

Debunking John Lott's latest dishonest attacks on the FBI active shooter reports

Summary

On October 3rd, 2022, pro-gun commentator John Lott released a [study](#) falsely alleging massive errors in the FBI's active shooter research. He claimed that the FBI missed dozens of cases of active shootings that were stopped by defensive gun use.

The FBI's active shooter research found that armed civilians halted 4.4% of active shooter cases since 2000. Lott's study erroneously claims that at least 34.4% – and closer to 50% in recent years – have been stopped in such a fashion.

As this special report will explore in greater detail, Lott's findings result from covertly expanding the FBI's definition of an active shooter event, despite Lott's false public protestations that he is following the FBI's definition. While the FBI uses the term "active shooting" to refer to attempted mass shootings, regardless of how many people that attempt kills or injures, Lott defines an "active shooting" as any shooting that occurs in public and is not part of another ongoing crime.

Lott's study then only applies that new definition to cases in which there was a defensive gun use, while deliberately excluding thousands of cases in which a defensive gun use did not occur. This deceptive tactic allows Lott to claim that the percentage of active shooter cases stopped by a defensive gun use is vastly higher than it is in reality, regardless of what definition of an active shooting one uses. ***The end result is blatant statistical malpractice.***

Lott's distorted findings were then amplified by the NRA, which called Lott's work a "[bombshell](#)," as well [Fox News](#), the [Washington Examiner](#), [Real Clear Politics](#), the [Epoch Times](#), and even Republican Congressmen [Thomas Massie](#) and [Jim Jordan](#). The widespread coverage of Lott's study in conservative media circles as well as among prominent politicians indicates that it could be used as a tool to undermine the FBI's credibility, a campaign Lott himself has engaged in for years.

This report will directly examine the central errors and falsehoods in Lott's research, thus demonstrating the strength of the FBI's research. It will then explore Lott's history of attacking the FBI and how such behavior contributes to the growth of popular false narratives that claim widespread defensive gun use. Finally, this report will conclude by

demonstrating how Lott's newest study is just one part of a multi-faceted [Firehose of Falsehood](#) campaign deployed by the gun lobby and its allies, along with solutions about how best to counter such efforts.

The Facts

Lott's [study](#) analyzed the FBI's active shooter reports from 2014 to 2021. While the FBI found 252 active shootings over that period, of which 11 were stopped by an armed civilian, Lott claims there were 360 such shootings, of which 124 were stopped by an armed civilian.

In the FBI's report. Lott's study considers [any shooting](#) that occurs in public that is not connected to another crime (such as robbery or gang activity) to be an active shooting.

However, the FBI defines an active shooter incident as "an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area." The FBI further clarifies that: "The study does not encompass all mass killings or shootings in public places and therefore is limited in its scope." In a [rebuttal](#) to some of Lott's earlier attempts to misconstrue the research on active shooters, the authors of the FBI report elaborate further: "Active shooter events are a specific type of attack that involves one or more individuals *attempting* to commit mass murder by firearm, regardless of what the outcome of this attempt is."

Yet despite the FBI's consistent statements, the cases Lott compiled overwhelmingly do not comport with the FBI's definition. For example, FBI reports of active shooter incidents do not include cases of road rage that involved a firearm. They also deliberately exclude cases of escalating arguments that involve firearms, such as those in bars and nightclubs. Yet Lott's analysis includes these types of cases, but only when a defensive gun use is involved. This is an important point to understand. By only including cases in which a defensive gun use is involved in his analysis - and leaving out cases in which a shooting occurred but there was no defensive gun use - he is skewing the statistics and providing an inaccurate representation of reality.

Lott conveniently excludes the thousands of road rage incidents and other escalating arguments that did not involve a defensive gun use. According to data from the [Gun Violence Archive](#), from 2014 to 2021 there were at least 1,928 incidents of road rage in which at least one person was shot and at least 7,012 shooting incidents at bars. Lott only

counts cases in which there was a DGU, but does not apply the same standard to these thousands of incidents. This deceptive tactic allows Lott to claim that the percentage of active shooter cases stopped by a defensive gun use is vastly higher than it is in reality, regardless of what definition of an active shooting one uses.

