

# POVERTY AND WEALTH IN MUSIC LYRICS

*Analysis of keywords and themes (2010-2019)*

BILL & MELINDA  
GATES *foundation*

*This presentation is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.*



# OVERVIEW & METHODOLOGY

[www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty](http://www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty)

# OBJECTIVES

To record the frequency and themes of wealth and poverty keywords in music lyrics from 2010-2019, we piloted a method to perform quantitative and qualitative analysis of music lyrics, using a lyrics database on **Lyrics.com**.



# KEYWORDS

- Selected 29 **wealth** and **poverty** keywords

## 8 WEALTH KEYWORDS:

- Money
- Cash
- Rich
- Diamonds
- Bank
- Trap
- Gucci
- Dollars





# 21 POVERTY KEYWORDS:

- Bills
- Rent
- Checks
- Projects
- Poverty
- Homeless
- Paycheck
- Welfare
- Wages
- Minimum Wage
- Payday\*
- Unemployed\*
- Child Support\*
- Unemployment\*
- Food Stamps\*
- Laid Off\*
- Eviction\*
- Poor People\*
- Out of work\*
- Working class\*
- Gentrification\*

# QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

- **40,467** songs with wealth or poverty keywords from 2010-2019
  - Counted total number of songs for each keyword, used Lyrics.com
- **6,301** genre tags on songs (16% of sample)
  - Identified most frequent genres for wealth/poverty keywords and each individual keyword

# QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

- Reviewed **50** unique English-language songs for each keyword and recorded qualitative themes
- Coded themes inductively on the song-level, based on recurring phrases, patterns, and topics in lyrics
- Condensed themes based on prior research conducted by GOOD Inc. (2019) on meta-narratives of poverty, paying attention to lyrics that cut against dominant wealth/poverty narratives
- Songs with references to systems and/or structural factors that contribute to poverty or wealth identified as having “counternarratives”



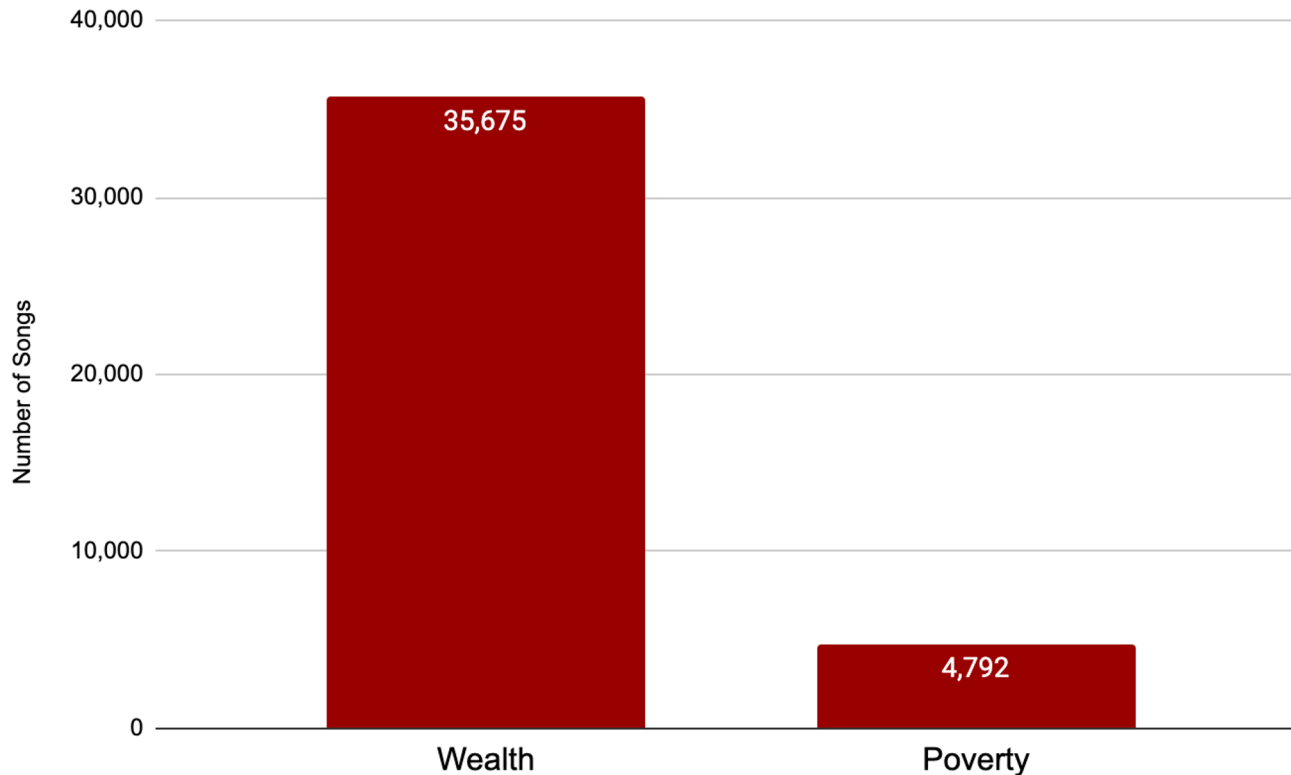
# QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

[www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty](http://www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty)

