

KNIFE CRIME ARCHES IN SCHOOLS:

Evidence on walk-through metal detectors and violence prevention in UK education settings



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Overview

Knife crime involving children and young people has become an increasingly prominent safeguarding concern in the United Kingdom, leading to growing pressure on schools to demonstrate how they are preventing serious violence and keeping pupils safe. In response, some schools have considered or implemented walk-through metal detectors, commonly referred to as “knife crime arches” or “knife arches”, at school entrances.

These devices are intended to detect metallic weapons and deter pupils from bringing knives onto school premises. While knife arches are often presented as a decisive and visible response to risk, their effectiveness as a violence-prevention measure remains contested. This literature review examines the research and policy evidence on the use of knife arches in schools, with a specific focus on violence prevention, safeguarding, school climate, and unintended consequences.



In England, schools have statutory powers to screen pupils for prohibited items using walk-through or hand-held metal detectors under Department for Education guidance on searching, screening and confiscation (Department for Education, 2022). Screening is defined as scanning pupils for weapons before they enter school premises and may be conducted without suspicion, provided it is proportionate and appropriately communicated to pupils and parents. The guidance advises school leaders to consult with local police, to ensure reasonable adjustments are made for pupils with disabilities, and to embed screening within wider behaviour and safeguarding arrangements (Department for Education, 2022). While this framework establishes that knife arches are lawful and permissible, it does not provide evidence that they reduce knife carrying or violence. UK policy therefore clarifies how knife arches may be used, but not whether they work as a violence-prevention strategy.

Ofsted's review of safeguarding children and young people from knife crime reinforces the importance of this distinction between permissibility and effectiveness. Ofsted emphasises that knife crime is shaped by complex social and community factors and cannot be addressed by schools alone (Ofsted, 2019). The report highlights the role of early identification of vulnerability, strong relationships with pupils, and multi-agency working in preventing serious violence. Although Ofsted acknowledges that some schools use searches and screening, it does not identify knife arches as an evidence-based solution to knife crime. Instead, it cautions against approaches that may undermine inclusion, trust, or safeguarding cultures (Ofsted, 2019). This provides an important context for evaluating knife arches through a violence-prevention lens rather than as a purely technical security measure.

From a violence-prevention perspective, knife arches are best understood as a secondary or tertiary intervention aimed at managing immediate risk at the school gate rather than addressing the underlying drivers of knife carrying. Public health and safeguarding frameworks typically distinguish between primary prevention, which seeks to reduce risk factors and strengthen protective factors before harm occurs, and reactive or containment-focused measures that respond once risk is already present. Knife arches fall firmly into the latter category. They may increase the likelihood of detecting weapons at entry points and may deter some pupils from carrying knives into school, but they do not address factors such as fear of victimisation, peer pressure, trauma exposure, exploitation, or community violence, all of which are commonly cited drivers of knife carrying among young people (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). This framing is important when assessing whether knife arches can meaningfully contribute to violence prevention rather than simply symbolising action.

Due to UK-based evaluative research on knife arches in schools is limited, much of the evidence comes from international research on school metal detectors, particularly from the United States where such measures have been used for several decades. The most influential synthesis of this literature is the review by Hankin, Hertz and Simon, which examined approximately 15 years of research on metal detector use in schools (Hankin, Hertz and Simon, 2011). The authors concluded that there was insufficient evidence to determine whether metal detectors reduce violent behaviour in schools. While some studies reported increased detection of weapons, there was no consistent evidence of sustained reductions in violence or serious incidents attributable to metal detectors. Importantly, Hankin and colleagues also identified evidence suggesting that metal detectors may negatively affect students' perceptions of safety (Hankin, Hertz and Simon, 2011). Although this review predates the last five years, it remains highly relevant because knife arches are functionally the same intervention and because more recent research has not fundamentally overturned its conclusions.

Recent synthesis research largely reinforces the mixed and uncertain picture identified by earlier work. A 2025 scoping review of school security approaches found emerging evidence that metal detectors may not be an effective method for reducing school violence and may have detrimental effects on students' perceptions of safety, particularly for marginalised groups (Stilwell et al., 2025). The review highlights that relatively few high-quality studies isolate the effects of metal detectors from other contextual factors, making it difficult to draw firm causal conclusions. This is especially important because metal detectors are often introduced in schools experiencing heightened concern about violence, meaning that observed outcomes may reflect pre-existing risk rather than the impact of the intervention itself (Stilwell et al., 2025).

Perceived safety and school climate emerge as central themes in the evidence base and are highly relevant to violence prevention. Perceived safety influences attendance, engagement, disclosure, and pupils' sense of belonging, all of which are widely recognised as protective factors against violence involvement. Research on visible security measures repeatedly suggests that intensifying security does not necessarily make students feel safer. More recent education research continues to report that highly securitised environments may reduce perceived safety and wellbeing, even when introduced with protective intentions (Hailey, 2025). From a safeguarding perspective, this matters because interventions that increase fear or signal that danger is expected may undermine trust and relational safety, potentially weakening the conditions that support prevention.

