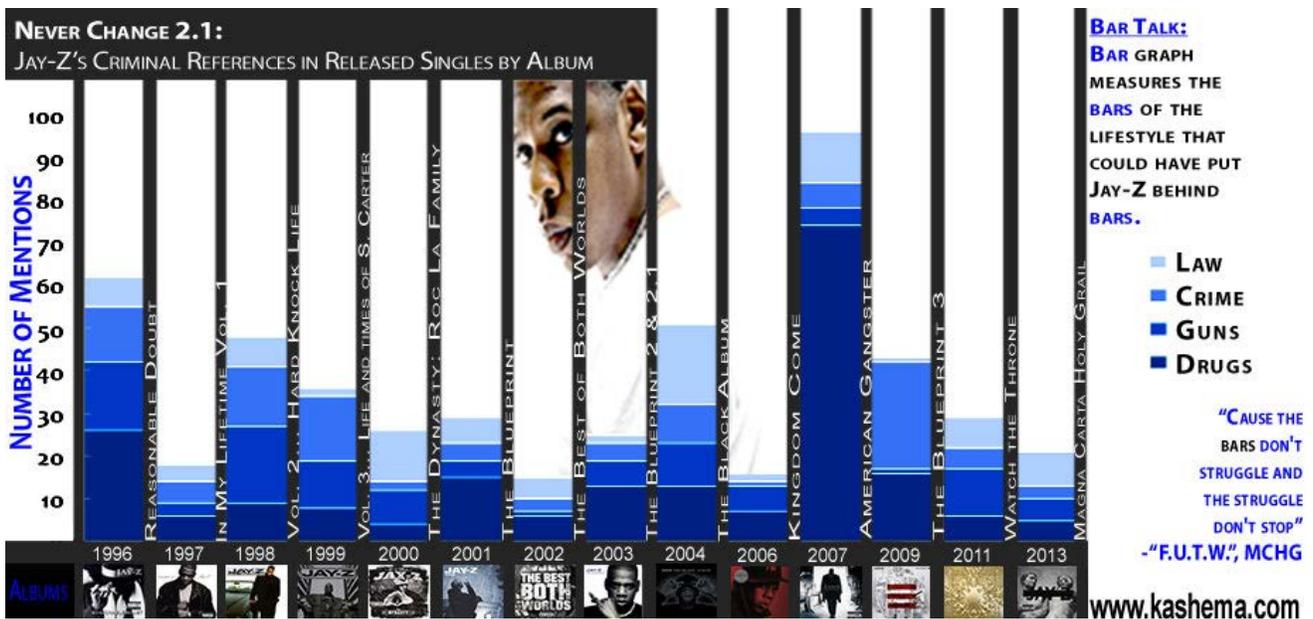


# Never Change 2.1: A Look at Jay-Z's Lyrical Evolution

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## Never Change 2.1: A look Jay-Z's Lyrical Evolution

By kashema h.

### "Intro"

Jay-Z's classic album *Reasonable Doubt* (1996) turned 20 years old this summer but it has been two years since he has released another album. He released "Spiritual" after the extrajudicial killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. Jay is featured on the remix of "All the Way Up" and teamed up with DJ Khaled and Future to create "I Got the Keys." Back in April, Mr. Carter made a cameo on his wife's Beyoncé's visual album, *Lemonade* as a family man.

The last time we saw the lyricist in full rap mode (e.g. album, singles and tour) was for *Magna Carta Holy Grail* in 2013. The promotional *On The Run* trailer for the married couple's tour stars Jay-Z and Beyoncé as bank robbers à la Bonnie and Clyde, and features all kinds of guns, ski masks, shady figures, cop chases and a line-up.

In 2014, I started to think about Jay's past criminal life as a drug dealer, and his references to it on his records. I let the thing between my eyes analyze Jay's skills, then put it down—type Braille...you feel me? Last month, the rapper narrated the New York Times Op-Ed: "The War on Drugs Is an Epic Fail." I went back to my study of Jay-Z and his lyrics with a more critical eye. This is an updated analysis of his lyrics to see if you take the man out of the hood, can you take the hood out of the man? Using the singles from Jay-Z's albums, four themes were counted (drugs, guns, crime and the law) to analyze the lyrical changes as Hov went from drug dealer to music mogul.

### "PSA"

This analysis is not written in the tradition of most studies found in academic journals. As the author of this study, I decided to write in a way that relates to different audiences outside of academia to better create dialogue about its' content. This paper is written for those from the corner block, but if those in the corner office like it—so be it. I do this for my culture.

### "The Blueprint" (Methodology)

A convenience sample of 60 singles by Jay-Z as the lead artist was used for this analysis. The lyrics were taken from [www.genius.com](http://www.genius.com), a website that breaks down text with line-by-line annotations. After excluding the hooks, references of drugs, guns, crime and the law were coded. Jay-Z is a notorious wordsmith; therefore, both literal and figurative meanings were included in this study.