# KEY QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

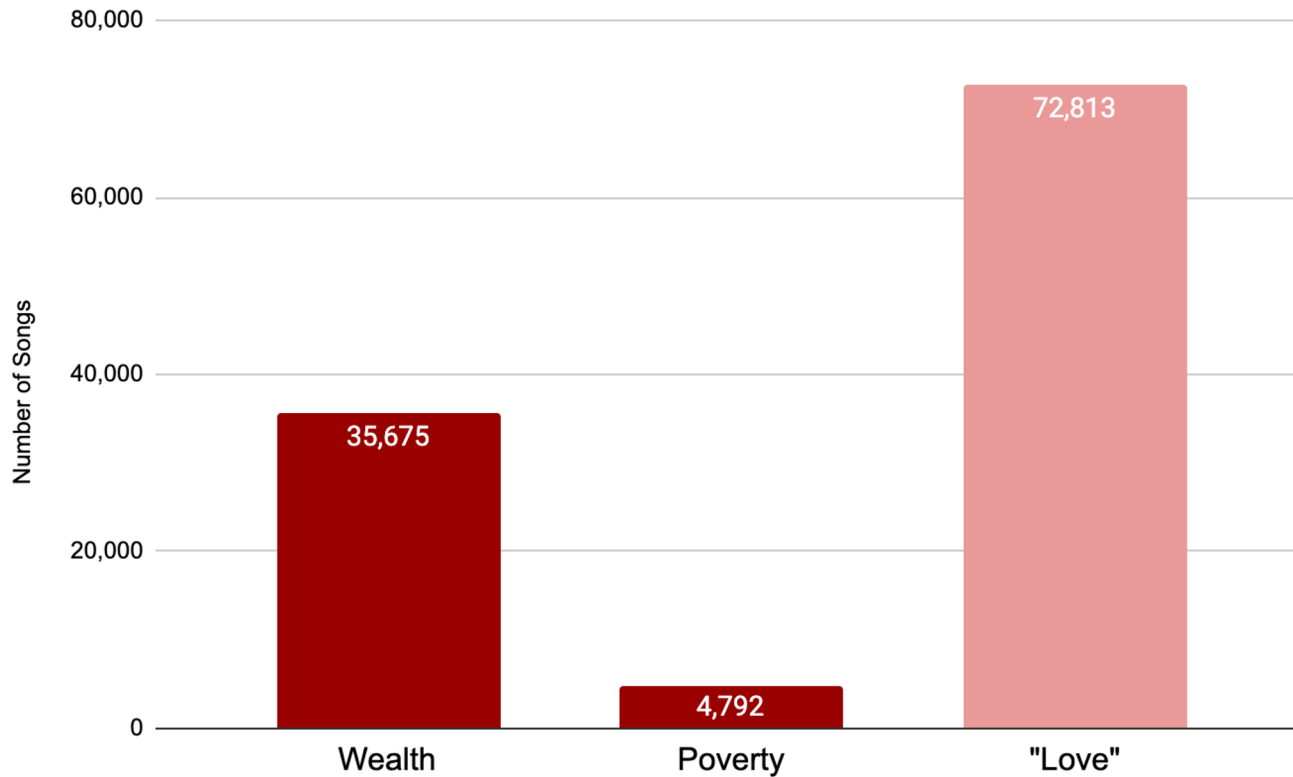
- **40,467** songs featured 29 **wealth** and **poverty** keywords
- **7 times** as many songs featured **wealth** keywords as **poverty** keywords
  - 35,675 wealth songs
  - 4,792 poverty songs
- “Money” was the most popular keyword, mentioned in over **15,000** songs

# WEALTH VS. POVERTY TOTAL SONGS



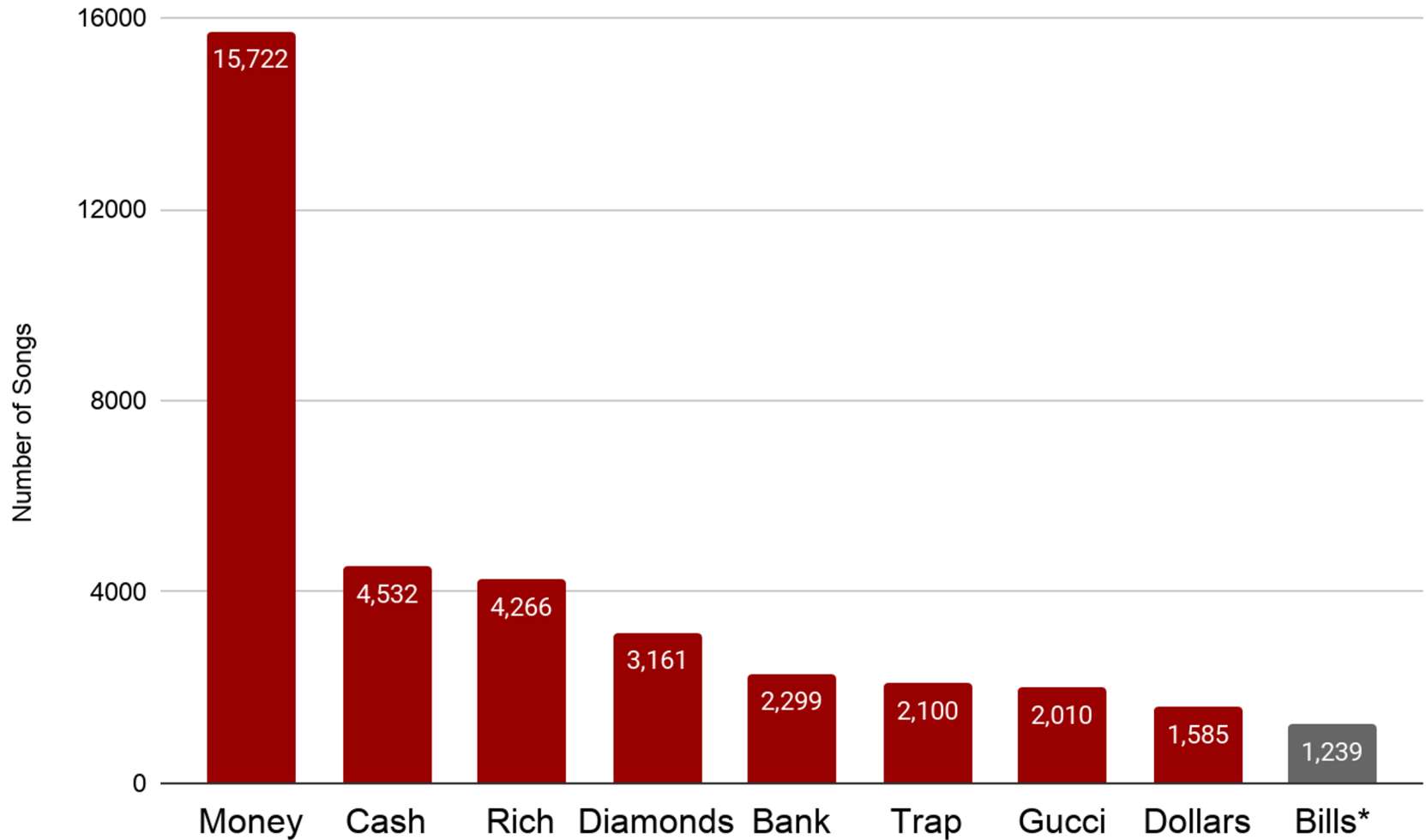
- **Wealth** songs outnumbered **poverty** songs by a ratio of 7 to 1
- This was despite the inclusion of almost 3 times as more **poverty** keywords than **wealth** keywords

