



**CSTS podcast series**  
***Let's Talk About Your Guns***  
**episode 206: Protection vs. Risk**

**BILL MAYS:** I started reading Guns and Ammo about the age of 12. I loved firearms. The way the gun looked, the way the gun feels.

**BILL MAYS:** When I started carrying I was in my early twenties. I just thought that having a firearm for self-defense was going to secure my safety. I live in, St. Louis, Missouri, so there was crime, criminal activity. And so I carried a firearm for protection.

**BILL MAYS:** And I became a firearms trainer, pistol expert, and trained carry conceal in the state of Missouri or anywhere else I would be able to go. I could train all over the country.

**BILL MAYS:** I had at least a hundred guns. I had rifles, I had shotguns. I had semi auto shotguns, I had pumps. I had semi, of course, semi all the pistols. I've had the revolvers. I don't think there's not a gun that I haven't had my little hands on.

**BILL MAYS:** I put 'em everywhere. I put 'em in the cabinet. I put 'em in my living room, in my resting area. I had firearms everywhere around the house.

**BILL MAYS:** I felt that if someone breaks in my home, I may be cooking. So if I'm cooking, I'm going to be able to get to that firearm.

**BILL MAYS:** Around 43 years old I was in a rough spot. I had lost my job. I had lost a relationship. Things were just bad. I had a lot of firearms, but I had started selling them and pawning them. I had to pay my rent, had to pay some bills.



**BILL MAYS:** I just really, I was in a deep depressed state and I was just like, man, I'm just going to end this. I want to end all of this. And I decided, okay, I'm going to go, go into my bedroom. I'm going to get my Glock 22, not 22 caliber, but model 22, which was a 40 caliber, which would've definitely did the job.

So I went in the bedroom and I pulled my nightstand drawer open because I kept a firearm, not stored, just in, just loose.

I went to get that firearm and it was a big old yellow receipt. Showed "pawned". And right then and there, right then and there, I changed my mind. I changed my mind because it was not there.

**BILL MAYS:** That feeling of despair, of me wanting to kill myself, it just poof. It just went away. That little space between that time that I didn't have that firearm where I could reach and get that firearm and it was available, saved my life.

**DR CURT WEST:** Bill Mays in one of the thirty to forty percent of U.S. adults who maintain firearms in their home.

**DR CURT WEST:** The vast majority of those own firearms for personal protection.

**DR CURT WEST:** Yet most firearm owners don't store their guns securely - creating a risk that a firearm bought for protection may increase the risk of accidental injury or death by suicide.

**DR CURT WEST:** I'm Curt West: psychiatrist and scientist at the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at the Uniformed Services University. Today, in *Let's Talk About Your Guns* we'll talk to Bill Mays, a firearms instructor and community advocate who survived a suicidal crisis and now works to educate people about secure storage of firearms.



**DR CURT WEST:** We'll also talk to Dr. Tara Warner, sociologist and researcher, about her work on the tension between protection vs risk and understand how that influences safe storage decisions.

**DR CURT WEST:** By examining this tension, it's our hope that we can empower more constructive conversations that both encourage safe storage but still respect an individual's concerns about having access to a firearm for protection.

**DR CURT WEST:** Firearm safety in the home is built around five principles. Weapons should be stored unloaded. They should be taken apart or stored with a disabling device. They should be stored in locked containers. And ammunition should be stored in a separate locked container. Finally, firearm safety in the home involves having a plan in advance for storing guns in an alternate location during times of crisis.

**DR CURT WEST:** Today's conversation is about finding that balance between having a gun readily accessible for protection and creating time and space for that person in crisis. Because this podcast isn't about whether you are for or against firearms. It's about how to have open and honest conversations about safe storage, conversations that may save a life.

**DR CURT WEST:** Bill, you started out as a firearms instructor?

**BILL MAYS** Yes. Right.

**DR CURT WEST:** What was it that you taught your students?

**BILL MAYS:** The first thing we would teach them, of course, how to carry the firearm how to shoot the firearm, how to line your sights up, how to squeeze the trigger and not pull the trigger. My thing was, by the time you get out of that class, you will know how to shoot. You will know when to shoot. You will be familiar with the firearm.



