

## AWOL use social media to get their message across

### An EUGANGS practitioner case study by Anne Ross

*Youtube is a popular site for young people to post videos which reference gangs. In this case study, Anne Ross of the West Midlands Police describes a series of raps posted by a local gang in Sandwell, known as AWOL. The videos enabled the youth offending team to gain information on the gang, which informed their interventions. The raps themselves tell the story of the gang's evolution, and display real talent.*

The rap video of *Clear The Air*<sup>1</sup> was posted in September 2013. It shows the lead guy rapping surrounded by his gang AWOL. In the rap he includes the line:

*AWOL the crew I'm about B double 6 we gonna take the crown. The OGs be kicking back sending YGs to handle biz. My YGs real hungry they will snatch your chain.*

Here, OG is the street term for original gangster and YG is young gangster.

AWOL consisted of three tiers. Tier one was the leader. The second tier was the slightly older guys, who in 2014 were given long prison sentences for a series of armed robberies.



In the background of the *Clear the Air* rap, you can see the younger lads. We were able to identify them, not least because the leader names them by nickname in the video. We tried unsuccessfully to divert these youngsters away from criminal activity.

After the imprisonment of the older gang members, the younger lads take a more prominent role in the recordings which followed. These included *Thugs R Us* and *Listen to your Heart*.

One of the lads I worked with, Kale<sup>2</sup>, was very talented musically and wrote the music and lyrics for the recordings. The videos become more tuneful in parts which I believe would have been written by him. When he was on remand he told me he spent his time writing his music.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u39IJ3dkYEw>

<sup>2</sup> pseudonym

In *Thugs R Us* the lyrics centre around selling drugs, not as something they enjoy doing, but as an only viable option for the young people to make money. This contrasts with rich rappers who talk about this lifestyle, but have not lived it.

*Thugs R Us*<sup>3</sup>



*Listen to your heart*<sup>4</sup>



*Listen to your heart* is about a member of AWOL who has betrayed the gang, probably by joining a rival gang. At the part of the recording where the rapper goes to an iron gate it then uses old clips of Kale from previous videos and the gate signifies him being in custody. Kale states in the rap he wrote the lyrics whilst in Stoke-on-Trent (this would be Werrington Youth Offending Institute). At the end of the video, all the tier 3 members are at the forefront shouting out his name, wanting him released.

A number of tier 3 lads were on orders with the youth offending team. They all denied any involvement in these raps and seemed surprised that we knew about them.

Kale claimed AWOL was only ever a music project. However, he was imprisoned for a robbery and later deported. He claimed in interview that he had been made to do it by a 'Black Rhino'<sup>5</sup> who is mentioned in the 2013 rap as being a member. He refused to give us any further information.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJudvoZ26LA>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GKGvdLuep4>

<sup>5</sup> Associate of Black Rhino, a performer known to attract people associated with gun and gang crime to his DJ events