# TOTAL SONGS VS. “LOVE”



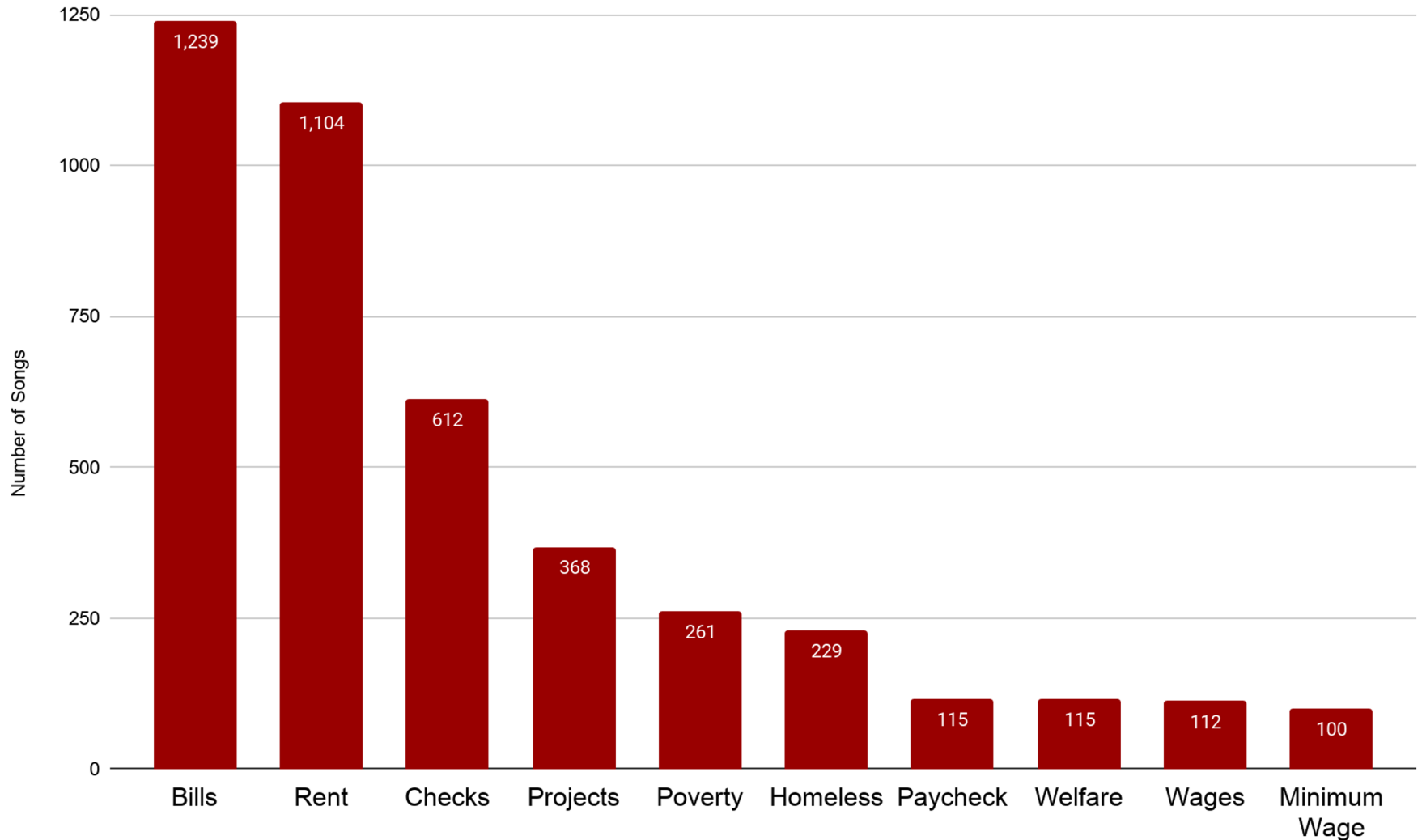
- To contextualize these numbers, we analyzed the frequency of the keyword “love”
- All 8 **wealth** keywords combined appeared in about half as many songs as “love”