**DR CURT WEST:** Was safe or secure storage part of the training?

**BILL MAYS** Initially, I wasn't pro storing firearms. That's not what I taught. I taught that you don't need a contraption to store it. I mean, you need to get to that firearm as quickly as possible. And so if it was stored or gun lock or in a storage case or that was going to keep you from protecting yourself.

But I was wrong.

After that crisis I had a new journey. My method now was different. I hyped up on storing your firearm. And so I start my training off by talking about storage and how it can help preventing suicide.

**DR CURT WEST:** Okay so these students are coming in to use a firearm for protection. I can imagine that there might be some resistance to you trying to convince them to make it less accessible. So how did you navigate that?

**BILL MAYS:** I had to go at a different angle first. I had to go through the back door, then come around to the front door. So my basic premises was to help them appreciate that. Do you have children? Yes, I have children in the house. Okay. So you want to make sure that that child is not able to get to your firearm, right? Yes. Okay. Yes. Because then I would expound, I would say, because not only that, we don't know where that child's head at. Not even only the child, but there's maybe someone in the home that's going through mental challenges, and we don't want them to get that firearm, do we? No. No. Okay. So we can see the importance of having that firearm stored away so that person cannot get to that firearm. Do that make sense? And they would say, yeah, yeah, that's right. It does. And so that's how I started talking about suicide, because suicide is not, again, suicide is not one plus one with firearms equals two. So I had to do some minuses there to get to the point where they understood suicide as well as children.

**DR CURT WEST:** So, okay, that is really fascinating how you did that. So you bring it into preventing access from somebody that they're trying to protect, a child or another



member of the family, and then saying, well, what if that person's not in a good spot? And okay, and then you bring it back to kind of what if that person's you?

**BILL MAYS:** Yeah. Yeah. What if that person is you? What if that person is you? And also what we have to keep in mind is that there's another element that you have to think about. What about the bad guy? What if that bad guy gets your gun before you do? If you're in the living room and you have your gun exposed somehow, what if the bad guy gets the gun? So again, the defending thing with the gun, it's a fairy tale.

**DR CURT WEST:** What were you able to say in these trainings that convinced your students that string a firearm safely would give them the same level of protection as if they'd just had it out in the open?

**BILL MAYS:** Well, it's not what I said. It's what I demonstrated. It demonstrated that you could store your firearm and also protect yourself at the same time. And that was big, because we demonstrated it.

**DR CURT WEST:** How did you do that?

**BILL MAYS:** So persons in the other room, you have your firearm. Let's lock your firearm. Let's put your firearm in this box. You hear a noise? Okay, let's time it. Boom. You got so many seconds to get your firearm. Not minutes, seconds. Let's see how you can do that. So what they would do is take the key, unlock it, have a firearm off person, still not in your room. They're not even close to you, but you have your firearm to defend yourself with. And so they understood that. They're like, wow, you're right. So we were able to demonstrate that you have enough time to get that stored, to get that locked gun, if you needed to protect yourself. So why not store your firearm? Because you have time to get that firearm out, that box.

**DR WEST:** So they needed the experience.

**BILL MAYS:** They need the experience. They needed to see it in action.



**DR WEST:** Dr Tara Warner is an Associate Professor in the University of Alabama Birmingham's Department of Criminal Justice. Her work examines how perceptions and anxieties about our safety shape gun ownership in the United States.

**DR WEST:** Dr Warner, can you tell me how you got started in this work about firearms, risk, and safety?

**DR TARA WARNER:** I really started thinking about these questions around 2016, 2017, with just being really curious about why individuals own firearms, I noticed how politicized the issue around firearms became following the Sandy Hook shooting. And so I started really looking at some of the data that the Pew Research Center had been collecting as part of their American Trends Panel. And I think they were one of the kind of first reports that really got a lot of attention talking about how many Americans own firearms and protection as being that most frequently reported reason that people were saying they own firearms. And so as a sociological criminologist I was seeing these reports alongside knowing, well, why is there so much protective ownership when we're experiencing crime declines? You know, crime had been declining since the 1990s and yet we're, every year seeing more and more individuals owning firearms, rates of people saying they own for protections increasing. So it's just out of step with crime if what people are protecting themselves from is crime.