Later in his report, Lott reveals that he is discarding the FBI's definition of an active shooter case and surreptitiously substituting his own. As Lott states:

"Finally, even these numbers underestimate the usefulness of legally carried concealed handguns in stopping mass public shootings because many of these active shooting incidents involve only one person being targeted."

If "only one person" is being targeted, then the incident is definitionally not an active shooter case. The FBI explicitly makes clear that an [active shooter case](#) is one in which "an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill **people** in a confined and populated area" (emphasis added). The word "people" indicates more than one. And as was noted earlier, the FBI considers [active shooter cases](#) to be "...one or more individuals *attempting* to commit mass murder by firearm." Once again, mass murder means more than one person being targeted. Neither of these FBI statements are consistent with Lott's data set.

GVpedia asked Dr. John Donohue of Stanford to examine Lott's study, and he confirmed our analysis. As he wrote in an email: "Yes, this is typical of the type of motivated-research that John Lott frequently presents. Obviously, there are many challenges to sorting out the issues but Lott predictably provides highly tendentious evaluations of data, and of course his meta message that we will all be safer if more people had guns is not supported by any valid study. Indeed, it never seems to occur to Lott that we have more active shooting incidents because more people have and carry increasingly lethal firearms."

To summarize, despite his own assertions to the contrary, Lott's study flagrantly deviates from the FBI's accepted definition of an active shooter incident and then only applies the new definition to incidents in which there was a defensive gun use. This dual-pronged strategy allows Lott to artificially maximize the percentage of alleged active shooter cases that were stopped by "a good guy with a gun" while making it appear the FBI was covering up cases for politically motivated reasons. As shown, Lott's artifice crumbles under scrutiny.

Lott's History with the FBI

Lott's recent active shooter study is the latest salvo in a long standing personal campaign to undermine the FBI's credibility.

After the FBI released its initial report on active shootings in 2014, Lott [criticized the report](#) multiple times over the following year. Lott claimed that the FBI had missed a large number of mass shootings as well as included shootings that couldn't be considered mass shootings or killings as no one died in the incidents. Yet, as the FBI noted in a [published rebuttal](#), Lott's attack was baseless as the FBI's report was not about mass shootings or killings. Indeed, in the initial report itself, the FBI is careful to stress that active shootings are a distinct category from mass shootings or killings.

This rebuttal did not stop Lott, who went on to publish other pieces attacking the FBI's active shooter report, all while Lott claimed to use the FBI's definition of mass shooting (which the FBI doesn't have) in other debates. In Lott's book *Gun Control Myths*, Lott talks about his back and forth with the FBI over certain cases that Lott felt should have been included in the FBI's Active Shooter study. The FBI repeatedly tells Lott that it does not include escalating arguments as active shooter cases. Yet as we saw in this report earlier, Lott would go on to include even more of those types of cases in his study. Of the six shootings Lott discusses in *Gun Control Myths*, four of them were the result of arguments rather than planned active shooting scenarios. In the two other cases, a person armed with a firearm attempted to stop the shooter but was critically shot by the perpetrator.

As [The Trace and New Yorker](#) recently reported, when former President Trump took office in 2017, Lott frequently petitioned allies in the Department of Justice (DOJ). In one communication, he wrote: "As we discussed, we need new research to advance the Trump agenda and pull indefensible studies done during the Obama administration." Once Lott got into the DOJ in late 2020, he focused on FBI data. However, as The Trace reports: "Lott's three-month stint at the DOJ was unremarkable. He compiled data relating to the background check system, and reviewed FBI reports he found problematic. Lott left the day before Joe Biden was sworn into office."

