

Hip-Hop is a Resource to be Shared: Social Prescribing as a Community Practice Approach for Live Music Artists

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Abstract: Hip-hop as a genre and culture provides an opportunity for viewers to ingest and learn ways to organize communities and make sense of their self-identity. Though stigmatized by the presence of sexual objectification, crime, and violence, hip-hop's benefits are highlighted by the growing impact it has on underserved communities today, while allowing for inclusion and a sense of belonging. There are many intersections that exist for those seeking to participate in and understand community engagement in the urban environment. Link workers and those who view social prescribing as an intervention may lead to arts engagement and community involvement, making hip-hop an ideal antidote that deserves to be monitored in future social work practice.

Keywords: community engagement, social work, identity, hip-hop, rap music, social prescribing, social isolation, link workers

Introduction

I understand social isolation as a lack of social connection that can lead to significant health challenges for individuals and communities. Isolating behavior can lead to feelings of hopelessness, depression, and anxiety for many. While current treatment models have been exercised and reviewed over the past century, in recent years social prescribing has been explored as an innovative form of treatment for those experiencing isolation (Husk et al., 2019). Though many still debate whether social prescribing can be considered a credible form of practice, researchers have found linkage to community support beneficial to those experiencing isolation and depression (Husk et al., 2019). In this article I use hip-hop and live performance to incorporate the socially isolated using my own direct and indirect experiences in the urban community. Hip-hop or rap music has been a heavy influence in urban and underserved communities for decades. The musical genre impacts the development of children, adolescents, and young adults. Its existence continues to encourage growth and resilience in its listeners. This written narrative of my own experiences with hip-hop music describes how the genre has allowed me to maneuver through poverty- and crime-infested communities while cementing myself in academia. Further, it provides a microcosm of the ways my research focuses interplay with one another: racial discrimination, socioeconomic resilience, emotional distress in marginalized communities, and hip hop as an intervention for maladaptive behaviors.

Being an educator, and a rapper, while navigating the artistic realm has been a challenge for me more times than a few. I would be remiss not to start by bringing attention to the rewards that complement my skills as a mental health advocate and professional. Alongside having a PhD and master's degree in social work—and over 15 years of experience in child welfare, juvenile justice, and community-based practice—I have now been a full contributor in the art community as hip-hop musician “Quis Chandla” for over five years. Many would say I have made “impressive strides” in my musical career during this short time.

My introduction to hip-hop emerged simultaneously with my interests in social justice, advocacy, and community engagement. Though today music is viewed as a vessel for engagement and interaction among underserved populations (Hotz, 2015), as a youth I was not able to make sense of the intersectionality of social work practice and hip-hop culture in the various ways I do today. During my upbringing music was the bridge in the relationship I had with my single working mother. She was often away working job after job to provide for her own basic needs as well as mine. With the support of my great grandparents, my mother relocated from our multigenerational apartment in Jersey City, leaving me in their care. To emphasize the uniqueness of the narrative I must share that Jersey City is one of the most diverse, yet underserved cities in the state of New Jersey. Many young black boys like me directly or indirectly experienced crime, violence, and drug addiction in our communities. We later sought distractions from the conditions in which we lived, and many of us typically gravitated toward music or sports. I spent a great amount of time during my child development engaging in both. For this narrative, I will focus on the area of music, specifically hip-hop.

Sustainable Communities

Power (2004) defines *sustainable communities* as those that enforce healthy environments where careful planning for physical and social wellbeing for community dwellers allows them to physically navigate walk, cycle, meet, play, and relax. Power (2004), adds that social well-being arises from a sense of security, belonging, familiarity, support, neighborliness, cohesion, and integration of different social groups, further reinforcing respect for different cultures, traditions, and backgrounds. Poor living conditions for those living in underserved urban communities are a threat to urban community sustainability. High levels of crime, poverty, and poor health conditions have limited the resilience of those directly impacted by these risk factors.