The *drugs* theme refers to any narcotics, their aliases, processing, distribution and/or consumption (from the fields to fiends, and all points in between). Once you are in the drug game, protection is necessary. A dealer needs to defend him or herself from addicts and rivals or thieves. If the dealer is on the offense and wants to increase their turf, they will need firepower. *Guns* refer to guns by names, aliases, anatomy, and/or their effect. Drug dealing is not only about drugs, there are other related illegal engagements, such as homicide, assault, money laundering and kidnapping. *Crime* refers to any illegal activity not related to drugs or guns. Finally, there is the law. *Law* refers to any legal process or interactions from stopping to imprisonment and/or mentions of law enforcement.

Example of themes in lyrics:

From the **dope spot** (D), with the smoke **Glock** (G) **fleeing the murder scene** (C, G)

You know me well

From nightmares of a lonely **cell** (L), my only hell...

"Hard Knock Life," Vol. 2...*Hard Knock Life* (1998)

The two collaborative projects with R. Kelly, *Best of Both Worlds* (2002) and *Unfinished Business* (2004) were combined because the latter was supposed to pick up where the former left off, hence the title. Moreover, there was only one official single released on *Unfinished Business*, "Big Chips." The singles from the joint album with Linkin Park were counted in *The Black Album*, where they were originally recorded.

An intercoder, second researcher, read and coded the lyrics to ensure reliability. In addition, [genius.com](http://www.genius.com) and Carter's memoir, *Decoded*, were used as references in cases of ambiguity. The data was not weighed, I'm pushing this Roc' raw, honey.

### “Show Me What You Got” (Results)

The results show a 69% decrease of all criminal references from *Reasonable Doubt (RD)* to *Magna Carta Holy Grail (MCHG)*. However, not all the themes decreased in mentions from the first album to the rapper’s latest release. The two largest decreases are drugs (-81%) and crime references (-77%) followed by guns (-69%), but the law mentions increased by 14%.

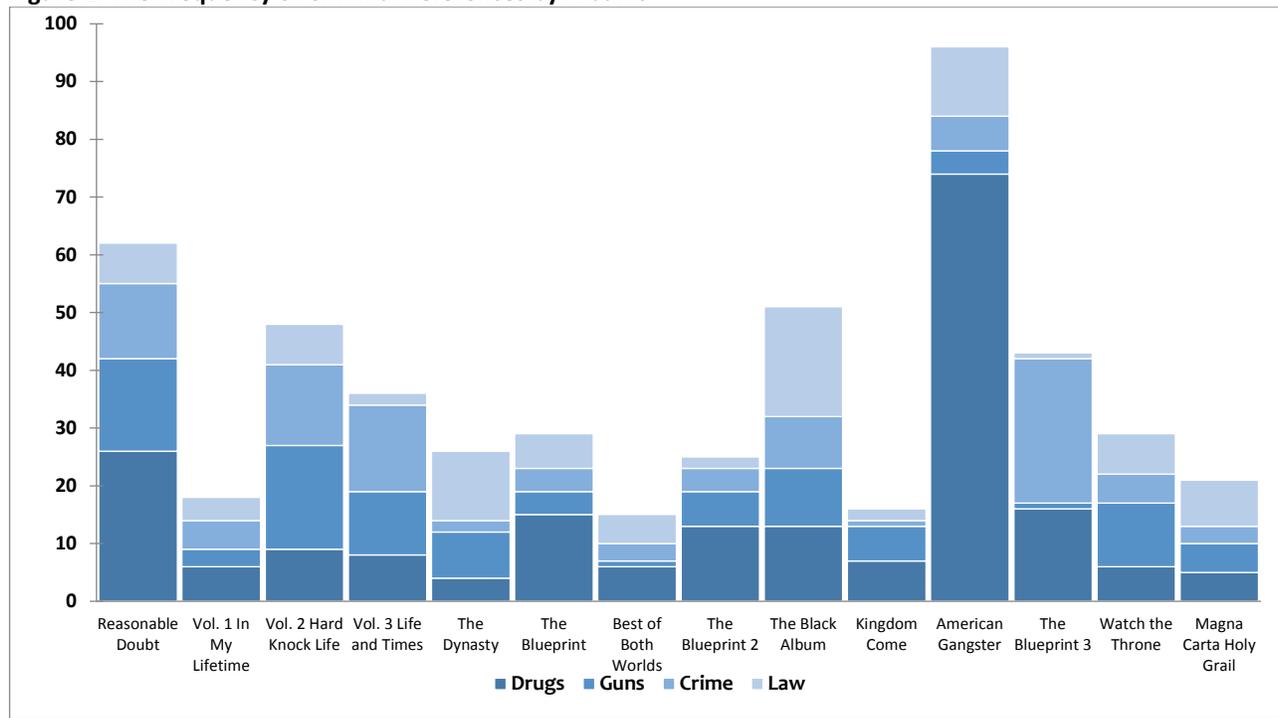
**Table 1.**

Changes in Theme References from Jay-Z’s First to Last Album					
	Number of Refs. in Singles	Reasonable Doubt (1996)	Magna Carta Holy Grail (2013)	Change	Change (%)
Drugs	208	26	5	-21	-81%
Guns	104	16	5	-11	-69%
Crime	109	13	3	-10	-77%
Law	94	7	8	1	14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>515</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>-43</b>	<b>-69%</b>

In between *RD* and *MCHG*, the number of single releases ranged between three and seven throughout Jay-Z’s discography, but the number of releases did not consistently correlate to the number of criminal references. The album with the lowest criminal references with just Jay was *Kingdom Come* (16) and the album with the highest criminal references was *American Gangster* (96).

