

The Role of Gun-Free Zones in Reducing Firearm Violence



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By Paul Reeping

Simply stated, gun-free zones are places where firearms are not allowed. Likely the most well-known of these are [gun-free school zones](#), which typically prohibit the possession of firearms within 1,000 feet of a school's grounds, be they public or private schools. However, gun-free zones can be and are established by states and localities in many different ways and with varying levels of enforcement.

For example, some [jurisdictions have laws](#) that prohibit firearm possession in public parks, government buildings (such as courthouses), and other sensitive areas where children might be present. Some states also restrict firearm carrying in places where alcohol is sold. Additionally, private businesses have the right to [prohibit firearms on their premises](#), so workplaces, malls, and other establishments often designate themselves as gun-free and enforce this through trespassing laws. An extensive list of all of the places that are legislated to be gun-free in New York State [can be found here](#).

Gun-free zones are typically indicated by signage, and enforcement can be elevated to active and more stringent security measures, such as the use of metal detectors, pat-downs, and security wands, which are sometimes used at stadiums, movie theaters, courthouses, and museums.

Since the 2022 US Supreme Court ruling in *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association Inc. v. Bruen*, which expanded the right for people to carry firearms outside the home beyond those who demonstrate "proper cause," gun-free zones have been considered an

country has increased from 4 percent to 17 percent, and the success rate of these legal challenges has risen from 18 percent to 69 percent. Here, I review the political controversy underlying this trend and the related empirical evidence from my recent work in order to better understand the impacts of gun-free zones, and why the debate over them persists despite their apparently positive, if sometimes modest, outcomes.

Essentially, with less ability to regulate *who* can carry firearms, some states have instead moved to regulate *where* firearms can be possessed.

The Controversy Around Gun-Free Zones

The establishment and enforcement of gun-free zones has been highly controversial. [Gun safety advocates](#) argue that they make places safer by reducing the presence of firearms and, therefore, firearm violence. On the other hand, [gun rights activists](#) argue that gun-free zones make locations *less* safe. Their reasoning is that while law-abiding citizens will refrain from carrying firearms in these areas, those who intend to break the law will ignore the restriction, leaving law-abiding individuals more defenseless and less able to protect themselves or intervene in a violent attack. As a result, gun rights advocates frequently label gun-free zones as “soft targets.” Almost like clockwork, after each major mass shooting, one can [expect an opinion piece](#) arguing that gun-free zones were the cause of the attack, though there is generally no evidence offered to support such a claim. The [BBC ran such an article](#) the day after the Sandy Hook school shooting in 2012, for example.

Given the controversy surrounding gun-free zones, the increase in litigation, and public skepticism about their effectiveness—[polling shows that the majority of Americans believe gun-free zones make places less safe](#)—our research team has now published four studies examining the impact of gun-free zones on various firearm and crime-related outcomes. Prior to these studies, there had been only one peer-reviewed, quantitative research manuscript that looked into the [effectiveness of campus carry laws, the findings of which were inconclusive](#). In each of our studies we found no evidence that gun-free zones increase firearm violence and, in some cases, we have found that these zones may actually prevent it.

Empirical Research on Gun-Free Zones

Gun-Free School Zones & Firearm Crime (2023)

[Our first study, published in 2023](#), examined the impact of gun-free school zones on firearm-related crime in St. Louis, Missouri. Gun-free school zones are inherently difficult to study because they are nearly universal across the US, with only minor variations in implementation. To work around this, we treated the 1,000 feet surrounding a school as the *exposed* area and compared it to the immediately adjacent, or *unexposed*, area. After adjusting for the fact that the exposed and unexposed areas were adjacent to each other, and therefore similar in many ways, we found no significant difference in firearm crimes committed inside versus outside the gun-free school zone—indicating that these zones did not make schools *less* safe. However, in a sensitivity analysis, where we defined gun-free school zones based on the geographic center of each school's address (which more closely reflects how law enforcement likely measures these zones), we found that firearm crime was 13.7 percent lower nearest to schools, suggesting a potential protective effect.

the cases and controls in terms of how many active shootings occurred, as many gun-free zones are only enforced through signs or policy handbooks rather than strict security measures. After accounting for similarities between the cases and controls, we found that active shootings were 62.5 percent less likely to occur in gun-free establishments compared to gun-allowing ones.

Gun-Free Zones & Alcohol-Serving Establishments (2024)

Later in 2024, we examined the impact of gun-free zone laws in alcohol-serving establishments. In Texas, any bar or restaurant where alcohol sales make up more than 51 percent of revenue is legally designated as gun-free and must post a red "51% sign" indicating that firearms are prohibited. After adjusting for factors such as if the establishment was a bar or restaurant, alcohol sales volume, census tract demographics, and the number of nearby bars and restaurants, we found that gun-free establishments and their surrounding areas (within 50 meters) experienced 37 percent fewer shootings than comparable gun-allowing establishments.

Campus Carry Laws & Crime (2025)

Most recently, in March 2025, we published a study on "campus carry" laws in the US. Arkansas, Georgia, and Texas implemented more permissive campus carry laws during the 2016-2017 academic year, allowing 106 public universities to permit firearms on campus. Looking at how rates changed over time in states with these laws to similar states without them, while controlling for state and time differences, we compared these states to 21 states that did not allow firearms on campuses during the study period. We found no significant changes in major violence or burglary rates following implementation of the laws.

After accounting for similarities between the cases and controls, we found that active shootings were 62.5 percent less likely to occur in gun-free establishments compared to gun-allowing ones.

Conclusions: What the Evidence Says About Gun-Free Zones

Across our studies, we found:

- Gun-free school zones do not increase firearm crime and may be protective near schools.
- Gun-free establishments were significantly less likely to experience active shootings compared to gun-allowing ones.
- Gun-free bars and restaurants had 37 percent fewer shootings in and around their premises than gun-allowing ones.
- "Campus carry" laws did not increase or decrease crime on college campuses

While more research is needed, as these are some of the first quantitative studies on gun-free zones, there is no evidence that gun-free zones attract violence or are "soft targets" as some claim. In fact, where evidence and good research exist, data show that gun-free zones indeed may help prevent firearm violence.

Why the Debate Over Gun-Free Zones Persists



A company has a policy that firearms are prohibited in the office. A disgruntled employee is unexpectedly fired and, in the heat of the moment, feels angry enough to commit an act of violence. However, because of the policy, they don't have a gun on them. By the time they would have obtained one elsewhere, the moment has passed, and an active shooting does not occur.

While some violent attacks are premeditated, they are outnumbered by impulsive acts of gun violence. Since gun-free zones do not increase violence, and in many cases may actually help prevent it, revoking or further limiting them will not lead to less firearm violence in the United States.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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David Souers
Friendship
LD 1743

LD 1743 An Act to Allow Municipalities to Prohibit Firearms Within Their
Municipal Buildings and Voting Places and at Their Municipal Public Proceedings

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, Members of the committee, I am David
Souers. On May 1st, 2025, I provided testimony in favor of LD 1743.

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