

# THINK PROGRESS

## The Discredited Nonsense That Gave America The 'More Guns, Less Crime' Myth

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Early Sunday morning, Omar Saddiqui Mateen walked into a gay club in Orlando, Florida with an assault rifle and opened fire. As of this writing, 50 are dead and even more are wounded. It's the deadliest mass shooting in American history, killing more people than the Sandy Hook shooting, the Columbine shooting and the Charleston church shooting combined.

It's also the 133rd mass shooting to occur in 2016. And it is a uniquely American problem. Other countries, with fewer guns than the United States, simply do not suffer from the epidemic of gun violence that infects this country.

Nevertheless, the idea that the solution to gun violence is more guns persists in American politics. Long before National Rifle Association CEO Wayne LaPierre proclaimed that "the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun," economist John Lott published what may be the seminal work of research used to justify lax gun laws as a public safety measure: *More Guns, Less Crime*. It's a book whose influence is matched only by its seeming invulnerability to criticism. No matter how frequently and how thoroughly Lott's thesis is discredited, it only rises again as a tool of lawmakers and advocates eager to dismantle gun laws.

### Let's Dispel With This Fiction That John Lott Knows What He's Doing

Many of the stories undermining Lott's credibility as a researcher would be comic if the implications of his research were not so deadly serious. Lott, for example, claimed that "98 percent of the time that people use guns defensively, they merely have to brandish a weapon to break off an attack." He supported this claim by referring to "national surveys" that Lott later identified as polls by the Los Angeles Times, Gallup and the public opinion firm Peter Hart Research Associates.

Lott later changed his story, however, claiming that he really only relied on one survey — his own — which he claimed to have performed with the help of research assistants. Yet, when Lott was asked to produce his data, he claimed that it was lost in a hard drive crash. Nor, according to

UCLA law professor Adam Winkler's book *Gunfight*, could Lott name the research assistants who supposedly helped conduct the survey. Lott couldn't produce the questions the survey supposedly asked. Or name the funder who paid for his survey. Or even produce phone records indicating that the survey calls had taken place.

Some time after various writers began to critique Lott online, someone named "Mary Rosh" emerged as one of his most vocal defenders online. "Rosh" wrote positive reviews of Lott's book on Amazon, and she showed up in comment forums on various websites to describe Lott as a "meticulous researcher" and "the best professor I ever had."

But Rosh, it turns out, was merely a pseudonym for Lott himself. This ruse was discovered by writer Julian Sanchez, now a senior fellow at the pro-gun Cato Institute, who "compared the I.P. address on Rosh's comment to the one on an e-mail Lott had sent me from his home. They were the same." When Sanchez confronted Lott with this evidence, Lott confessed that "the MaRyRoSh pen name account was created years ago for an account for my children, using the first two letters of the names of my four sons."

### **New York Is Not Mississippi**

Of course, it's possible that Lott enjoys masquerading as a former student but that he also managed to produce credible research on the subject of guns. And, indeed, if Lott's research is reliable, it has profound public policy implications. Lott's book grew out of a 1997 paper he co-authored with economist David Mustard, which examined the impact of permissive carry laws like one enacted in the state of Florida. It's conclusions were simply staggering, suggesting that there would have been 1,500 fewer murders, 4,200 fewer rapes and 60,000 fewer aggravated assaults if other states followed Florida's lead.

It's only a slight exaggeration, however, to suggest that these conclusions spawned an entire field of academic scholarship devoted entirely to debunking Lott and Mustard's claims. A panel of the National Research Council concluded in a 2004 report, for example, that there is "no credible evidence that the passage of right-to-carry laws decreases or increases violent crime," uncertainty that it attributed to the fact that "the data available on these questions are too weak to support unambiguous conclusions or strong policy statements."

Subsequent critiques of Lott's thesis noted several major flaws in his research. First of all, while it is true that Florida did experience a drop in the forms of crime noted by Lott and Mustard after it enacted its permissive carry laws, Florida also enacted gun regulations such as waiting periods and background checks for gun purchasers a few years later. Thus, the decline in crime could result from more gun regulation, not less, as Lott and Mustard suggest.

In any event, when you remove Florida from the data used in Lott and Mustard's study, the evidence that more guns lead to less crime disappears, according to one leading critique of their research.

Additionally, according to Rutgers Sociology professor Ted Goertzel, Lott and Mustard's research compares vastly dissimilar states. The kind of permissive carry laws Lott and Mustard focus on "were instituted in states where the National Rifle Association was powerful, largely in the South, the West and in rural regions." Meanwhile, urban areas that typically did not have

these laws were being ravaged by an epidemic of violence that had very little to do with carry laws.

Lott and Mustard were comparing trends in Idaho and West Virginia and Mississippi with trends in Washington, D.C. and New York City. What actually happened was that there was an explosion of crack-related homicides in major eastern cities in the 1980s and early 1990s. Lott's whole argument came down to a claim that the largely rural and western "shall issue" states were spared the crack-related homicide epidemic because of their "shall issue" laws. This would never have been taken seriously if it had not been obscured by a maze of equations.

Indeed, research by Yale law professor Ian Ayres and Stanford law professor John Donahue corroborates this insight that the "more guns, less crime" hypothesis only stands up if you apply it to a limited time frame. Lott and Mustard's original study only examined data from 1977 through 1992. Ayres and Donahue examined data from the late 1990s, after the wave of crack-related violence began to ebb, and found that crime dropped dramatically in urban areas without permissive carry laws. They conclude that "no longer can any plausible case be made on statistical grounds that shall-issue laws are likely to reduce crime for all or even most states" — and, indeed, their research suggests that permissive carry laws may increase crime rates.

### **So What Does The Data Really Show?**

Even if Lott's research is difficult to trust, the real answer to the question "do more guns lead to more crime" is surprisingly hard to determine. This is due, in no small part, to the fact that federal law imposes strict limits on federally-funded research into the causes of gun violence.

The data that does exist, however, suggests that Lott isn't simply wrong, but that the opposite of his conclusions are actually true. Although the 2004 National Research Council report found that there is insufficient evidence to determine the impact of carry laws on crime, a subsequent study by Stanford researchers determined that "right-to-carry gun laws are linked to an increase in violent crime." This study indicates that right-to-carry laws increase the rate of aggravated assault by 8 percent. Though it also suggests that such laws "are associated with an increase in rape and robbery," this evidence for this claim is less strong.

Similarly, a 2013 report by the Center for American Progress found a strong correlation between lax gun laws and more gun violence. According to that report, "the 10 states with the weakest gun laws collectively have a level of gun violence that is more than twice as high — 104 percent higher — than the 10 states with the strongest gun laws."

More guns, in other words, lead to more crime.