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One-Third of Popular Songs Refer to Substance Abuse

Rap and country top the list with references to alcohol, drugs, study finds

By Randy Dotinga

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THURSDAY, Nov. 8 (HealthDay News) -- Could country music be worse for kids than rock music? If you judge by the number of alcohol and drug references in songs, a new study suggests the answer could be yes.

Researchers who looked at the bestselling songs in several genres from 2005 found that 37 percent of top country songs featured references to drugs or alcohol, compared to just 14 percent of rock songs.

"It's not like country music is as wholesome as mom and apple pie," said Ralph DiClemente, a professor of public health at Emory University who's familiar with the study findings.

But country couldn't hold a candle to rap music, whose singers referred to substance use in a whopping 77 percent of songs.

The study, released Wednesday at the American Public Health Association annual meeting, in Washington, D.C., didn't examine whether there's a link between song content and how kids behave. Still, research does suggest that children aged 8 to 18 listen to popular music about two hours a day.

"It's good for us to know that this exposure is there so that we can go the next step," said study author Dr. Brian Primack, an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. "We can talk to kids about it and say what we think is correct, and what is not."

The study researchers looked at 279 of the bestselling songs in 2005, based on Billboard magazine charts, in five genres they considered popular with kids -- rap, country, R&B/hip-hop, rock, and pop.

In total, one-third of songs referred to substance use. Just 9 percent of pop songs and 20 percent of R&B/hip-hop songs did.

Singers referred to alcohol and marijuana the most and were more likely to refer to what the researchers called "positive" consequences. "What we found is that very often, sexual, social and emotional consequences were positive, but physical and legal consequences were negative," Primack said.

What about veiled references to drugs or alcohol in songs? Primack said there just aren't many of those types of songs today -- compared to, say, The Beatles' "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds," thought by some to refer to LSD, although the band said that wasn't the case.

"Today's music is not nearly as subtle as the Beatles were," he said.

And what about country music and the findings that it often refers to alcohol instead of drugs?

"I'm not saying that's great, but we don't know if it really makes a difference," Primack said.

"Maybe kids listen to songs with alcohol, and it doesn't affect them one way or another. Maybe it affects them a great deal."

DiClemente agreed that research hasn't shed much light on exactly how the entertainment that kids watch or hear affects their behavior. For example, it's hard to tell if violent TV makes kids violent or if they were already aggressive and liked violent TV for that reason, he said.

"The question again is, what the relationship is to the behavior of people, if there is any?"

DiClemente said. "It would be nice to know."

More information

Find out more about music's influence on children at the [U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy](#).

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