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ENTERTAINMENT

LEISURE

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SCI

Opinion

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OBAMA'S FIRST 100
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PREVIEW

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Media Coverage of Mall Shooting Fails to Reveal Mall's Gun-Free-Zone Status

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By John R. Lott, Jr.

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The horrible [tragedy](#) at the Westroads Mall in Omaha, Neb. received a lot of attention Wednesday and Thursday. It should have. Eight people were killed, and five were wounded.

A Google news search using the phrase "Omaha Mall Shooting" finds an incredible 2,794 news stories worldwide for the last day. From India and Taiwan to Britain and Austria, there are probably few people in the world who haven't heard about this tragedy.

But despite the massive news coverage, none of the media coverage, at least by 10 a.m. Thursday, mentioned this central fact: Yet another attack occurred in a gun-free zone.

Surely, with all the reporters who appear at these crime scenes and seemingly interview virtually everyone there, why didn't one simply mention the signs that ban guns from the premises?

Nebraska allows people to carry permitted concealed handguns, but it allows property owners, such as the [Westroads Mall](#), to post signs banning permit holders from legally carrying guns on their property.

The same was true for the attack at the Trolley Square Mall in Utah in February (a copy of the sign at the mall can be seen [here](#)). But again the media coverage ignored this fact. Possibly the ban there was even more noteworthy because the off-duty police officer who stopped the attack fortunately violated the ban by taking his gun in with him when he went shopping.

Yet even then, [the officer](#) "was at the opposite end and on a different floor of the convoluted Trolley Square complex when the shooting began. By the time he became aware of the shooting and managed to track down and confront Talovic [the killer], three minutes had elapsed."

There are plenty of cases every year where permit holders stop what would have been multiple victim shootings every year, but they rarely receive any news coverage. Take a case this year in Memphis, where WBIR-TV reported a gunman [started](#) "firing a pistol beside a busy city street" and was stopped by two permit holders before anyone was harmed.

When will part of the media coverage on these multiple-victim public shootings be whether guns were banned where the attack occurred? While the media has begun to cover whether teachers can have guns at school or the [almost 8,000](#) college students across the country who protested gun-free zones on their campuses, the media haven't started checking what are

the rules where these attacks occur.

Surely, the news stories carry detailed information on the weapon used (in this case, a rifle) and the number of ammunition clips (apparently, two). But if these aspects of the story are deemed important for understanding what happened, why isn't it also important that the attack occurred where guns were banned? Isn't it important to know why all the victims were disarmed?

Few know that Dylan Klebold, one of the two Columbine killers, closely was following Colorado legislation that would have allowed citizens to carry a concealed handgun. Klebold strongly [opposed](#) the legislation and openly talked about it.

No wonder, as the bill being debated would have allowed permitted guns to be carried on school property. It is quite a coincidence that he attacked the Columbine High School the very day the legislature was scheduled to vote on the bill.

Despite the lack of news coverage, people are beginning to notice what [research](#) has shown for years: Multiple-victim public shootings keep occurring in places where guns already are banned. Forty states have broad right-to-carry laws, but even within these states it is the "gun-free zones," not other public places, where the attacks happen.

People know the list: Virginia Tech saw 32 murdered earlier this year; the Columbine High School shooting left 13 murdered in 1999; Luby's Cafeteria in Killeen, Texas, had 23 who were fatally shot by a deranged man in 1991; and a McDonald's in Southern California had 21 people shot dead by an unemployed security guard in 1984.

All these attacks — indeed, all attacks involving more than a small number of people being killed — happened in gun-free zones.

In recent years, similar attacks have occurred across the world, including in Australia, France, Germany and Britain. Do all these countries lack enough gun-control laws? Hardly. The reverse is more accurate.

The law-abiding, not criminals, are obeying the rules. Disarming the victims simply means that the killers have less to fear. As Wednesday's attack demonstrated yet again, police are important, but they almost always arrive at the crime scene after the crime has occurred.

The longer it takes for someone to arrive on the scene with a gun, the more people who will be harmed by such an attack.

Most people understand that guns deter criminals. If a killer were stalking your family, would you feel safer putting a sign out front announcing, "This Home Is a Gun-Free Zone"? But that is what the Westroads Mall did.

John Lott is the author of [Freedomnomics](#), upon which this piece draws, and a senior research scholar at the University of Maryland. [E-Mail](#) | [Print](#)

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