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Original Research Article

# Drill music: The experience and beliefs of carers supporting looked after children in residential care

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**Abstract:**

The research sought to understand carers in residential children's homes experiences of drill music; a genre of music that has attracted controversy and been linked by professionals and agencies to both youth violence and criminal exploitation. Twenty-one carers from 11 different residential homes took part in focus groups, and thematic analysis identified seven core themes. Carers expressed concerns that drill music promotes gang culture and identities, and children need scaffolding around their relationship with the music, but nevertheless stated that drill music provides opportunities to build connections with young people in care, and can help them process and understand their early adverse childhood experiences. The authors make recommendations around safer use guidance so carers have the confidence and knowledge to support children engaged with drill music, in addition to providers offering mandatory training and developing youth culture champions to promote BAME diversity, and ensure carers keep abreast of ever-evolving youth culture.

## Introduction

The focus of this research project is understanding the experiences, attitudes and beliefs of residential carers who support looked after children, and gaining an insight into their perspectives on drill music. Drill music can be defined as a form of contemporary rap, often with dark content, first introduced in Chicago, then moving to Brixton, London in 2012, before slowly gaining traction and interest from young people across the UK. The Safer Lives Survey, by the Youth Violence Commission (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020), found that just under half of all young people aged between eight and 27 listened to music with violent lyrics at least once a day. Whilst the Safer Lives Survey did not specifically look at the



prevalence of drill music in everyday youth culture, this does highlight how commonplace it is for children and young adults to listen to music with violent content.

Drill music elicits controversial and divided opinions amongst professionals, organisations and agencies alike. For some, drill music is strongly associated with gang violence, particularly in South London, and the Metropolitan Police have consequently sought to criminalise lyrics, videos, and performances with the potential to incite violence (Andell, 2019; Refaart, 2021). However, for others, drill music represents an opportunity to express the realities of young people's lives in a relatable way, whilst providing a means of escape from these realities. It gives voice to a group of individuals who feel unheard and misunderstood, and readily feel disempowered in society (Cobbett, 2019; Hilditch, 2019). Indeed, music has always been used as a form of expression and storytelling, often laced with symbolic and emotive language. Drill is designed to shock and to evoke a strong reaction. For many artists, it is a platform to reflect upon their lived experience in a meaningful and accessible way (Hall et al., 2022; Refaart, 2021).

The tendency to criminalise drill often results from a fear of violence, and a desire to prevent it. However, in moving towards the criminalisation or demonisation of an artform, some have argued we risk disempowering an already marginalised and vulnerable community. This may serve to further exacerbate cycles of violence associated with feeling marginalised and unheard (Hilditch, 2019). The misunderstanding and misreading of drill music in the criminal justice system could thus risk criminalising already disadvantaged urban youth and their lyrical expression, while failing to understand the content being rapped about and why (Caluori & Olajide, 2022). It is imperative to focus on and connect to the stories, adversities and traumas that underpin drill music. Furthermore, Ilan (2020) identified that video removals and restrictions on performances have been shown to be counterproductive from a crime-reduction perspective. As such, any censorship of drill music is unlikely to reduce gang violence.

The poor outcomes experienced by children who have been in care when compared to their peers are well documented. Children living in care fare worse in terms of educational achievement, employment status, contact with the criminal justice system, mental health, experiences of homelessness, and substance misuse (Murray et al., 2020; Schlechter et al., 2023). The factors contributing to these poor outcomes are complex and reflect looked after children's pre-care and care experiences, as well as their personal needs. Music-making has been identified, in both government and other published evidence, as having a role to play in meeting these young people's needs (Dillon, 2010), and the therapeutic effect of drill music has been established in music therapy (Smith-Sands, 2022). Drill music could be seen as an accessible form of music



for some vulnerable young people, and its benefits should not automatically be discounted. Furthermore, to demonise drill music could create a lack of connection between young people in care and safe adults seeking to develop validating and accepting relationships (Cobbett, 2009).