# WEALTH KEYWORDS





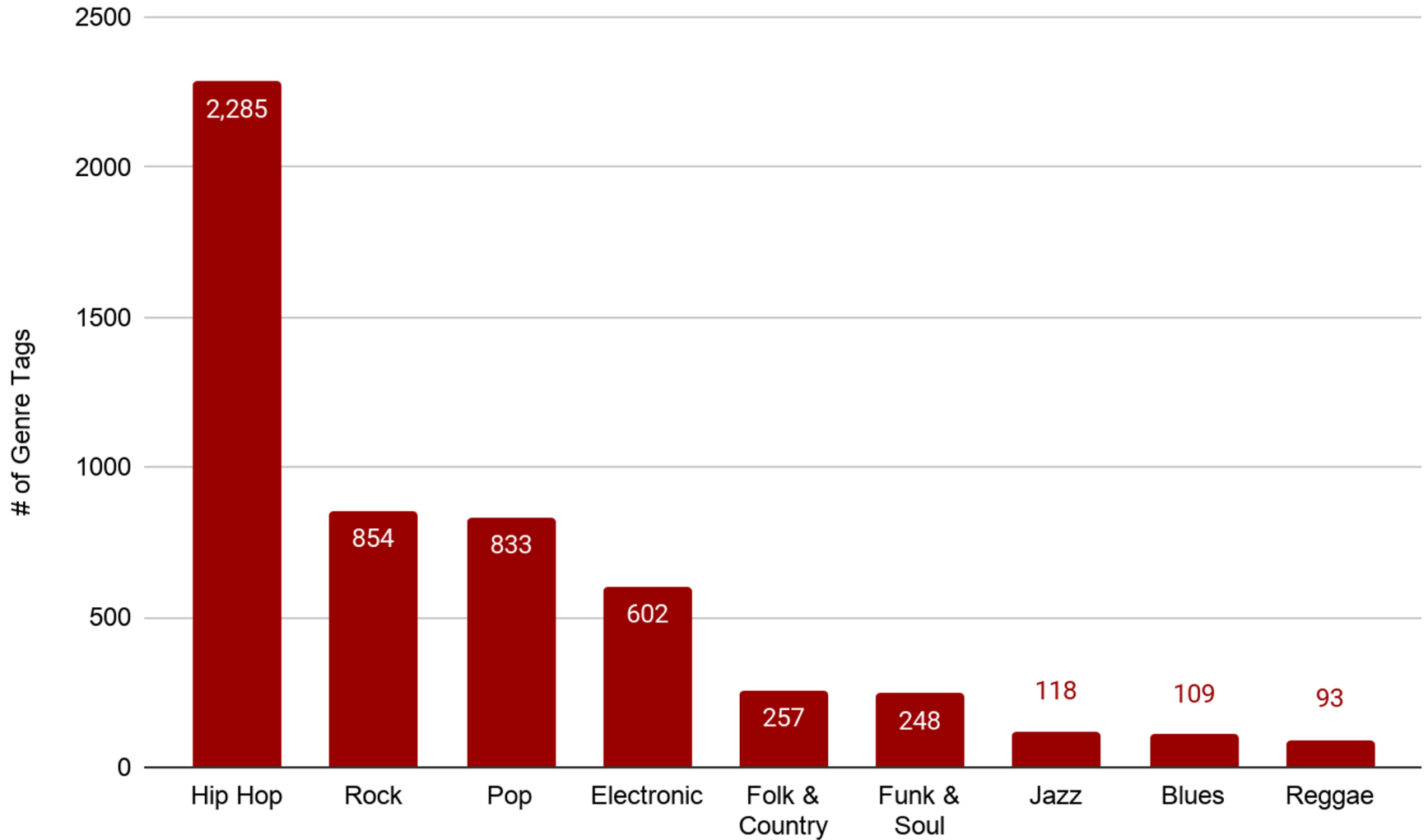
# TOP 10 POVERTY KEYWORDS



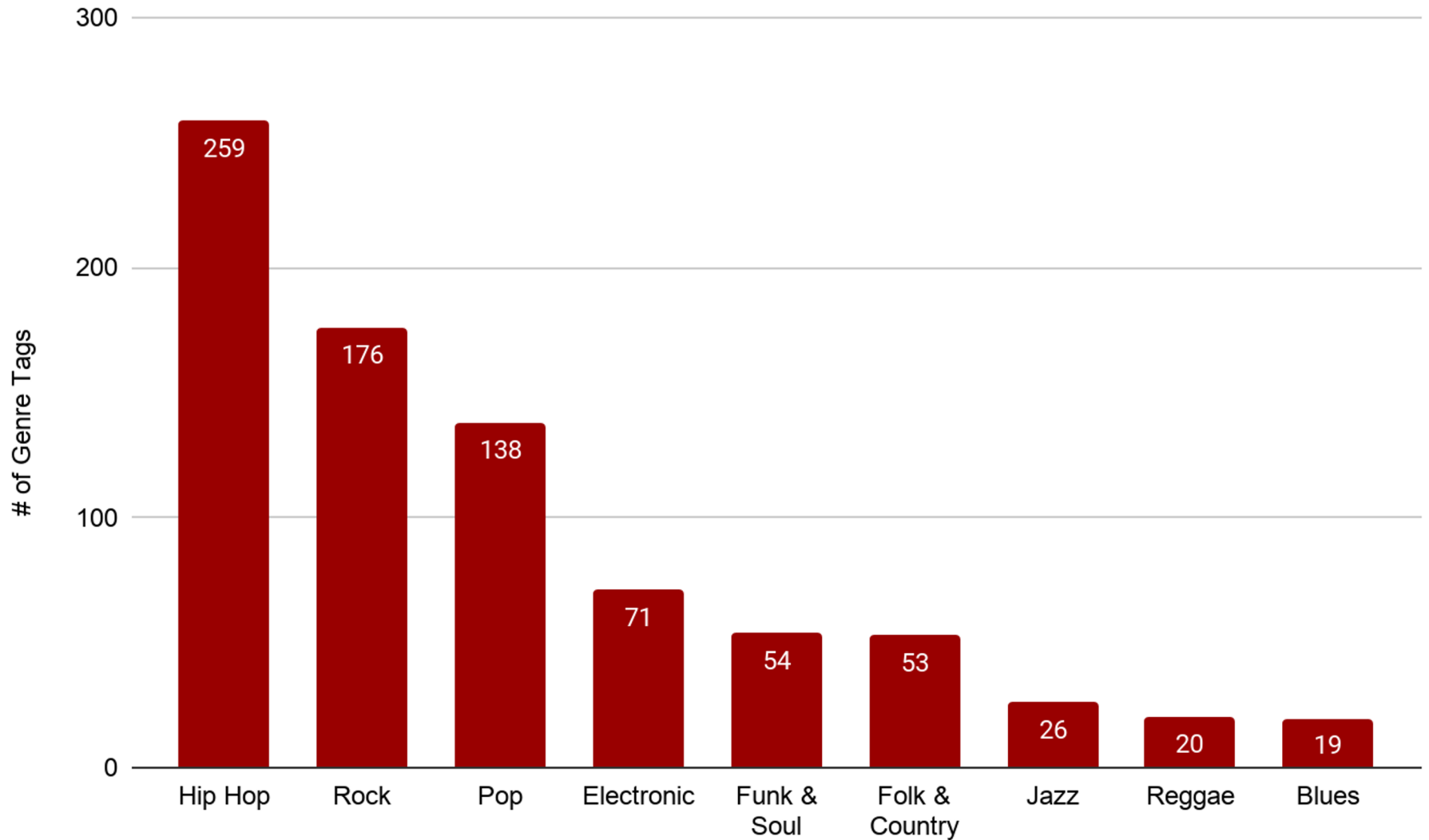
# GENRE ANALYSIS

- **Hip Hop** was the most common genre to feature either **wealth** or **poverty** keywords
  - 40% of songs in the sample with identified genre were tagged with Hip Hop
- **Hip Hop** was the top genre for 15 of 29 keywords
- **Rock** was the top genre for 9 keywords
- **Folk & Country** was among the top 3 genres for 3 keywords

# WEALTH KEYWORDS BY GENRE



# POVERTY KEYWORDS BY GENRE





# QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

[www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty](http://www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty)

# KEY QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

- GOOD's (2019) meta-narratives of poverty (character, system, greed, meritocracy, and culture) were identified in sampled songs
- Lyrical counternarratives highlighted the role of failed systems, institutions, and social determinants (particularly racism) in creating and maintaining economic inequality

# THEMES IN WEALTH KEYWORD SONGS

- Bragging about one's affluence and/or expensive purchases was a prominent themes among **wealth** keyword songs
- Wealth flaunting often paired with the meritocracy narrative of attributing one's wealth and success to nonstop hard work
- Displays of wealth were frequently connected to themes of sexual conquest and prowess—particularly for male artists, who asserted the role of wealth in attracting sexual partners



# THEMES IN WEALTH KEYWORD SONGS

- Some lyrics provided critiques of extreme wealth, by characterizing money as unimportant, meaningless, or corrupt
- Another narrative centered the accomplishments of Black artists attaining wealth, despite the historical and structural barriers they encounter



In the lyrics for “Blue Sky” (2011), Common calls himself the “*Black Wall Street*” and references MLK and the civil rights movement in celebration of his wealth.