Sustainable communities do not exist without individuals who actively participate within social environments. Social institutions are a reflection of their inhabitants, with many challenges threatening the likelihood of sustainability in underserved urban areas. Lack of resources leads to social isolation (Krivo et al., 2013). The absence of routine activities amongst other resident and neighborhood dwellers in many ways promotes social isolation. Disadvantaged communities lack the opportunity to remain sustainable without resources that promote healthy social engagement.

Born, raised, and currently living in Jersey City, I am familiar with the risk factors for those that reside in the underdeveloped parts of the town. With a population of 291,657, the city is diverse in many ways, some ways serving as a risk factor or a protective factor depending on one's demographic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). The second most inhabited city in the state of New Jersey according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2023), Jersey City has experienced mass migration of out-of-towners, leading to dramatic change in its culture because of gentrification. The gap in income as well as education among residents has increased the likelihood of social isolation. In addition, the impact of seclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges not just for residents but also for residing artists in underserved areas.

Hip-hop has played a major role in highlighting the lack of resources in urban communities through songs such as Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" (Travis, 2015). As the genre rapidly increased its audience of the mid-1980s much of the content was less passive, telling the story of urban community deprivation in a more radical form than previously displayed. The "Golden Era" of rap music in the mid-90s was led by talented orators, many of whom would unfortunately be labeled as "thugs" (Joseph, 2020, p. 1) by mainstream media for their abrasive style of performance. This term would minimize the art and social commentary provided by lyricists such as Tupac Shakur. Joseph (2020) highlights how the misuse of the term "thug" overshadows the conceptualization of underserved civilians who admire a lifestyle that differed from their impoverished conditions, whilst boasting their resilience. In my journey as a youth, I would look for ways to immerse myself within hip-hop as a contributor. Today my views reflect socially conscious dwellers of the "hood" like Mr. Shakur. Thus, those who continue to reside in Jersey City also seeking ways to express themselves tend to isolate unless they can express themselves artistically.

I greatly appreciate socially conscious hip-hop and artists alike. Most purist fans of rap seek to find an artist they deem as their "favorite rapper." For me the imagery and stories that Nasir "Nas" Jones provides has shaped my emotional development more than any other artist. Nas quotes on his song "One Mic":

"Seeds watch us, grow up and try to follow us /
Police watch us, roll up and try knockin' us /
One knee I ducked, could it be my time is up /
But my luck, I got up, the cop shot again /
Bus stop glass bursts, a fiend drops his Heineken /
Richochetin' between the spots that I'm hidin' in /
Blackin' out as I shoot back, forget gettin' hit."
(Nas, 2001)

The lyrics in songs such as One Mic depict the story of Nas' life in the Queensbridge projects. I empathize much with Nas' music, dissecting my own attempt at surviving crime and violence while living in affordable housing.

Hip-hop music allows me to critically think about my identity and who I want to become, and the genre continues to specifically influence the personalities of adolescent youth and adults today (Brown, 2006). I speak about my own experiences in the "hood" in written or performance format; thus, it serves as a coping skill to dealing with socioeconomic risk factors such as economic and social injustice. In theory, the rationale has allowed me to find comfort in speaking about my own resilience in the way that my favorite rappers have. The thought process is also supported by the concept of distress tolerance as described by Simon and Gaher (2005). In their distress tolerance model, special attention is given to the following:

1. A person's capacity to tolerate a negative emotion,
2. One's belief in their ability to cope with a negative emotion,
3. How consumed one is by an emotion,

4. How ready one is to change their emotional state.
(Levy et al., 2022; Simon & Gaher, 2005).

Marginalized conditions like what Nas mentions in his music, such as selling drugs, gang banging ... etc., very much mimic my own adolescent development. Engaging survival tactics are synonymous to the story in hip-hop—told too many times by successful black rappers who navigated the pressures of the “streets” on their way to the top. The popularity of financial freedom using drug distribution has been a common narrative in the community since the 1980s; however, this is a direct result of the lack of employment, social welfare, and quality of life (Smiley, 2017). This type of community engagement often leads to acts of violence becoming a direct threat to the sustainability in communities of promise (Smiley, 2017). Jersey City has a history of black artists emerging from the ranks of “hood” such as Kool and The Gang, Joe Budden, Heather B., and PM Dawn. Even with its history of emerging artists, in this vastly changing community it is difficult to find spaces where hip-hop talent can articulate the experiences they go through.