Greater changes in the frequency of references are due to life events. For example, “Guilty until Proven Innocent” (*The Dynasty: Roc La Familia*, 2000) highlighted Jay-Z legal trouble. The album *American Gangster (AG)* (2007), is based on the [biopic with the same title](#) about former drug dealer Frank Lucas, hence the upshot in drug references. *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia* and other collaborative projects (*The Best of Both Worlds* [2002]/*Unfinished Business* [2004] and *Watch the Throne* [2011]) have fewer references because the verses are divided between Hov and other artists (Fig. 1).

**Figure 1. The Frequency of Criminal References by Albums**

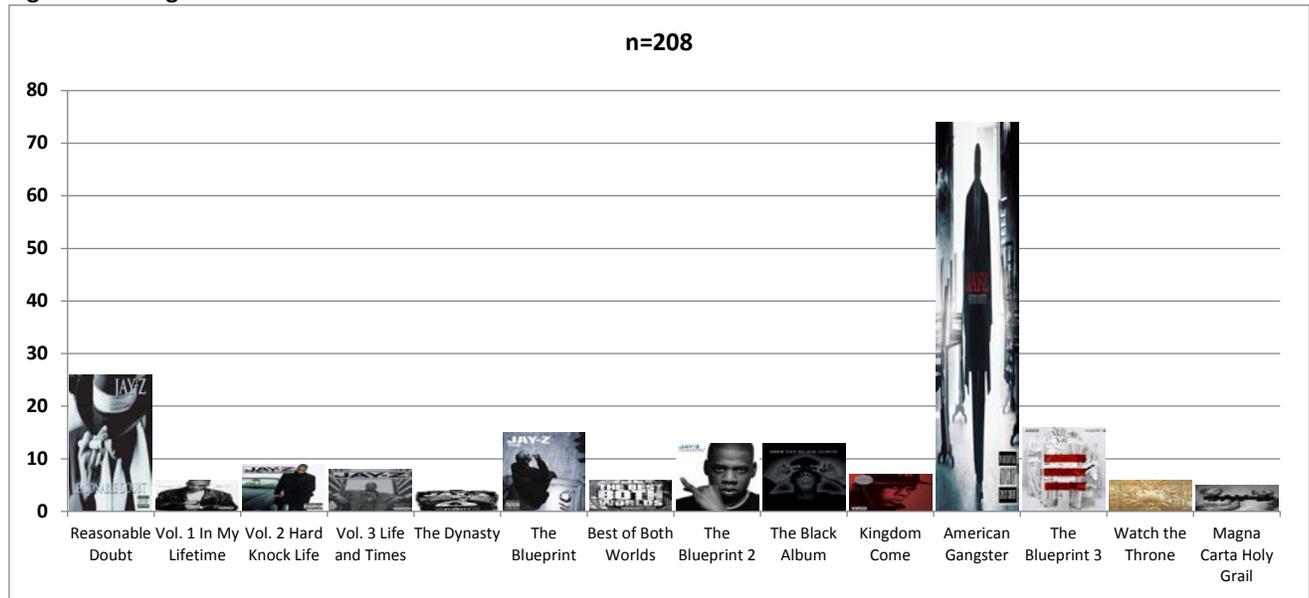


The changes in the frequency of cumulative themes also indicate a transition away from the drug game, for every spike in references the following albums decrease. To illustrate, after *RD*, the successive albums references decrease until *The Black Album*. After the release of *American Gangster* there is another decrease in overall criminal references.

*Drugs*

Drugs is the most referenced theme (208). After the release of *RD*, the number of mentions drops by 77% on *Vol. 1* then is relatively moderate then increases almost fourfold-from 4 to 21- on *The Blueprint*. There is an average of 11 references from *The Blueprint* to *Kingdom Come*. For *AG*, however, the references dramatically increase due to the concept of the album. However, the cumulative sum of drug references of the last three albums is only one more than that of *RD* (26). This is evidence that drugs were no longer as significant as in his initial project that he recorded 13 years prior. After *RD*, 62% or eight of the 13 subsequent albums have less than 10 drug references per album. Although Jay gets further away from the street hustling life, traces of it are still evident (Figure 2A).

