



**A Series of Information Resources
on**

***Youth Subcultures:
Understanding Subgroups to Better
Address Barriers to Learning
& Improve Schools***

As calls for addressing barriers to student learning and improving schools increase, better understanding of youth subculture is essential. This series is intended to stimulate thinking about the implications for policy and practice of the complex, multifaceted subgroups with which youth come to be identified and/or assigned by peers.

Public health and education policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and educators need to know as much as they can about the factors that lead youth to manifest behaviors stemming from group defined values, beliefs, attitudes, and interests. Such understanding is basic to promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems arise, and enhancing intervention impact on severe and chronic problems.

To these ends, the Center is producing a series of resources, such as this one, as aids for policy and practice analyses, research, education, and school and community improvement planning.

About Hip Hop Youth Subculture

Our focus here is on briefly highlighting:

- (1) how Hip Hop youth subculture is defined and how members are identified
 - (2) the impact of this subculture on society and on subgroup members
 - (3) prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact
 - (4) data on intervention efforts
 - (5) proposed new directions
 - (6) resources for more information.
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About Hip Hop Youth Subculture

In the late 1970s, Hip Hop as a youth subculture emerged from the Bronx in New York City. Its roots are widely credited to the African American community; however, contributions also are credited to Jamaican American and Latino American communities. The Hip Hop lifestyle gained widespread and global popularity in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, the lifestyle, music, lingo, and more have been so incorporated into the mainstream that hard-core adherents suggest the need to differentiate Hip Hop from Hip Pop.

Defining Hip Hop and Identifying Subgroup Members

The term Hip Hop is used both for a musical style and a subcultural movement. Scholars such as Carl and Virgil Taylor (2005) emphasize that “Hip-Hop is not only a genre of music, but also a complex system of ideas, values and concepts that reflect newly emerging and ever-changing creative correlative expressive mechanisms including but not limited to song, poetry, film and fashion.” Tagging, rapping, and break dancing are viewed as “artistic variations” of street gang competition and one-upmanship.

Origin of the term is credited to various rappers, but DJ Afrika Bambaataa is credited as the first to describe Hip Hop as a subculture. As described in Wikipedia, DJ Afrika Bambaataa “outlined the five pillars of hip-hop culture: MCing, DJing, breaking, graffiti writing, and knowledge. Other elements include beatboxing, hip hop fashion, and slang.” The Wikipedia entry goes on to state:

“When hip hop music began to emerge, it was based around disc jockeys who created rhythmic beats by looping breaks (small portions of songs emphasizing a percussive pattern) on two turntables, which is now more commonly referred to as sampling. This was later accompanied by "rapping" (a rhythmic style of chanting or poetry more formally in 16 bar measures or time frames) and beatboxing, a vocal technique mainly used to imitate percussive elements of the music and various technical effects of hip hop DJs. An original form of dancing and particular styles of dress arose among followers of this new music. These elements experienced considerable refinement and development over the course of the history of the culture. The relationship between graffiti and hip hop culture arises from the appearance of new and increasingly elaborate and pervasive forms of the practice in areas where other elements of hip hop were evolving as art forms, with a heavy overlap between those who wrote graffiti and those who practiced other elements of the culture” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hip_hop).

The term may be used to designate any subgroup who become devotees to rap music, but it usually is applied to inner city youth who adopt the subcultural lifestyle. And for many young people those who identify themselves as part of the subgroup, it amounts to a “proclamation that they are independent and intolerant of much of what they consider to be adult society, which they frequently view as hypocritical” (Taylor & Taylor, 2005).

The impact of Hip Hop on society and on subgroup members

It is apparent that Hip Hop has had a worldwide impact. The evidence is in movies, TV, magazines, and on the internet. Many elements have been adopted by a wide segment of mainstream society. For example, as Diamond, et al (2006) note: “According to the latest Kaiser Family Foundation poll, rap/hip hop is the most popular genre of music for youth across all ethnic groups: 65% of junior and senior high school kids said they had listened to rap/hip hop music the previous day, which is more than twice the portion that reported listening to any other sing music genre.... Contrary to popular perception, White youth constitute the majority of rap consumers. But most research on rap music has focused on consumption by minority youth because of the fact that the majority of artists are

African American or Hispanic. According to a national survey of inner-city Black youth, 48% consider hip hop/rap to be their favorites style of music.”

