European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol 5 | Issue 5 | September 2025
ISSN 2736-5522

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reframing Knife Crime Among Children in the UK—from a Securitization Approach to a Human Security Approach

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the growing security dilemma in the context of youth knife crime and serious violence in the United Kingdom. The article argues that knife crime is currently seen through a securitization lens, which often means that children who are involved in knife crime and weapons-enabled offending are framed as threats to societal order, reinforcing punitive responses that may exacerbate marginalisation and violence. The article explores whether a human security approach can provide a more effective response to the issue of knife crime and what this might entail in practice. Through a synthesis of academic literature and policy analysis, this article argues that the current framing of knife crime as a security issue rooted in individual responsibility overlooks the structural factors that may contribute to youth violence, such as poverty, school exclusion, and systemic racism. A human security approach is proposed as a more holistic alternative. The article concludes that meaningful change will require policy transformation, investment in communities, and a public shift in how perpetrators are viewed.

Keywords: Human security approach, knife crime, securitization approach, youth justice.

Submitted: June 16, 2025
Published: September 12, 2025

10.24018/ejsocial.2025.5.5.609

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1. Introduction

This article will focus on the security dilemma in the context of knife crime among children in the United Kingdom. It will also explore one way in which this dilemma may be overcome via a human security approach. According to critical security studies, traditional concepts of security, such as realism and liberalism (Williams & McDonald, 2018), should be challenged, and the concept of security should be reframed. Within traditional security studies, realist views would dictate that the state is the referent object, i.e., the institution to be protected, which leads to security policy being skewed towards protection from threats to the state (Kesić, 2017) as states act in their national interests. Securitization theory is associated with the Copenhagen school of thought (Hough *et al*., 2020), wherein any subject can become politicised and thereby subject to increased scrutiny by the government, leading to the issue being framed as one of security which can then justify policy changes as a means to tackle the security threat (Durak, 2023; Waever, 1995). In the case of knife crime, it is sometimes described using perhaps misleading terminology, such as "epidemic" (Kabir *et al*., 2022) and reported as such in the media. As a result, sentencing powers have changed with the aim of tackling the problem. What this does not do, however, is address the wider structural issues that may contribute to the involvement of knife crime.

Knife crime involving children in the United Kingdom continues to rise, with a 10% increase between 2021 and 2022 (Office for National Statistics, n.d.-b, n.d.-c) and a 4% increase from 2023 to 2024 (Office for National Statistics, n.d.-a). This is not a problem confined solely to London (McIntyre, 2019; Younge, 2017). In the whole of England and Wales, there were 562 homicides in the year 2023/24 (Office for National Statistics, n.d.-a). The rise in knife crime has sparked widespread concern among

policymakers, media, and the public. High profile cases are likely to bring media attention and a demand for a solution to the problem. Recent examples which have caught the attention of mainstream media include the murders of Elianne Andam in Croydon (Jessup, 2024), Brianna Ghey (CPS, 2024), a transgender teen, and the Southport murders (Sandford *et al.*, 2024), which led to riots in a number of towns and cities across the U.K. in summer 2024. Changes to legislation have also meant that sentences for knife offences have increased (Sentencing Council, n.d.).

Despite multiple interventions, the problem persists, raising fundamental questions about the underlying frameworks used to address it. This article engages with the concept of the security dilemma as it applies to youth knife crime, arguing that the dominant approach–rooted in securitization theory–has limited effectiveness and may even reinforce the conditions that perpetuate violence. As an alternative, this article proposes a shift toward a human security paradigm, one that focuses on addressing structural issues and prioritising the safety and well-being of individuals and communities.

2. Methodology

This article adopts a theoretical and conceptual methodology grounded in critical security studies to analyse how knife crime among children in the U.K. is framed. The methodological approach taken is primarily discursive and interpretive, relying on secondary data sources including academic literature, policy documents, government statistics and media reports. These sources were selected purposively for their relevance to the key themes under discussion and the analysis is informed by a critical reading of the literature and policies that guide current youth justice responses.

