

INSIDE THE MIND OF AMERICA'S FAVORITE GUN RESEARCHER

John Lott is a one-man pro-gun research machine whose work has been cited nearly 200 times by the National Rifle Association. The problem? Many of his peers have major misgivings about his methods.

PETER MOSKOWITZ · UPDATED: SEP 23, 2018 · ORIGINAL: JUN 1, 2017

I returned from Orlando depressed. I was there reporting a few days after a man had opened fire in a crowded nightclub with a semi-automatic weapon, killing 49 and wounding dozens of others. Mass shootings have been a common news item in the United States over the last few years, but this one seemed different, both in its scale and in the response (or lack thereof) that followed.

After Columbine (two high school seniors shot and killed 12 students and one teacher), Sandy Hook (one man shot and killed 20 six- and seven-year-olds and six adults), Fort Hood (an Army major shot and killed 13 people and injured 30 more), the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C. (a man shot and killed 12 at a naval base), Aurora (a man shot and killed 12 and injured 70 in a movie theater), and Charleston (a white supremacist shot and killed nine black churchgoers), there was at least debate about what to do. Background checks? End the sale of assault rifles? Create an interstate tracking system?

A few days after Orlando, former President Barack Obama, speaking on the block-long grass field in the downtown district where thousands of mourners had left notes to those who died at Pulse nightclub, implored lawmakers to "do the right thing"—to change their minds about background checks, to consider legislation, to at least create a watch list for suspected terrorists who want to purchase guns. It was a milquetoast speech. And nothing followed it. There were no new laws; the push for background checks failed. The usual debate that had raged in the U.S. after mass shootings in the past did not happen after Orlando. Calls for specific action had turned into pleas to at least acknowledge there was a problem. It was the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history, and yet the debate had gone so far backwards that gun-control advocates were no longer advocating for control, but for some debate about control.

In Orlando, I'd attended a gun show where, outside, an LED sign had been set up to scroll the hashtag [#PrayForOrlando](#), and, inside, everyone told me that guns did not kill people. Even at the memorial, the same one Obama spoke at, yards away from where family members of the deceased were gathering, crying, adding to a quickly growing pile of flowers and homemade signs with their letters streaked from a near-constant drizzle, people told me that this was not about guns, that actually guns were good, that really the solution was more guns—guns at home, guns on the street, guns at clubs (or at least security guards with guns). There was relatively little gun debate in Orlando after Pulse, virtually no gun debate in Congress. There was just a general feeling that guns are good, and a feeling that, if you believe that, you're right.

A man named John Lott can be assigned a degree of responsibility.

Lott is a one-man pro-gun research machine. He's published four books on the subject. He speaks at countless conferences and colleges. He writes dozens of op-eds each year, and is cited in thousands of news stories. If you know a statistic or a fact-based argument about how guns save lives, it's likely, whether you know it or not, you're citing some of Lott's work. Lott is not affiliated with any university, and hasn't been for years. Little of his gun research has been published in peer-reviewed journals. And yet he is, without a doubt, the most influential pro-gun researcher in the U.S.

I will not be able to debunk Lott here and now. I am not an academic. I—and 99 percent of people, I'd venture to guess—am not as good with statistics as Lott. What I can tell you is what the people who do have that skillset say. There are many people who agree with Lott—especially in the fields of criminology and economics. But it appears the majority of researchers who work in the field say Lott's wrong: that his analyses are misleading, that they skew data to favor certain outcomes, and that his research methods don't stand up to scrutiny. If they did, his critics say, Lott would still be published in academic journals, or doing his research out of a university instead of a non-profit called the Crime Prevention Research Center.

After a bit of coaxing, Lott agreed to meet me at a debate on campus-carry laws he'd be participating in at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Lott arrived at the debate, his hair wispy, his suit loose-fitting, his shirt tucked in only halfway. The mostly conservative students who filed into the auditorium, dressed in well-fitting skirts and heels and khakis and boat shoes, looked like the best of conservative America—professional, jovial, past the more juvenile aspects of college. But Lott's look just added to his authenticity. He exudes professorial vibes. He does not look like a snake-oil salesman. He is, it seems, a true believer.