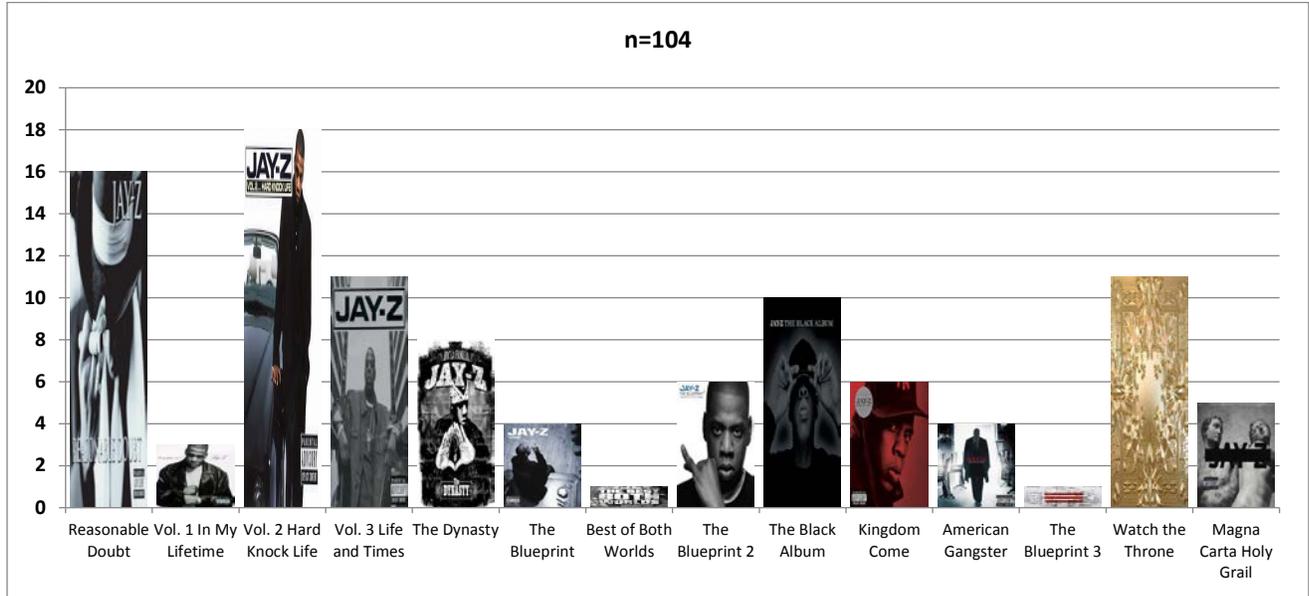
**Figure 2A. Drugs**



*Guns*

There are 104 gun references. Collectively, the first five of Jay-Z’s albums have more than half or 53 percent of the total gun mentions. *Vol. 2... Hard Knock Life* has the most gun mentions (18), which reflects the grittier New York rap scene during that period. After *Vol. 3*, the frequency of gun references decrease until *The Blueprint 2*. *The Black Album* illustrates the transitioning and reflecting of the rapper’s earlier lifestyle and his career milestones hence the increase in references. The final increase of gun references in *Watch the Throne* are mainly metaphors for verbally taking shots at people he is no longer on good terms with, but still has love for. The gun theme has the same frequency pattern as the overall criminal references (Fig. 1), after significant increases in gun references (i.e. *Vol. 2... Hard Knock Life*, *The Black Album* and *Watch the Throne*) the frequency of the subsequent albums decrease (Fig 2).

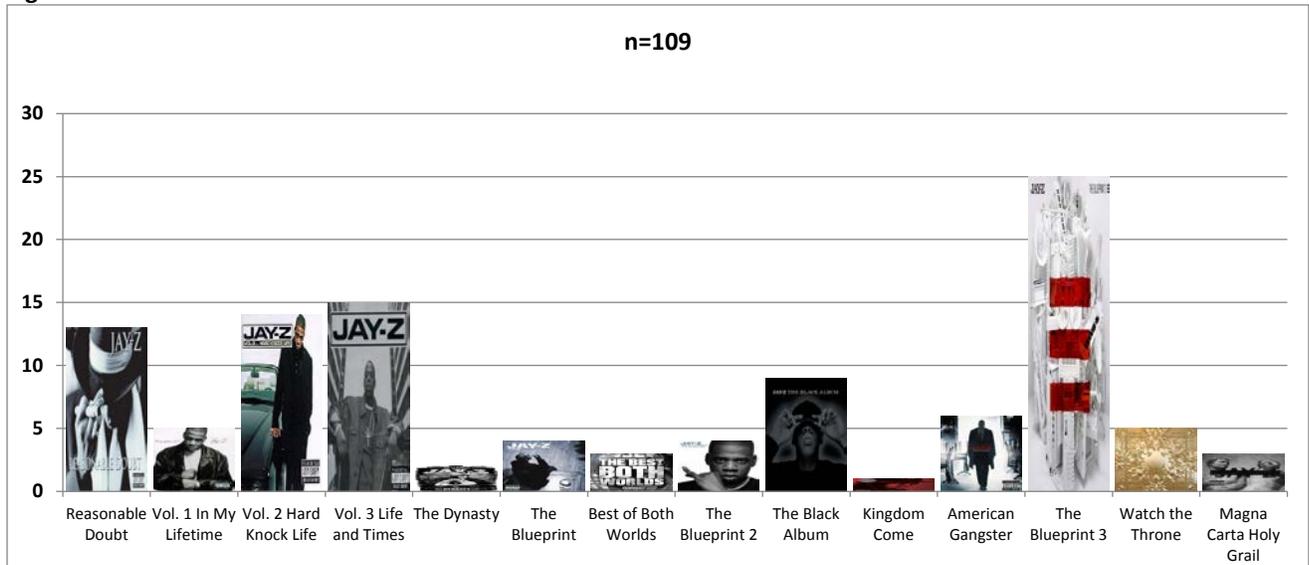
Figure 2B. Guns



*Crime*

There are 109 criminal references throughout Jay-Z's discography. However, like the guns theme, Hov's 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> albums, the crime references increase to reflect the lyrical trend of that time. *The Blueprint 3 (BP3)* has the most mentions of crime (25) and is almost twice as much as *RD* (13). *BP3* is followed by *Vol. 3...* with 15 references. In between these albums Jay-Z crime references are relatively low and after *BP3* the criminal mentions are comparatively low (Fig. 2C).

