

**“Anything you say,  
will be used against you!”**

The necessary place for creative expression and language  
as an outlet for young people,  
and the criminal act of criminalising them.



\*Benjamin Zephaniah's logo

Professor Shawn Sobers  
University of the West of England

**Two early lessons in  
my career working with  
young people...**

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1 - Meet young people where they are at, rather than expecting them to come to you.  
(psychologically, not just physically)

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1 - Meet young people where they are at, rather than expecting them to come to you.  
(psychologically, not just physically)

2 – The expectations and culture of a place can alter how young people are perceived, and how they behave.  
(same as with all people)

(N.B. multiple perceptions and behaviours can be simultaneously true.)

SAN FRANCISCO [VIDEO](#)

# Courtnei Webb, San Francisco High School Senior, Suspended For Writing Poem About Sandy Hook Shooting

Local Student Suspended For Writing Poem About Newtown Massacre



By Aaron Sankin

28/12/2012 07:18pm GMT | Updated December 28, 2012



A 17-year old high school student in San Francisco has been suspended for a poem she wrote about the tragic mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

"I understand the killings in Connecticut. I know why he pulled the trigger," wrote Courtnei Webb in a poem that was not turned in for an assignment, but was found by a teacher and then given to the school's principal. "Why are we oppressed by a dysfunctional community of haters and blamers?"

Webb, a senior at the Life Learning Academy on Treasure Island, told ABC San Francisco that the poem was just her way of expressing herself. "The meaning of the poem is just talking about society and how I [understand why things like that incident happened](#). So it's not like I'm agreeing with it, but that's how the school made it seem," she said. "For example, the only person I can think of would be like Stephen King. He writes weird stuff all the time. That doesn't mean he's going to do it or act it out."

The Life Learning Academy is a 60-pupil vocational school for students that haven't been successful at other educational institutions. Since it is a charter school, Life Learning Academy, which was named the "2010 Charter School of the Year" by the California Charter School Association, its discipline is handled outside of the San Francisco Unified School District. Officials at Life Learning Academy were not immediately available for comment.

In 1998, an eighth grader in Half Moon Bay was suspended for five days for writing an a pair of essays that administrators deemed "terroristic threats." The San Francisco Chronicle [reports](#):

*The suspension was based on a state law that took effect Jan. 1. It allows a school to suspend or expel a student for making either a verbal or written threat against a school official that could result in death or serious injury, even if the student does not have the intent to carry out the threat. The law, part of the Education Code, allows similar punishment if the student threatens to cause \$1,000 or more in property damage.*

A report by the UCLA Civil Rights Project found that [over 400,000 students were suspended](#) from California's K-12 public schools last year.

## Where can young people go for refuge? (Open letter to the Principle and Governors of Life Learning Academy, San Francisco)

DECEMBER 29, 2012

Courtnei Webb, one of your 17 year old high school students, is now facing the possibility of being expelled from your school after writing a poem about the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School. In the poem Courtnei wrote she understood why someone like Adam Lanza might do what he did. She wasn't agreeing with it, but in her poem said she understood the oppression in society that could cause such a tragedy.

For her intelligence and insight you did not award her a scholarship, but you alienated her further, exactly what she was writing about in her poem. Working against young people like this, rather than with them, will do more harm than good. But you know this already, as that will be the reason your school was founded in the first place. Your **Life Learning Academy**, that Courtnei attends, is a last chance educational facility that takes on children that have struggled at their previous schools, who have been in trouble with the police, been involved with gangs etc. So no doubt Courtnei has a reputation that precedes her. She will not be an angel, and that may have influenced your decision to suspend her on this occasion. I don't have the luxury of knowing the inside story of what was going on here.

Is it a case that Courtnei is more intelligent than you give her credit for? If so this is a sad situation, as we hope teachers have high expectations of their students, and have a duty of care to support them when they show signs of intelligence, (even when challenging to society's norms), not to demonize them, as has happened here. From what I can see, a young person who has struggled in life, has turned to poetry to creatively express her feelings, (which at her age will be as confused as they are clear), and rather than those of you with a duty of care for her to see that talent and nurture her skills, you have thrown it back in her face and have alienated her further.