# THEMES IN POVERTY KEYWORDS SONGS

- Personal stories of struggle featured prominently in **poverty** keyword lyrics, where some artists emphasized perseverance in escaping or overcoming poverty
- Such stories reinforce meritocracy narratives, in which anyone can go from rags-to-riches if they simply work hard enough
- Some **poverty** keywords, such as “laid off,” “unemployed,” and “eviction” were used as insults to demean artists’ rivals



In “The Gospel” (2016), Alicia Keys sings of poverty as a “*battle*” that one must work hard to overcome.

# THEMES IN POVERTY KEYWORD SONGS

- **Poverty** keywords also brought to light a number of notable counternarratives, including:
  - References to broken systems (welfare, health care, criminal justice, capitalism, politics)
  - Rejection of the American Dream
  - Making connections between race, racism, and poverty



*“Livin in America, this s\*\*t is a facade  
But you gotta push through and persevere, word to  
God  
Tryna find a home, but I can't afford a home  
'Cause I'm 25 and owe a hunnid grand in student loans  
Tryna get healthcare, but I'm on **welfare**  
Man I swear to god, I wish I was living in Bel Air  
F\*\*k Medicaid, I just wanna get paid  
[...]  
Come now folk, get woke, stay woke  
'Cause the white man want the black man stay broke”*

In “Mos Definitely” (2017), Logic raps  
of housing costs, student loans,  
healthcare, welfare, and racism.

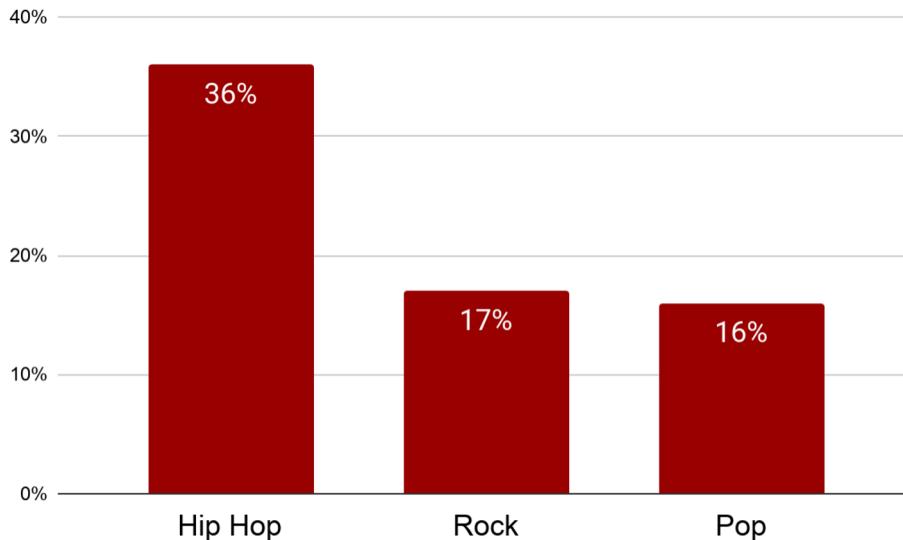


# TOP 5 WEALTH KEYWORDS

[www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty](http://www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty)

# “MONEY”

- 15,722 songs containing “Money”
- “Money” themes include:
  - Signifying extreme wealth
  - Sexual conquests of women
  - Drugs, illicit activity, and/or bail
  - Money as corrupt, meaningless, and unimportant



n =  
2,636

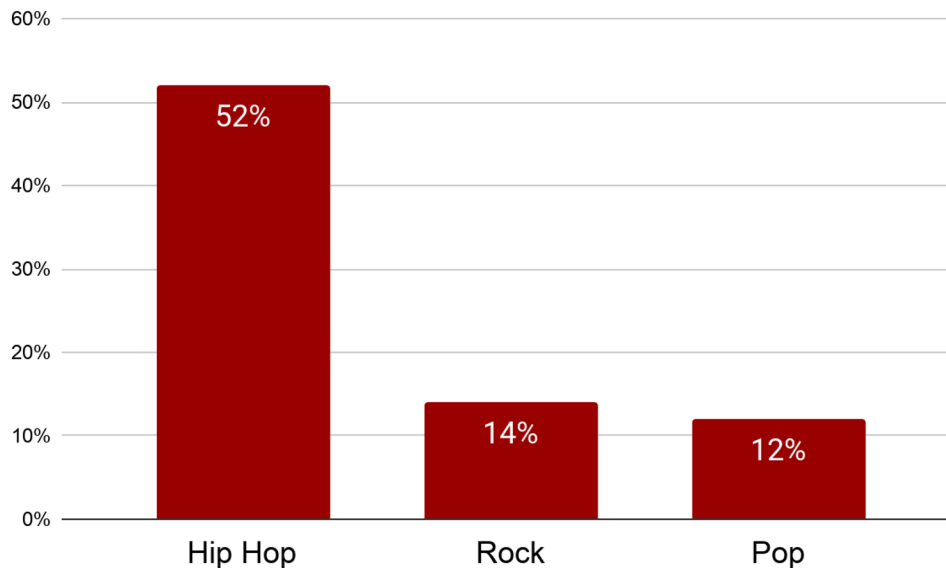


*“If your chick come close to me  
She ain't going home when she post to be (no)  
I'm getting **money** like I'm post to be  
I'm getting **money** like I'm post to be, oh”*

