

Gangs influenced by drill

Street gangs in Scotland's towns and cities – including Edinburgh – are being increasingly influenced by London's drill music culture according to a new BBC Scotland documentary series.

Young gang members inspired by YouTube videos dress in an all-black “uniform” of hoodies and balaclavas. They refer to themselves as “roadmen” and associate the music and dark lyrics with glamour.

The development is revealed in Street Gangs, a three part documentary series hosted by best-selling author and ex-gang member Graeme Armstrong, which continues this week.

Armstrong, 32, who wrote about his own experiences growing up in gangs in Airdrie, Lanarkshire, in his acclaimed novel “The Young Team”, said that his recent work in communities and in schools suggested that gangs were on the increase in Scotland.

He said there was evidence of “slipping back into the old ways” with old gangs being resurrected and new ones being formed.

In the series, he travels to different parts of Scotland, including Edinburgh, and speaks with street gangs who reveal the growing influence of drill music, which Armstrong describes as “a type of hip hop known for its violent and dark lyrics and is often linked to gangs”.

He said: “If they self-ID as roadmen and if they've been

inspired by this cultural phenomenon from elsewhere we need to take it seriously.

“The message in drill music isn’t really social realism, it’s more like a manual to murder. If you look at the gang violence in London, in 2018-19 it started hitting the headlines, stabbings everywhere – stab city and all of that.

“There were 178 murders that year and 70% of them were young guys aged 18-24, so that paints a really serious picture of territorial gang violence with knives.

“That’s what Scotland always had so the drill thing, it is a change of uniform, it is there, they take it seriously, but it’s feeding into our existing gangs.”

In Prestonpans near Edinburgh, Armstrong meets with three youths all in black and wearing balaclavas, in a tunnel used for gang fights.

One says: “Drill music has a big impact on every **** to be honest. It’s a bad influence at the end of the day. Folk just listen to the lyrics and they’re like ‘I want to be like that’, but it doesn’t work like that.”

Armstrong said: “You heard it from those young guys – when you actually listen to what they are saying – he said categorically on the film that drill music has a big impact on them, and for me I was like ‘wow, there it is’. That was compelling for me.”

Armstrong also meets Edinburgh drill artist and rapper YD, to ask how much blame the genre should take for violence.

YD tells the programme: “I think violence is becoming more of a trend because it seems more cool to be violent for some reason. I hate to say it because I’m a drill artist but drill, from London, influenced it.”

Another artist, Dundee rapper Eugene, when asked why knives

are coming back onto Scottish streets, tells the programme: "Drill music 110 per cent. It's the biggest influence on violence in the UK just now. They're not fighting over your scheme anymore, it's your wee rap groups, it's mad."

Armstrong also explores his own past, reflecting on the reasons why he was first drawn into a culture which was marked by substance abuse, violence and territorial claims.

Involved in street gangs from around the age of 12, he eventually escaped a world of violence after gaining a place at Stirling University to study creative writing. He would go on to write *The Young Team*, his debut novel, which won a clutch of awards.

However, after numerous incidents of violence caused by involvement with his own "young team", he counts himself lucky to be alive.

His turning point came in 2012, when he was smashed over the head with a Buckfast bottle at a house party. Around the same time, three of his friends died from heroin overdoses while another stabbed and killed a person in a horrifying attack.

Armstrong says: "I think a lot of these young guys mistake a gang for a family but, the reality is, that street family is a dysfunctional family. They've not always got your best interests at heart.

"It's a seductive thing – the glamorised portrait of what gangs are, and what that life is, isn't the reality."

He insists that kids in tough communities need a plausible alternative to steer them away from gangs.

He adds: "They offer something that society doesn't offer. These are people who feel excluded, who feel neglected. In gangs the togetherness, the belonging, the camaraderie becomes a street family and that is a family that's dysfunctional,

that harbours risk, but it seems worth it.”

* [Street Gangs](#), Wednesdays, BBC Scotland, 10pm.



Image courtesy of BBC