Does Rap Put Teens at Risk?

Study: Association Found Between Video Viewing Time and Risky Behaviors

By [Sid Kirchheimer](http://www.webmd.com/sid-kircheimer) WebMD Health News

[Teens](http://children.webmd.com/tc/growth-and-development-ages-15-to-18-years-promoting-healthy-growth-and-development) who spend more time watching the sex and violence depicted in the "reel" life of "gangsta" rap music videos are more likely to practice these behaviors in real life, suggests one of the first studies to specifically explore how rap videos influence emotional and physical health.

After studying 522 black girls between the ages of 14 and 18 from non-[urban](http://www.webmd.com/drugs/drug-14986-Urban+Oral.aspx?drugid=14986&drugname=Urban+Oral), lower socioeconomic neighborhoods, researchers found that compared to those who never or rarely watched these videos, the girls who viewed these gangsta videos for at least 14 hours per week were far more likely to practice numerous destructive behaviors. Over the course of the one-year study, they were:

* Three times more likely to hit a teacher
* Over 2.5 times more likely to get arrested
* Twice as likely to have multiple sexual partners
* 1.5 times more likely to get a sexually transmitted disease, use [drugs](http://www.webmd.com/drugs/index-drugs.aspx), or drink alcohol.

"What is particularly alarming about our findings is that we didn't find an association with just violence or one or two risky behaviors," says researcher Ralph J. DiClemente, PhD, of Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health. "We found an association with a string of these behaviors."

His study, published in the March issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*, only involved black girls living in Birmingham, Ala. -- all of whom were already sexually active. While the researchers surveyed viewing habits for various types of rap videos, gangsta rap was by far the most popular among the girls practicing these destructive behaviors.

"We wanted to focus on young, African American women, a population that is very vulnerable," DiClemente tells WebMD. "In these videos, men hold the power and women don't and as a result, are subservient. I'm not sure that the girls in our study were lashing out because of this, but more likely role-modeling the behaviors they see. The women in these videos are doing OK, they're hanging around with a man who is powerful, affluent, going to nice clubs and wearing nice clothes. For these girls, they may not be a bad thing."

His team is currently expanding its research to investigate how these and other rap videos may influence behaviors across other racial, gender and socioeconomic lines. Although gangsta rap videos depict tough inner-city "street" life, their largest viewing audience is white suburban youth, who have better access to cable television channels such as MTV and BET (Black Entertainment Television).

Of course, this isn't the first time that rebellious music has been blamed for society's ills. From Elvis to Columbine, the songs of music-obsessed youth have often been blamed for anti-social behavior. But rap -- and in particular, the especially violent and sexually-explicit gangsta variety -- has raised special concern.

"Most children between ages 2 and 18 spend upwards of seven hours a day ingesting some sort of media," says Susan Buttross, MD, FAAP, chief of [child development](http://children.webmd.com/guide/default.htm) and behavioral pediatrics at the University of Mississippi Medical Center and spokeswoman for the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). "We know that with any type of repeated media exposure, a desensitization can occur that makes these behaviors seem normal. So this finding doesn't surprise me at all."

Buttross, who was not involved in DiClemente's study, is a member of the AAP's committee on public education, which has written several policies warning about the effects the media has on children's' behavior. Her committee is currently updating its 2001 policy statement that found 75% of music videos involved sexual imagery, and more than half involved violence -- usually against women. In 1996, the AAP issued another policy statement that was critical of rap music.

But others feel that rap is getting a bad rap. "Yes, there are rap videos that are particularly violent or sexual, but let's look at what is more important in whether or not these kids act out of behaviors -- their family structure and the type of [parenting](http://www.webmd.com/parenting/default.htm) they get," says Cheryl Keyes, PhD, associate professor of ethnomusicology at UCLA and author of *Rap Music and Street Consciousness. "*Parents need to get more involved in what their children are watching."

No argument from DiClemente or Buttross.

"You cannot stick your head in the sand and expect your child will only look at good stuff," says Buttross. "Parents need to know what their children are being exposed to. Certainly, rap is not the only music that portrays negative stereotypes or can negatively impact behaviors, and not all rap music should be implicated. But there have been nearly 1,000 studies that have looked at the effects that the media has on children's behavior. And nearly all of them find there is a strong effect."

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:**

**This AotW provides you with some basic data whose purpose it is to support the claim that rap music DOES put teens at risk. Using an appropriate graphic organizer, please indicate (1) the risk (2) the proof (3) your agreement or refusal of that proof, with possible reasons for or against.**