Imposter Syndrome and Social Isolation

I began to experience what Clance and Imes (1978) define as *imposter syndrome*—a fear of presenting intellectual phoniness. As an African American man pursuing an advanced degree, I at times struggle with being a suitable voice skilled enough to be fair in my position. Le (2019) studied how African Americans experience additional racism and discrimination from various institutions or employers and within academic or professional spaces. This leads to individuals feeling misjudged or ostracized by superiors or peers. Much like what is explored in the study, I at times would feel unsupported and out of place serving as a mental health professional and an artist simultaneously. This profound and complicated experience of self-doubt led to social isolation. I have spent many nights to myself focused on work and no longer feeling joy engaging with others. I felt unable to express myself artistically during developing life changes. Dadswell et al. (2017) suggest that participatory arts assist with helping to build a sense of self-worth in those experiencing social isolation. Zavaleta et al. (2017) define social isolation as “the inadequate quality and quantity of *social relations* with other people, at the different levels where human interaction takes place (individual, group, community and the larger social environment)” (p. 4).

Social isolation is not a foreign experience in underserved communities. My familiarity came in different ways but later emerged in a dual form. My childhood years at times were challenging in trying to avoid crime and violence. My attempt at conceptualizing the experience of living in high crime and impoverished areas led to feelings of discomfort and loneliness. Communities that lack opportunities for fulfilling social experiences are likely to experience social isolation (Zavaleta et al., 2017). Without an outlet to discuss these feelings and emotions it remained difficult to build social networks. I faced a synonymous experience years later in academia. Navigating a doctoral program as a black man lands me at 10 percent of the population who hold a PhD with regards to race, and at the age of 29 when I graduated, I was in the 18 percent with regards to age (*Doctoral student demographics and statistics in the US*, n.d.). These statistics speak to the feeling of imposter syndrome when sharing my education as well as my

professional status. At times balancing those worlds and the life of an artist enhance my insecurities leading to heightened levels of anxiety and maladaptive behaviors. I have found that having access to social networks and activities that foster social expression serve as a protective factor with regards to decreasing isolation and enhancing my overall feeling of self-worth.

Social Prescribing

My experience in mental health, early on, reflected the importance of psychotherapy and medical treatment. However, at this stage in my life I did not feel that either form of treatment could intervene in my feelings of imposter syndrome or social isolation. It would take my own immersion into spaces of artists alike to appease the feeling of loneliness that I experienced. I would soon seek social connectedness in the artist's world by visiting the Arts District of Baltimore. The free expression and the safe space in the "Open Mics" serve as outlets for people to feel heard and strengthen collective philosophies at the same time (Lomas, 2016; Scarborough, 2012). However, in social work practice there is limited research that supports leisure activity as a key clinical form of interventions. Wise (2015) states that leisure activities strengthen social connections and a member's ability to flourish in the community.

Social prescribing is defined as the linking of individuals who use varieties of primary care and non-medical supports within the community to improve health and well-being (Husk et al., 2019). The social prescribing approach is most known in the United Kingdom, where non-medical support is a form of treatment. Its primary goal is to address the existing issues of disparities in education, income, household, and other social determinants of health; Aldersick (2018) stated that the process of social prescribing reflects the following:

1. Identifying an individual's social needs.
2. Referring them to community services.
3. Providing them with support for accessing services that support their overall health.

Further, the Alliance for Healthier Communities (2020) has found that any perceived health challenges are psychosocial in nature if they are related to issues of income, relationships, self-confidence, social isolation, loneliness, and a lack of perceived belonging. I would suggest that experienced imposter syndrome falls under the umbrella of these issues—specifically in regard to self-confidence, social isolation, and lack of perceived belonging. Wildmen et al. (2019) argue that by linking individuals to activities in the community, an opportunity is created for those individuals to develop and enhance social networks, and thus a sense of belonging, that may decrease their risk of social isolation. This notion is relevant to my experience finding a way to engage in social prescribing using the open mic community.