Have we learned nothing?

Where can young people go for refuge from a world that doesn't understand them, if not into the safety of the creative world, in a school that is their last chance? If a 17 year has the clarity of mind to write a poem about their feelings, no matter how challenging to adult polite society those feelings may be, they should be applauded, not treated as a bad person, (which is obviously why they might be angry in the first place).

“In the poem Courtni wrote she understood why someone like Adam Lanza might do what he did. She wasn’t agreeing with it, but in her poem said she understood the oppression in society that could cause such a tragedy.

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Dr Shawn Naphtali Sobers — — —  
thoughts, images and things. [HOME](#) [CONTACT](#) [ABOUT THIS BLOG](#)

Where can young people go for refuge? (Open letter to the Principle and Governors of Life Learning Academy, San Francisco)  
DECEMBER 26, 2012

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Where are the ears to hear what these young people have got to say?

Where can young people go for refuge, if not in the safety of their own note books, and the trust of the adults around them?”

Dr Shawn Naphtali Sobers — — —  
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**Valerie Statham** says:  
January 8, 2013 at 6:22 am Edit

Hello Doctor

I wanted to personally Thank You for you letter of support. My daughter Courtni was re-instated and the suspension revoked and taken off her record today. Thank you so much for your kind words to Life Learning Academy on my daughters Courtni's behalf.

**WHAT STORIES DO WE TELL?**

**WHAT STORIES DO WE APPRECIATE?**

Members of an influential crew tell the local gang leader Shawn, that he will be top leader of the whole area. Encouraged by his crew, Shawn kills the current leader, and becomes the new area boss, and kills more people out of paranoia. Turf war erupts to overthrow Shawn, resulting in more death.

Three witches tell the Scottish general Macbeth that he will be King of Scotland. Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth kills the king, becomes the new king, and kills more people out of paranoia. Civil war erupts to overthrow Macbeth, resulting in more death.

shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/shakespeares-plays/macbeth/


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# Macbeth

Synopsis and plot overview of Shakespeare's Macbeth



TL;DR (may contain spoilers): Macbeth hears that he is going to be king, he and Lady Macbeth kill people so he can become king; both of them die.

#### Macbeth Summary

Three witches tell the Scottish general Macbeth that he will be King of Scotland. Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth kills the king, becomes the new king, and kills more people out of paranoia. Civil war erupts to overthrow Macbeth, resulting in more death.

- [Read our Macbeth Character Summaries](#)

#### In this section

- > All's Well That Ends Well
- > Antony and Cleopatra
- > As You Like It
- > The Comedy of Errors
- > Coriolanus
- > Cymbeline
- > Hamlet
- > Henry IV Part 1
- > Henry IV Part 2

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<https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/shakespeares-plays/macbeth/>

“I never saw the point in experiencing only one thing. The low art/high art distinction comes from the establishment telling me how I'm supposed to think.”

Matt Tong (musician)