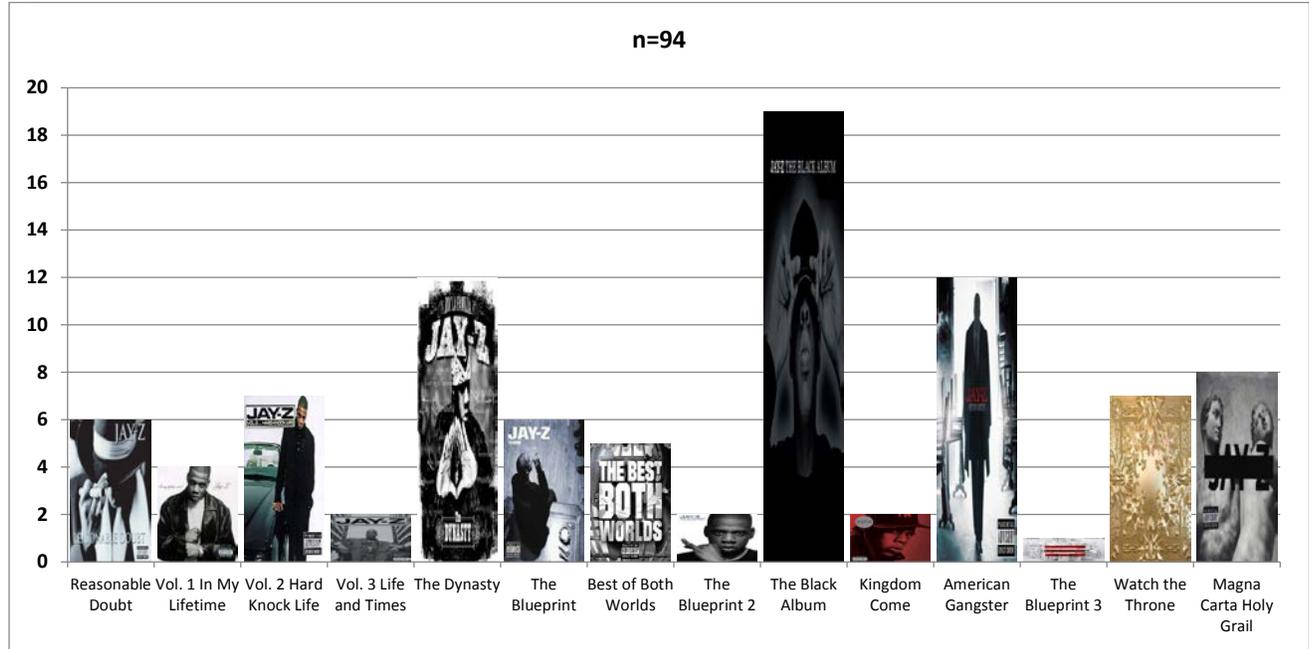
Figure 2C. Crime



*Law*

Of all the themes, the law references are the most varied. The album with the most legal references is *The Black Album* (19), which is, three times more than *Reasonable Doubt* (6). The song "99 Problems" carries most of the law mentions as he raps about getting pulled over by the police on the album. The law theme also gets more shine in the collaborative projects. For example, *The Dynasty* album usually has a low frequency of references, but is one of the third highest due to the "Guilty until Proven Innocent" feat. R. Kelly. The first five albums fluctuate in references, unlike the normal frequency seen in the other themes. Moreover, there is an increase in law references for the last two albums. It is also interesting to note that Jay-Z's high law frequencies reflect the rapper avoiding incarceration and defying rules (Fig. 2D).

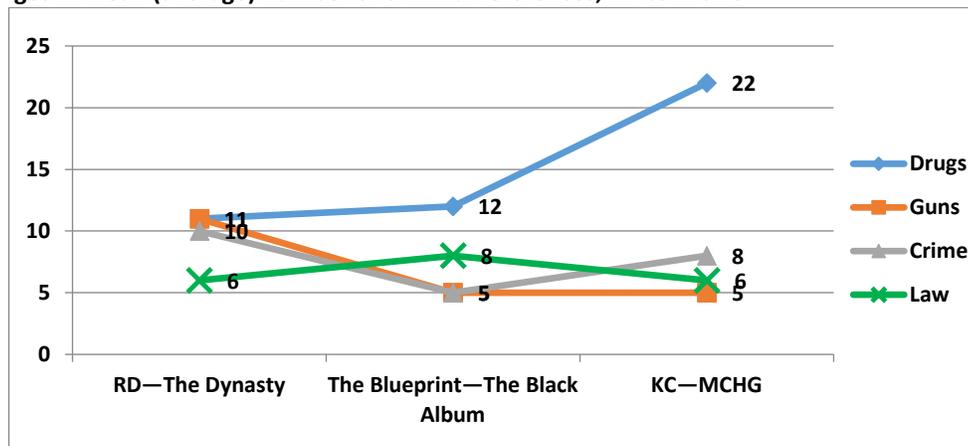
Figure 2D. Law



“Reminder”

