Misrepresenting the FBI Active Shooter Report: A Response to Lott

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The March 2015 edition of *ACJS Today* published a paper by John Lott criticizing the report titled "A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013" released by the FBI in September of last year (see Blair & Schweit, 2014 for the entire report). As part of the team that produced this report, we feel the need to respond to this criticism and explain the importance of these data. Lott's essential argument is a straw man; he accuses us of saying something that we did not and then attempts to show this is wrong. We provide the specifics of this straw man argument below.

The Straw Man

Lott begins by admitting the FBI report is about active shooter incidents and not mass murders or mass shootings. 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. In some instances, many deaths occur. However, in the majority of cases, fewer than three deaths result. Active shooter events have garnered substantial public and law enforcement attention since the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 and even more so following the 2012 shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School. The first text pages of the report (pp. 4–5) identify the definition of active shooter incidents and distinguish them from mass murders and shootings. Throughout the FBI report, the only times the terms *mass murder* or *mass shooting* are mentioned are to clarify that active shooter incidents and mass murder shootings are not synonymous (e.g., pp. 7, 9, and 20 all state that only 40% of the active shooter incidents reviewed qualify as mass murder under the federal definition of three or more people killed during a single incident).

Lott then cites a number of news headlines in which the media mistakenly reported mass shootings were on the rise. The media reports did not say that mass murders were on the rise; rather, they stated that mass shootings were. We agree with Lott's assessment that some media outlets got it wrong. At the press conference releasing the report, we went to great lengths to clarify how active shooter events were different from mass murders and mass shootings. Several speakers made this point and specific sections in the report were highlighted in an attempt to make it clear that, in most of these events, fewer than three people were killed and fewer than five were shot. While we went to great efforts to avoid misrepresentations by the media, they unfortunately happened anyway. We have little control over this. We wonder if some members of the media intentionally misreported findings in an attempt to generate a bigger headline or advance their own agendas. Nonetheless, the report does not misrepresent the data.

Next, Lott accuses the FBI of a bait and switch, stating, "While the FBI study discusses 'mass shootings or killings,'" (p. 19). However, the report does not discuss mass shootings or

killings other than to distinguish them from active shooter incidents. It is at this point that he begins to confound mass shootings with mass murders. His definition of a mass public shooting requires that a specific number of people die, but it does not require that a certain number of people be shot. Lott then switches his focus from mass shootings to mass murder (using the criteria of the number of people killed instead of the number shot) while still periodically referring to mass shootings.

Lott then suggests that other cases should be included in the data set, that the definition of mass shootings should be two or more killed, that official data should be used, and that the time frame of the analysis should be longer. Lott concludes that the increase in mass shootings (really murders) is much smaller than the FBI claims and statistically insignificant. His analysis can be criticized on a number of points (e.g., discussing mass shootings without considering the number of people shot, the use of two deaths as the definition of mass murder when three or four is typical, the use of significance tests on what should probably be considered population data). Most important, the FBI report never claims mass murders or shootings are on the rise.

We reported an increase in the number of active shooter incidents, most of which were not mass murders or shootings. Overall, Lott's paper is clearly a straw-man argument. His assertion that the FBI claims mass shootings are on the rise is simply not true. Lott then attempts to show that mass shootings/murders are not on the rise (puzzling, the data still show an upward trend after the adjustments) to prove that what the FBI report does *not* say is wrong. We turn now to why we think the study of active shooter events is important and why we collected these data.

The Importance of Studying Active Shooter Events

The authors of this response work for the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) Center at Texas State University. The mission of this center is to provide the best, research-based active shooter response training in the nation. We study active shooter events and train first responders to deal with these events for one reason: to save lives. We believe the more we know about these events, the more successful we can be.

To accomplish this objective, we needed to identify active shooter events for study. The first place we looked was existing "official" data sets such as the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and Supplemental Homicide Reports (SHR).We were quickly confronted with one of the standard issues in secondary data analysis—trying to fit data that were collected for one purpose to another. As there is no specific criminal statute for active shootings, official data do not directly address our question. We could have used some form of homicide to get at the issue (as Lott did), but that would miss a large part of the picture. For our purposes, we could learn as much (or more) from events where few or no where few or no people were killed as we could from events where many people were killed. For example, if we used only homicide-based data, we would miss cases like the 2011 attack at Deer Creek Middle School in Colorado. The shooter opened fire on 8th grade students exiting the school until a teacher tackled the shooter and ended the

attack. Consequently, only two students were shot; both survived. We would also miss cases like the recent attack at a Garland, Texas anti-Islam event where an alert police officer was able to stop two heavily armed shooters before they could hurt the attendees; only a security guard was injured. Knowing about these types of events provides important information about active shooter events and they should not be excluded. In some ways, including these events provides a perspective that is similar to the branch of homicide research that compares fatal outcomes (homicide) to non-fatal outcomes (e.g., attempted murder and aggravated assaults; Brookman, 2005).

Next, we looked at other collections of active shooter events. We found these to be incomplete, and they often did not explain how cases were defined or located. Consequently, we decided we needed to collect our own data. We first conducted searches of newspaper archives and supplemented these with FOIA requests for police reports and reviews of SHR data. We chose 2000 as our starting year because 1999 marked a significant change in how police respond to these events. Prior to the Columbine High School shooting, the standard patrol response to an active shooter was to contain the incident and call for a special weapons and tactics (SWAT) team. However, following Columbine, patrol officers were now expected to enter active shooter attack sites to end the shootings as quickly as possible (Blair, Nichols, Burns, & Curnutt, 2013).We were most interested in how these events unfolded following the change in police response tactics.

In 2013, we partnered with the FBI to do a more extensive search, and they were able to obtain police reports we could not. This improved the quality of the data. We also engaged in systematic vetting of cases to ensure we had the best possible information.

We acknowledge in the FBI report that our data are imperfect. Even "official" data have substantial issues, most of which have been thoroughly dissected by scholars (see Kelling, 1996; Stephens, 1999; Wolfgang, 1963).However, we believe we have collected the best data currently available on active shooter events. We are also constantly trying to improve our data. As new cases come to our attention, they are vetted and incorporated, as appropriate (we are doing this with the cases identified by Lott).

For our purposes, we wish to collect operationally useful data. This includes information on shooting environments, number of people hurt, how shooters were equipped, and the manner in which events concluded. First responders around the country have used the information in the FBI report to help them better prepare for and react to these types of events. We feel providing imperfect but relevant data is preferable to allowing police and other first responders to operate in the dark.

In conclusion, because official data did not contain the information we needed, we had to develop our own. This required choices between various options with different strengths and weaknesses. While our data is imperfect, it nonetheless represents the best attempt to date to comprehensively capture active shooter events. Because it is the best available data, it can help inform response procedures and hopefully help save lives. Changes in mass murder trends, while

important for other purposes, are not relevant to a police officer responding to an active shooter event.

References

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