An important additional research insight concerns the legitimacy and acceptability of security measures. Recent qualitative and mixed-methods studies examining how pupils, parents, and staff interpret school security practices indicate that measures such as walk-through metal detectors are often experienced as intrusive or uncomfortable, even when they are perceived as potentially effective by some stakeholders. These studies suggest that security practices are interpreted not only through their stated purpose but through how they are implemented and what they symbolise about trust and suspicion in school communities (Stilwell et al., 2025). For violence prevention, legitimacy is crucial. If screening is experienced as humiliating, stigmatising, or unfair, it may increase conflict at the school gate and discourage pupils from seeking help, particularly those who are already fearful, exploited, or vulnerable.

Evidence on behavioural outcomes, such as weapon carrying and violent incidents, is more difficult to interpret and remains inconsistent. Recent reviews note that where reductions in weapon carriage are observed, effects often depend on the broader context and on how security measures are combined with other school practices, rather than on the presence of metal detectors alone (Stilwell et al., 2025). This aligns with wider research on school safety suggesting that the impact of security measures cannot be separated from the surrounding policy and practice environment. For example, research examining the interaction between school security measures and restorative or supportive approaches suggests that outcomes differ significantly depending on whether security is embedded within a relational, prevention-oriented framework or a primarily punitive one (Seo, 2022). This reinforces the argument that knife arches should not be evaluated as a standalone intervention.

Practical implementation issues further complicate the violence-prevention impact of knife arches. Metal detectors detect metal, which means they cannot identify all potential weapons, and they generate false positives from everyday items such as keys or phones. This can create queues, repeated alarms, and frequent secondary searches, all of which shape pupils' daily experience of school. These operational realities were highlighted in earlier research and remain relevant in contemporary discussions because routine exposure to security checks can normalise an atmosphere of surveillance (Hankin, Hertz and Simon, 2011). From a prevention

perspective, repeated low-level conflicts or stressors at the school gate may cumulatively affect relationships between pupils and staff, with potential implications for behaviour and engagement.

Displacement is another prevention-relevant concern. If knife arches deter pupils from bringing knives through the school gate, weapons may be stored nearby or carried on journeys to and from school, shifting rather than eliminating risk. While displacement is not inevitable, it is a plausible unintended consequence that should be considered in any evaluation of knife arches. Violence prevention is concerned with overall harm reduction, not simply relocating risk from one space to another. UK safeguarding discussions acknowledge that screening is one option available to schools but emphasise that such measures are not widespread and must be considered within broader safeguarding and multi-agency responses (Safeguarding Network, n.d.).

Equity considerations are prominent in recent research and are central to violence-prevention aims. The scoping review by Stilwell et al. (2025) highlights concerns that the negative impacts of metal detectors on perceived safety may be more pronounced for marginalised pupils. Even where screening is applied universally at entrances, discretion enters through secondary searches after alarms, responses to refusal, and how staff manage distress or dysregulation. Pupils with special educational needs, trauma histories, or prior negative experiences of authority may therefore be disproportionately affected. From a safeguarding perspective, this raises the risk that knife arches could unintentionally intensify punitive interactions for already vulnerable groups, potentially increasing exclusion or disengagement rather than reducing violence.

Recent UK violence-prevention guidance reinforces the importance of prioritising protective factors and evidence-informed practice in education settings. The Youth Endowment Fund's guidance for schools emphasises approaches such as trusted adults, targeted support, and whole-school systems that reduce children's involvement in violence, while advising caution around unproven or potentially harmful strategies (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). Although statutory guidance on searching and screening is acknowledged, knife arches are not presented as a core evidence-based prevention intervention. Instead, the emphasis is on prevention-oriented systems that identify risk early and respond with support rather than solely with control (Youth Endowment Fund, 2025). This aligns with the broader research literature suggesting that security technology alone is unlikely to deliver meaningful violence-prevention outcomes.

In summary, the research evidence indicates that knife arches are a highly visible security measure with uncertain effects on violence outcomes and more consistent signals of potential risks to perceived safety, school climate, and equity. The foundational evidence base concludes that there is insufficient evidence that metal detectors reduce violent behaviour in schools and that there may be detrimental effects on how safe students feel (Hankin, Hertz and Simon, 2011). More recent synthesis research continues to caution that metal detectors may not be a positive approach to reducing school violence and may carry unintended harms, particularly for marginalised pupils (Stilwell et al., 2025). Within a UK violence-prevention and safeguarding framework, knife arches should therefore be treated as a limited risk-management tool rather than a standalone solution. If used, they should be implemented proportionately, in a trauma-informed manner, and embedded within a broader safeguarding strategy that prioritises trust, early identification, and support. Without such safeguards, the evidence suggests a credible risk that a visible security response could undermine protective conditions in schools and sit at odds with the aims of violence prevention.

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