**- “Post to Be” by Omarion Ft. Chris Brown & Jhene Aiko” (2014)**

# “CASH”

- 4,532 songs containing “Cash”
- “Cash” themes include:
  - Spending cash to signify wealth
  - Begging for cash or being cash poor
  - Cash as powerful



n = 614

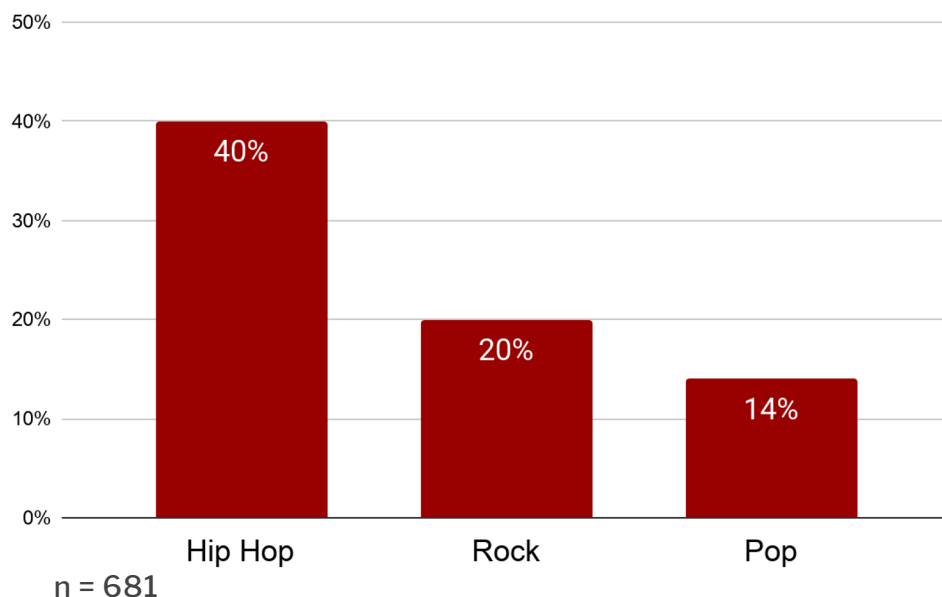


*“Make money, no vacation  
Pay **cash**, don't make payments  
Getting high like I'm eighteen  
But I've been rich since the late  
eighty's”*

**- “Stop It” by Juicy J (2013)**

# “RICH”

- 4,266 songs containing “Rich”
- “Rich” themes include:
  - Getting rich through hard work
  - Flaunting wealth
  - Contrasting wealth with artists’ own humble origins
  - Critiques of the rich and their corruption
  - Celebrating Black wealth



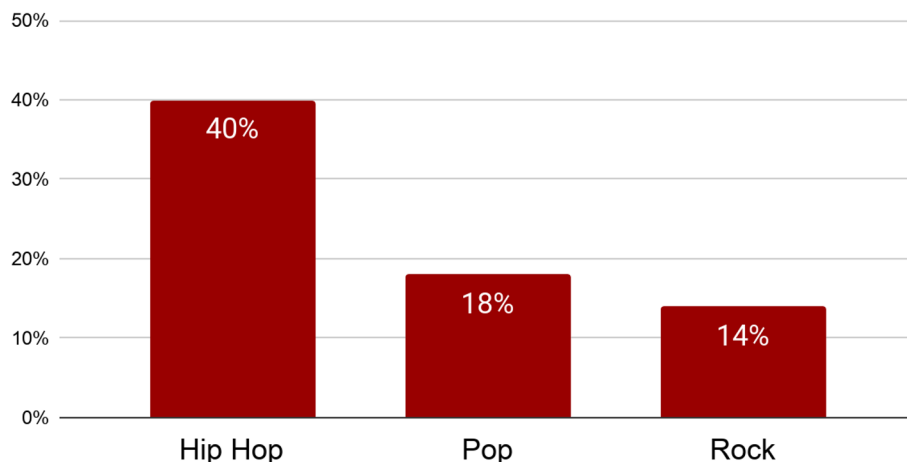
*“See dem fake leaders  
Now let me explain it real quick  
'Cause the system full of dem tricks  
And there is something you just can't miss  
No matter what you think you're fighting  
for  
To make **rich** those who profit from war  
Look what they're doing to us people  
If only they could lead  
The world to love and unity”*

**- “See Dem Fake Leaders” by Ziggy Marley (2018)**



# “DIAMONDS”

- 3,161 songs containing “Diamonds”
- “Diamonds” themes include:
  - Wealth flaunting
  - References to high-end brands
  - Critiques of wealth
  - Wealth and sexual prowess
  - Wealth and drugs



n = 468

*“If they forgot about my worth, I got a check  
to remind 'em  
Got some things on the wrist, Cartier with the  
**diamonds**  
If this was 10 years ago n\*\*\*a would've went  
**diamond**”*

**- “Know Bout Me” by Timbaland  
featuring Jay Z, Drake, and James  
Fauntleroy (2013)**

# “BANK”

- 2,299 songs containing “Bank”
- “Bank” themes include:
  - “Break the bank”
  - Stealing / “Robbing the bank”
  - “Big bank take little bank”  
(whoever has more money takes all)



*“I got white folks money that I won't blow / If you ask why 'cause the white folks don't*