Both positive and negative influences of Hip Hop are acknowledged. For example, Taylor and Taylor (2005) note that “Early hip hop has often been credited with helping to reduce inner-city gang violence by replacing physical violence with dance and artwork battles.... With the emergence of commercial and crime-related rap during the early 1990s, however, an emphasis on violence was incorporated, with many rappers boasting about drugs, weapons, misogyny, and violence.”

As an art form, the musical style incorporating rhythmic and/or rhyming speech is seen as having a widespread and lasting influence. As an economic engine, Hip Hop “represents a multi-billion dollar industry that influences everything from automotive design and fashion to prime time television programming, collegiate and professional sports, mass media marketing, and Madison Avenue advertising” (Taylor and Taylor, 2005). Ironically, the commercial interest in Hip Hop has led to targeting expensive products to those who cannot afford them, and the quest for the products has been associated with illegal behavior.

In terms of its influence on individuals, concern on one level is that the initial attraction to Hip Hop subculture becomes an entrenched negative lifestyle for too many young people as a reaction to the lack of acceptance and indeed outright rejection of Hip Hop by adults with socializing responsibilities (e.g., parents and other family members, teachers). The rejection often reflects a wide spread fear that Hip Hop contributes to deviant behavior. Supporting the fear, Diamond, et al (2006) state the following:

“A survey conducted with male youth offenders (aged 17 to 21) of diverse ethnicities found that their musical preference was rap. The study also found that 72% of these youth believed that music influenced the way that they feel at least some of the time; however, only 4% perceived a connection between music listening and their deviant behavior.... Youth who chose to listen to rock and rap music with defiant messages were more likely to exhibit trait rebelliousness, disinhibition, and hostility using standard psychometric measures....

Most studies cannot determine whether the media shapes people’s attitudes or whether people’s attitudes shape their media consumption. These studies, however lend support to the argument that media content and audiences’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors tend to be mutually reinforcing. More specifically, they show that there is a close, but not necessarily causal, link between popular music preferences and youth attitudes and behavior around drugs. As social cognitive theory predicts that the impact of music is most likely greatest when the messages are reinforced by peers and are reflects in other media.”

Similarly Selfhout, et al (2008) report on studies that find rap fans exhibit more externalizing behavior (e.g., drug use, engagement in unsafe sex, aggression, delinquency) than other adolescents. They emphasize that

“Several theoretical perspectives can be found in discussion about mechanisms behind associations between youth culture style preferences and externalizing problems. One line of reasoning is that adolescents’ youth culture style preferences influence their behaviors. According to the sociocognitive perspective, a preference for music styles with antisocial content activates antisocial schemas, which may in turn lead to actual antisocial behavior. ...

Several other processes have been proposed to account for the effect of adolescents’ youth cultural style preferences on their behaviors. First, there may be a tendency for someone to conform to the perceived deviant lifestyle and behavioral characteristics of the youth culture style with which he or she most identified, regardless of whether this person actually interacts with members of that crowd... Second, if adolescents are actual

members of a clique (i.e, friendship group) embedded within a certain youth culture style group, they may conform to perceived group norms. ... Third, the desire to be affiliated with a certain youth culture style may guide adolescents toward deviant behavior. ...

Studies have also suggested that adolescents with more problems may indeed choose to affiliate themselves with nonmainstream youth cultures and peers facing or acting out the same types of problems. ...

Our findings support the aforementioned sociocognitive perspective and other views in which adolescents' cultural orientations preceded problem behavior rather than result from it. Adolescents with relatively strong preferences for heavy metal or hip-hop may be more frequently exposed to music and videos with antisocial content, which may make them behave more defiantly and activate more antisocial cognitive schemas. ... Strong preferences for heavy metal and hip hop may also lead to externalizing problems through modeling processes and conformity to group norms. ... For example, the peer socialization hypothesis suggests that adolescents more deeply embedded in a deviant peer context have more peer models, encouragement, and rewards for exhibiting problems behavior. ... No support was found for the psychosocial perspective: Adolescents' externalizing problems did not predict later heavy metal and hip hop youth culture style preferences."