There is not an abundance of academic literature to help professionals with their interpretation of drill music. The rapid expansion of online street culture is a relatively new phenomenon and academic research is at an early stage (Ilan, 2020). This research project seeks to understand the views and opinions of residential care staff looking after children in the care system, and to consider them in the context of the variety of narratives portrayed within the public domain. It is important to understand potentially controversial viewpoints so services know how and where to develop policies and produce training that is both balanced and therapeutic.

## Method

### Sample and procedure

All residential care staff working at residential children's homes with a large private provider in the UK were approached and invited to take part in the research project by the in-house clinical team. The project was completed as a service improvement study, to learn about carers' experiences of drill music, as part of a broader goal to develop service policy and strategies with regards to exploitation and county lines. The project was approved by the company's internal ethics committee.

Carers typically looked after children in the care system aged between eight and 18 years. A flyer was used to advertise the study and was circulated via email. Twenty-one participants from eleven different homes in England and Wales agreed to take part in focus groups, all of which took place over Microsoft Teams and lasted no more than 90 minutes. Between three and five participants took part in a total of five focus groups. All participants were made aware that their contributions to the focus group would remain confidential and anonymised, and participation was entirely voluntary.

Prior to attending the focus groups, all participants were asked to complete a demographic form and provided consent by signing the consent form. The demographic form asked questions relating to age, gender, years of experience in residential care, and relevant training previously attended in relation to gangs/county lines, criminal exploitation and drill music.

The focus group was led by a clinical psychologist with one of two potential assistant psychologists observing to assist with future thematic analysis. All focus groups were recorded to enable transcription.



The focus groups used a semi-structured interview format with eight core questions, each having between two and four probes. The aim of the questions was to capture information about (1) general opinions on drill music, (2) direct experience of drill music, (3) the origins of young people's interest in drill music, (4) the impact of drill music on carers and young people alike, (5) ways to support young people interested in drill music, and (6) support or training carers would find useful on the subject.

## **Transcribing and coding**

All focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six stage reflexive thematic analysis procedure was then used to analyse the transcripts. Firstly, the coder (an assistant psychologist) became familiar with the data through immersion in each of the transcripts. Initial 'open codes' were then generated, and subsequently sorted into preliminary themes. This process was repeated by another coder (another assistant psychologist) to increase the accuracy and objectivity of the analysis and to ensure salient codes/themes were not missed.

The research team then met to review, modify and develop these preliminary themes further, using a collaborative and reflexive approach, which aimed to achieve richer interpretation of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The research team included a clinical psychologist and a specialist advisor on child exploitation, in addition to the two assistant psychologists involved in the coding. In the final stage, key themes and sub-themes were defined. During the thematic analysis, an inductive approach was used to allow for salient codes and themes to emerge from the data, without the coders analysing the transcripts with pre-conceived ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **Results**

### **Descriptive information**

The sample of participants who took part in the focus groups included slightly more females than males, and two non-binary individuals. The majority of participants were aged 25 to 44 years and had a diverse length of experience in the sector. Only two participants were new to the sector, and six participants had considerable experience (greater than 10 years working in children's residential care). In terms of specialist training that may have related to the subject matter included within the focus groups, just over half the participants had attended an in-house training session on gangs, county lines and exploitation. Four of these participants had completed more specific training on drill music or music therapy. Three of the participants had not previously completed any relevant specialist training.



A breakdown of the demographic information for the participants is displayed in 'Table 1: Demographic Information' below.