*Big **bank** take lil' **bank, bank***

*Big **bank** take lil' **bank, bank***

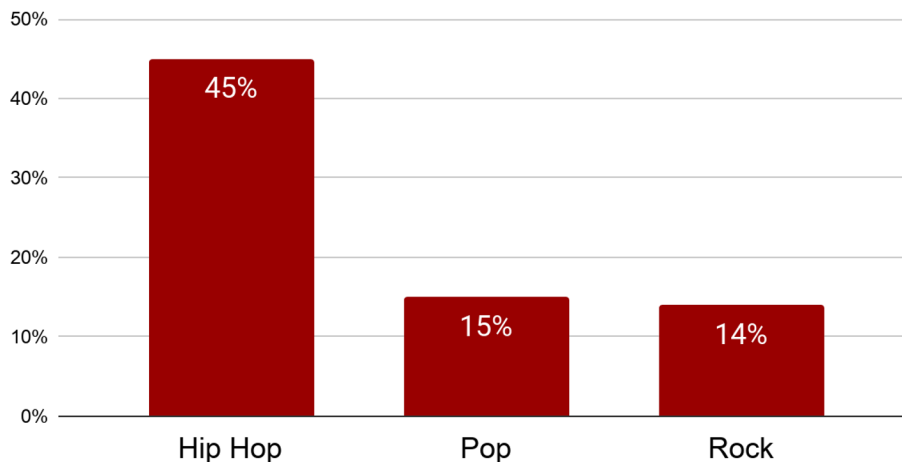
*Type of money you gon' need a safe*

*Type of money you gon' need a **bank***

*From the hood, this type of money make you stay awake*

*Type of money she gon' let you put it in her face”*

**- “Big Bank” by YG featuring Nicki Minaj, Big Sean, 2 Chainz (2018)**



n = 375



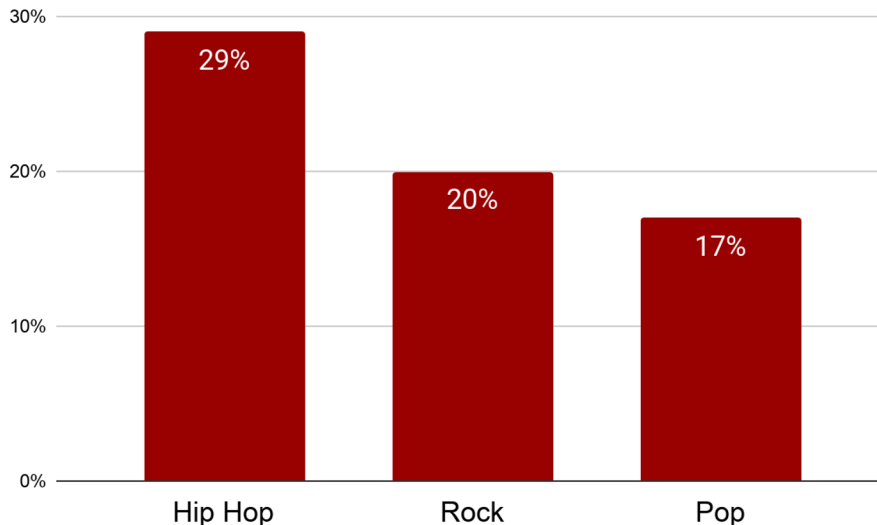


# TOP 5 POVERTY KEYWORDS

[www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty](http://www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty)

# “BILLS”

- 1,239 songs containing “Bills”
- “Bills” themes include:
  - Working hard or “grinding” to pay bills
  - Paying bills on behalf of family members
  - Ignoring bills or paying late bills
  - Wealth flaunting



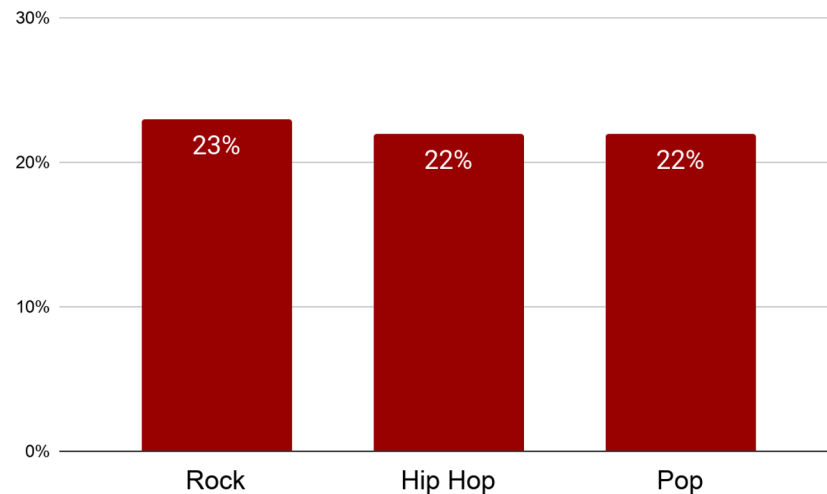
n = 189

*“Something about the way that you  
walked into my living room  
Casually and confident lookin' at the  
mess I am  
But still you, still you want me  
Stress lines and cigarettes, politics  
and deficits  
Late **bills** and overages, screamin'  
and hollerin'  
But still you, still you want me”*

**- “Next to Me” by Imagine  
Dragons (2017)**

# “RENT”

- 1,104 songs containing “Rent”
- “Rent” themes include:
  - Going from being unable to pay rent to being rich
  - Working hard to pay rent
  - Critiquing capitalism
  - Using rent prices to quantify the cost of expensive things (wealth flaunting)
  - Paying rent in exchange for sex



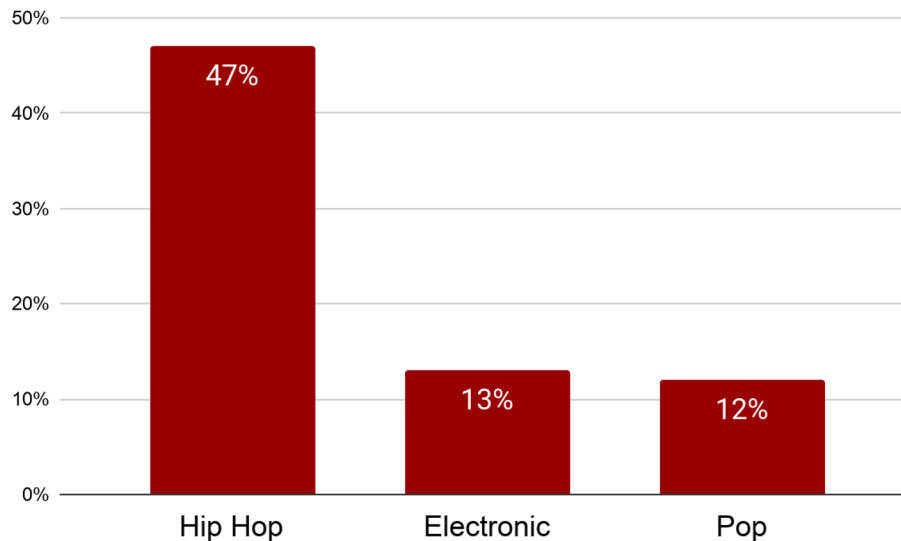
n = 250

*“I hate my job, I have no social life  
I use my check to pay my **rent**  
I've never seen a dime of it my friends  
They're never there for me  
They never show up to my shows  
I know they think my band's a joke”*

**- “Cross My Heart” by Forever the Sickest Kids (2013)**

# “CHECKS”

- 612 songs containing “Checks”
- “Checks” themes include:
  - Flaunting wealth
  - Working hard for money
  - Money as meaningless