The school's chapter of the [Federalist Society](#), a national conservative group, had invited him here. According to Lott and another organizer, it took months to set the meeting up—first there was mysteriously no classroom available in the law school, where the Federalist Society usually held events, and then no one would debate Lott. Lott told me he'd reached out to around 20 people, including professors at Baylor, with no luck. The backdrop was this: Texas had recently passed a law mandating that public universities allow students to carry weapons on campus. It sparked protests at public schools, and pushed leaders of private schools to come down on a side of the gun debate. Ken Starr, Baylor's president at the time, banned weapons from campus, a move a vocal minority of students disagreed with. So it made sense professors did not want to broach the issue. Instead, Lott found Andrea Brauer, the executive director of Texas Gun Sense, a small non-profit that pushes for small changes in gun laws in Texas.

The debate went well for Lott—he arrived prepared with a PowerPoint chock full of data, most of which was based on his own research from his seminal book *More Guns, Less Crime*, published in 1998. He hit on all the pro-gun tropes, and backed them with numbers—terrorists pick gun-free zones, he said; public shootings happen more frequently in Europe; good guys with guns stop bad ones. Brauer couldn't compete. She had talking points, but she was not a researcher, she could not debunk him on technical grounds, and the audience was already in Lott's pocket. She stumbled over her words. She let Lott speak over her and could only answer many of his retorts by saying he was wrong, but that she did not have the data to prove it. "Aren't you making a feelings-based argument," one student asked her. "That's good for you, throwing your opinion out there," another student said after the debate.

"I know his research is flawed," Brauer told me afterwards. "A lot has been discredited. But it's hard to argue with him."

Lott's main assertion is that states that pass right-to-carry laws (laws that allow you to carry a concealed handgun) have significantly lowered their crime rates. Lott first made the claim in a 1997 study that he conducted while at the University of Chicago, along with David Mustard, then a graduate student at the University of Chicago and now a respected economist at the University of Georgia. Lott expanded on the study in his *More Guns* book, a herculean undertaking: Lott, with a few assistants, collected 15 years' worth of gun and violence data from 3,054 U.S. counties. It was, and still is, one of the grandest studies of gun violence ever conducted. Lott found that, were all 50 states to pass concealed-carry laws, more than 1,500 murders, 60,000 aggravated assaults, and 4,000 rapes could be avoided per year. The influential criminologist Gary Kleck told *Mother Jones* that Lott's early work "was light-years ahead of anybody else at the time."

Even those prone to support gun control agreed it was an impressive body of work. And for those who agree with Lott, *More Guns* remains one of the most important works in the field to date.

"A lot of his research is some of the most highly cited research on firearms," says Mustard, who hasn't conducted research with Lott since their original project, though they've collaborated in other ways. "It's clearly the most highly cited by academics and it's also incredibly frequently cited by politicians."

Lott's work quickly became a favorite of pro-gun legislators, academics, and policy wonks, including at the National Rifle Association (the group's Institute for Legislative Action has cited his work 175 times). And Lott's research attracted media attention. According to one count, his work has been cited no fewer than 1,100 times in newspapers. After *More Guns, Less Crime* was published, Lott rose to be the most prominent gun researcher in America by far—appearing on television shows dozens of times a year, constantly touring college campuses, cited by state and federal lawmakers in gun-policy debates—all while being, according to many of his colleagues, wrong about his research. But that just shows the bias of academia, according to Lott.

"In a field such as public health, I suspect a school like Harvard University may not even have a single Republican," Lott wrote me in an email (he insisted on email after our initial in-person interview). "No matter how well done my research is there is no way someone who wrote the types of studies that I do would ever get hired there. The entire field is like that."

But researchers told me their qualms with Lott originate not in the field of politics, but basic scientific method. Several pointed out that concealed-carry laws tend to be passed after a spike in violent crime, and that many of the states Lott researched for his 1997 paper passed laws right after the crack epidemic. But, as researchers have pointed out, most concealed-carry permits are issued to white men outside of urban areas, so Lott was measuring two separate trends—an increase in violent crime associated with the crack epidemic in urban areas, and an increase in concealed-carry permits in rural areas—and then concluding they influenced each other. Lott did discuss the crack epidemic in a footnote in 1997, and the rural-urban issue in later research that appeared in the influential *American Economic Review*, but he continued defending his position long after the scholarly consensus rejected it.