The article engages in a theoretical analysis of two frameworks–securitization theory and human security theory–in relation to attitudes towards knife crime. The article compares the contrasting logics of securitization and human security approaches. The article demonstrates how securitization theory frames young people as threats, whereas a human security lens highlights their vulnerabilities and the need for holistic protection.

By synthesising theoretical insights and contextual data, the article aims to offer a conceptual reorientation rather than an empirical generalisation. It seeks to propose a shift toward an alternative framework that prioritises structural reform and community well-being, which is more in line with trauma-informed and child-first practice. This theoretical approach is particularly appropriate for interrogating normative assumptions about security, responsibility, and the role of the state, and offers a foundation for future empirical research or policy innovation.

3. Securitization Theory vs Human Security Theory

Securitization theory, developed by the Copenhagen School, suggests that political actors can frame social issues as existential threats, thereby justifying extraordinary measures. In the context of U.K. knife crime policy, securitization has meant portraying young people as threats, rather than as individuals requiring protection and support. This has led to increased policing, punitive sentencing, and interventions that focus on individual behaviour rather than structural causality. A securitization approach is very "black and white", with perpetrators being painted as "bad" and deserving of whatever punishment they receive, such as the case of the murder of James Bulger in 1992, which caught the public and media's attention in a way that perhaps had not occurred before, and could be argued to have set the scene for subsequent media coverage of similar crimes (Franklin & Petley, 2005). There was extensive media coverage at the time and in subsequent years of the perpetrators, with news reporting speaking of those responsible in negative terms (Franklin & Petley, 2005). This extended to a campaign by The Sun newspaper to have boys' sentences increased (Reg. v. Secretary of State for the Home Department, (1997–1998)), which did eventually bear fruit when the boys' sentences were increased by the then Home Secretary Michael Howard, although this was later overturned when Howard was found to have acted outside of his capacity as Home Secretary (Reg. v. Secretary of State for the Home Department, Ex parte V. and Reg. v. Secretary of State for the Home Department, Ex parte T, n.d.). James and Jenks (1996) have explored factors relating to public perceptions of childhood in the context of those children who commit crimes, including moral issues whereby the image of the "child" as an innocent is shattered by involvement in such a crime, leading to a blurring of boundaries between adult and child and the "eviction" of the child from that category.

The Bulger case bears some similarities to that of Silje Redergard, a five-year-old Norwegian girl who was killed by peers of a similar age in 1994. Instead of demonising the killers in the media and holding criminal trials, however, the perpetrators were given extensive therapy, professionals worked to calm the community, and significant support was offered to all those affected (James & MacDougall, 2010). Such a response could be said to take a human security approach to such a tragedy, acknowledging that something terrible has happened but working with all those affected.

This article argues that taking a human security approach would be a more holistic way to address the various factors that can contribute to knife crime, including poverty, social exclusion, economic marginalisation and would be a better way to overcome the security dilemma. Human security argues that societies should move beyond punitive measures to help increase personal safety (Hough *et al.*, 2020). Critical security studies aim to challenge pre-existing concepts and theories of security and reframe them. Realism is a traditional security concept (Williams & McDonald, 2018) that puts forward the state as the referent object to be protected via specific security measures and policies. Such an approach can lead to a major focus on issues such as anti-terrorism, war, nuclear threat, migration, economic wellbeing etc. While these are of course, important sectors for any state to focus on, they perhaps ignore the realities that individuals within the state may face on a day-to-day basis with regards to their own safety and well-being. Within this context, it could be argued that knife crime as a security dilemma is inevitable due to the focus being on the state as the referent object rather than the individual. This means that efforts to maintain security and address threats are mainly targeted towards the "larger" threats outlined above as issues of national security. It could be argued that due to the global political context, this is absolutely necessary as other states also focus on similar issues and as such, the United Kingdom government must also do the same. If the government didn't focus on such threats, e.g. terrorism, and were then the targets of a major terror attack, questions would be posed as to why this issue was neglected. This is despite more people dying due to knife crime than terrorism in the U.K. each year (Office for National Statistics, n.d.-b, n.d.-c).