In “Reminder” (*The Blueprint 3*, 2009) Jay raps, “Men lie, women lie, numbers don't/Ain't nothin changed for, me 'cept the year it is.” Well, numbers (statistics) don't “lie,” but if you know what to do with them...Look here, let me coach you. By creating new categories based on the phases of his rap career: his first classic album to his first collaboration (*RD* to *The Dynasty*); his second classic album to his retirement album (*The Blueprint* to *The Black Album*) and; his out of retirement to his latest album (*Kingdom Come* to *MCHG*) the numbers don't lie, they just tell another story or a different side of the same story.

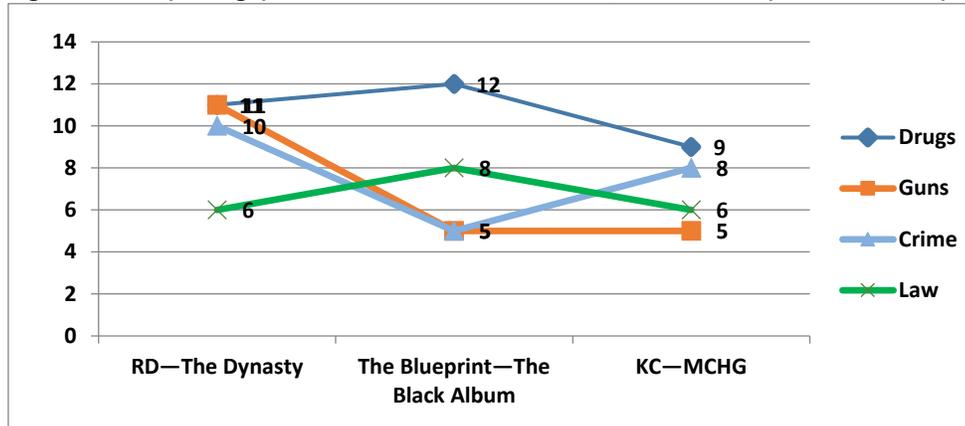
Figure 3A: Changes in mean (average) number of criminal references, *RD* to *MCHG*



The number of drug and the law references were sustained from the first to the second rap period while the guns and crime categories decreased by half. However, during the second period of Jay-Z’s rap career, he had a higher average of drug references caused by AG. In the world of statistics, AG is an outlier, “an observation whose value lies outside the set of values considered likely according to some hypothesis (usually one based on other observations).”<sup>1</sup> Basically, due to the high frequency of drug references in the concept album, the average drug mentions dramatically increases from 12 to 22, as oppose to the other categorical averages which decrease (guns and crime) or stay the same (law) from *RD* to *MCHG* (Fig. 3A)

<sup>1</sup> "outlier, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2016. Web. 30 September 2016.

Figure 3B: Changes in mean (average) number of criminal references, RD to MCHG (without outlier)



If AG was omitted for being an outlier (which is normally the case), the average drug mentions for the KC to MCHG period would have been nine (Fig. 3B). The moral of the story: Believe half of what you see/None of what you hear, even if it's spat by...Jay-Z.

### “What We Talkin’ About” (Discussion)

*“We invite you to something epic...Where we hustle out of a sense of hopeless, sort of a desperation...we feel we have nothing to lose (and everything to gain), so we offer you, well, we offer our lives...”*

*“Can I Live”, Reasonable Doubt (1996)*

It took Jay-Z took 26 years to record *Reasonable Doubt*. His ability to verbally chronicle the life of a drug dealer was not just reflective of his own career, but of other hustlers he witnessed while growing up in Marcy Projects. Even though Jay-Z’s debut single was “In My Lifetime,” his first official album single was “Dead Presidents II.” The track was so street, New York’s HOT97 radio DJ Funk Master Flex didn’t want to play it. However, the persistence of producer Irv Gotti’s met Flex’s resistance and won. The single was a taste of *Reasonable Doubt*—an album of a hustler who knows how to rap.

For the second album, *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*, Jay-Z got a taste of fame that was greater than when he was on tour with Big Daddy Kane. His lyrics switched up to address the limelight, the groupies, the critics, and his new riches. This album was influenced by the “player” lifestyle that fellow Brooklyn rapper, the Notorious B.I.G. and Jay glorified. The best example of this is the video for “Who You Wit.” The blaxploitation themed video takes place at a “Player’s Ball” with characters donned in 1970s fashion (e.g. polyester, satin, lamé, bell bottoms, boas, wide brim fedoras with feathers) and afros to compliment. In addition, the responsibility of “holding it down” carried more weight when BIG died eight months prior to the sophomore release. Jay explains his transition in “The City is Mine” when he raps that he can “cross the T’s and dot the I’s/Now that I got too popular to cop them pies/I’m taking this rap shit serious, to my demise/Jay shit’s like cake mix, watch me rise.”