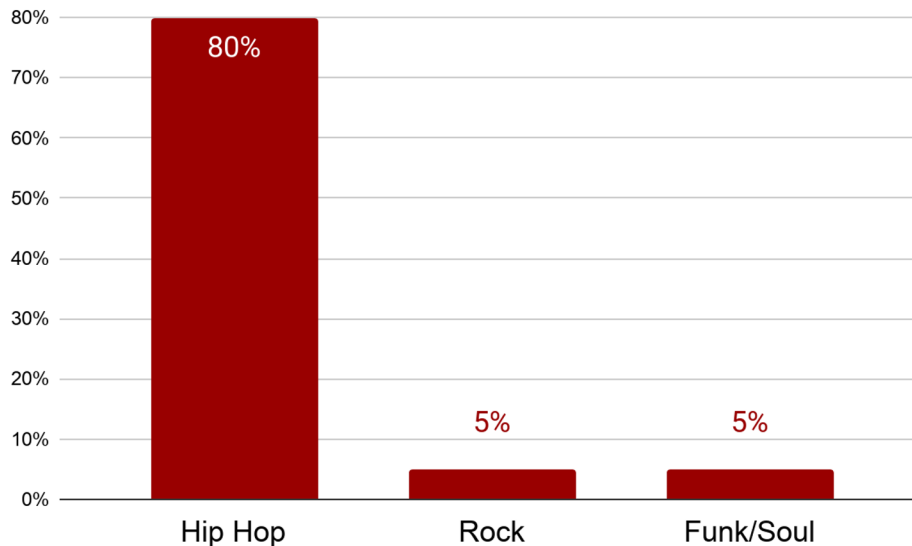


*“See I really can't relate to your Volvo  
And you can't get these shoes at a Aldo  
When I let a dude go, that's his loss  
I was cuttin' him **checks**, I was his boss  
Yo I don't give a f you, a curse, nor bless  
you  
Never let them stress you.  
I ain't a business woman, I'm a business,  
woman  
And I'm known for giving b\*\*\*\*\*s the  
business, woman”*

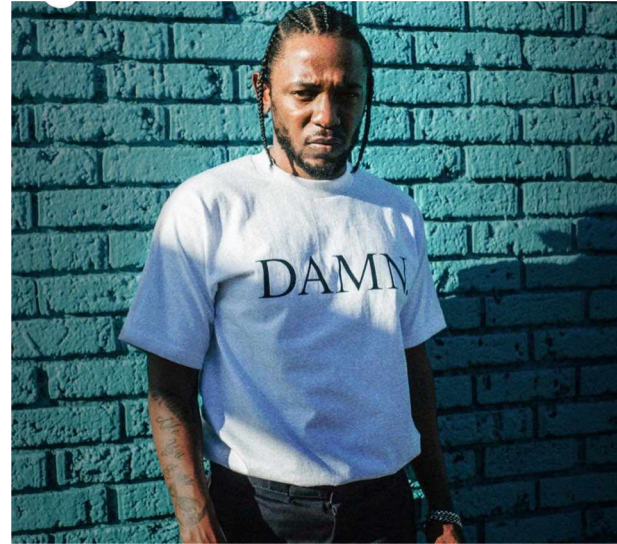
**- “I Don't Give A” by Madonna featuring Nicki Minaj (2012)**

# “PROJECTS”

- 368 songs containing “Projects”
- “Projects” themes include:
  - Growing up in the projects
  - Wanting to take one’s family out of the projects
  - Getting rich and leaving the projects



n = 55



*“Children listen, it gets deep  
See once upon a time inside the Nickerson  
Garden **projects**  
The object was to process and digest  
poverty's dialect  
Adaptation inevitable, gun violence, crack  
spot  
Federal policies raid buildings and drug  
professionals”*

**- “DUCKWORTH” by Kendrick Lamar (2017)**



# “POVERTY”

- 261 songs containing “Poverty”
- “Poverty” themes include:
  - Struggling with poverty
  - Escaping poverty
  - Poverty and broken families
  - Poverty, crime, policing, and prisons
  - Race and poverty
  - Critique of politicians and systems

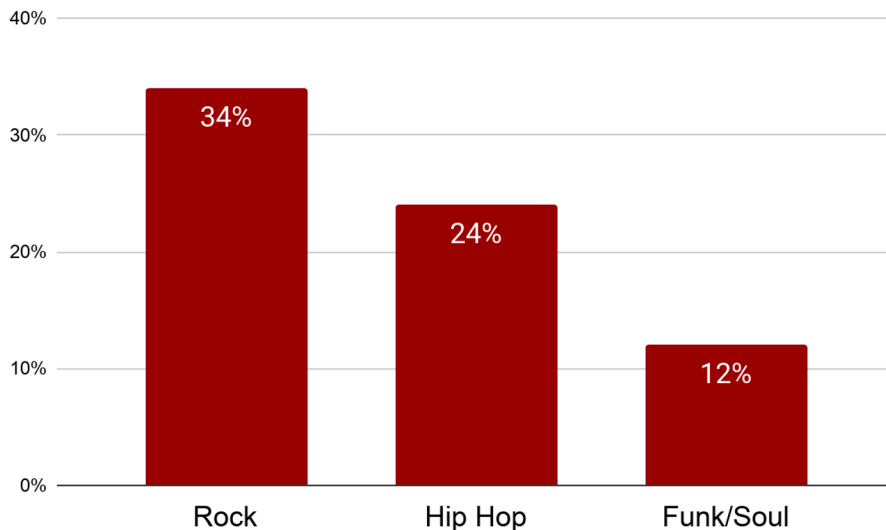


“Cops yellin', "stop, freeze," shoot him before he try to leave

Air quality so foul, I gotta try to breathe  
Endangered species and we runnin' out of trees  
If I could hold the world in the palm of these Hands, I would probably do away with these anomalies

Everybody checkin' for the new award nominee  
Wars and atrocities; look at all the **poverty**  
Ignoring the prophecies, more beef than broccoli  
Corporate monopoly, weak world economy  
Stock market topplin'  
Mad marijuana, Oxycontin, and Klonopin  
Everybody out of it?”

- “Dear God 2.0” by The Roots featuring Monsters of Folk (2010)



n = 41

# POVERTY IN MUSIC LYRICS

*Frequency analysis of poverty keywords*

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March 2021