4. Media Narratives and the Construction of Threat

In the last two years, cases such as the murders of Brianna Ghey (February 2023), Elianne Andam (September 2023), and the Southport murders (July 2024) have brought renewed focus on knife crime as a security concern. Media narratives can sensationalise such events, and, in the case of the riots that followed the Southport murders, social media in particular may have helped fuel some of the revenge-seeking behaviour that was witnessed. Such an approach can mean that there is not enough focus on efforts to understand such tragedies due to a preoccupation with revenge. These narratives also ignore the gendered status of knife crime, with it being seen mainly as a male issue (Cook & Walklate, 2022), which may feed into public shock when a female is involved, either as a victim or perpetrator.

Media reporting on knife crime can fuel "moral panic" (Cohen, 2011), demonising certain groups (particularly BAME people either as perpetrators or victims), or activities like drill music, a genre currently particularly popular among young people that can feature the use of violent lyrics and imagery in videos (Schwarze and Fatsis, 2022, Stuart, 2020). There have been cases where involvement in drill music has been used as a way to demonise someone, including the controversial case of Chris Kaba, with media using negative terms such as "feared" and "carnage" to describe the drill group 67, which Chris Kaba was linked to (Daily Telegraph, 2024). Drill music has also been used as evidence in criminal cases, despite research showing it doesn't necessarily indicate criminal involvement (France, 2018; Pinkney & Robinson-Edwards, 2018; Kleinberg & McFarlane, 2020). Evidence suggests that drill artists may exaggerate criminal connections and involvement in order to build a particular image e.g., building rivalries to increase authenticity, but this unfortunately can escalate into real-world violence (Alexander, 2023a). A human security approach would seek to explore the cultural experiences of those involved in drill music, which would inevitably involve exploring issues relating to poverty, social exclusion, ambition, identity, etc. It would seek to avoid stigmatising those involved in drill music as violent and to increase understanding and empathy for the experiences of drill artists and fans (Scott, 2020).

5. Securitization Theory in Practice

It has been widely known for years that stop and search appears to disproportionately target those from BAME communities. In the year ending March 2023, 20.9 stops per 1,000 people identified as Black Caribbean, 92 stops per 1,000 people who identified as Black Other, but only 5.9 stops per 1,000 people who identified as White, and 5.6 stops per 1,000 people who identified as White British (Stop and search, 2024). Increased contact with police via unfair stop and search practices can skew statistics and reinforce perceptions that BAME people are more likely to be involved in knife crime. A human security approach would seek to build relationships between the community and police, particularly communities that are disproportionately affected by stop and search practices, in order to try and increase a sense of trust between police and the local community. Community involvement could also help both sides to understand the position of the other, building empathy and trust. There is not sufficient space within this article to do justice to the concerns over systemic racism within police,

which date back several decades despite numerous reports (MacPherson, 1999), but a human security approach would seek to address longstanding concerns within BAME communities regarding policing approaches.

Changes to legislation were implemented to introduce mandatory custodial sentences for any repeat offenders (Sentencing Council, n.d.). In theory, this means that a second knife offence would incur a mandatory custodial sentence, including for children. Legislative changes also include Knife Crime Prevention Orders (KCPOs) (Hendry, 2022), which were trialled in 2021 and allowed police to propose stringent conditions, sometimes on people who had no prior convictions. This exemplifies the securitization theory in that those suspected to be at risk of becoming perpetrators of knife crime are seen as a threat and treated as such by the state. This could lead to criminalisation amongst those who may be subjected to them (Parpworth, 2023), and can lead to instances of penalising someone twice, as carrying a weapon is already illegal under U.K. legislation, so a person could effectively be prosecuted both for possessing a weapon and also for breaching the conditions of the KCPO. Ironically, initiatives such as KCPOs were designed to fall under the umbrella of prevention despite their overwhelmingly punitive nature.