<b>Demographic information</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
<b>Age (years)</b>	
18-24	2
25-34	8
35-44	7
45-54	3
55+	1
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	8
Female	11
Non-binary	2
<b>Years of experience in children's residential care</b>	
Less than one	2
1-3	7
4-7	6
8 - 10	0
10 +	6
<b>Specialist training attended</b>	
Gangs, County Lines and Criminal Exploitation	12
Social Media and Online Exploitation	5
Drill music or music therapy	4

**Table 1: Demographic Information**

## **Thematic analysis**

Seven core themes, with subthemes, emerged through thematic analysis: (1) drill music has a negative impact on young people, (2) drill music helps young people achieve a sense of belonging, (3) drill music offers a sense of identity, (4) drill music creates opportunities for carers to connect with young people, (5) drill music helps young people make sense of their story, (6) carers need greater awareness and understanding of drill music, and (7) carers need ways to safely scaffold the influence of drill music.

### **Theme 1: Drill music has a negative impact on young people**

Carers consistently spoke about drill music having a negative and worrying impact on young people, making this the most salient theme across all focus groups. They described unease with the language used in the lyrics, perceived it



as glamorising and promoting gang culture, and were concerned it gives young people a false impression of opportunities to illegally earn substantial amounts of money.

Subtheme one – Drill music promotes and normalises misogynist and racist attitudes

Participants referred to the strong language contained within drill music and how this potentially causes young people to adopt racist and misogynist views. Participants reported concerns that young people should not be exposed to inappropriate and unsuitable lyrics.

Some of the wording, it is very inappropriate, very sexual. Some of it makes women out to be sort of some sort of sex object and it can be very, very racist both ways, white and coloured, do you know what I mean? It can be horrible.

The things that are becoming more prevalent in my home is the misogyny, the attitude to women, the fact that it's now OK to punch a woman in the face and no consequences will happen. That's alright. That's society. Women are inferior to men.

The 'bitches are all horrible' Yeah, the misogyny, the chauvinistic, that's playing more of a precedence in my home than getting involved in gangs.

Subtheme two – Drill music glamorises and promotes gang culture, knife crime and violence

Participants saw a strong connection between drill music and gangs, and felt lyrics advocated the use of knives, and children were often adopting street language in their daily dialogues. They also reported that young people see gangs and the gangster image as being desirable and alluring.

Most of the lyrics she was on about, it was saying like shanking people, like stabbing people.

We have a young person who listens to drill music and he is quite obsessed with weapons [...] He's Googled gangs in the local area and things like that.

I know a lot of it is gang related and a lot of people hiding their faces saying things about all the gangs and whatnot, threatening violence [...] promoting it as well.



Subtheme three– Drill music gives young people a false impression of easy but illegal ways to make money

Participants described worries that children listen to drill music, are inspired by the artists' lifestyles, and see activities such as drug dealing as offering a rich and lucrative future.

It promotes the lifestyle, which is cool. You have loads of money, you can hold a gun. And kids see that as cool, don't they?

It just intrigues kids. It makes them want to sort of look into it further because they're thinking like oh wow, you can make this much money. I can earn, what was it like £2000 a week? It's just that lifestyle that they sort of desire.

They're not learning about getting money by working jobs and stuff like that. They learning to get money from selling drugs. They're gonna get a nice car, nice clothes, nice girls.

## **Theme 2: Drill music helps young people experience a sense of belonging**

Focus groups identified that children in care often struggle with a sense of belonging, and gangs and drill music offer ways to increase this. Gangs can be perceived as a form of family, whereas following drill music and associated trends can strengthen an association with a peer group.

Subtheme one – Gangs offer a sense of family and belonging

Participants reflected on the attachment needs of children in care and that gangs can superficially appear to offer high levels of connection and worth, which can be appealing to children.

A lot of kids in care don't have much self-worth, don't feel part of something. It's like a family to them as such and being part of a gang is like part of the family to them. Drill music is part of that family stuff.

If they've got attachment issues, if they don't have strong relationships, they're going to be more drawn into this gang culture where they're all supporting one another because it's that inclusion that they've not had elsewhere.

A lot of the kids here, they're kind of trying to find something to fill that void. So, whether it is music and like they're seeing these videos and like there's a massive gang of them and they're wearing nice tracksuits, and they've all got each other's back and they're all loyal and maybe they want to be a part of that.