What are the prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact?

Given the general public's concern that Hip Hop's impact on some youth generates problems for society, it is not surprising that policy and practice has focused on ways to contain the influence. However, the proposed remedies themselves have raised concerns about regulative censorship and individual rights. Thus, efforts to counter presentations that are seen by the mainstream as profane and as too graphic in depicting violence and sex usually are met with legal challenges.

In contrast, schools have focused on strategies that have been adjudicated as legal, such as enforcing dress codes and adopting school uniforms to counter the Hip Hop clothing fashions, especially those that have crossed over from "gangsta" culture.

Any data on intervention impact?

Given the challenges to censorship efforts, the only impact data are that such interventions are commonly met with legal challenges. With respect to school interventions for regulating dress, the Education Commission of the States (n.d.) notes that there have been no long term empirical studies on the effectiveness of school uniforms or dress codes in improving student or school performance. They Commission stresses, however, that "proponents argue that the use of such policies can enhance schools' ability to achieve their basic academic purposes."

Proposed new directions

In contrast to the advocacy for regulative censorship, there has been a call for proactive strategies. These include using the subculture to promote positive youth development and learning and finding ways to work collaboratively with those who control the media with the aim of incorporating positive messages and reducing those that have a negative impact.

Diamond, et al (2006) provide examples of the emphasis on promoting positive youth development and learning (see contact information in References and Resources)

(1) Commercial efforts:

- > *Flocabulary*: Hip Hop in the Classroom – An educational publishing company creating

original hip hop music and standards-based curricular materials to teach academic content for grades 3-12.

- > *Hip Hop Educational Literacy Program* – A supplement to instruction for middle and high school students; strengthens students' ability in phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, comprehension, writing and fluency

(2) *Nonprofit/501(3)C*

- > *Hip Hop Education* – Educates, empowers, and activates young people to become the next generation of social justice leaders by giving them a voice in from of their peers to inspire positive change in their communities.

From the perspective of our Center's work, addressing concerns related to Hip Hop subculture should be proactive, multifaceted, and comprehensive. At the same time, the approach must avoid traditional tendencies to look at such a subculture group as requiring totally unique intervention strategies. As is evident from the information provided above, some facets of dealing with the negative side of Hip Hop subgroups overlap concerns raised by other youth subculture groups. On the next page and in the box that follows, we offer a perspective about policy and practice related to all students with a few examples to illustrate how specific considerations related to Hip Hop might be addressed.

The emphasis is on developing and implementing a comprehensive intervention continuum that:

- *Promotes healthy development and prevents problems*

For instance:

- > providing information to educate school and key community stakeholders about the subgroup
- > establishing working alliances to dialogue with members of the subgroup (e.g., about what behaviors can and cannot be accommodated, including codes for dress; about "safe" places for the subgroup to congregate at school and in the community)

- *Intervening when problems are noted*

For instance:

- > implementing agreed upon accommodations
- > protecting the subgroup (e.g., from bullying or harassment)
- > ensuring subgroup membership isn't interfering with success at school (e.g., enhancing regular attendance and motivated participation)
- > providing medical, mental health, and learning supports for the subgroup (e.g., related to social, emotional, and learning problems)

- *Attending to chronic and severe problems*

For instance:

- > identifying and referring subgroup members for appropriate individual interventions (e.g., related to drug abuse, illegal activity)
- > establish a safety net of support (e.g., through school, family, community mental and physical health providers, social service and juvenile justice agencies)

In contrast to a reactive overreliance on social control strategies, new directions thinking stresses a proactive approach to improving the academic and personal well-being of current Hip Hop devotees, using a continuum of interventions that contributes to enhancing a positive school climate.