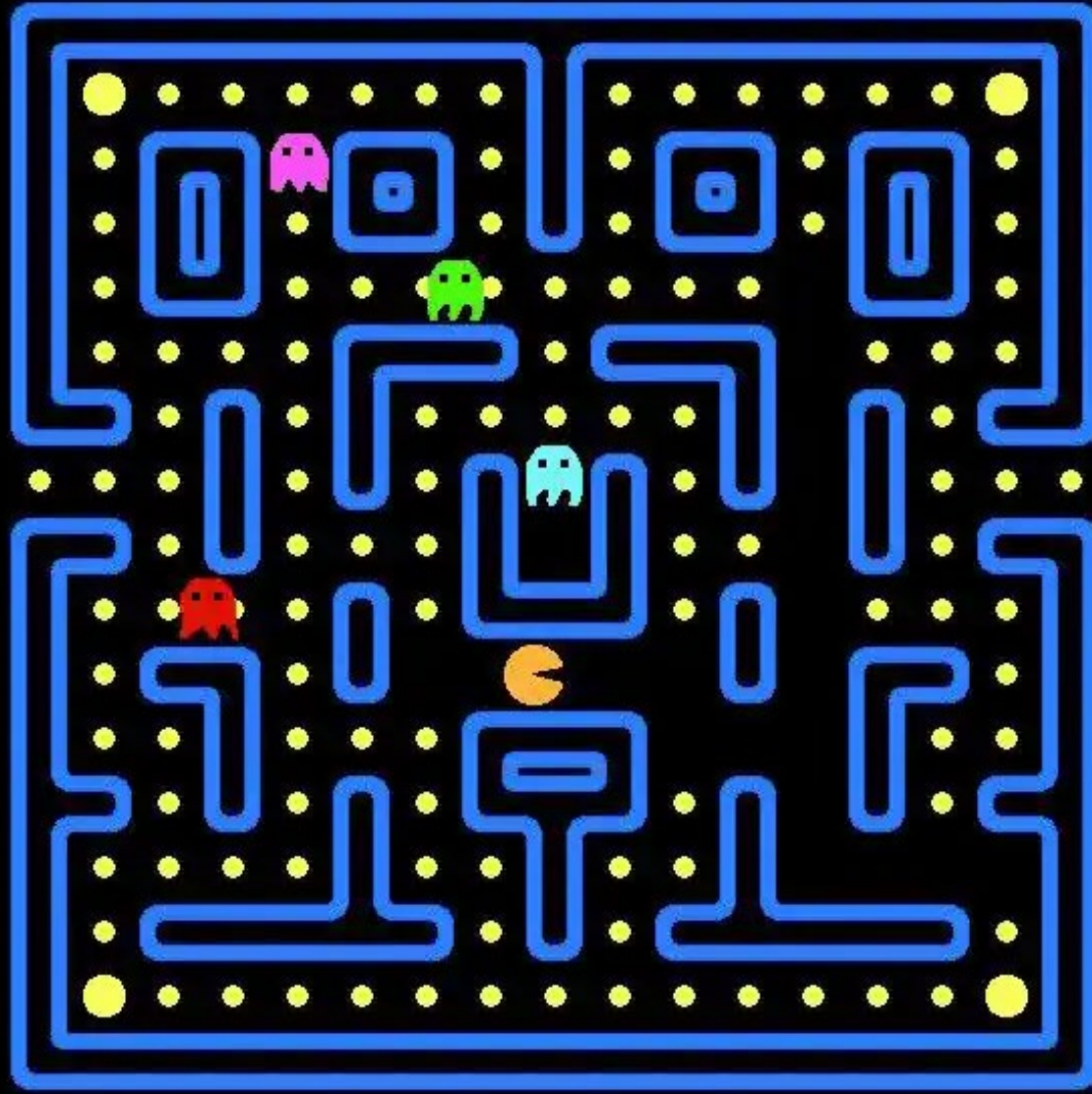
“Art requires neither complaisance nor politeness.”

Gustave Flaubert (novelist)





Beat Street, 1984



"I sometimes feel like I'm in. game of Pac Man, no matter what you do you get stopped at every turn. Even when you're living straight and doing good, they still want to tell you you must be doing bad."

Young person's opinion, 1990s.



**NOT BAD  
MEANING  
BAD  
BUT BAD  
MEANING  
GOOD**





**Bad**  
**Wicked**  
**Dangerous**  
**Cold**  
**Dope**

**Dark**  
**Sick**  
**Boooo!**



**Bad  
Wicked  
Dangerous  
Cold  
Dope**

**Dark  
Sick  
Boooo!**

“Hip-hop saved me. It gave me permission to use language in a certain way. It validated my community and my friends. It gave our slang a certain elegance.”