### Subtheme two – Drill music offers a way to connect to peers and belonging to a peer group

Participants shared that young people build peer relationships through shared interests, and drill music offers a connection to peers through the music itself, but also the image that comes with it, such as street clothing and strong branding.

But it's about being part of that group. And like I say the way he talks. But even something I didn't mention before is branding, he's obsessed with Hoodrich and Trapstar, which I think is kind of born of that group of music and that's filtered down to the young people. A lot of our younger ones want to have that, that brand of clothing.

It's like a lot of like peer pressure, what your friends are listening to. If they are listening to it or wearing that clothing, that's what they want, to be the same.

I've noticed with one of our young people, she listens to a variety of music, even country music, but then if she suddenly gets a message and she's got to go out with her friends. You can be in the car and you can be singing along to Dolly Parton. Then she gets this message that she's meeting her friends and suddenly the music changes and it becomes very, do you know what I mean? Angry, swears, even her demeanour changes; she becomes very street, very [...] her language becomes more inappropriate.

## **Theme 3: Drill music offers a sense of identity to young people**

Participants shared that their young people may be drawn to drill music and gang culture as it helps give them a sense of identity and can help them feel more powerful in the world.

### Subtheme one – Children engage with drill music and gang identities in an attempt to figure out who they are and develop their own sense of identity

Participants recognised the important task of a teenager needing to develop a sense of identity in adolescence, with drill music offering a platform for young people to shape their identity around.

Doesn't really understand who he is yet, so he's just searching until he finds something.

He's sort of being sort of brainwashed by this music, trying to be his brother and trying to find his own identity.

It's part of them exploring and developing who they are and their own likes and dislikes. So, we're not gonna say 'no you can't listen to it'.





Subtheme two – Drill music and gang persona creates a tough identity that helps young people feel strong and powerful

Participants also identified that a 'gangster' persona can serve an important function for young people, helping them feel better equipped to navigate life and serving as a 'shield' to protect them.

The older lad he, when he walks around, the way he talks, it's like he's trying to put on a performance that he is this strong, threatening person and that he, that he can look after himself maybe.

A balaclava, like with our young, our young lad wears like a balaclava. Obviously, he thinks that we're scared of him when he puts his balaclava on, things like that.

This whole, like, demeanour might change. So you're like, 'are you all right?' And he'll be like 'shut up ya arsehole'. And I was like, 'what? Like what're you on about?' And he says things like this or, you know, 'you're a waste man'. And then the whole demeanour changes, like the attitude, the posture, and sometimes like communicating as well.

#### **Theme 4: Drill music creates opportunities for carers to connect with young people**

Participants highlighted the importance of joining children in their interests as this helps develop connections and relationships.

Subtheme one – It is important that carers and homes proactively engage in children's interest in drill music

Participants highlighted that homes could seek to embrace drill music in the vein of celebrating all forms of diversity, and this could send a powerful message to children about valuing and respecting them and their interests.

We run a LGBTQ and all the rest of it. So why can't you run a positive sort of drill music or you know or have different aspects of different genres of music there?

There're times when we're in here making up bars and doing the whole DJ and thing, having a mini concert. And that's been going on for months and it's every evening. It's amazing. We dance, we just carry on silly. And they love it, absolutely love it.

We try to rap, but that's the most fun part of it, because they see us trying to do something that they were, you know, more capable of doing. So that alone enhances the relationship. I mean all the kids here, they get along great with the staff and that's because we literally go down to their level, non-judgmental.



Subtheme two – Carers should follow children’s interest in drill music as it provides an opportunity to build and strengthen carer-child relationships

Participants in all focus groups highlighted that to build connections with children in care, carers need to actively join and share their interests, and this included appreciating drill music if that is important to the child.

That actual connection, music is a huge thing for young people and there's not many people within our team that would be willing to dive into drill music far enough to actually be able to have a relationship with one of the kids about music anymore.