A Perspective on What Schools Should Do Based on the Work of our Center at UCLA

Schools experience many overlapping concerns related to youth subgroups and youth subculture. Of special concern is addressing any negative impact (e.g., criminal acts, bullying, sexual harassment, interracial conflict, vandalism, mental health problems). But, also essential is a focus on promoting healthy development and fostering a positive school climate.

As always, the more we understand about subgroups and individual differences, the more effective our interventions can be. But to keep from the tendency to focus on each concern as if it is discrete, schools need to work in a new way.

Given the complexity of the negative behaviors that arise in relation to youth subgroups, those in the school, district, and community who have responsibility for gangs, safe schools, violence prevention, bullying, interracial conflict, substance abuse, vandalism, truancy, and school climate need to work collaboratively. The *immediate objectives* are to (1) educate others about motivational and behavioral factors associated with a particular subgroup, (2) counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services, and (3) facilitate opportunities on campus for youth subgroups to engage positively in subcultural activity and connect with effective peer supports.

By working collaboratively and differentiating the causes of observed problems, school staff and community stakeholders can integrate fragmented and marginalized initiatives for promoting positive youth development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems are identified, and providing effective ways to respond to pervasive, chronic, and serious problems. *Longer-term*, the aim is to help develop a comprehensive system of student and learning supports that (a) addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development and (b) re-engages disconnected youth. Such a system encompasses a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems that are fully integrated into the improvement agenda for schools and communities (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, b).

Toward these ends, schools must reach out to the community and establish a collaborative mechanism where those with specialized knowledge not only bring that knowledge to the table, but also work to build the needed comprehensive system of student and learning supports that addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development (Adelman & Taylor, 2007). And it is essential to remember that those with specialized knowledge include youth themselves (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2009).

Moving forward requires building a comprehensive and systemic continuum of interventions and fully integrating the system into the improvement agenda for schools and communities. To guide development of a systemic approach, we have suggested using a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems as a unifying framework. This includes school-community systems for promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible, and addressing chronic and severe problems.

Policy that helps schools and communities develop the full continuum of interventions is essential to moving forward in enhancing equity of opportunity. Such policy must effectively establish a *comprehensive intervention framework* that can be used to map, analyze, and set priorities. It must guide fundamental *reworking of operational infrastructure* so that there is leadership and mechanisms for building integrated systems of interventions at schools and for connecting school and community resources. And, it must provide guidance for the difficulties inherent in facilitating major *systemic changes*. By working in this way, we can counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services.

For resource aids related to policy examples, intervention frameworks and related mapping tools, examples of ways to rework the operational infrastructure and develop key mechanisms such as a *Learning Support Resource Team*, guides for facilitating systemic change, and much more, see the Center's Toolkit at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

References and Resources

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A Few Additional References

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Cited Resources

- Flocabulary – <http://www.flocabulary.com>
- High Hop Education – <http://www.hiphopeducation.us>
- Hip Hop Educational Literacy Program – <http://www.edlyrics.com>

The Center's Series of Information Resources on *Youth Subcultures: Understanding Subgroups to Better Address Barriers to Learning & Improve Schools**

Online:

What is Youth Culture? A Brief Introduction

Glossary of Terms Related to Youth Culture Subgroups

Youth Subcultures: Annotated Bibliography and Related References

About Youth Gangs

About the Goth Youth Subculture

About Hip Hop Youth Subculture

About "Loners" and "Losers"

About "Jocks" as Youth Subculture

About Emo Youth Subculture

About Surfing and Skateboarding Youth Subcultures

About the Cheerleading Youth Subculture

About "Mean Girls" as a Youth Culture Subgroup

About "Nerds" and "Geeks" as an Identified Subculture

About "Preppies" as a Youth Culture Subgroup

About Sexual Minority (LGBT) Youth Subculture

Youth and Socially Interactive Technologies

About Raves as a Youth Culture Phenomenon

Others are in development

*Many of the terms used by youth in referring to subgroups often are pejorative and offensive. We do not condone such language. We do, however, recognize the need to go beyond adultcentric definitions and descriptions of youth subgroups if we are to understand youth perceptions and perspectives. So the *Information Resource* documents reflect the terms used by youth.