Jason Reynolds, (author)  
2017



Rastafari language - *Iyaric / Dread Talk*  
(1930s onwards)

<b>WORD</b>	<b>Overstanding / Innerstanding</b>
<b>SOUND</b>	<b>Apprecilove</b>
<b>POWER</b>	<b>Livication</b>
	<b>Inl</b>
	<b>Politricks</b>
	<b>Forwards (never 'back', e.g. forwards to Africa)</b>

Understanding

Appreciate

Dedicate

Me / you

Politics

Rastafari language - *Iyaric / Dread Talk*  
(1930s onwards)

**WORD**

Overstanding / Innerstanding

**SOUND**

Apprecilove

**POWER**

Livication

Inl

Politricks

Forwards (never 'back', e.g. forwards to Africa)

“Since its inception in the late 1930s, Rastafari have attempted to build a decolonised lexicon, to turn perceived negatives into positives, and to effectively construct a linguistic programme of *re-programming* the emancipated, post-colonial, pan-African Rastafari mind, free from the shackled mind-states imposed during slavery.”

Shawn Sobers, 2016

Underground subcultures, youth cultures and resistance movements, expressing themselves in new forms of language and codes, which when they emerge into the glare of the mainstream public, clash with the expected representations of the society.

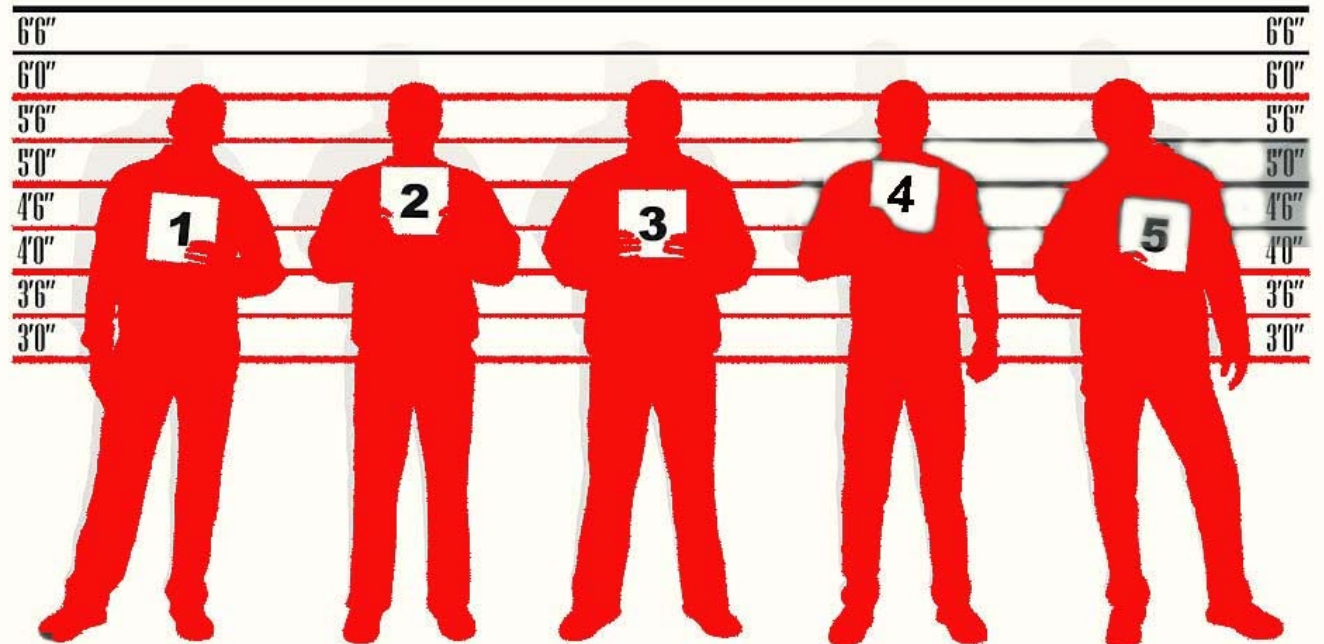
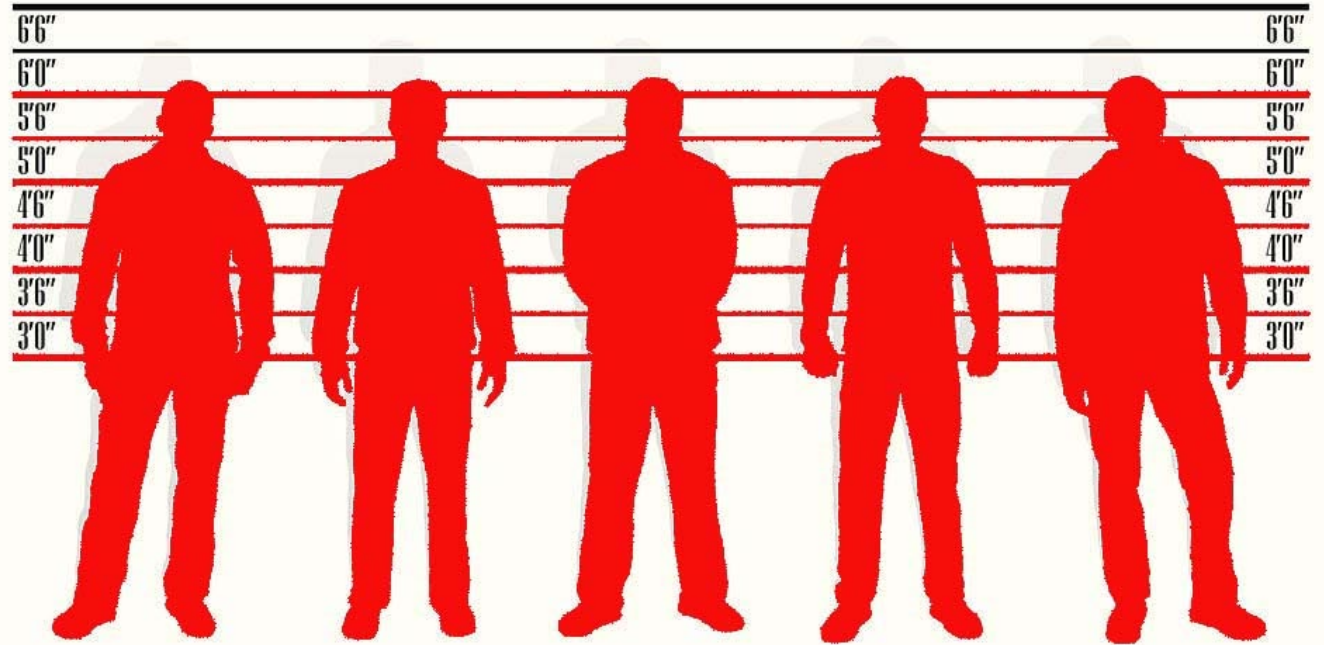
That doesn't make them wrong, just misunderstood.