Most importantly, focusing on the individual as the threat within the context of securitization theory means that broader structural issues that can contribute to knife crime are overlooked (Griffin, 2023). Interventions designed to support young people at risk of, or convicted of, weapons offences, are targeted mainly towards the individual e.g. youth justice programmes such as weapons awareness or victim awareness work. This is of course helpful to an extent but doesn't address the structural issues that might be affecting the individual, such as economic inequality, learning needs, poverty, school exclusion etc (Haylock *et al*., 2020). Any of these conditions can make a young person more vulnerable to being targeted for exploitation or groomed into a gang, which could make them more at risk of becoming a victim or perpetrator of knife crime. Marginalised young people may form their own norms and values which influence their behaviour, including criminal behaviour (Miller, 1958), and economic marginalisation may be so entrenched through generations that it may be difficult to target even with appropriate professional interventions (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2008). It is here that this article will now turn to the alternative of the human security approach.

6. The Human Security Approach to Knife Crime

In recent years various interventions (outlined below) have been implemented across the United Kingdom with the aim of trying to tackle knife crime. Violence Reduction Units have been implemented in certain areas of the United Kingdom following the success of such an approach in Scotland (Harris, 2018). Rainey *et al*.'s (2015) analysis demonstrated a reduction in assault-related A&E attendance at one hospital in Glasgow, which they attribute at least partially to the introduction of the VRU. The aim of the VRU is to take a public health approach towards knife crime, i.e. treating it like a disease which needs to be treated and prevented (Middleton, 2022). VRU's can help to fund projects to tackle knife crime. This can include things like ensuring youth workers are available in the hospital to offer support to any young person admitted as a result of being the victim of violence (Alexander *et al*., 2024). It can be argued that this approach is currently at odds with the overall securitization approach to knife crime, which is increasingly punitive and sees the individual as the "threat". As such, these schemes may not have as much of an impact as they could if the security dilemma relating to knife crime were tackled via a different approach, and they are not always implemented consistently (Hurst *et al*., 2024). Alongside the implementation of the VRU in Scotland, the government have also recently removed all under 18s from custody in favour of the use of secure accommodation (The Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 (Commencement No. 1 and Transitional Provision) Regulations 2024, n.d.). There has been a drastic decrease in the number of young people in custody in other parts of the U.K., with 400 under-18s in custody as of October 2024 (Youth custody data, 2024) However, significant concerns remain over those currently residing in the custodial estate (HMIP, 2024). This is, unfortunately, nothing new, with concerns about the secure estate dating back years (Bateman, 2008). A novel approach to youth custody, which may fall under a human security approach, has recently been implemented via Oasis Restore; however, there is currently no evaluation of this project due to the recency of its opening. A human security approach could also include focusing on a public health approach to tackling knife crime (Brenner, 2022). Hurst *et al*. (2024) explore different fields in which a public health approach has been tried, showing that such an approach is not solely limited to tackling issues such as knife crime. However, their research shows that there is a huge inconsistency in the way in which the public health approach is implemented.

There has been a shift towards greater use of prevention and diversion within the youth justice sector, with programmes such as the Turnaround Programme (Raab *et al*., n.d.) and the Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforce (gov.uk, 2021) in place to try and capture those young people on the cusp of

involvement in the criminal justice system as a whole and to work with them to avoid criminalising them. At present these kinds of programmes can be implemented differently depending on the area, may have specific inclusion criteria, or may not be available in all areas of the country, which means that not all young people have access to them, however it is evidence of a move towards adopting more of a human security approach in some ways.