"He's able to find things in data that most people don't," says [Daniel Webster](#), a professor of health policy at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the director of the school's [Center for Gun Policy and Research](#), noting that Lott hasn't been peer-reviewed for his gun research in over a decade.

Other researchers have found it problematic that Lott's landmark 1997 paper depended on the state of Florida and incorporated crime data he collected from police departments on his own, as opposed to relying solely on data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. If you take out Florida, Lott's claimed reductions in crime become much less dramatic.

After Sandy Hook, Evan DeFilippis and Devin Hughes, two young, independent gun researchers, noticed the usual slew of pro-gun arguments on Facebook from conservative family members and friends. They realized that nearly all who used statistics in an attempt to prove that guns were safe relied solely on Lott's work.

As undergraduates at the University of Oklahoma, DeFilippis and Hughes began looking carefully into Lott's research. They found that his models only worked under strict and often unrealistic conditions. Adding new variables often produced results that didn't match real-world observations—a conclusion other researchers have also reached.

"To debunk him, you have to dive down this rabbit hole [of data]," Hughes says. "People just don't want to go down that rabbit hole, and they don't realize how important he is to the entire pro-gun narrative."

In the four years immediately following the conclusion of Lott's 1997 study, 14 more jurisdictions passed concealed-carry laws. [Ian Ayres](#), a lawyer and economist at Yale Law School, and Stanford Law School professor [John Donohue](#), both of whom have published extensively on gun control, jointly wrote a 106-page takedown of Lott's work in 2002. They decided to add those 14 jurisdictions to Lott's models, and found that, in every jurisdiction, all categories of crime increased after concealed-carry laws were passed.

[David Hemenway](#), a professor of health policy at Harvard, found that, if you increase the unemployment rates in Lott's models, homicides drop dramatically—the opposite of what research on gun violence and unemployment shows. And if you reduce the number of black women age 40 to 49 in Lott's models by 1 percent, homicides drop by 59 percent and rapes increase by 74 percent. Hemenway argued that such massive effects from such a tiny change in just one demographic suggest Lott's model is "no good." Lott, as he usually does when criticized, responded with a litany of blog posts, op-eds, and media appearances.

The failure of variable-testing Hemenway identified in Lott's work is among the clearest signs that his methods are flawed. If research is strong, it should stand up to being tested and picked apart by other researchers, which is what the peer-review process is for. Lott's recent research hasn't gotten the same scrutiny most scientific researchers do, because if it did, other researchers told me, it would be torn apart.

"He is, perhaps, perceived by some [to have] the same credibility as myself or other people who have published tons of stuff in scientific, peer-reviewed literature and have been through rigorous academic vetting," Webster says. "He's just some guy who anointed himself as the pro-gun researcher."

"What I dislike is he says all these things that are clearly wrong, and his science is not very good at all," Hemenway says. John Donohue says Lott obfuscates with bad data, and won't admit when he's wrong. "Lott's work was mainstreamed very quickly because it did appeal to a powerful economic interest, and political interests, and so the work got more prominence more rapidly than it probably deserved."

"What I've found over the years, at least for me, is the best way to move forward is to kind of pretend he doesn't exist," says Stephen Teret, another professor at the Bloomberg School of Public Health who is familiar with Lott's work.

These researchers hold the majority opinion. Hemenway, with the help of his graduate students, compiled a list of academics in peer-reviewed journals who had published on gun safety within the last four years. Those surveyed came from various fields—criminology, economics, political science, public health, public policy. And there was a clear consensus: 84 percent concluded guns in the home increase the risk of suicide, 64 percent said guns make homes more dangerous in general, and 73 percent said guns are used for crimes more often than for self-defense. Perhaps most damningly for Lott, Hemenway's survey found that only 9 percent of researchers thought that concealed-carry laws reduced gun violence rates.

