legal or otherwise—album sales can only capture one narrow sliver of potential listenership for a song. Third, this method does not pick up influential underground or nonmainstream artists. In short, this method only guarantees that we are selecting songs that have been heavily purchased. That said, this method has become standard in hip-hop studies because of the difficulty inherent in systematically and randomly sampling any other way. In other words, we are confronted with the challenge of theoretical objectivity mired by the subjective reality of research.
3. The data for this study was analyzed and coded by the first author. The practice of using one coder to analyze lyrics has been engaged in by other hip-hop scholars (Armstrong, 2001; Kubrin, 2005a; Kubrin, 2005b). In addition, intercoder reliability—ensuring coding by more than one coder is both consistent and reliable—was neither a concern nor an issue because only one coder was used. As such, there was no other coder to be inconsistent with.
4. The definition of fairness/unfairness used within this study is based on the procedural justice literature (i.e., Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002) and scholarship which applies components of procedural justice to the execution of criminal justice on minority communities (i.e., Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011; Rocque, 2011).
5. The study by Thomas and González-Prendez (2009) focused on a sample of African American women. There is, however, little reason to believe that feelings of powerlessness would not engender similar emotions like anger and distress in males, of which hip-hop is dominated.

# References

Agozino, B. (2000). Theorizing otherness, the war on drugs and incarceration. *Theoretical Criminology*, *4*, 359–376.

Alridge, D. P. (2005). From civil rights to hip-hop: Toward a nexus of ideas. *The Journal of African American History*, *90*, 226–252.

Anderson, E. (1990). *Streetwise: Race, class, and change in an urban community*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Armstrong, E. G. (2001). Gangsta misogyny: A content analysis of the portrayals of violence against women in rap music, 1987-1993. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, *8*, 96–126.

Ashcraft, R. (1991). *John Locke: Critical assessments*. London, England: Routledge.

Bogt, T. F. M., Engels, R. C. M. E., Bogers, S., & Kloosterman, M. (2010). ''Shake it baby, shake it'': Media preferences, sexual attitudes and gender stereotypes among adolescents. *Sex Roles*, *63*, 844–859.

Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2010, December). *Bulletin: Correctional populations in the United States, 2009* (NCJ 231681). Washington, DC: L. E. Glaze.

Butler, P. (2004). Much respect: Toward a hip-hop theory of punishment. *Stanford Law Review*, *56*, 983–1016.

Butler, P. (2009). *Let's get free: A hip-hop theory of justice*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Cam'Ron. (2002). *Come home with me. On Come home with me* [CD]. USA: Sony Records/Epic Records.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Cheney, C. (2005). In search of the ''revolutionary generation'': (En)gendering the golden age of rap nationalism. *The Journal of African American History*, *90*, 278–298.

Conrad, K., Dixon, T., & Zhang, Y. (2009). Controversial rap themes, gender portrayals and skin tone distortion: A content analysis of rap music videos. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *51*, 134–156.

Dennis, A. (2007). Poetic (in)justice. *Columbia Journal of Law & the Arts*, *31*, 1–41.

Dyson, M. E. (2007). *Know what I mean? Reflections on hip hop*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books.

Feagin, J. R. (2010). *Racist America: Roots, current realities, and future reparation*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Gabbidon, S., Higgins, G., & Potter, H. (2011). Race, gender, and the perception of recently experiencing unfair treatment by the police: Exploratory results from an all-black sample. *Criminal Justice Review*, *36*, 5–21.

Gates, D. (1990, March 19). Decoding rap music. *Newsweek*, *115*, 60–63. Retrieved May 31, 2011 from Academic Search Complete.

Geis, K. J., & Ross, C. E. (1998). A new look at urban alienation: The effect of neighborhood disorder on perceived powerlessness. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *61*, 232–246.

Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double-consciousness*. Cambridge, UK: Harvard University Press.

Hamm, M. S., & Ferrell, J. (1998). Rap, cops, and crime: Clarifying the "cop killer" controversy. Reprinted In R. C. Monk (Ed.), *Taking sides: Clashing views on controversial issues in crime and criminology* (pp. 23–28). Guilford, CT: Dushkin/McGraw-Hill.

Henderson, H., Wells, W., Maguire, E. R., & Gray, J. (2010). Evaluating the measurement properties of procedural justice in a correctional setting. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *37*, 384–399.

Jay-Z. (2001). *Never change.* On *Blueprint* [CD]. USA: Roc-a-Fella Records.

Jay-Z. (2003). *December 4th.* On *Black album* [CD]. USA: Roc-a-Fella Records.

Jay-Z. (2006). Do U Wanna Ride (feat. John Legend). On *Kingdom come* [CD]. USA: Rock-a-Fella Records, Def Jam Recordings.

Jay-Z. (2007). *Pray. On American gangster* [CD]. USA: Rock-a-Fella Records.