I think the more we get with it, the better it is. Because once you can relate to a young person, then you've got a foot through the door when you're saying to them, 'no, I don't listen to that sort of music. I can't really, you know, I don't want to' then you'll, you will actually sort of barrier for yourself. So, getting to know the YP, ask them questions, 'what's your favourite one?' when you do your research, if it's Stormzy, you come back singing the line with Stormzy.

I think any knowledge that you've got on what the young people are into, it's good. Like when Top Boy and stuff was out, I sat and watched that. The kids could relate to me because I've seen it and we could talk about it and the language used in it.

## **Theme 5: Drill music helps young people make sense of their story**

Participants shared drill music’s ability to speak to young people in care and the lyrics often relate to their own experiences. Listening to drill music can help children express their feelings and make sense of their inner world.

Subtheme one – Drill music often resonates with our children’s lived experiences

Participants recognised many children in care relate to the stories told within drill music. Drill music is an accessible way for children to relate to their experiences and trauma. It validates their thoughts and feelings.

It can be like someone telling a story of their life. Do you know what I mean? Like usually like if they with it when they were younger, if they'd done something and they spent time in jail and they'd done that. Do you know what I mean? Like, so obviously you don't know what younger kids' experiences and their like family thing. So obviously you don't know if they can relate to that in some in way.

They're like obviously kind of relate to like obviously what they are talking about.

I think they find it quite relatable because sometimes some of the stuff they're singing about is relatable to their own personal circumstances.



### Subtheme two – Drill music helps children express their thoughts and feelings

Participants acknowledged that drill music helped young people express their thoughts and feelings, which was important and had therapeutic value.

I'm not gonna stop them from listening to it because that's something they identify with and that's part of their identity that they're finding a way to express themselves.

I think it's important for any young people and everybody to express themselves in it, in whatever, whatever arena they feel comfortable doing it.

It's basic needs and emotions being articulated in the sense of anger, hurt, hate, not necessarily the overcoming of it.

### Subtheme three– Drill music can help young people to understand and process their adversity

Participants understood that drill music created opportunities for young people in care to begin to understand and make sense of their childhoods and internal worlds, and carers could help them with this process.

It's just helping them to sort of unpack, you know, it's like a jigsaw and you know the drill artists have given them the jigsaw. We need to help and put the picture together and we need to show them a clearer picture.

What we need to do as a company and as support workers is try and decipher that message but give it back to them in a more positive way than what they're hearing. So, to try and use that message and not ignore that message, don't try and, you know, take that away from them, but try and get our kids to understand the different level, there's a deeper meaning to that message.

## **Theme 6: Carers need greater understanding and awareness of drill music**

Participants spoke about some carers being offended or upset by drill music, arguing that, to ensure consistent and appropriate responses within teams, carers need access to more specialist training. Participants also urged caution around assuming drill music was dangerous and felt it was important to draw comparisons with past genres of music, to ensure carers had a balanced perspective.

### Subtheme one – The content of drill music can be shocking for carers

Some participants acknowledged that the content of drill music can have a negative impact on carers, potentially including those who had their own trauma experiences or were older and unfamiliar with the lyrical style.



I found it quite upsetting. No, not upsetting. But I thought, what is this? I didn't know. I've never heard nothing like it before. And I was really shocked.

It can be upsetting to carers; it can trigger things. It, we obviously, we don't know what anyone's lived experiences are. So, if I've got a kid listening to a song about rape and one of my team members has gone through that, then that causes a whole load of issues to deal with.

It's hard to not turn around and not say 'whoa, that's a bit' [...] do you know what I mean? I don't like those wordings and they laugh and stuff but yeah, it can be a bit like, whoa, why are they listening to this? It's not good.

Subtheme two- Carers perceive drill music to be the latest genre of music that is stigmatised for promoting violence, but caution is needed when carers collude with these narratives

Participants shared a concern that drill music was readily stigmatised, and this is maybe reminiscent of similar past genres of music, and a tendency to readily assume listening to music means we will act on the narratives contained within it.