**DR CURT WEST:** So if the threat of crime is actually decreasing, what is it that people are protecting themselves from? What do we call these things that are driving protective gun ownership?

**DR WARNER:** So I've called them a few different things and other scholars have used some different terminologies. When we're talking about crime or previous victimization, we'll refer to that as like approximate threat or an immediate threat. Contrast that with the sort of bigger, broader stuff that I have referred to as diffuse or



abstract or depending on what we're actually measuring I've referred to it as economic threats, cultural threats or status and identity related threats. It's, you know, anything that's really experienced as negative, anything that generates a reaction, I think can fall within the purview of threat. It's taking a much bigger definition of threat, moving it away from just that physical safety threat and recognizing that we can experience threats to our sense of self, threats to our identity, threats to our ability to just feel secure in how we go about our day-to-day lives.

**DR WEST:** Would you say that it's actually these more abstract threats that people are protecting themselves from?

**DR WARNER:** That's the million-dollar question. And I don't even know if it's accurate to say they are protecting themselves from something. We have tended to use the term protection, I think, as a catch-all because it sounds reasonable, but if you really dig into it, what are you protecting yourself against if it's some kind of abstract identity threat? No one's coming after your identity.

**DR WEST:** If it's not "protection", what would you call it?

**DR WARNER:** Instead of maybe protection, it's reaffirming. So I'm reaffirming my sense of self. I'm reaffirming my autonomy, my ability to say that I'm in control of my surroundings, to be able to say that I could protect my family if I needed to.

**DR WEST:** It's not so much protecting myself from a dangerous neighborhood or bad actors around me. It's just more broadly protecting myself from a dangerous and uncertain world.

**DR WARNER:** Yes, I think it's much more protecting against the unknown. I recognize I'm making some generalizations here. There are certainly firearm owners who have experienced crime or who live in very high crime spaces. And so their ownership is more clearly connected to those tangible, immediate threats. But what



we know from the survey research is most of the firearm owners aren't going to experience crime at all. They're not victims. And this corresponds with the fear of crime research, which finds that the individuals that are most fearful about crime are the least likely to ever experience it.

**DR WEST:** Does owning firearms for protection differ from why people owned firearms in the past?

**DR WARNER:** Absolutely. So I must credit sociologist David Yamani for developing the term gun culture 2.0, which he uses to describe this very shift in gun owning motivation between, you know, from like the 1970s and 80s to today where we have definitely seen a shift away from owning primarily for hunting and recreation to this owning primarily for protection. We've seen hunting decline, recreational firearm use has declined. There's a shift towards far more handgun ownership away from long gun ownership. And so that's absolutely been observed and characterized as a new type of gun culture.

**DR WEST:** Is that associated with any change in the demographics of who's buying a firearm now compared to in the past?

**DR WARNER:** I think as the shift away from hunting and recreation into protection, the demographic of gun owners has remained largely older white men, more conservative individuals, but in more recent years, particularly post-COVID and post Black Lives Matter, we have seen increasing diversity among new gun owners in particular. We're seeing more women and people of color coming to firearms for the first time and that's definitely an area in need of continued research to understand the motivations that are driving individuals who were not previously part of that community into firearm ownership and particularly protective firearm ownership.

**DR WEST:** So how does that play out from a public safety perspective?





**DR WARNER:** I think that disconnect between physical threat and my fears and worries is probably a big part of why we have so much trouble with public safety because I know from talking with my public health colleagues and just reading the public health literature that so often starts with, know, X number of Americans have firearms for protection, but you're so much more likely to be harmed by your own firearm than you are to use it defensively. We're just, they're speaking past each other because that's not even part of the calculus.

**DR WEST:** That is interesting. So when researchers talk about firearm safety, they're talking about it in terms of suicide and accident prevention. But when firearm owners talk about safety, they are thinking about protection.

**DR WARNER** Absolutely. Yes that is a perfect way of summarizing it. When it comes to protective ownership, what many owners are protecting themselves from are things that are so big and broad, it could limit their ability to really see those immediate risks. Individuals will think, well, that would never happen to me. We tend to overestimate the risk of bad things happening to other people and underestimate the risk of it happening to ourselves.