Johnson, J. D., Adams, M. S., Ashburn, L., & Reed, W. (1995). Differential gender effects of exposure to rap music on African American adolescents' acceptance of teen dating violence. *Sex Roles*, *33*, 597–605.

Johnson, J. D., Jackson, L. A., & Gatto, L. (1995). Violent attitudes and deferred academic aspirations: Deleterious effects of exposure to rap music. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, *16*, 27–41.

Knobloch-Westerwick, S., Musto, P., & Shaw, K. (2008). Rebellion in the top music charts: Defiant messages in rap/hip-hop and rock music 1993 and 2003. *Journal of Media Psychology*, *20*, 15–23.

Kubrin, C. E. (2005a). Gangstas, thugs, and hustlas: Identity and the code of the street in rap music. *Social Problems*, *52*, 360–378.

Kubrin, C. E. (2005b). "I see death around the corner": Nihilism in rap music. *Sociological Perspectives*, *48*, 433–459.

Mahiri, J., & Connor, E. (2003). Black youth violence has a bad rap. *Journal of Social Issues*, *59*, 121–140.

Marikar, S. (2011, May 11). Common's White House visit slammed by critics. *ABCNews*. Retrieved September 12, 2011 from http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/rapper-commons-white-house-visit-called-controversial-critics/story?id=13572464

Martinez, T. A. (1997). Popular culture as oppositional culture: Rap as resistance. *Sociological Perspectives*, *40*, 265–286.

Miranda, D., & Claes, M. (2004). Rap music genres and deviant behaviors in French-Canadian adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *33*, 113–122.

Mystikal. (2000). *Murderer III. On Let's get ready* [CD]. USA: Jive Records.

Nisker, J. (2007). "Only god can judge me": Tupac Shakur, the legal system, and lyrical subversion. *The Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, *14*, 176–196.

Quinn, M. (1996). "Never shoulda been let out the penitentiary": Gangsta rap and the struggle over racial identity. *Cultural Critique*, *34*, 65–89.

Rocque, M. (2011). Racial disparities in the criminal justice system and perceptions of legitimacy: A theoretical linkage. *Race and Justice*, *1*, 292–315.

Rose, T. (1994). *Black noise: Rap music and Black culture in contemporary America*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Shakur, T. (2002). *Better dayz. On Better dayz* [CD]. USA: Interscope Records.

Shakur, T. (2002). *Thugz mansion. On Better dayz* [CD]. USA: Interscope Records.

Shakur, T. (2004). *Crooked Nigga too. On Loyal to the game* [CD]. USA: Amaru Records/Interscope Records.

Smith, A. (2011). *Why Americans use social media: Social networking sites are appealing as a way to maintain contact with close ties and reconnect with old friends*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved February 21, 2012 from http://pewinternet.org/~/media//Files/Reports/2011/Why%20Americans%20Use%20Social%20Media.pdf

Snoop Dogg. (2000). *Set it off. On The last meal* [CD]. USA: No Limit Records/Priority Records/EMI Records.

Sunshine, J., & Tyler, T. R. (2003). The role of procedural justice and legitimacy in shaping public support for policing. *Law and Society Review*, *37*, 513–548.

Thomas, S. A., & González-Prendez, A. A. (2009). Powerlessness, anger, and stress in African American women: Implications for physical and emotional health. *Health Care for Women International*, *30*, 93–113.

Tonry, M. (2011). *Punishing race: A continuing American dilemma*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Tyler, T. R. (1984). The role of perceived injustice in defendants' evaluations of their courtroom experience. *Law and Society Review*, *18*, 51–74.

Tyler, T. R. (2004). Enhancing police legitimacy. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *593*, 84–99.

Tyler, T. R. (2006). *Why people obey the law*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Tyler, T. R., & Huo, Y. J. (2002). *Trust in the law: Encouraging public cooperation with the police and courts*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Unnever, J. D., & Gabbidon, S. L. (2011). *A theory of African American offending*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Weber, M. (1968). *Economy and society*. G. Roth & C. Wittich (Eds.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Weitzer, R., & Kubrin, C. E. (2009). Misogyny in rap music: A content analysis of prevalence and meanings. *Men and Masculinities*, *12*, 3–29.

Wyclef, J. (2000). *Thug angels. On The ecleftic: 2 sides II a book* [CD]. USA: Sony Records.

Ying-Yang Twins. (2005). 23 hr. lock down. On U.S.A.: *United States of Atlanta* [CD]. USA: Tvt Records.

Zhang, Y., Dixon, T. L., & Conrad, K. (2010). Female body image as a function of themes in rap music videos: A content analysis. *Sex Roles*, *62*, 787–797.

## Bios

**Kevin F. Steinmetz** is a doctoral student at the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University.

**Howard Henderson** is an assistant professor within the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University.