I don't think this is a new trend, I think it's just the latest. If we look back to the '90s we saw Marilyn Manson scapegoated for satanic rituals and mass murders. This is just the new focus.

It can be rap music, now it's moved on to drill. So, they used to blame rap music for a lot of violence and promoting violence, and it's just moved on something else now.

I just think it gets a bad rep when there's a lot of positives that can be taken from it. And again, I think it's easy to stigmatise and label something as being 'no, you can't do this, you can't do that'. But, actually embrace it. It's part of their culture, it's part of their identity, it's part of the world we live in, not going away.

Subtheme three – Need for more in-depth training to ensure carers are consistent and offering the correct responses

Participants referred to a need for more training on drill music to ensure their responses were helpful, up to date and appropriate, and not driven by personal opinion.

I think the training we've got at the moment is very basic and we have like sort of specialist training for other things, but we don't have specialist training for the one thing that the kids actually could get impacted on for the rest of their life, which is criminal records, possible death



I think the training is already out there and I think we can adapt this training. I think you can adapt the Prevent training<sup>1</sup> because everything we've been listening to here has basically listened to sort of you know, like in extremism, you know, they're being indoctrinated.

I think training is a good idea as well because, so that, because we are the, you know, the role models for these boys and we need to get it right. So, if we are not educated enough on this area then, you know, we don't want to like let this bit slip by and like fail this part of the development. So, we need to like be able to appropriately and correctly guide them.

## **Theme 7: Carers need ways to safely scaffold the influence of drill music**

Participants spoke about the importance of scaffolding children's relationship with music, including education and setting boundaries around dangerous content or inappropriate language, and encouraging healthier, more creative engagement through song writing and music making.

Subtheme one – Education on dangers if they acted out the lyrics and setting boundaries around what is acceptable

Participants described a responsibility for educating young people on content that is inappropriate or harmful, and setting boundaries around drill music.

Just like to educate them in the relation to like obviously the dangers and if they were to do that, like what would happen to them and the consequences down the line.

Just giving them the knowledge of maybe what some of the things mean and obviously guide them into the direction of 'it's OK to listen to the music but don't follow up on the actions and something you're not' sort of thing.

We use it as an opportunity to key work<sup>2</sup>. And so, like I said we listened to bits and then when stuff and themes come up in there, it's a good opportunity to kind of get his perspective on 'what is, actually is that appropriate, which parts are appropriate and how would you react in a different way in those situations?'

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<sup>1</sup> Prevent training is a form of safeguarding training that helps to prevent the risk of people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism.

<sup>2</sup> Key working refers to a residential children's home identifying opportunities for carers to offer one-to-one time to a young person in order to deliver child-centred psychoeducation sessions and to develop a richer understanding of their thoughts and feelings.



### Subtheme two – Create opportunities to direct or shape their interest

Participants shared the need to direct young people to safer or cleaner drill artists, so that they were exposed to more appropriate role models. Carers reflected that they have opportunities to shape children's interests but to do this with drill music, additional information on suitable artists and resources to refer to would be helpful.

If we can do some research ourselves and look into more positive drill music artists or try and sort of, you know, show them different aspects of that, of that type of music with a different, with a different beat. I mean kids are, you know, they're malleable. They'll learn, you know, and if we can sort of, you know, you know, we can make that difference.

Even if you had sort of like quiz nights and you designed these quiz nights around their interests. Not just sort of popular culture. You know when movies and things like that. You could sort of use like, you know, name that tune with the drill artist. You know and then you can start opening up conversations.

I think we would benefit from a bit more knowledge around if there is any more appropriate artists or groups that we could signpost them to.

### Subtheme three- Encourage song writing and music making

Participants identified the potential to encourage young people to be creative and write or record their own lyrics and shared the potential therapeutic value of these activities.

