

# Drill & Rap

Drill rap – a gritty subgenre of hip-hop that originated in Chicago around 2010 – has surged in popularity among youth in the U.S. and UK. Characterized by ominous trap-inspired beats and brutally frank lyrics, drill music aims to depict the harsh realities of street life.

However, authorities and community leaders have grown concerned that drill rap is more than just music: it is being used as a platform to glorify gang violence and even recruit new gang members, especially through social media. Law enforcement officials note that gangs leverage drill music videos and lyrics on YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms to promote gang culture, taunt rivals, and lure in vulnerable youth.

This examines the role of drill rap in modern gang culture, case examples of violence linked to drill, how gangs use social media and music to spread their message, what authorities (including the FBI and police) have observed, and how schools, parents, and communities can recognize and mitigate drill rap's influence on at-risk youth.

By staying informed on these evolving trends, educators and school safety personnel can better identify risk factors and provide early interventions to support students who may be vulnerable to gang influence. Open discussions, digital literacy education, and positive mentorship opportunities remain key strategies in fostering safe learning environments and countering the allure of gang-affiliated recruitment messaging online.

Recruitment  
Prevention  
Strategies.



# Drill

In Gang Culture:  
Glorifying Violence

# Rap

Drill rap has gained a reputation as “hip hop’s most violent subgenre,” often featuring graphic descriptions of shootings, stabbings, and retributive killings. The lyrics are frequently hyper-local and gang-specific, calling out street names, rival crews (“opps”), and even named individuals. This personalization of violence can escalate real-world gang feuds. Prosecutors observe that “gang-related drill music personalises lyrics and may also use symbolism, which can be linked to offences and could fuel violent gang-related animosity.”

In many songs, weapons are flaunted and territorial dominance is boasted, effectively glamorizing gang life. These songs often function as musical gang anthems by bragging about shooting rivals or avenging fallen friends, drill rappers provide a soundtrack to ongoing turf wars, reinforcing a retaliatory cycle of violence. Law enforcement reports indicate some gangs even fund or start rap crews to further exalt the gang’s image.

While many artists insist they are merely reflecting their reality and not causing violence, the feedback loop between drill content and gang conflicts is evident in certain areas. Social scientists note that social media and drill tracks have blurred the line between music and gang “score-keeping,” where disrespect in a song can trigger real retaliation. For example, Chicago’s early drill scene saw a feud between rapper Chief Keef’s clique and rival Joseph “Lil JoJo” Coleman’s crew; after Lil JoJo released a provocative diss track online, he was shot dead at age 18 amid the gang rivalry it inflamed. Such incidents underscore how drill music can mythologize gang rivalries and turn local grudges into viral entertainment - with deadly consequences.



Skengdo & AM backstage at greener on the other side EP Launch at the Ace Hotel Shoreditch. Drill music often intersects with gang culture, and some performers even conceal their identities.

Gangs have increasingly leveraged the appeal of drill music as a means to attract new members, often aligning with emerging artists to expand their influence. In some instances, gangs have reportedly formed associations with local drill rappers, using their music both as a legitimate business venture and a platform to engage with youth who may be vulnerable to recruitment.

According to the FBI, some gangs organize rap concerts or competitions, not only as entertainment events but also as opportunities to connect with talented young artists and their audiences. These gatherings can, in some cases, serve as a gateway for recruitment efforts, as young people may be drawn to the perceived prestige, opportunities to meet famous rappers, and recognition that comes with musical success.

The broader concern lies in the cyclical nature of this phenomenon—where gang-related themes in music can reinforce violent narratives, escalating conflicts and further embedding at-risk youth into gang culture. Social media amplifies this dynamic, providing a widespread platform for gang-affiliated content to reach impressionable audiences.



# Music Videos, Social Media, & "Cyberbanging"

In recent years, social media and video-sharing platforms have become significant tools for the dissemination of gang-related messaging. Rather than relying solely on traditional methods of communication, some groups now use digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok to amplify their presence, recruit new members, and assert influence. This growing trend has been referred to as "cyberbanging"—a term used to describe how gangs leverage social media to recruit individuals, intimidate rivals, promote criminal activity, and communicate within their networks.