Figure 1

The Process of Social Prescribing



Note. From *Social prescribing: applying All Our Health*, by Office of Health Improvement and Disparity, 2022 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-prescribing-applying-all-our-health/social-prescribing-applying-all-our-health>). Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government License v3.0. GP indicates “general practitioner.”

Open Mics

Today, an artistic social network is something that enhances my quality of life. In working through my own perception of self, I joined social art communities in the Baltimore Arts District before returning to my hometown of Jersey City. Graffiti on the walls, street performers entertaining for dollars and coins, and a multitude of music venues display how important “culture” is to its residents of Baltimore. It remains a great place for furthering your education, both formally and on the arts scene. One may wonder how a city that has been known for crime and violence as portrayed on the hit television show *The Wire* is less famous for its breeding ground of individuals coming together night after night to work on their craft. Many perform on any given night short of dancers, poets, rappers, singers, comedians, etc. It is empowering to witness a community so underserved come together and support each other night after night with constructive criticism and applause. Most of these performers on a nightly basis would identify as African American or Black.

When one thinks of open mics, they immediately refer to it as a place of free expression to enjoy and be entertained. In addition, open mics may also serve as a place of communal healing. I too

use the pain and despair I felt in the early years of my life to articulate through my musical catalog. One example of that is my writing and recording of the following:

Dark skies don't keep the trees from growing right
But we the stars so in dark times we bring you light
No artificial cause we not fluorescent
Don't rush to feel ya boy slow release it takes a couple seconds.
Shining like the crescent of the moon
the lessons are special tuition coming soon
It's FAFSA for rappers I bet you got the tune
These trumpets we bumping straight from my brother "Tune"

Social prescribing is relevant to my personal journey as I regularly join communities that offer me the opportunity to immerse myself in an environment that is healthy for my self-efficacy and community involvement. I continue to watch others in the art community go from depressed and hopeless ways of thinking to confident and elevated in their mood, which speaks to the benefit of social prescribing.

Figure 2

Artscape Music Festival 2016



Note. Copyright 2016 by photographer Stanley Gross, Jr. Used with permission.

Previously in this narrative I shared that during my time in Baltimore, I was at first reluctant to share with colleagues about my participation in the arts community. Through exposure to the open mic scene of Baltimore I eventually felt confident using my musical talent to advocate for underserved communities, not only behind a desk but also on audio, in face-to-face engagement, and ultimately on the stage. This shift in my expression was so fulfilling that it was welcomed with some discouragement as I thought about the lack of rewarding and empowering artistic communal experiences in my hometown of Jersey City. The comparison to the city of Baltimore was polarizing. I wanted to be the change I wished to see.

Where Beats Meet Bars as a Social Prescribing Intervention

Though empirical research is scarce regarding the intersection of the triad of social prescribing and music performing and social work practice, my experience speaks to the importance of filling this gap (Husk et al., 2019). Social prescribing allowed me to find emotional wellness and self-efficacy as I shared live-music stages with hip-hop legends such as KRS One, Mr. Cheeks, Krayzie Bone, and Freeway. Looking at what these opportunities were able to provide for my overall well-being, I decided it was time to bring all I learned back home to Jersey City.

This was the place that made me, regardless of the vast amount of gentrification that consumed the city since my departure. Months after returning to my hometown I asked myself, “How can I build an artist community when the people who would benefit most are being pushed out of the city?” Most residents from my childhood days were forced to relocate to neighboring cities or limited to sections of the city in both Greenville and Bergen Lafayette areas, responsible for the most violent crimes. As stated in writings from authors such as Joseph (2020), the negative stigma associated with violence in the rap community complicated my plight even more. However, the poor conditions that remained prevalent still in my return are evidenced by the need for group interventions for individuals within the community. In a study by Krivo et al. (2013), the authors hypothesized that those who live in heavily poor conditions lack social resources, which results in involuntary social isolation. The authors compared adults, teenagers, and children from both underserved and affluent communities in Los Angeles, CA. In their findings, those that had a higher level of home disadvantage had a higher disadvantage in connecting with local social resources. Thus, creating a space for those in need of a social community and consistent social interaction is practice that I seek to create and maintain for the populations with the most limited resources. These efforts are evidenced by the creation of a signature event for the artist community Where Beats Meet Bars.