There has also been a recent move towards child-first practice (Case & Haines, 2015; Haine & Case, 2018; Wigzell *et al*., 2024) within the youth justice sector. Initially promoted by the First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford (Drakeford, 2009), child-first practice advocates meeting the child "where they are", and tailoring interventions to their specific needs and circumstances. The move towards child-first practice appears to be a positive one, and links with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), whereby practitioners recognise that basic needs, including safety, must be met first. While youth justice practitioners are using a child-first approach, this is not necessarily the case with Children's Social Care, the courts, the custodial estate, police, education, and other services that may be involved in working with a specific child. As such, it may be difficult to implement a multi-agency approach towards child-first practice. One criticism of the child-first approach could be that it continues to place the emphasis on the individual and their actions, and that it contradicts the risk management approach currently utilised within the youth justice system in England and Wales (Case *et al*., 2024).

A human security approach in the context of knife crime would argue that children should be protected from knife crime and its effects by addressing their personal security. This can be achieved by not only working with the individual to address their immediate safety concerns, but also addressing structural issues such as poverty, inequality, school exclusion, exploitation and gang involvement etc. This differs from the securitization approach in that it involves the entire community being empowered and given the resources to address such structural issues, which in turn would reduce risk to individual safety. Childhood is extended thanks to continued compulsory education, difficulties entering the workplace, and other socioeconomic complexities (Furlong, 2006), and communities can provide an additional source of support for those navigating those transitions.

A human security approach may involve tackling some of the issues associated with austerity, such as the closing of youth clubs and reliance on the third sector and charity funding to deliver services that may previously have been provided by the state. Research has shown the importance of access to youth clubs, particularly among the most vulnerable children (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). Statutory services such as Children's Social Care have not been immune to cuts associated with austerity. The rise of food banks is one example of the impact of austerity, with the Trussell Trust reporting a 94% increase in food bank usage over the past 5 years (The Trussell Trust, n.d.). On the one hand, it is admirable that the public donates to food banks to ensure those less fortunate than themselves are able to access food; however, the need for food banks in one of the richest countries in the world could be said to be an overall negative. Nonetheless, community-run food banks could be a source of strength and cohesion within a human security approach, as involving the community in tackling structural issues is a key component of this approach. Sometimes there can be an assumption that "professionals know best" and that interventions should be led by the state, which in turn disempowers communities and can lead to increases in violence (Alexander, 2023b). Alexander demonstrates that an informal human security approach was working within a local context until interrupted by a professionalisation of interventions, which removed some of the community structures that had been helping to safeguard vulnerable children and young people. Achinewhu-Nworgu *et al*. (2013) explore black males' reasons for carrying weapons, with lack of family unit, particularly the absence of male role models, a frequently occurring issue. A human security approach would help provide such role models from within the community.

A human security approach could also involve further focus on prevention, which could include further investment into the programmes outlined above (Turnaround, ASPT) but with more of a focus on a whole-family approach. Such approaches should not be confined to solely within the realm of youth justice but should also involve working closely with education, health, housing, Children's Social Care etc. to ensure that support is not just targeted to the child with the family being somewhat of an afterthought, but that the family are at the centre of the support being offered.

A human security approach would also necessitate working in a trauma-informed way with children (Day *et al*., 2023). Trauma-informed approaches could be said to be at odds with some interventions currently available, such as events which aim to use fear or provide a "shock" to young people involved in knife crime and do not account for those who may have lost peers to knife crime or been victims of knife crime themselves and are not supported by evidence (Hobson *et al*., 2022). Such interventions could be argued to responsibilise young people and shame them for their actions without accounting for the structural and contextual issues that may be contributing to their carrying a weapon.

7. Challenges to Implementation

A human security approach would necessitate significant investment into tackling structural issues, which may present some issues in itself, given the current economic situation in the United Kingdom at the time of writing. Current funding has been criticised at targeting short-term interventions and with insufficient sums of money (British Youth Council, 2019). Long-term structural change may be difficult to achieve, given that political parties are never guaranteed to be in power for more than one election cycle.