In *Vol. 2... Hard Knock Life*, there is an increase in criminal references. During this period, the rap scene changes. An up and coming rapper from Yonkers with a growl and voracious hunger for rap success who went by Dark Man X (DMX) had the street’s attention by 1998. DMX wasn’t alone, his powerhouse label, Ruff Ryders, was behind him, which included hardcore rap group, The Lox. Shortly to follow was Ja Rule of Murder Inc., Irv Gotti’s imprint—all three labels were under the Def Jam umbrella. Spitting about Versace, linen and Moët & Chandon was not on the agenda. Hov, the hustler, is well aware of supply and demand, with the track “Money, Cash, Hoes” (featuring DMX) Jay sets the tone, “sex, murder, and mayhem—romance for the street/only wife of mine is a life a crime.”



Ja Rule, Jay-Z and DMX grace the cover of the June 1999 cover of XXL Magazine.

From the albums *Vol. 3... Life and Times of S. Carter* to *The Blueprint* there is a steady decline of total criminal references. Most of Jay-Z's criminal references can be found on "Guilty until Proven Innocent" feat. R. Kelly about his legal woes during that time. In 2001, Jay-Z pleaded guilty to assault charges stemming from the stabbing of Lance "Un" Rivera in 1999.

In 2002, *The Blueprint 2* picks up where the steady decline should have been even with the single "La La La" about Mary Jane and other criminal activity. The sudden increase in his "retirement album" *The Black Album* (2003) is because of "99 Problems." *The Black Album* is said to be a more personal album and on the track, he retells the time he was stopped for driving while black in the second verse. In the third verse, he narrates his "problem" being a snitch that gets Jay-Z into legal trouble. In 2004, Roc-a-Fella Records was sold to Def Jam, and Jay-Z changed clothes from the throwbacks to the two-piece suits and became president of Def Jam.

In the same year, Jay and R. Kelly released *Best of Both Worlds* but due to R. Kelly's legal trouble, there was no touring. In an attempt to finish what they started, Jay-Z and R. Kelly released *Unfinished Business* (2004) but released only one single due to conflicts between the two camps. Although there are criminal references, the singles that feature R. Kelly are usually about money, partying, women and materialism ("Honey," "Take You Home with Me [aka Body]" [2002] and "Big Chips" [2004]) resulting in very low number of criminal references.

Mr. Carter came out of his rap "retirement" with *KC* (2006) as the president of Def Jam. The singles off the album reflected his lavish lifestyle and the pitfalls of fame. On "Lost One" addresses the personal and career changes of no longer being one-third owner of Roc-A-fella with Dame Dash and Kareem "Biggs" Burke, the strains in his relationship with songstress Beyoncé and having to deal with the death of his nephew. The track, "30 Something" is dedicated to his "maturity" and the do's and don'ts of adulthood. (Not too much crack dealing and gun-busting there.)

The Brooklyn MC has a habit of comparing himself to basketball legend Michael Jordan, more specifically, "the Mike Jordan of recording." His coming back to rap definitely mimicked that of the basketball legend's hiatus return. Not a good look. In his defense, it was his "first game back, don't shoot him." That's because the shot Pres. Carter took with *KC* was a brick (although commercially successful—it was lukewarm in the streets) and also had the lowest criminal references as a solo album—it may have been because of the blinding lights of "Hollywood." It's rated "AG" though because Hov caught his own rebound and took another shot titled *American Gangster* (2007).



*American Gangster*: The rebound that revived the street hustler.

*AG* is based on the movie about former Harlem hustler, Frank Lucas. Hov tapped into his former career to create a solid album that vocalizes the nuances of the illegal lifestyle—no stone was left unturned. The most drug references (74) can

be found in "I Know," the Neptunes-produced single personifies heroin addiction and is masked as a lyrical love affair. The hustler who knows how to rap was back...or maybe he never left.

In 2009, *The Blueprint, Vol. 3* was the next album to drop and so did the criminal references, by almost 50%. The album is about power and dominance, sort of like controlling the block more specifically, he proclaims on the first track, "I don't run rap no more, I run the map." Mr. Carter and his clique also declared that they "Run This Town" with an "Empire State of Mind." So naturally anything he didn't see fit he was killing on wax, so there was a "Death of Autotune" and other assaults ("your colors too bright, your voice too light...jeans too tight"). Jay borrows from his brother, Biggie and decided to murder everything moving ("the kid, the dog, everybody dying"). Then he had a moment of silence. So disrespectful. *BP3* as a whole maps out Jay-Z's significance as he elaborates in "Forever Young": "Reminisce, talk some shit, forever Young is in your mind/Leave a mark they can't erase, neither space nor time."

The last two albums, *Watch the Throne* (2011), the collaboration with Kanye West, and *MCHG* (2013) decrease in criminal references. It should be noted that *The Dynasty* had a few artists rapping however, with *Watch the Throne*; it was just Jay and 'Ye. Moreover, there were only three singles released on *The Dynasty* whereas *Watch the Throne* had seven, which is why the references are higher.