Where Beats Meet Bars

At times community intervention promotes and enhances healthy lifestyles for a variety of social groups (Washington, 2018; Wells et al., 2004). Studies on community intervention and social prescribing (SP) highlight the intersectionality of arts engagement with those impacted by social isolation (e.g., Washington, 2018). Savage et al. (2020) state that community intervention approaches typically focus on either or all of the following: (1) improving social skills (e.g., psychotherapy), (2) enhancing social support (e.g., telephone-based support or befriending programs), (3) increasing opportunities for social interaction (e.g., suggesting resources in the

community), and (4) addressing maladaptive social cognition (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy).

Creation of Where Beats Meet Bars (WBMB) took months and required finding like-minded artists and creators who understood the community value of such an event. Each show starts with an improv performance to break the ice in the room for rap artists and singers whose anxieties may emerge preceding their participation. I have found that creating a welcoming environment encourages artists' participation in the arts community while said individuals are building their craft (Travis et al., 2022; Lomas, 2016). The experiences of many of the participants I am familiar with, some being those of seeking a transition from past criminal activity.

Since its creation in 2017, the WBMB event and the members of this community have encouraged social prescribing by allowing individuals to do the following:

1. Become a positive part of a community that previously contributed to their social isolation.
2. Accept vulnerability and overcome the anxieties of performing in front of groups of people.
3. Utilize the art community as an intervention to address social isolation and promote a sense of belonging.
4. Create a network for supporting self-esteem and decreasing the likelihood of maladaptive behavior.

This Jersey City art community typically focuses on other areas of art expression and has yet to introduce social prescribing efforts in this fashion.

Each month WBMB hosts a supportive crowd eager to listen to rappers, producers, and singers. Even through the COVID-19 pandemic, WBMB continued to receive support while transitioning to a virtual event for a little over a year. WBMB continues to empower not only the artists but the audience. Those with blemished histories as community members are welcomed to our stage, not to be judged by their past behavior but only their craft. Many perform with family and friends in attendance, proud to witness their hidden talent. As the community grows, an expansion of activities and services have become an integral part in what we call the "WBMB FAM." The inclusion to the WBMB FAM is an extension of social prescribing efforts by providing community support through the expression of music and allowing them to use an outlet that is meaningful to participants.

Conclusion

Social prescribing is indeed untapped territory in the field of social work; however, it offers an opportunity to be innovative in practicing with communities who seek hip-hop as a refuge (Wildman et al., 2019). Yet, the WBMB communities show there is a space for artistry in the field of social work. Social work practitioners should include social prescribing not only in the arts field but in other areas in the community as a form of intervention and practice for clients.

The social prescribing approach serves as a promising intervention working with communities seeking state-of-the-art strategies to remain empowered and resilient.

My background in social work and as an educator has allowed me to find innovative ways to engage with the underserved community. Along my journey of self-reflection, overcoming imposter syndrome was needed for me to have confidence in my role as a change agent and hip-hop contributor. As a youth, hip-hop was a major protective factor for me as I navigated development up into my adulthood and geographical routing.

Throughout my journey academically, I was fortunate in being able to apply my foundational knowledge of systems and social work theory in building an artist community. Much of these tactics were learned through life experiences, in the academic setting, and in my conceptualization of social work practice. As a result, there was a social prescribing utilization that grew organically in my targeted community. There continues to be an emergence of cohesiveness among the participants today. The credit that should be given to most is hip-hop. I am a testimony to its impact and ability to instill resilience in those with a passion for such a rewarding genre. Its influence continues to be shared among individuals and underserved communities today.

Figure 3

Where Beats Meet Bars 2022



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