A human security approach would advocate a greater focus on the public health approach, such as that adopted in Scotland. Without repeating previous discussions on Scotland's VRU and public health approach, this would require a change in policy and move away from an overall punitive approach. Violence Reduction Units, despite being rooted in human security principles, still operate within systems dominated by punitive logics, which can lead to a dilution of impact. Leading on from this, changes in policy would be instrumental in implementing a human security approach. Knife crime does not appear to be solvable simply by arresting those caught with weapons and imprisoning them. It may remove one person with a knife from the street, but it doesn't solve the wider problem. This could be a challenge due to public perceptions of knife crime, which could be argued to be influenced widely by media reporting. A human security approach would mean not demonising those who have committed crimes, while still acknowledging their actions were wrong. It would mean avoiding moral panics and media sensationalising (Green, 2008). Would such an approach be possible in the United Kingdom, or would our sense of needing "revenge" as part of the justice system override opportunities to address the security dilemma?

Involving the family and community may be challenging in situations where families may be subject to Child Protection plans due to concerns over parenting, or in situations where children are in care and not living with their families. Recognition needs to be given to the circumstances of children in care, who can be subject to frequent moves and placement breakdowns, which can limit the support available. Children in care are also recognised as being at higher risk of criminalisation and criminal exploitation than their counterparts who are not living in care (Bateman, 2016; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2017; Hunter, 2023).

8. Conclusion

This article has presented the security dilemma in relation to knife crime among children as it currently exists through the lens of securitization theory, outlining the problems associated with such an approach as well as the limited attempts to try and fit different approaches and interventions within a securitization approach. This article has then presented a human security approach as an alternative to the current approach, and has outlined what this might look like in practice, including greater implementation of some of the current programmes, such as VRU's, as well as significant investment into wider community resources as a way to resolve more structural issues that might be contributing to knife crime, including empowering communities to support each other. Evidence shows that despite promising programmes VRUs and community-based youth initiatives, their effectiveness is undermined by their utilisation within a predominantly punitive framework (Densley *et al*., 2020). Of course, addressing structural issues related to knife crime may also be applicable to issues of broader crime and other societal issues and are not necessarily exclusive to tackling knife crime alone. There are potential challenges with this, not least the financial implications of trying to tackle structural poverty, for example, which could involve increasing taxes to help fund the support that is required. This could be an unpopular choice among voters, which may mean that such a policy is unlikely to be adopted by politicians. A perhaps equally important challenge would be tackling public perceptions of those involved in knife crime, which can be strongly influenced by the media. Addressing the human nature of a need for revenge in cases where someone has been harmed would be critical to ensure the success of a human security approach, as it would involve removing the concept of the perpetrator as "evil", a "monster", i.e. othering them.

This article has argued that while a human security approach would be a more appropriate way to try and tackle knife crime, the current securitization approach almost inevitably ensures that the security dilemma surrounding knife crime will remain an issue moving forwards. Research shows that police agree that a multi-agency, preventative approach is required to tackle knife crime (Bullock *et al*., 2023). Continuing to fit elements of a human security approach within the current securitization approach, although positive, is likely to produce limited results due to the overall punitive elements of the securitization approach. If we maintain the current approach towards the issue of knife crime with children and young people, the security dilemma will remain inevitable due to continued perception of the individual as the threat. Such an approach responsibilises young people and assumes that the onus

is on them to change and not to address the wider issues that may be contributing to their behaviour. The interventions outlined above are all attempts to bring a different approach towards tackling knife crime, but set within the wider context of securitization theory, such approaches cannot make the required structural changes. To be effective, human security must be adopted not as a supplementary approach, but as the dominant framework guiding youth justice and community safety policy.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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