### Limitations

This is a convenience sample composed of Jay-Z's released singles which limits the generalization of Jay-Z's entire discography and its' criminal references. Moreover, single releases are often geared toward commercial success; these singles are usually have catchy hooks and beats. For example, "Hard Knock Life" (*Vol. 2...Hard Knock Life*, 1998) focuses on surviving in urban conditions, but samples lyrics from the children's musical, *Annie*. However, unreleased tracks like "Can I Live?" (*Reasonable Doubt*, 1996), "You Must Love Me" (*In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*, 1997), "Reservoir Dogs" (*Vol. 2...Hard Knock Life*, 1998), "No Hook" (*American Gangster*, 2007) have more crime references and explicit lyrics and a grittier sound. Moreover, the more explicit the track the less likely the track will be a choice for radio play.

### "Never Change" (Conclusion)

To build a clientele base, a street pharmacist has to give samples to let consumers know who has "the dope shit." Similarly, the purpose of a single is to promote an album. The released track has to be commercially marketable; however, it may not accurately reflect the entire album. For example, on *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*, the single "The City is Mine" is about Jay-Z's career transition, but "You Must Love Me", documents the effect drugs had on his relationship with his mother, his brother and an ex-girlfriend. It is a heartfelt apology and thank you to those who loved him after all the wrong he did. However, the music business is more business than music. Singles are previews, but albums are the feature show. Its made to catch your attention, but there is more to it that you have to pay for. Hov points this out in *Rap Game/Crack Game* (*In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*): "Let 'em test the product, give 'em a promo show/Just a breeze, not enough to catch a real vibe/Then we drop a maxi single and charge 'em two for five."

As the life and times of Jay-Z flourished in the music business and other ventures, different elements were addressed, like owning part of a basketball team. In an interview, he explained that he rhymes about his "truths" which explains why he's not "talking 'bout how [he] be in the project all day." For the *MCHG* Samsung commercial, Jay-Z discusses the challenge of remaining himself while navigating through success. However, despite the accolades and fame, the MC from Marcy Projects poses the question: "How distant is that story of your own life ever going to be?" Carter proved it was not too far with *American Gangster*. Hov's discography is an evolution—an evolution of a hustler who didn't change his aim, just his targets.

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to my intercoder, Tiffany R. and the Block: Seil, Rell, DJ Springer, DFrance, Nicky Nicco, Trevy Trev 5, WB and Em J. I appreciate you putting up with my randomness—it's the method to my madness.

## Appendix A. Singles from Jay-Z's Discography

### **Reasonable Doubt (5)**

- "In My Lifetime"
- "Dead Presidents"
- "Ain't No Nigga"
- "Can't Knock the Hustle"
- "Feelin' It"

### **In My Lifetime, Vol. 1 (4)**

- "Who You Wit"
- "(Always Be My) Sunshine"
- "Wishing on a Star"
- "The City Is Mine"

### **Vol. 2... Hard Knock Life (5)**

- "It's Alright"
- "Can I Get A..."
- "Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)"
- "Money, Cash, Hoes"
- "Ni--a What, Ni--a Who (Originator 99)"

### **Vol. 3... Life and Times of S. Carter (4)**

- "Jigga My Ni--a"
- "Girl's Best Friend"
- "Do It Again (Put Ya Hands Up)"
- "Big Pimpin'"

### **The Dynasty: Roc La Familia (3)**

- "I Just Wanna Love U (Give It 2 Me)"
- "Change the Game"
- "Guilty until Proven Innocent"

### **The Blueprint (4)**

- "Izzo (H.O.V.A.)"
- "Girls, Girls, Girls"
- "Jigga That Ni--a"
- "Song Cry"

### **The Best of Both Worlds (3)**

- "Honey"
- "Take You Home with Me (A.K.A. Body)"
- "Big Chips"

### **The Blueprint 2: The Gift & The Curse (4)**

- "03 Bonnie & Clyde"
- "Hovi Baby"
- "Excuse Me Miss"
- "La-La-La"

### **The Black Album (4)**

- "Change Clothes"
- "Dirt off Your Shoulder"
- "99 Problems"
- "Encore"

### **Kingdom Come (4)**

- "Show Me What You Got"
- "Lost One"
- "Hollywood"
- "30 Something"

### **American Gangster (4)**

- "Blue Magic"
- "Roc Boys (And the Winner Is)..."
- "I Know"
- "Jocking Jay-Z (Dope boy Fresh)"

### **The Blueprint 3 (6)**

- "D.O.A. (Death of Auto-Tune)"
- "Run This Town"
- "Empire State of Mind"
- "On to the Next One"
- "Young Forever"
- "A Star is Born"

### **Watch the Throne (7)**

- "H•A•M"
- "Otis"
- "Lift Off"
- "Ni--as in Paris"
- "Why I Love You"
- "Gotta Have It"
- "No Church in the Wild"

### **Magna Carta Holy Grail (3)**

- "Holy Grail"
- "Tom Ford"
- "Part II (On the Run)"

□