False Claims about Defensive Gun Use

The reason the FBI's active shooter report in particular has been a thorn in the side of pro-gun advocates, and particularly John Lott, is because it indicates that a small

percentage of active shooter incidents have been stopped by a “good guy with a gun.” This poses a substantial challenge to claims that defensive gun use is widespread.

Lott’s false claims regarding defensive gun use are multitudinous, ranging from claims that there are millions of defensive gun uses each year ([there are](#) approximately 2,000 verified DGUs annually), that defensive gun uses outnumber criminal uses of firearms ([every single data source](#) that looks at both DGUs and criminal uses finds that criminal uses far outnumber DGUs), or that using a gun is by far the most effective means of defense ([injury rates](#) from using a gun in self defense fall in line with other means of defense, including taking no defensive action at all). While these false claims form part of the backdrop on which Lott centers his new study, Lott more specifically calls upon assertions that armed civilians pose little risk to others during attacks - another falsehood.

To downplay the risks of armed civilians participating during active shooter events, Lott’s study quotes his board member and colleague at the Crime Prevention Research Center (CPRC), Carlisle Moody:

“The media and gun control advocates always seem concerned with the worst possible outcomes when firearms are involved. We know that armed citizens do, in fact, stop active shooters. And while there’s a possibility of a bystander getting hurt, the data put together by the CPRC show that an armed citizen has yet to accidentally shoot an innocent bystander. We also know that the police have accidentally shot the hero citizen just once. That was in [Colorado on June 21, 2021](#). That’s not something that would normally happen, because the police usually arrive long after the incident is resolved.”

The statements that an armed citizen has yet to accidentally shoot an innocent bystander, and police have only shot the “hero citizen” just once are provably false. In 2021, GVPedia compiled a list of cases in which armed citizens have accidentally shot an innocent bystander, which can be found [here](#) and [here](#). These cases include a security guard at a Chicago bar who was [shot by police](#) after disarming a shooter, a man who broke up a fight at Portland State University who was [shot by police](#), a couple of escalating arguments in which a permit holder shot the [wrong person](#), and many other cases. It is important to note that GVPedia’s list of cases is not comprehensive, meaning the actual number of cases is likely higher.

Why this matters

Truth matters, and that alone is sufficient reason to spell out and debunk Lott's numerous errors and falsehoods concerning active shooters. Yet when placed in context, it becomes evident that Lott's latest study is but one thread in a larger tapestry of falsehoods supporting the central theme that guns make us safer.

Earlier this year GVPedia released a detailed report examining the gun lobby's [Firehose of Falsehood campaign](#), a concerted effort from the gun lobby to change the narrative surrounding guns. More importantly, our report provides guidelines and strategies about how best to counter it. One of the first steps to successfully defeating the gun lobby's Firehose is to root out myths and expose them to the sunlight of careful analysis. Allowing falsehoods to fester unperturbed can only lead to disinformation successfully spreading and changing minds.

Lott's shoddy research is already having an outsized impact. Congressmen Thomas Massie and Jim Jordan approvingly pushed out Lott's flawed study on active shootings along with a bevy of conservative media. This widespread attention on Lott's work indicates that it may be used as ammunition in the ongoing right-wing war to politicize, tarnish, and hamper the FBI. With Republicans taking control of the House of Representatives, a substantial number of investigations have already been pledged, many of which will likely target the FBI. The FBI's research on active shooters is an important bedrock for accurate data and cultivating public health solutions to curb the tide of increasing gun violence. Allowing the FBI's work to be tarnished by specious accusations and blatant falsehoods would be a mistake.

The first step in countering disinformation is to make sure it does not go unchallenged, which requires having the requisite facts and data at hand. Media institutions that uncritically share Lott's work without so much as a background or fact check should issue corrections at the very least. And if Lott's work is used as the basis for Congressional investigations, lawmakers need to be notified that Lott's study is fatally flawed.

(You can find the original posting of this response [here](#).)