

# Southport attacks: What we know about knife crime in the UK and how to solve it

August 5 2024, by Sue Roberts

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The knife attack on a dance class of children [in Southport](#) has left the country horrified. We do not yet know much about what happened, but a male aged 17 has been [charged](#) with the murder of three girls and 10

counts of attempted murder.

Misinformation, distributed via [social media](#), has been linked to [serious violence](#) after the attacks.

An attack of this kind is extremely rare. We know [very little](#) about the alleged attacker, except his age and name, and that the prosecution [said in court](#) that he had an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis. At this stage it would not be helpful to generalize or try to identify conclusions, but the police are not treating this as a terrorism-related incident.

Attacks like these prompt calls for knife crime to be [better](#) tackled and knives to be harder to access. Earlier this year, the Labor party put out an [action plan](#) which includes the ambition to cut knife crime by half. It is early in the life of the new government and such ambitions may be realized in time.

The previous government's [criminal justice bill](#) included measures to limit the sale of knives and increase police powers, but it was not passed before the end of the last parliament.

The many causes of and potential solutions to knife crime are [well documented](#) in extensive research, [including my own](#). Social issues including poverty and deprivation, serious mental health issues and online radicalization are all part of the [prevalence of knife crime](#).

The lack of a proper home, violence in the home, lack of resources and money, parental neglect, [adverse childhood experiences](#), supply of drugs and so-called [county lines](#) are also sometimes part of the picture.

The social issues behind knife crime are well known to [parliament](#) and [law enforcement](#), and feature in the government's strategy on [serious violence](#) from 2018. And yet, knife crime is [increasing each year](#) in

England and Wales.

## What are the solutions?

One of the reasons we have not been able to tackle this in the long term is the lack of collaboration between different agencies and sectors of society. Knife crime and other violence are [complex problems](#), but the approach in England and Wales has so far been too simple, [focused on punishment, not prevention](#).

In contrast, Scotland's partnership approach has attracted international attention for its [success](#) and impact. The country's Violence Reduction Unit treats knife crime as a complex public health issue, and homicides [were more than halved](#) in the decade after it was set up in 2005.

This approach involves not just the criminal justice system, but also schools, health and [mental health services](#), probation, [social services](#) and youth outreach. (Some scholars argue that cuts to youth services have played a role in rising knife crime in London).

Calls for a similar approach in England and Wales have been largely [left unanswered](#). We need a clear policy on tackling [knife crime](#) that spreads throughout society.

The internet—and lack of regulation—also presents concerns, specifically in the prevalence of violent material and the availability of knives.

Knife sales and purchases on [the internet](#) are difficult to police. The National Police Chiefs Council is trying to assemble a current [picture of](#) the availability of knives through internet retailers.

But regulating the internet has proven an intractable problem. The UK's

[Online Safety Act](#) attempts to protect the vulnerable from online harm but is slow to [keep pace](#) with technological advances.

Recently, police have warned about a rise in people [fascinated by violence](#) turning to extreme behavior sparked by online activity.

Little is known about the background to this terrible tragedy, but it is clear we cannot wait for reviews or strategies any longer. We need immediate action to keep pace with rapid developments in internet regulation, and to prevent [violence](#) through a holistic approach—not just punish it after it happens.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Southport attacks: What we know about knife crime in the UK and how to solve it (2024, August 5) retrieved 5 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-southport-knife-crime-uk.html>

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