Sometimes it's handy that they can, if they do write lyrics that they can still sometimes find it easier to put it down in lyrics, then speak to somebody about it [...] Makes sense. You might find out a bit more about the life before, which they don't normally tell you.

We encourage our young people to write and to make their own music. We do actually have a young person who does write. She goes to the studio at school and records her own music. When her musical preference changed to drill, she would write about her history.

Now we don't have to tell her 'If you're upset, just go and write', she just does it. She will do that as opposed to trashing her room, putting her hands on staff or self-harming. So we've seen 360° change in this young person within a year and it's just because we've encouraged her to write, not just music, but journaling as well-being reflective on things that have gone well as opposed to focusing on the things that have gone terribly wrong for her in her life.



## Discussion

Carers in all focus groups spoke at length about concerns with regards to drill music; mainly relating to worries that it (1) encourages racist and misogynistic views, (2) is closely linked with gangs and drug crime, and (3) glamorises involvement with these activities, giving young people a false and alluring impression about ways to create a financially comfortable life through illegal methods. This was the strongest theme and elicited a lot of content in all focus groups and from all carers.

The concern of carers regarding the risk of children in care becoming victims of gangs, and county lines, is highly relevant as a recent report by the crime and justice specialists, Crest Advisory, identified looked after children as disproportionately represented in County Lines networks (Caluori & Corlett, 2020). The focus groups identified carers linking drill music with gang culture, violence, knives, stabbings and drug use. Research also indicates that there has been a 124% increase from 2016/17 to 2019/20 in the number of children referred to children's services with concerns about gangs identified at assessment (Department for Education, 2019).

Although outside the remit of this project, future research could seek to better understand how children in residential care view and are impacted by drill music. Researching the topic from young people's perspectives would further illuminate why young people in care are drawn to drill music and how this affects them. Such research could reinforce or reconceptualise residential carers' concerns about the negative influence of drill music on children, as uncovered by this research in the largest theme across the dataset, Theme 1. Carers' concerns around young people's vulnerabilities in regard to county lines and child exploitation feel highly relevant to many teams (Shaw & Greenhow, 2020), with this being a rapidly growing, yet relatively new, concern in the sector. The statistics around the growing issue of child exploitation would also indicate that this subject area should be a national priority, and all services and agencies supporting looked after children undoubtedly need robust safeguarding policies in place in terms of this area of risk (Pearson & Cavener, 2024; Shaw & Greenhow, 2020). With regards to drill music specifically, providers of residential care may wish to produce safe usage guidance around this genre of music, so carers are confident when risk is identified, and concerns are escalated appropriately.

Whilst it is essential to be alert to signs of young people being pulled into country lines and criminal exploitation, the focus groups also identified the need for caution and to not overly stigmatise drill music. Participants highlighted that different generations have frequently been drawn to music with negative connotations and drill music is part of the evolution of the music scene.



Carers recognised the underlying need for children in the care system to experience a sense of belonging, and that drill music can directly speak to this attachment/relational need. At best, carers spoke about drill music being on trend, such that young people being engaged with it might help them build connections with peers and strengthen their belonging to a group. However, at worst, young people are drawn towards drill music as belonging to a gang can offer a solution to their fear that they do not belong anywhere, and their sense of being unwanted or invisible. The pull towards gangs can be powerful and represent young people in care's attempts to resolve their unmet emotional needs. This need for a sense of belonging is possibly greatest in those children living in residential care (Hughes, 2004), who have typically experienced many placement moves, living with carers and co-residents with different accents and from different cultures, in different parts of the country, far away from their birth families, all of which weaken a young person's sense of identity and belonging.

