

## **Debunking the Gun-Free Zone Myth**

The claim that mass shooters overwhelmingly attack gun-free zones – loosely defined as areas where civilians are not allowed to carry firearms – is ubiquitous in pro-gun circles and cited by right wing [celebrities](#), [organizations](#), [legislators](#), and even by former President [Donald Trump](#). The assertion is used to justify a carte-blanche rejection of stronger gun safety measures as well as [legislation](#) to eliminate areas where people are not allowed to currently carry firearms. This even includes efforts to [arm teachers](#) such as a recently passed Tennessee law.

The heart of the gun-free zone talking point and legislative efforts stemming from it comes from the work of pro-gun commentator John Lott, who has claimed that between 94-98% of public mass shootings occur in gun-free zones. Along with popularizing his research in pro-gun circles, Lott himself has used the claim in [testimony](#) in front of Congress and state legislatures, as well as in [amicus briefs](#) for important court cases, including one currently ongoing in California.

However, despite its popularity and ubiquity, Lott's gun-free zone research is severe academic malfeasance and littered with numerous other errors. Here is why:

In an [investigation](#) published on July 2, 2019, GVPedia uncovered that in one of Lott's [spreadsheets](#), he claimed that since 1950 there were 320 public mass shootings which were divided into three periods:

7 mass shootings from 1950 to 1976  
247 mass shootings from 1977 to 1997  
66 mass shootings from 1998 to May 24th, 2018

However, additional digging revealed that Lott's entire claim that 98 percent of mass shootings occur in gun-free zones rested on a massive, yet basic, error: for 1977–1997, Lott counted each individual death in mass shootings as an entire mass shooting for the overwhelming majority of shootings he lists.

For example, Lott's own spreadsheet indicated that there were 14 mass shootings where four or more people died in Oklahoma in 1986. Yet, there weren't 14 mass shootings in Oklahoma that year, [just one](#) in which 14 people were killed.

Immediately after publication of GVPedia's report on July 2, 2019, Lott [denied](#) the existence of any error. However, in a [covert update](#) on July 6th, Lott revised his claimed number of mass shootings to the following:

1950 to 1976 – 7 mass shootings (no change)  
1977 to 1997 – 50 mass shootings (down from 247)  
1998 to May 24th, 2018 – 74 mass shootings (up from 66)

In the time since Lott changed his data, he has asserted that any fluctuation in the percentage of mass shootings occurring in gun-free zones is due to new shootings occurring. Lott has accused GVPedia of [fabrications and denied](#) our findings. As Lott's own spreadsheets prove, however, Lott knew there was an error. Importantly, Lott provided no public acknowledgement of the error and publicly defamed GVPedia, both of which point to a willful intent to deceive and a deliberate cover-up of any sign of data manipulation.

In 2022, Lott issued an [update](#) claiming that the percentage of mass shootings in gun-free zones had increased, despite his underlying data showing a substantial decrease. The discrepancy resulted because Lott reintroduced the error GVPedia identified in 2019. This error has continued to persist in Lott's updates in [2023](#) and [2024](#). Lott no longer makes the spreadsheets with his data for 1950-1997 publically available. Reviewers have to use Lott's original 2018 post to find the data proving that his current gun-free zone assertions are fraudulent.

To review:

- From 2014 to 2019, Lott claimed 98% of mass shootings occurred in gun-free zones
- In 2019, GVPedia found that Lott was counting individual mass shooting fatalities from 1977 to 1997 as entire mass shootings
- Four days after GVPedia's report, Lott changed the number of mass shootings from 1977-1997 from 247 to 50.
- Lott publicly claimed there was never an error, and falsely accused GVPedia of fabrications
- From 2022 to the present, Lott once again counts individual mass shooting fatalities from 1977-1997 as entire mass shootings
- Lott's error artificially boosts the claimed percentage of mass shootings occurring in gun-free zones

John Lott's pattern of behavior clearly demonstrates that he knew his gun-free zone claim was false, or at the very least, he was reckless as to its truth. Lott regularly touts himself as an expert on gun violence statistics and has been called as such to provide testimony in front of legislatures and courts across the country. Lott's research has been relied on in [crafting legislation](#) and in [court decisions](#). Lott's pattern of behavior combined with the continuing importance of his claims fits under definitions of both [academic fraud](#) and legal [fraud](#).

In addition to the fraudulent data manipulation, Lott's gun-free zone research is filled with numerous other errors. For example:

- Lott falsely claims shootings such as those in [Buffalo, NY](#); [Allen, TX](#); [Hialeah, FL](#); and [Umpqua, OR](#) occurred in gun-free zones, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.
- Lott dubiously classifies shootings such as those at the [University of Texas](#); [Parkland, WA](#); [Washington Naval Yard](#); and [Orlando, FL](#) that involved actual gun battles during the shootings as gun-free zones.

- Lott incorrectly excludes mass shootings such as those in [Mount Airy, NC](#); [Skagit County, WA](#); [Geneva County, AL](#); [Odessa, TX](#); [Meteor, WA](#). The shooting in Mount Airy he falsely claims was gang related, and the other four are listed in the FBI's [active shooter report](#), the report which Lott claims his mass shootings definition is based on.

These errors merely represent the tip of the iceberg, and a more detailed audit of Lott's research would undoubtedly uncover many more errors and distortions.

Given the high-profile nature of Lott's gun-free zone claim and those who repeat it, it was inevitable that professional fact checkers would conduct their own analyses. Indeed, over the years the [Associated Press](#), [Washington Post](#), [Politifact](#), [Factcheck.org](#), and even local papers such as [AZCentral](#) have all investigated Lott's claim. Disappointingly, while each of the articles highlighted specific errors with Lott's work, all of them concluded with a rating of "half-true" or similar metric. None of the fact checkers looked at Lott's underlying spreadsheets to verify that his provided data actually supported his claims. Further, the AP and AZCentral fact checks also appeared after GVPedia released its findings on Lott's initial error, meaning the information was even easier to find.

Lott's fraud and errors are not small – and collapse a foundational pillar of the gun lobby's [Firehose of Falsehood](#). Legislation and court cases across the country are influenced by this fraudulent claim, and it is also distorting the public discussion around firearm policy. Unfortunately, the public has not been able to rely on professional fact checkers to catch and report this data manipulation so the disinformation has been allowed to spread largely unimpeded. This is also not the first time Lott has engaged in academic malfeasance of this and other kinds as GVPedia has [documented](#) extensively and as was profiled by the [New Yorker](#).

The status-quo of ignoring Lott's gun-free zone claims or even granting them credibility must end. Any outlets that have published Lott's fraudulent gun-free zones claims should retract those stories. While repudiating and removing this talking point from the public discourse is only one step in countering the gun lobby's Firehose of Falsehood, it is essential.