**DR WEST:** Ok, so let's bring this back to conversations. Based on what you know, are there things that a person can talk about with a gun owner in their life? Things that they can talk about that may influence them towards more secure storage behaviors?

**DR WARNER:** So in talking with owners, what can we do to try and move the needle a little bit? Some of the work that my colleagues and I are doing right now is with a small group of gun owners as we're trying to unpack what responsibility means and how it's enacted. And some of the themes that have come up among owners is this idea about risk calculus and recognizing and talking with owners about not just how they're storing their firearms, but what are the other risks and other people in that immediate space? And then folding that into the conversation. Because if I'm talking to a gun owner who lives alone, who maybe has firearms stored less securely than I



would like, that could be a very different conversation than if I'm talking with a firearm owner that has kids. Now yes, the firearm owner who lives alone is still at risk of harming himself, but contrast that to the family with the firearm. You could harm yourself, your kid could harm themselves, your kid could harm you, vice versa. just kind of talking with owners, and this goes back to recognizing that this is a very diverse population. Not just in terms of their demographic characteristics, but in terms of the environments that they're in and who might be at risk for that firearm being stored unsecurely at home? And how can we sort of shift owners to recognize all of the possible risks within the immediate environment?

**DR WEST:** When it comes to helping firearm owners recognize and balance protection vs risk, Bill Mays is on the frontlines. Today, he works with Safer Homes Collaborative in St Louis, a joint effort between the firearm and suicide prevention communities that promotes safe storage.

**BILL MAYS:** What I do now with Safer Homes Collaborative and helping ones to appreciate how important it is that when one is in a struggle, in a struggle mentally we have to be able to look at that person in the view of what he's going through and say, okay, he has a firearm. We've got to do two or three things. Number one, you got to make sure that firearm is stored. Number two, if you have someone for a fact that has crisis in their life, I go forward. I don't say, well, lock it up, store it. Take that gun out of the home, take that firearm out of their home. Because it's like anything else. If someone wants something, really, they'll do whatever they can to get it, and if they're bent on doing it.

**DR WEST:** There's a couple of things that you said that have really been helpful to me today. One was this idea of when people are concerned about their safety and they're employing firearms to get that sense of safety, if you want them to store securely, to store safely, it's more important to demonstrate than it is to just tell them. And then the



other piece is when you put that time in place, it's going to enable you in that unexpected worst moment. It's going to protect you from that unauthorized person accessing the firearm that you never anticipated, but it's you.

**BILL MAYS:** Yes. Because again, it can save your life. It could save your loved one's life, your children.

This lady came to one of my classes. I always ask who has children? And she was one that she raised hand. And I said, okay. So she was telling me her child was inquisitive about her gun she had, and she was saying, I said, well, do you have a storage? Do you have a gun log? She said, no, I don't have anything like that. And so I said, I'll tell you what, I've got a couple of 'em, two or three of them. So I said, why don't you take this one here and put your firearm in it? So she took the case with her, and I remember her calling me and she said, I just want to thank you so much. And I asked her why. And she said that her child had company over and they were looking for her firearm, but they could not get into that lock box, but the child told her. The child actually told the mom that, and she thanked me so much. She said, because I know for a fact that if that child would've gotten into that box, who knows would've happened with them two kids.

**DR WEST:** That must have felt really good to have that conversation.

**BILL MAYS:** That conversation is one of the greatest conversations I could ever have. And not only was the conversation good, but it showed that she took responsibility because she became a responsible gun owner. Just because you have a firearm does not mean that you're responsible. You have to be a responsible firearm. And you know what responsible firearm owners do? They store their firearms.

**DR WEST:** Today's episode illustrates just how challenging these conversations can be about balancing the need for protection against the risk posed by having a firearm



in the home. We all perceive risk differently, and yet we still all want the same thing: to live in homes that are safe and protected. Storing firearms safely doesn't have to mean compromising protection. When it comes to firearm suicide, it's about putting time and space between an impulsive thought and a fatal act.

**DR WEST:** Thank you to Bill Mays and to Dr Tara Warner for participating in today's discussion.

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