One of the more prominent ways gangs engage in digital outreach is through music videos, particularly within the drill rap genre. These videos often depict high-energy performances filmed in local neighborhoods, with participants displaying specific hand signs, referencing rival groups, and, in some cases, showcasing weapons. Once uploaded, these videos can serve multiple functions: they act as promotional material for the group, reinforce a sense of identity and loyalty among members, and, in some instances, escalate existing conflicts.

The potential real-world impact of this digital activity is concerning. A study conducted by the UK Home Office found strong evidence that gang-affiliated social media content contributes to youth violence by glamorizing gang culture and taunting rival groups. Certain drill music videos have been flagged by law enforcement for including explicit threats, gang symbolism, and aggressive rivalries that, in some cases, have led to acts of violence.

For example, in New York City, the Bronx District Attorney's Office reported in 2022 that a local gang had used drill rap videos to promote violent incidents and directly challenge their rivals. These videos, whether based on reality or exaggerated for effect, contribute to the perception of power and notoriety—factors that may appeal to impressionable youth searching for social belonging or financial opportunities.

Beyond video content, social media provides a broad-reaching platform that allows gang-related messages to spread far beyond local communities. Reports from the National Gang Intelligence Center indicate that some gangs have adapted to online culture by organizing events, concerts, and parties that serve as potential recruitment spaces. In some instances, gangs have also used social media to engage in financial crimes, including money laundering, through seemingly legitimate music ventures.

Notably, law enforcement agencies have documented cases in which gangs have extended their digital footprint beyond social media. Some groups have been found using encrypted messaging apps, online gaming platforms, and live-streaming services to recruit and communicate. For example, MS-13, a transnational criminal organization, has reportedly utilized PlayStation Network chats as a discreet way to coordinate activities across different locations.

Ultimately, the intersection of social media, music culture, and digital engagement has transformed how gang activity manifests and spreads. Former gang members and law enforcement professionals alike have drawn comparisons between the online recruitment strategies of criminal groups and extremist organizations, noting similarities in how individuals are influenced through targeted messaging, digital storytelling, and social validation. While drill music itself is a form of artistic expression, the way it is sometimes used to reinforce gang narratives raises important considerations for educators, community leaders, and policymakers who seek to prevent youth involvement in violence.



# Preventing Youth Gang Recruitment: Strategies for Schools, Families, & Communities

Parents, educators, and community leaders play a crucial role in preventing youth gang involvement by recognizing early warning signs and offering positive alternatives. Youth gangs employ a variety of recruitment strategies, including personal relationships, social media, music, and the promise of belonging or financial gain. Understanding these methods can help educators and school safety teams create proactive intervention strategies. Studies indicate that early intervention at the elementary and middle school level is the most effective in preventing long-term gang involvement (National Institute of Justice, 2021). **Below are several expert-recommended approaches for identifying and addressing gang recruitment in schools and communities.**

## Educate and Communicate

- **Foster Open Dialogue:** Students need trusted adults who can openly discuss the realities of gang life. Research shows that gangs often target youth who feel isolated or lack positive role models (National Gang Center, 2022). Encouraging open discussions about peer pressure, social media influence, and the consequences of gang affiliation can help students make informed choices.
- **Understand the Language and Symbols:** Gang-affiliated messaging, slang, and symbols can appear in digital spaces, school notebooks, clothing, and music. School personnel and parents should educate themselves on emerging trends and common identifiers to recognize when a student may be engaging with gang culture so they can begin intervention steps.