Beat Street, 1984 – (screengrab)



Opera  
Classical  
Bagpipes  
Folk  
Steel pan  
Blues  
Jazz  
Rock n Roll  
Reggae / Ragga  
Rock  
Heavy metal  
House / Techno  
Jungle / Drum n Bass  
Hip Hop  
Drill



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Rap

**This article is more than 6 months old**

**Behind bars: how rap lyrics are being used to convict Black British men**



Will Mitchell  
 Head of News & Current Affairs

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**Exclusive** Crown Prosecution Service claims no use of courts solely via lyrics, but showing new research finds juries being shown music and lyrics as evidence of guilt

On 6 February 2023, around 11.30am, a 45-year-old boy stepped out of Regency Square, the hub with him a handful of small, published packages, some bound in blue plastic, the others in white. The different colours let him know which contained heroin, and which cocaine. This date police officers working the boy soon discovered another 31 similar bags in the hotel room he had been staying in.

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**Judge rules rap lyrics can 'conditionally' be used as evidence in Young Thug trial**

He denied a motion filed by Young Thug's attorney against the use of lyrics.

By **Deena Zaru**  
 November 9, 2023, 6:19 PM




**DEVELOPING STORY**  
**JUDGE RULES RAP LYRICS CAN 'CONDITIONALLY' BE USED AS EVIDENCE IN YOUNG THUG TRIAL**

Artists alarmed after judge rules lyrics can be used as evidence in Young Thug trial  
 Young Thug faces charges in a sweeping RICO indictment over his alleged involvement and leader... [Show More](#)

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**Hip-hop on trial: When can a rapper's lyrics be used as evidence in a criminal case?**

Published: September 27, 2023 1:27pm BST

Brooklyn rapper 6ix9ine's lyrics were used against him during his criminal trial in 2019. John Parra/Getty Images

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**This article is more than 1 year old**

**Letters**  
**Drill lyrics alone won't send a man to prison**

Thankfully UK courts demand much more evidence in criminal trials than the contents of a rap song, says criminal barrister **Sam Trefgarne**




**WWD**

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20 September 2022

**LONG READ: A CULTURE OF DEMONISATION, DRILL WARS: THE PHANTOM MENACE AND SCENE POPPING ON TIKTOK.**



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**New law in California stops rap lyrics from being used as evidence in court**

It follows the recent indictments of US rappers Young Thug and Gunna, whose lyrics have been directly quoted at them in an ongoing legal trial.

© Saturday 1 October 2022 05:10, UK

**News** 11:00 on TV Tonight 7:00pm

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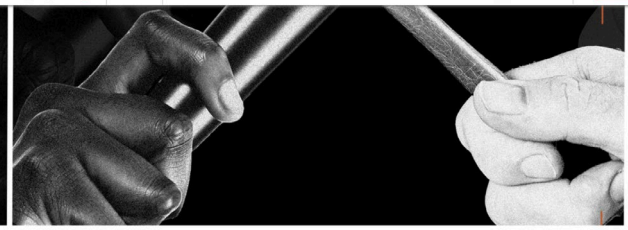
5m

11 Jan 2024

**Should drill lyrics be used as evidence in criminal cases?**

By **Ria Chatterjee**

**Rolling Stone** Menu Read Now Elton John hired Wembley Arena for Glastonbury rehearsals, Jacob Lusk reveals



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**Spitting innocence: the use and abuse of drill lyrics in court**

For a large portion of white society, rap is associated with a "racist construction of Blackness: danger, threat, uncivil". As a result, drill lyrics are currently being misused in courts of law to prosecute Black and Brown young people in the UK, as a recent case demonstrates

By **Tara Joshi**

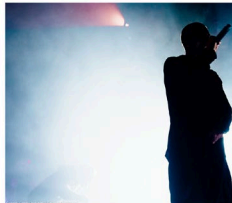
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**NEWS & COMMENTARY**

**Putting Rap Lyrics on Trial is a Violation of Free Speech**

The state of Tennessee is violating a rapper's First Amendment rights by trying to use his lyrics as evidence at trial.




**Emerson Sykes**  
 Staff Attorney  
 ACLU Speech, Privacy and Technology Project

If song lyrics could be used as evidence in criminal trials, many of the most famous artists in history would be in serious trouble. Bob Marley sings "I Shot the Sheriff."

**NBC NEWS**

**Black rappers call out double standard of using hip-hop lyrics as evidence in rapper Young Thug's criminal trial**

"I would like to think that prosecutors have more than just song lyrics to use against someone in court," one hip-hop artist said.



Rapper Young Thug performs a solo during his 2023, in Chicago. (AP Photo/Chris Wedel)

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Research > Research for the World > Race Equity > Society > Impact

**Music on trial: challenging the use of rap as evidence in criminal courts**

RACE EQUITY, SOCIETY, IMPACT

Music is a form of entertainment, and yet rap lyrics and videos are being used by

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**CPS WILL NOW BE ABLE TO USE DRILL MUSIC VIDEOS AS EVIDENCE IN UK COURTS**

Drill lyrics can also be used, but only when there is also other evidence to link a defendant to a crime

WORDS: AMEESH AHMED | IMAGE: GIP HOFFMAN | 28 JUNE 2022

