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How The Crack Epidemic Changed Life in the Bronx

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How The Crack Epidemic Changed Life in the Bronx

The Crack Epidemic, which hit US cities with incredible force between 1985 and 1995, transformed hip-hop in ways which remain controversial to this day. During the early years of hip hop as recorded music, 1979-1985, it is difficult to find a single song which refers to women with contempt, which uses the "N" word repeatedly, and which appears to normalize violence and describes shootouts and drug deals in hypnotic detail. By the early 90's, all of those elements had become fixtures within commercially successful hip hop.

The first chapters of JZ's autobiography, "Decoded" provides the best short description I have ever read of crack's impact on the communities where hip hop became the "CNN of the streets," as one rapper described it,, but I would like to share my own recollections of crack's impact on the Bronx to help explain how and why it transformed hip hop's message and appeal- with the same force that the Vietnam War did to Rock and Roll 20 years earlier.

The year was 1985, my 15th year teaching at Fordham. I was working very closely with community groups who were rebuilding the South Bronx, and were stabilizing communities adjoining the Fordham campus and I was feeling optimistic about where the Bronx was heading.. Then one day, an organizer for the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition called me to say: " Mark, something crazy is happening in the Bronx. There are teenage prostitutes lined up on Jerome Avenue from 183 street to Fordham Road. And there are gun battles taking place in the streets so people are afraid to leave their houses""

I was shocked by what he told me, but his portrait of a deteriorating, rapidly changing social atmosphere on Bronx streets was reinforced by a student I worked closely with who lived on Bronx Park South right off Southern Boulevard. Not only had several of her women friends become addicted to crack and were selling their bodies along Southern Boulevard, but several of her male friends who had always denounced drug dealing had been seduced by the huge amounts of money they could make selling the new drug and had become crack dealers. Along with this upheaval in personal relationships which destroyed lifetime friendships, her family's sense of personal safety had disappeared in a neighborhood they once felt comfortable in. There were so many gun battles taking place between rival drug crews that she no longer felt safe going to the corner bodega, and her father, a building contractor who worked locally, insisted she only go to Fordham, or anywhere else in the Bronx or NYC by taking a car service that picked her up right in front of her apartment building

In subsequent years, more chilling stories were brought to me by students who lived or worked in the Bronx. A student who lived near St Mary's Park in the South Bronx wrote a paper which contained a graphic which showed over 40 drug spots near his home which rented for \$1000 a week from a local drug lord. His paper also contained a portrait of 7 of his middle school friends, 5 of whom were dead or in jail. Another student described the fears young people he worked with experienced going to and from Roosevelt High School across the street from Fordham. They were afraid of being shot while going to school, leaving school, or even walking through the halls in the school (this is before metal detectors were put in public schools!)

And finally, I was contacted by a priest in a parish 7 Blocks south of Fordham, St Martin of Tours, who had officiated at 25 funerals in one year (1992) of young people killed in drug battles in the streets. He wanted to form an organization, called Save A Generation, to help reach out of school, out of work youth, who had been drawn into the crack trade, and were at risk of an early death. I joined him in his efforts, which along with other initiatives like it, began to achieve some results in reducing violence by the late 1990's

But the level of violence I just described, which by the early 90's had spread to almost every US city, turned the world of inner-city youngsters inside out and upside down. Not only did it throw traditional gender roles into chaos as the drug hit women as hard, or harder than men; it destabilized age hierarchies within families and neighborhoods as young men, some of them only 14 or 15 years old, became the wealthiest and best-armed people in their communities.

As this huge social transformation took place, hip-hop became the voice of young people living in a crack-dominated world- whether they were dealers, armed enforcers, observers, horrified witnesses, or victims of violence. The music they produced would shock the world with its confrontational language, but also, in some cases, with its unmatched lyrical brilliance and sonic resonance.

Crack-era hip-hop emerged as the voice of young people who had largely been abandoned in a time of shrinking incomes, rising unemployment, and government austerity. Their anger, at their own elders of the Civil Rights generation as well as at conservative politicians, would sweep aside the party atmosphere of hip hop's early years and replace it with something much more ominous, but also more profound.