Whilst the need to belong can act as a magnet towards gangs, and drill music can be seen as a facilitator in the development of these relationships, the need to belong can also offer solutions. Carers recognised that if they show an active and genuine interest in young people's passions, including drill music, this creates opportunities to build connections. There is a danger that if carers buy too much into the stigma surrounding drill music, opportunities are missed to relate to young people. Carers spoke about educating themselves on drill music so they could demonstrate authentically that the children's interests are important to them. However, alongside joining young people in their interests, they also saw themselves as having a responsibility to educate and guide the children in their care. This could be through suggesting 'cleaner' artists, or having open conversations about lyrical content and the danger involved in acting out some of the behaviours described. A recommendation could be that providers of residential care have a standard pack of resources to be used in keyworker sessions, to ensure carers give advice and guidance informed by current research and free from personal opinion.

Carers observed that drill music has a therapeutic value in allowing young people who have experienced trauma and adversity to make sense of their story, to feel less alone, to relate to others, and to feel validated. If we can help children use song writing and music making in a constructive way, this provides a healthy and accessible platform for children to sit with and through which to articulate overwhelming and distressing thoughts and feelings. To help facilitate this therapeutic process, it could be fruitful for residential children's homes to have access to qualified music therapists or artists who offer a mentoring service and have their own lived experience of county lines or gangs.

A potential barrier to carers being able to scaffold young people's engagement with drill music, may be their own difficulties in relating to it. Some comments suggested older carers potentially find it harder to appreciate and understand





why and how drill music speaks to young people in care. Routinely providing mandatory training to residential care staff on drill music, alongside training on county lines and gangs, will help to ensure all carers are well educated on this subject, and that their own prejudices and biases do not come into play, thereby ensuring a consistent response within homes. The authors would also suggest providers of residential care to looked after children may find it helpful to have a dedicated 'champion of youth culture' in service, or a steering group involving both staff and young people, so that providers keep abreast with changes and movements in youth culture. BAME youth culture should also be celebrated as part of diversity protocols within services and should be given as much focus as other areas of diversity, such as LGBTQ+.

The focus groups identified that many carers felt drill music exposed young people to a 'gangster' image, which may connect with their senses of vulnerability and anxiety in the world and offer a solution. The gangster persona could be a survival behaviour designed to help the child feel a little safer and to promote a belief that they can look after themselves; this is often in the context of an early childhood that likely taught them adults are unreliable and untrustworthy, and the world is a dangerous, unpredictable place. As Kim Golding states when referring to children with a past involving trauma, 'children are taking charge of their own safety; it feels so much safer to be in charge' (Golding, 2017, p.39).

It is also likely that children are generally exposed to drill music at a time when they are trying to establish a sense of identity. In Erikson's (1959) eight psychosocial stages of development model, the central task of adolescence is to develop a coherent identity. Drill music and gangs provide a concrete identity many young people perceive to be both accessible and a good fit for them. The challenge for care teams is to help build a healthy sense of identity, and to provide opportunities to experiment and 'try on for size' alternative identities, and to be exposed to different role models. This could be through encouraging young people towards 'cleaner' artists or alternative styles of music, but also helping them understand who they are and their values, hopes and goals.

In conclusion, drill music is a popular form of music in current youth culture but is arguably more complex than other genres. It has attracted widespread concern due to its association with crime and gang violence, and this research echoed those worries. Carers see drill music as being linked to stabbings and county lines, as well as discriminatory language and attitudes. Nevertheless, carers also readily identified a thoughtful understanding of why the lyrics often speak to children in care, and that embracing it, with the caveat of ensuring the child is safe and developing a healthy identity and sense of belonging outside of gang related activities, provides clear therapeutic opportunities to help develop connections and help young people understand and process their traumatic past.



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## About the authors

The authors collaborated on this paper when they worked together at Keys Group Ltd. The research was inspired by the observation that carers within the organisation appeared to be encountering drill music and its potential effects more often. Through reading around the topic, the current and controversial climate surrounding Drill music was uncovered, and this research topic was established to investigate how residential carers experience and support drill music with the children they care for.

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## Ethical Approval Statement

Please note that in order to assess if the project required NHS Research Ethics Committee (REC) review, the HRA's decision tool was used. This indicated that an ethics committee review is not necessary for this project.