Lott countered with another survey showing that a smaller majority of researchers from only two fields (criminology and economics) agreed with him. "They only surveyed academics, and only three economists. That's their way of discrediting my research," he said. "They never mention all the published studies that confirm my results. They always want to make it seem like it's only me saying these things." Hemenway and others have disputed the results of Lott's survey too.

When challenged on his research, Lott has, in the past, resorted to odd behavior. He admitted to using an alternate online persona named Mary Rosh, who would defend Lott's articles. "I shouldn't have used it, but I didn't want to get directly involved with my real name because I could not commit large blocks of time to discussions," Lott said once the Rosh debacle was uncovered. Lott has also come under fire for writing an op-ed under the name of a real woman who had a stalker and became a gun advocate after her college would not provide her with adequate protection. Even pro-gun-rights outlets like *Townhall* and *Reason* have criticized these efforts.

And Lott has never publicly shared the data behind one of his most-cited statistics—that 98 percent of defensive gun use doesn't even require a gun to be fired, just pulled out to scare away the attacker or intruder. When the late sociologist Otis Dudley Duncan, who pioneered the field of human ecology at the University of Chicago, asked Lott for more raw data, Lott said he'd lost it in a hard drive crash. Lott then redid the survey with a sample of about 1,000 people, and found that 13 had used a gun in self-defense. Only one had actually fired the gun—not the largest sample, but even one out of 13 (7 percent) is far from the 2 percent that Lott has touted for most of his career.

For every attack lobbed at him, Lott has hit back with lengthy posts on his blog that attempt to dismantle his opponent's critiques. And in each one he dives deep into statistical analyses that seem designed to confuse more than elucidate. DeFilippis and Hughes call this "security through obscurity." Similarly, Rutgers University sociologist Ted Goertzel has said Lott's work "would never have been taken seriously if it had not been obscured by a maze of equations."

"I have been willing to debate other academics, and I have done so every time that I have been asked to do so," Lott wrote me in an email. "I have [asked people] many times to try to set up debates but it has been very difficult to get other academics to participate."

When DeFilippis debated Lott on a liberal radio show a few years ago, he experienced the deluge-of-data technique firsthand. "You end up getting into a high-level, technical debate, which is not going to persuade the lay audience," DeFilippis says. "You're fighting an uphill battle."

Outside of the Baylor auditorium, Lott told me about his journey to becoming the most prominent and most hated gun researcher: His interest in guns, he said, started when he was an economist at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Students asked him about his thoughts on gun control, and so Lott started researching. He wasn't a gun expert then, just an economist. But he noticed that, despite the volume of gun research, there were few well-designed studies with large sample sizes. Around the same time, Lott had become disillusioned with the Clinton administration. He said he had been a Democrat, but found himself starting to align with more-conservative belief systems. He felt that the response to the research he'd started doing on guns encouraged his political transformation. It appeared to Lott that the liberal establishment had gotten everything wrong, and that, in their rush to prove their progressive fantasies, they had ignored the facts.

By the time Lott's first research came out, he was a researcher at the University of Chicago. But his new fascination with guns made him a pariah there. He says he began receiving death threats from gun-control advocates, and so his wife and kids moved back to Pennsylvania so they wouldn't be harmed if one of the threats ever materialized. Then, Lott says, under pressure from a gun-conscious mayor, the university terminated him because of his pro-gun views. (The University of Chicago declined to comment on the specifics of Lott's departure.)

Lott returned to Pennsylvania and eventually started the Crime Prevention Research Center, which is funded through small donations and operates with a limited budget. When he flies around the country giving talks, it's with his own money. His lifestyle does not appear lavish. He seems isolated, and he seems impassioned—doing this of his own volition, making a decent living but not an offensive one. The Crime Prevention Research Center is mostly run out of his house, in the suburbs of Philadelphia. He sleeps little, because he does his research at night.

Seeing Lott slouching in an uncomfortable, shiny lounge chair at Baylor made me wonder why he does this—when so many of his peers say he's wrong, when he's not being given obscene amounts of money for his work, when he's been essentially banished from academia, pushed to self-publishing and creating fake identities to advance his research.

After half an hour of me trying to figure out his motivations, Lott said he'd be late if we talked any longer, so he got up and opened the double doors to the auditorium, where he was introduced by a smiling student in a suit to a round of applause.