## Monitor Social Media & Online Influence

- **Recognize Digital Recruitment Tactics:** Many gangs now operate on social media platforms, encrypted messaging apps, and online gaming communities. Recruiters may pose as friends, influencers, or mentors offering money or protection in exchange for loyalty. According to the National Crime Prevention Council, online recruitment tactics include direct messaging, exposure to violent content, and engagement in online feuds that escalate into real-world violence.
- **Encourage Digital Awareness:** Parents and educators should help youth critically evaluate online content, emphasizing the potential dangers of engaging with unknown individuals or participating in gang-affiliated conversations. The FBI recommends setting guidelines on social media use, including monitoring privacy settings and educating students about cyber safety (FBI National Gang Report, 2023).
- **Identify Warning Signs:** Sudden changes in online behavior, such as increased secrecy, engagement with violent or gang-related content, or communication with older individuals outside their usual peer group, may indicate a risk of recruitment or other concerning behavior.

## Strengthen Community Programs

- **Provide Structured Extracurricular Activities:** Research shows that young people with access to after-school programs, sports, arts, and mentoring opportunities are significantly less likely to engage in gang activity (OJJDP, 2022). Community centers and school programs should prioritize offering engaging activities that provide a sense of belonging and accomplishment.
- **Promote Music, Art, and Media Literacy Programs:** While some forms of music, including drill rap, may be associated with gang culture, music itself can be a powerful tool for self-expression and resilience. Schools and community groups can encourage students to explore creative outlets that promote positive messaging and social awareness.
- **Support Mentorship and Career Readiness Initiatives:** Providing mentorship programs and vocational training helps youth develop skills that can lead to stable employment, reducing the appeal of gang-related financial incentives.

## Increase Supervision & Family Support

- **Encourage Parental Engagement:** Studies show that parental involvement and supervision significantly reduce the likelihood of youth joining gangs (National Institute of Justice, 2021). Schools can support families by providing parent workshops on recognizing recruitment tactics and reinforcing positive parenting strategies.
- **Enhance After-School Supervision:** Gangs often target unsupervised youth during the hours immediately after school. Ensuring that students have access to safe spaces—whether through structured school programs, sports, or community organizations—reduces opportunities for recruitment.
- **Support Families Facing Economic and Social Challenges:** Many young people are drawn to gangs due to financial instability, lack of family support, or exposure to community violence. Connecting families with social services, financial assistance programs, and mental health resources can help address underlying factors that contribute to gang involvement.
- **Showcase Pathways to Change:** Schools, community organizations, and law enforcement should work together to offer gang exit programs, counseling, and safe reporting mechanisms for individuals seeking to leave a gang. Providing young people with alternative social groups and structured re-entry programs can significantly improve their long-term outcomes.
- **Address Retaliation Fears:** One of the barriers to gang disengagement is fear of retaliation. Schools and law enforcement should collaborate to provide safe exit strategies, including relocation assistance, protective measures, and long-term mentorship for youth seeking to leave gangs.

## Train Schools and Staff

- **Recognize Early Warning Signs:** Schools play a critical role in identifying students at risk of gang involvement. Training educators, security officers, and counselors to recognize common gang indicators—such as changes in behavior, association with known gang members, or the use of gang-affiliated clothing and symbols—can lead to early intervention.
- **Implement Clear Policies on Gang-Related Activity:** Schools should establish policies that discourage the promotion of gang culture while fostering inclusivity and support for at-risk students. This includes addressing bullying, preventing gang-related graffiti or attire, and maintaining a strong anti-violence stance.
- **Collaborate with Law Enforcement and Community Organizations:** School safety teams should partner with local law enforcement and youth-focused organizations to stay informed on gang trends, share resources, and implement preventative strategies.
- **Foster Meaningful Relationships with Students:** Research consistently shows that strong, trusting relationships between students and school staff significantly reduce the likelihood of gang involvement. According to the National Gang Center (2023), students who feel connected to at least one trusted adult at school—whether a teacher, counselor, or coach—are more likely to seek help when facing gang-related pressures. Staff should not fear or avoid students who may be affected by gang culture; instead, they should welcome them into the classroom as valued individuals. A study by The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP, 2022) found that youth who receive positive reinforcement from educators are more likely to disengage from negative peer influences. Teachers and staff should strive to create an environment where students feel safe discussing both small concerns and major life challenges without fear of judgment. When students know an adult is genuinely invested in their well-being, they are more likely to reach out before gang involvement escalates.