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Hip-Hop Therapy: An approach to working with young offenders with severe mental health conditions

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Rap music is one of the most popular forms of music among youth (Dyson, 1996). Rap music emerged over four decades ago as a struggle for self-determination following North American slavery and oppression. The Hip-Hop culture was founded on this adversity and illustrates a form of social protest, promoting messages of social awareness, personal consciousness, activism, pleasure and power (Miller et al., 2013). As such the lyrical content of rap music has widely focused on social issues, drug use, crime, violence, religion, culture, alienation and disenfranchisement. Research to date has supported the therapeutic efficacy of rap music for at-risk young adults (Levy, 2012; Alvarez, 2011; Elligan, 2000). Although, Hip-Hop Therapy is a relatively novel and unconventional mode of therapy for young people, engagement with rap music programs have found to be increasingly high compared to Treatment as Usual (TAU; Elligan, 2000). As such, Hip-Hop therapy remains an effective but underutilized treatment approach targeting at-risk youth and currently, there are few similar programs in the community or correctional settings in Australia. The Rhythm & Rhymes Adolescent/Adult Program (RRAP) or Hip-Hop therapy, is a therapeutic group program for young and adult offenders with severe mental health disorders. The objectives of the group were to use rap music and song writing to increase prosocial activities, facilitate positive behaviour change, increase engagement in therapeutic programs, improve coping skills, depression, anxiety and hopelessness in young people with severe mental health disorders. Forty adolescent and adult patients from a high secure Forensic Hospital in Sydney, Australia completed a voluntary 12-week Hip-Hop Therapy group. A mixed methods study design was utilised. Pre and post group measures were collected, individual lyrics were qualitatively analysed and post group interviews were conducted.

Results found that there were improvements in prosocial behaviours, engagement in therapy, depression, coping skills, anxiety and hopelessness. Overall, this study illustrates how rap music has the potential to promote prosocial behaviour, increase engagement in treatment, improve empowerment, self-efficacy and distress tolerance skills in correctional and forensic settings.